

The Manifold Expressions for the Showbread (the Bread of the Presence)

A compilation of Biblical references with discussion of translation problems.

Working paper. 2018. Peter Schmidt.

Introduction

The Old Testament uses a wide variety of expressions for referring to the showbread (*trad.*: shewbread). This creates a difficulty in translation. Those translators who want to use the same term consistently risk missing some relevant references, because no simple electronic search can be performed. Those translators who want to render each of the Hebrew expressions with its own equivalent in the receptor language will still benefit from looking at all places together, in order to synchronize them. This compilation, then, is meant to serve as a starting point when translating the term, and as a checklist. I do not discuss fully the significance of the showbread, but quotes from the literature are added in an appendix.

The textual data

The following table lists all wordings for the “Bread of the Presence” with their references.

Table 1: Hebrew and Greek expressions for the Bread of the Presence

Hebrew / Greek	References (complete)	English (literal)	Grammtical construction
לֶחֶם פָּנִים	Ex 25:30	bread of presence	construct chain
לֶחֶם הַפָּנִים	Ex 35:13; 39:36; 1Sam 21:7; 1Ki 7:48; 2Chr 4:19	bread of the presence	construct chain with article
לֶחֶם הַתָּמִיד	Num 4:7	bread of continuity / the regular bread	construct chain with article
לֶחֶם קֹדֶשׁ	1Sam 21:5 [Engl. 4]	bread of holiness / consecrated bread	construct chain
לֶחֶם הַמַּעֲרֶכֶת	1Chr 9:32; 23:29; Neh 10:34 [Engl. 33]	bread of the row	construct chain with article
מַעֲרֶכֶת תָּמִיד	2Chr 2:3 [Engl. 4]	row of continuity	construct chain
מַעֲרֶכֶת לֶחֶם	2Chr 13:11	row of bread	construct chain
οἱ ἄρτοι τῆς προθέσεως	Matt 12:4 par. Mark 2:26 / Luke 6:4 (all identical)	the bread[s] of the placing-in-public / the loaves laid before (LSJ)	genitive (as LXX)
ἡ πρόθεσις τῶν ἄρτων	Hebr 9:2	the placing-in- public of the bread[s]	Genitive. Unusual expression (cf. Ellingworth, NIGTC, 1993). In view is the bread itself. Probably metonymy: abstract for concrete (so Neuer Sprachlicher Schlüssel). Cf. 2Chr 13:11.

Looking at the table, a translator is faced with the question how to translate these expressions. Some of them are unwieldy. A related question that arises is how many different expressions should be used to refer to this same thing – the holy bread.

The legislation about the Bread of the Presence is found in Lev 24:5-9. It is thus a text that we should consult as well, even though none of the special religious terms above is used in that passage. Leviticus refers to the bread simply as a certain type of bread [חֶלֶקֶת], NASB: “cake”). For convenience, we quote this passage from Lev 24 here:

NASB: ⁵“Then you shall take fine flour and bake twelve cakes with it; two-tenths of an ephah shall be in each cake. ⁶You shall set them in two rows, six to a row, on the pure gold table before the LORD. ⁷You shall put pure frankincense on each row that it may be a memorial portion for the bread, even an offering by fire to the LORD. ⁸Every sabbath day he shall set it in order before the LORD continually; it is an everlasting covenant for the sons of Israel. ⁹It shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place; for it is most holy to him from the LORD'S offerings by fire, his portion forever.”

Discussion of some wordings

Ex 25:30, the first occurrence, reads literally:

You shall set on the table bread-of-face before my face continually.

At this point, nothing more is said than that – bread is put before the LORD. Now the *Handbook* says:

The bread of the Presence has traditionally been translated as “shewbread” (KJV) or “showbread” (ASV, NAB). This interpretation may have originated with Jerome’s Latin (Vulgate) panes propositionis (“bread of the exhibition”) and LUTHER’s German Schaubrot (“display bread”). The Hebrew word translated as Presence, however, literally means “face” and is frequently used to represent the actual person of Yahweh himself (see 33.14 and the comment there). Some interpreters have therefore suggested that this expression means “the bread of God,” or “the bread dedicated to God.” Others have “bread of display” (TAN), “Holy Bread” (TOT), or “sacred loaves of bread” (CEV). ...

