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 מחוספס and the wordמן in the phrase Manor הוא, 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 Manor, two of which, "rounded" and "uncovered", have also been supported by the findings of modern biblical philology. Two medieval commentators rightly interpreted the word Manor in the phrase Manor הוא 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

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


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. 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 מחוספס and the phrase מן-הוא, which also appears only in this biblical story. In the second part, I will present the modern exegesis of the word מחוספס and the phrase מן-הוא, 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 מחוספס

The termuya, 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: דק "fine" (as frost) and מחוספס:

ictured画像 שלמה שלמה סנונית על פנים מחוספס דק מחוספס דק מחוספס

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

Likewise, in the same chapter, v. 31, the manna is described as כזרע גד לבן "white like coriander seed" and its taste is said to resemble the taste of בדולח, apparently meaning "wafers in honey". The adjective מְּחֻסְּפָס appears only once in Biblical Hebrew, in this pericope. In Num 11:8, the manna is again likened to coriander seed and also to בדולח. Its taste is likened there to the לְשַׁד־הַשָּמֶן "rich cream". 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 מְּחֻסְּפָס.

3 The house of Israel named it Manna, it was white like coriander seed, and it tasted like wafers in honey ([Exod 16:31]). שָׁהְפָּעָה אֵילָא אֶת שְּמוֹ מָן וְּהוּא—and the people also gathered it and ground 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]).


5 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". The Talmud 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. Johanan said: [It means] something which is absorbed by the two hundred and forty-eight limbs". 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 מanna ("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 גד, which is used to describe the manna in Exod 16:31 and Num 11:7.

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 (mudhra), which means "rounded.

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6 Thus, for example, the dictionaries of Even-Shoshan (Avraham Even-Shoshan, Ḥāmmilôn Hāḥādāṣ (The New Dictionary) (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1980) and Rāb-Millīm (Yaakov Choueka, Rab-Millīm [Melingo Ltd, 2000–2010], [Melingo Ltd, 2000–2010], https://www.ravmilim.co.il/naerr.asp), entry מחוספס.
7 B. Yoma 75b.
8 In Hebrew: נִשְׁמָא עַל פְּסַח דּוּד, 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 ἵδος ἐπὶ πρόσωπον τῆς ἑρήμου 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 משובח which means "peeled". Also, Onkelos uses this word (see below). The Peshitta adds another description to the מanna that does not appear in the Masoretic Text. Instead of the word לָשׁ ("thin") which according to the Masoretic text is repeated twice in the verse, the Peshitta translates the second appearance of the word מanna into the word כְּרָאָם, which means "covered". The two translations of the Peshitta – "peeled" (uncovered) and "covered" – seem to contradict each other.
like a small ball"/"roundish." 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". In Sefær Hahaššāgā he claims that there exist original quadrilateral roots, as for example the adjective מחוספס. Ibn Janāḥ also discusses the root of this word in three different places in Sefær Hāriqmā. Radaq, in his dictionary, mentions the adjective as a quadrilateral root (מחוספס), and explains it in the same manner: "rolled up", "round". Radaq also mentions the translation of Onqelos, who derives the adjective from the root חש"ף "to uncover".

1b Second Interpretation: “Uncovered”

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

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11 Yehuda Ratzaby, Rav Saadya's Commentary on Exodus (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1998), 69.
13 David Téné, Sefær Hahaššāgā, which is Kitāb Al-Mastalḥaq of Rabbi Jonath Ibn Janāḥ in the Hebrew Translation of Obadiah Ha-Sefaradi (Jerusalem: The Academy of the Hebrew Language and The Bialik Institute, 1996), 176.
15 Entry חוספס (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.
18 "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 ס/ש often interchanges.
20 דק מחוספס – על דנף אנקלוס, מ"המשה יבש"; השם יבש; "המשה יבש"; המעש יבש; המעש יבש; ו"המשה יבש"; accordingly, it is derived from [the same root as] המעש יבש [the white of the rods”; ‘Then says he’, [‘Then says he’, [‘God has exposed’], the sin having interchanged with the [homophones] sāmek, and the second radical (the sāmeq of חסף) is doubled.
dictionary of Menahem b. Saruq. He derives the adjective from the root חס"ף (חסף).

*1c Third Interpretation: "Wrapped"

This is the second interpretation suggested by Rashi. He derives the adjective מחוספס from the root חפ (to wrap). The manna was placed between the two layers of dew like in a wrapping or a package.

