



spindle

Contents:

- Introduction
- 1. Root and Comparative Material
- 2. Formal Characteristics
- 3. Syntagmatics
- 4. Ancient Versions
- 5. Lexical/Semantic Fields
- 6. Exegesis
 - 6.1 Textual Evidence
 - 6.2 Pictorial Material
 - 6.3 Archaeology
- 7. Conclusions
- Notes
- Bibliography / Abbreviations

Introduction

Grammatical type: n.m.

Occurrences: 2× HB (0/1/1); 0× Sir; 0× Qum; 0× Inscr. (Total: 2)

Nebiim: 2 Sam 3:29

Ketubim: Prov 31:19

A.1 The noun must be distinguished from the homonym פֶּלֶךְ II, ‘district’ (8× in Neh 3:9-18; LXX: *περίχωρος*), which is a loanword derived from Akk. *pilku*, ‘boundary’, plur ‘district’ (*CAD* P, 373-74 s.v. *pilku* A; cf. KBL, 763; *DCH* VI, 696; Ges¹⁸, 1056). Demsky (1983) proposed to interpret פֶּלֶךְ II as a loanword deriving from Akk. *pilku*, ‘work assignment building walls’ (*CAD* P, 374-75 s.v. *pilku* B). See also *DCH* VI, 696-97 s.v. פֶּלֶךְ III; cf. 6.1 B.1 for Holloway 1987. However, פֶּלֶךְ II is undoubtedly a geographic designation, as is shown by a comparison of שַׂר הַמְצַפָּה, ‘ruler of Mizpah’ (Neh 3:19), and שַׂר פֶּלֶךְ הַמְצַפָּה, ‘ruler of the פֶּלֶךְ of Mizpah’ (Neh 3:15), with פֶּלֶךְ apparently designating the area around Mizpah (Williamson 1985: 206).

1. Root and Comparative Material

A.1 ROOT: The noun 𐎶𐎵𐎶 has cognates in several Sem. languages, namely in Akk., Ug., Phoen., PBHeb., JAram., and Arab. Von Soden (1981: 163) suggested that 𐎶𐎵𐎶 together with its cognates in other Sem. languages is ultimately a loanword from Sumerian, but this is an unfounded suggestion. The word's origin is unknown.

A.2 AKKADIAN: The Akk. cognate *pilakku* (other spellings: *pilaqqu*, *pilaggu*) means 'spindle' (*CAD* P, 371-73). The same word is often written as BAL, the logographic equivalent of *pilakku*. The logogram is often but not always preceded by the determinative ^{GIŠ} (^{GIŠ}BAL), which indicates that the object is made of wood. The word *pilakku* was widely used and occurs in older as well as younger Akk. texts. Lexical texts show that it was also used in Ebla (^{GIŠ}BAL = *bí-a-gu*; Kreberník 1983: 16, no. 459) and Emar (BAL = *palakk/qqu*; *WSEmar*, 138; Arnaud 1987: 68). None of the occurrences demands the meaning 'spindle whorl', which is designated as *qaqqad pilakki*, 'the head of the spindle' (*CAD* P, 373). Lexical texts mention the 'hooked spindle' (*pilak qarni*; *CAD* P, 372), whose hook probably served to prevent the fibres or yarn from slipping away.

The texts refer to spindle whorls made of *algamišu* stone (probably steatite) as well as spindle whorls made of tamarisk and other kinds of wood (*CAD* P, 373). Large numbers of expensive spindles (BAL.MEŠ), made of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, alabaster, horn, etc., were included in the gift which King Tušratta of Mitanni sent to Egypt according to EA 25 III:70-72. The golden spindles are said to have a total weight of 8 shekels and the 26 spindles of silver are said to weigh 10 shekels altogether, which probably means that a single silver spindle weighed around 3 grams (according to the Babylonian weight system; ca. 4.5 grams each if the Hittite system was used). The interpretation as 'spindles' is certain (see *CAD* P, 372; Moran 1992: 79; Cochavi-Rainey 1999: 129). Rainey's unusual interpretation of BAL.MEŠ as representing the plural of *maqqû*, 'libation bowl' (Rainey 2015, I: 266-67, II: 1361), is unacceptable in view of the small weight of the objects. Some Akk. inventories and dowry lists mention among a married wife's possessions spindle boxes made of wood or copper (^{GIŠ}/URUDU É.BAL = *bīt pilakki*; ^{GIŠ}PISAN.BAL; *CAD* P, 372, 373).

A.3 UGARITIC: The Baal myth contains the following lines with regard to the goddess Athiratu: 'ahdt.plkh[.bydh] / plk.t'lt.bymnh (*KTU* 1.4.II.3-4). The noun *plk*, which occurs in each of the two lines, is usually interpreted as 'spindle' (Watson 2007: 673-77; *DULAT*³, 661) and the lines can be translated as follows: 'She took her spindle [in her hand], an exalted spindle in her right hand' (Smith & Pitard 2009: 434). Watson (2007: 678) proposed to interpret *plk* as 'perfume', 'soap'. However, with reference to an Ug. spindle whorl inscribed with the word *plk* (RS 5.179; *KTU* 9.2; see Sauvage & Hawley 2013; cf. 6.3 A.1), he recently adopted the

usual interpretation as ‘spindle’ (Watson 2018: 380). Translating *plk* as ‘spindle’ is also quite likely in view of a quadrilingual glossary from Ugarit, in which Sumerian BAL, Akk. *pí-la-ak-ku*, Hurrian *te-a-ri*, and Ug. *pí-la-ku* are equated (RS 20.123+; *Ugaritica* 5, 137 II:22’). Interestingly, in a damaged passage at the beginning of the story of Elkunirša, Athiratu’s counterpart Ašertu seems to use a spindle as a weapon (*CTH* 342; see *COS* I: 149; text partially reconstructed).

