

callipers

מְחַוֵּנָה

1. Statistics

Torah: 0. Nebiim: 1. Ketubim: 0. Total: 1.

2a. Literal Use

The Old Testament has preserved only one occurrence of the word מְחַוֵּנָה, viz. Isa. 44:13. The word under discussion is part of a long, rather ironic description of the making of an anthropomorphic idol (Isa. 44:9-20). In v. 13 a description is given of some stages in the labour of the woodworker (חָרַשׁ עֵצִים). He stretches a measuring-line tight (→ קָו), outlines the shape with an awl (יְתַאֲרֶהוּ בְשֵׁרֶד), uses various chisels for further shaping (→ מִקְצָעָה) and מְחַוֵּנָה יְתַאֲרֶהוּ 'outlines it with a מְחַוֵּנָה'. The same verb תָּאָר Pi. 'to outline' or 'to draw' is used with both the שֵׁרֶד and the מְחַוֵּנָה, suggesting that both instruments were used for drawing lines. Rather than a precise description of the successive stages in the work of the sculptor the whole description wants to bring home the message that making an idol is an utterly human, very laborious process that stands in stark contrast to God's making/forming his human servant 'Jacob' from the womb (Isa. 44:2).

KJV, RSV, JPS, NJB and Childs 2001, 338, render 'compass', ASV and NIV 'compasses'. Oswald 1998, 178: 'scrapers', and Baltzer 2001, 190: 'rounding tool', apparently following Elliger's rendering 'Drechseisen' (a lathe for polishing) which is no more than a guess, as he himself admits (Elliger 1978, 428). Blenkinsopp 2002, 238, has 'callipers'. The context itself does not reveal the exact meaning of מְחַוֵּנָה other than that it is an instrument used by a woodworker (see also vv. 14-16, 19). If the parallelism of the instruments in v. 13a-b is embracing, the measuring rope (→ קָו) balances the מְחַוֵּנָה which suggests that the latter too might be some kind of tool to measure the width of a solid object and mark the result on another object.

2b. Figurative Use

Not attested.

3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Not attested.

4. Cognates

The $\sqrt{\text{חננ}}$ ‘to draw a circle’ or ‘move in a circle’ is attested in Hebrew, Jewish-Aramaic, Syriac and Mandaic (*HAHAT*, 328). The Hebrew noun חַנֵּן ‘circle’ is derived from it. It is not impossible that the root is related to $\sqrt{\text{חננ}}$ ‘to make a pilgrimage, dance’, Arabic $\sqrt{\text{hġġ}}$, ‘to make a pilgrimage’, as well as Middle-Hebrew עַנַּן ‘to draw a circle’ (cf. Klein, *CEDHL*, 207, 210).

OLD AND IMPERIAL ARAMAIC: In the Old Aramaic inscription KAI 202B:5 the phrase ʿyt kl mĥgt ḥsnȳ occurs the meaning of which might be ‘a complete circle of fortresses’ (for other proposals, cf. Hoftijzer & Jongeling, *DNSI*, 611).

JEWISH ARAMAIC: מְחַנְנֵה ‘drawing an outline of something in the air, gesturing’ (cf. Jastrow, *DTT*, 757; Sokoloff, *DJBA*, 654).

SYRIAC: ḥāg ‘to circle’; ḥūgtā ‘circle’ (Brockelmann, *LS*, 218).

MANDAIC: ḥgaga ‘circle’ (Macuch, *MD*, 130).

5. Ancient Versions

Θ and other Greek versions: The Θ shortens the verse a little, but apparently καὶ ἐν κόλλῃ ἐρρούμισεν αὐτό is its rendering of וּבְמִחְנֵה בְּמִצְעָרָה. Usually the Θ’s rendering is translated as something like ‘and he composed it with glue’. However, the primary meaning of ῥύμιζω being ‘to bring into a measure of time or proportion’ (*LSJ*, 1576), one wonders if ἐν κόλλῃ might not be an early error for ἐν κύκλῳ ‘with a circle’.

Of α’ and the other later Greek translations unfortunately no equivalent has been preserved. Aquila’s ἐποίησεν αὐτο ἐν περιγωνισκοῖς apparently renders יַעֲשֶׂהוּ בְּמִצְעָרָה (→ מִצְעָרָה).

