

The Leaders of the Levites in 1-2 Chronicles

An overview. 2018. Peter Schmidt. – Quotes by NASB.

As we read through Chronicles, we pick up more and more expressions for various leaders among the Levites. For a translator, who needs to come up with fitting words in his language, it might be helpful to know beforehand, how many offices he needs to distinguish.

Before we turn to certain titles (nouns), let me point out that there are also two other phrases that express oversight, and which occur repeatedly in 1-2 Chronicles:

1. The simplest possible way of expressing leadership is to use the **preposition** על 'al **“above / over”** in a verbless sentence, as e.g. in 1Chr 27:4:

Dodai the Ahohite and his division had charge of [*literally just*: “over”] the division for the second month.

This phrase can be used of someone who is in charge of *things* as well, as in 2Chr 31:14.

2. The other phrase is ... על יד \ יד' 'al yad / y'dē ... **“under the hand(s) of ...”**. E.g. 1Chr 25:2 says:

...; the sons of Asaph were under the direction of [*literally*: “under the hand of”] Asaph, who prophesied under the direction of [*literally*: “under the hands of”] the king.

The table below gives an overview over the noun phrases for leaders of the Levites (without a guarantee of completeness). I do not deal with the terms for leading *priests* here.

Remark on the word rōš in the first row of the table: rōš is also used in the phrase ראשי אבות הקלויים rāšē 'abôt halwiyyim (with minor variations), literally “chiefs of the fathers of the Levites”. This happens in Ex 6:25; Josh 21:1; 1Chr 9:33/34; 15:12. The phrase is to be understood as “chiefs of the fathers’ houses of the Levites”, thus **“chiefs of the clans of the Levites”**. That the word ‘house’ is missing in Hebrew is due to a regular ellipsis.¹ We find it in the book of Numbers as well. Num 31:26 is such a case:

You and Eleazar the priest and the heads of the fathers’ households [added in NASB] of the congregation take a count of the booty ...

Milgrom (Numbers, JPSTC, 1990, note # 56 on 31:26 (p. 328)) explains the ellipsis:

..., but the word *beit* is dropped when 'avot is in construct (or in genitival relation) with the preceding and following nouns (see 36:1; and contrast Ex 6:14; Jos 22:14).

This is what happens in the present cases as well. The *Handbook* on Ex 6:25 rightly says:

There are six generations from Levi to **Phinehas**, but all those named in these verses are considered **heads of the fathers’ houses** for all **the Levites**, that is, for all the descendants of Levi. The Hebrew does not include the word for houses in this verse, although it is used in verse 14. Most translations supply it since it is probably understood. ...

The alternative that is added afterwards is probably not needed:

... But it is also possible to interpret the Hebrew as referring to “the leading Levitical ancestors,” as TOT has done.

The *Handbooks* on Josh and 1Chr do not explain the issue, but their renderings are in line with the understanding presented here.

¹ For the following point, and for a more thorough interpretation of “father’s house”, cf. Peter Schmidt: Short Note: *bēt āb* ‘Father’s House’ in Numbers. *Journal of Translation*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2017, pp. 26-28. 2017. www.sil.org/resources/publications/entry/72283.

Table: Terms for leading Levites				
Hebrew expressions	English glosses	Used on clan level	Used for a certain task	Remarks
ראש <i>rōš</i>	head / chief	1Chr 9:33/34; 15:5-12; 23:11; 26:31; in 26:21-22 >	1Chr 9:17 chief gate keeper > over treasures	See the remark above on this phrase.
שר <i>šar</i>	leader	1Chr 15:16/22	2Chr 35:9 general leadership; 1Chr 15:22 in charge of the singing / directing music	
גְּבֹרֵי הַשַּׁעֲרִים <i>gibbōrê haššō^arîm</i>	the chief gatekeepers (four)		1Chr 9:26 (cf. v. 17) guarding / organizing the guarding	Might involve other tasks as well. / Same as the ones below?
שֹׁמְרֵי הַסֶּף \ שֹׁמְרֵי הַסִּפִּים <i>šōmrê hassap / šōmrê hassippîm</i>	the keepers of the threshold(s)		1Chr 9:19; 2Chr 34:9 chief gatekeepers (so NLT in 2Ki 25:18)	<i>Handbook</i> on 2Chr 34:9: “They were apparently not mere doorkeepers, but high-ranking officials. ... (see 2 Kgs 23.4; 25.18; Jer 52.24). ...”
נָגִיד <i>nāgîd</i>	ruler / leader / chief		1Chr 26:24 over the treasures 2Chr 31:12 over the contributions etc.	both are in charge of storage – one of valuables, and one of the tithe etc.
פֶּקִיד <i>pāqîd</i>	overseer		2Chr 31:13 “were overseers under the authority of Conaniah and Shimei”	This is a middle management position.
נָצַח <i>nšḥ</i> (inf.cs.)	overseer		1Chr 23:4 “to oversee the work of the house of the LORD”	The meaning of the verb in this verse is uncertain. See <i>Handbook</i> .
שָׂטְרִים וְשֹׁפְטִים <i>šōṭrîm w^ššōṭṭîm</i>	officers and judges		1Chr 23:4 (6,000 men); 26:29 (two men)	See <i>Handbook</i> .
שֵׁנִי <i>šēnî</i> מִשְׁנֵה <i>mišneh</i>	second second [in position / rank / command] / deputy	1Chr 23:11	2Chr 31:12 over the contributions etc. 1Chr 15:18 musicians	

Conclusion and Translation

What we encounter in 1-2 Chronicles is not an elaborate system of leadership terms where consistency would be a big issue in translation. Rather, the translator needs to find terms that are appropriate in each given context.

A few points to be aware of when making word choices are these:

- The two Hebrew phrases *'al*, meaning “in charge of”, and *'al yad*, meaning “under the direction of” can be translated freely, as in the examples further above (“had charge of / were under the direction of”). For the second one, NET says “were supervised by ...” in 1Chr 25:2.
In 2Chr 31:15, most English versions turn the perspective around and use a form of “to assist” to express the relationship: “... were assisting him” (NRSV) / “His assistants were ...” (NLT).
Where *things* are in view (rather than people) – as in 1Chr 26:28 –, the English versions say “... was in the care of ...” (e.g. NASB), or “... in the custody of ...” (NIV in 1Chr 29:8). GNB (in 1Chr 26:28) makes the supervisor the subject and says “... were in charge of ...”.
- Another possibility is the use of appropriate titles, if the receptor language offers such.
- Words are needed for at least three different kinds of leaders: (1) leaders on clan level, (2) leaders entrusted with specific tasks (e.g. “treasurer”), and (3) deputies (see the bottom row of the table).²
- The first two rows of the table (*rōš* and *śar*) refer to leaders in general. If a language has a limited vocabulary for such groups, it is not essential to distinguish them. However, if a distinction can be made, then it seems appropriate to translate *rōš* ‘head’ with a term for the top leader(s), and *śar* with another term for leaders. (In 1Chr 23:11, Jahath is the *rōš*, followed by Zizah, called “the second”. 1Chr 26:10 says that Shimri was made *rōš*, even though he was not the firstborn (cf. v. 2). These usages seem to show that a *rōš* really holds the top position.)
- The authority of the roles may be relative: A *rōš* ‘chief’ might be the top leader – but only in his own clan; whereas the *nāgîd* ‘ruler’ over the storehouses has a position that is held centrally for the whole country.

² A ‘deputy’ is “a person appointed or authorized to act as a substitute for another”, or “a person appointed or elected as assistant to a public official, serving as successor in the event of a vacancy” (dictionary.com).