A.4 PHOENICIAN: The Azatiwada Inscription (late 8th cent. BCE?) shows the following phrase: *wbymty ’nk ’št tk lhdy dl plkm* (KAI 26 A II:5-6). Its interpretation is disputed. *DNWSI*, 915-16 s.v. *plk*₁, takes difficult *dl plkm* as ‘with spindles’, but lists various other interpretations. Younger (1998: 32-33) also lists deviating interpretations, but points out that the parallel Hieroglyphic Luwian text includes the logogram “FUSUS”, which roughly has the form of a spindle and supports the interpretation of *plk* as ‘spindle’. He translates the phrase as follows: ‘But in my days, (especially) mine, a woman can walk alone with her spindles’.



FIGURE 1: Luwian hieroglyph denoting a spindle

A.5 POSTBIBLICAL HEBREW: The noun פֶּלֶךְ does not occur in Ben Sira and the non-biblical Dead Sea Scrolls, but still occurs in living usage in rabbinic literature. b. Ketubbot 72b refers to a woman using a פֶּלֶךְ (in the same passage also Aram. פִּילְכָא) for spinning (→ טוה). t. Kelim Bava Batra 1:6 includes the expression טווי הפֶּלֶךְ שְׁעַל גְּבִי הַפֶּלֶךְ, ‘spun (wool) which is on the spindle’. The פֶּלֶךְ is regarded as an instrument typically used by women: אִין חֲכָמָה לְאִשָּׁה אֵלָא בְּפֶלֶךְ, ‘a woman has no wisdom except at a spindle’ (b. Yoma 66b, with reference to the spinning of women in Exod 35:25a; → טוה; see also the references in Jastrow, *DTT*, 1182 s.v. פֶּלֶךְ; Dalman, *AuS* V, 49).

A.6 JEWISH ARAMAIC: The JAram. cognate is פִּילְכָא, ‘spindle’ (Jastrow, *DTT*, 1182; Sokoloff, *DJBA*, 900-01). The Aram. counterpart of the PBHeb. phrase אִין חֲכָמָה לְאִשָּׁה אֵלָא בְּפֶלֶךְ (b. Yoma 66b) is חֲכָמָה בְּפִילְכָה (b. Yoma 66b) is חֲכָמָה לְאִשָּׁה אֵלָא בְּפִילְכָה (y. Soṭah 3, 19a). b. Bava Batra 13b refers to a woman יִדְעָא פִּילְכָא וְנוּלָא, ‘who knows (how to use) the spindle and the loom’. Qohelet Rabba (ad 7:9) presupposes the emphatic form *פִּלְכָתָא, which is also interpreted as ‘spindle’.¹ הַכָּמָא דְמַעֲזִילָא עֲזִיל עַל פִּלְכָתָהּ כִּן סָלִיק לִיהּ בְּפִלְכָתָהּ הוּא נָסִיב, ‘just as the spinner (masc.) spins upon his spindle, so he manages to take by means of his spindle’. For a jar with the inscription פִּלְכָה שְׁמַעוֹן, see 6.3 A.2. In b. Megillah 14b, the word פִּלְכָא has been interpreted as a form of a denominative verb that apparently occurs only here: אַתְתָּא בְּהַדִּי שׁוּתָא פִּלְכָא, ‘during a conversation a woman is spinning’ (פִּלְכָא < פֶּלֶךְ; Sokoloff, *DJBA*, 913; cf. Jastrow, *DTT*, 1182). However, the spelling פִּלְכָא in

part of the manuscripts and editions reflects the interpretation as the noun פֶּלֶכָא.

A.7 ARABIC: Several BHebr. dictionaries (e.g., Gesenius, *TPC* II, 1105; KBL, 763; *HALOT*, 933; Ges¹⁸, 1056) present an etymology by referring to the Arab. verb *falaka*, ‘to be(come) round’ (Lane, 2443). The Arab. noun *falkat^{un}/filkat^{un}*, ‘spindle whorl’, has been assumed to be ‘thus called because of its roundness’ (Lane, 2444). However, *falaka* can also be a denominative verb.

2. Formal Characteristics

A.1 פֶּלֶךְ is a *qatl* form (BL, 456 *j*’); cf. pausal פֶּלֶךְ in Prov 31:19.

3. Syntagmatics

A.1 פֶּלֶךְ occurs as the direct object of תָּמַךְ *qal*, ‘to hold’, in Prov 31:19b (בְּפִיָּהּ תָּמַכּוּ).

A.2 In 2 Sam 3:29, פֶּלֶךְ is preceded by the combination of the verb חִזַּק *hiph.* and the preposition בְּ, which indicates that the פֶּלֶךְ is grasped.

4. Ancient Versions

A.1 The noun פֶּלֶךְ is rendered as follows in the ancient translations.

a. Septuagint (LXX) and other Greek versions:

ἄτρακτος, ‘spindle’:² 2 Sam 3:29^{α’σ’},³ Prov 31:19^{LXX}

σκυτάλη, ‘staff’, ‘cudgel’, ‘club’:⁴ 2 Sam 3:29^{LXX}

b. Peshitta (S)

ܡܘܙܐܠܐ (*mu‘zālā*), ‘spindle’:⁵ 2 Sam 3:29; Prov 31:19.

c. Targum (T)

אַגְרָא, ‘wages’, ‘reward’, ‘profit’:⁶ T^J 2 Sam 3:29. The emendation of אַגְרָא to אַגְדָּא, ‘long staff’, ‘crutch’, ‘pole’,⁷ is questionable (Van Staaldouine-Sulman 2002: 499-500).

