

Problematic Terminology of the Manna Pericope (Exod 16:14-15) in the Light of Medieval Jewish Commentators and Biblical Hebrew Philology

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I shall discuss the adjective מְחוּסָפֶסֶת and the word מִן in the phrase מִן-הָרֹאֵא, which both appear in the manna pericope in Exod 16:14-15. I will present the different interpretations suggested by medieval Jewish commentators as well as modern scholars and dictionaries, and I shall attempt to show which one of the medieval interpretations is the most appropriate in the light of modern biblical philology. Medieval Jewish commentators suggested four different interpretations of the word מְחוּסָפֶסֶת, two of which, "rounded" and "uncovered", have also been supported by the findings of modern biblical philology. Two medieval commentators rightly interpreted the word מִן in the phrase מִן-הָרֹאֵא as an interrogative pronoun. This is also the commonly accepted interpretation in contemporary modern biblical philology.

KEYWORDS: Exod 16:14-15; Manna pericope; Jewish medieval commentators; Jewish medieval grammarians; modern biblical Hebrew philology; etymological equivalent; semantic equivalent; interrogative pronoun

A INTRODUCTION

When modern scholars of the Bible and biblical philology interpret unique or difficult words or phrases, they often rely exclusively on modern biblical exegesis and lexicology, and do not take into consideration the interpretations offered by medieval exegetes, grammarians and lexicographers.¹ In not a few cases, the explanation commonly accepted in modern biblical philology has

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¹ Chaim Cohen notes, in his article "Medieval Exegesis of Genesis and Modern Biblical Philology: Part I: Gen. 1-18," *JQR* 81 [1990]: 1, that only a minority of modern scholars take medieval exegetes and grammarians into consideration in their works, among them: H.M. Orlinsky in his commentary on the Pentateuch; *Notes on the New (JPS) Translation of the Torah* (Philadelphia, 1969); Weinfeld in his commentary on Genesis: M. Weinfeld, *The Book of Genesis with a New Commentary* [Hebrew], Tel-Aviv, 1975.

already been suggested hundreds of years ago by medieval exegetes and grammarians. True, these scholars did not have at their disposal modern philological tools, such as comparative Semitic linguistics and archaeological findings, often used by modern scholars. They also had no knowledge about the various Semitic and non-Semitic languages on which many modern scholars rely, such as Akkadian, Ugaritic, Canaanite, Aramaic, Arabic, and Egyptian. However, despite these "disadvantages", sometimes medieval scholars nevertheless arrived at the true or most probable explanation of a difficult word, by force of their developed linguistic sense and outstanding ability to understand the biblical text.² For these reasons, it is befitting for any modern philological research, alongside the use of modern linguistic tools, to make systematic and critical use of medieval exegetical and grammatical works. In many cases, it will become apparent that the true explanation of those words or expressions is already found there. In the first part of the present study, I will examine how the medieval exegetes and grammarians explained the unique adjective **מְחוּסָפֶס** and the phrase **מִן-הָרוֹא**, which also appears only in this biblical story. In the second part, I will present the modern exegesis of the word **מְחוּסָפֶס** and the phrase **מִן-הָרוֹא**, and finally, I will show which of the medieval explanations is consistent with modern exegesis. As stated, the purpose of the study is two-fold: to provide the medieval exegetes and grammarians with a platform and to voice their opinions, and to demonstrate the great benefit modern philology may derive from the findings of medieval scholars.

B THE ADJECTIVE **מְחוּסָפֶס**

The term **מֶן**, the manna that the people of Israel ate in the desert, occurs fourteen times in the Bible: five times in Exodus 16, three times in Numbers 11, twice in Deuteronomy 8, twice in Joshua 5, once in Ps 78:24, and once in Neh 9:20.

In the book of Exodus 16:14, manna is described by two adjectives: **דָק** "fine" (as frost) and **מְחוּסָפֶס**:

וַתַּעַל שְׁכַבַּת הַטָּל וְהָיָה עַל-פְּנֵי הַמִּדְבָּר דָק מְחוּסָפֶס דָק כְּכַפֹּר עַל-הָאָרֶץ

² On the contribution of the medieval exegetes and grammarians to biblical philology and the need to consult their writings, see for example Cohen, "Medieval Exegesis," 1, 4-6, 8-11; idem, "Medieval Exegesis of Genesis and Modern Biblical Philology: Part Two," in *Mas'at Aharon: Linguistic Studies Presented to Aaron Dotan* (eds. Moshe Bar-Asher and Chaim E. Cohen; Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 2009), 25, 27, 29, 31-31, 36; Sivan Daniel. "The Internal Passive of G-Stems in Northwest Semitic Languages," in *Mas'at Aharon: Linguistic Studies Presented to Aaron Dotan* (eds. Moshe Bar-Asher and Chaim E. Cohen; Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 2009), 51. Sivan notes that the internal passive of the *qal* conjugation was first identified by the medieval grammarians R. Yehuda Hayyuj, R. Yona ibn Janach, and Radaq. Chanoch Gamliel, "Rashi and the Hebrew Lexicon," *Lěšonénu* 73 (2011): 437, 440-446.

