

מס עבד

אבנר רמו



Men sized for not paying taxes in ancient Egypt

We read in the Book of Kings:

כל-העם הנותר מן-האמרי החתי הפרזי, החוי והיבوسی, אשר לא-מבני ישראל המה.
בניהם אשר נתרו אחריהם בארץ, אשר לא-יכלו בני ישראל להחריםם; ויעלם שלמה למס-
עבד עד היום הזה.

“All the people that were left of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, who were not of the children of Israel;

Their children that were left after them in the land, whom the children of Israel were not able to destroy, and Solomon did raise on them a levy of bondservants, to this day” (1 Ki 9:20-21).

Yet when these words appear in the Book of Chronicles we find:

כל-העם הנותר מן-החתי והאמרי והפרזי, והחוי והיבوسی, אשר לא מישראל המה.
מן-בניהם אשר נתרו אחריהם בארץ, אשר לא-כלום בני ישראל; ויעלם שלמה למס [] עד
היום הזה.

“[As for] all the people that were left of the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, who were not of Israel;

Of their children that were left after them in the land, whom the children of Israel did not consume, and Solomon did raise on them a levy [of bondservants], to this day” (2 Ch 8:7-8).

While the change here from **אשר לא-יכלו בני ישראל להחריםם** - “whom the children of Israel were not able to destroy” to: **אשר לא-כלום בני ישראל** - “whom the children of Israel did not consume” is mostly stylistic, other differences between these verses are more significant. The syntax of the second verse in each pair is odd, and it seems that the Chronicler tried to amend it by adding the word **מן** - “of”, but this insertion did not much improve the syntax.

The most important issue here is whether the Chronicler erroneously (or willfully) deleted the word **עבד**, which turned **מס-עבד** - “a levy of bondservants” to **מס** - “a levy (or tax).”

While the Greek translator wrote for both “tribute” the English translated them as “a levy of bondservants.” The Book of Deuteronomy explains the nature of **מס** levied under similar circumstance:

כי-תקרב אל-עיר להלחם עליה-וקראת אליה לשלום.
והיה אם-שלום תענד, ופתחה לך: והיה כל-העם הנמצא-בה יהיו לך למס-ועבדוך.
“When you draw nigh to a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace to it.
And it shall be, if it answers you with peace, and open to you, then it shall be, that all the
people that are found therein shall become tributary to you, and shall serve you” (Deu
20:10-11).

However, the Hebrew **יהיו לך למס-ועבדוך** literally meaning: “shall become a levy for you and work for you”. These words are synonymous with **יהיו לך למס-עבד** - “shall become to you a levy of bondservants.”

The outcome of turning to **מס-עבד** - “a levy of bondservants” is mention in two other situations of a minority remaining in a place controlled by other group of people:
יששכר חמר גרם-רבץ בין המשפתים.
וירא מנחה כי טוב, ואת-הארץ כי נעמה; ויט שכמו לסבל, ויהי למס-עבד.
“Issachar is a large-boned ass, couching down between the sheep-folds.
For he saw a resting-place that it was good, and the land that it was pleasant; and he bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a levy of bondservants” (Gen 49:14-15).

ולא הורישו את-הכנעני היושב בגזר; וישב הכנעני בקרב אפרים עד-היום הזה, ויהי למס-עבד.
“And they drove not out the Canaanites that dwelt in Gezer; but the Canaanites dwelt in the midst of Ephraim, to this day, and became a levy of bondservants” (Jos 16:10).

Yet we find in the Book of Judges:
זבולן לא הוריש את-יושבי קטרון ואת-יושבי נהלל; וישב הכנעני בקרבן, ויהיו למס [.]
“Zebulun drove not out the inhabitants of Kitron, nor the inhabitants of Nahalol; but the Canaanites dwelt among them, and became tributary” (Jud 1:30; see also: Jos 17:13; Jud 1:28, 30, 33, 35).

However, the comparison between these verses suggests that here again the word **עבד** is missing and this omission erroneously turned **מס-עבד** - “a levy of bondservants” to **מס** - “a levy (or tax).”

In the Book of Kings we read:
ויעל המלך שלמה מס מכל-ישראל; ויהי המס שלשים אלף איש.
וישלחם לבנונה, עשרת אלפים בחדש חליפות-חדש יהיו בלבנון, שנים חדשים בביתו; ואדנירם על-המס.

“And king Solomon raised a levy out of all Israel; and the levy was thirty thousand men.
And he sent them to Lebanon, ten thousand a month by courses: a month they were in Lebanon, and two months at home; and Adoniram was over the levy” (1 Ki 5:27; see also: 1 Ki 9:15).

However, the nature of this “levy” is of **מס-עבד** - “a levy of bondservants”, which suggests that here again the word **עבד** is missing.



Similarly, we read in the Book of Exodus:

ושימו עליו שרי מסים למען ענתו בסבלתם; ויבן ערי מסכנות לפרעה-את-פתם ואת-רעמסס.

“And they did set over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh store-cities, Pithom and Raamses” (Ex 1:11).

However, here שרי מסים literally mean: “rulers of levies.” In addition, if here למען ענתו is a letter-substitution error of למען עבדו - “for making them labor”, then we can conclude that the Hebrew minority in Egypt became מס-עבד - “a levy of bondservants.”



Corvee labor

We are told that the inhabitants of Gibeon managed to deceive Joshua and the elders of the of the congregation to grant them a covenant of peace. After the truth was revealed Joshua indeed saved their lives but:

ויתנם יהושע ביום ההוא, חטבי עצים ושאבי מים-לעדה; ולמזבח יהוה עד-היום הזה,

“And Joshua made them that day hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation, and for the altar of YHWH, to this day” (Jos 9:27).

In the Book of Numbers we read:

וידבר משה אל-העם לאמר, החלצו מאתכם אנשים לצבא; ויהיו על-מדין, לתת נקמת-יהוה במדין.

אלף למטה, אלף למטה-לכל מטות ישראל, תשלחו לצבא.
וימסרו מאלפי ישראל אלף למטה-שנים-עשר אלף חלוצי צבא.
וישלח אתם משה אלף למטה לצבא:

“And Moses spoke to the people, saying: Select men from among you for the army, that they may go against Midian, to execute *YHWH*’s vengeance on Midian.

Of every tribe a thousand, throughout all the tribes of Israel, shall you send to the army.

And there were delivered, out of the thousands of Israel, a thousand of every tribe, twelve thousand selected for army.

And Moses sent them, a thousand of every tribe, to the army” (Num 31:3-6).

The Greek translator wrote here “and they numbered”, but it appears more likely that here וימסרו is a letter-insertion error of וימסו - “and they were levied (from the thousands of Israel).”