מַעֲזָא, derivative of עָזַל, ‘to spin’, probably either ‘spindle’ or ‘spun wool/yarn’:⁸ T^K Prov 31:19.

d. Vulgate (V)

fusus, ‘spindle’:⁹ 2 Sam 3:29; Prov 31:19.

A.2 It has been suggested that in 2 Sam 3:29 not only LXX but also T^J supports the interpretation of פֶּלֶךְ as a walking stick or crutch. However, this is dubious; see 6.1 A.2. It is true that the Talmud interprets the expression מְחִזֵּק בְּפֶלֶךְ as referring to a lame or cripple, but it is uncertain whether in LXX σκυτάλη already denotes a walking stick or crutch. The Greek word might even denote the rod of a spindle, which would correspond with the interpretation of פֶּלֶךְ as a spindle in α’, σ’, S and V. In T^J, the rendering of מְחִזֵּק בְּפֶלֶךְ by מתקין באגר, ‘one who grasps wages’, may be interpretative, ‘indicating that a man who needs to spin must have fallen to poverty’

(Van Staalduine-Sulman 2002: 500). This means that the word אגרא may imply that T^J also interpreted פֶּלֶךְ as a spindle.

5. Lexical/Semantic Fields

A.1 In BHebr., the semantic field of spinning includes the verb → טוה, ‘to spin’ (Exod 35:25-26), and its derivative מְטוּה, ‘spun yarn’ (Exod 35:25). The verb → שׁוּר, ‘to twist’ (see מְשׁוּר in Exod 26:1, etc.), denotes an activity that was probably also performed with a פֶּלֶךְ. If in Prov 31:19 the noun → בִּישׁוּר designates a distaff or another instrument used for spinning, it belongs to the same semantic field.

6. Exegesis

6.1 Textual Evidence

A.1 As one of the skills of a capable woman, the acrostic poem of Prov 31:10-31 mentions her ability to use the בִּישׁוּר and the פֶּלֶךְ (31:19): יָדֶיהָ שִׁלְחָהּ בִּבִּישׁוּר וְכַפֶּיהָ: פֶּלֶךְ (31:19): תִּמְכּוּ פֶּלֶךְ, ‘her hands she stretches out to the בִּישׁוּר and her palms hold the פֶּלֶךְ’. It is beyond doubt that in this verse פֶּלֶךְ designates a spindle; see [Ancient Versions](#) and [Cognates](#). The noun → בִּישׁוּר may designate the distaff, a stick onto which wool or flax (צִמְרָה, פִּשְׁתִּים; 31:13) was wound that was consequently used for spinning with the help of a spindle. The spun yarn was used for the production of cloth fabrics (31:22, 24). The woman’s economic independence in Prov 31:10-31 corresponds with the Akk. reference to a woman who has acquired a slave-girl *ina pilakkiša*, ‘by (what she earned by) her spindle’ (*CAD P*, 372).

A.2 The curse which David pronounces in 2 Sam 3:29 implies that Joab’s family may never lack (וְאֵל יָכָרַת מִבֵּית יוֹאָב) men suffering a lamentable fate, namely a man who suffers a discharge (זָב, presumably a venereal disease), a man afflicted with a rash (מַצֵּרֶע), a man who holds the פֶּלֶךְ (מַחְזִיק בַּפֶּלֶךְ), a man falling by the sword (נָפֵל), and a man in want of bread (חָסֵר לֶחֶם). The reading מַחְזִיק בַּפֶּלֶךְ is undisputed and is supported by 4QSam^a (וּמַחְזִיק בַּפֶּלֶךְ; DJD XVII, 112).

The [LXX](#) understood the expression מַחְזִיק בַּפֶּלֶךְ as κρατῶν σαυστάλης, ‘holder of a staff’ (cf. emendation T^J), seemingly interpreting this expression as referring to a lame or cripple who needed a walking stick or crutch. A similar interpretation is found in the Talmud, which regards the curse concerning the מַחְזִיק בַּפֶּלֶךְ as fulfilled with King Asa’s foot disease (b. Sanhedrin 48b, with reference to 1 Kgs 15:23). Some Heb. dictionaries (Gesenius, *TPC* II, 1105; Zorell, 651) also suppose that in 2 Sam 3:29 פֶּלֶךְ designates the stick of an ill person, although they affirm that it designates a spindle in Prov 31:19. However, Steven Holloway (1987: 371) rightly remarks:

While a desire for the crippling of an enemy falls naturally enough within the general conceptual pool of the treaty-curse, philological warrants are lacking.

The Greek itself is suspect: in order to convey the idea of staff as walking stick or crutch one would expect *βακτηρία* or *ῥάβδος* rather than a noun with the primary meaning of cudgel or club—a weapon. There is no cognate usage of *plk* which firmly points to a meaning of staff or crutch.

