

Leviticus: Textual Question: “Relatives” versus “People” – Notes, PS, 2022

There is a textual question that comes up repeatedly in Leviticus. The first case is in 19:16. In 19:16, HOTTTP rates the reading “among your relatives” with {A}, against the variant “among your people”.

The issue is not really difficult, but in many resources it is not well explained, and the relevant references are not dealt with together. What complicates the matter is that in English the translation “people” is somewhat ambiguous; it is not absolutely clear whether the translator had in mind the extended family or the nation – but this is the very question at hand in Hebrew.

As far as I understand them, the issues behind this problem are as follows: רְעֵמֶיךָ is a plural form and means “your peoples”. But it is strange that other nations besides Israel would be in view, for example, in 19:16:

You shall not go about as a slanderer among your peoples[?].

Therefore this interpretation can be ruled out. Many Hebrew manuscripts have the variant רְעַמְךָ (i.e., the word is written without the *Yodh*). This would make it a singular form, “among your people [nation]” – which is easy to understand. Ancient translations are based on the same meaning. But why does the MT have the plural?

רַעַי does not always mean ‘people’ [as in HALOT, s.v., § C]. **It can also mean ‘(paternal) relationship, clan, kin’** [as in HALOT, s.v., § B]. DCH lists this as a homonym, רַעַי II ‘kinsman’. NIDOTTE also deals with these words as homonyms. רַעַי “people” in the sense of nation is listed as # 6639. The other one is found under # 6638 (3:429f.) It is glossed as: “populace-member, citizen; kinsman, relative; collective: populace, people; kin” (The author denies that it has to be a *paternal* relative, or even kinship at all.)

Both HALOT and DCH list Gen. 25:8 as an example:

Abraham breathed his last ...; and he was gathered to his kin [Heb. plur.].

Applying this to the sentence in Lev. 19:16 results in:

You shall not go about as a slanderer among your kin [NJPS] / ancestors [NET08] / relatives [WBC].

(*Remark*: In English, “kin” usually refers to a person’s relatives collectively, although it can also refer to an individual relative or kinsman (cf. dictionary.com).)

Now this understanding apparently raised the question why such behaviour (the slandering) would only be prohibited among relatives. But there is no need for such a restrictive reading. The own clan is simply where such misbehaviour would begin (cf. Ehrlich, referred to in Milgrom).

Hieke translates with “Abstammungslinie” (≈ lineage) and explains (on Lev. 21:1 and 7:20; see notes and comments):

(1:324) Es geht um die väterliche Abstammungslinie, die wiederum den Platz des Einzelnen im Volk definiert. Wenn nun jemand von seiner Abstammungslinie abgeschnitten wird, heißt das, ihn aus seiner sozialen Einbettung in Familienstrukturen ... zu reißen, ... – und zugleich, dass er selbst die Abstammungslinie nicht fortsetzt, also keine Nachkommen haben wird.

English: It is about the paternal line of descent, which defines the individual’s place in the society. If someone is cut off from his line of descent, this means that he is ripped out of his social context in family structures – and at the same time his line of descent is not continued, i.e., he will not have descendants.

Milgrom, in Lev. 19:16, translates “among your kin”.¹ Note his translation in Lev. 21:1-2:

None shall defile himself (mourning) for any dead person among his kin,
except for his closest relatives: ...

Hieke (on 19:16; see note and comments) translates the MT, but finds the variant “among your people” simpler and more likely (and takes the MT essentially to mean the same; gossip would start in the own clan and then spread).

Hartley (WBC) notes:

Many Heb. MSS, Sam., and LXX read a sg noun בעמך, “with your people,” but this pl. occurs in 21:1, 4, 14, 15; 23:29 and Gen 49:29.

Not only does the plural occur elsewhere; in several place it does so without any variant reading being shown (see e.g. Lev. 7:21; 23:29). This is an argument for going by the MT also in those places where variants are known, as long as the text makes sense, and it does (e.g. in 7:20).²

Conclusion: The MT, with עַם understood as “fellow citizen / kinsman”, and in the plural “community / kin” makes sense and seems, in fact, more precise than the variant reading, the singular of the second lexeme עַם “people [nation]”.

This matter concerns sentences like these – **references complete for Lev.:**

- 7:20; that person shall be cut off from his kin.
+ 7:21, 25, 27; 17:9; 19:8; 23:29
- 19:16 You shall not go about as a slanderer among your kin.
- 21:1 Speak to the priests ...: No one shall defile himself for a dead person among his kin. + 21:4
- 21:14 He is to marry a virgin of his own kin. + 21:15

Textual variants occur only[?] in 19:16; 21:1, 4, 15. (20:24, 26 use the plural of עַם in the more frequent sense ‘peoples’.) Most English versions might, in fact, go by the MT when they say “among your/his people” (cf. 7:20, where there is no variant, and מִן־עַמּוֹתָיִךָ is translated “from his people”! [in the sense of ‘community’?]); but “people” would normally be read as “nation”, in which case they would be following the textual variant בעמך.

The *Handbook* is of limited help, because it picks up the issue, but does not really explain the textual variants and the two meanings of the word עַם.

On 7:20, it says:

The Hebrew term translated **people** (see 4.3) is used in several different expressions having slightly different meanings ranging from a very broad “kin” to membership in a particular tribe or clan. If the receptor language has several different words to describe different degrees of kinship, it is probably best to use the most general term in this context. If there is any possibility that the reader or hearer will misunderstand **his people**, then it should be translated “the people of Israel,” or perhaps “the nation of Israel.”

On 21:1, it says:

Regarding the word **people** or “kinsmen,” see 7.20 and 19.16. This word is used four times in this chapter (here and in verses 4, 14, and 15) and in this context probably means “the tribe of Levi,” all those who are a part of the priestly clan.

Literature: Most commentaries & UBS *Handbook* consulted. – BHQ on Lev.: Biblia Hebraica Quinta. Fascicle 3: Leviticus. Prepared by Innocent Himbaza. A. Schenker and R. D. Weis (eds.). Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2020.

¹ But he sees Ezek. 22:9 supporting the meaning of the entire people. However, he does not make a similar comment regarding Lev. 21:1. Comparing Lev. 21:14 with Ezek. 44:22, he sees a change.

² Rendtorff (*Leviticus*, BKAT, vol. 1), in 7:20, has no special comment. He translates “der soll aus seinen Volksgenossen herausgeschnitten werden” (≈ he shall be cut out from amidst his people’s fellows). (The volumes in which the other references would be covered were never published.)