



# The STAFF

More Than a  
Walking Stick



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The innermost mummy form coffin of solid gold representing Pharaoh Tutankhamen as the god Osiris holding his regular emblems, the crook and flail.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ/ THE EGYPTIAN MUSEUM/ CAIRO, EGYPT (15/2/4)

## By R. Raymond Lloyd

**T**HE STAFF—MORE THAN A WALKING stick? Yes! Many words! Many meanings! Much overlapping! “Staff”<sup>1</sup> is one of a variety of words English Bibles use to translate at least 10 different Hebrew words, each having a wide range of function. Four of these words, *matteh*, *maqel*, *misheneth*, and *shebet*, greatly dominate the Old Testament usage.<sup>2</sup> In places, the words are almost synonymous, virtually interchangeable, and yet translations vary widely. Following a thumbnail sketch of each of these four words, usage of such will be examined under the headings: Literal, Symbolic, and Metaphorical.

*Matteh* appears about 250 times<sup>3</sup> in the Hebrew Old Testament with meanings of branch, staff, rod, and tribe. While staff and rod have some literal meaning, they are often associated with the power of Yahweh and thus are instruments of divine activity. Also, *matteh* indicates “tribe.”

*Maqel* occurs but 18 times,<sup>4</sup> variously translated as “staff” or “rod,” and is the most literal of the Hebrew words. It most frequently refers to a walking stick or weapon, adhering to its root meaning of sprout, branch, or stick.

*Misheneth* appears only about 12 times<sup>5</sup> and is fundamentally something to lean upon. Most versions translate it as “staff.” In a few cases *misheneth* carries a symbolic function.

*Shebet*, the second-most predominant word—appearing about 190 times,<sup>6</sup> is largely translated as “tribe.” While this noun has limited literal meaning as a shepherd’s staff or

rod of discipline, its secondary significance is that of a scepter, or symbol of tribal leadership.

### Literal Meaning

Each of these four words has at least some purely literal usage, as a branch, walking stick, pole, staff, rod, or club.

*Matteh*, while being the most predominant word, has limited literal usage. It was the “staff” (walking stick), apparently having some economic value, that Judah gave as one of the pledges to Tamar (Gen. 38:18,25). The term also referred to a stick or pole on which a person would stack bagel-shaped bread, perhaps to keep it away from mice (Lev. 26:26, RSV; Ps. 105:16, RSV; Ezek. 4:16; 5:16, RSV).<sup>7</sup> Jonathan tasted a bit of honey from the tip of his “staff” (1 Sam. 14:27,43). The Levites carried the “poles” that bore the ark of the covenant (1 Chron. 15:15). Habakkuk, in his prayer, spoke of *matteh* as a weapon of punishment, a “spear” or shaft that pierced the invader’s head (Hab. 3:14). It was likewise a weapon the Assyrians used against Israel, translated variously as “club” or “staff” (Isa. 10:15,24 NIV, RSV).

*Maqel* is almost totally literal. When Jacob returned to meet Esau he had “only my staff when I crossed this Jordan” (Gen. 32:10). David went with his “staff” to select stones for his encounter with Goliath, and the giant retorted: “Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?” (1 Sam. 17:40,43).



Above: From the time of Pontius Pilate (A.D. 26-36), bronze coin; obverse, Lituus (a Roman priest’s staff).

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Jeremiah's visions included "the branch of an almond tree" (Jer. 1:11). Hosea condemned Israel for consulting a wooden idol and for being answered by a "rod" [or staff, RSV, KJV] of wood (Hos. 4:12). Jacob took "branches" from select trees, peeled the bark in order to create bare wood streaks, and placed them in a watering trough to influence the breeding of a great flock of speckled and spotted sheep (Gen. 30:37-41). Twice *maqel* depicts a weapon: once as the "staff" Balaam used to beat his donkey (Num. 22:27), and second as the "war clubs" or "handpikes" (RSV) Israel was to destroy following their victory over the enemy (Ezek. 39:9). Furthermore, the Lord commanded the Hebrews that each was to have his "staff" in hand as they ate the Passover meal just prior to the exodus (Ex. 12:11).