Most dictionaries interpret פֶּלֶךְ both in 2 Sam 3:29 and Prov 31:19 as a spindle or spindle-whorl (BDB, 813; GB, 643; *HAWAT*, 364; KBL, 763; *HALOT*, 933; Ges¹⁸, 1056). The interpretation as a spindle in 2 Sam 3:29 is not only in agreement with Prov 31:19, but it is also confirmed by several [ancient translations](#) (α', σ', s, v) and the many [cognates](#) in other Sem. languages (see already Driver 1913: 250-51). The interpretation of מְחִזִּיק בַּפֶּלֶךְ as '(male) holder of a spindle' seems to be reflected in Talmud Yerushalmi, where the expression is connected with the weak king Joash and his defeat as described in 2 Chron 24:24: וְהוּא מַעֲנִין בּוֹ כְּדֶרֶךְ שֶׁמַּעֲנִין אֶת הָאִשָּׁה, 'they tormented him as they torment a woman' (y. Qiddushin 1, 61a).

That having a '(male) holder of a spindle' in a family with military commanders was regarded as a severe curse seems quite likely against the background of ancient Near Eastern texts, in which the spindle is a symbol of effeminacy (see Hillers 1964: 66-68) and feminised warriors are regarded as weak (Bergmann 2007: 664-68). In Hittite texts, both spindle (^{GIŠ}*huešaš*, ^{GIŠ}BAL) and distaff (^{GIŠ}*hulali*) are symbols of femininity. In a Hittite prayer, the goddess Ištar is asked to deprive the enemies of their manliness including their weapons and to give them a woman's distaff and spindle instead (*CTH* 716; see *COS* I: 164-65 § 8). The First Soldiers' Oath threatens soldiers with loss of their manliness if they transgress the oath, which is illustrated by a ritual indicating that their weapons will be replaced by a distaff and a spindle and other symbols of femininity (*CTH* 427; see *COS* I: 165-67 § 9). A ritual against the sexual impotence of a man includes placing a spindle and distaff in the man's hand and, consequently, replacing it by a bow and arrows (*CTH* 406; see Hoffner 1987: 272, 277, 283). For the relevant Hittite texts and terminology, see also *HW*² III/2, 632-33, 690-91.

Akk. texts refer to men with female apparel and implements who play a role in specific contexts: the cult of the goddess Inana/Ištar, who could alter a person's sex (Hillers 1964: 66-67), and the cult of goddesses associated with her (cf. *CAD* K, 557-59 s.v. *kurgarrû*). The *kurgarrû* men (LÚ.KUR.GAR.RA.MEŠ) performing in the cult of the goddess Nanaya are said to make use of a spindle (*pilakku*), a whip, etc. (SAA 3, 13, text 4; *CAD* K, 558). A male servant of the goddess Dilbat reports to the king that he carries (*anašši*) a spindle (^{GIŠ}*pilaqqu*) for the goddess (SAA 10, 69, text 92). After categories of temple personnel, a lexical list mentions a LÚ-GIŠ-BAL-ŠU-DU₇ = *nāš pilaqqi*, '(male) carrier of a spindle' (*MSL* 12, 103: 217; 135: 198a).

The following curse in Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty may indicate that also in Mesopotamia, outside the specific cultic contexts, holding a spindle was regarded

as a disgrace to men: ‘May they (the gods) make you whirl(?)¹⁰ like a spindle (^{GIS}*pilaqqu*), may they make you like a woman before your enemy’ (SAA 2, 56, text 6 §91). Brigitte Groneberg (*RA* 80, 1986, 190-91) assumed that the reference to the movements of the spindle reflects the dancing of transvestites in the cult of Ištar. She interpreted the curse as ‘mögen sie (die Götter) euch surren lassen (d.h. die Transvestie durchführen)’. The idea that depriving soldiers of their masculinity and turning them into women was a curse occurs also in the treaty of Aššur-Nerari V with King Mati’-Ilu of Arpad (*COS* IV: 151-52; V:8-15) and other Akk. texts (Bergmann 2007: 666-67).

In view of all this extra-biblical evidence, David’s use of the expression מְחֹזֵק בְּפָלָךְ, ‘(male) holder of a spindle’, in 2 Sam 3:29 becomes understandable. This part of the malediction must have been quite shocking to relentless military commanders like Joab and his brother Abisai (cf. 1 Sam 26:6-9; 2 Sam 3:22-27, 39; 16:9-11; 18:5-15; 19:21-22; 20:4-12). It corresponds with biblical curses implying that enemies become (like) women and, consequently, will be defenceless (Isa 19:16; Jer 50:37; 51:30; Nah 3:13; cf. Bergmann 2007: 668-72).

A.3 Some dictionaries (BDB, 813; KBL, 763; *HALOT*, 933) assume that פָּלָךְ refers to the whorl of the spindle, while other dictionaries (GB, 643; Zorell, 651; *DCH* VI, 696) suppose that פָּלָךְ denotes the entire spindle. Except for the late cognate in Arab., the cognates in other Sem. languages designate the spindle in its entirety. Even if the derivation of פָּלָךְ from a root meaning ‘to be(come) round’ is correct (see 1 A.7), the word can still designate the entire spindle just as well as the whorl of the spindle, since both the whorl and the shaft of the spindle were round. Moreover, the fact that the two contexts in which פָּלָךְ occurs indicate explicitly that it was held (2 Sam 3:29: חֹזֵק hiph. with בָּ; Prov 31:19: תָּמַד qal) suggest that פָּלָךְ designates the spindle as a whole, since the whorl had to twirl freely. See also the [Cognates](#) and [Ancient Versions](#).

