

staff, support

מְשַׁעֵן / מְשַׁעֵנָה / מְשַׁעֵן / מְשַׁעֵנָה

1. Statistics

	Torah	Nebiim	Ketubim	Total
Total	2	13	2	17
1. Staff	2	8	1	11
2. Support	0	5	1	6

Since the words מְשַׁעֵנָה / מְשַׁעֵן occur only once, moreover as word pair and parallel with מְשַׁעֵן, this survey takes them as intentional artificial deformations of the latter (Isa. 3:1). The masculine and the feminine form of the same noun can serve to express entirety (*GKC*, § 122v).

2a. Literal Use

מְשַׁעֵנָה serving the literal sense of the stem, refers to a staff which offers support on a walk or journey, always with an accompanying purpose such as help for an infirm (Exod. 21:19) or elderly person (Zech. 8:4), a symbol of authority (Num. 21:18), herding the flock (Ps. 23:4) or an instrument for performing miracles (Judg. 6,21; 2 Kgs 4:29, 31). The travelling background keeps a low profile where the theological meaning of relying on YHWH rather than on men is involved (2 Kings 18:21 / Isa. 36:6; Ezek. 29:6).

2b. Figurative Use

The second series of noun forms (מְשַׁעֵן and מְשַׁעֵנָה) occurs only in the figurative sense of ‘support, stay’.

The first noun form (מְשַׁעֵן) refers to the basic needs of ‘bread/water’, the supply of which the leaders have to guarantee the people. This noun form occurs once more with reference to YHWH (2 Sam. 22:19 / Ps. 18:19). As such the noun serves the biblical theme which is mainly expressed by the corresponding verb (שָׁעַן Niph. + עָל) that people should depend on God rather than on anything else (Isa. 10:20; 30:12; 31:1; 36:6; 50:10; Ezek. 29:7; Mic. 3:11; Job 8:15; 24:23; Prov. 3:5; 2 Chr. 16:7).

The couple of the masculine and feminine noun forms in Isa. 3:1 (מְשַׁעֵן / מְשַׁעֵנָה) refers to the subsequent list of professional groups (vv. 2-4). Usually the following מְשַׁעֵן-לָחֶם וְכָל מְשַׁעֵן-מַיִם is seen as an explanatory gloss (Duhm 1892, 44) but it might well be the writer’s intention to indicate that the basic supplies of

bread and water will be lacking when the leadership is removed (cf. vv. 6-7).

3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Not attested.

4. Cognates

Etymologies thus far proposed for $\sqrt{\text{שען}}$ are unconvincing (cf. *HCHAT*, Bd. 2, 483; *HALAT*, 1488; *CEDHL*, 672). Metathesis of $\sqrt{\text{שנ}}$ ‘to be strong’ (attested in Aramaic, and rarely in Sabaic and Akkadian) might be taken into consideration. Cf. Arab. ‘*uššānat* ‘trunk, stem’ (Kazimirski, *DAF*, t. 2, 264). Cf. the rendering of ש in Ps. 17:19, of ט^{O} in Exod. 21:19, of ט in Isa. 3:1, and the association with strength in 1 QS XI 4-5 (see below).

5. Ancient Versions

ש and other Greek versions: ש translates מִשְׁעָנָה by $\rho\acute{\alpha}\beta\delta\omicron\varsigma$ (6 times), only in 2 Kgs 4:29, 31 and Ps. 23:4 by $\beta\alpha\kappa\tau\eta\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$. Both Greek nouns mean ‘staff, rod’. Apparently the translators regarded it as a synonym of \rightarrow מִשְׁעָן and מִשְׁעָל. In Num. 21:18 ש substitutes the noun by the infinitive $\kappa\upsilon\rho\iota\epsilon\upsilon\sigma\alpha\iota$, effacing in this way the concrete meaning of ‘staff’ in favour of its function of exercising authority. The abstract noun מִשְׁעָן is translated, likewise, by abstract nouns: $\epsilon\pi\iota\sigma\tau\eta\rho\iota\gamma\mu\alpha$ in 2 Sam. 22:19 / $\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\iota\sigma\tau\eta\rho\iota\gamma\mu\alpha$ in Ps. 17:19 (both ‘support’), $\iota\sigma\chi\acute{\upsilon}\varsigma$, ‘strength’, in Isa. 3:1. In the latter text, the word pair מִשְׁעָן וּמִשְׁעָנָה is rendered by participles which maintain the difference of gender: $\iota\sigma\chi\acute{\upsilon}\omicron\nu\tau\alpha$ $\kappa\alpha\iota$ $\iota\sigma\chi\acute{\upsilon}\omicron\upsilon\sigma\alpha\nu$.

