

MIŠKĀN AND ʾŪHEL MŌĒĒD: ETYMOLOGY, LEXICAL DEFINITIONS, AND EXTRA-BIBLICAL USAGE¹

RALPH E. HENDRIX
Andrews University

Miškān and ʾūhel mōēēd are names for the cultic dwelling place of YHWH described in Exod 25-40. This, the first of three studies on *miškān* and ʾūhel mōēēd, will consider the etymologies of the terms, their lexical definitions, and parallel terms found in non-Semitic languages. Particular attention will be given to their usage in Ugaritic and their translation or interpretation in the LXX. The intention of this paper is to form some notion of the basic meaning of these terms/phrases as a foundation for a second study which focuses on their usages as witnessed within the text of Exod 25-40. A third study will present the literary structure of Exod 25-40, which these terms help to form.

1. The Etymology and Lexical Definition of *Miškān*.

Miškān is a nominal form of *škn*, a verb which has the meaning of "self-submission" (once), "settle," "rest," "stop," "live in," "inhabit," "sojourn," "dwell" (in its *qal* form); "let/make to live/dwell" (in the *piel*); "settle," "let/make to live/dwell" (in the *hiphil*).² Its Assyrian cognate is *šakānu* ("set," "lay," "deposit") which yields the nominal form *maškanu* ("place," "dwelling place").³

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²W. L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1971), 369-370; F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, eds., *The New Brown, Driver and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (BDB) (Grand Rapids, 1981), 1014-1016; L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, eds., *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (KB) (Leiden, 1958), 2:575; J. O. Lewis, "The Ark and the Tent," *RevExp* 74 (1977): 545; E. Klien, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (New York, 1987), 391.

³BDB, 1014. See also A. L. Oppenheim and E. Reiner, eds., *The Assyrian*

The Hebrew noun *miškān* is generally understood to mean "dwelling place," the identity of which is determined by the context in which the term is found.⁴ In addition, Holladay indicates its use for "home," "tomb," and "(central) sanctuary."⁵ J. O. Lewis suggests that *škn* is "rooted in the nomadic past of Israel and literally means 'to pitch a tent.'"⁶ He distinguishes *škn* from *yšb*, noting that the latter is the normal term used for "dwelling in houses," from a basic meaning "to sit down." That is, *škn* refers to a nonsedentary dwelling place (Lewis suggests a tent) while *yšb* refers to a sedentary dwelling place (e.g., a house). Thus, one may arrive at the preliminary conclusion that the verb *škn* refers generally to some form of nonsedentary dwelling, perhaps "camping" in modern parlance, and that the noun *miškān* therefore refers to the place of that activity: a nonsedentary "dwelling-place," a "camp," or perhaps a "camp site." The emphasis of *miškān* is therefore on the nature of the camp—its nonsedentary nature.

Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, volume 10, part I (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1977), 369-373, where the following basic definitions for *maškanu* are given: "1. threshing floor, empty lot, 2. small agricultural settlement, 3. emplacement, (normal) location, site (of a building), base (of a statue), stand (for a pot), residence, position, 4. tent, canopy; 5. fetter (for a slave), 6. pledge given as security, and 7. sanctuary (?)." Definition #4 indicates a broader meaning than simply "tent" or "canopy" (372). An appropriate interpretation may be "camp," as suggested by at least two of the seven examples given.

⁴BDB, 1015; J. J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt: Studies in Exodus*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 254.

⁵Holladay lists these primary texts: Num 16:24; Isa 22:16; Lev 15:31; and notes the meaning as "(central) sanctuary (74 of 130 times), tabernacle Exod 25:9" (219).

⁶Lewis, 545.

