

# Female Slave vs Female Slave: אָמָה and שְׁפָחָה in the HB

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# FEMALE SLAVE VS FEMALE SLAVE: אִמָּה AND שִׁפְחָה IN THE HB\*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Hebrew Bible has two terms to designate female slaves: אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה. A matter that is frequently revisited is whether there is a distinction between these terms.

It is clear that אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה are used as synonyms. This is shown by the use of both terms to designate female slaves in general (e.g., אִמָּה in Nah 2:8[7] and Lev 25:44; and שִׁפְחָה in 1 Sam 8:16 and Deut 28:68), and the interchanging of the terms for Hagar in Gen 16:2–5 (שִׁפְחָה) and 21:10–13 (אִמָּה) and for Bilhah and Zilpah in 31:33 (אִמָּה) and 33:1, 6 (שִׁפְחָה). A clear synonymous use of the two terms is found in Gen 30:3–4:

Then she [Rachel] said, “See! My female slave [אִמָּתִי] Bilhah! Go in to her so she may bear children on my knees and I also may have children through her.” So she gave to him Bilhah her female slave [שִׁפְחָתָהּ] as a wife; and Jacob went into her. (Gen 30:3–4)<sup>1</sup>

A similar synonymous use occurs in 1 Sam 25:27–28 in which Abigail uses both terms interchangeably when speaking to David in deference:

“... And now, this gift that your servant [שִׁפְחָתִי] has brought to my lord, let it be given to the young men who follow in the footsteps of my lord. Please forgive the transgression of your servant [אִמָּתִי] ...” (1 Sam 25:27–28)

It is to be expected that אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה should have distinct meanings, but as yet no agreement has been reached on what these meanings are despite continuing efforts to determine them. In

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<sup>1</sup> English translations are mine unless indicated otherwise.

addition, there is only one, full-length, comprehensive study on the matter, Cohen's 1979 article.<sup>2</sup> Short articles by Jepsen and Fensham give some discussion of these two terms and have proved influential.<sup>3</sup> Dictionaries and lexica obviously discuss the terms, but cannot be expected to provide detailed argument for distinctions between the terms,<sup>4</sup> though larger lexical works do give some discussion.<sup>5</sup> As the *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions* comments, "Unfortunately a dictionary does not give the opportunity to present arguments for one's preferences."<sup>6</sup> The matter is often discussed incidentally, and though useful, lacks the advantage of a full discussion and tends to follow previous scholarship.<sup>7</sup> Younger and Marsman provide short reviews of existing scholarship.<sup>8</sup>

My contribution to the discussion on אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה is to argue that there are patterns of use of אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה that intersect, and that such patterns and their intersections lie behind proposals for distinct meanings between the two terms. My argument has two parts. First, I critically review the main proposals for distinctions in

<sup>2</sup> C. (H.R.) Cohen, "Studies in Extra-biblical Hebrew Inscriptions I: The Semantic Range and Usage of the Terms אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה," *Sbnaton* 5–6 (1979), XXV–LIII.

<sup>3</sup> A. Jepsen, "Amah und Schiphchah," *VT* 8 (1958), 293–97; F. Charles Fensham, "The Son of a Handmaid in Northwest Semitic," *VT* 19 (1969), 312–21.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., F. Brown, S.R. Driver, C.A. Briggs, W. Gesenius, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew-English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1979 [1907]), 51, 1046; D.J.A. Clines, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 1:309–10.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., E. Reuter, "שִׁפְחָה *šiphá*," *TDOT* 15:405–10; Richard Schultz, "אִמָּה, *āmā*," *NIDOTTE* 1:419; idem, "שִׁפְחָה, *šiphá*," *NIDOTTE* 4:212 (provides a chart of three views). Surprisingly, *TDOT* does not have an entry for אִמָּה.

<sup>6</sup> J. Hoftijzer, K. Jongeling, *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions* (Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1995), xiv.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g. E.J. Revell, *The Designation of the Individual: Expressive Usage in Biblical Narrative* (CBET 14; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 38; Édouard Lipiński, "Kinship Terminology in 1 Sam 25.40–42," *ZAH* 7 (1994), 12–16 (15); Hans W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (trans. M. Kohl; London: SCM, 1974), 199; N. Avigad, *Bullae and Seals from a Post-exilic Judean Archive* (Qedem 4; Monographs of the Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University; Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1976), 11–12; Ingrid Riesener, *Der Stamm 'bd in Alten Testament. Eine Wortuntersuchung unter Berücksichtigung neuerer sprachwissenschaftlicher Methoden* (BZAW, 149; Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1979), 83; E. Neufeld, *Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws* (London: Longmans, Green, 1944), 121–24.

<sup>8</sup> K. Lawson Younger, "Two Comparative Notes on the Book of Ruth," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 26 (1998), 121–32 (126); Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (OTS, 49; Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003), 447–49.

meaning between אָמָה and שְׂפָחָה. Secondly, I discuss the terms and the contexts of their use in the Hebrew Bible where I discern patterns of use of the two terms. I also distinguish between the descriptive use of the terms and their use as deference in discourse. Previous proposals have failed to take fully into account these two uses, which I argue impact on the proposed meanings for the terms.

**PROPOSED DISTINCTIONS IN MEANING BETWEEN אָמָה AND**

**שְׂפָחָה**

My review of proposals for distinctions in meaning between אָמָה and שְׂפָחָה covers publications in the last century which have proved influential. It starts with BDB, because of its continuing influence in philological studies in the Hebrew Bible. This review groups those publications that argue that there is a status difference between the terms (with שְׂפָחָה always thought to be the lower status term), those that argue אָמָה has a wider meaning than שְׂפָחָה, and those that argue the two terms are completely synonymous.

The earliest publication I covered in the first group is BDB. In its two brief listings for אָמָה and שְׂפָחָה, BDB shows the two terms are essentially synonymous.<sup>9</sup> However, it also argues that שְׂפָחָה is distinct from אָמָה in two ways. The first is that שְׂפָחָה denotes a “maid, maid-servant, as belonging to a mistress.” Many occurrences of שְׂפָחָה are cited in support. No similar claim is made for אָמָה, though it is noted when it is also used in relation to the mistress (Gen 30:3; Exod 2:5) and when שְׂפָחָה is used in relation to the master (Gen 29:24, 29; 33:23[22]; Ruth 2:13). Secondly, BDB claims that שְׂפָחָה is more servile than אָמָה, citing Exod 11:5; 1 Sam 25:41 and 2 Sam 17:17, noting that אָמָה is never used in such contexts. They also make the observation that שְׂפָחָה is rarely found in legislation (only in Lev 19:20) or in texts assigned to P (only in Gen 16:2, 5; 35:25-26), whereas אָמָה is found in both cases. They also observe that, when אָמָה and שְׂפָחָה are used for deference, they are synonymous (both are used “in token of humility”) except that only אָמָה is used toward God (1 Sam 11:1).

To summarize, BDB views the terms as essentially synonymous, yet maintains some distinction that שְׂפָחָה being more servile than אָמָה. These arguments and observations have merit, but BDB may have overstated its case in regard to שְׂפָחָה being more servile than אָמָה. Three references are not enough to build a strong case, and the role of the שְׂפָחָה in 2 Sam 17:17 (a messenger) is not necessarily servile. The use of שְׂפָחָה in relation to the master also works against BDB’s argument that שְׂפָחָה denotes a maid-servant who belongs to a mistress.

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<sup>9</sup> BDB, 51, 1046.

