

**branch, rod, staff**

מַקֵּל

**1. Statistics**

Torah: 9. Nebiim: 9. Ketubim: 0. Total: 18.

**2a. Literal Use**

מַקֵּל appears to be a fresh branch of a tree in Jeremiah's vocation story. Here the term indicates a branch in its natural condition because no other site is mentioned in connection to it: 'I see a branch of an almond' (Jer. 1:11; cf. v.13: 'a boiling pot facing away from the north'; otherwise Sauer 1966: 'ein vom Baum geschnittener Stab' [57]; Carroll 1986, 102-103: 'cannot be determined ... unimportant'). Whether or not the wordplay between the vision ('almond', שֶׁקֶד, v. 11) and the explanation ('I am watching', שֶׁקֶד, v. 12) involves a blossoming branch because the almond is the first in spring to blossom, is disputed (Holladay 1986, 37, *vs* W. McKane 1986, 15). In all other texts, a מַקֵּל is a rod taken from a tree. As a consequence, it is unlikely that Jeremiah in his vision was not watching a real almond tree but the rod of Aaron, a cultic object preserved in the temple of Jerusalem, which presence there is explained in Num. 17:16-26 (1-11), the more so since in this story Aaron's staff is always called → מַטֵּה (*pace* Van der Toorn 1989, following a suggestion of H. Gressmann). A מַקֵּל is light enough to be carried and strong enough to be leant on during journeys through rough territory (Gen. 32:11; Exod. 12:11), to discipline domesticated animals and to beat off aggressive ones with it (Num. 22:27; 1 Sam. 17:40,43) or to be used as a weapon (Ezek. 39:9). Only once it occurs, parallel to → מַטֵּה, as a prestigious symbol of authority (Jer. 48:17).

In the story of how Jacob manipulated the breeding of Laban's flocks (Gen. 30:31-43), the meaning of מַקֵּל as a freshly peeled branch is clear (vv. 37-41). Obscure, however, is the function of these rods placed near the watering troughs (v.39; for a survey of the problems of the passage, cf. Fokkelman 1975, 144-51). Explanations diverge from fertility magic (things observed by living beings during the conception, in this case varicoloured rods, would leave their characteristics on the offspring) to breeding techniques, well-known in olden times, of medical or aphrodis-

iac impact. Nevertheless, parallels from the Ancient Near East with regard to these insights and practices are lacking. The complexity of the story is partly put right if the phrase אֶל־הַמִּקְלוֹת (v. 39) is translated not as usually ‘at the sight of the rods’ or ‘near the rods’, but ‘upon the rods’, conceived as a *phallus fallax* or teaser animal. Jacob misleads the animals which he does not want to be impregnated, as part of a more sophisticated procedure to enrich himself with a strong flock while providing Laban with a flock of weaker animals. The story has to be interpreted as a revenge for Laban’s treatment of Jacob in Gen. 28. Laban had tricked Jacob into receiving the ‘wild cow’ Leah instead of the ‘ewe lamb’ Rachel. Here, Jacob tricks Laban into giving him the lambs he desires (cf. Noegel 1997). ‘Rod’ as euphemism for phallus may also play a role in Hosea’s accusation of rhabdomantic: ‘My people inquire of a thing of wood, and their staff (מַקֵּל) gives them oracles. For a spirit of harlotry has led them astray’ (4,12; cf. Ginsberg 1967, 74-5). On the other hand, in Gen. 30 the context, esp. vv. 37-38 and 40-42, suggests that real striped rods were involved in a more or less magical way. The parallel word מַקֵּל in Hos. 4:12 is never used as a euphemism for the *membrum virile*. So it remains uncertain whether מַקֵּל could have this figurative meaning.