ט^{T} : Exod. 21:19 מִשְׁעָנָה, ‘(supporting) staff’ (*DSA*, 320); Num. 21:19 חֲסִמָּכָה, ‘support’ (*DSA*, 597).

ט : In Exod. 21:19, *Fragm. A*; Num. 21:18 ט^{O} and the Palestinian Targumim; 2 Kgs 4:29, 31 חוּטְרָא ‘staff, rod’. In Exod. 21:19 ט^{O} has בּוּרִיָּא ‘strength’ (*WTM*, Bd. 1, 115). סִמְכָא ‘support’, is preferred in 2 Kgs 18:4; Isa. 3:1 (next to סִמְכָא ‘support’); Ezek. 29:6. In Judg. 6:21 we find an isolated שׁוּטִיָּהא ‘staff’. And in Zech. 8:4 the ט opts for paraphrastic עוֹבְדָא ‘work’.

ס : מִשְׁעָנָה is always rendered by *hwtr* ‘staff, rod, sceptre’, except

in 2 Kgs 18:21 || Isa. 36:6 where *smk* ‘pillar, support’ has been preferred. מִשְׁעָן is paraphrased by the participle Pa‘el of *sw* ‘to uphold, support’ (Payne Smith [Margoliouth], *CSD*, 369) in 2 Sam. 22:19, but by *prwq* ‘saviour’, in the parallel verse Ps. 18:18. In Isa. 3:1 it is freely translated with *smk* Pe‘al ‘to sustain, uphold, support’. The other related words in Isa. 3:1 are rendered *smwk* and *smwkt* ‘stay, support’.

ו: This version translates מִשְׁעָנָה by *baculus*, only in Judg. 6:21 by *virga*, maybe because here the person holding the staff is the ‘messenger of YHWH’, who does not need a staff to support him. The abstract noun מִשְׁעָן is rendered as *firmamentum* ‘support’, in 2 Sam. 22:19 / Ps. 17 (18):19, as *robur* ‘strength, vigor’, in Isa. 3:1. In the latter text, the word pair מִשְׁעָנָה / מִשְׁעָן is translated by terms which do not maintain the gender difference of מ, ט and ס: *validem et fortem* ‘the valiant and the strong’.

6. Judaic Sources

In Sirach Hebrew, מִשְׁעָן occurs only in its abstract meaning. In Sirach ט it is equally rendered by abstract nouns (3:31: στήριγμα ‘support, staff’ [cf. 2 Sam. 22:19 / Ps. 17(18):19: ἀντιστήριγμα]; 36:29: ἀναπαύσις ‘rest’; 40:26: βοήθεια ‘help, aid’ [with regard to this verse, the Hebrew term is only attested in ms Masada; cf. Beentjes 1997, 160]).

