

sack, donkey-pack

אֲמִתָּחַת

1. Statistics

Torah: 15. Nebiim: 0. Ketubim: 0. Total: 15.

2a. Literal Use

The use of אֲמִתָּחַת is confined to three chapters (Gen. 42–44) of the Joseph narrative. In Gen. 42 and 43 it denotes, together with the terms → כָּלִי and → שֶׁק, the sacks for the transport of victuals that are lashed to a (pack)-ass (חֲמֹר). When he opens the sack (פתח שק) in 42:27, אֲמִתָּחַת in 43:21) to fetch fodder (מִקְפּוֹא) for his ass, one of Joseph's brothers discovers to his dismay the money (כֶּסֶף) he had paid for the grain in his אֲמִתָּחַת (so 42:27; according to 43:21 all the brothers). Joseph had ordered to put (שִׁים 42:25; 43:22, cf. נתן 43:23) the money surreptitiously back into the sacks, as he did later on with his own beaker (→ נָבִיעַ; 44:2). It is stipulated explicitly that the money, or the pouch with money (→ צָרוּר, 42:35), is found 'in the upper part of the sack' (בְּפִי אֲמִתָּחַת, cf. 42:27, 35; 43:21; 44:1, 8, 11). According to 44:1 an אֲמִתָּחַת was usually filled with food (אֵכֶל) which in this particular case must be understood to mean 'grain' (cf. 42:10; 43:2, 20; 44:25; the words בָּר, שֶׁבֶר and אֵכֶל in Gen. 42–44 are apparently synonyms, as observed by Redford 1970, 173). The sacks are filled (מָלֵא, 42:25; 44:1) with grain or emptied (רִיק Hi., 42:35), they are loaded (נָשֵׂא, 42:26, cf. עָמַס, 44:13 which ⚙ elucidates by adding μάρσπιπος, 'sack, bag') or unloaded (יָרַד, 44:11). Nowhere the material of which these sacks were made has been specified.

In the scholarly literature there is discussion about the exact relation between the various terms used in Gen. 42–43. In 42:25, 35 the money is put back into (שוב Hi.) a שֶׁק. 42:27 relates how Joseph's brother finds the money in the upper part of his אֲמִתָּחַת when he opens the שֶׁק. In the parallel verses 43:18 and 43:21 it is stated that the money was put back (שוב Hi.) into the אֲמִתָּחַת, c.q. that the brothers find the money when their אֲמִתָּחַת is opened. How should this variation be evaluated? Several attempts have been made to distinguish sharply between the terms אֲמִתָּחַת, כָּלִי and שֶׁק in Gen. 42–43.

At a previous stage of research scholars tried to solve the

problem with the help of literary criticism by attributing אַמְתָּחָה to the Yahwist, and קֶשׂ to the Elohist (cf. *TWAT*, Bd. 7, 851). This necessitated taking 42:27-28 as a Yahwistic intrusion in the Elohist chapter Gen. 42 (so e.g. Schwally 1891; Gunkel 1902; Skinner 1930). This solution fails to convince, mainly because of the parallel use of the two terms in 42:27 (the circumstance that the Θ reads *μάρσιππος* twice here must be attributed to harmonisation; so Westermann 1982, 118). Rather than by invoking source criticism, the ostensible tension between 42:27, 42:35 and 43:21 can be resolved by paying attention to rhetorical strategy (see, for example, Westermann 1982, 118-9; Sternberg 1985; Alter 1981).

A totally different interpretation has been given by Jacob 2000. In his view קֶלִי in 42:25 and 43:11 specifically denotes the containers ('Behältnisse') in which the grain was stored, קֶשׂ in 42:25, 35 would relate exclusively to the fodder-sack ('Futtersack') for the donkeys, whereas אַמְתָּחָה would denote the baggage/pack of the asses in general. In this manner it would be possible to delineate the semantic content of the three terms precisely. However, this proposal flounders on the circumstance that in 42:27 (see also 43:21) קֶשׂ and אַמְתָּחָה are obviously parallel concepts, as קֶלִי and אַמְתָּחָה are in 42:25 and 44:1. Therefore it seems best to agree with Soggin 1997:

Man beachte die drei verschiedenen Wörter für 'Sack': *kêlî*, wörtlich 'Behälter [im allgemeinen]', *śaq*, das übliche, und das seltene *'amē tahat*. Dies weist nicht auf verschiedene Quellen hin, wie man glaubte, sondern auf den reichen Wortschatz des Erzählers.

In the chapters under consideration we are dealing with a variation of idiom to describe the same objects: the sacks of grain or fodder which were attached to the pack animals (so already Keil 1866 and Dalman, *AuS*, Bd 3, 198; Bd. 7, 246). The medieval Jewish exegete Nahmanides describes the אַמְתָּחָה as 'a big sack (שֶׁק גְּדוֹל) having two sides (צַדִּיִן) which in the language of the Talmud is called מִשְׂרָאָה'. The latter is a Greek loan word (*μετρητής*) which in this instance designates 'a double sack' (cf. Cohen 1999; Sokolof, *DJBA*, 661).

2b. Figurative Use

Not attested in Biblical Hebrew.

3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Not attested.