⁷Ibid. Cf. Holladay, 146. F. M. Cross points out that the usual "priestly" word for people "dwelling" was *yšb*, and was never used of YHWH except when referring to His "throne" or "to enthrone" (F. M. Cross, Jr., "The Tabernacle," *BA* 110 [1947]: 67). M. Haran ("The Divine Presence in the Israelite Cult and the Cultic Institutions," *Bib* 50 [1969]: 259) concurs with a differentiated use of *škn* and *yšb* in the deuteronomic writings where *škn* speaks of "God's presence in a chosen place," but *yšb* refers to "his staying in heaven." For various uses of these two roots, see M. H. Woudstra, *The Ark of the Covenant from Conquest to Kingship* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1965), 69-70.

Especially important is the fact that no particular object is inherently associated (etymologically) with the term, which may apply either to a living being or an inanimate object. The breadth of the meaning of *miškān* must be taken into account in determining its use in context. To understand the meaning of *miškān*, one must ask: "Dwelling place of *what* or of *whom*? The answer must be found in the context. In practice, the answer is subject to interpretation flavored by theological and hermeneutical presuppositions.

As a case in point, considerable discussion has been generated concerning how *miškān* relates to the dwelling place of YHWH as described in the biblical text. R. Friedman defines *miškān* as the "inner fabric" over which is the "outer fabric" (*ʾōhel*), both comprising a "single structure."⁸ F. M. Cross defines *škn* "to encamp" or "to tent"; therefore, he suggests that *miškān* originally meant "tent" and later came to mean "the" tent par excellence.⁹ On the basis of Ras Shamra evidence, G. E. Wright defines *miškān* as "tent-dwelling."¹⁰ G. H. Davies takes a broader view, defining *miškān* as "tabernacle, dwelling, dwelling-place, habitation, abode, encampment"; however, he allows that the term may refer to the "shrine as a whole" (Exod 25:9) or "virtually the holy of holies" (Exod 26:1).¹¹ Here then is provided the prevalent scope of definition: as specific as the "inner fabric" within the tent, yet as broad as "abode" or "encampment."

To add confusion, *miškān* is often translated "tabernacle," which in turn, is derived from the Latin Vulgate's *tabernaculum*, meaning

⁸R. E. Friedman argues that the Mosaic construction was just the right size to fit into the Most Holy Place of the Solomonic Temple ("The Tabernacle in the Temple," BA 43 [1980]: 243, 245). Friedman's "outer tent" (*miškān*)/"inner tent" (*ʾōhel mŌʿĒd*) idea is clearly at odds with their relationship described in Exod 26:7 (see below, in the main text).

⁹Cross, 65-66.

¹⁰G. E. Wright, "The Significance of the Temple in the Ancient Near East, Part III: The Temple in Palestine-Syria," BA 17 (1944): 72.

¹¹G. H. Davies, "Tabernacle," in IDB, 1962 ed., 4:498. The breadth of this definition is not justified in Exod 25-40. Certainly Exod 26:1 is not only the "holy of holies," as Davies suggests. The larger context of which Exod 26:1 is a part (Exod 26:1-37; especially v. 33) includes both *haqqōdeš* ("the holy") and *qōdeš haqq' dašim* ("the holy of holies"). In Exod 26:1, *miškān* refers to the two-compartment unit.

have been incomprehensible or even reprehensible, given the circumstances of the earlier period. The writer called the dwelling place by a term which was immediately understandable within his cultural framework. *Miškān*, it seems, calls to mind a nonsedentary type of dwelling place: the "camp," not particularly a structure itself, but a place where an object or a being abides.