"When the layer of dew had evaporated, behold, on the surface of the wilderness lay a fine and מְחֹסֶפֶס substance, as fine as frost on the ground".

Likewise, in the same chapter, v. 31, the manna is described as לבן כזרע גד "white like coriander seed" and its taste is said to resemble the taste of צפחית בדבש, apparently meaning "wafers in honey".³ The adjective מחוספס appears only once in Biblical Hebrew, in this pericope. In Num 11:8, the manna is again likened to coriander seed and also to בדולה.⁴ Its taste is likened there to the לשד השמן "rich cream".⁵ Relying on these attributes of the manna, we shall attempt, at the end of the discussion of this word, to point out the most reasonable interpretations of the word מחוספס.

³ וַיִּקְרְאוּ בֵּית-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת שְׁמוֹ מִן הַזֶּה וְהוּא כְזֵרַע גֹּד לֶבֶן וְטַעְמוֹ כְּצַפְחִית בַּדְּבָשׁ ("The house of Israel named it Manna, it was white like **coriander seed**, and it tasted like **wafers in honey**" [Exod 16:31]). גד is most likely the coriander plant. For this identification, see Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 151 (BDB); Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (translated and edited by Mervyn E. J. Richardson; Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000), 1:176 (HALOT); Menaḥem T. Qaddari, *A Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2006), 141.

⁴ Bdellium, a type of aromatic resin. In Akkadian: "budulḫu" (Ignace J. Gelb, Benno Landsberger, A. Leo Oppenheim, and Erica Reiner, eds., *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, B [Illinois: Oriental Institute, 1965], 305-306 [CAD]). For which see Chaim Cohen, "False Friend': Regular Meanings of Words in Modern Hebrew which Originated Erroneously," in Šā^a-rê Lāšon: *Studies in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Jewish Languages Presented to Moshe Bar-Asher* (eds. Aharon Maman, Shmuel Fassberg, and Yochanan Breuer; Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 2007), 1:27-43: 36-39; idem, "New directions in modern biblical Hebrew lexicography," in *Birkāt šālôm: Studies in the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Literature, and Postbiblical Judaism Presented to Shalom M. Paul on the occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (eds. Chaim Cohen, Victor A. Hurowitz, Avi M. Hurvitz, Yochanan Muffs, Baruch J. Schwartz, and Jeffrey H. Tigay; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 441-473: 465-470.

⁵ וְהָיָה כְזֵרַע-גֹּד הוּא וְעֵינּוֹ כְּעֵין הַבְּדֹלָה שְׁטוֹ הָעֵם וְלִקְטוּ וְטָחְנוּ בְרִחִים אוֹ דָכוּ בַמְדֹכָה וּבִשְׁלוּ בַפָּרוֹר ("Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance like that of **bdellium**. The people would go about and gather it and grind it between millstones, or pound it in a mortar, and boil it in a pot, and make cakes of it. It tasted like **rich cream**" [Num 11:7-8]).

In Modern Hebrew, the adjective מחוספס is usually explained as meaning "not smooth, rough, bumpy" or "coarse, unrefined, unpolished".⁶ The Talmud⁷ interpreted the noun homiletically: "What is the meaning of the word מחוספס? Resh Lakish said: It is something that melts on the wrist of the hand.⁸ Johanan said: [It means] something which is absorbed by the two hundred and forty-eight limbs".⁹ We shall now turn to the medieval Jewish commentators in order to observe how they interpreted this adjective. As we shall see below, many explanations have been offered for the adjective מחוספס, both in the middle ages and in modern times, which in fact shows that the exegetes found this word difficult to understand. In my opinion, the main reason for this difficulty lies in the fact that it appears only once in the entire Bible, as an adjective of the heavenly food called מן ("manna"), the nature, shape and appearance of which are entirely unknown. This claim is reinforced by the fact that the Septuagint does not translate the word. Instead of translating it, the Septuagint brings the word γη, which is used to describe the manna in Exod 16:31 and Num 11:7.¹⁰

1 Medieval Exegesis

Among medieval Jewish commentators we find four different interpretations:

1a First Interpretation: "Roundish"

This is the interpretation suggested by Rav Sa'adya Gaon. He translates the word מחוספס into the Arabic word مدحرج (*mudahraj*), which means "rounded

⁶ Thus, for example, the dictionaries of Even-Shoshan (Avraham Even-Shoshan, *Hāmmilōn Hāḥādāš* (The New Dictionary) (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1980) and *Rāb-Millīm* (Yaakov Choueka, *Rab-Millīm* [Melingo Ltd, 2000–2010], <https://www.ravm.ilim.co.il/naerr.asp>), entry מחוספס.

⁷ B. Yoma 75b.

