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Peter Schmidt

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Short Note:
בֵּית אָב *bêt āb* 'Father's House' in Numbers

By Peter Schmidt

The purpose of this compilation is to give an overview over the use of the key phrase "father's house" to alert to differences in meaning in various places and to discuss further issues connected with this phrase.

The phrase "father's house" occurs 46 times in the book of Numbers, mainly in chapters 1–4.

How big?

The phrase **"father's house" does not always refer to the same body or unit of people**, as the following examples show.

30:4–5 [English 3–4][1] clearly speaks of a core **family**:

> Also if a woman makes a vow to the LORD, and binds herself by an obligation in her father's house in her youth, ... and her father says nothing to her, then all her vows shall stand....[2]

Then there are cases where **clans** are in view—the units that are larger than a family and smaller than a tribe. Consider, for example, Numbers 3:24:

> and the leader of the fathers' households of the Gershonites was Eliasaph the son of Lael.

The Gershonites are one of the three clans in the tribe of Levi.

In contrast, Numbers 17:17 [English 17:2] has to do with whole **tribes**:

> Speak to the sons of Israel, and get from them a rod for each father's household: twelve rods, from all their leaders according to their fathers' households.

Another verse is 7:2, where the phrase (most likely) also speaks of tribal leaders.

> Then the leaders of Israel, the heads of their fathers' households, made an offering (they were the leaders of the tribes...

An alternative interpretation is this:

> Then the leaders of Israel, who were each head of their fathers' household [i.e., head of a clan within their respective tribes], made an offering (they were the leaders of the tribes....

It seems best, then, to **define a "father's house" as a "group of relatives under the leadership of a patriarch"**—"patriarch" in the sense of a "male head of a family or tribal line" (dictionary.com). The size of this group can range from the family that shares one tent to the whole tribe. (In Numbers 36:1 both meanings occur in the same verse.)

Fixed expression

The fixed expression לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם *lᵊmišpᵊḥōtām lᵊbêt ᵃbōtām* "**according to their clans, according to their fathers' houses**" occurs 13 times in chapter 1 and four times in chapter 4: to be precise in 1:2,20,22,24,26,28,30,32,34,36,38,40,42 and 4:2,29,40,42. It does not occur outside of Numbers. The same two phrases in the reverse order occur in 3:15 and 4:22. In all these cases, 'father's house' refers to **families**.

An example is 1:20, which tells us how the members of the tribe of Reuben were enlisted according to smaller units.

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[1] The verse counting follows the Hebrew, and English deviation indicated with square brackets where needed.
[2] Quotes are from NASB unless indicated otherwise, with highlighting by underlining added.

> *literally:* The sons of Reuben, Israel's firstborn, their descendants [listed] according to their clans, according to their fathers' houses, [were] ... 46,500.

An unusual plural

There is a grammatical exception in the phrase "father's house." The construct chain "house of father" with both "house" [construct] and "father" [absolute/genitive] occurring in the singular is found in Num [MT] 3:24,30,35; 17:17; 18:1; 25:14,15; 30:4; and 30:17. However, all other cases, and that is the majority, has "fathers" in the plural (*lit.* "house of father**s**"). A combination with "house" in the plural does not occur (also not outside of Numbers).

Thus, in the above example with Reuben (1:20), the literal rendering is not "according to their clans, according to their fathers' houses", but "according to their clans, according to their fathers' house".

This is curious, because usually, if more than one house is meant, the word "house" itself [in the construct] would be put into the plural (GKC § 124 p.). The text would then read *bātê*, not *bêt*. For this issue, HALOT points to GKC § 124 r, where they acknowledge cases where **the word in the absolute [*or:* genitive; *here:* "father"] can be put into the plural, and in this way express a plural meaning of the word in the construct state**.[3]

The examples that are listed in Gesenius / Kautzsch § 124 include the phrase under discussion here as it occurs in Exodus 6:14 and Numbers 1:2ff; furthermore 2 Kings 17:29 (*lit.* "the house of the high places"; cf. 23:19); 1Samuel 31:9; Ezekiel 46:24—all with the word *bêt*. See also Judges 7:25. Thus, **what is literally "house of fathers" means "houses of fathers."**

Apart from the KJV, which renders the phrase with a singular "house," all English versions reflect this same understanding. (The REB words it differently, but for other reasons.)[4]

We could not make out a difference in meaning that would depend on the kind of plural construction that is used. As can be shown with the examples from the beginning, the double singular "father's house" can refer to family, clan, or tribe (30:4 [3], 3:24; 17:17). The construction with the plural of "father"—"fathers' house"—can also refer to both family or tribe (1:20, 7:2); only, for the meaning "clan," Numbers does not contain any clear example.