*Misheneth*, basically something to lean upon, is the

"staff" a wounded combatant used as he walked around (21:19). The elderly walk with a "cane" or "staff" (Zech. 8:4, RSV, KJV). Strangely, persons dug wells with "staves" (Num. 21:18). Both *shebet* and *misheneth*, translated "rod" and "staff" respectively, appear in Psalm 23:4, picturing the care the shepherd provides his flock. *Shebet* is a short type of club, perhaps knobbed at one end, like a sapling with its root ball, with which to drive off animals or thieves. *Misheneth* is a long pole on which to lean, or to use in guiding and prodding the sheep, or to aid in rescuing a wandering lamb. The shepherd would use his *misheneth* to beat leaves off of trees beyond the reach of sheep, thus providing them food. The shepherd would also lean on his *misheneth* as he watched over his sheep, providing his flock a sense of security and safety.<sup>8</sup>

*Shebet*, in its literal sense, most of the time means a rod used as a weapon. Rarely is it translated "staff." Benaiah fought an Egyptian with a "club" (2 Sam. 23:21). Joab "took three javelins" or "darts" (RSV, KJV) and plunged them into Absalom's heart—perhaps a pointed staff (2 Sam. 18:14). For Assyria (Isa. 10:24) and for "many nations" (Mic. 4:11-5:1) it was a weapon. Also, it was the "rod" that smote the Philistines (Isa. 14:29). More frequently it served disciplinary purposes. The wisdom writer spoke of the "rod of discipline" for a child (Prov. 22:15; see 23:14-15; 29:15) and punishment for the fool (10:13; 26:3). Hebrew slaves were beaten with a *shebet* (Ex. 21:20). The term appears in a more gentle fashion as a threshing instrument for cumin (Isa. 28:27) and as a measuring stick for counting sheep (Lev. 27:32; see Ezek. 20:37; 40:3).

## Symbolic Meaning

The literal staff or rod is the instrument that symbolically conveys the power of Yahweh or of another authority figure.

*Matteh* especially carries this meaning in Exodus and Numbers. The "staff" Moses carried became a snake as a symbol of Yahweh's power and as a visual expression of "divine authority" before Pharaoh (Ex. 4:2,17). The word demonstrates that symbol of power in 5 of the 10 plagues.

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**Left: Part of a glazed brick frieze representing the Persian Royal Guard, from the Palace of Darius at Susa. The guard is carrying a long spear, a quiver, and a strung bow.**

**Below: Copper javelin point; the hooked handle attachment is bent to secure the point to the shaft; from Jericho; dates 2000-1800 B.C.**

**Bottom: From el-Amarna in lower Egypt, a fragment of a slate cubit rod with incised markings showing the divisions at the beginning of a cubit: one finger, two fingers, three fingers, one palm. Dated 1350-1320 B.C.**

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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM/ OXFORD, ENGLAND (31/31/69)