⁸ In Hebrew: נִימַח עַל פִּיִּסַת הַיָּד, Resh Lakish clearly interpreted מחוספס as an acronym (see Rashi ad loc.).

⁹ The numerical value of the word מחוספס is 248, which is the number of limbs in the human body.

¹⁰ καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐπὶ πρόσωπον τῆς ἐρήμου λεπτὸν ὡσεὶ κόριον λευκόν, ὡσεὶ πάγος ἐπὶ τῆς γῆ (= "and behold, on the face of the wilderness [was] a thin thing like coriander, white as frost upon the earth"). <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/apostolic/exodus/16.htm>. It should be noted that some of the ancient translations, such as the Peshitta and Onkelos, did translate this word as they understood it on the basis of its context and etymology. In the Peshitta, the word מחוספס is translated into the word מקלף which means "peeled". Also, Onkelos uses this word (see below). The Peshitta adds another description to the מן that does not appear in the Masoretic Text. Instead of the word דק ("thin") which according to the Masoretic text is repeated twice in the verse, the Peshitta translates the second appearance of the word מן into the word קרים, which means "covered". The two translations of the Peshitta – "peeled" (uncovered) and "covered" – seem to contradict each other.

like a small ball"/"roundish".¹¹ This is also the opinion of R. Abraham ibn Ezra, who rejects the interpretation "uncovered" (see below). He claims that there are no cases in which only the second root letter is doubled. R. Yonah ibn Janāḥ interprets the noun מחוספס in a similar manner, as meaning "rolled up", "round".¹² In *Sefar Hahaśśāgā* he claims that there exist original quadrilateral roots, as for example the adjective מחוספס.¹³ Ibn Janāḥ also discusses the root of this word in three different places in *Sefar Hāriqmā*.¹⁴ Radaq, in his dictionary, mentions the adjective מחוספס as a quadrilateral root (חספס), and explains it in the same manner: "rolled up", "round".¹⁵ Radaq also mentions the translation of Onqelos, who derives the adjective from the root חש"ף "to uncover".¹⁶

1b Second Interpretation: "Uncovered"

This is the first interpretation suggested by Rashi,¹⁷ which is also reflected in the Aramaic translation of Onqelos מקלף "peeled, uncovered".¹⁸ Nachmanides follows Onqelos. He derives the noun מחוספס from the root חש"ף,¹⁹ through a doubling of the second root consonant ס.²⁰ This opinion is also found in the

¹¹ Yehuda Ratzaby, *Rav Saadya's Commentary on Exodus* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1998), 69.

¹² Entry חספס (Wilhelm Bacher, *Sefer HaSchorashim: Wurzelwörterbuch der hebräischen Sprache von Abulwalīd Merwān Ibn Ganāḥ* (R. Jona), aus dem Arabischen in's Hebräische übersetzt von Jehuda Ibn Tibbon [Berlin: Itzkowski, 1896], 176).

¹³ David Téné, *Sefar Hahaśśāgā, which is Kitāb Al-Mastalḥaq of Rabbi Jonah Ibn Janāḥ in the Hebrew Translation of Obadiah Ha-Sefaradi* (Jerusalem: The Academy of the Hebrew Language and The Bialik Institute, 1996), 176.

¹⁴ Michael Wilensky, *Sefar Hāriqmā, which is Kitāb Al-Luma of Rabbi Jonah Ibn Janāḥ* (Jerusalem: The Academy of the Hebrew Language, 1964), 1:122; 1:183; 1:185.

¹⁵ Entry חספס (Johann H. Biesenthal and Fürchtegoot Lebrecht, *Rabbi Davidis Kimchi Radicum Liber* [Berlin: Bethge, 1847], 124).

¹⁶ Thus, also Nachmanides and Menahem b. Saruq. On this suggestion, see below.

¹⁷ "מחוספס – מגולה; ואין לו דמיון במקרא [...] ואונקלוס תרגם: "מקלף" – לשון "מחשוף הלבן" ("מחוספס – uncovered; this is a *hapax legomenon* in Scripture. Onkelos rendered it as 'peeled away', like in מחשוף הלבן ['a white surface, peeled away'; Gen 30:37]); Rashi's commentary on Exod 16:14 (Mikraot Gedolot Ha-Keter, ed. Menahem Cohen, *Exodus* [Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press: 2012], 1:136).

¹⁸ וסליקת נחתת טלא וקא על אפי מדבבא דעצק/דעצק מקלף דעצק/דעצק דגיר/כגיר כגלידא/דגלידא על ארעא ("When the layer of dew lifted, there, over the surface of the wilderness, a thin and flaky substance, the thinness of chalkstone, like frost, lay on the ground". Targum Onkelos to Exod 16:14. (in Israel Drazin, *Targum Onkelos to Exodus: An English Translation of the Text with Analysis and Commentary* [New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1990], 2:168).

¹⁹ He notes that the letters ח/ש often interchange.

