

stick, staff, tribe

שִׁבְטֵי

1. Statistics

	Torah	Nebiim	Ketubim	Total
Total	32	117	42	191
1. Stick, staff	4	22	18	44
2. Tribe	28	95	23	146

In some cases, it can be discussed whether meaning 1 or 2 applies, in other cases whether within meaning 1 ‘stick’ or ‘staff’ applies. See also → שִׁבְטֵי.

2a. Literal Use

שִׁבְטֵי stands for a wooden ‘stick’ which can be broken (Isa. 9:3;14:5, 29). Sometimes iron was used for its head or for the reinforcement of a bronze sceptre (Ps. 2:9; cf. Lemaire 1986; Salvesen 1998, 130). As opposed to its equivalents → מִטְּהָה and → מִקְּלֵה it rarely occurs in the sense of a branch still attached to its tree (Ezek. 19:11, 14; 21:15; cf. Rüthy 1942, 53-4). It is basically used as a tool of power and as a symbol of authority. As a tool of power it occurs in the context of fighting (2 Sam. 18:14; 23:21 || 1 Chr. 11:23), of beating people and nations in order to punish and discipline them (Exod. 21:20; 2 Sam. 7:14; Isa. 9:3; 10:5, 15, 24; 11:4; 14:5, 29; 30:31; Mic. 4:14; Ps. 2:9; 89:33; Job 9:34; 21:9; 37:13; Prov. 10:13; 22:8; 26:3; Lam. 3:1) or with a pedagogical purpose (Prov. 13:24; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15). Related is its use in the context of herding: to guide and defend the flock (Mic. 7:14; Ps. 23:4) or to select the animals (Lev. 27:32; Ezek. 20:37).

With regard to the problems of the plural use of the term in 2 Sam. 18:14 and the discussion about the art of Joab’s action, cf. Salvesen 1998, 123.

Unique is the mention of שִׁבְטֵי as an instrument to harvest fine products like cummin (Isa. 28:27).

שִׁבְטֵי also functions as a symbol of authority, ‘staff’, like → מִטְּהָה and → מִקְּלֵה. In spite of the predominant meaning of the word as ‘tribe’ (cf. section 2b), its use as symbol of authority rarely occurs in the context of Israel’s tribes (Judg. 5:14), unless in the messianic application to Judah’s privileged destiny (Gen. 49:10;

Num. 24:17; Ezek. 21:15,18; Mic. 7:14), mostly, however, in the context of unjust and ruthless rulers of the nations (Isa. 14:5; Amos 1:5,8; Zech. 10:11) and of Israel (Ezek. 19:11, 14; Ps. 125:3), twice of the righteous Davidic king (Ps. 2:9; 45:7). As opposed to this classification, Even-Shoshan 1977-1980 lists some of these text under 'stick' (Judg. 5:14; Ezek. 21:15,18; Mic. 7:14; Ps. 2:9; 125:3).

The perplexingly difficult texts of Ezek. 21:15, 18 seem, anyhow, to be an exegetical comment, inspired by Gen. 49:10, on 'the song of YHWH's sword' in that chapter; cf. Allen 1989; Greenberg 1997.

The parallelism in Gen. 49:10 between an object, 'staff', and a person, 'ruler', has led to various emendations but the interpretation of 'staff' as metonymy for 'king' suffices (cf. Targumim; Brettler 1989, 80, 183 n. 11; Macchi 1999, 94).

2b. Figurative Use

From the systematic lexicographical point of view, it is possible that the meaning 'tribe' derived from the meaning 'stick' by way of the specification 'staff, sceptre', but diachronically this can hardly be demonstrated (Judg. 5:14; cf. section 2a). For the figurative sense, too, is attested in layers of the Hebrew Bible which generally are considered to be older (Gen. 49:16; Deut. 33:5; 1 Sam. 9:21; Isa. 10:5, 24; 49:6; Hos 5:9).

This fits in with the fact that the meaning 'tribe' occurs in texts which place themselves not only before the entry into the land (Gen. 49:16; Num. 18:2; 24:2; Deut. 1:13; 3:13; 10:8; 29:7, 9; Josh. 1:12; 4:2; 7:14; 12:6; 18:4 etc. [33 times]) and after the settlement there (Judg. 18:1,19,30; 20:12; 21:3; 1 Sam. 9:21; 10:19vv.; 15:17; 2 Sam. 5:1; 7:7; Ps. 78:55, 67v.), but also after the consolidation of the monarchy (2 Sam. 15:2,10; 19:10; 20:14; 24:2; 1 Kgs 11:13, 31v., 35v.; 12:20v.; 18:31; 2 Kgs 17:18; Hos. 5:9; 1-2 Chr [16 times]), down to the time of the fall of Jerusalem (Jer. 10:16; Ezek. 20:37) and thereafter (Isa. 49:6; 63:17; Ezek. 37:19; 45:8; 47:13; Zech. 9:1; Ps. 74:2).