*1d Fourth Interpretation: "Scattered"

Rashbam suggests this interpretation on the basis of the context. The manna was scattered on the earth like frost.

2 Modern Scholarship

We shall now turn to the findings of modern scholarship, in order to see which, if any, of the medieval interpretations is the most suitable or close to these findings.

Cassuto, in his commentary on Exodus, suggests explaining the adjective מחוספס as meaning "to be revealed" – this food was revealed/uncovered before the eyes of the people. He adds that in Ugaritic the root חס פ (hsp), which

[and placed at the end of the word]). Nachmanides’ commentary on Exod 16:14 (Mikraot Gedolot Ha-Keter, Exodus, 1: 137).

21 Entry חספס (Angel Sáenz-Badillos, Mahberet Menahem Ben Saruq [Granada: Universidad de Granada, 1985], 183). As an additional example he brings מחשף הלבן.

22 This opinion is also found among modern translators. For example, the YLT (Young's Literal Translation) translates the words דק מחוספס – "a thin, bare thing" (online: https://biblehub.com/exodus/16-14.htm).

23 In his commentary on Exod 16:14 (Mikraot Gedolot Ha-Keter, Exodus, 1:136) Rashi wrote: "But the more probable explanation is that מחוספס is related to the term חפיסה in the phrase 'a valise and a satchel', which is found in the language of the Mishna; when part of the layer of dew had been uncovered, they saw that there was something thin contained within it, between the two layers of dew". This explanation is already found in the Babylonian Talmud (Yoma 75b). On the two explanations offered by Rashi and his preference towards the second one, see: Gamliel, "Rashi," 443.

24 This word has no additional appearances in the Bible; its meaning according to its context is – scattered"; Rashbam’s commentary on Exod 16:14 [in Martin I. Lockshin, Rashbam's Commentary on Exodus: An Annotated Translation (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 173]).

25 Umberto Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1952), 135.
parallels the biblical root חָשִּ֛ף, means "to be revealed". The root חָשִּׁף (with sāmāk) does not exist in Biblical Hebrew. In Aramaic it means "clay, potsherd". In Biblical Hebrew the root חָשִּׁף (with sin) means "to uncover/expose". However, it should be noted that the adjective מחוספס occurs in a book from First Temple times, while the interchanging of the letters ש/ס does not characterize Classical Biblical Hebrew of the First Temple times, only the Late Biblical Hebrew of the Second Temple times.

BDB explains the adjective מחוספס as the result of the doubling of the root חָשִּׁף. The adjective is a shortened form of the noun מחספסף. The dictionary explains the adjective to mean "scale-like" or "scaled off". Etymologically, it compares the adjective to the Arabic verb خَشْف (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".

Ben-Yehuda finds the aforementioned suggestions unsound both etymologically and semantically. 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 "tahspn" (tahsupuna), 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 חָשִּׁף//ערָבִּה – they can mean both "to uncover/expose" and "to pour from one vessel to another". In Ugaritic, there is an additional root חָשִּׁף [hsp], 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 חָשִּׁף, 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.


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 וּשְׁפָּט, as suggested by different scholars, but rather השפנתא, which is derived from the root חָשִּׁף, which later dissimilated into חָשָׁף and חָשָׁף.


32 For example, he rejects the claim that the word cannot possibly be derived from the quadrilateral root חָשִּׁף, or from the root חָשִּׁף.

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* (ﺣِيسَفوﺝ). This word refers to a kind of seed that has the form of small balls.\textsuperscript{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 מַחְסְפֶּס is a shortened form of מחָסְפִּיס. He also refers to the Jewish Aramaic parallel חָסְפִּינָה, which means "scale".\textsuperscript{35}

The dictionary HALOT derives the adjective from the root חָסָפ"ס.\textsuperscript{36} It explains this adjective to mean "crackling", comparing it to the Arabic verb hasafa (ﺣَسَف‎), which means "to crackle".

Tal\textsuperscript{37} suggests that מַחְסְפֶּס 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.\textsuperscript{38} According to Tal, a similar idea lies at the basis of the translation of Onqelos מַכְלָפ "peeled, uncovered".\textsuperscript{39} When the peel is removed, the matter that is exposed is shiny or white. In the margins of the Targum Neofiti, מַחְסְפֶּס is translated into the word היר "white". In the text itself we find the rendering: מַחְסְפֶּס "striped".\textsuperscript{40} Another way of interpreting מַחְסְפֶּס is "smashed", like the meaning of the root מְסֶפ"ס in Talmudic literature, which resembles the meaning of מְסַף – "to squeeze", "to squash".\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{34} With regard to the interchanging of the Arabic letter ג (jim) with the Hebrew ס (סָמָאָק), 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.

