

**(flax), wick**

פִּשְׁתָּה

**1. Statistics**

Torah: 2. Nebiim: 2 Ketubim: 0. Total: 4.

**2a. Literal Use**

פִּשְׁתָּה is a by-form of פִּשְׁתָּה\*, ‘flax, fibre’ (cf. König, *Syntax*, § 255a, g; GK, § 122r, t). The latter occurs only in Hos. 2:7, 11 in the singular; in the rest of its occurrences always a masculine plural of composition פִּשְׁתָּהִים is used (cf. *GBHrev*, § 136b). Flax was a highly valued crop that yielded fibre for the manufacture of linen. The fibre is obtained by soaking the stalks to the point of putrefaction (retting) and drying them again for around two years. Before the whitish fibres within the stalks can be removed, the flax has to be combed to straighten it (Wilkinson 1998, 61f.). It is possible that the קִנְהַ רְצוּיָה ‘crushed stalk’ of Isa. 42:3 designates flax at the next production stage,

The second stage in the process of preparing the flax stems for spinning is the beating or bruising of the plants to separate the fibres from the wooden parts of the stem. (G. Vogelsang-Eastwood, in: *AEMT*, 271; cf. Dalman, *AuS*, Bd. 5, 27.)

So the parallelism in Isa. 42:3 might be progressive.

In Exod. 9:31 (2x) it is mentioned next to barley, wheat and emmer (Exod. 9:32) as a food stuff (cf. Forbes, *SAT*, vol. 4, 28; H.-P. Müller, *UF* 2 (1970), 230f.). According to Zohary 1982 no oil was extracted from its seeds in biblical times, but see Borowski, *AIAI*, 98-9.

As appears from the figurative language of Isa. 42:3; 43:17, the word can also denote the wick of a lamp (→ נֵר), made out of twined flax fibres (see section 8 below). Placed in the spout(s) of the lamp, it sucks up the oil from the reservoir of the lamp by capillary extraction.

**2b. Figurative Use**

In Isa. 42:3; 43:17 the wick as a vital part denotes the burning lamp itself (metonymia, synecdoche). As a metaphor, it is used in a similar way as the lamp itself (→ נֵר, and → נֵיר). In Isa.

43:17 the misfortune, the total destruction of the enemies is described as the extinguishing (qal), snuffing out (qal) of the wick. The smouldering, the dimly burning (qal, derivative of I) wick denotes the lamp which does not burn brightly, because its oil is running out. As such it is a symbol of the weak, the people without hope (cf.  $\text{ט}^{\text{J}}$ ). Of this wick it is said, however, that it will not be snuffed out (pi.), i.e., the lamp will be filled with oil, so that the wick will start burning brightly again. So the smouldering, but not extinguished wick is a metaphor for people who have perspective, thanks to the appearance of the Servant of YHWH (Isa. 42:1), the subject of Isa. 42:3 (for different interpretations see the discussion in Elliger 1978, 210-4; Koole 1997, 220-2).

### 3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Gezer Calendar line 3: פִּשְׁתָּהּ (possibly defective spelling), at that time reaped *c.* March. See KAI 182.

### 4. Cognates

SEMITIC: *ptt* / *pšt(h)* is apparently a North-West Semitic word which could not be realised in Aramaic because the *t* would have developed into a *t*, making it a homograph of פִּתָּהּ ‘piece of bread’.

UGARITIC: *ptt*, plur. *pttm* ‘linen, linen fabric’ (Del Olmo Lete & Sanmartín, *DULAT*, 688, with earlier literature).

PHOENICIAN, PUNIC: *pšt* ‘flax, linen’ (Hoftijzer & Jongeling, *DNSI*, 947; Krahmalkov, *PPD*, 408).

POSTBIBLICAL HEBREW: פִּשְׁתָּהּ, plur. פִּשְׁתָּיִם – ‘Lein, Flachs’ (Levy, *WTM*, Bd. 4, 153).

### 5. Ancient Versions

Ⲅ and other Greek versions: Isa. 42:3; 43:17 λίνον – *GELS-L*, 282: ‘flax, linen-cloth, lamp-wick’.