The \aleph reading שֵׁבֶטֶיְכֶם in Deut. 29:9 should be retained on textcritical grounds and can be explained by the stylistic pattern of elaborative parallelism: 'your heads / your tribes' || 'your elders and your officials /

all the men of Israel'; cf. Begg 1982. On the other hand, De Moor 2000, 186, assumes that שִׁבְטֵי is used metonymically for the person holding the sceptre in Num. 24:17; Deut. 29:9; 33:5; 2 Sam. 7:7.

The *lectio difficilior* שִׁבְטֵי of ט in 2 Sam. 7:7 does not allow for being changed into שִׁבְטֵי (cf. 1 Chr. 17:6). For the concept of corporate personality enables a ready alternation between leader(s) and group (cf. Ps. 78:68vv.; 1 Chr. 28:4); cf. Begg 1982; Salvesen 1998, 122-3. The proposal of Murray 1987 to add מְבַל before שִׁבְטֵי lacks support from the versions and would result in a third occurrence of this word in the verse.

Even though these occurrences, in general, cannot be dated in the time about which they report, taken together they testify to the circumstance that some nomadic tribal structure from which Israel originated continued into the territorial distribution of the tribes and was not abrogated by the form of government created by the kingship. Nevertheless, it is subject matter of discussion whether the pre-exilic tribal structure already consisted of a system of precisely twelve tribes. In the view of some scholars, such a representation might be an exilic or post-exilic creation which combines two pre-exilic smaller lists of Northern and Southern tribes. It all depends on the question whether or not texts referring to a twelve tribes system (Gen. 49; Deut. 33; Judg. 5:14-18; 1 Kings 11,30-32) are diachronically based on the supposedly exilic story of Jacob (Gen. 29:31–30:24; 35:16-20). Cf. the different positions of De Hoop 1999 and Macchi 2000, 251-99.

This is supported by the finding that the term 'tribe' is combined with the name of a Palestinian region only in case the same name refers to an ancestor who plays a role in Israel's history ('Manasseh': Num. 32:33; Deut. 3:13; 29:7; Josh. 1:12 (+ 12 times); 1 Chr. 5:18 [+ 5 times]; 'Judah': Josh. 7:16; 1 Kgs 12:20; 2 Kgs 17:18; Ps. 78:68; 'Benjamin': Judg. 20:12; 1 Sam. 9:21; 10:21; 1 Kgs 12:21; 'Dan': Judg. 18:1; 'Ephraim': Ps. 78:67). Therefore, the combination 'the tribe of Levi' (Deut. 10:8; 18:1; Josh. 13:14, 33; 1 Chr. 23:14) as much as 'the tribes of Jacob' (1 Kgs 18:31; Isa. 49:6) cannot be but theological constructs.

The tribal structure of the ethnic entity Israel comes to the fore in the theologoumenon of 'the tribes of Israel' which plays variegated roles in larger text compounds (56 times). It provides

the two lists of tribal blessings with a focus: the first one with an ideological closing (Gen 49:28), the second one with a programmatic opening (Deut. 33:5). The book of Joshua owes its narrative frame to it (Josh. 3:12 and 24:1; furthermore 4:5, 8; 7:16; 12:7). In the book of Judges, it offers the criterion for measuring the misbehaviour in ‘federal’ solidarity of the tribes of Dan (Judg. 18:1) and Benjamin (Judg. 20:2,10,12; 21:5, 8, 15, 17). The establishment of the kingship is weighed against the tribal composition of the commonwealth (1 Sam. 9:21;10:19vv.), which especially applies to the Davidic dynasty (2 Sam. 5:1; 7:7; 15:10; 24:2; 1 Kgs 8:6; 11:31v.). The remarkable recurrence of ‘the tribes of Israel’ in Ezekiel’s vision of the restored land and temple (Ezek. 37:19; 47:13, 21v.; 48:19, 29, 31) and its unique application in Ezra-Nehemia, exactly in the passage of the dedication of the new temple (Ezra 6:17), are indicative of the main function of the term. Through the course of history with its changing political structures, it calls to Israel’s mind that YHWH’s past guidance of his people through the desert into the land remains their very ethnic and spiritual basis and the bond of their togetherness. Seen in that light, the appalling crime of the Benjaminites (Judg. 19) is a real threat to the very existence of Israel which requires an adequate initiative to maintain the unity of the tribes (Judg. 21:3, 6, 15, 21).