A.4 Exod 35:25-26 recounts that women spun (→ טוה) yarn for the curtains of the tabernacle and the clothing of Aaron and the priests. Although the word פָּלָךְ does not occur there, the description probably implies that these women, who are said to have spun with their hands (בְּיָדֵיהֶן; 35:26), made use of a פָּלָךְ. The materials spun by these women were sheep wool coloured with costly dyes (→ תְּכֵלֶת, ‘bluish purple’; → אַרְגָּמָן, ‘reddish purple’; תוֹלַעַת הַשָּׁנִי, → שָׁנִי, ‘scarlet’), fine linen (שֵׁשׁ), and goat hair (עִזִּים). See further → טוה.

B.1 Steven Holloway (1987: 372) proposed to interpret the expression מְחֹזֵק בְּפָלָךְ in 2 Sam 3:29 as ‘one who makes repairs among the corvée, a corvée-worker’. He regarded פָּלָךְ in this verse and in Neh 3 as a derivative of Akk. *pilku* B, ‘corvée’ (see [Introduction](#)) and pointed out that in Ezek 27:9, 27 and Neh 3:4-32 חֹזֵק hiph. means

‘to repair’. However, Scott Layton objected and demonstrated that the combination of חִזַּק hiph. and the preposition -בִּי never means ‘to carry out repairs among’ (Layton 1989: 81). He rightly remarked that ‘in every occurrence of this verb + preposition idiom, the noun which follows the preposition is the person or thing (abstract or concrete) which is grasped or held fast’ (Layton 1989: 82). Further, he pointed out that the closest parallels to מְחִזֵּק בִּפְלֶךְ occur in Prov 31:19 and the Ugaritic Baal myth, where פֶּלֶךְ/plk is the object of verbs meaning ‘to hold/grasp’, תָּמַד and ’hd, respectively (Layton 1989: 83). Of course, the fact that several ancient translations interpreted מְחִזֵּק בִּפְלֶךְ as referring to the holding of a spindle is also significant.

6.2 Pictorial Material

A.1 The pictorial material from Egypt relates mainly to the production of linen from the fibres of flax (A.2), while the pictorial evidence from the rest of the ancient Near East concerns mainly the production of wool threads (A.3). Since flax needs regular access to water during cultivation, it is not surprising that in Egypt linen was more widely used than in the rest of the ancient Near East, where the use of wool predominated. The constant presence of water in some areas outside Egypt, for instance near the central Jordan river and in the Beth Shean valley, made it possible to cultivate flax also there (Shamir 1996: 142), but from those areas no relevant pictorial evidence remains. Flax and wool have different properties and, consequently, their fibres had to be processed differently before they could be spun (*BRL*², 311-12; Barber 1991: 11-15, 20-22; Andersson Strand 2015: 40-44).

A.2 Ancient Egyptian depictions of the consecutive stages of textile production include representations of spindles and help to understand how they were used (see the illustrations in *ANEP*, no. 142, 143; Dothan 1963: 106-09; Barber 1991: 45, 48, 74, 76; Spinazzi-Lucchesi 2018: 190). Although several depictions seem to be somewhat schematic, they demonstrate that the processing of flax into linen went differently from the processing of wool.

In ancient Egypt, the spindle whorl was placed near the top of the spindle. Before the high-whorl spindles were used, the long flax fibres were spliced into continuous threads by twisting the ends of the fibres together (Barber 1991: 46-48; Andersson Strand 2015: 45-46). The spinners, mostly women, drew these thin threads from spinning bowls in which the threads were apparently wetted to make the flax flexible (cf. Olofsson *et al.* 2015: 81). The spindles were not used to produce threads from unconnected fibres but merely to add twist to already-formed threads, often two or more threads that were twisted together to produce thicker, stronger threads. Elizabeth Barber suggests that the BHebr. verb → שָׁזַר (see שֵׁשׁ מְשֻׁזָּר, ‘twisted linen’; Exod 26:1, 31, 36, etc.) refers to the same method of making linen threads (Barber: 1991: 50, 72). With regard to certain depictions of only a single thread per spindle,

she observes (Barber 1991: 48):

The fact that in some pictures we are *shown* spinners pulling only one thread per spindle may be a simplification on the part of the artist, but it may also show a practice of adding a strengthening twist to the fine “single” yarns ...



FIGURE 2:

Spinning and weaving scene from the tomb of Khnumhotep II
Beni Hasan, Middle Egypt, ca. 1900 BCE (picture: www.alamy.com)

In a wall painting from the tomb of Khnumhotep II in Beni Hasan (see Figure 2), the woman centre right is splicing flax fibres into long threads, which she coils in front of her. The woman standing right is processing threads, which she pulls from two spinning bowls. She adds twist to the threads with a suspended spindle. These threads are consequently wound around the spindle rod. This woman seems to hold a second spindle with a twisted thread attached to it behind her back. Other ancient Egyptian representations seem to display other spinning techniques. For instance, a wall painting in the tomb of Khety (also in Beni Hasan) shows spinners forming threads while holding their spindle with one hand or both hands. One spinner seems

to roll the spindle on the thigh, while another draws the thread over a forked stick and apparently twists the thread by revolving the spindle with both hands (Dothan 1963: 105-06). For the procedures and discussions of the Egyptian depictions, see Barber 1991: 44-51, 74; Spinazzi-Lucchesi 2018: 27-29, 97-101.