4. Cognates

It is questionable whether etymological research helps us to understand the term אִמְתָּחָה much better. Because the word occurs exclusively in the Joseph narrative, one might suppose that it is an Egyptian loan word. However, no Egyptian etymology has been proposed thus far. A derivation from the Hebrew preposition תָּחָה (‘das Wort bez. ein Gefäss, welches oft zum Reiten benützt wird, so dass es *unter* dem Reiter sich befindet’, so Bacher 1885) failed to get any support. Greenfield 1965 connected אִמְתָּחָה with an Assyrian verb *matāhu*, ‘to bear, carry, lift up’ (cf. *CAD* M/1, 403-4). Consequently the word אִמְתָּחָה would not mean ‘sack’, but ‘load, burden, pack’ (this was taken over by *HAHAT*, 79: ‘Sack, besser Ladung, Last’). This might also explain the rendering of the word by טיענא ‘load, burden’ in ϵ and ς (see section 5 below). However, Greenfield’s etymological and comparative philological argument in itself is inconclusive because it does not explain the parallelism between אִמְתָּחָה, אִמְתָּחָה, קָלִי and שֶׁק in 42:25, 27, 35; 43:11, 12 and 44:1.

More promising is the long-standing derivation from the Hebrew verb מָתַח, ‘to stretch, spread out’ which occurs once in Isa. 40:22 in parallelism with נָטָה. In Mishnaic Hebrew it is used frequently (see below). For the prosthetic א, cf. *BL*, 487; Klein, *CEDHL*, 37. The following cognates may be mentioned here:

AKKADIAN: *matāhu*, ‘to carry, transport . . . to pickup, lift’, *CAD* M/1, 403-5.

UGARITIC: Del Olmo Lete, Sanmartín, *DULAT*, vol. 2, 599: ‘a measure of length (?)’. However, De Moor 1981 and 1985 proposed to connect Ugaritic *mtpdm* and *mthm* with Hebrew → מִשְׁפָּחִים and אִמְתָּחָה respectively in the sense of ‘donkey-packs’. In Ugaritic these words are used metaphorically in the sense of layered ‘stretches’ of geological formations. See also De Hoop 1999.

POSTBIBLICAL HEBREW: Levy, *WTM*, Bd. 3, 295: Qal ‘ausdehnen, ausspannen’; Jastrow, *DTT*, 861: Qal ‘to extend, stretch’.

JEWISH ARAMAIC: Levy, *CWT*, Bd. 3, 295: Peal ‘ausdehnen, ausspannen’; Jastrow, *DTT*, 861: Peal to extend, stretch’; 780: מִיִּזְחָה ‘stretching’; מִתְחָה ‘extension’; מִתְחָה ‘stretching’. Sokoloff, *DJBA*, 719: Peal ‘to pull, stretch, elongate’; 720 מִתְחָה ‘stretching’; Sokoloff, *DJPA*, 336: Peal ‘to stretch’.

SAMARITAN ARAMAIC: Tal, *DSA*, 492: מִתְחָה ‘spreading out’.

SYRIAC: Payne Smith (Margoliouth), *CSD*, 314: *m^etah* Peal ‘to stretch out, extend, prolong’, *m^etāhā* ‘stretching out’, etc.

CLASSICAL ARABIC: *mataḥa* ‘to draw, extend’ (Lane, *AEL*, 2688; Dozy, *SDA*, t. 2, 575).

ETHIOPIC: Geez *matha* ‘to be thin’ (Leslau, *CDG*, 371).

5. Ancient Versions

Ⲅ and other Greek versions: Ⲅ μάρσιππος ‘sack, bag’, Gen. 42:27, 28; 43:12, 18, 23; 44:1-12 [15x]. *GELS*, 290: ‘sack, bag’; *LSJ*, 1081: ‘bag, pouch’; *LSJ* Suppl., 203: add ‘a kind of sackcloth’.

Ⲡ^T: טוּעַן ‘carrying bag’, Tal, *DSA*, 320. The suggestion put forward by Z. Ben Hayyim *apud* Greenfield 1965, 90, n.2, is better discarded.

Ⲫ: טַעוּנָא, ‘load, burden’ in all Targumim in all instances.

Ⲥ: ṭa^cnā’ ‘load, burden, package’ (Payne Smith (Margoliouth), *STS*, 181) in all instances.

Ⲯ: *saccus*, ‘sack’, Gen. 42:27, 28; 43:18; 44:1-12 [15x]; *sacculus*, ‘little bag’, Gen. 43:12, 21, 23; *marsuppium*, ‘pouch’. Gen. 43:22 (a Graecism; also used in Prov. 1:14 to render → Hebr. בָּיִט, ‘bag’).

6. Judaic Sources

Not attested.

7. Illustrations

A good drawing of the type of sack described above is found in Wilson, *PPSE*, vol. 2, 24, lower right corner:



See also the photographs Avitzur, 189-91 and Bolen, *PLBL*, tb060503203.

8. Archaeological Remarks

In Egypt grain was distributed in sacks (Kemp 1994). [Further text will be added later on.]

9. Conclusion

The אִמְתָּחָה seems to be a sack for storing grain which was extended (מתח) like a piece of cloth and folded over the back of an ass by way of pack-saddle, hanging down both sides of the animal. Such saddles are also attested in Mesopotamian sources (Derck-

sen 2009, 92). At the ends the sack was tied shut (cf. Elliger 1978; see also Bacher 1891: ‘אַמְתָּחָה, der Sack, der nur so gefüllt oder geleert werden kann, indem man ihn zieht, ausdehnt’). This explanation is supported by the context in which it balances קָלִי ‘container’, and שַׂק ‘sack’, and also by the etymological cognates of the word, by several renderings in the ancient versions and by the interpretation offered by the medieval exegete Nahmanides. Although its material is not specified in the Bible, there is reason to suppose it was woven from black goat’s hair (Dalman, *AuS*, Bd. 3, 198). Exactly such a double sack made of goat’s hair was used for the transport of grain on donkeys in Mesopotamia. It was called a *patnu* or *zurzu* there (cf. Salonen, *Hausgeräte*, Bd. 1, 188-90; Veenhof 1972, 8). Probably the אַמְתָּחָה did not differ greatly from the → מִשְׁפָּתִים and שְׂפָתִים.

10. Bibliography

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