\textsuperscript{35} Qaddari, *Dictionary*, 329.

\textsuperscript{36} HALOT, 1:338.


\textsuperscript{38} בן גמליאל: תדע אתה אררו טללים. שבראשונה כשהיה טל יורד על גבי תבן ועל גבי רבן שמעון אמא היה מלבין, שנח: והנה על פני המדבר דק מחספס, "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]).

\textsuperscript{39} See above, n. 18.

\textsuperscript{40} Similarly, the translation attributed to Yonatan renders מַכְלָפ "made up of lines".

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

In the adaptation of the Arabic translation is found the Arabic word, مباشش, which means "to watch" and "to look out", although its root (בש) means "glow" and "radiance". In the Samaritan Aramaic translation we find the verb מנטן, which may mean both "blossoming" and "shining".

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 Janâḥ, and Radaq, was endorsed by Ben-Yehuda. The interpretation suggested by Rashi (his first explanation), Menahem, and Nachmanides, which is based on Onqelos "peeled, uncovered" (ממות), 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. Likewise, 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.\footnote{Chaim Cohen, "The 'HELD method' for comparative Semitic philology," \textit{JANES} \textbf{19} (1989): 14-15.} 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 מחוספס in Modern Hebrew – "not smooth", "coarse" – as already suggested by some of the modern dictionaries (BDB, HALOT, Kaddari) seems to be the least suitable.\footnote{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: \url{https://biblehub.com/exodus/16-14.htm}). They translated the word מחוספס 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 גז; 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...} 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, \textit{Commentary}, 135; Martin Noth, \textit{Exodus: A Commentary} (OTL) [London: SCM, 1962], 132; Samuel E. Loewenstamm, "Manna", in \textit{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 \textit{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: \url{https://www.britannica.com/topic/manna-plant-product#ref275090}.
characteristics: נקָּוֶד “well ground”כַּפַּר “like frost”כְּרַד “white like coriander seed” "its appearance was like that of bdellium". Loewenstamm notes that the resemblance to סדום, 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".

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

C THE WORD מָן-הוא IN THE PHRASE מָן-הוא

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

תָּרְאָה בָּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יִדְבַּקְרוּ אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים מָן-הוא אַחִים לְאָכְלָה מַּה הַלֶּחֶם אֲשֶׁר נָתַּן הָאֱלֹהִים לְךֶם לְאָכְלָה

"When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another: מָן-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 מָן 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 מָן as meaning "sustenance", paralleling the Arabic word מָן (mān) and מֻנָּה (mūna), which means "sustenance".

their translation open to both possibilities – the form of the מָן 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). מָן is mentioned twice in Scripture, in both cases it describes the manna. See above, n.3.
55 Loewenstamm, "Manna", 9-10.
Second Interpretation: Preparation or Provision of Food

Rashi connects the word ‏מן‏ to Dan 1:5: ‏וימן להם המלך‏, which he apparently understands to mean "and the king prepared for them" , since he explains ‏מן‏ to mean ‏הכנת מזון‏ - "preparation of food". Before him, Menahem seems to have explained the word in a similar way, explaining it to mean ‏יער‏ - "arrangement" or "preparation". According to this explanation, the manna fell down from the sky already fit to be eaten.

Ibn Ezra rejects the possibility of explaining ‏מן‏ as the Hebrew parallel of the Arabic word meaning "what". He claims that the Arabic word means "who" and is used only in connection with human beings. Like Rashi, he derives the word from the root ‏מנ"י‏, but explains it to mean ‏זימון‏ - "summoning" or "providing". According to this understanding, the word ‏מן‏ does not come to emphasize that the manna fell down fit to be eaten (although Ibn Ezra most probably agreed to this), but the sheer fact that it was provided by Heaven.

Third Interpretation: "what"

Rashbam explains ‏מן‏ as meaning "what". He claims that this is an Egyptian word, a language which the people of Israel knew. Rashbam refers to additional

KJV (English) and the Dutch State Translation – understand ‏מן‏ as a noun functioning as predicate, and the pronoun ‏הוא‏ as the syntactic subject of the sentence. From the point of view of content and syntax, this possibility is less probable. In a nominal clause, the subject (here, the pronoun ‏הוא‏) usually precedes the predicate, while in the verse under discussion an exceptional word order seems to have been employed, the predicate preceding the subject. If, indeed, ‏מן‏ is a noun functioning as predicate, the word order should have been: ‏הוא מן‏ and not ‏מן הוא‏ (on the nominal clause and its characteristic word order, see for example: Jojón and Muraoka, A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew, 531-538, §154ea-h).