Out of these suggestions, I prefer “bread of display” (TAN/NJPS) or “bread placed before God”. The danger with all kinds of other wordings is that they misinterpret the meaning – and at the same time lose the core idea: that the bread was **to be there before God**. The *Handbook* on Mark 2:26 brings this out when it says:

... In some languages, accordingly, the closest equivalent of bread of the Presence would be ‘bread set before God’ or ‘bread set before the face of God’ (Luvale); ‘loaves which are laid before the face (of God)’ (South Toradja).

These suggestions keep the original meaning. – The challenge with doing this in Ex 25:30 might be that the sentence could sound tautologous: “Put the bread that is put before me on the table before me.” But this can be avoided by using different verbs, like “Place the bread, which is presented before me, on the table before me.”, or: “Make sure to set the bread that is to be placed in my presence on the table continually.” Anyhow, this same problem does not occur in the other places where the “Bread of the Presence” is mentioned.

Num 4:7 speaks of the packing of the holy items before moving camp. The *Handbook* says about “the Table of the Presence”:

The continual bread also shall be on it can be expressed much more clearly by saying “The bread shall always remain on the table” (similarly GNT). FRCL is also clear with “they will also put on it the loaves which are to be offered to me [the LORD] permanently.”

I do not favor the first suggestion, because I believe that the nominalized adjective חֶלֶקֶת does not serve to express an imperative in the sense of “Even when moving camp the bread shall remain on the table”; this would not make sense in 2Chr 2:3 [Engl. 4], where the word חֶלֶקֶת is also used. In fact, חֶלֶקֶת already occurs adverbially in the first reference to this bread in Ex 25:30. It characterizes the bread as bread that was presented continuously. The second suggestion (from FRCL) fits better. NET (“..., and the Bread of the Presence must be on it continually”) also has the wrong focus. In this verse, חֶלֶקֶת is part of the name of the bread, not an adverb that goes with the verb.

1Sam 21:5[4] should be easy enough to translate into most receptor languages as “holy / sacred / consecrated bread”.

The places in **Chronicles and Nehemia** that mention the ‘row’ [מַעַרְכֵּת] deserve some explanation. The word refers to some kind of arrangement. Because of the dimensions of the table and the size of the loaves, the commentators largely agree that this Hebrew word **refers not to rows but to ‘piles’ or ‘layers’** (cf. HALOT: “stratification, display” and also “laid-out or shew-bread”; HALAT: “Aufschichtung, Schicht, Schicht- oder Schaubrote”; Milgrom (on Lev 24:5-9, p. 2091 and 2096-2097) “**pile bread**” etc.). Most likely, the loaves were arranged in two piles of six pieces each (see the illustration in the *Realia Handbook* (249)).

The expression “bread of the row” will not work in many receptor languages. The *Handbook* quotes NRSV with “rows of bread”. What are other possibilities? Before we replace it with one of the other terms like “sacred bread” (e.g. GNB) or a paraphrase (e.g. NIV: the bread set out on the table), one can **try to keep the idea by saying something like “the stacked bread”** (Houtman on Ex 25:30, p. 391) or **“the bread that was to be piled up [in the sanctuary]”** or simply **“the bread piles”**. The English and German versions do not provide an example for this – except for Menge’s alternative rendering in parentheses, “Schichtbrote”, but that risks being misunderstood as “Schicht” (= ‘layer’) having something to do with the dough and how the bread was baked. – Anyway, the passages in 1Chr are concerned with some practical tasks in the Temple ministry. It is fitting to use a wording that stresses the actual handling of the bread loaves here, not its deeper meaning (“Bread of the Presence”).

Translation

Obviously, decisions will depend on the kind of translation that the project is supposed to produce. I will just mention a few points in addition to what was said above.

Apart from KJV with its traditional rendering “showbread”, most English versions go literal with “Bread of the Presence”. This makes the reader ask “Whose presence?”. Granted, that God is meant is quite obvious. Nevertheless the expression is not altogether natural.

