

Understanding and Translating Numbers 1:20-21ff.

Peter Schmidt. Revised July 2019.

The verses Num 1:20f. read (NASB):

²⁰ Now the sons of Reuben, Israel's firstborn, their genealogical registration [תולדותם *tôlēdôt*] by their families, by their fathers' households, according to the number of names, head by head, every male from twenty years old and upward, whoever was able to go out to war, ²¹ their numbered men of the tribe of Reuben were 46,500.

Because the phrasing of these two verses is so long-winded, it becomes untransparent where different *exegesis* leads to the respective English translations, and where the translations simply differ in *style*. I hope to make some exegetical details more transparent here.

I suspect that the rendering of Num 1:20f. in many English versions (NASB, NIV, REB, NET, NRSV, NLT) is due to a **too narrow understanding of תולדותם *tôlēdôt* and a misinterpretation of the syntactical role of this same word**. I suggest that *tôlēdôt* should be understood not as "genealogical registration / records", but as "offspring / descendants" (cf. TEV) and that the Hebrew sentence – even if it is long and has only one verb – is more straightforward than some English versions make it look like.

To make it easier to follow the argumentation further below, I refer the reader to the following table which lays out the syntax of Num 1:20f.

Table: Num 1:20f. in Hebrew and in English	
<p>וַיְהִיו בְּנֵי־רְאוּבֵן בְּכֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל תּוֹלְדוֹתָם לְמִשְׁפַּחָתָם לְבֵית אֲבוֹתָם בְּמִסְפַּר שְׁמוֹת לְגִלְגָּלָתָם כָּל־זָכָר מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְיָמָעֵלָה כֹּל יָצָא צָבָא: פָּקְדֵיהֶם לְמִטָּה רְאוּבֵן שֵׁשָׁה וָאַרְבָּעִים אֲלֶפֶי וַחֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת:</p>	<p>They were the sons of Reuben, Israel's firstborn, their descendants/offspring [<u>counted</u>] by their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, head by head, every male from twenty years old & upward, whoever was able to go to war, their enrolled of the tribe of Reuben 46,500.</p>

The basic sentence in Hebrew is: "The sons of Reuben were 46,500." תולדותם *tôlēdôt* is an apposition to "sons of Reuben", as is פקדיהם *p²qudêhem* 'their enrolled' close to the end. If *tôlēdôt* is an apposition, it cannot, as far as I know, be understood in the sense of "according to [the genealogical records]".

tôlēdôt does not necessarily include the idea of a registration or a written record. HALOT, for the cases in Num 1, just lists "descendants / successors". If *tôlēdôt* should be understood as being a written record, then how would it fit into the syntax of the sentence?

I will admit that in an elegant translation one has to provide an extra verb. It is the specifying phrases "by their clans" etc. that miss a verb. This is probably due to the list-character of the Hebrew text. But the expression *p^oqudêhem* 'their numbered / enrolled' in v. 21 justifies supplying the words "as counted/listed" in front of "by their clans ...". Also, *בְּמִסְפָּר* *b^omispar* 'by the number' implies the activity of counting.¹

So how does a fitting translation develop? We start with a literal one:

They were, the sons of Reuben, Israel's firstborn, their descendants by their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, head by head, every male, from twenty years old and upward, whoever was able to go out to war, – their mustered of the tribe of Reuben: 46,500.

For a more elegant translation provide the missing verbs and place "were" at the end:

The sons of Reuben, Israel's firstborn, their descendants, counted by their clans, by their ancestral houses, and listed by name, head by head, every male, from twenty years old and upward, whoever was able to go out to war, – their mustered of the tribe of Reuben were 46,500.

Stylistic amendments lead to a freer translation:

The whole tribe of Israel's firstborn Reuben was counted by their clans and by their ancestral houses and were listed by name, one by one – every male person aged twenty years and upwards and fit for military service. The recruits of the tribe of Reuben totaled 46,500 men.

Finally, some re-structuring will be in place. Reading the above translations, the reader will first think of *every tribal member* being listed; then towards the end of the sentence it becomes apparent that only *recruits* are counted. Borrowing the idea from NCV we end up with:

The whole tribe of Israel's firstborn Reuben was counted; every male person aged twenty years and upwards and fit for military service was listed by name according to their clans and ancestral houses. ²¹ The recruits of the tribe of Reuben totaled 46,500 men.

Summary: The differences to other translations then are: Firstly, the term "register / records" is not there, because *tôlêdôt* is not interpreted as such. Secondly, the verbs "was counted / were listed" are added; yet they do not relate to the word *tôlêdôt* in its understanding as "genealogical register", but they make explicit what is implied in *p^oqudêhem* "their enrolled" and *b^omispar* "by the number", because the phrases "by their clans" etc. grammatically require verbs in English.

Appendix: English versions (for reference; underlining mine)

NASB: Now the sons of Reuben, Israel's firstborn, their genealogical registration by their families, by their fathers' households, according to the number of names, head by head, every male from twenty years old and upward, whoever *was able to* go out to war, 21 their numbered men of the tribe of Reuben *were* 46,500.

NIV: From the descendants of Reuben the firstborn son of Israel: All the men twenty years old or more who were able to serve in the army were listed by name, one by one, according to the records of their clans and families. 21 The number from the tribe of Reuben was 46,500.

REB: The tribal list of Reuben, Israel's eldest son, by families in the father's line, with the name of every male person aged twenty years and upwards fit for service, 21 the number in the list of the tribe of Reuben being forty-six thousand five hundred.

NET: The descendants of Reuben, the firstborn son of Israel: According to the records of their clans and families, all the males twenty years old or older who could serve in the army were listed by name individually. 21 Those of them who were numbered from the tribe of Reuben were 46,500.

¹ Cf. the usage of this phrase and similar ones in Lev 25:15 "corresponding to the number of years"; Num 14:34 "according to the number of days"; Deut 25:2 "with the number of stripes according to his guilt"; 2Sam 24:9 "the number of the registration of the people".

NRSV: The descendants of Reuben, Israel's firstborn, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, individually, every male from twenty years old and upward, everyone able to go to war: 21 those enrolled of the tribe of Reuben were forty-six thousand five hundred.

NCV: The tribe of Reuben, the first son born to Israel, was counted; all the men twenty years old or older who were able to serve in the army were listed by name with their families and family groups. 21 The tribe of Reuben totaled 46,500 men.

TEV: 1.20-46 The men twenty years old or older who were fit for military service were registered by name according to clan and family, beginning with the tribe of Reuben, Jacob's oldest son. The totals were as follows: ...

NLT: 20-21 This is the number of men twenty years old or older who were able to go to war, as their names were listed in the records of their clans and families: ...