With regard to the internal structure of the tribe, some texts suggest an ascending line of family (‘husband and wife’), clan (בְּשֵׁבֶטֶה) and tribe (Deut. 29:17; cf. Num. 4:18; Josh. 13:29; 1 Sam. 9:21; 10:19) or a descending one from tribe over clan and household (בֵּית) to individual men as independent, combatant landowners (יְגֵרָה) (Josh. 7:14; cf. Judg. 21:24: ‘tribe, clan, inheritance’, גִּזְלָה). A consequent system through the ages, however, seems improbable given the fact that the terminology sometimes equates ‘tribe’ and ‘clan’ (Judg. 18:19; [cf. v. 1 with v. 11]; 13:2: ‘the clan of Dan’; 20:12: ‘the tribes of Benjamin’; in 5:14-17, the clans Machir and Gilead are treated as tribes). Nevertheless, a division of the tribe into clans may be a fundamental characteristic. It embodies the concrete membership of individual persons by means of genealogically demonstrable kinship which goes back to one ancestor (De Vaux, *IAT*, t. 1, 15-29; Bendor 1996).

In a later phase, the term שִׁבְטָה was used in association with a site or locality so much so that the meaning of ‘territory’ came to be implied in the concept ‘tribe’ (e.g. Deut. 12:5: ‘the place your God will choose from among all your tribes’; cf. v.14; 1 Kgs 8:16; 11:32, 36; 14:21; 2 Kgs 21:17). Cf. Heger 1995.

3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Not attested.

4. Cognates

SEMITIC: Cf. *HALAT*, 1291, 1787; Leslau, *CDG*, 485.

EGYPTIAN: Semitic loanword in Egyptian: *šbd* ‘staff, rod’; also Demotic *šbt* ‘stick’. Used in the context of beating (Hassan 1979; Hoch, *SWET*, 276-8).

COPTIC: *šbôt* ‘rod, staff’ (Crum, *CD*, 554).

AKKADIAN: Cf. *šabātu* G ‘to strike, hit, blow’ (*CAD* Š/1, 8-9); *šabbittu* ‘staff’ (*CAD* Š/1, 10; Tawil, *ALCBH*, 38). Metonymically *šibtu* A, ‘plague, epidemic’ (*CAD* Š/2, 387, and *šibtu* B, 1. ‘gale, blast of wind’, 2. (a disease).

OLD AND IMPERIAL ARAMAIC: In Old Aramaic *šbt* occurs metonymically in the meaning of ‘affliction’ (*DNSI*, 1100). In Biblical Aramaic once (Ezra 6:17) in the meaning ‘tribe’. In Egyptian Aramaic *šbyt* ‘shawl’ (?) (Porten & Lund, *ADE*, 288).

POSTBIBLICAL HEBREW: See section 6 below.

JEWISH ARAMAIC: שִׁבְטָה ‘to strike, press the weaving rod’ (Jastrow, *DTT*, 1512; Dalman, *ANHT*, 413); שִׁבְטָה, שִׁבְטָה ‘tribe’; שִׁבְטָה, שִׁבְטָה ‘beating, pressing’ (Sokoloff, *DJPA*, 534); שִׁבְטָה, שִׁבְטָה ‘tribe’ (Sokoloff, *DJBA*, 1102). See further section 6 below.

SAMARITAN ARAMAIC: *šbt* ‘staff, rule, tribe, chastisement’ (Tal, *DSA*, 863-4). SYRIAC: *šabtā* ‘stick, sceptre, stroke whipping, lightning’ Jewish: ‘tribe’; *šbt* Pa., ‘to hammer’; *šabūtā* ‘nail’ (Costaz, *DSF*, 357).

MANDAIC: *šibttā* ‘rod, staff, disease, tribe’ (Macuch, *MD*, 495).

OLD ARABIC: Sab. *sbṭ* ‘to strike, beat down, contend’; as a noun: ‘lash, stroke’ (Biella, *DOSA*, 325; Beeston, *SD*, 123).

