

## The Meanings of מסכנות and מס (Exodus 1:11)

By: MITCHELL FIRST

### I. מסכנות

Exodus 1:11 is the only time the word מסכנות appears in the *Humash*. But it appears six other times in *Nakh*, in various forms.<sup>1</sup> Out of these seven times, five times it appears with the word ערי preceding it.

From the contexts of the various verses,<sup>2</sup> it is clear that the meaning is “store cities,” but what is the root of מסכנות? S. D. Luzzatto postulates a switch of letters. He wants to understand the word as if the root was כנס (=gather).<sup>3</sup> This far-reaching switch is farfetched!

Let us first see what happens if we stick with the Hebrew root that we have. There are three different סכן roots in *Tanakh*. One is סכן with the “danger” meaning. This meaning only appears one time, at Ecclesiastes 10:9. It does not explain our word *miskenot*.

There is another root סכן with a meaning like “pauper.” This root appears a few times in Ecclesiastes and once at Deut. 8:9. On the simplest level, this also does not seem to have anything to do with our word *miskenot*. (Admittedly, Rav S. R. Hirsch on Ex. 1:11 comes up with a very clever connection: *miskenot* means “years of need.” The cities were built for years of need: “hunger-years”!)

The third סכן root is the main meaning of the root in *Tanakh*. It means something like “useful, benefit, be accustomed to” (e.g., the סכנת to David at I Kings 1:2). Moreover, there is one place, Isaiah 22:15, that this root perhaps implies economic management. Therefore, Rashi and many others cite it to explain our *miskenot*. This verse reads, “Go, get thee to הסכן

<sup>1</sup> Ex. 1:11, II Chr. 8:4, 8:6, 16:4, 17:12, and 32:28, and I Kings 9:19.

<sup>2</sup> See especially II Chr. 32:28.

<sup>3</sup> See his comm. on Ex. 1:11.

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הזה (=this *sokhen*) to Shevna who is over the house.”<sup>4</sup> Of course, I would feel better about this explanation if there were more occurrences of this root in *Tanakh* that implied economic management.

There is, however, an entirely different approach that one can take to *miskenot*. It relies on Akkadian as a first step towards seeing the original Semitic and Hebrew root.

Akkadian is a Semitic language that is related to Hebrew, but only distantly.<sup>5</sup> It was the language of ancient Assyria and Babylonia.

There is an Akkadian verb *shakanum* that means “to deposit, to lay an object down.” This verb led to certain nouns like *masbkantum*, a storage place. This is likely the same word as our *miskenot*, just that it utilizes “sh” instead of “s,” but we can recognize the Semitic and Hebrew root שכן in *shakanum*.

We can now suggest that the root of our *miskenot* was originally שכן. We all know this root. It means, “dwell, lay down.”<sup>6</sup> Now we understand our word! A storehouse is where things are laid down! This suggestion is adopted by the widely used scholarly work, *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*.<sup>7</sup> Others who adopt this interpretation include Ernest Klein,<sup>8</sup> Menahem Zevi Kaddari,<sup>9</sup> and Hayim Tawil.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The Targum uses a word from the root אוצר. Rashi writes *ke-targumo* and then cites Isaiah 22:15 and interprets סכן there to be *gizbar ha-memuneh al ha-otzarot* (=the treasurer who is in charge of the warehouses).

<sup>5</sup> Hayim Tawil writes: “Akkadian is the Semitic language genetically most distant from Hebrew and its cognates.” See Hayim ben Yosef Tawil, *An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew* (2009), p. xi.

<sup>6</sup> It is the root of the word שכניה. (This is a post-Biblical word.) I have also seen the interesting suggestion that the root שכן is really a *Shaph’el* form of כן and literally means “cause to be set up, cause to be established.” See Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (1987), p. 658.

<sup>7</sup> Eds. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner (1995, revised edition), p. 606. Unfortunately, there is a major “typographical” error here. Instead of writing that *shakanum* meant “deposit,” the word erroneously printed is “defeat.”

<sup>8</sup> Klein, p. 361.

<sup>9</sup> *Millon Ha-Ivrit Ha-Mikrait* (2006), p. 634.

<sup>10</sup> Pp. 218–219. See also Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (1967, tr. by Israel Abrahams), p. 11.

At Ex. 1:11, *Da’at Mikra* translates our word as מַחְסָנִים. The root חסן means “store.” *Da’at Mikra*, however, does not attempt any (farfetched) etymological connection to כנס. Nor does it mention the Akkadian-related etymology that I suggested. (Typically, *Da’at Mikra* does mention reasonable etymologies proposed by scholars.)