Ellipsis of "house"

There are places where we simply read of, literally, "the heads of the fathers," i.e. the word "house" is missing. This is a case of ellipsis. An automated search for "father's house" would miss these places. HALOT and Gesenius/Donner both include Numbers 31:26 in their list of such cases. NASB marks its addition to this verse with italics:

> You and Eleazar the priest and the heads of the fathers' *households* of the congregation take a count of the booty....

There are a few more such places in Numbers; see below. Milgrom (note #56 on 31:26 [p. 328] explains the ellipsis convincingly in this way:

> ... 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 Exodus 6:14; Joshua 22:14).

- Numbers 31:26
  וְרָאשֵׁי אֲבוֹת הָעֵדָה and the heads of the fathers' *households* of the congregation

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[3] See also Joüon/Muraoka (*A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 2006), who write (§136m-n): "There are three ways of forming the plural of a genitive group.… 2) The **second noun** only in the plural. This rather rare construction assumes that the genitive group forms a compact block equivalent to a single noun. It seems to be found only with בַּיִת, most commonly בֵּית אָב *family* (literally *a house[hold] of a father*), pl. בָּתֵּי אָבוֹת...."

[4] One could consider the possibility that the whole tribe as one entity is in view. However, this understanding makes little sense, because the phrase stands alongside 'clans' *(mišpāḥāh)*, and they occur in the plural.

- Numbers 32:28
  וְאֶת־רָאשֵׁי אֲבוֹת הַמַּטּוֹת לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל and to the heads of the fathers' *households* of the tribes of the sons of Israel
- Numbers 36:1(a)
  רָאשֵׁי הָאָבוֹת לְמִשְׁפַּחַת בְּנֵי־גִלְעָד בֶּן־מָכִיר the heads of the fathers' *households* of the family of the sons of Gilead, the son of Machir
- Numbers 36:1(b)
  רָאשֵׁי אָבוֹת לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל the heads of the fathers' *households* of the sons of Israel

Ancestral house?

NRSV uses the expression "ancestral house" (compare NLT in 1:44: "listed according to their ancestral descent"). This is misleading, because it makes one think of the forefathers. But they are not in view. When the tribes are enlisted "by their clans" *(mišpāḥôt)*, and next "by their *bêt ābôt*," then these latter ones are smaller units. The expression probably refers to people living in one tent or group of tents. Whether it is a core family only, or an extended family including a third or even forth generation, is secondary here.

Paternal line

The UBS *Handbook on Numbers* says at Numbers 1:2: "The Israelite kinship system was clearly based on patriarchal lines of descent, not matriarchal." This should come out in the translation somehow; that is, just using the word for 'family' everywhere might not be enough.

The Hebrew does not have a separate word for 'family'. *bayit* 'house' is it. But since in the present contexts we read of *bêt āb* 'father's house', it could be that the fact of organization by paternal line is emphasized. On the other side, this should not be over-interpreted. There is no indication that this organization was challenged. HALOT says 'paternal family'.

Summary and Translation

- The phrase "father's house" has to be translated in a context-sensitive way. A literal rendering is little helpful, and a concordant rendering in all places would cause much confusion. The reader should understand whether a family, a clan, or a tribe is in view.

  We suggest the following distinctions (some places are debatable):

  - tribe: in 1:4,44; 2:2,32,34; 7:2; 17:17–21 [English 2–6]; 25:15; 26:2; 36:1(b)
  - clan: in 3:24,30,35; 25:14; 34:14
  - family: in all other places.
- For the fixed expression, the rendering: "according to their clans and families" (CEV, similarly NIV, NET, GNB, NLT) is fitting.
- Naturally, the ellipsis of "house" has to be filled in.
- An equivalent of the expression "ancestral house" is misleading and should be avoided.
- The fact that descendency was reckoned by the paternal line, which is expressed in the phrase "*father's* house," should come out in the translation, for example by using an explicit phrase in the first of the twelve occurrences in chapter 1 (REB: "by families in the father's line" [but they drop "clan"]). It is probably not necessary to do so in each instance.