CLASSICAL ARABIC: *sabaṭa* ‘to be lank, tall’; *sibt* ‘grandchild’, Jewish: ‘tribe’; *sabit* ‘tall, long’; *sabat* ‘fever’ (Lane, *AEL*, 1294-5). Also *sibt* ‘sceptre’ (Dozy, *SDA*, t. 1, 625).

MODERN SOUTH-ARABIC: Mehri *sbt* ‘to beat, hit’ (Johnstone, *ML*, 340).

ETHIOPIIC: *zabaṭa* ‘to smite’; *sabt* ‘pointed rod’; Tigr. *abaṭ abbala* ‘to hit slightly’, *s^ebaṭ* ‘threshed grain’ (Leslau, *ESAC*, 52-3; *CDG*, 485).

5. Ancient Versions

Ⓞ and other Greek versions:

Ⓞ translates שֶׁבֶט in the sense of ‘stick’ mainly by ῥάβδος (28 times), in the sense of ‘staff’ by σκῆπτρον (17 times), in the sense of ‘tribe’ by φυλή (119 times) (*TWAT*, Bd. 7, 967). The translation ὑός (7 times) is considered by Muraoka, *HIS*, 145, to be implausible and corrected into φυός. There are 15 other terms, each occurring only once, five of which deserve distrust in the data of the Hatch-Redpath Concordance (Muraoka, *ibid.*, cf. p. 10; cf. Salvesen 1998, 125-6). In as far as their renderings have been preserved, α’, σ’ and θ’ do not add significantly to this information.

Ⓢ: Generally the Targumim opt for the Aramaic equivalent שבטא. A literal meaning חוטרא ‘staff’, is assumed in Ⓢ^O Lev. 27:32; the Palestinian Targums have שרביטא ‘staff, rod, stick’ there. Whereas several Palestinian Targums translate שֶׁבֶט in Exod. 21:10 literally by שרביטא ‘rod, sceptre’ (→ שרביט), Ⓢ^O surprisingly opts for בשולטן ‘with force, violence’. In Gen. 49:10 the Palestinian Targums translate מלכין ‘kings’, or מלכין ושלטנין ‘kings and rulers’ which further on in the verse is applied to מלכא משיחא or מלכא דמשיחא ‘the king Messiah’. Ⓢ^O renders עביר שולטן ‘one exercising power’, but also introduces the Messiah in the second half of the verse. This is compareable to Num. 24:17 where Ⓢ^O translates נִקְם מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁבֶט מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל as ויתרבא משיחא מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל, ‘and the Messiah will be raised from Israel’. Ⓢ^N has ופרוק ושלית מן דבית ישראל ‘and a redeemer and ruler from the house of Israel’, Ⓢ^J ויתרבי משיחא ושיבט תקיף מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל ‘and the Messiah and a strong tribe will be raised from Israel’.

Targum Jonathan to the Prophets mostly chooses חוטרא ‘staff,

rod', as a literal translation (2 Sam. 23:21; Isa. 10:15; Micah 4:14), but also Aramaic words for javelins or lances occur (2 Sam. 18:14) and flails or whips (Isa. 10:24 var.; 28:27). This Targum demilitarises Judg. 5:14 and therefore picks קוֹלְמוֹסָא 'reed, writing pen' (a Greek loanword) as its rendering of שֶׁבֶט. A figurative meaning is assumed in 2 Sam. 7:14 (lashing); Isa. 9:3; 14:29 (ruler); 10:5, 24; 14:5; 30:31 (rulership); 11:4 (Word; cf. Micah 7:14); 19:13 (district); Ezek. 19:11, 14 (king); 20:37 (judicial decision).

In the Targums of the Ketubim we find literal שֶׁבֶטָא in the sense of 'staff, sceptre, rod' (Ps. 89:32; 125:3; Prov. 10:13; 13:24, etc.), הוֹטְרָא 'staff, rod' (Ps. 2:9; 45:7; Lam. 3:1), הַגְדָּא 'staff, sceptre' (Ps. 23:4; First Targum Est. 4:11; 5:2; 8:4), but also figurative interpretations are attested (tribe, Ps. 74:2; 78:55, 67, 68; 122:4; Word, Ps. 23:4; affliction, Job 9:34; 21:9; 'rain of retribution', Job 37:13; Egyptians, Ps. 105:37).