## II. מס

*The Grammar of God* (2015) is a very interesting book by Aviya Kushner. She grew up in Rockland County with a very good knowledge of Hebrew. Later in life, she studied the King James Bible<sup>11</sup> in a graduate school course in Iowa among non-Jews. She was shocked at the inadequacies of the King James Bible translation and wrote the above book on this topic.

As one example, when she got to Exodus 1:11, שְׂרֵי מַסִּים, she noted that the translation in the King James Bible was “taskmasters.” She wrote, “But ‘taskmasters’ is not what the literal Hebrew says. The Hebrew word means ‘tax masters.’ Slavery in Hebrew begins with a tax. This tax, in Exodus 1:11, is a most unpleasant one. It is a tax so high it cannot be paid in money; it must be paid in bodily labor.”<sup>12</sup>

I thought her comments were clever and mentally filed them away for a future essay. Now that I have researched the Biblical word מס, I realize that she erred. The word occurs twenty-three times in *Tanakh* (in either its singular or plural form).<sup>13</sup> If we focus on the earliest twenty-one of these verses, there is usually some contextual evidence that the reference is to physical labor.<sup>14</sup> For example, at Genesis 49:15, we have ויהי למס עבד. At Deut. 20:11, we have יהיו לך למס ועבדוך. At Josh. 16:10, we have the same phrase as at Gen. 49:15. At Josh. 17:13, we have ויתנו את הכנעני למס. At Isaiah 31:8, we have ובהוריו למס יהיו. In none of these twenty-one verses is there any indication that the reference is to a financial payment.

The second to last reference chronologically is Lamentations 1:1.<sup>15</sup> Here “forced labor” is probably the meaning as well. See, e.g., the Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon,<sup>16</sup> and the Anchor Bible edition of Lamentations.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This translation of the Bible into English was published in 1611.

<sup>12</sup> P. 85.

<sup>13</sup> These are: Gen. 49:15, Ex. 1:11, Deut. 20:11, Josh. 16:10 and 17:13, Judges 1:28, 1:30, 1:33, and 1:35, II Sam. 20:24, I Kings 4:6, 5:27 (twice), 5:28, 9:15, 9:21 and 12:18, II Chr. 8:8 and 10:18, Isa. 31:8, Prov. 12:24, Lam. 1:1, and Est. 10:1. Another instance may be Deut. 16:10. (See the discussion in Tawil cited below.)

<sup>14</sup> *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (1906), pp. 586–87, does a good job of showing this.

<sup>15</sup> Chronicles was completed in the Second Temple period, but the references there are merely parallels to passages in Kings.

<sup>16</sup> P. 587.

<sup>17</sup> P. 61. Many other modern scholars follow this interpretation. Also agreeing with this interpretation is *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 604. “Forced labor” is also the view of the *Da’at Mikra* commentary but it is stated too briefly. “Forced labor” is also the view of Yaakov Klein and Nadav Na

The import of this verse is that the former “princess of the provinces” (*sarati ba-medinot*) is now being humiliated by “forced labor of its people” (probably in Babylon).<sup>18</sup>

As to the latest chronological occurrence of the word, at Esther 10:1, admittedly the probable meaning of the word **סמ** there is “tax.” This is discussed below.

The meaning “tax,” if it exists in *Tanakh* at all, is a **later meaning** of the word. Fundamentally, the word means something like “forced labor on a governmental project at a location outside of one’s home town.” Most likely, the word originated with forced labor of a nation’s own people and then expanded to forced labor of a conquered people.<sup>19</sup>

The sophisticated word usually used to convey these ideas is *corvée*. See, e.g., the comments on Exodus 1:11 of Rabbi Dr. J.H. Hertz in his Pentateuch. Similarly, *Da’at Mikra* on Exodus 1:11 defines **סמ** as *gius la-avodat kefiyah*.<sup>20</sup>

Kushner is not the only source to make this understandable error in translating *mas*. If you look at the concordance of Avraham Even-Shoshan, the only definition he gives for *mas* is *tashlum hovah le-otzar ha-medinah* (=obligatory payment to the government treasury).<sup>21</sup> It seems that anyone overly influenced by Rabbinic Hebrew and modern Hebrew will make this error in translating the word in *Tanakh*.

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‘aman (see next footnote). See also Yair Zakovitz and Avgidor Shinan, *Megillat Eikhab-Peirush Yisraeli Hadash* (2017), p. 29. I thank Rabbi Jay Goldmintz for this reference and for his insights on the meaning of **סמ** in the various verses.