2. The Etymology and Lexical Definition of ʾŪhel MôʿĒḏ

The genitival construct *ʾūhel mōʿĒḏ* is often translated "tent of meeting" in modern versions.¹⁵ The Hebrew word *ʾūhel* means "tent."¹⁶ Variations of the word are found in Aramaic (*ʾāhalāʾ*), Phoenician (*ʾhl*), Ugaritic (*ʾhl*), and Egyptian [*(a)har(u)*].¹⁷ The Assyrian cognate is *ālu*.¹⁸ The Vulgate translates both *ʾūhel* and *miškān* as *tabernaculum* (occasionally, *tentorium*), obscuring the discrete meaning of the Hebrew terms.¹⁹ The term *môʿĒḏ* is a nominal form of the verb *yʿd*: "designate," "appear," "come," "gather," "summon," "reveal oneself." Its basic meaning is "appointed time/place/sign," "meeting place," "place of assembly," or "to meet by appointment."²⁰ The word occurs in Ugaritic (*môʿīdu*) and Egyptian (*mwʿd*).²¹

¹⁵NIV, RSV, KJV = "tent of the congregation".

¹⁶Holladay, 5-6. Cf. KB, 17; Klien, 9; BDB, 13-14; J. P. Lewis, "ʾŪhel," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 1980 ed., 1:15; Davis, 254.

¹⁷Klien disallows a connection between the Hebrew *ʾhl* and the Arabic *ʾhl* (p. 9). See Cross, 59-60; K. Koch, "ʾhl," *TDOT*, 1:123; Davies, 4:499.

¹⁸BDB, 13. Oppenheim and Reiner indicate that *ālu* had four basic meanings: "1. city; 2. city as a social organization; 3. village, manor, estate; 4. fort, military strong point" (*Assyrian Dictionary*, volume 1, part I, 379). In each case, *ālu* refers in some respect to either a sedentary dwelling or sedentary dweller (*ibid.*, 379-390). This may indicate a sedentarized origin for the nonsedentary Hebrew *ʾūhel*.

¹⁹Davies, 4:498.

²⁰*Ibid.*; Holladay, 137-138, 186; Klien, 327; E. T. Mullen, Jr., *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature*, Harvard Semitic Monographs, no. 24 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 174-175; BDB, 417; and Lewis, 1:15.

²¹Mullen, 117, 129; J. A. Wilson, "The Assembly of a Phoenician City," *JNES* 4 (1945): 245.

Combining the two words, the phrase *ʾhēl mōʿēd* carries the notion "tent of the place of meeting/assembly/appointment," or perhaps more interpretively: "tent where YHWH reveals Himself." Brichto calls this the "Tent of Encounter" or "rendezvous."²² This tent was the place of appointed gathering, known more by the event associated with it (meeting, gathering, or assembly) than by its physical character (hides over a wooden frame). In the YHWHistic cult, it was perceived to be the location of the ultimate cult event. With *ʾhēl mōʿēd*, the focus is on the event: "meeting/assembly/appointment/revelation." This is quite distinct from *miškān*, which focuses on the place rather than the event.

3. Parallel Terms in Ugaritic Sources

The Ugaritic language provides a lexical cross-reference for Semitic-language documents written in the Middle Bronze III (IIC)/Late Bronze I time frame.²³ Useful for this study are cognates for *miškān* and *ʾhēl mōʿēd* which appear in the Ugaritic corpus, especially instances in which the terms are found in close literary formation.

²²H. C. Brichto, "The Worship of the Golden Calf: A Literary Analysis of a Fable on Idolatry," *HUCA* 54 (1983): 23.

²³For a brief account of the discovery of the Ugaritic materials, see P. C. Craigie, *Ugarit and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 7-25; and A. Curtis, *Cities of the Biblical World: Ugarit Ras Shamra* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 18-33. See H. O. Thompson, *Biblical Archaeology* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1987), xxv. Stratum I.3 at Ras Shamra (ca. 1365-1185 B.C.E.) is the latest occupation of Ugaritic civilization on a site continually occupied since Neolithic Stratum V.C, ca. 6500 B.C.E. (Curtis, 41). The ʾAqhat and Keret epics, in which our words are found, are dated "between the seventeenth and fifteenth centuries B.C." (Mullen, 2). See also J. Gray, *The KRT Text in the Literature of Ras Shamra: A Social Myth of Ancient Canaan* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1955): 2.