²⁰ דק מחוספס – על דעת אונקלוס, מן "מחשוף הלבן"; "חשף ה"; בחלוף השי"ן בסמ"ך, ועי"ן הפועל דק מחוספס – according to Onkelos, it is derived from [the same root as] מחשוף ['the white of the rods']; חשף ה' [God has exposed], the *sin* having interchanged with the [homophonous] *sāmæk*, and the second radical (the *sāmæk* of חספס) is doubled

parallels the biblical root ח"ש"ה, means "to be revealed".²⁶ The root ח"ס"ה (with *sāmæk*) does not exist in Biblical Hebrew. In Aramaic it means "clay, potsherd". In Biblical Hebrew the root ח"ש"ה (with *sin*) means "to uncover/expose".²⁷ However, it should be noted that the adjective מחוספס occurs in a book from First Temple times, while the interchanging of the letters ח/ש does not characterize Classical Biblical Hebrew of the First Temple times, only the Late Biblical Hebrew of the Second Temple times.²⁸

BDB explains the adjective מחוספס as the result of the doubling of the root ח"ס"ה. The adjective מחוספס is a shortened form of the noun מחוספס.²⁹ The dictionary explains the adjective to mean "scale-like" or "scaled off". Etymologically, it compares the adjective to the Arabic verb خشف (*chashafa*), which means "to be scabby", "to scratch oneself". The dictionary notes that in general the Arabic consonant ش (sh) does not turn into ס (s) in Hebrew. It also points out the Aramaic word חספינתא, which means "scale (of fish), scurf".³⁰

Ben-Yehuda³¹ finds the aforementioned suggestions unsound both etymologically³² and semantically.³³ He suggests explaining the adjective as meaning "formed like more or less round grains". He notes that the first one to

²⁶ Ugaritic indeed contains the verb "taḥspn" (taḥsupuna), which mostly carries the meaning "to draw water, drain liquid", but not the general meaning "to be uncovered, revealed" (Daniel Sivan, *A Grammar of the Ugaritic Language* [Leiden: Brill, 2001], 119; Gregorio del Olmo Lete and Joaquin Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition* [translated and edited by Wilfred G. H. Watson; Leiden: Brill, 2003], 1:373). However, as I demonstrate elsewhere ("The contribution of Mishnaic Hebrew to biblical Hebrew philology" [forthcoming]), there is a semantic connection between the roots ח"ש"ה/ח"ש"ה – they can mean both "to uncover//expose" and "to pour from one vessel to another". In Ugaritic, there is an additional root ח"ש"ה [ḥsp], which means "to dry up" (it implies a sickly state in plants), a meaning which does not fit our context (Olmo Lete and Sanmartín, *Dictionary*, 1:410).

²⁷ Also, Gesenius followed a similar path. He derived the adjective מחוספס from the root ח"ש"ה/ח"ס"ה, which means "uncovered" (alongside another suggestion: "like scales"). On the suggestion of Gesenius, see Arthur E. Cowley, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (28th ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 153, §§55k.

²⁸ Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* [Roma: Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 2006], 26-27, §5m.

²⁹ BDB, 341.

³⁰ According to Tal (Abraham Tal, *A Dictionary of Samaritan Aramaic* [Leiden: Brill, 2000], 1:325, n. 40), the Aramaic word is not חספינתא or חרספינא, as suggested by different scholars, but rather חרספיתא, which is derived from the root ח"ס"פ, which later dissimilated into חרס"פ and חרצ"פ.

³¹ Eliezer Ben Yehuda, *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew* (Berlin: Schöneberg, 1909–1959), 3:1676-1677 (in Hebrew).

³² For example, he rejects the claim that the word cannot possibly be derived from the quadrilateral root ח"ס"פ"ח, or from the root ח"ס"ה.

³³ For example, the suggestion "scale (of fish)".

interpret in this manner was Rav Sa'adya Gaon (see above). Ben-Yehuda notes that an etymological parallel exists in Arabic *haysafuj* (حيسفوج). This word refers to a kind of seed that has the form of small balls.³⁴

Qaddari, in his dictionary, explains the adjective as carrying the modern day meaning of "not smooth", "a thing with protrusions and cracks in it". He notes that the noun מחוספס is a shortened form of מחספס. He also refers to the Jewish Aramaic parallel חספינתא, which means "scale".³⁵

The dictionary HALOT derives the adjective from the root חספ"ס.³⁶ It explains this adjective to mean "crackling", comparing it to the Arabic verb *hasafa* (خسف), which means "to crackle".

Tal³⁷ suggests that מחוספס may mean "white" or "shining", on the basis of the Tosefta, which states that before the manna was cursed it would fall down on stubble and straw and turn white.³⁸ According to Tal, a similar idea lies at the basis of the translation of Onqelos מקלף "peeled, uncovered".³⁹ When the peel is removed, the matter that is exposed is shiny or white. In the margins of the Targum Neofiti, מחוספס is translated into the word היור "white". In the text itself we find the rendering: מפספס "striped".⁴⁰ Another way of interpreting מפספס is "smashed", like the meaning of the root פספ"ס in Talmudic literature, which resembles the meaning of פר"ך – "to squeeze", "to squash".⁴¹

³⁴ With regard to the interchanging of the Arabic letter ج (jim) with the Hebrew ס (*sāmæk*), Ben-Yehuda, relying on Brockelmann (Carl Brockelmann, *Grundriss der vergleichenden Grammatik der semitischen Sprache*, vol. 1 [Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1961] §45g), notes that this interchanging has certain precedents.