In a similar manner to BDB, Neufeld proposed that that שְׂפָחָה refers to status, namely, a female slave of the lowest possible status.<sup>10</sup> This proposal is advocated by Fensham, Engelken and *TDOT* and is accepted by Avigad.<sup>11</sup> Neufeld, like BDB, cites Exod 11:5; 1 Sam 25:41 and 2 Sam 17:17 as indicating menial tasks.<sup>12</sup> *TDOT* also argues that the status difference in the two terms carries into deference in the following manner: the use of שְׂפָחָה in deference represents submissiveness on the part of the speaker and the use of אִמָּהּ represents “a heightened sense of self-awareness.”<sup>13</sup> Against this argument stand some of the passages that *TDOT* discusses (1 Sam 1:13–18; 1 Sam 25; 2 Sam 14) which show that אִמָּהּ and שְׂפָחָה are interchangeable as terms of deference.<sup>14</sup>

In a similar vein that שְׂפָחָה is more servile than אִמָּהּ is Riesener’s proposal that שְׂפָחָה emphasizes a slave as a possession or laborer and that אִמָּהּ emphasizes a slave’s feminine qualities.<sup>15</sup> This proposal is accepted by *NIDOTTE* and Younger. Younger also argues that the distinction carries into deference.<sup>16</sup> Noteworthy is Riesener’s observation of a frequent use of אִמָּהּ in conjugal contexts (Gen 20:17; Exod 21:7–11; Judg 9:18; 19:19; and 2 Sam 6:20–22). This association with conjugality is also evidenced in the occurrences in, for instance, Exod 23:12, Ps 86:12 and Ps 116:12, in which the phrase בֶּן־אִמָּתְךָ (“son of your female slave/servant”) refers to children born in slavery. The appearance of שְׂפָחָה in this context in Gen 31:33, 33:1–6 and Lev 19:20, however, shows that Riesener’s proposal may be too strong.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Neufeld, *Marriage Laws*, 121–24.

<sup>11</sup> Fensham, “The Son,” 314; *TDOT* 15:408–9; K. Engelken, *Frauen im alten Israel: Eine begriffsgeschichtliche und sozialrechtliche Studie zur Stellung der Frau im Alten Testament* (BWANT, 130; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1990), 131–132; Avigad, *Bullae*, 11–12.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *TDOT* 15:408–409: grinding flour (Exod 11:5) is considered to be particularly degrading, given that elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible it is a *topos* for work done by prisoners (Judg 16:21; Isa 47:1–2; Job 31:10).

<sup>13</sup> Neufeld, *Marriage Laws*, 121–24; *TDOT* 15:408–409. Neufeld is more circumspect than Fensham cites him: on the one hand, Neufeld dismisses the idea that אִמָּהּ outranks שְׂפָחָה, but on the other hand concedes that it did, citing 1 Sam 25:41. Fensham’s interpretation of Neufeld has proved influential.

<sup>14</sup> Noted also by Neufeld, *Marriage Laws*, 122, 123; Cohen, “Studies,” xxxviii–xl; and Marsman, *Women*, 448.

<sup>15</sup> Riesener, *Der Stamm*, 83. See also Diana V. Edelman, *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah* (JSOTSup, 121; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 216, who argues that Abigail’s use of אִמָּהּ in 1 Sam 25:41 emphasizes her sexuality.

<sup>16</sup> *NIDOTTE* 1:419; 4:212; and Younger, “Comparative,” 127: אִמָּהּ “expresses the speaker’s need for protection and help . . . , while [שְׂפָחָה] implies subservience and readiness to serve.” Cf. *TDOT*’s view of אִמָּהּ and שְׂפָחָה in deference.

<sup>17</sup> Noted also by Marsman, *Women*, 448, n. 63.

The second group of publications argues that אָמָה has a wider meaning than שְׁפָחָה. Jepsen, for example, proposes that שְׁפָחָה primarily refers to an unmarried woman who gives personal service to a mistress (cf. BDB) whereas אָמָה is a broader term, covering also a slave wife (thus anticipating Riesener). Over time this distinction was lost.<sup>18</sup> This proposal has proved influential, being accepted by Wolff, a number of commentaries, the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (TWOT) and the *Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament* (HAL).<sup>19</sup> Westermann and Wenham also interpret Jepsen as saying that שְׁפָחָה is usually used when a female slave is answerable to a mistress, whereas אָמָה is used when a female slave is answerable to the master.<sup>20</sup> Prov 30:23b (*and a female slave [שְׁפָחָה] when she supplants her mistress*) and Isa 24:2c (*as with the female slave [שְׁפָחָה], so with her mistress*<sup>21</sup>) are frequently cited in support, though Gen 16 and 29–30 are also used. In critique, it is only by arguing that the two terms later lost their distinctions that it would be possible to understand אָמָה and שְׁפָחָה as synonyms, an idea that the scholarship reviewed so far does not accept. Furthermore, as noted above and by BDB, אָמָה is also used in relation to the mistress (Gen 30:3; Exod 2:5; Nah 2:8[7]).

The idea that אָמָה is a broader term than שְׁפָחָה and also covers a slave wife is extended by Lipiński, who argues that that אָמָה can designate the status of a wife, whereas שְׁפָחָה does not. Recent scholars such as Younger and Jackson argue similarly.<sup>22</sup> To assist their argument, both Lipiński and Younger appeal to epigraphic remains from the Levant and elsewhere. In two Hebrew inscriptions, אַמָּה is used to refer to women associated with men:

זאת [קברת ...] יהו אשר על הבית אין פה כסף וזהב [כי] אם  
עצמתו] ועצמת אמתה אתה ארור האדם אשר יפתח את זאת

<sup>18</sup> Jepsen, “Amah,” 293.

<sup>19</sup> Wolff, *Anthropology*, 199; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary* (trans. J. J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 238; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (WBC 2; Waco: Word, 1994), 6; Hermann J. Austel, “Shiphâ. Maidservant, Maid,” *TWOT* 946–947; Jack B. Scott, “אָמָה (‘āmā),” *TWOT*, 49; and Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (4 vols; Leiden/New York, Köln: Brill, 1994+), 1621.

<sup>20</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 6; Westermann, *Genesis*, 238. *TDOT* 15:408, also interprets Jepsen similarly.

<sup>21</sup> The phrase is כְּשִׁפְחָהּ כְּגַבְרִיתָהּ, and comes in the midst of a list of paired status-related terms, all beginning with the inseparable form of כִּי. The exact nuances of כִּי are difficult to translate; however, Isa 24:2 intends that social status does not spare a person from God’s apocalyptic judgment on the land.

<sup>22</sup> Lipiński, “Kinship,” 15; Younger, “Comparative,” 127–28; Bernard S. Jackson, “The ‘Institution’ of Marriage and Divorce in the Hebrew Bible,” *JSS* 56 (2011), 221–51 (227–28, 235).

This is [the sepulchre of ...]yahu who is over the house. There is no silver and no gold here but [his bones] and the bones of his slave-wife [אמתה] with him. Cursed be the man who will open this! (Royal Steward Tomb inscription of Silwan; *KAI* 191 = TSSI 3.191)

לשלמית אמת אלנתן פה. .