ט: וּבְנִשְׁרִין מֵאֲחִיד לִיהּ ‘and he is grasping it in נִשְׁרִין’. The latter word is usually translated as ‘clasps’ or the like (so e.g. Jastrow, *DTT*, 927; Dalman, *ANHT*, 275), but Levy, *CWT*, Bd. 2, 126 writes, ‘Form od. Messwerkzeug, womit man ein Kunstwerk nach seinen Umrissen bestimmt, proportionell abmisst’. Levy, *CWT*, Bd. 3, 431: ‘Werkzeug der Zimmerleute, wie Schraubstock u. dgl.’

A variant reading is וּבְנִשְׁמִין for which the dictionaries give similar meanings.

ס: The Peshiṭta, possibly influenced by ס, renders *wbtt' dbqh wglph* 'and he fastens it with glue and engraves it'.

ט: *in circino tornavit illud* 'in callipers he rounded it off'. For *circinus* 'pair of compasses, callipers' with which a space is measured, see *LD*, 334.

6. Judaic Sources

The word does not occur in other Judaic sources.

7. Illustrations

No suggestions.

8. Archaeological Remarks

[Will be added later on.]

9. Conclusion

The word מְחוּגָה is a hapax legomenon. Consequently, there is no reference frame of other occurrences, so that conclusions concerning the meaning of the word and the functioning of the utensil can only be drawn from Isa. 44:13, the ancient versions and etymology. The interpretation of this verse is difficult, because it refers to four typical instruments the carpenter used when making a cult object or idol. The meaning of three of them is doubtful. The word belongs to the small category of technical terms (→ עֵט, → צַפְרָן, → קִסָּת, → שֵׁרָר, → חֲרָט, the basic function of which is either the essential shaping of artefacts or the writing of characters).

The over-technical description in Isa. 44:13 merely serves to ridicule the plainly human nature of the fabrication of idols. It does not aim at providing the reader with either an exact technical knowledge of the making of cult objects or a complete survey of the tools of the craftsman. Its distinctive purpose is the denunciation of idolatry and the proclamation that YHWH's power is indisputable against the empty boast of the Mesopotamian deities and their representations. The contrast in magnitude between the

Creator, הַיֹּשֵׁב עַל־חֹמַי הָאָרֶץ, ‘who dwells on the circle of the earth’ (Isa. 40:22) and shapes the whole cosmos instead of a pitiful anthropomorphic image (Isa. 40:12) could not be greater.

It is sometimes assumed that the description of the activities of the carpenter in v. 13 is inextricably bound up with those of the smith in v. 12. This would be the case if the smith made the plating for the wooden core of the statue. However, in that case it is strange that the metalwork precedes the woodwork. Moreover, iron plating of divine statues is unknown and the vv. 12 and 13 are separated from each other by a Setumah in 1QIsa^a. So we have to assume that in v. 12 the fashioning of a solid metal idol is involved, whereas in v. 13 the making of a wooden image is ridiculed.

For the determination of the meaning of מְחַוֵּנָה Targum and Vulgate are the most helpful. Both point in the direction of callipers, an instrument used to measure the diameter of objects. There is a remote possibility that the 6 originally supported this too (section 5). The noun מְחַוֵּנָה is clearly derived from the root *ḥwg* and might mean an instrument to encircle. If the parallelism of the instruments in v. 13 is embracing (section 2a), the מְחַוֵּנָה might be a pair of callipers to measure the diameter of various parts of the wooden image to ensure complete congruence (cf. Koole 1985, 288).

10. Bibliography

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– *KBL*, 512: ‘Zirkel, circle-instrument, compass’ – Koole 1985: J.L. Koole, *Jesaja II* (COT), Kampen 1985, 288 – *LHA*, 425: ‘circinus (Zirkel, compas)’ – *MHH*, 598: מכשיר להחזיק עיגולים – Oswalt 1998: J.N. Oswalt. *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66* (NICOT), Grand Rapids 1998, 178 – Schroer 1987: S. Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder: Nachrichten von darstellender Kunst im A.T.* (OBO, 74), 218 – Gesenius & Roediger, *TPC*, 450: ‘circinus’.

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