

*On the Meaning of the Word *Hem'ah* in Biblical Hebrew*

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The word *hem'ab* (חמאה) occurs in the Pentateuch twice (Genesis 18:8, Deuteronomy 32:14), in Judges once (5:25), in 2 Samuel once (17:29), in Isaiah twice (7:15, 7:22), in Job once (20:17) and in Proverbs once (30:33). Its meaning, while generally assumed to be “butter,” is a matter of some obscurity, as this short article will demonstrate. Here the earliest source will be examined, that of Genesis 18. There Abraham hastens to greet his angelic guests with delicacies, some of which have been produced by his cattle. The verse reads:

וַיִּקַּח חֲמֵאָה וְחֵלֶב וּבֹרֶה־בְּקָרָא אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיִּתֵּן לַפְּנִיָּהֶם וְהוּא־עֹמֵד עֲלֵיהֶם תַּחַת
הָעֵץ וַיֹּאבְלוּ.

In the Septuagint, the word *hem'ab* is rendered as βούτυρον (*bouturon*). The word βούτυρον is understood to mean “butter.”¹ Later translations of the Bible seem to follow this translation: the Vulgate renders *butyrum*; the King James Version reads “butter.” An attempt must be made to ascertain if this translation is equivalent to modern-day butter, which for the purposes of this article shall be generally characterized as churned, unclarified butter.

Pliny the Elder remarks: “From milk, too, butter (*butyrum*) is produced; held as the most delicate of food among barbarous nations, and one which distinguishes the wealthy from the multitude at large. It is mostly made from cows’ milk, and hence its name; but the richest butter is that made from ewes’ milk.” Here Pliny makes reference to the origin of the Greek word: *bous* (cow) and *tyros* (curds or cheese). This may be a clue as to the different nature of this ancient butter: in the process of

¹ H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).

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churning butter, the maker should see neither curds nor cheese.² This supposition is confirmed by Pliny's explanation of the process:

There is a butter made also from goats' milk; but previously to making it, the milk should first be warmed, in winter. In summer it is extracted from the milk by merely shaking it to and fro in a tall vessel, with a small orifice at the mouth to admit the air, but otherwise closely stopped, a little water being added to make it curdle the sooner. The milk that curdles the most, floats upon the surface; this they remove, and, adding salt to it, give it the name of "*oxygala*." They then take the remaining part and boil it down in pots, and that portion of it which floats on the surface is butter, a substance of an oily nature. The more rank it is in smell, the more highly it is esteemed.³

The process Pliny describes is markedly similar to that used to this day in the Middle and Far East for the production of clarified butter. Pliny may have erred in his characterization, for the solids that are produced and float to the surface are in these methods discarded and the remaining liquid preserved, coagulated and consumed. This possibility has already been remarked upon by John Bostock and H.T. Riley, Pliny's translators.⁴ The historian and linguist Andrew Dalby argues that unclarified butter of the churned sort was rare in Ancient Mesopotamian cuisine, because the climate would have rendered it rancid within hours. He claims that references to butter in Near Eastern literature must be references to ghee.⁵ His claim is partially supported by the translation of Onkelos *ad loc*, who renders the word *hem'ab* as *חמץ*, a word it is same to assume is a cognate of the Arabic *smen* or *samneh*. Indeed, Saadya Gaon in his *Tafsir* renders the translation "*סמנא*," while in Deuteronomy he translates "*סמן*." *Smen* is quite similar to ghee.⁶

It is necessary, however, to take literary context into account. In the scene portrayed by the Bible, Abraham rushes to his cattle and "*takes butter*

² See also <https://www.uoguelph.ca/foodscience/book-page/overview-butter-making-process>

³ John Bostock, Pliny the Elder and Henry Thomas Riley, *The Natural History of Pliny* (1855) 28:35.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Note 5.

⁵ Andrew Dalby, *Food in the Ancient World from A to Z* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁶ It seems unlikely that the butter described in the Biblical account is whey butter, as some have suggested. Whey butter is a product that requires excessive labor, and the process required to create it is extremely inefficient, yielding as little as three pounds of butter per 1,000 pounds of milk. See Charles Francis Doane, *Whey butter* (Washington, DC: US Dept. of Agriculture, Bureau of Animal Industry, 1910).

and milk.” The implication is strong that the “butter” Abraham takes is produced quickly or immediately, a scenario that in the case of smen or ghee loses credibility. The Biblical narrative is clearly intended to convey an impression of great haste. This point is hammered home by the French medieval commentator Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (“Rashi”), who goes so far as to suggest that *hem'ab* here refers to nothing more than cream, skimmed from the freshly produced milk. While this reading is quite compelling, it is possible to explain the alternative translation offered by most versions of the Bible.

It is entirely likely that in this case, *hem'ab* means curds. The process of curdling may be effectuated by adding a curdling agent or even by the mere application of heat. The resulting product is then strained, and may be eaten immediately if absolute dryness is not required. This translation is followed by later editions of the Bible, such as the English Standard Version. It is also the translation rendered by Gesenius.⁷ This would explain how Abraham is able to quickly produce the dairy product in the Bible’s description.⁸ ❧

⁷ H.W.F. Gesenius and Samuel Prideaux Tregelles (transl.), *Gesenius’ Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957).

⁸ It is noteworthy that the Pentateuch’s choice of *hem'ab* to refer to curds may point to a relatively late date of origin for the word *hem'ab*, used generally in rabbinic literature and once in the Book of Job to mean “cheese.”