Belonging to Shelimoth maidservant of Elnathan (Shelimoth seal inscription)

What אמה means in these two inscriptions is debatable. Avigad argues אמה in the tomb inscription means “slave-wife,”<sup>23</sup> but אמה in the Shelimoth inscription means “official,” on analogy with the frequent use of עבד in both the Hebrew Bible and in seal inscriptions taking this meaning.<sup>24</sup> Younger assumes אמה in both inscriptions means “wife,”<sup>25</sup> but does not indicate whether אמה could refer to a *free* wife. Lipiński argues that אמה could refer to a free woman as a wife. To do so, he cites two Semitic language inscriptions, which use the cognate of אמה, *’mt*:

[This ivo]ry casket (’rn.[z.š]n), Amatbaal, daughter of Patesi, ’amat of Idnān, has given (it) as a gift to Astarte, her Lady. May you bless her in her days! Idnan [the engraver ([br]’?) has constructed the base. (Phoenician inscription, Ur Box; *KAI* 29 = TSSI 3.20)

[Queen Gaḥimat] ’amat of the mukarrib of Saba, Yila<mar Bayyin, son of Šumhu<alīy. (Sabaic rock inscription).<sup>26</sup>

Lipiński draws attention to Amatbaal’s having a patronym, something unusual for slaves in Ancient Near Eastern epigraphic remains, and to Queen Gaḥimat’s designation as an *’mt*. It is unlikely that a queen is a slave!

Despite Lipiński’s persuasive argument that שפחה means a “house-born girl who was not a legal daughter of the *paterfamilias*,” his argument that שפחה does not designate the status of a wife is proved false by Gen 33:1–6 in which שפחה is used to designate Jacob’s wives’ maid-servants in their roles as wives to Jacob. A

<sup>23</sup> Avigad, *Bullae and Seals*, 12–13. This affirms a proposal given by Albright for two Ammonite *’mh* seal inscriptions (*’lyh ’mt hnn’l*, and *’nmwt ’mt dblbs*); see W.F. Albright, “Notes on Ammonite History,” *Miscellanea Biblica B. Ubach* (Montserrat, 1954), 134 (cited in Avigad, *Bullae and Seals*, 13).

<sup>24</sup> N. Avigad, “A Seal of a Slave-wife (amah),” *PEQ* (1946), 125–32; idem, “The Epitaph of a Royal Steward from Siloam Village,” *IEJ* 3 (1953), 137–52; and idem, *Bullae and Seals*, 12, 30–31. This interpretation is accepted by *DCH*, 310.

<sup>25</sup> Younger, “Comparative,” 127.

<sup>26</sup> Lipiński, “Kinship,” 13–14.

second critique of Lipiński is his application of his observations of the inscriptional use of אִמָּה and <sup>3</sup>mt to 1 Sam 25:41 to conclude that Abigail uses אִמָּתְךָ to mean “wife.” He seems unaware of the use of אִמָּתְךָ as a term of deference in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Ruth 3:9; 2 Sam 14:15–16; 20:17; 1 Kgs 3:20), as well as Abigail’s high use of אִמָּתְךָ in 1 Sam 25:23–31.

The third group of publications, those that argue the two terms are fully synonymous, goes back to Cohen’s proposal that אִמָּה is characteristically used in legal contexts, whereas שְׂפָחָה is more common in colloquial contexts. This proposal is adopted by Revell and Marsman.<sup>27</sup> For Cohen, “colloquial context” means a setting in narrative. That is, שְׂפָחָה is a “colloquial” term and אִמָּה is a “legal” term. This proposal allows the two terms to be understood as synonyms, which is primarily what Cohen argues. Cohen’s proposal can only be used tentatively, since שְׂפָחָה appears in Lev 19:20 and Deut 28:68, which are legal contexts, and אִמָּה appears in Gen 30:3; 31:33 and Exod 2:5, which are narrative texts.<sup>28</sup>

To summarize, proposals for distinctions in meaning between אִמָּה and שְׂפָחָה generally argue that the two terms indicate status difference. That is, אִמָּה indicates a higher status than שְׂפָחָה, whether it be on the basis of servility, birth (Lipiński only) or marriage. However, each proposal for a distinction in meaning between אִמָּה and שְׂפָחָה suffers from the fact that the number of exceptions makes the proposal only tentative. Jepsen’s claim that the terms lost their distinctive meanings is an attempt to recognize this problem, but is improvable since the Hebrew Bible uses the terms after they supposedly lost their distinct meanings. Even Cohen’s proposal that שְׂפָחָה is a “colloquial” term and אִמָּה is a “legal” term, in order to defend the synonymy of the two terms, suffers the problem of exceptions, recognized by Cohen himself.

This conclusion raises a matter which will be the subject of the rest of this paper, namely, can a proposal be made for a distinction in meaning between אִמָּה and שְׂפָחָה that can cover all uses of the terms in the Hebrew Bible?

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<sup>27</sup> Cohen, “Studies,” (English summary); Revell, *Designation*, 38; Marsman, *Women*, 448–49; Younger, “Comparative,” 126; cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 6. Cf. also *BDB*, 51, 1046, noted above.

<sup>28</sup> Raymond Westbrook (“The Female Slave,” V.H. Matthews, B.M. Levinson, T. Frymer-Kensky [eds], *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* [JOTSS 262; London: T & T Clark, 1998], 214–38 (232–23); repr. in B. Wells; F.R. Magdalene [eds], *The Writings of Raymond Westbrook, Volume 2: Cuneiform and Biblical Sources* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009], 149–83) also interprets “reluctantly” the other synonymous uses of אִמָּה and שְׂפָחָה in Genesis 16–33 as representing inconsistencies in the text.



**THE USE OF אָמָה AND שִׁפְחָה TO DESIGNATE FEMALE SLAVES**

To answer the question, my discussion on אָמָה and שִׁפְחָה will differentiate between the use of the terms to designate women and the use of the terms in deferential speech. In my discussion, I will consistently translate both אָמָה and שִׁפְחָה as “female slave” unless the context shows that it is otherwise, or when the terms are used in deference.<sup>29</sup> Partly in support of this proposed translation is another term, נַעֲרָה (“young woman”), which can denote “female servant” (e.g., Exod 2:5; 1 Sam 25:42; Ruth 2:8) in similar fashion to the frequent use of נַעַר (“young man”) to denote “male servant.” I will also, in a vein similar to Cohen’s distinction between “legal” and “colloquial” contexts, distinguish between “narrative texts” and “legal texts.” “Legal texts” refer to texts that are clearly legal in focus, such as Exod 21–23, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. “Narrative texts” refer to Joshua–2 Kings (the “Deuteronomistic History”), Genesis, Ruth, and the narrative portions of Exodus and Jeremiah, along with Ezra–Nehemiah.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> In doing this, I follow Harris’ argument in Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ* (Leicester: Apollos, 1999), 183–91, for translating δούλος in the New Testament. To support his argument, Harris cites E.J. Goodspeed, *Problems of New Testament Translation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1945), 139–40; E.J. Goodspeed, “Paul and Slavery,” *JBR* 11 (1943), 169–70; G.A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (trans., L.R.M. Strachan; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965 [1922]), 319; W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, F.W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979), 205; C. Spicq, *TLNT* 1:380; and S.S. Bartchy, “Slavery (New Testament),” *ABD* 6:66.