GNB and CEV qualify the bread as “sacred bread / sacred loaves of bread” (even in Ex 25:30). That is fully in line with 1Sam 21:5[4], but does not convey the idea of “presence”. NJPS captures this better with **“the bread of display”**. Among the French versions, **BDS does it similarly when it speaks of “le pain exposé devant moi”** (= the bread displayed / set out before me).

Depending on the language and the preferred style, wordings with adjectives, participles or relative clauses may be considered – like “the displayed bread / the to-be-displayed bread / the bread that is displayed”.¹ Next to “display”, an equivalent of “to present” might work.

CEV has a footnote on “sacred bread“ in Num 4:7. It says: **“This bread was offered to the LORD and was a symbol of his presence in the sacred tent. ...”** This should not be copied. It was not the bread that symbolized God’s presence. The bread was laid out in his presence. Cf. Houtman (Exodus, vol. 3, HCOT, 2000, on Ex 25:30, p. 393).

1Chr 9:32 is translated by REB as follows: “Some of their Kohathite kinsmen were in charge of **setting out** [כִּוֵּן] the rows of the Bread of the Presence every sabbath.” This blurs the distinction between the priests and the other Kohathites. It should not sound as if any Kohathites other than the priests had access to the Holy Place. Probably, we are to understand that some Kohathites made and baked the bread; but it would be the priests who put it onto the table. If so, it is safer to use the verb “prepare” – as several versions do.

Residue

Some exegetical questions, which we cannot address here and now, are the following:

- What kind of bread was it? What does מַעַרְכֵּת (Lev 24:5) mean?

¹ As to German and French versions, this is what we find: Luther (2017) and Einheit (2016): “Schaubrote” (= showbread); GCLNR00: “geweihte Brote” (= dedicated / consecrated bread); HFA: “die Brote, die mir geweiht sind” (= the [loaves of] bread that are dedicated to me); several French versions use a form of the word *offrir* (= offer / give).

- Does the use of **תָּמִיד** ('continuously') mean that the bread was to be presented "regularly" (every week) or that it was to lie on the table "constantly" (without interruption)?
- Was the *azkara* (Lev 24:7) the bread or the incense? Was it a "reminder" to God or to the people?
- How are we to understand the word "covenant" in Lev 24:8b? Is the presenting of the bread a covenant duty? Or is the bread a symbol for the covenant? – Milgrom (Leviticus, III, AB, 2001) translates Lev 24:8b "(a commitment) of the Israelites as a covenant for all time" (2080-2081) and says (2094): "I can only concur with the opinion that the bread offering is a "pledge of the covenant between the twelve tribes and the Lord" (de Vaux 1961: 422)."

Appendix: Selection of quotes from commentaries and dictionaries about the meaning of the Bread of the Presence

One question to ask is whether the Bread was meant as something for the benefit of the Lord, or whether it reminded the Lord of the needs of his people, or whether it reminded the people to devote themselves to the ever-present Lord. – I quote what some scholars say, without making a definitive evaluation.

Something that almost everybody seems to agree upon is what, for example, Levine (Leviticus, JPSTC, 1989) says like this (on Lev 24:5):

As noted by Ibn Ezra, the twelve loaves clearly represent the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

Keil's view is worthwhile considering. He says (on Lev 24:5-9):

..., the laying out of these loaves assumed the form of a bloodless sacrifice, in which the congregation brought the fruit of its life and labour before the face of the Lord, and presented itself to its God as a nation diligent in sanctification to good works.

(See also Keil on Ex 25:30.)

Houtman (Exodus, vol. 3, HCOT, 2000) translates "private bread" (389), and says on Ex 25:30 (391):

לֶחֶם פָּנִים ... has been taken to mean 'bread of the face/of the presence,' that is, set before the face of YHWH/at the place where YHWH is present. **לֶחֶם פָּנִים** has also been taken as the bread at which YHWH gazes and which he graciously accepts and as the 'bread of the personal presence'(viz. of YHWH), in the sense of YHWH's personal bread. ... The most plausible interpretation is 'personal'.