³⁵ Qaddari, *Dictionary*, 329.

³⁶ HALOT, 1:338.

³⁷ Abraham Tal, "Lexicographic Studies", in *Hebrew and Arabic Studies in Honour of Joshua Blau*, (ed. Haggai Ben-Shammai; Tel Aviv/Jerusalem: Graphit, 1993), 325.

³⁸ אמ' רבן שמעון בן גמליאל: תדע שנתארוו טללים. שבראשונה כשהיה טל יורד על גבי תבן ועל גבי אמ' רבן שמעון בן גמליאל: תדע שנתארוו טללים. שבראשונה כשהיה טל יורד על גבי תבן ועל גבי אמ' רבן שמעון בן גמליאל ("Rabban Simeon b. Gamliel Said: 'You should know that the dew has been cursed. In olden times, when the dew came down on straw and on stubble, it would turn white, as it is said: '... there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing ...', but now it turns black" [Tosefta Sotah 15:2, in Jacob Neusner, *The Tosefta: Translated from the Hebrew with a New Introduction* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 1:890]).

³⁹ See above, n. 18.

⁴⁰ Similarly, the translation attributed to Yonatan renders מסרגל "made up of lines".

⁴¹ On the roots פספ"ס and פר"ך see for example Ben Yehuda, *Dictionary*, 10:5038-5039, 5181-5183; Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Jerushalmi and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Pardes Publishing House, 1903), 2:1199, 1228; Menahem Moreshet, *A Lexicon of the New Verbs in Tannaitic Hebrew* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1980), 284, 291-292.

A similar version is found in the Arabic translation of the Samaritans, where the word מפרוך⁴² has the same meaning. In two other manuscripts of the Arabic translation⁴³ we find the word מפרום in the same meaning.⁴⁴

In the adaptation of the Arabic translation⁴⁵ is found the Arabic word, مبصباص mubaṣbaṣ, which means "to watch" and "to look out", although its root (bṣṣ) means "glow" and "radiance".⁴⁶ In the Samaritan Aramaic translation we find the verb מנצנץ, which may mean both "blossoming" and "shining".⁴⁷

To sum up: it seems difficult to determine the exact meaning of the adjective מחוספס. However, what we can say is that some of the interpretations suggested by modern biblical philology had already been suggested by medieval Jewish commentators. For example, the explanation "rounded", suggested by Rav Sa'adya Gaon, Ibn Ezra, Ibn Janāḥ, and Radaq, was endorsed by Ben-Yehuda.⁴⁸ The interpretation suggested by Rashi (his first explanation), Menahem, and Nachmanides, which is based on Onqelos "peeled, uncovered" (מקלף), is supported by one of the interpretations suggested by Gesenius, and perhaps also by Cassuto.

One of the reasons for the difficulty in deciding between the different suggestions is that the identity of the manna remains unclear.⁴⁹ Likewise,

⁴² According to MS Barberini Or I.

⁴³ MSs Nablus 4 and 6. On the different versions of the Arabic translations of the Samaritans, see Haseeb Shehadeh, *The Arabic Translation of the Samaritan Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1989-2002), 1:332.

⁴⁴ Tal notes that in the Samaritan script the consonants מ and כ frequently interchange.

⁴⁵ This adaptation was carried out by Abu-Said in the 13th century. On the adaptation of the Arabic translation, see Shehadeh, *Translation*, 1:333; Tal, "Lexicographic Studies", 326.

⁴⁶ On this root in Arabic, see Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1955-1956), 1:209-210.

⁴⁷ וסלקת שכבת טלה והא על אפי קפרא דקיק מנצנץ (=מְחֻסְפָס) דקיק כחולה (=כַּפְפָר) על ארעא ("When the fall of the dew lifted, there, over the wilderness, [lay] a fine and blossoming/shining [מְחֻסְפָס] [substance] fine as sand [כַּפְפָר] on the ground" [Tal, *Dictionary*, 2:544]). Tal notes that there exists a semantic connection between the meanings "growth" and "light", cf. the root צ"י/צ"ו/ץ – "blossom" and "shine" (BDB, 847; Qaddari, *Dictionary*, 909). The Samaritan translates ככפור with the word כחול ("like sand"). Tal surmises that the translator might have understood this noun like Rav Sa'adya Gaon (it is well known that the Samaritans made use of Sa'adya's translation) – round like the sand of the seashore.