The Egyptian equivalent for *ʾhēl mōʿēd* (*mwʿd*) is also found in the Tale of Wen-Amon (ca. 1100 B.C.E.), referring to a city "assembly," and in a document from Byblos (7th cent. B.C.E.); see Mullen, 129, n. 31; and Wilson, 245. For more on these two documents, see Cross, 65; R. J. Clifford, "The Tent of El and The Israelite Tent of Meeting," *CBQ* 33 (1971): 225; and H. Goedicke, *The Report of Wenamun* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 123.

The verb form *škn* occurs sixteen times in Ugaritic literature; its noun form (*mškn*) appears twice.²⁴ The paucity of occurrences of *mškn* makes definition problematic. Both occurrences of the noun are plural and both seem to refer to the multitudinous gods' private "dwelling places," not a meeting chamber or council place.²⁵ The Ugaritic equivalent of *môʿēd* is limited to a single occurrence of the phrase *puhru mōʿidu* meaning "the gathered assembly."²⁶ An equivalent to the Hebrew phrase *ʾihel mōʿēd* does not appear in Ugaritic texts.

The equivalent term for *ʾihel* (Ugaritic, *ʾhl*) does occur and is especially important for this study in that the term occurs in association with *mškn* in each of its two occurrences.²⁷ Two lines of the Keret epic read:

*ti'tayu ʾiluma la-ʾahalihum,
daru ʾili la-miškanatihum.*²⁸

Mullen provides the following translation, noting the association of *la-ʾahalihum* and *la-miškanatihum*:

The gods proceed to their tents
The assembly of ʾEl to their dwellings.²⁹

²⁴For a list of occurrences of *škn*, see R. E. Whitaker, *A Concordance of the Ugaritic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 594. For the occurrences of *mškn* see p. 436.

²⁵This study follows the numbering system of A. Herdner, *Corpus des Tablettes en Cunéiformes Alphabétiques Découvertes à Ras Shamra-Ugarit de 1929 à 1939 (CTA)*, Mission de Ras Shamra, 10, 2 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1963), quoted in Curtis, 80, 82. The specific references are to CTA 17.V.33 and CTA 15.III.19; cf. Whitaker, 436. See also S. Segert, *A Basic Grammar of the Ugaritic Language: With Selected Texts and Glossary* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 193; also C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Manual* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1955), 327.

²⁶Mullen, 117, 129 (CTA 2.I.14, 15, 16-17, 20, 31). Also Clifford, 224-225. See I. Al-Yasin, *The Lexical Relation Between Ugarit and Arabic*, Shelton Semitic Series, no. 1 (New York: Shelton College, 1952), 75. For a note on *ʾhl*, see *ibid.*, 37.

²⁷Whitaker, 436, reads: *tity. ilm.l ahl hm. / ʾr il.l mškn hm . . .* The word *ʾhl* [cf. *ahl*] occurs in CTA 17.V.32; CTA 15.III.18; CTA 19.IV.214; CTA 19.IV.222; CTA 19.IV.212; *ibid.*, 9. *Mškn* occurs in CTA 17.V.32 and CTA 15.III.19; *ibid.*, 436.

²⁸CTA 15.III.18-19.

²⁹*Ibid.* Mullen states that there is "here the parallelism of *ʾahalihum* and *miškanatum*, thus equating the tent with the tabernacle structure (note 42). The same

Here *ʾahalihum* ("their tents") is poetically associated with *miškanatihum* ("their dwelling places"). However, there is no equivalent Ugaritic phrase for *ʾhel mōʿēd*. The lack of an exact parallel demands an interpretive step by the reader. The terms are associated in the Ugaritic, but perhaps not in the same way as they are in the Hebrew. One would expect identical phrases if the Ugaritic and the Hebrew were synonymous or identical. In fact, the narrative speaks of a plural number of gods going to their plural tents. This is quite unlike the context of Exod 25-40 (and of the whole MT which allows no plurality of true gods). In line 19, the "assembly" is going to a plural number of "dwellings." The tents are not "tents of assembly," or of "meeting," or of "appointment," or of "revelation." They are simply personal tents, private tents, not a community tent.