A.3 A relief from Susa (western Iran, 8th to early 6th cent. BCE) displays a woman whose hands hold a spindle onto which yarn has been wound (*ANEP*, no. 144). Reliefs on several neo-Hittite monuments from northern Syria and southeastern Turkey show women holding a spinning instrument in either their right or their left hand. One of these reliefs displays a woman with yarn wound onto her spindle; see Figure 3 (complete figure: Bonatz 2000: pl. 18 C 51).



FIGURE 3:
Detail of neo-Hittite monument
from Maraş, 9th to 8th cent. BCE
Internet: [Maraş Stele](#)

A funerary stele displays two women, each holding a spinning implement with the hand in the foreground, while the woman on the left lifts up a beaker with her left hand and the woman on the right raises a mirror with her right hand; see Figure 4 (Bonatz 2000: 79-80, 82, 90, pl. 14 C 33; Hawkins 2000, I/1: 273-74, I/3: pl. 124). The older interpretation of the spinning implements as pomegranates must be rejected, since no crowns of small leaves or other characteristics of pomegranates are displayed. The objects are possibly spindles (Hawkins 2000, I/1: 273), but according to Dominik Bonatz their blunt upper ends suggest that they are distaffs (Bonatz 2000: 85-86). Bonatz also interprets an object held by a woman depicted on relief C 60 as a distaff, pointing out that from this object a hand-twisted wool thread runs down to a wool box in which the roving is kept (Bonatz 2000: 79, 85, pl. 21). Of course, the representation of high-class women with spindles and distaffs suggests that these objects enhanced the status of these women.



FIGURE 4: Neo-Hittite funerary stele of Tarhuntiwasti from Maras, 9th to 8th cent. BCE
Two women, each with a spindle or distaff in the hand in the foreground.

Internet: [Funerary Stele](#)

Several Mesopotamian amulets depict the female demon Lamaštu with a spindle and a comb, typical feminine paraphernalia (Farber 2014: 4-6 with fig. 3, 6; see also fig. 15, 19, 20, 22). The Lamaštu texts suppose that a spindle (^{GIŠ}BAL = *pilaqqu*) is a gift that pleases this demon; e.g., Lam. I: 197, Lam. II: 99, 173 (Farber 2014: 91, 110, 123, 158, 172, 178; cf. *CAD* P, 372).

6.3 Archaeology

A.1 SPINDLES AND SPINDLE WHORLS: Spindles consisted of a rod and a spindle whorl. Spindle whorls are circular, often disk-shaped objects with a perforation in the centre that allows the rod to be inserted through it. Remains of ancient spindles made of bone, ivory, or metal have been preserved across the Near East, but their number is quite small (Barber 1991: 57-65; Sauvage 2014: 186-88, 210-11; Spinazzi-Lucchesi 2018: 30-33). Much more numerous are the surviving ancient

spindle whorls without a rod. Most of them are made of durable materials, such as stone, bone, reworked pottery sherds, or baked clay. They have been excavated all over the Near East, including Ugarit, Ebla, Hazor, Megiddo, Masada, and other sites in Israel/Palestine (Spinazzi-Lucchesi 2018: 34-48).



FIGURE 5:
Bone spindle with damaged rod,
Achzib, 8th to 6th cent. BCE
Courtesy of Israel Museum, Jerusalem

The preservation of so many spindle whorls without a rod is explicable. Most of the rods were made of wood, which usually decays in the more humid climate zones. However, especially in Egypt many spindles partially or entirely made of wood have survived. In Egypt, not only most of the spindle rods but also numerous spindle whorls were made of wood (Spinazzi-Lucchesi 2018: 84-87, 107-15). While several ancient metal spindles from several parts of the Near East show either a groove or a hook near the top for attaching the first fibres (Barber 1991: fig. 2.19, 2.20, 2.22), many wooden spindles from Egypt show a groove near the top that was incised for the same reason (Spinazzi-Lucchesi 2018: 84-85, 109-10; Barber 1991: fig 2.7). The total number of ancient wooden spindle whorls discovered in Israel/Palestine surpasses sixty (Sitry & Langgut 2019: 44* n.3). Chiara Spinazzi-Lucchesi refers to three very old examples from Jericho, dating from the Middle Bronze Age, that have survived thanks to favourable circumstances. She points out that these whorls 'are very important because they give evidence for the use of wood to make these artefacts and remind us that the amount of spindle whorls at each site is always underestimated, as wooden ones are almost always lost' (Spinazzi-Lucchesi 2018: 41). Several dozens of wooden spindle whorls, presumably dating from the tenth century BCE, were found in Tell el-Ḥammah, in the central Jordan valley (Shamir 2007: 46). Wooden spindle whorls as well as a complete wooden spindle from the Early Roman Period were discovered in Wadi Murabba'at and published in DJD II

(41-43 with fig. 12:11, planche XIII). The spindle has indentations at the upper end to prevent the fibres or thread from slipping away; see Figure 6. In the Cave of the Letters (cave 5-6) in Naḥal Ḥever, three wooden and two stone spindle whorls were found, together with a bundle of dyed, unspun wool and balls of woollen and linen threads, all with 135 CE as the *terminus ad quem* (Yadin 1963: 35-36, 130-32, 169-88, 252, 256, plates 36, 59, 88).

