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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

"OFFICERS" IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

by G. T. MANLEY

THE Rev. G. T. Manley has been for many years an occasional contributor to THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY. Evangelical scholarship in England owes him a greater debt than is commonly recognized. Among other services which he has rendered to the cause, we may mention that he was the first Chairman of the I.V.F. Biblical Research Committee, and presided over its development in the precarious years that followed its inauguration in 1938. When we recall that this was the Committee which launched the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research, and consider that Fellowship's increasing output of scholarly monographs on Biblical and theological subjects, we may begin to appreciate something of our indebtedness to Mr. Manley's vision and wisdom. That a mathematician should turn his attention to Old Testament studies is nothing new. Mr. Manley was Senior Wrangler as long ago as 1893, and served Christ's College, Cambridge, for fifteen years as a mathematical Fellow. For a number of years now he has paid special attention to the problems of Deuteronomy. Some of the fruits of this study have appeared in our pages ("The Moabite Background of Deuteronomy" in April, 1949, and "A Problem in Deuteronomy" in October, 1955), and he contributed the section on Deuteronomy to the I.V.F. "New Bible Commentary" which appeared in 1953. We are glad to know that his studies are shortly to appear in the form of a volume entitled "The Book of the Law"; we look forward with great interest to its publication. Meanwhile, it gives us much pleasure to publish the veteran scholar's brief examination of a point which has special relevance for Deuteronomistic studies.

A RECENT article by the Dutch scholar J. van der Ploeg¹ discusses the meaning and use of the word *šoṭerim* ("officers") in the Old Testament.

The article is clear and informative as to the etymology of the word and the duties assigned to these officials. The root *sh-t-r* is found in Accadian and Syriac, meaning to "write" or "record".² This fits well with the duty of the officer in Ex. 5: 8, who had to be responsible for his "tale of bricks".

¹ "Les *Soferim* d'Israël", *Oudtestamentische Studiën* x (1954), pp. 185-196.

² Also in Arabic, meaning to "rule" (a book), to "write" or "range in order": see S. R. Driver, *Deuteronomy* (I.C.C.), p. 17.

They reappear as subordinate officials, on the one hand acting as overseers over the rank and file (cf. Prov. 6: 7, where "overseers" stands for *shoterim*), and on the other hand as record-keepers and assistants to the chiefs under whom they served, who are termed elders, captains and judges.

Professor van der Ploeg thinks that "the office of *shoter* was probably introduced into Israel in the period of the kings". He observes that the word is not found in the prophets, and that its presence in Deut. 1: 15, whilst it is absent from the account of the same incident in Ex. 18, "would be explained if they [the *shoterim*] had begun to play a part, let us say, in the middle of the monarchic period". Since "the authors of the Pentateuch, Joshua and Chronicles used written sources which had been in existence possibly a long time, it would be hard to prove that the word *shoter* was found in them".

These views seem worthy of further examination. The Chronicler certainly used written sources, some of which he names, but the case is not quite the same with the Pentateuch and Joshua. The sources often assumed for them are conjectural, and by no means a matter of general agreement. In what follows we shall work from the data of the existing text.

The references to *shoterim* can be arranged as follows according to the periods to which they refer:

1. The Egyptian oppression (Ex. 5: 6, 10, 14, 15, 19).
2. The wilderness journey (Num. 11: 16; Deut. 1: 15).
3. The invasion period (Deut. 16: 18; 20: 5, 8, 9; 29: 10 (9); 31: 28; Josh. 1: 10; 3: 2; 8: 33; 23: 2; 24: 1).
4. Under David and Solomon (1 Chron. 23: 4; 26: 29; 27: 1).
5. The reigns of Jehoshaphat (2 Chron. 19: 11), Uzziah (2 Chron. 26: 11), and Josiah (2 Chron. 34: 13).
6. The word is also found in Prov. 6: 7 (E.V. "overseer"), and the cognate form *mishtar* in Job 38: 33 (E.V. "ordinances").

The LXX translate γραμματεῖς except in Deut. 1: 15; 16: 18; 29: 10; 31: 28, where they use γραμματοεισαγωγεῖς (see p. 154).

There is an Accadian root *sh-t-r* having the general sense "to write", from which the word may have penetrated into the other Semitic languages. The word persists in a slightly modified form among the Jews of Amsterdam as a slang term for the police.³

³ This is stated by Van der Ploeg and confirmed to me by my friend Miss M. Loesberg.

UNDER DAVID AND SOLOMON

It will be convenient to consider first the fourth of these sections which refers to the close of David's life. It is reasonably certain that the building of the temple took place early in Solomon's reign, and there is no reason to doubt that David had prepared for it and had associated Solomon with himself in the kingship, or that Nathan the prophet and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada took an active part in these events (1 Kings 1: 22, 32). David had his scribe (2 Sam. 8: 17), whose sons held office under Solomon (1 Kings 4: 3); and it is generally conceded that already at that time annals of the court were kept.⁴ Such annals the Chronicler quotes as his authority, and in addition, for David's reign, "the book (*dibrê*) of Nathan the prophet" (1 Chron. 29: 29).

The list of David's officers which occupies 1 Chron. 23-27 contains a few names of David's well-known contemporaries such as Benaiah, but a great number of others known to us only from their occurrence here. It is highly improbable that these are mere inventions; it is much more likely that they were derived from the records to which reference is made. Let us see what they have to say about the *shoterim* of that time.

The first thing to notice is that they fall into two groups, military and civil.

Taking the former first, as being simpler, 1 Chron. 27 contains an account of the leaders of David's army, described as "the chief of the fathers, and the captains of thousands and hundreds, and their officers (*shoterim*)". Among the captains we find Benaiah (v. 6) and Asahel the brother of Joab (v. 7); but, as he had been slain by Abner (2 Sam. 2: 18-23), we have "and Zebadiah his son after him".