ס: The normal rendering in ס is *šabtā* which can have both a concrete and a metaphorical meaning, see section 4 above. In Exod. 21:20; Lev. 27:32 and 2 Sam. 23:21 *ḥūtrā* 'staff, rod', has been chosen, in Isa. 28:27 and Prov. 26:3 *zeqtā* 'rod, goad'. Judg. 5:14 *qānyā* 'reed', seems to rest on the same exegetical tradition as ט. The figurative meaning is also represented by Ezek. 21:10, 18; Ps. 105:37; 122:4 (2x) *šarb^etā* 'family, tribe' (Payne Smith (Margoliouth), *STS*, 597), Zech. 10:11 *šūltānā* 'ruler', and Job 37:13 *šallit* 'ruler'. In Prov. 23:13-14 ס paraphrases with the verb *mḥ* 'to strike'.

ט: Translates שֶׁבֶט in the literal meaning of 'stick' by preference with *virga*, even in cases where *sceptrum* would seem to be a more appropriate choice (the latter word is used only in Gen. 49:10; Isa. 9:3[4]; Ezek. 19:11, 14; Amos 1:5, 8; Zech. 10:11; Ps. 44[45]:7). In two places, a more technical term occurs (2 Sam. 18:14: *lancea*; Isa. 28:27: *baculus*). The figurative sense of 'tribe' is always rendered by 'tribus'.

6. Judaic Sources

In Jesus Sirach Hebrew, the plural of the term is attested in the sense of 'tribes' (33:13: 'of Jacob'; 44:23: 'the twelve'; 48:10: 'of Israel') and the singular in the sense of 'staff' (32:23: 'the staff

of the insolent / the sceptre [מטה] of the wicked'). Remarkable is the expression 'the two staffs', which refers to the two kingdoms of North and South (47:21).

The Dead Sea Scrolls are familiar with the use of שֵׁבֶט in both senses. The literal meaning is attested in 4Q417:1.27 לֹא יִכּוּ בַשֵּׁבֶט 'he will not strike him with a stick' (cf. Prov. 23:13). In the literal meaning of 'sceptre' it occurs by preference in quotations and explanations of Num. 24:17. This prophecy is applied to the leader of the community (1QM 11:6f.; 4Q175:12; CD-A 7:19f. [and parallels in 4QD mss]) and, in combination with a reference to Isa. 11:4, to the community itself (1Q28b:24-27). Likewise, 4Q163:8-10,12 quotes Isa. 14:28. The figurative meaning of 'tribe' occurs especially in the War Scroll, in all the applications known from the Old Testament: the twelve tribes of Israel (1QM 2:7; 3:14; 4:10; 5:1f.; 4Q375:1,5,7f.; 4Q491:1-3, 8f.; 11Q:19[Ta] 21:2; 18:16; 60:10) and their chiefs (1QM 2:3; 3:14f.; 1Q28a:1,29; 4Q164:7; 4QM494:1,2; 4QM496:10,5f.). The election of the tribe of Judah and the offspring of David forms a special topic (4Q504 Frags 1-2, 4:5-6). In this context, the prophecy: 'The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs' (Gen. 49:10) is even crystal-lised into: 'The sceptre shall not depart from the tribe of Judah. While Israel has the dominion, there will not be cut off someone who sits on the throne of David. For "the staff" is the covenant of royalty . . . Until the Messiah of righteousness comes, the branch of David. For to him and to his descendants has been given the covenant of the kingship of his people . . .' (4Q252:5, 1-4).

In rabbinic sources the term is not attested in a sense that sheds new light on the term as compared with its meanings in the Hebrew Bible.

7. Illustrations

→ מִטָּה.

8. Archaeological Remarks

[Will be added later on.]

9. Conclusion

טִּבַּט is an old word for stick or staff, as appears from its occurrence as a Semitic loanword in Egyptian. Because it is still lacking in Ugaritic, Moabite, Ammonite, Phoenician and Punic, it is uncertain whether it was a Proto-Semitic word. The root *šbt* and the use made of the טִּבַּט indicate that beating was the main semantic sphere associated with it.

Used in a literal sense for an implement, טִּבַּט it is commonly made of wood, but it could at times have an iron head or a rod reinforced with iron. Like → מַטֵּה and → מַקְלָה, it was a herdsman's main tool. It is impossible to make a reliable semantic distinction between these three words. Because it was often used for beating opponents or discipline the unruly, it became a symbol of power and authority. As such it fitted well into the ancient Near Eastern imagery of divine and royal pastoral care.

There is some difference of opinion between scholars with regard to the distinction between the literal and the metonymous or metaphoric use of טִּבַּט. This uncertainty is already reflected in the ancient versions. The well-known figurative use of טִּבַּט in the sense of 'tribe', also in a geographical sense, seems to be typical for the Hebrew tradition.

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