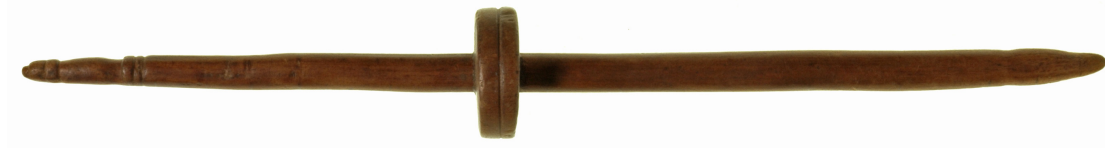


FIGURE 6: Wooden spindle, length 23.5 cm; Wadi Murabba'at, Early Roman Period
Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority

The archaeological evidence demonstrates that spindles were already widely used during the Late Bronze Age. This is not surprising, since it was relatively easy to produce them and the materials of which they were usually made were cheap. Furthermore, spinning with a spindle was much faster than hand spinning, which implied the twisting of fibres by hand or by rolling them against the thigh. Other advantages of spinning with a spindle were that its weight helped to keep the fibres taut and prevented the spun yarn from tangling and untwisting, while the whorl increased the regularity of the spinning (Barber 1991: 41-42; Sauvage 2014: 184-85; Spinazzi-Lucchesi 2018: 25-26). For these reasons, it is no surprise that the use of spindles was so widespread in the world of the Bible.

A vast majority of the excavated objects identified as spindle whorls weighs between 2 and 30 grams, but there are also examples of heavier whorls. Illustrative are the Late Bronze Age spindle whorls from Ugarit (Sauvage 2013: 192-95, 200-01), those from Iron Age II unearthed in Tel Mique-Ekron (Shamir 2007: 45-46), and whorls from the Hellenistic and Early Roman Periods discovered at Gamla (Cassuto 2016: 272-75). Most of the spindle whorls from Iron Age Jerusalem weigh also less than 30 grams, but many are relatively heavy, with weights up to 200 grams (Shamir 1996: 149-52).

In her description of the ancient spinning methods, Eva Andersson Strand reports on recent spinning tests with modern reconstructions of ancient spindles. The tests demonstrated that, contrary to earlier assumptions, even very light whorls could be used to spin yarn. The spindles with lighter whorls appeared to produce thin yarn, while the spindles with heavier whorls produced coarser, thicker yarn (Andersson Strand 2015: 44-48; similarly Olofsson *et al.* 2015: 77-87). While coarser, hard spun wool threads could be used as warp, more loosely spun wool could be selected for

the weft. Andersson Strand gives the following description of the ways in which the spindles were used for the processing of wool fibres (2015: 45):

The spindle shaft is rotated while the spinner simultaneously draws out the fibres, and it is the twisting of the fibres around their own axis that forms the thread. During spinning, the spindle can hang freely (a so-called suspended spindle) (...), or it can be supported, with the shaft resting on the ground or in a bowl, or on the thigh. On a suspended spindle the whorl can be placed at the top (high-whorl), the bottom (low-whorl) or sometimes also in the middle (mid-whorl) of the shaft. On a supported spindle, the whorl is placed at the top of the shaft (...). A third variation is the hand-held spindle, a shaft with or without a whorl that is turned within the hand (...). Finally, a thread can be spun by using a hooked shaft; in this technique the spinner draws out the fibres and forms the thread by rolling the shaft against the thigh (...). The hook helps to control the fibres when they are drawn out.

When a certain length of the thread had been spun, the finished part was wound around the rod of the spindle. Thereafter, the spinning was continued until the thread was finished or the rod had been filled with thread. Finally, the thread could be wound up on a reel, onto a weft bobbin or into a ball (Andersson Strand 2015: 47). However, the spindle full of yarn could also be used as a shuttle during weaving, moving the woof yarn between the threads of the warp yarn (Rahmstorf 2015: 11). Note that BAL, the logographic equivalent of Akk. *pilakku*, was also used for Akk. *nabalkutu*, ‘to cross over’ (CAD NI, 11-20).

Spindles were not only used for producing individual strands of yarn, but also for plying two or more strands together in order to get a plied yarn. While the fibres of the individual threads had been twisted in the same direction, either to the right or the left, these threads were usually plied together in the opposite direction to create a balanced yarn, without the tendency to twist upon itself (*BRL*², 312-13; Andersson Strand 2015: 47; Skals *et al.* 2015: 62, 64, 67). See also → שֹׁרֵר, → טוֹה. Spindles with relatively large and heavy whorls, such as the one from Ugarit inscribed with the word *plk* (cf. 1. A.3; Sauvage 2013: 193, 201: 114.2 grams), may have been used for plying single threads of wool together (Sauvage & Hawley 2013: 365, 372; Sauvage 2013: 204). For the plying of threads of flax fibres with a spindle, see 6.2 A.2. In Tell el-Ḥammah, in the central Jordan valley, a spindle with linen threads still wrapped around it was found in the 10th-century BCE stratum (Shamir 1996: 142). Unfortunately, figures and more details of this find are not available. Ancient spindles entirely or partially made of precious materials, such as copper, bronze, silver, gold, or ivory, have been discovered mainly in graves of women, but sometimes in domestic contexts (Barber 1991: 57-65, with figures; Sauvage 2014:

186-88, 210-11, with figures; Spinazzi-Lucchesi 2018: 30-33). References to spindles made of such costly materials occur in several texts (Hittite: *HW*² III/2, 632; El-Amarna: EA 25). Such precious spindles probably represent status symbols rather than being tools of everyday use (Spinazzi-Lucchesi 2018: 30).