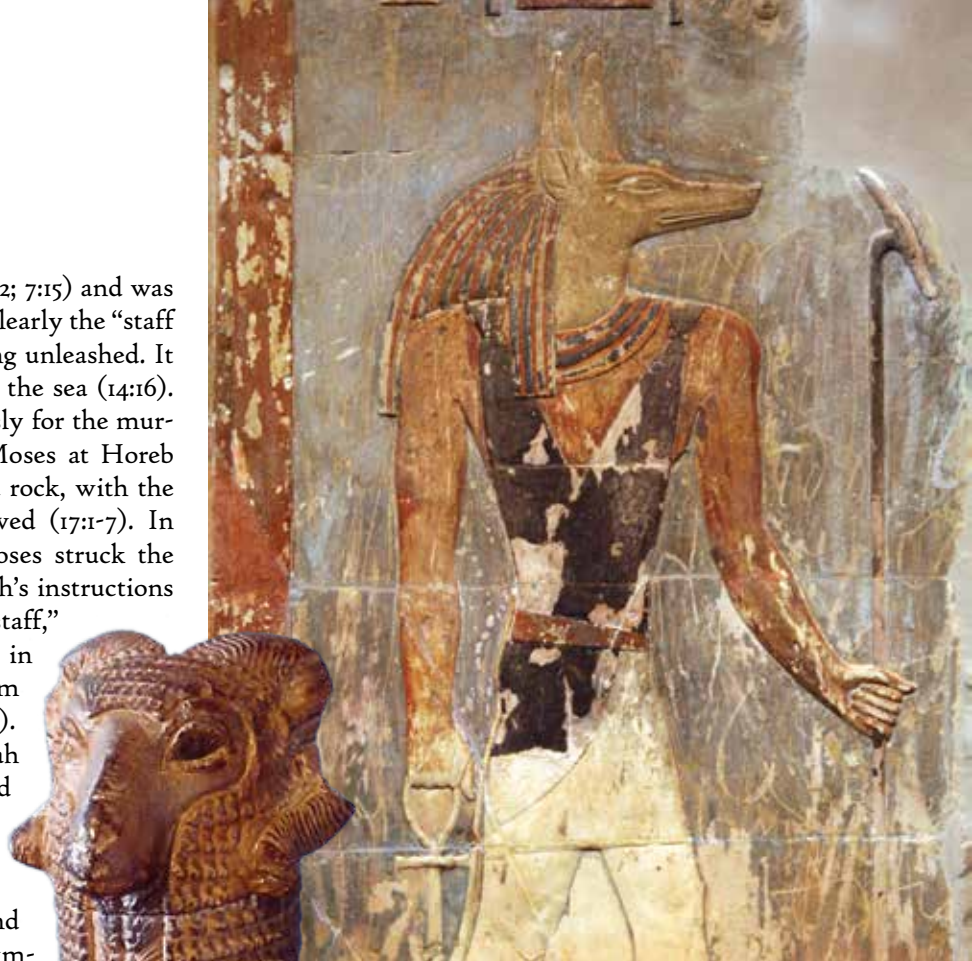


While the “staff” belonged to Moses (4:2; 7:15) and was frequently called Aaron’s “staff,” it was clearly the “staff of God” (4:20; 17:9); His power was being unleashed. It was the same staff Moses raised to part the sea (14:16). Yahweh once again provided miraculously for the murmuring Hebrews as He commanded Moses at Horeb to strike the most unlikely of sources, a rock, with the same “staff.” Consequently, water flowed (17:1-7). In a similar experience (Num. 20:1-13) Moses struck the rock with his “staff,” contrary to Yahweh’s instructions to speak to the rock. Further, Aaron’s “staff,” made from an almond tree, was placed in front of the tabernacle as a message from Yahweh to the “rebellious” flock (17:8-10).

*Maqqel*—Yahweh instructed Zechariah to break two “staves” (“Favor” and “Union”), thus annulling the covenant with Israel that had provided protection from enemies, and “breaking the family bond between Judah and Israel,” demonstrating prophetic symbolism (Zech. 11:7b,10a,14). On the other hand, Jeremiah described Moab’s authority as a “glorious staff” that was “broken” (Jer. 48:17). These are the only two uses of *maqqel* in a symbolic sense.

*Misheneth*—While primarily literal, in a couple situations “staff” does demonstrate the authority behind it. When “with the tip of the staff” the angel touched the meat and bread, miraculous power was released, and the foods were consumed (Judg. 6:21). In addition, it conveys the idea of Egypt’s diminished power, described as a “staff of this bruised [or broken] reed” (2 Kings 18:21, KJV; Isa. 36:6; see Ezek. 29:6).

*Shebet*—The leader or chief of a company of people carried a staff, most frequently translated “scepter,” symbolic of authority (Judg. 5:14). “The scepter will not depart from Judah” (Gen. 49:10a) signified that Judah’s leadership among the early tribes would continue. Amos voiced the judgment Yahweh would bring on those who hold the “scepter” in “Beth Eden” and “Ashkelon” (Amos 1:5,8). Yahweh climaxed the promise of the Hebrew captives’ return with these words: “Assyria’s pride will be brought down and Egypt’s scepter will pass away” (Zech. 10:11b). Regarding Babylon, Isaiah stated, “The LORD has broken...the scepter of the rulers” (Isa. 14:5). Likely referring to David, and with messianic overtones, Balaam depicted a royal power symbolized by “a scepter will rise out of Israel” (Num. 24:17b). Translated as “rod” it conveys the disciplining power of God (Job. 21:9).



**Above left: Ram’s head that likely decorated the head of a staff; unearthed at Ur.**

**Above right: Bronze spearhead Mesopotamian;**



**1200–1000 B.C.**

**Top: From the tomb of Mentuemhat, depiction of Anubis, the canine (perhaps jackal) headed deity. Anubis carries in**

**his left hand a scepter and an ankh in the other. Mentuemhat was the mayor of Thebes and was Upper Egypt’s governor from about 700–650 B.C.**

## Metaphorical

From its literal significance as something to lean on, the staff became the figure of speech to describe the major sociological unit—the tribe. *Matteh* and *shebet* are being considered together because little difference, if any, exists in the meaning of the two words as “tribe.” English Bibles translate *matteh* as “tribe” in a “majority of its 250” or so appearances, and *shebet* in approximately three-fourths of its 190 or so.<sup>9</sup> *Matteh* carries the idea of various branches coming from the same tree trunk, thus a reference to Jacob and his offspring, hence the term “tribe.” *Shebet* often depicts the “scepter” of a tribal, city, or national leader, and it may well have developed into the term for the “tribe” as being under the leadership of the one carrying the scepter.<sup>10</sup> Numbers 18:2 uses both terms, which Fabry translates as “tribe of Levi, branch of your father,” a picturesque, yet literal translation.<sup>11</sup> Genealogy was vital to the Hebrews and all the tribes recognized they were branches of the same ancestral tree trunk, each branch led by a patriarch or chief with a “staff.”