Ⲫ: Ⲫ<sup>O</sup>, Ⲫ<sup>PsJ</sup>, Ⲫ<sup>N</sup> and Fragment Ⲫ MS Vatican Ebr. 440 on Exod. 9:31: כִּיהָנָא, Levy, *CWT*, Bd. 1, 396: ‘Lein, Flachs’; Jastrow, *DTT*, 637: ‘flax’. Ⲫ<sup>J</sup> Isa. 42:3 חֲשִׁיכִיא דְכַבּוּצִין ‘the needy who are like a wick’; Isa. 43:17 כְּבִזְיִן ‘like a wick’. Cf. Levy, *CWT*, Bd. 1, 86,

288; Jastrow, *DTT*, 147, 510.

5: Isa. 42:3; 43:17 *šrg* ‘lamp’, → נֵר.

ו: *linum*.

## 6. Judaic Sources

Not attested in the meaning of ‘wick’.

## 7. Illustrations

No suggestions.

## 8. Archaeological Remarks

The Egyptian hieroglyph for a lamp wick shows the basic form of the wick. It was made of short length of twisted cord of flax fibres (cf. G. Vogelsang-Eastwood, in: *AEMT*, 291).

## 9. Conclusion

פִּשְׁתָּה in the sense of a wick of the lamp, was made of a twisted cord of flax fibres which was placed in the spout(s) of the lamp and sucked up the oil within its reservoir by capillary extraction.

In Isa. 42:6 the smouldering, but not extinguished wick is a metaphor for destitute Israelites who still have perspective, thanks to the appearance of the Servant of YHWH. In Isa. 43:17 the defeated Babylonian armies are compared to a quenched wick.

## 10. Bibliography

Nicholson & Shaw, *AEMT*, 269-74 – Borowski, *AIAI*, 98-9 – Dalman, *AuS*, Bd. 4, 270; Bd. 5, 19-30; Bd. 7, 232 – *BDB*, 834: ‘flax’ (1) ‘growing’ (2) ‘=wick’ – Alonso Schökel, *DBHE*, 602: ‘Lino . . . mecha, pabilo’ – *DCH*, vol. 6, 796: ‘flax; wick’ – Elliger 1978: K. Elliger, *Deuterojesaja* (BK, 11/1), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1978, 210-4 – *EM*, vol. 6, 536 – *GB*, 665: (1) ‘der auf dem Acker wachsenden Lein’ (2) ‘flächserner Docht’ – *HAHAT*, 1088: 1. Flachs (auf dem Feld) 2. Docht (aus Flachs) – *HALAT*, 924: (1) ‘Flachs (auf dem Feld)’; (2) ‘Docht (aus Flachs)’ – *HAWAT*, 377: (1) ‘nomen unitatis: Linnenstück = Docht’ (2) ‘Massenwort: Leinsaat’ – *HCHAT*, Bd. 2, 247: ‘eig. das Faserige, Gekrämpelte, dah. Flachs

... coll. Flachs, Lein ... der daraus gefertigte Docht' – C. Houtman, *Exodus*, vol. 1 (HCOT), Kampen 1993, 159 – *HWAT*, 604: '1) Flachs; 2) Docht' – *KBL*, 785: 'Flachs flax Leinen linen'; (2) 'Docht aus Flachs wick of flax' – Koole 1997: J.L. Koole, *Isaiah III*, Vol. 1 (HCOT), Kampen 1997, 220-2 – *LÁ*, Bd. 2, 256-7 – *LHA*, 674: 'linum planta in agro crescens (collective)'; 'lampadis ellychnium' – *NIDB*, vol. 2, 461 – *NIDOT*, vol. 3, 711-2 Gesenius & Roediger, *TPC*, 1137: (1) 'linum' (2) 'ellyphnium' – *TWAT*, Bd. 6, 816-8 – Wilkinson 1998: A. Wilkinson, *The Garden in Ancient Egypt*, London 1998, 61f. – Zohary 1982: M. Zohary, *Plants of the Bible*, Cambridge 1982, 78.

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