⁴⁸ This is also the way taken by the following modern translations of the Bible: Nkjv; Kjb; Nheb; Akjv; Asv; Dbt; Erv; Wbt; Web. They translate the word מחוספס into the words "round" or "granular". For the modern translations of the Bible, see online: <https://biblehub.com/exodus/16-14.htm>.

⁴⁹ Attempts have been made to identify it, but a convincing solution has yet to be found. One of the attempts was made by the scholars Bodenheimer, Kaiser, and Ubach.

according to Held's method of Comparative Semitic Philology, etymological parallels do not in themselves constitute sufficient evidence.⁵⁰ It is necessary to examine whether the Arabic and Aramaic parallels that have been suggested also serve in the context of food, and not only in the context of animals and skin afflictions (the word which means "scales").

Among the different solutions suggested, the one which equals the meaning of *מְחוּסָפֶסֶת* in Modern Hebrew – "not smooth", "coarse" – as already suggested by some of the modern dictionaries (BDB, HALOT, Kaddari) seems to be the least suitable.⁵¹ This becomes clear in the light of the manna's remaining

They tried to identify the manna with a food found in the Sinai Peninsula created from the secretion of insects (=coccoidea) covering the trees, especially the tree named *Tamarix Mannifera* or *Tamarix Gallica*. The insects discharge small drops the size of a pinhead or pea, which look like water drops and glitter in the sun like dew (this secretion dripping from the tree is called "resin"). The drops dry and turn into whitish-orange-brown coloured sticky crystals. These drops serve as sustenance for various types of flying insects, particularly flies, which lay their eggs on them, which subsequently turn into maggots. The drops are also eaten by desert dwellers, who, due to their sweet, honey-like taste, consider them to be a delicacy. The Arabs call the food *man* or *man min sama* (man from Heaven; also in the Bible it is called "grain of Heaven" [Ps 78:24] and "bread of Heaven" [Ps 105:40]). This is the reason why the biblical story likens the appearance of the manna to crystal (see above n. 4), and notes that its taste resembles that of wafers made with honey. Others identify the manna with a certain desert bush. This bush breaks off and is carried away by the wind, and its branches have a sweet taste. On the attempts to identify the manna, see for example Cassuto, *Commentary*, 135; Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (OTL) [London: SCM, 1962], 132; Samuel E. Loewenstamm, "Manna", in *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (eds. Benjamin Mazar, Jacob Liver, Samuel E. Loewenstamm, Naphtali H. Tur-Sinai, Chaim Rabin, and Samuel Yeivin; Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 1968), 7-10: 9 (in Hebrew); Aharon Shulov, "Manna", in *Exodus (Olam Ha-Tanach Series)*; eds. Shemaryahu Talmon and Yitzhak Avishur; Tel-Aviv: Dodzon-iti, 1993), 5:104-105; The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Manna," n.p. [cited 13 April 2020]. Online: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/manna-plant-product#ref275090>.

⁵⁰ Chaim Cohen, "The 'HELD method' for comparative Semitic philology," *JANES* 19 (1989): 14-15.

⁵¹ This is the direction taken by many of the English translations: Niv; Nlt; Esv; Bsb; Nasb; Ctb; Cev; Gnt; Hcsb; Isv; Nb; Gwj; Jps; Nas (online: <https://biblehub.com/exodus/16-14.htm>). They translated the word *מְחוּסָפֶסֶת* into the word "flaky", which may be understood to mean thin and flat as a flake, or alternatively, rough as scales, which is the modern meaning of this adjective. If the modern translations intended to convey the first possibility, thin and flat, then they were probably relying on the additional descriptions of the *מָן*; but if their intention was to convey the meaning scales/rough, like the modern meaning of the word – "scaly" – then they seem to have been influenced by the modern biblical dictionaries mentioned above. It is also possible that they deliberately chose to translate into "flaky" and not "scaly" in order to keep

characteristics: "well ground";⁵² ככפור "like frost";⁵³ כורע גד לבן "white like coriander seed";⁵⁴ עינו כעין הבדולה "its appearance was like that of bdellium".⁵⁵ Loewenstamm notes that the resemblance to בדולה, when explained as aromatic resin, refers both to the sticky nature and to the light brown-yellow colour of the two materials, which do not possess characteristics such as "the opposite of smooth" or "coarse".⁵⁶

It may thus be inferred that the characteristics of מחוספס must resemble one of the latter descriptions.

C THE WORD מן IN THE PHRASE מן-הוא

The phrase מן-הוא occurs only in the manna pericope in Exod 16:15:

וַיִּרְאוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו מִן הוּא כִּי לֹא יָדְעוּ מָה הוּא וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֲלֵהֶם הוּא הַלֶּחֶם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן ה' לָכֶם לֶאֱכֹלָהּ

"When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another: מן הוא – for they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them: "This is the bread that God has given you to eat".

Likewise, only in this verse does the word מן appear as an interrogative word with the meaning "what".