<sup>18</sup> There is no evidence, however, of forced labor of the Jews exiled to Babylon. One possibility is that the author of the verse at Lam. 1:1 assumed that forced labor was their fate. Another possibility is that the reference is to non-deported Jews utilized in forced labor for the Babylonian officials governing Judea from their center at Mitzpah.

<sup>19</sup> See Yaakov Klein, *Eikhab: Im Mavo U-Peirush* (2017, *Mikra Le-Yisrael* Series), pp. 128–29. (These pages are an appendix where he discusses the meaning of **סמ** throughout *Tanakh*.) I thank Prof. Reuven Kimelman for this reference. See similarly Nadav Na’aman, “From Conscription of Forced Labor to a Symbol of Bondage: *MAS* in the Biblical Literature,” in Yitschak Sefati et al., eds., “*An Experienced Scribe Who Neglects Nothing*”: *Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honor of Jacob Klein* (2005), pp. 746–758.

When *Tanakh* refers to the person in charge of the **סמ**, it is referring to the person in charge of the conscription, not the person who supervises the actual work. Na’aman, p. 750.

<sup>20</sup> See also *Da’at Mikra* to I Kings 4:6, and *Tosafot*, Hag. 8a, s.v. **וישם**.

<sup>21</sup> P. 683.

If one assumes that the word *מס* comes from Hebrew and tries to figure out its root, the theories abound. Some suggestions are: 1) *מסס*, 2) *נסס*, 3) *מכס*, 4) *נשא*, and 5) *נסה*.<sup>22</sup>

But the widespread scholarly view today is that it is a foreign word. The Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon had stated that it was probably a foreign word but did not make a suggestion. Now scholars usually connect it with the word *massu* found in texts from approximately the 17<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E. at the site Alalakh in southern Turkey and a few centuries later in one of the many texts from El-Amarna, Egypt.<sup>23</sup> All these texts are in the Akkadian language.<sup>24</sup> These texts describe workers who were conscripted to work at locations outside of their hometowns.<sup>25</sup>

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Regarding the meaning at Esther 10:1, almost all sources (Rabbinic commentaries and scholars) are willing to give *מס* its later meaning, “tax,” at Esther 10:1.<sup>26</sup> If, however, *מס* meant “forced labor” all twenty-two prior times, there should be a presumption that this is its meaning at Esther 10:1, until we have indications to the contrary.

Admittedly, *וישם* sounds like the placement of a tax. This same verb, however, is used at Judges 1:28 in connection with the “forced labor” meaning, *וישם את הכנעני למס*.

The Soncino commentary is one source that gives *מס* the “forced labor” meaning at Esther 10:1. At the top, the translation of the Jewish Publication Society of America of 1917 had been “tribute.” On the bottom is the comment of the Soncino edition: “Since the Hebrew word everywhere else means ‘forced labor,’ a better translation is ‘imposed forced labor.’”<sup>27</sup> (Perhaps the image of Ahashverosh ordering widespread “forced labor” is an even greater image of strength than his ordering a tax.)

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<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Rashbam and S.D. Luzzatto to Ex. 1:11, Rav S. R. Hirsch to Deut. 16:10, and the *מס* entries in the dictionary of M. Jastrow and the concordance of S. Mandelkern. See also *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 603.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Klein and Na‘aman.

<sup>24</sup> The language of all these texts is considered to be “peripheral Akkadian.” For further explanation, see *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1972), 15:933.

<sup>25</sup> See Na‘aman, pp. 747–49. The etymology of the word *massu* is unknown. Tawil (pp. 217–18) suggests that it originated as a word for “basket” and “basket carriers.”

<sup>26</sup> As to scholarly sources, see, e.g., Klein, Na‘aman, *Da‘at Mikra*, and *Anchor Bible*.

<sup>27</sup> P. 243.

Here, however, we have וישם המלך... מס על הארץ, as opposed to וישם את הכנעני למס. Moreover, no clues are given in the verse as to what such a forced labor might have been for. In contrast, if מס merely meant a tax, no clues are required, as we understand that kings always need revenue. Therefore, the later meaning, “tax,” is the preferable one here.

Erica Brown, in her *Esther: Power, Fate, and Fragility in Exile* (2020), remarks poignantly that, by the time we are at the end of the Megillah, “Haman is no longer with us, but taxes are here to stay.”<sup>28</sup> ❧

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<sup>28</sup> P. 440.