SPEARHEAD: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ JAMES MCLEMORE/ THE MARIAN EAKINS ARCHAEOLOGICAL COLLECTION/ GOLDEN GATE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY/ MILL VALLEY, CA. (10/30/20) RAM'S HEAD: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY (3/24/12)

*Matteh* appears over and over in the tribal listings: census (Num. 1:20-46), encampment (2:3-31), order of march (10:14-27), and division of land (Josh. 15:1-19:48). *Shebet* appears more in generic tribal references, for example, “tribes of Israel” (Ex. 24:4; Judg. 20:2; Ezek. 48:19; see Josh. 7:14; Deut. 29:18).<sup>12</sup> *Misheneth* and *maqel* have little or no figurative meaning as “tribe.”

## Connections

Many words! Many meanings! Much overlapping! Much interchange! “Staff” as a branch made into something on which to lean conveys an underlying and unifying theme that runs through virtually every use of these words and their translations. Support and security are the dominant themes. Clearly evident is the literal idea of the walking stick, cane, club, or rod that gives support for the individual; support for the flock; and the club used to drive away attacking animals or humans. The same theme is evident as the staff or scepter depicts power, authority, and thus support on the part of the leader, be he human or divine. The figure of Yahweh standing on the rock (Ex. 17:6), the rock Moses was to strike with his staff to bring forth water, creates the strong impression of the Lord’s support and provision for His people, symbolized by the staff. And on the tribal concept, the common ancestral heritage—that brotherhood of tribes provided mutual support, cohesiveness, and security for the Israelites from their earliest days and throughout most of their history. That concept transcends the pages of the Old Testament in messianic overtones, which speaks of a scepter, which shall not depart from Judah until he comes to whom it belongs (Gen. 49:10). The promise was indeed made complete in Christ, who was and is the ultimate staff of support, security, and salvation. 📌

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Dated to about A.D. 160, a statue of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing. The god leans on a staff, around which his sacred animal, the snake, is coiled. Found at the Sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidaurus, which was about 25 miles south of Corinth.

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).
2. Robert Young, *Analytical Concordance to the Bible*, 22nd ed. (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1954), 823, 929. Each of the additional Hebrew words occurs four times or less. This article does not consider the two Greek words of the New Testament because of infrequent use (about 15 times) and with primarily the literal meaning as “staff” or “rod.”
3. Heinz-Josef Fabry, “מַטֵּה” (*matteh*, staff) in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (TDOT), ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. Douglas W. Stott, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 241—“252 times”; “Matteh” in *Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* (EDBW), ed. Stephen D. Renn (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 927—“nearly 250 contexts”; C. Van Dam, “Rod, Staff” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), 693—“about 250 times.”
4. “Maqqel” in EDBW, 927—“eighteen occurrences”; Young, *Analytical Concordance*, 823, 929; Van Dam, “Rod, Staff,” 693—“18 times.”
5. Van Dam “Rod, Staff,” 693—“11 times”; “Mish’ enet” in EDBW, 928—“12 occurrences”; Young, *Analytical Concordance*, 929.
6. H. J. Zobel, “שֵׁבֶט” (*sebet*, staff) in TDOT, vol. 14 (2004), 303—“192 times”; Van Dam, “Rod, Staff,” 693—“190 times.”
7. “מַטֵּה” in Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson, vol. 2 (New York: Koninklijke Brill, 2000), 573; NIV translates “matteh” here as “supply(ies),” having little relation to the literal meaning.
8. G. M. Mackie, “Rod” in *A Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. James Hastings, vol. 4, part 1 (1898; repr., Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2004), 291.
9. H. J. Zobel, “שֵׁבֶט” (*sebet*, staff), 306, “overwhelming majority,” see fn. 30—“143 times”; G. M. Mackie, “Rod,” 291, fn.—“183 times.” See Young, *Analytical Concordance*, 1000-1001.
10. Van Dam, “Rod, Staff,” 693.
11. Fabry, “מַטֵּה” (*matteh*, staff), 245.
12. *Ibid.*, 246. Neither word is ever used of Joseph as a “tribe,” but as “house” (Josh. 17:17) or “sons of” (17:14,16). Ephraim and Manasseh are both referred to as “tribes.”

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