<sup>30</sup> In making this distinction, I recognize the continuing debate as to what are “legal” and “narrative” texts, and also what role the biblical laws had in ancient Israelite society, given the lack of use of the laws to legal situations in biblical narrative. As it is, the biblical laws are located “in a religious historical narrative set in the distant past” by the final authors/redactors of the biblical texts (Raymond Westbrook, “The Laws of Biblical Israel,” B. Wells, F.R. Magdalene [eds], *Law from the Tigris to the Euphrates: The Writings of Raymond Westbrook, Volume 2: Cuneiform and Biblical Sources* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009], 317–340 (321); repr. from F.E. Greenspahn [ed.], *The Hebrew Bible: New Insights and Scholarship* [New York: New York University Press, 2008], 99–119). Westbrook argues that the biblical law codes, in keeping with the wider ancient Near East, are descriptive, not prescriptive (Raymond Westbrook, “Cuneiform Law Codes and the Origins of Legislation,” B. Wells, F.R. Magdalene (eds), *Law from the Tigris to the Euphrates: The Writings of Raymond Westbrook, Volume 1: The Shared Tradition* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009], 73–95; repr. from *ZA* 79 (1989), 201–22); and Ska argues that common law was more important than any written sources that may have been current at any given time (J.-L. Ska, *The Exegesis of the Pentateuch: Exegetical Studies and Basic Questions* [FAT, 66; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009], chap. 12: “The Law of Israel in the Old Testament”), something with which Westbrook

The use of אָמָה and שְׁפָחָה to designate women occurs in all parts of the Hebrew Bible:

אָמָה: Gen 20:17; 21:10–13; 30:3; 31:33; Exod 2:5; 20:10, 17; 21:7–11, 20, 26, 27, 32; 23:12; Lev 25:6, 44; Deut 5:21; 12:12, 18; 15:17; 16:11, 14; Judg 9:18; 19:19; 2 Sam 6:20–22; Ezra 2:65; Neh 7:67; Job 19:15; 31:13; Pss 86:16; 116:16; Nah 2:8[7].

שְׁפָחָה: Gen 12:16; 16:1–8; 20:14; 24:35; 25:12; 29:24, 29; 30:4–18, 43; 32:5[6], 23[22]; 33:1–6; 35:25–26; Exod 11:5; Lev 19:20; Deut 28:68; 1 Sam 8:16; 2 Sam 17:17; 2 Kgs 5:26; Esth 7:4; Ps 123:2; Prov 30:23; Eccl 2:7; Isa 24:2; Jer 34:9–16; Joel 3:2[2:29]

The synonymy of the two terms can easily be shown. When female slaves are designated in general without regard to function or status, אָמָה is used in Exod 21:20–32; Lev 25:6, 44; Deut 12:12, 18; 15:17; 16:11, 14; Nah 2:8[7] and Job 31:13; and שְׁפָחָה is used in Deut 28:68; Jer 34:9–16; Joel 3:2 [2:29] and Esth 7:4. In most cases, both terms are used as counterparts to עֶבֶד: e.g.

When a man strikes his male slave or his female slave (אֶת־עֶבְדוֹ אוֹ אֶת־אִמָּתוֹ) ... (Exod 21:20; cf. 21:26)

... you shall sell yourselves to your enemies as male slaves and female slaves (לְעִבְדִים וְלִשְׁפָחוֹת) but there will be no buyer (Deut 28:68)

... If as male slaves and female slaves (לְעִבְדִים וְלִשְׁפָחוֹת) we had been sold ... (Esth 7:4)

Both אָמָה and שְׁפָחָה appear in property lists. אָמָה is used in Exod 20:17 (= Deut 5:21) and Ezra 2:65 (=Neh 7:57); and שְׁפָחָה is used in Gen 12:16; 24:35; 30:43; 32:6[5]; 1 Sam 8:16; 2 Kgs 5:26; and Eccl 2:7:

... and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male slaves and female slaves (וְעִבְדִים וְשְׁפָחוֹת), female donkeys and camels (Gen 12:16)

... besides their male slaves and their female slaves (עֲבָדֵיהֶם וְאִמָּהֵתֵיהֶם), of whom there were 7,337 ... (Ezra 2:65; cf. v. 66 for horses, mules, camels and donkeys; all numbered)<sup>31</sup>

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would also agree (c.f. “The Laws,” 332, 339).

<sup>31</sup> English Bibles translate עֲבָדֵיהֶם וְאִמָּהֵתֵיהֶם as *male and female servants*. Despite the high number of persons listed, it is best to understand עֲבָדֵיהֶם וְאִמָּהֵתֵיהֶם as denoting slaves, since these persons are listed separately from the assembly and just before livestock.

Both terms are used when the female slave's relationship with the master is the context. *אִמָּה* is used in Job 19:15 and 31:13, and *שִׁפְחָה* is used in Gen 29:24, 29; 32:23[22]):

My female slaves (*אִמָּהֹתַי*) think of me as a stranger (Job 19:15b; spoken by Job)

Laban gave Zilpah his female slave (*שִׁפְחָתוֹ*) to Leah his daughter as a slave (*לְשִׁפְחָהּ*) ... Laban gave to Rachel his daughter Bilhah his female slave (*שִׁפְחָתוֹ*) as a slave (*לְשִׁפְחָהּ*) (Gen 29:24, 29)

Finally, both *אִמָּה* and *שִׁפְחָה* are used to designate Bilhah and Zilpah in their roles as (slave-) wives to Jacob. *אִמָּה* is used in Gen 21:10–13; 30:3; 31:33 and *שִׁפְחָה* is used in Gen 16:2–8 and 30:4.<sup>32</sup>

Despite these synonymous uses of *אִמָּה* and *שִׁפְחָה*, there are observable patterns of use of the two terms. Without taking context of use into account, there is a concentration of *אִמָּה* in Exodus and Deuteronomy and *שִׁפְחָה* in Genesis. The references for *אִמָּה* in Exodus and Deuteronomy (Exod 2:5; 20:10, 17; 21:7–11, 20, 26, 27, 32; 23:12; Deut 5:21; 12:12, 18; 15:17; 16:11, 14) are all in “legal” contexts (except Exod 2:5). To this list can be added Lev 25:6, 44. All references, except for Exod 2:5 and 21:7–11, identify female slaves as the counterpart to male slaves.<sup>33</sup> Both BDB and Cohen are right to draw attention to this pattern and it gives support to Cohen's proposal that *אִמָּה* is the legal term for female slaves. Yet, as noted above, *שִׁפְחָה* appears in Lev 19:20 (marital context) and in Deut 28:68 (general reference to slavery). Thus, though this pattern is clear, biblical writers were not constrained to use *אִמָּה* solely in legal settings and *שִׁפְחָה* in non-legal settings when they deal with female slaves generally.

A second pattern is the predominance of *שִׁפְחָה* in property lists (see references above), with *אִמָּה* appearing only twice in this context (Exod 20:17 [= Deut 5:21] and Ezra 2:65 [= Neh 7:57]). Clearly, biblical writers preferred *שִׁפְחָה* to designate female slaves as property. This phenomenon could suggest *שִׁפְחָה* carries the meaning of lesser status than *אִמָּה*. Against this is the appearance of *אִמָּה* in Exod 20:17 // Deut 5:21. Here, either the legal context overrode the preferential use of *שִׁפְחָה* for slaves as property or the pattern was not universally held to by biblical authors. It is such intersections between the different contexts of the use of *אִמָּה* and *שִׁפְחָה*

<sup>32</sup> Despite the tendency of the author(s)/compiler(s) of Genesis to keep awareness that Bilhah and Zilpah were owned by Rachel and Leah (e.g. Gen 35:25–26) once they were given to them, they are designated simply with *the female slaves* in 31:33 (*הָאִמָּהֹת*) and 33:1–2, 6 (*הַשִּׁפְחֹת*), and as Jacob's (*his female slaves*; *שִׁפְחֹתָיו*) in 32:23[22].

<sup>33</sup> In the household (most references); as possessions (Exod 20:17; [= Deut 5:21]); as workers (Exod 20:10 [= Deut 5:14]; Lev 25:6); when mistreated (Exod 21:20–32); and as debt slaves (Deut 15:17; cf. Exod 21:3).

that create the difficulty for proposing a distinction in meaning between the two terms that can cover all uses of the terms.