The Dead Sea Scrolls are familiar with both noun forms. מִשְׁעָנָה is used, as in the Hebrew Bible, in literal sense in: ‘a delightful plantation ... its sprouts with support (מִשְׁעָנָה עַל) (up to) the height of heaven’ (4Q433a, frag. 2, 5), but the figurative sense is also found in the expressions: ‘God’s support’ (מִשְׁעָנָה אֵל; 1QM IV 13) and ‘their (i.e. of wicked people) support is without ...’ (מִשְׁעָנָהם בְּלֹא; 1QM XVII 4). The other noun form, מִשְׁעָן, occurs, as in the Hebrew Bible, only in figurative sense: ‘What always is, is support for my right hand’ (וְהוּיָא עוֹלָם מִשְׁעָן יְמִינִי; 1QS XI 4, see also XI 5). The circumstance that מִשְׁעָן יְמִינִי is used here in parallelism with ‘a rock of strength’ (סֵלַע עוֹז, 1QS XI 4) and ‘his might’ (גְּבוּרָתוֹ, 1QS XI 5) suggests that מִשְׁעָן was associated with strength. The very fact that in 1QHa XVIII the two nouns occur in the same figurative sense in close distance to each other makes

clear that in these later period the functional difference of literal and figurative use between them no longer applied; cf.: ‘You have not placed my support in robbery’ (22-23: *וְלֹא נָתַתָּה מִשְׁעָנִי עַל בָּצַע*) with: ‘My support is in the refuge from up high’ (32: *וּמִשְׁעָנִי בַּמַּעוֹז* (32: *מָרוֹם*)).

In rabbinical sources, מִשְׁעָנָה in its literal meaning of a ‘staff’ or rather ‘crutch’ is attested in b. Gittin, 72b-73a : *דָּהַלְךְ עַל מִשְׁעָנֹתוֹ*, ‘when he goes about on his crutch’ (with reference to a convalescent person).

7. Illustrations

→ הַמָּחֶה.

8. Archaeological Remarks

[Will be added later on.]

9. Conclusion

מִשְׁעָנָה and its variant forms denote a strong staff providing the convalescent and elderly with a reliable support (שָׁעַן, ‘to lean on’), or serving the mighty as a symbol of authority. The circumstance that it is never used to strike might indicate that it was a sturdy, fairly heavy type of staff. Metaphorically it designated the unwavering support one expected from the deity. In the bible the noun forms (מִשְׁעָן and מִשְׁעָנָה / מִשְׁעָנָה) occur in the figurative sense of ‘support, stay’ only, but in Qumran also מִשְׁעָנָה occurs in this metaphorical sense. So there is insufficient reason to suppose a formal differentiation between the literal and the metaphorical use of the nouns.

10. Bibliography

See in addition to the literature cited with → מִשְׁעָנָה:

BDB, 1044: ‘support, staff’ – Beentjes 1997: P.C. Beentjes, *The Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew: A Text Edition of All Extant Hebrew Manuscripts and a Synopsis of all Parallel Hebrew Ben Sira Texts* (VT.S, 68), Leiden 1997, 160 – Cavaletti 1953: S.Cavaletti, ‘La terminologia biblica per “bastone”’, *Anton.* 28 (1953), 420-2 – Klein, *CEDHL*, 672 – *DCH*, v ol. 5, 552-3: ‘support, sustenance’ – Duhm 1892: B. Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaja* (HAT, 3/1), Göttingen

1892, 44 – *GB*, 472: ‘Stab, Stütze’ – *HAHAT*, 759: ‘Stab, Stock, Stütze’ – *HALAT*, 615: ‘Stütze, Stab’ (*HALOT*: ‘staff, support’) – *HAWAT*, 254: ‘Stütze, Stab’ – *HCHAT*, Bd. 2, 801: ‘Stütze, Stab’ – *HWAT*, 389: ‘Stütze... Lebensunterhalt, Nahrung ... Stab ... Zepter’ – *KBL*, 579: ‘Stütze, Stab’ – *LHA*, 484: ‘fulcrum, baculus’ – *MHH*, 678: סַעַד, עֶזְרָה; 679: מְשַׁעֲנָה, מִקֵּל – *NIDOT*, vol. 4, 202-4 – Gesenius, Roediger, *TPC*, 1458: ‘fulcrum, adminiculum, baculus’ – *TWAT*, Bd. 8, 351-5.

Last update: 24-03-2011

W.A.M. BEUKEN