Among medieval Jewish commentators we find four different interpretations:

1 Medieval Exegesis

1a First Interpretation: "Sustenance"

Rav Sa'adya Gaon explains מן as meaning "sustenance", paralleling the Arabic word مان (mān) and مونة (mūna), which means "sustenance".⁵⁷

their translation open to both possibilities – the form of the מן was thin and flat, and its texture was the opposite of smooth

⁵² The opposite of thick (Qaddari, *Dictionary*, 193).

⁵³ Water which has frozen into a thin layer of ice or snow (Qaddari, *Dictionary*, 527).

⁵⁴ According to Qaddari, "the manna is likened to coriander seed due to the ball-like form of its fruits" (Qaddari, *Dictionary*, 141). גד is mentioned twice in Scripture, in both cases it describes the manna. See above, n.3.

⁵⁵ בדולה is mentioned twice in Scripture: Gen 2:12; Num 11:7. See above, n.4.

⁵⁶ Loewenstamm, "Manna", 9-10.

⁵⁷ Ha'egron, Entry II מן (Nēḥemya Allony, *Ha'egron, Kitāb 'uṣūl Al-Shi'r Al-'ibr'ānī*) [Jerusalem: The Academy of the Hebrew Language, 1969], 300. About the Arabic words see Reinhart P.A. Dozy, *Supplement aux Dictionnaires Arabes* (3rd ed.; Paris: G.P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1967), 2:565-566. Like Rav Sa'adya Gaon, who understood the word מן as a noun, so do two translations into foreign languages – the

examples of the Bible's use of words from foreign languages, such as פור, which appears alongside גורל (Esth 3:7), and the phrase יגר שהדותא, appearing alongside the phrase גל-עד (Gen 31:46). Rashbam notes that also Dunash⁶² explained the word to mean "what", but in his opinion it is the Aramaic interrogative word מן, which usually means "who" but in this particular case it means "what".⁶³

Id Fourth Interpretation: "Kind"

Ibn Janāḥ, in his dictionary, suggests three different interpretations of the word מן.⁶⁴ 1. "species", "kind". He adds that although מין contains the letter י, which is not found in מן, there exist additional examples of this kind of change.⁶⁵ 2. "To count", "to allot". 3. The Aramaic interrogative word מן, usually means "who", but in this case it carries the meaning "what". Ibn Janāḥ notes that all the interpretations are valid, but he personally prefers the first one: "kind". The people of Israel said about the manna, the unknown food, that it was a kind of food which they did not know. By preferring the first interpretation, Ibn Janāḥ ignores the immediate context.

2 Modern Scholarship

Ben-Yehuda explains the word מן to mean "what", noting that this use is unique to the verse in Exodus.⁶⁶

According to the currently accepted opinion, מן is an interrogative particle meaning "what". This interrogative particle, which is a regular Akk term *mannu*

... ובאותו לשון היו רגילין שהוא כמו 'מה', כתבו משה באותו לשון שאמרו, להודיענו שלפיכך "ויקראו ...". ("They said one to another *man hu*' [which means 'what is it?'] – because they did not know what it was; also Dunash explained [the phrase] in this way, relying on the continuation of the verse: 'for they did not know what it was'. In my opinion, however, *man hu* is the [Aramaic] translation of 'who'; but since this phrase is written in the Egyptian language, and in that language the common meaning of *man* is 'what', Moses wrote the phrase in the precise language that people said it, in order to inform us that they were wondering [what is was], and they said *man hu* – what is it?..." [the translation relies partly on Lockshin, *Rashbam*, 173-174]). Scholars have noted that Rashbam, obviously, did not know ancient Egyptian, and that his interpretation is based purely on conjecture (Lockshin, *Rashbam*, 174).

⁶² See Tzvi Filipowski, ed., *Teshuvot Dunash ben Labrat* (London, Edinburgh: Hevrat Me'orerei Yeshenim, 1855), 20.

⁶³ Also the Septuagint (τί ἐστὶ τοῦτο = "what is this") and the Vulgate (quid est hoc = "what is this") rightly understood the word מן as an interrogative meaning "what".

⁶⁴ Entry מין (Bacher, *HaSchorashim*, 259).

⁶⁵ Such as the word מן in Isa 16:4, which is the equivalent of the word מין in Prov 30:33.

⁶⁶ Ben Yehuda, *Dictionary*, 6:3076.

meaning "who" (as in Aramaic),⁶⁷ occurs also in the Canaanite dialect of El-Amarna (*manni, manna, mannu*) meaning "what".⁶⁸ It also occurs in Ugaritic *mannu mn* meaning "who, the one who",⁶⁹ in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic מן/מן,⁷⁰ in Babylonian Aramaic,⁷¹ and in Syriac (מן, מנא), also there meaning both "who" and "what".⁷² This is the interpretation accepted by Gesenius,⁷³ Cassuto,⁷⁴ Qaddari,⁷⁵ Sarna,⁷⁶ Loewenstamm,⁷⁷ BDB,⁷⁸ and HALOT.⁷⁹

To sum up: In this case, unlike the previous one, the meaning is unequivocal. מן is an interrogative word meaning "what". As shown, among medieval Jewish commentators, only Rashbam arrived at the right solution when explaining מן as an interrogative word meaning "what", in agreement with the findings of modern biblical philology.⁸⁰ Although medieval Jewish commentators had no knowledge of those ancient Semitic languages on which modern scholars based this interpretation (Akkadian, Amarna Canaanite, Ugaritic), they nevertheless succeeded in arriving at the true solution, relying on

⁶⁷ CAD M1, 213-218; Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 2:796.