A third pattern is observable in the frequent use of שִׁפְחָה to denote a female slave or servant in relation to the mistress (Gen 16:1–8; 25:12; 30:4–18; 35:25–26; Ps 123:2; Prov 30:23 and Isa 24:2):

These are the generations of Ishmael son of Abraham, whom Hagar the Egyptian, female slave of Sarah (שִׁפְחַת שָׂרָי), bore to Abraham (Gen 25:12)

As the eyes of (male) slaves / [look] to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a female slave (שִׁפְחָה) / [looks] to the hand of her mistress (Ps 123:2ab)

In relation to the master, אִמָּה appears to predominate: Gen 20:17; 21:10–13; Job 19:15 and 31:13. Against this is the use of both אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה for Hagar, Sarah's slave, in Gen 16 and 21, though this can be explained as in keeping with the pattern. In 16:1–8, Hagar's relationship with Sarai is clearly in focus: Sarai calls Hagar שִׁפְחָתִי (*my female slave*; vv. 2, 5); the narrator says שִׁפְחַתָּה (*her female slave*; v. 3); Abraham says שִׁפְחַתְּךָ (*your female slave*; v. 6); and God (יהוה) says שִׁפְחַת שָׂרָי (*female slave of Sarai*; v. 8). In 21:10, Sarai (now Sarah) twice calls Hagar הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת (*this female slave*). The change in term suggests that Sarah dissociates herself from Hagar and makes Hagar and Ishmael Abraham's responsibility. God (אֱלֹהִים) in 21:12 continues this by saying to Abraham that Hagar is אִמְּתְּךָ (*your female slave*). That is, Gen 16 and 21 can support the pattern of אִמָּה being used in relation to the master and שִׁפְחָה being used in relation to the mistress. Legal texts also give support to this pattern because of the male audience presupposed in the texts, such as *when a man strikes his male slave or his female slave* (Exod 21:20), and *your male slaves and your female slaves* in Deut (12:12, 18; 15:17; 16:11, 14). An alternative explanation for the change in terms used for Hagar is provided by Westbrook, who argues Hagar had a split legal personality. She is chattel to Sarah, but a wife to Abraham.<sup>34</sup> Thus שִׁפְחָה is appropriate in Gen 16, but אִמָּה is appropriate in Gen 21 when Sarah, in effect, asks Abraham to divorce Hagar.

As with the previous two patterns, exceptions occur. In this case, אִמָּה is used in relation to the mistress (Gen 30:3; Exod 2:5; Nah 2:8[7]) and שִׁפְחָה in relation to the master (Gen 29:24, 27; 32:23[22]; Jer 34:9–16).<sup>35</sup> In Jer 34:9–16, it can be assumed that men are in focus since all the people of Jerusalem are in view. These texts, along with Genesis 16 and 21, indicate another intersection of contexts: the predominance of שִׁפְחָה in narrative texts,

<sup>34</sup> Westbrook, "The Female Slave," 228.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *BDB* above.

along with the many references in Genesis to Abraham and Jacob's slave wives, and the use of אִמָּה in legal contexts. If Genesis and legal contexts were removed from consideration, the pattern becomes less prominent, shown by the following:

אִמָּה in relation to the master: Job 19:15; 31:13

אִמָּה in relation to the mistress: Exod 2:5; Nah 2:8[7]

שִׁפְחָה in relation to the master: Jer 34:9–16

שִׁפְחָה in relation to the mistress: Ps 123:2; Prov 30:23; Isa 24:2

To these, three further references could be added for the use אִמָּה in relation to the master: Judg 9:18; 19:19; 2 Sam 6:20–22. These occur in the context of marriage or other conjugal relationships, which I will treat as yet another pattern (see below). This distinction between אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה in the context of relationship between the female slave and her master or mistress should therefore be thought of as a pattern rather than as a difference in meaning between the two terms.

A fourth pattern is that אִמָּה is the predominant term to denote female slaves in marriage or other conjugal relationships with the master or another male member of the household (Gen 20:17; 30:3; Exod 21:7–11; Judg 9:18; 19:19; and 2 Sam 6:20–22): e.g.

And if a man sells his daughter to be a slave [לְאִמָּה] ... If something displeasing [is found] in the eyes of her master who appointed her for himself ... And if he appoints her for his son ... If he takes another [wife] for himself ... And if these three things he will not do for her ... (Exod 21:7–11)<sup>36</sup>

But you have risen against my father's house today ... and have made Abimelech, the son of his slave [אִמָּתוֹ] king over the lords of Shechem ... (Judg 9:18)

... Michal the daughter of Saul went out to meet David, and said, "How the king of Israel honored himself today, who un-

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<sup>36</sup> Interpretations as to the status of the female slave and the purposes of the legislation vary. See Westbrook, "Female Slave," 218–20, and Carolyn Pressler, "Wives and Daughters, Bond and Free: Views of Women in the Slave Laws of Exodus 21.2–11," V.H. Matthews, B.M. Levinson, T. Frymer-Kensky (eds), *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (JSOTSup, 262; London: T&T Clark, 1998), 155, who both argue the woman is sold as a debt-slave and for the purpose of concubinage. Marsman, *Women*, 450, takes a similar view, except that the woman had the status of slave-wife, not concubine. Mendelsohn argues that sale-adoption is in view (*Slavery in the Ancient Near East* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1949], 10) but then changes his mind to say she remains in the master's house to be married to yet another debt slave (pp. 13–14).

covered himself in the eyes of the female slaves of [אָמָהוֹת] his servants' [עֲבָדָיו], like one of the shameless uncover themselves!" (2 Sam 6:20)<sup>37</sup>

Exod 23:12, Pss 86:16 and 116:16 can also be thought to reflect this pattern, because they contain the phrase, בְּוֹאֲמָתָהּ (*son of your slave woman*), a reference to (male) children born into slavery.<sup>38</sup> Since Exod 21:7–11 is in a legal context, it is not surprising that אָמָה will be used. The two women who are designated with אָמָה in Judg 9:18 and 19:19 are also designated with פְּלִגְשָׁה (“concubine, secondary wife”; 8:31; 19:1), suggesting in these contexts they were secondary wives.<sup>39</sup> It is noteworthy that in both cases, the designation of פְּלִגְשָׁה comes first, and אָמָה is only used in a character’s speech. The use of אָמָה in 9:18 by Jotham may be derogative, whereas the use of אָמָה in 19:9 by the Levite may be deferential. The Levite’s subsequent behavior to his פְּלִגְשָׁה (allows her to be gang raped), however, suggests אָמָה carries the status of slave, an interpretation assisted by the narrator’s use of אֲדֹנָיָהּ (*her master*) for the Levite in Judg 19:27. Gen 21:10–13 could also be argued to reflect this pattern of אָמָה being the preferred term for marriage or other conjugal arrangement with the master. Against this, as discussed above, it could simply be part of the biblical pattern privileging אָמָה in the context of the female slave’s relationship with the master or may reflect Hagar’s legal standing with Abraham. In addition, the use of שְׁפָחָה in this context (Lev 19:20) provides an

<sup>37</sup> 2 Sam 6:20–22 is riposte between Michal and David, the topic of which is the use of slave women for sexual purposes without regard to marital status.