## 2b. Figurative Use

In the prophetic symbolic action of Zech. 11:4-14, the term מַקֵּל designates two ‘rods’ of a shepherd, called ‘Delight’ and ‘Bonds’ (esp. vv. 7,10,14; for the exegesis of this passage, cf. Meyers & Meyers 1993, 237-304). A shepherd often carried two staves with him (→ מַטְּהָה). YHWH’s command ‘to shepherd a flock doomed to slaughter’ (v. 4) leads the prophet to taking these two rods which embody the ideological programme of his ministry (v. 7), just as he will later symbolise its failure by breaking them (vv. 10,14). The story draws on older prophetic themes. A first tradition is that of the evil shepherds, the leaders of Israel, who have not fulfilled their responsibilities and enriched themselves instead of taking care of the needs of the flock (Ezek. 34). As opposed to this allegory, the Zechariah narrative does not promise a better future: neither God nor the prophetic shepherd is to guide the

herd for its own welfare. Instead, the prophet is to punish the buyers and sellers by leaving the flock to complete abandonment and destruction (v. 8-9). The focus is so much on the chastisement of the elite that the rescue of the flock is not at stake. A second tradition at the basis of this symbolic act is the one to which Ezekiel was called, i.e. the joining of two pieces of ‘wood’ (עֵץ) with the names of ‘Judah’ and ‘Joseph’, which means that ‘they shall be no longer two nations’ (Ezek. 37:15-23, esp. v. 22). What Zechariah does with the second rod, ‘Bonds’, forms the counterpart of that story. By severing this rod he clarifies that ‘the kinship between Judah and Israel is broken’ (v. 14). His severing of the first rod, ‘Delight’, which stands for ‘the annulling of the covenant that I had made with all the peoples (i.e. the component tribes of Israel)’ (v. 10), has no counterpart in a specific rod in the Ezekiel story. It could be, however, an antithetic elaboration of the second purport of Ezechiel’s act, i.e. the renewal of the covenant: ‘and they shall be my people, and I will be their God’ (Ezek. 37:23). In this way, because the taking of the rods is subservient to their breaking, the story as a whole points retrospectively to the failure of Israelite prophecy (cf. ‘the hardening of the people’ by Isaiah [6:8-10] and the *confessiones* of Jeremiah [esp. 20:7-18]).

The circumstance that the rods are given names, points to the fact that they could function as symbols of authority (→ מַטְּהָה). The names of the two rods here have no traditio-historical background. The first one, ‘Delight’ (נֵעֵם), has a variety of meanings, reaching from ‘pleasantness’ parallel with ‘peace’ (Prov. 3:17), ‘purity’ (Prov. 15:26) and ‘health’ (Prov. 16:24), to the ‘favour’ which people enjoy in the presence of YHWH (Ps. 16:11; 27:4; 90:17). Since its semantic basis involves some form of good relationship, it is a fitting term for the covenant of YHWH with his people. The second term, ‘Bonds’ (חֲבָלִים [active participle]), is a concrete noun. It might hint at the reciprocity of commitment between Judah and Israel, the more so since  $\sqrt{\text{חבל}}$  is associated with the idea of pledging. At the same time, an association with the noun חֶבֶל for ‘territory, allotted portion’ seems to be intended since the two kingdoms are allied to each other by the apportion-

ing of the Land (cf. Deut 32:9; Josh. 17:14; Zeph. 2:7; Ps. 105:11). Both names, however, witness to the originality in wording of this prophetic symbolic action.

### 3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Not attested.

### 4. Cognates

Klein, *CEDHL*, 379: ‘Of uncertain etymology. cp. Egypt. *ma-qi-ra*.’ The latter was proposed by Albright 1934, 45. Also Helck, *BÄV*, 515, and Hoch, *SWET*, 166-7, regard it as a Semitic loanword in Egyptian, so this does not help us with regard to the Hebrew word’s etymology. Some scholars confidently declare  $\sqrt{\text{קל}}$  to be the root (e.g. König, *HAWAT*, 242) or raise other possibilities, like a  $\sqrt{\text{קל}}$ , or even  $\sqrt{\text{קל}}$  or  $\sqrt{\text{קל}}$ , all three otherwise unattested in Hebrew (discussion: *TPC*, 816; *HWAT*, 780; *GB*, 456; *BDB*, 596; Kopf 1976, 158; *HALAT*, 593; *HAHAT*, 730). Since the Hiph. of  $\sqrt{\text{קל}}$  is attested in biblical Hebrew, it would seem safest to assume an original meaning ‘instrument to make lighter, faster’ (cf. *HGHS*, § 61qζ-xζ), i.e. an instrument to increase a person’s mobility. As a consequence, one has to assume that the meaning ‘branch’ would be a secondary development. The  $\sqrt{\text{ql}}$  ‘to be light, swift’ is attested in many Semitic languages, cf. Leslau, *CDG*, 428. An Indo-Mediterranean origin (Salvesen 1998, 124) is less likely.