⁶⁸ CAD M1, 214-215; Anson F. Rainey, *Canaanite in the Amarna Tablets: A Linguistics Analysis of the Mixed Dialect Used by Scribes from Canaan* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 1:103-108. According to Cassuto (*Commentary*, 135), the early Israelites probably spoke this language

⁶⁹ Sivan, *Grammar*, 59. Olmo Lete and Sanmartin, *Dictionary*, 2:560.

⁷⁰ Sokoloff, *Palestinian Aramaic*, 316-317. According to Sokoloff, the interrogative particle is מן, which means both "what" and "who".

⁷¹ Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002), 636-637. According to Sokoloff, the interrogative particle is מן, which means both "what" and "who". In Babylonian Aramaic מנו means "what is it".

⁷² Robert P. Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879-1901), 280; Michael Sokoloff, *Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon Syriacum* (Indiana: Eisenbrauns 2009), 778.

⁷³ Wilhelm Gesenius, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament* (18th ed.; Berlin: Springer-Verlag), 3:692.

⁷⁴ Cassuto, *Commentary*, 135.

⁷⁵ Qaddari, *Dictionary*, 625.

⁷⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1989), 89, 249.

⁷⁷ Loewenstamm, "Manna", 10.

⁷⁸ BDB, 577.

⁷⁹ HALOT, 2:596-597.

⁸⁰ While Dunash and Ibn Janāḥ (in one of the three suggested interpretations) explained מן as an interrogative word, they relied on Aramaic, in which the regular meaning of מן is "who", claiming that only in this verse does it mean "what" (also in Biblical Aramaic we find the word מן in the meaning "what", in the phrase מן אנון ... "what are the names of the men"; Ezr. 5:4. BDB, 1100).

the context and additional languages (Aramaic and hypothetical ancient Egyptian).

D CONCLUSION

The present study has presented the interpretations of the adjective *מְחוּסָפֶסֶת* and the interrogative *מִן* in the phrase *מִן הָוֵא* of both medieval exegetes and grammarians as well as of modern Bible scholars. The purpose of the study was to demonstrate that some of the interpretations of modern scholars, which are based on the novel tools of research of biblical philology (Semitic languages, archaeological findings, etc.), had already been put forth hundreds of years before by medieval exegetes and grammarians. With regard to the adjective *מְחוּסָפֶסֶת*, occurring only once in the Bible, medieval exegetes and grammarians have offered four different explanations: roundish (Rav Sa'adya Gaon, Ibn Janach, Ibn Ezra, Radaq); uncovered (Menahem, Rashi [first explanation, relying on Onkelos] Nachmanides); wrapped (Rashi, second explanation, which he himself prefers); scattered (Rashbam). Two of the explanations suggested by medieval exegetes have found support in modern biblical philology. The explanation "roundish", suggested by Rav Sa'adya Gaon, Ibn Janach, Ibn Ezra, Radaq, is supported also by Ben-Yehuda (as noted above, this is also the way taken by some of the modern translations into English); and the explanation "uncovered", suggested by Rashi (first explanation), Menahem, and Nachmanides, relying on Onkelos (*מְקֻלָּף*), is supported by Gesenius and Cassuto. Also with regard to the interrogative *מִן*, which forms part of the phrase *מִן-הָוֵא*, also occurring once in the Bible, four explanations have been suggested: food (Rav Sa'adya Gaon); to prepare and arrange food (Menahem, Rashi, Ibn Janach, Ibn Ezra); interrogative "what" (Rashbam, Ibn Janach); kind and type (Ibn Janach). Also in this case, the explanation suggested by Rashbam and Ibn Janach, an interrogative meaning "what", constitutes the commonly accepted explanation in modern biblical philology. Although the medieval scholars had no access to those Semitic languages to which modern scholars have access (Akkadian, Canaanite, Ugaritic), and on which they base and enforce their analysis, the medieval scholars nevertheless arrived at the true explanation. These two examples, as well as numerous others suggested in various studies presented in this study, illustrate how the medieval exegetes, through their linguistic knowledge and the exegetical tools at their disposal, arrived at the true explanations of difficult biblical words and phrases, explanations that in many instances match the findings of modern biblical philology. The conclusion of this is that it is indeed appropriate for any modern research on biblical philology to take medieval exegesis into consideration, and often it will become clear that the modern explanations may be enforced by the findings of medieval exegetes and grammarians.

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