<sup>38</sup> N. Wyatt (“Araunah the Jebusite” and the Throne of David,” *ST* 39 [1985], 39–53 [45–47]) interprets בְּוֹאֲמָתָהּ in Pss 86:16 and 116:16, a metaphoric use, to reflect the voice of the king, following G.W. Ahlstrom, *Aspects of Syncretism in Israelite Religion* (Horae Söderblomianae 5; Lund, 1963), 76. Wyatt is also influenced by the formula *bn ’mtk* in the Ugaritic *Keret* text (*KTU* 1.14 ii 3, iii 25; a ritual title of the chief queen of a king that guarantees the/a son of that union to succeed to the throne). However, Exod 23:12 indicates that בְּוֹאֲמָתָהּ is simply a term for a man born into slavery, translated this way by the NRSV. In Pss 86:16 and 116:16, בְּוֹאֲמָתָהּ is used to evoke dependency on, and loyalty to, YHWH by the worshipper. See Edward J. Bridge, “Loyalty, Dependency and Status with YHWH: the use of ‘*bd*’ in the Psalms,” *VT* 59 (2009), 360–378 (372–74).

<sup>39</sup> The key matter in these texts is whether פְּלִגְשָׁה refers to a free woman. For discussion, see, e.g., K. Engelken, “פְּלִגְשָׁה, *pilegeš*,” *TDOT* 11:550; Victor P. Hamilton, “פְּלִגְשָׁה (*pilegeš*), concubine,” *NIDOTTE* 618–19. Julian Morgenstern, “Additional Notes on ‘Beena Marriage (Matriarchat) in Ancient Israel,’” *ZAW* 49 (ns 8) (1931), 56–58, who, despite arguing פְּלִגְשָׁה originally denoted a class of wife captured in war or purchased in some fashion, claims they were not the same class as an אָמָה.

exception to this pattern of אִמָּה being the preferred term in a marriage or other conjugal relationship. As it is, in Genesis 16–35, Hagar, Bilhah and Zilpah are only mentioned because of their roles as mothers of a patriarch’s children. All three have been given in marriage to their respective husbands by their mistresses. The result is that there is yet another intersection of contexts: the conjugal context and Genesis as a work. Genesis prefers שִׁפְחָה and continues awareness that the three slave-women belong to their respective mistresses, yet they are important as wives to Abraham and Jacob. Even שִׁפְחָה in Exod 11:5 (*the female slave who is behind the handmill*) implies a conjugal context. שִׁפְחָה is used here for slave women who have children and the term is placed in conjunction with *Pharaoh* to cover all social classes in Egypt.

As for the other three patterns, biblical authors were clearly not constrained to maintain the pattern, as is shown especially by the author(s)/compiler(s) of Genesis. If Genesis and the legal texts, Exod 21:7–11 and Lev 19:10, were removed from discussion because of Genesis’ preference for שִׁפְחָה and legal texts’ preference for אִמָּה (i.e. Genesis and the legal texts are “biased”), אִמָּה as the term for slave women in marital or other contexts would become a strong pattern. The use of אִמָּה and its cognate *’mt* in epigraphic evidence also assists to secure this pattern, if the interpretation that אִמָּה and *’mt* can mean “wife” in the four inscriptional texts discussed above can be sustained.

The results can be presented in the form of a cross-classification table, such as Table 1.<sup>40</sup> Variable 1, “category of use,” is the patterns that have been argued as indicating a difference in meaning between אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה. Variable 2 is the genre of the text in which the references are found. I have separated Genesis from other narrative texts, because of its strong preference for using שִׁפְחָה. This strong preference creates problems for postulating clear distinctions in meaning between אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה. Variable 3 is the two terms. The number of times each term occurs is listed is based on the term’s use in a given text (e.g., a unit or pericope of narrative) for the same person or persons in that text. Thus, in Gen 16:1–9, שִׁפְחָה is used six times, but always for the same person. Therefore, it is counted only once in the table. When a term is used to refer to different people in the same text, each occurrence is counted. Numbers in brackets represent the total number of times the term appears in the relevant context when it has been used more than once for the same person or persons in a given text. This gives an idea of the frequency of use of each term for each pattern in each genre of text.

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<sup>40</sup> I am indebted to Stephen Llewelyn for providing me with a model cross-classification table from which I developed my tables.

Table 1: אָמָה and שְׁפָחָה as designations for slave women

Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 3: The Terms	
Category of use	Genre	אָמָה	שְׁפָחָה
General	Legal	14 <sup>41</sup>	1 <sup>42</sup>
	Genesis	1 <sup>43</sup>	0
	Narrative	0	2 <sup>44</sup>
	Wisdom/Prophetic	0	1 <sup>45</sup>
Property	Legal	2 <sup>46</sup>	0
	Genesis	0	4 <sup>47</sup>
	Narrative	2 <sup>48</sup>	2 <sup>49</sup>
	Wisdom/Prophetic	0	1 <sup>50</sup>
Relation to mistress	Legal	0	0
	Genesis	0	3 <sup>51</sup>
	Narrative	1 <sup>52</sup>	0
	Wisdom/Prophetic	1 <sup>53</sup>	3 <sup>54</sup>
Relation to master	Legal	0	0
	Genesis <sup>55</sup>	0	2 <sup>56</sup>
	Narrative	0	1 <sup>57</sup> (4x)
	Wisdom/Prophetic	2 <sup>58</sup>	0
Marriage/conjugal	Legal	2 <sup>59</sup>	1 <sup>60</sup>
	Genesis	3 <sup>61</sup> (6x)	5 <sup>62</sup> (17x)

<sup>41</sup> Exod 20:10 (// Deut 5:14); 21:20, 26, 27, 32; 23:12; Lev 25:6, 44; Deut 12:12, 18; 15:17; 16:11, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Deut 28:68.

<sup>43</sup> Gen 31:33.

<sup>44</sup> 2 Sam 17:17; Esth 7:4.

<sup>45</sup> Joel 3:2[2:29].

<sup>46</sup> Exod 20:17 // Deut 5:21.

<sup>47</sup> Gen 12:16; 24:35; 32:6[5]; 30:43.

<sup>48</sup> Ezra 2:65 = Neh 7:57.

<sup>49</sup> 1 Sam 8:16; 2 Kgs 5:26.

<sup>50</sup> Eccl 2:7.

<sup>51</sup> Gen 29:24, 29; 32:23[22]. Since the use of שְׁפָחָה for Hagar, Zilpah and Bilhah focus on their roles as secondary wives to Abraham or Jacob (Bilhah is designated with פְּלִנְיָה in Gen 35:22), this category of the use of שְׁפָחָה is intimately connected with the category, "marriage/conjugal."

<sup>52</sup> Exod 2:5.

<sup>53</sup> Nah 2:8[7].

<sup>54</sup> Ps 123:2; Prov 30:23; Isa 24:2.

<sup>55</sup> Similarly for שְׁפָחָה in Genesis (see n. 50), the use of אָמָה in Genesis is intimately connected with the category of use, "marital/conjugal."

<sup>56</sup> Gen 29:24, 29.

<sup>57</sup> Jer 34:9–16 (4x).

<sup>58</sup> Job 19:15; 31:13.

<sup>59</sup> Exod 21:7–11; 23:12 (בְּיָמֵי אֲמָתֶיךָ).

<sup>60</sup> Lev 19:10.

<sup>61</sup> Gen 20:17; 21:10–13 (4x); 30:3.

<sup>62</sup> Gen 16:1–9 (6x); 25:12; 30:4–18 (5x); 33:1–6 (3x); 35:25–26 (2x).



	Narrative	3 <sup>63</sup> (4x)	1 <sup>64</sup>
	Wisdom/Prophetic	2 <sup>65</sup>	0

Of the patterns of use that have been discussed, three are strong: אִמָּה is the predominant term in legal settings; אִמָּה is the predominant term in marital or other conjugal contexts, except in Genesis; and שִׁפְחָה is the preferred term in Genesis. Weaker patterns are: שִׁפְחָה is preferred when female slaves are viewed as property; and when used in the context of the female slave-mistress relationship. In contrast to scholarly opinion, אִמָּה is not the preferred term in the female slave-master relationship.