The word *mšknt* also appears in the Ugaritic Aqhat epic:

h.tbˁ.ktr. l ahl,

*h.hyn.tbˁ.l mšknt*³⁰

H. Ginsberg provides the following translation:

Kothar departs for/from his tent,

Hayyin departs for/from his tabernacle.³¹

Although "tabernacle" is a poor translation for *mšknt* (better would be "dwelling" or "dwelling place"), the terms *ʾhl* and *mšknt* clearly associate linguistically, in poetic parallelism. This parallelism, however, does not necessarily imply synonymity. The absence of the equivalent for the Hebrew *ʾhel mōʿēd* limits this passage's possibility of clarifying the Hebrew text. Thus, an in-depth analysis of this Ugaritic text is unnecessary for the current study.

parallelism is common in Hebrew literature (cf. Num 24:5; Isa 54:2; Jer 30:18; etc, where *ʾhel* and *miškān* are in parallel)." Mullen accepts that the *miškān* "may be equated with" the *ʾhel*, a conclusion accepted without critical evaluation (pp. 168-175, passim) and therefore misunderstands the term as used in the Hebrew text. Poetic parallelism should not be confused with synonymity, either in the Hebrew text or in the Ugaritic material, especially since there is a difference in actual terminology (*ʾhel mōʿēd* compared with the Ugaritic *ʾhl*) and a perceived contextual connotative nuance.

³⁰CTA 17.V.31-33; Whitaker, 436.

³¹H. L. Ginsberg, "Ugaritic Myths, Epics, and Legends," in *ANET*, 151. See his n. 19 for the "for/from" alternative reading.

Summarizing: the Ugaritic literature witnesses two instances of *mšknt*, both times in close connection with *ʾhl*. While clearly in poetic association, the words need not be synonymous. So, little additional definition from Ugaritic sources is added to the definition of *miškān* and *ʾihel mōʿēd* already obtained from Hebrew (by way of lexicography and word studies). No occurrence of “tent of assembly” (*ʾhl mʿd*) is witnessed in Ugaritic materials currently available. In short, the Ugaritic evidence shows a similarity in basic meaning between the two terms (that is, both are places to inhabit), but does not offer additional insight in regard to the nuance of their definitions.

The Ugaritic language makes no clear distinction in meaning between the words *mšknt* and *ʾhl*, whereas the Hebrew clearly does. The reason for this may be related to cultural factors. The texts quoted above are normally dated in the Middle Bronze III (IIC)/Late Bronze I, between the 17th and 15th centuries B.C., when Ugarit was already an urban center. The chapters in Exodus, according to traditional views on the authorship of the book and the internal chronology of the book, deal with the late 15th century. Israel was at the time a pastoral and nonsedentary people who became sedentarized much later. Given these divergent cultural conditions, it is possible that *mšknt* and *ʾhl* did not convey the nonsedentary/sedentary differentiation simply because of cultural constraints.³² Furthermore, it is possible that the *miškān* and *ʾihel mōʿēd* phraseology typical of contemporary Late Bronze Semitic cultures may have been redefined when adopted into the terminology of the YHWHistic religion. Terms commonly used by surrounding peoples, who had a pantheon of gods, were inadequate—without redefinition—to convey the appropriate theological meaning within the YHWH cult.