The rendering "private / personal" for 'face' is pressing things too far in my view.

He refers to Strack and others and says ...

Functioning as a reminder to the Israelites that it is YHWH who sustains them, is what several interpreters see as the (central) purpose of the bread.

..., but is convinced (393):

The contention that the bread had this instructional purpose for Israel lacks all grounds. The bread is first of all intended for YHWH. It lies in the sanctuary. Not as a symbol of YHWH's presence, but for the benefit of YHWH.

He goes on to say (393):

He, the Lord of the world, should feel completely at home on earth. ... A blunt anthropomorphic conception of God – as if the deity were actually eating and drinking in the sanctuary – is, however, excluded by the description. Bread and table service are strictly ornamental.

Levine says (on Lev 24:7):

... The loaves themselves were a presentation to God ... The bread was viewed by God and, by this means, accepted by Him. Subsequently, the loaves were apportioned to the priests. ... God was pictured as inhaling the aroma of the burning frankincense, which served as "an offering by fire."

Hartley (Leviticus, WBC, 1992) (on Lev 24:5) considers various theories without being absolutely decisive, and ends on a note referring to Levine:

In any case God views this bread, which is placed in his presence, and thus accepts it.

ISBE (1986, s.v. Presence, bread of the, vol. 3, pp. 955-956):

..., the twelve loaves are presented as a pledge of the eternal covenant between God and the twelve tribes of Israel (Lev 24:8; see de Vaux, p. 422). As a symbol of all that nourishes and sustains life, the bread was a constant reminder that Israel's life depended upon God's sustaining presence. The eating of the loaves by the priests (rather than by the deity) symbolized the communion between God and the people to whom he was continually present.

Hartley (on Lev 24:8-9), too, states that

It is possible that the priests' partaking of this bread symbolized that all members of the twelve tribes are in table fellowship with Yahweh.

However, Houtman (394) states on this idea: "The OT is silent on it."

IVP New Bible Dictionary (3. ed., 1996, s.v. showbread):

Heb. *leḥem happānīm*, lit. 'bread of the face', *i.e.* bread set before the face or presence of God ... The passages referred to do not themselves indicate the significance of the showbread, but it is possible to infer from these data that God is man's provider and sustainer, and that man lives constantly in the presence of God. This truth makes it obligatory for man to offer his life to God (Rom. 12:1).

Wenham (Leviticus, NICOT, 1979) says (on Lev 24):

Like circumcision (Gen. 17:13, 19) and the sabbath (Exod. 31:16), the bread of the Presence symbolized the "eternal covenant" (v. 8) between God and Israel (cf. Ps. 105:10; Rom. 11:28-29). Alternatively this phrase could refer to the everlasting covenant announced to Noah that God would never again destroy the earth and its crops in a flood. But this seems less likely (Gen. 9:16).

Milgrom (Leviticus, III, AB, 2001) (2092) says (contrasting this with neighboring cultures):

... clearly a token offering whose purpose was exposure, not food (Barr 1963).

He concludes (2095):

In sum, the twelve loaves displayed on the table in the inner shrine probably had the same function as the two onyx stones attached to the two shoulder-pieces of the high priest's ephod and, most likely, as the twelve stones mounted in his breastpiece of decision as a "remembrance of the Israelites ... before YHWH" (Ex 28:12; cf. v. 21). This interpretation is reinforced by the association of the loaves with the covenant (v. 8b). They are a constant reminder to YHWH of his *b'rît ôlām*, his "eternal covenant" with his people.

One should also investigate **in what sense this Bread is an "offering"**. In ISBE, it says (1986, s.v. Presence, bread of the, vol. 3, p. 956):

..., the OT provides no evidence that the bread of the Presence was ever understood as a sacrifice ...

On the other hand, de Vaux argues (Ancient Israel, part 4, ch. 10, § 5):

The fact that incense was placed there justifies us in regarding the loaves as something like a sacrificial offering, and Ezechiel himself likens the table on which they were put to an altar (Ezek 41:21-22).