The preference for שִׁפְחָה in Genesis proves some of the synonymy between the two terms and also that proposed distinctions in meaning such as אִמָּה is preferred in relation to the master and שִׁפְחָה is preferred in relation to the mistress cannot be maintained (the latter is only a weak pattern). Table 2 shows this clearly.

*Table 2: אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה as designations for slave women – Genesis only*

Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 3: The Terms	
		אִמָּה	שִׁפְחָה
Category of use	Genre		
General	Genesis	1	0
Property	Genesis	0	4
Relation to mistress	Genesis	0	3
Relation to master	Genesis	0	2
Marriage/conjugal	Genesis	3 (6x)	5 (17x)

With respect to the category, “marriage/conjugal,” the use of אִמָּה for women in Abimelech’s harem (Gen 20:17), Hagar (Gen 21:10–13) and Bilhah (Gen 30:3) shows that, for the author(s)/compiler(s) of Genesis, אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה are synonyms. Even if the arguments discussed above, that אִמָּה is used for Hagar in 21:10–13 because her relationship to or legal standing with Abraham is in focus, it is her role as mother of Abraham’s son Ishmael that precipitates the plot of the pericope. Thus, no matter the exact nuance of her relationship with Abraham, a marriage/conjugal context is present.

The contrasting preference for אִמָּה in legal texts and שִׁפְחָה in Genesis also shows synonymy of the two terms, while also giving support to Cohen’s proposal that אִמָּה is the preferred legal term for female slaves and that שִׁפְחָה is preferred in “colloquial” contexts. This synonymy is most apparent in the categories “property” and “marriage/conjugal” (see Table 1). However, it is outside of

<sup>63</sup> Judg 9:18; 19:19; 2 Sam 6:20–22.

<sup>64</sup> Exod 11:5.

<sup>65</sup> Pss 86:16 and 116:16 (בְּיָדֵינוּ אִמָּתֶיךָ).

Genesis and legal texts that the synonymy of the two terms is most apparent. This is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: אָמָה and שְׁפָחָה as designations for slave women – Genesis and legal settings excluded**

Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 3: The Terms	
Category of use	Genre	אָמָה	שְׁפָחָה
General	Narrative/Wisdom/Prophetic	0	3
Property	Narrative/Wisdom/Prophetic	2	3
Relation to mistress	Narrative/Wisdom/Prophetic	2	3
Relation to master	Narrative/Wisdom/Prophetic	2	1 (4x)
Marriage/conjugal	Narrative/Wisdom/Prophetic	5 (6x)	1

The categories, “property,” “relation to mistress,” and “relation to master” have near equal uses of both terms. Favoring of one term over the other is found in the categories “general” and “marriage/conjugal.” Three occurrences of שְׁפָחָה in the Hebrew Bible for general references to female slaves is, however, not enough data to claim that this is a distinctive meaning for שְׁפָחָה. Yet, the absence of אָמָה for this category supports Cohen’s proposal that אָמָה is the preferred legal term for female slaves. The favoring of אָמָה over שְׁפָחָה in the marriage/conjugal setting is a somewhat stronger pattern suggesting that, outside of Genesis and legal texts, אָמָה is the preferred term for a female slave who is a wife or in some conjugal relationship with her master. This is supported by the epigraphic evidence discussed above. But proposals to make this preference for אָמָה in the marriage/conjugal setting to be a distinct meaning for אָמָה (i.e. אָמָה is a broad term and includes a wife whereas שְׁפָחָה is the term for the lowest slave status) are countered by the preference for שְׁפָחָה in Genesis, which includes marriage/conjugal contexts, and the appearance of both terms in this context in legal texts (see Table 1). Maintaining this distinction in meaning between the terms can only be done if the use of the terms in Genesis is considered to be the result of an idiosyncratic use of language by the author(s)/compiler(s).

To summarize, אָמָה and שְׁפָחָה, when designating female slaves, are synonymous terms, but some patterns are present. One is that אָמָה is preferred in legal contexts, but the presence of שְׁפָחָה in Lev 19:10 and Deut 28:68 shows אָמָה cannot be proposed as *the* legal term for female slaves. A second pattern is that שְׁפָחָה is preferred in Genesis. This preference is strong enough that some proposed distinctions in meaning between the two terms are proved false, such as the use of אָמָה in relation to the master and שְׁפָחָה in relation to the mistress, and שְׁפָחָה not referring to slave women in marriage or other conjugal contexts. A third pattern is that, outside Genesis, אָמָה is the preferred term for female slaves in a marriage or other conjugal contexts. Since, however, Genesis uses שְׁפָחָה

frequently for this context and the term also appears in Exod 11:5, “wife” cannot be considered to be a distinctive meaning for אִמָּה. A fourth pattern is that, outside Genesis and legal contexts, שִׁפְחָה appears to be the preferred term when female slaves are referred to in general. This, along with אִמָּה in marriage/contexts, can support proposals that see a status difference between אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה, but the few references should give caution. Ultimately, it is the intertwining of context and genre that proves the synonymy of אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה and denies a clear differentiation in meaning between the two terms.

#### THE USE OF אִמָּה AND שִׁפְחָה (AS אִמָּתָךְ AND שִׁפְחָתְךָ) IN DEFERENTIAL SPEECH

When אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה are used as terms of deference (as אִמָּתָךְ and שִׁפְחָתְךָ) by a speaker, can it also be argued that they are synonymous as BDB suggests, or is there a distinction between them as TDOT and Younger propose?

אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה appear as deference in:

אִמָּתָךְ: Ruth 3:9; 1 Sam 1:11, 16; 25:24, 25, 28, 31; 2 Sam 14:15b–16; 20:17; 1 Kgs 3:20

שִׁפְחָתְךָ: Ruth 2:13; 1 Sam 1:18; 25:27; 2 Sam 14:4–7, 12, 15a, 17, 19; 2 Kgs 4:16

Two immediate observations can be made. One is that the terms appear only in narrative texts. This is not surprising, since it is only in narrative that speech or other communication by women occurs.<sup>66</sup>

A second observation is that both terms can appear in a single speech or dialogue (1 Sam 1:12–18; 25:24–31 and 2 Sam 14:4–19). For example:

“... Now the reason I have come to speak this matter to the king my lord [is] because the people have terrified me. So your servant [שִׁפְחָתְךָ] said, ‘Let me speak to the king. Perhaps the king will perform the request of his servant [אִמָּתִי]. For the king will listen to deliver his servant [אִמָּתִי] ...’ And your servant [שִׁפְחָתְךָ] said, ‘Please let the word of my lord the king be rest.’ ...” (2 Sam 14:15–17a)

When אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה are both used by the one speaker, there are no patterns of use of the terms. In Abigail’s speech to David, אִמָּתְךָ

<sup>66</sup> On the lack of women’s prayer in the Hebrew Bible, see Marc Z. Brettler, “Women and Psalms: Toward an Understanding of the Role of Women’s Prayer in the Israelite Cult,” V.H. Matthews, B.M. Levinson, T. Frymer-Kensky (eds), *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (JSOTSup, 262; London: T&T Clark, 1998), 25–56.

is preferred over אִמָּהּ (1 Sam 25:24, 25, 28, 31 for אִמָּהּ; v.27 for אִמָּהּ). In the Tekoite woman’s dialogue with David, אִמָּהּ is preferred over אִמָּהּ (2 Sam 14:4–7, 12, 15a, 17, 19 for אִמָּהּ; vv.15b, 16 for אִמָּהּ). In the dialogue between Hannah and Eli (1 Sam 1:12–18), Hannah uses each term once. In these three speaking events, אִמָּהּ and שְׂפָהּשׁ are interchangeable terms and deny the proposal that אִמָּהּ carries a higher status than אִמָּהּ.