In his commentary on Exod 16:15 Rashi wrote: ‏"מן הוא‏ – הבנת מזון הוא. כב"ו "יירשל המלך‏, ‏מן הוא‏ - [this phrase means:] it is preparation of nourishment, like in the phrase 'and the king prepared portions for them' (Dan 1:5). 'For they did know what it was' – so that they could call it by its proper name). It should be noted that the use of the root ‏מני‏ in the pi’el conjugation with the meaning of "to allot, prepare food", "to appoint, assign, designate" is found mainly in books from the Second Temple period (Daniel, Chronicles. It occurs also in the book of Jonah and in late poetic texts). On this root, see for example Atalya Brenner, "The language of the book of Jonah as a measure for determining the time of its composition", Beit Mikra 24 (1979): 399-400.

Maḥberet Menahem, Entry ‏מן‏ (Sáenz-Badillos, Maḥberet, 242). As additional examples he brings in the verbs ‏וימן‏ (Jon 4:7) and ‏מנה‏ (Dan 1:10).


In his commentary on Exod 16:15 (Mikraot Gedolot Ha-Keter, Exodus, 1:136) Rashbam wrote: ‏"ויאמרו איש אל אחיו מן הוא‏ – לפי שלא ידעו מה הוא; והם דונש פתר כן, כי מחקו המקרה הספק. 'ככל לא ידוע מה הוא', אף אמור 'מן היא', ו carrera שיא ויל ירד, כתוף שיא לשב ומדרש.
examples of the Bible's use of words from foreign languages, such as אד, which appears alongside כה (Esth 3:7), and the phrase ירד התרמה, appearing alongside the phrase יגירה (Gen 31:46). Rashbam notes that also Dunash explained the word to mean "what", but in his opinion it is the Aramaic interrogative word מ, which usually means "who" but in this particular case it means "what". 63

1d Fourth Interpretation: "Kind"

Ibn Janāḥ, in his dictionary, suggests three different interpretations of the word מ. 64 1. מין "species", "kind". He adds that although מין contains the letter י, which is not found in מ, there exist additional examples of this kind of change. 65 2. "To count", "to allot". 3. The Aramaic interrogative word מ, 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 מ to mean "what", noting that this use is unique to the verse in Exodus. 66

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

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63 Also the Septuagint (τί ἕστι τοῦτο = "what is this") and the Vulgate (quid est hoc = "what is this") rightly understood the word מ as an interrogative meaning "what".
64 Entry מ (Bacher, HaSchorashim, 259).
65 Such as the word מ in Isa 16:4, which is the equivalent of the word מ in Prov 30:33.
66 Ben Yehuda, Dictionary, 6:3076.
meaning "who" (as in Aramaic), occurs also in the Canaanite dialect of El-Amarna (manni, manna, mannu) meaning "what". It also occurs in Ugaritic mannu mn meaning "who, the one who" in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic mannî, mannu in Babylonian Aramaic, and in Syriac (man, man), also there meaning both "who" and "what". This is the interpretation accepted by Gesenius, Cassuto, Qaddari, Sarna, Loewenstamm, BDB, and HALOT.

To sum up: In this case, unlike the previous one, the meaning is unequivocal. מ is an interrogative word meaning "what". As shown, among medieval Jewish commentators, only Rashbam arrived at the right solution when explaining מ as an interrogative word meaning "what", in agreement with the findings of modern biblical philology. 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

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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
70 Sokoloff, Palestinian Aramaic, 316-317. According to Sokoloff, the interrogative particle is מ, 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 מ, which means both "what" and "who". In Babylonian Aramaic מ means "what is it".
74 Cassuto, Commentary, 135.
75 Qaddari, Dictionary, 625.
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 מ as an interrogative word, they relied on Aramaic, in which the regular meaning of מ is "who", claiming that only in this verse does it mean "what" (also in Biblical Aramaic we find the word מ in the meaning "what", in the phrase מ אנון מהו... "...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 מחוספס and the interrogative מ in the phrase מ ה in 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 מחוספס, 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 (Menachem, 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 (מקלף), is supported by Gesenius and Cassuto.

Also with regard to the interrogative מ, which forms part of the phrase מ ה 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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