4. Parallel Terms in the Septuagint

This work is concerned primarily with the contextual use of *miškān* and *ʾihel mōʿēd* in Exod 25-40 of the Hebrew. The way these

³²The reality of a period of Israelite nonsedentary pastoralism is currently the subject of discussion within the archaeological community. The issues are multiple and complex, but some scholars contend for some sort of nonsedentary pastoralism (see I. Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1988)).

words are translated in the LXX is surveyed in a search for further information. *Miškān* is translated exclusively by *skēnē*, while the common translation for *ῥhel mō'ed* is *skēnē tou martyriou*.³³ Hence, both *miškān* and *ῥhel* (in the phrase *ῥhel mō'ed*) are translated by the same word *skēnē*. W. Bauer defines *skēnē* as "tent" or "booth."³⁴ J. Thayer agrees with this definition—"tent" or "tabernacle"—and adds that *skn* is used "chiefly for *ῥhel* [in the LXX and] often also for *miškān*."³⁵ Bauer notes the use of *skēnē* for both *miškān* and *ῥhel* in his definition of *hē skēnē tou martyriou*, "the tabernacle or Tent of Meeting."³⁶

Like the English and Latin translations, the LXX shows little differentiation in its choice of terms for *miškān* and *ῥhel mō'ed*.³⁷ As a significant OT textual tradition, the LXX witnesses to an understanding of the Pentateuch which postdates its writings by many centuries. That both *miškān* and *ῥhel mō'ed* are translated most often by *skēnē* may be attributed to several causes, one of which is a diluted perception of their connotational nuance. That is, by the time of the LXX, the two terms had come to mean virtually the same things; Israel had by then long been sedentarized.

5. Summary and Conclusions

The noun *miškān* (derived from the verb *škn*) means "dwelling place." It concerns a "place" or "site" (similar to the modern word "camp"), and carries connotations of transience. It should not be

³³A. Rahlfs, *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1949).

³⁴W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, 2d ed. rev. and aug. by F. W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 754.

³⁵J. H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Company, 1886), 577.

³⁶Bauer, 754.

³⁷The argument could be made that *miškān* and *ῥhel mō'ed* are synonymous, and therefore the single Greek term is adequate for both. The analysis of the use of these terms in Exod 25-40 clearly shows the terms to be similar but not synonymous (see note 2, above). For a more comprehensive view of the occurrences of *skēnē* in Exod 25-40, see G. Morrish, ed., *A Concordance of the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 222-223.

limited to a specific form of "dwelling" (particularly not the English "tent" or Latin *tabernaculum*), as this leads to confusion with *ʾohel*. The phrase *ʾohel môʿēd* is a genitival construct meaning "tent of assembly" or "encounter." It was the name of the structure in which the Divine and human met, emphasizing the event rather than the structure.

Parallel terms found in the Ugaritic literature provide no additional information beyond that already known from the Hebrew. In fact, the Ugaritic literature offers only limited insight because the word *ʾhl* does not appear in genitival construction with *môʿēd* or its equivalent. Furthermore, the differentiation between the nonsedentary and sedentary meanings of the words in Hebrew appears to have been lost.³⁸ As was noted, the reason for this could well have been that Ugarit, unlike Israel, was sedentary and urban.

The LXX, by translating both *miškān* and *ʾohel* by *skēnē*, obscures the meaning of the Hebrew terms. It would seem that by the time the LXX was translated, the words were understood as synonyms. Again, the cultural setting of a sedentary and urban people would have assisted in eroding the differences. The Vulgate, likewise, fails to distinguish between the two.

Two future articles on *miškān* and *ʾohel môʿēd* will complete the study of the meaning of the words. The first will deal with the usage of the terms in Exod 25-40. The second will present an overview of the literary structure of those chapters. This introductory study has shown scholarly insensitivity to the connotational nuance of the words. The next two studies will reveal the pitfalls resulting from this insensitivity.

³⁸This suggestion, made to the author by David Merling, finds support in Mullen (170), who recognizes "that the deities were pictured as tent dwellers, even by the highly urbanized culture of Ugarit." Mullen wonders at this anachronism, yet misses the significance of this for interpreting the Hebrew text (see Whitaker, 436). The vital point is that a nonsedentary (tent-dwelling) culture is being described by a sedentary (urbanized) writer, thus potentially giving rise to the blurred terminological nuance posited above.