When all female speakers in the Hebrew Bible are considered, both terms are found in requests for a hearing or to speak further (אִמָּהּ: 1 Sam 25:24, 2 Sam 20:17; שְׂפָהּשׁ: 1 Sam 28:21–22, 2 Sam 14:12), in expressions of gratitude (אִמָּהּ: 1 Sam 25:41; שְׂפָהּשׁ: 1 Sam 1:18, Ruth 2:13), and when self-defense is given (אִמָּהּ: 1 Sam 1:16; 25:25; שְׂפָהּשׁ: 2 Sam 14:19). There is also the possibility of two patterns. When critique is made of the (socially superior) hearer, only שְׂפָהּשׁ is used (2 Sam 14:15a, 17; 2 Kgs 4:16), and when a request is made for marriage, only אִמָּהּ is used (1 Sam 25:31<sup>67</sup>; Ruth 3:9). The use of אִמָּהּ in requests for marriage does match with the use of אִמָּהּ to designate female slaves in a marriage or conjugal setting, but the preference for אִמָּהּ over שְׂפָהּשׁ in 1 Sam 25 may explain its use in 1 Sam 25:31. Similarly, the preference for שְׂפָהּשׁ over אִמָּהּ in 2 Sam 14 may explain its use in the context of critiquing the hearer in 2 Sam 14:15a and 17. Only one reference is left as certain for each context, which is not enough to prove distinct meanings. The result is that אִמָּהּ and שְׂפָהּשׁ should be viewed as synonyms when used as deferential language. This discussion can be presented as in Table 4. Since genre is the same (speech in narrative), only two variables are present: the terms and the context of use.

*Table 4: אִמָּהּ and שְׂפָהּשׁ in deference*

Variable 1	Variable 2: The Terms	
	אִמָּהּ	שְׂפָהּשׁ
Context		
Request for hearing or to speak further	2	3
Gratitude	1	2
Self-defense	2	1
Critique of the hearer	0	3
Request for marriage	2	0

With regards to 1 Sam 25:41, in which both אִמָּהּ (אִמָּהּ) and שְׂפָהּשׁ appear, this verse, as shown earlier, is frequently cited as evidence that אִמָּהּ carries a higher status than שְׂפָהּשׁ. The thought is that אִמָּהּ relates directly as Abigail’s term of deference in regards to David’s

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<sup>67</sup> Abigail’s request for marriage in 1 Sam 25:31 is an indirect request. On this, see Edward J. Bridge, “Self-abasement as an Expression of Thanks in the Hebrew Bible,” *Bib* 92 (2011), 255–273 (266 and n. 31).

marriage proposal (vv. 39–40), whereas שפֹּהָה is coupled with a menial role: washing feet.

She [Abigail] rose and bowed, her nose [= face] to the ground,  
and said, “See! Your servant [אַמָּהָה] is a slave [לְשֹׁפְהָהָ] to wash  
the feet of the servants of my lord [וְרַגְלֵי עַבְדֵי אֲדֹנָי]!”

I wish to argue this is not the case. As noted above for 1 Sam 25:24–31, אַמָּהָה is Abigail’s preferred term of deference, so it is not surprising that it appears again in 1 Sam 25:41. שפֹּהָה is used as a metaphor that plays on the serving role of female slaves. What שפֹּהָה metaphorically denotes is not agreed upon, since Abigail comes to David as a wealthy lady with five serving women (נְעֹוֹת; v.42).<sup>68</sup> Given her status, her statement should be interpreted as self-abasement. Because Abigail has already requested David marry her (v.31), anticipating that her husband Nabal will die, her self-abasement should be interpreted as thanks for his favourable answer. Self-abasement in the context of thanks is found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 32:11[10]; 47:9; 2 Sam 7:18; 9:8; 16:4; 14:22; 1 Kgs 3:7; Pss 116:16; Ruth 2:13), and also in the Lachish letters (2:3–4; 5:3–4; 6:2–3).<sup>69</sup> The problem with citing 1 Sam 25:41 as evidence for a status difference between אַמָּהָה and שפֹּהָה is that the terms have different roles in the sentence, even though the use of שפֹּהָה involves a menial role.<sup>70</sup> The narrator could have chosen אַמָּהָה as the term of deference, since it appears in v. 27, and אַמָּהָה for the metaphor. Since Abigail is narrated as preferring אַמָּהָה, שפֹּהָה is left as the literary option for the metaphor.

To summarize, the deferential use of אַמָּהָה and שפֹּהָה matches with their use as designations for women: they are synonyms. There are some patterns of use, but these patterns are less certain

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<sup>68</sup> Some interpretations are: Abigail wants to be a mistress or concubine to David (Edelman, *King Saul*, 214); Abigail intends, “here is your wife (acting) as a housemaid ...” (Lipiński, “Kinship Terminology,” 16); Abigail simply uses the language of hospitality (Ralph Klein, *1 Samuel* [WBC 10; Milton Keynes: Word, 1986], 252); Abigail uses treaty language to David—a common interpretation (e.g., Joseph Lozovyy, *Saul, Doeg, Nabal and “the Son of Jesse”: Readings in 1 Samuel 16–25* [LHBOTS, 497; New York, London: T&T Clark, 2009], 176–177; Jon D. Levenson, Baruch Halpern, “The Political Import of David’s Marriages,” *JBL* 99 [1980]: 509–523; Moshe Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel: A Literary Study of Comparative Structures, Analogies and Parallels* [Ramat-Gan: Revivim 1985], 127–128); and Abigail expresses minimal obligation to David in the context of giving thanks (Bridge, “Self-abasement,” 265–66).

<sup>69</sup> See Bridge, “Self-abasement,” 255–73; and idem., “Polite Language in the Lachish Letters,” *VT* 60 (2010), 518–534 (523–25).

<sup>70</sup> For suggestions as to the metaphorical meaning of שפֹּהָה, see the literature cited in n. 68.

than for those found for when the terms are used as designations for women. This is because of the paucity of references and the interchangeable uses of these terms that are reflected within the speech of female speakers in the two major speaking events in 1 Sam 25 and 2 Sam 14.

### CONCLUSION

To conclude, no general distinction in meaning between אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה can be made. אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה are synonyms, both when they designate women and when used by a speaker for deference. Patterns of use, or preference of one term over the other, however, occur. When אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה designate women, אִמָּה is preferred in legal contexts and שִׁפְחָה is preferred in Genesis. Outside Genesis, only אִמָּה is used in marital/conjugal contexts. Because of Genesis' strong preference for שִׁפְחָה, proposals for distinct meanings of אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה cannot be sustained, such as אִמָּה is used for female slaves or servants in relation to the master, and שִׁפְחָה is used for female slaves or servants in relation to the mistress. Since שִׁפְחָה is mostly used for the patriarchs' slave wives in Genesis, the proposal that שִׁפְחָה refers to female slaves of the lowest status and אִמָּה to female slaves in marriage contexts also cannot be sustained. When used as deference, both terms are used in a number of contexts, and the choice of which term is preferred in a long speech or dialogue appears to be arbitrary. Such arbitrariness overrides possible patterns that אִמָּה is preferred in requests for marriage and שִׁפְחָה is preferred when a speaker critiques her hearer. Ultimately, the problem of determining distinctions in meaning between אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה is due to the intertwining of context of use and genre of text. For each possible context of use, from which a distinctive meaning for each term could be proposed, the other term also appears, even if from a different genre of text.