A.2 SPINNING BOWLS: Ancient bowls with two (rarely one, three or four) interior handle-like loops have been discovered at several locations in Egypt and Israel/Palestine. These bowls have been interpreted as spinning bowls (Dothan 1963; *BRL*², 312-13, with fig. 81:11, 12; Barber 1991: 70-76; Rahmstorf 2015: 10-11; Spinazzi-Lucchesi 2018: 48-50, 116-18). They were made to keep threads of spliced flax or threads of spun wool before they were twisted together with a spindle in order to get a plied yarn. The threads were passed through different loops to prevent them from entangling. The constant rubbing of the threads past the undersides of the loops left grooves, apparently due to the tension that was placed on them. Part of the spinning bowls served also to wet threads of spliced flax to make them more flexible; see 6.2 A.2 with Figure 2. In Egypt such bowls appear to have been used during the second millennium BCE. These Egyptian spinning bowls were made of either clay or stone. The spinning bowls discovered in Israel/Palestine date from the Late Bronze Age until the middle of the first millennium and are made of clay.

A peculiar jar from Israel/Palestine, presumably dating from late Roman or Byzantine times, was published and discussed by Joseph Naveh (1979: 28-30, with plates opposite p. 29). Unfortunately, the jar's provenance is unknown, but it carries an inscription with a word that seems to be related to פִּלְדָּה: פִּלְכָה שִׁמְעוֹן. Naveh interpreted the word פִּלְכָה as Aram. and translated פִּלְכָה שִׁמְעוֹן as 'spinning vessel (of) Shimeon' (with reference to פִּלְכָתִּיה in *Qohelet Rabba*, ad 7:9). The jar is 29 cm high and has a maximum diameter of 23.5 cm. Before the clay was fired, the jar was provided with a sealed top with seven small holes (ca. 0.5 cm wide), a wide mouth on its shoulder (ca. 8 cm), and two exterior handles, one at each side of the mouth. Naveh convincingly argues that this peculiar spinning jar was made to hold balls of spun yarn. Such balls could be placed inside the jar through the mouth, while the yarns could be passed through the small holes at the upper side. Above the jar, the strands could be plied together into heavier threads, supposedly with a spindle.

7. Conclusion

A.1 Biblical Hebrew פִּלְדָּה is probably a primary noun. Most of the cognates in other Semitic languages are also nouns and designate the same object as פִּלְדָּה, namely a spindle. A cognate verb occurs only quite late, in Arabic (*falaka*) and possibly also in Jewish Aramaic, which suggests that the verb is denominative.

A.2 In biblical Hebrew, the noun פִּלְדָּה designates a spindle, an instrument consisting

of a circular spindle whorl with a perforation in the centre through which a rod has been inserted. Spindles were used for spinning (\rightarrow טוה), which implied either forming new yarn from raw fibres, or plying several strands together to form stronger, thicker yarn.

A.3 The interpretation of פֶּלֶךְ as a spindle is beyond doubt in Prov 31:19. The parallel noun \rightarrow כִּישׁוֹר may denote a distaff, a stick onto which wool or flax was wound that was consequently spun with the spindle. The fact that Prov 31:19 refers to a woman's ability to work with a spindle corresponds with the ancient Near Eastern evidence indicating that this ability enhanced the reputation of women.

A.4 With regard to מְחַזֵּיק בַּפֶּלֶךְ in 2 Sam 3:29, the interpretation of פֶּלֶךְ as a spindle is also the most convincing option. This interpretation is confirmed by most of the ancient translations (α' , σ' , s, v). The interpretation as a walking stick lacks a lexicographical basis and it is dubious whether it can be defended with reference to the rendering *σκυτάλη* in LXX. In extra-biblical texts from the ancient Near East, the spindle is a symbol of effeminacy. This confirms that having a מְחַזֵּיק בַּפֶּלֶךְ, '(male) holder of a spindle', in a family comprising military commanders was regarded as a curse. Several modern translations rightly reflect the interpretation of פֶּלֶךְ as a spindle in 2 Sam 3:29: 'who holds a spindle' (NRSV), 'a man holding a spindle' (WYC), and, paraphrastically, 'fit only to do a woman's work' (GNTB).

Notes

- 1 ↑ The noun is wrongly translated as ‘distaff’ in Sokoloff, *DJPA*, 322 s.v. מעזל, 401 s.v. עזל, 436 s.v. פלכה.
- 2 ↑ LSJ, 272; *GELS*, 101.
- 3 ↑ Field¹, 552.
- 4 ↑ LSJ, 1617; *GELS*, 628.
- 5 ↑ Sokoloff, *SLB*, 727 (cf. 800: חבל, ‘spindle’); derivative of חל, ‘to spin’ (*SLB*, 1090).
- 6 ↑ Jastrow, *DTT*, 14; Sokoloff, *DJBA*, 80-81; *DJPA*, 34-35.
- 7 ↑ Jastrow, *DTT*, 10. Sokoloff, *DJBA*, 78, mentions only ‘carrying pole’ (with uncertain etymology) as a possible meaning.
- 8 ↑ Cf. Sokoloff, *DJPA*, 322; Jastrow, *DTT*, 814. Since in Prov 31:19 מעזלא is the object of ארם, לכוך, ‘to grasp’, the word must denote something tangible.
- 9 ↑ Lewis & Short, *LD*, 798; *OLD*, 751.
- 10 ↑ *lušaṣbirukunu* (*ṣabārum* Š stem) is translated as ‘may (the gods) make you whirl(?)’ in *CAD* P, 372, as ‘may (the gods) have you oscillate’ in *CAD* Š, 4, and as ‘may (the gods) spin you around’ in *SAA* 2, 56 (cf. *COS* IV: 165).

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For the abbreviations applied → [List of Abbreviations](#)

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