### 5. Ancient Versions

Ⲙ and other Greek versions: The LXX translates מַקֵּל mostly by ῥάβδος ‘rod, staff, sceptre’ (*GELS-L*, 415; *GELS-M*, 210), only in Exod. 12:11; 1 Sam. 17:40 (not in v. 43) and Jer. 1:11 by βακτηρία, ‘staff, rod’ (*GELS-L*, 76). In Jer. 48:17 α’ has σακῆπτρον, ‘sceptre’ which is his common rendering of מַטֵּה, and in Zech. 11:7 σακταλή, ‘staff, pole’ (*LSJ*, 1617). The latter is also attested as an alternative hexaplaric rendering in Gen.31:37 and Zech. 11:7.

ⲱ<sup>T</sup>: חוטר and חוטר, ‘stick, staff’, serve as renderings for both מַטֵּה and מַקֵּל (*DSA*, 266).

Ⲛ: In the rabbinic Targumim חוטר is the normal rendering of all

Hebrew words for ‘stick, staff, branch’. Only in Ps.-Jon. on Num. 22:27 we find שׁוּטָא ‘whip’.

ס: Normally מִקֵּל is rendered *hūtrā*, ‘stick, staff’, but in Gen. 30 ס has *zeqtā*, ‘rod, goad’ (*CSD*, 120; *DSF*, 91) in all instances.

ו: The Vulgate translates by *virga* in texts when the meaning is ‘branch’ (Gen. 30:37-41; Jer. 1:11; Zech. 11:7,10,14), by *baculus* when the meaning is ‘staff’ or ‘stick’ (Gen. 32:11; Exod. 12:11; 1 Sam. 17:40,43; Jer 48:17; Ezek. 39:9; Hos. 4:12), by *fustis*, ‘stick, cudgel, staff’, only once (Num. 22:27).

## 6. Judaic Sources

In the Hebrew text of Jesus Sirach and the Dead Sea Scrolls מִקֵּל is not attested. The term occurs several times in Mishnaic and Talmudic tractates, mostly in the sense of a walking stick (b. Shab., 66a), which also serves for defence (m. Pes. V.9; Rosh Hash. I.9) or to discipline (b. Shab., 139a; m. Abod. Zar. III.1; b. Abod. Zar., 41a; y. Ned., 41b). Its worked character comes to the fore in the fact that it could have a secret receptacle for a *mezūzah* or jewels (m. Kel. XVII.16; B. Meṣ. VII.9). These texts confirm the Old Testament range of functions of the staff.

## 7. Illustrations

→ מִטְּהָה, section 7.

## 8. Archaeological Remarks

[Will be added later on.]

## 9. Conclusion

Whether ‘branch’ (Gen. 30:31-43; Jer. 1:11) or ‘instrument to make (walking) lighter, swifter’, hence ‘staff’ (almost all other occurrences), is the more original meaning is uncertain. Like other Hebrew words for staves the מִקֵּל could serve as a symbol of authority. The ancient versions seem to indicate that at least in later times little difference was made between the various types of rods and staves.

In Zech. 11:4-14 the staves are a symbol of the prophet’s ideological ministry and its failure. People could give names to their

staves (Zech. 11:7, 10, 14), as they did with other objects of a personal nature, e.g. weapons. More or less magical use of the מַקֵּל might attested in Gen. 30:31-43 and Hos. 4:12, or it might be a metaphor for the *membrum virile* there. The word occurs as a Semitic loanword in Egyptian. One of its attestations there seems to indicate that a מַקֵּל could have a knob of painted wood (Hoch, *SWET*, 166). Perhaps this knob sometimes contained a secret hollow to hide a precious object in (section 6).

## 10. Bibliography

See in addition to the literature cited with → מִצָּה:

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