The duties of the "officers" are not stated; but since vv. 23 f. refer to the "numbering" by Joab which was not completed, we may conjecture that in this the officers took a share.

The other group of officers are employed in the civil administration, and these are associated with "judges" (*shophetim*, 1 Chron. 23: 4; 26: 29), a word of wider significance than "judge" in English. In the Book of Judges, the *shophet* (LXX ἄρχων, "ruler") was a leader whose functions merged with those of king.

In 1 Chron. 23: 1-6 the "Levites" are numbered and divided into four groups, after which the names of the leaders are given. The groups are (1) "for the work of the house of the LORD", (2)

⁴ Cf. A. Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, I (1948), p. 171.

“for officers and judges”, (3) doorkeepers, and (4) musicians. The leaders are given in a different order, and at the end we have those “for the outward business over Israel, for officers and judges”, some of them stationed in Transjordan (1 Chron. 26: 29-32).⁵ The date is given as the fortieth year of David’s reign, and their work was “for every matter pertaining to God, and for the affairs of the king”, which has been held to mean the local administration of justice and revenue. Whatever the source upon which the Chronicler relied for this detailed information, it seems reasonably certain that the institutions of judges and officers goes back to the days of Solomon.

UNDER LATER KINGS

In the reign of Jehoshaphat we read again of judges and officers, a main source of information being “the history of Jehu the son of Hanani, which is inserted in the book of the kings of Israel” (2 Chron. 20: 34, R.V.), this Jehu being a contemporary of the king (2 Chron. 19: 2).

Jehoshaphat “walked in the first ways of his father David” (2 Chron. 17: 3), and being established on the throne, he “set judges in the land throughout all the fenced cities of Judah” (2 Chron. 19: 5), and set up a central authority in Jerusalem, saying: “behold, Amariah the chief priest is over you in all matters of the LORD; and Zebadiah the son of Ishmael, the ruler of the house of Judah, in all the king’s matters: also the Levites shall be officers (*shoterim*) before you” (2 Chron. 19: 11), the last clause implying that the “officers” would be at the service of their leaders.

As in the previous record, we find the officers associated with judges, and the same distinction between the matters of the LORD and the king’s matters. The two accounts confirm one another, and the details and names given attest their historical basis.

In the account of Uzziah’s army there is another mention of officers. “Uzziah had an army of fighting men, that went out to war by bands, according to the number of their reckoning made by Jeiel the scribe and Maaseiah the officer, under the hand of Hananiah, one of the king’s captains” (2 Chron. 26: 11). Here again we see the officer working under his captain and concerned in recording the numbers, probably to be written down by Jeiel the scribe.

One more reference occurs in the story of Josiah’s repair of the temple, of the workmen and their payment, ending with the words:

⁵ In 1 Chron. 26: 30, where A.V. translates “officers”, the word is not *shoterim* but *pequddah* (R.V. “oversight”).

"and of the Levites there were scribes and officers and porters" (2 Chron. 34: 13). As in the previous passage, the scribes and officers are associated, but distinguished; and porters and officers are found in company as in 1 Chron. 23: 4 f.

We are justified in the conclusion that officers engaged in both civil and military service were employed throughout the period of the monarchy.

THE INVASION PERIOD

Officers are not mentioned in the Book of Judges, but we find Deuteronomy and Joshua unexpectedly rich in references to them. Already at that time there is the distinction between civil and military, the former working with judges, the latter with captains.

In the Deuteronomic law (Deut. 12-26) we have, first of all, religious instructions (12: 1 to 16: 17) and then rules concerning justice, beginning: "Judges and officers shalt thou appoint in all thy gates, which the LORD thy God giveth thee, according to thy tribes" (16: 18). This is the only word concerning civil officers, but a little later a tribunal for the trial of "hard cases" is founded (17: 8-13), and judges are mentioned again in 19: 17; 21: 2; 25: 1 f., where it is apparent that they are to be found in each locality. The parallelism between these laws and Jehoshaphat's action is striking; compare Deut. 16: 18 and 2 Chron. 19: 5; Deut. 16: 19 f. and 2 Chron. 19: 6 f.; Deut. 17: 8 and 2 Chron. 19 8-10; Deut. 17: 9 and 2 Chron. 19: 11. Everything shows the Deuteronomic law to be the older: the primitive laws and penalties, the absence of any mention of the king, the co-operation of priests and judges in the old law of Deut. 21: 1-9.

In the great assembly at the foot of Mount Ebal for the inscription of the law, "all Israel, and their elders and officers, and their judges, stood on this side the ark and on that side before the priests the Levites" (Josh. 8: 33).

Deut. 20 lays down rules for the army about to invade Canaanite territory. The priest was to assure them of Yahweh's presence and leadership (vv. 2-4), after which "the officers shall speak unto the people", proclaiming exemptions from service (vv. 5-8; cf. Judges 7: 2 f.); and "when the officers have made an end of speaking unto the people", they (i.e. the people, or their leaders) "shall appoint captains of hosts at the head of the people" (v. 9). We are back in the days of the theocracy and the holy war; the setting is primitive, but even now the captains and officers have their place in the military order.

Similarly in the Book of Joshua, the "officers of the people"

were commanded to pass through the camp and bid the people prepare for the crossing of Jordan (1: 10 f.); and when the river bank was reached, "the officers went through the midst of the camp" instructing them as to the order of the crossing (3: 1 f.).

We read also in the assemblies of the people of the presence of heads, elders and officers (Deut. 29: 10; v. 9 in Heb.);⁶ elders and officers (Deut. 31: 28); elders, heads, judges and officers (Josh. 23: 2; 24: 1).

The LXX seem to recognize a distinction between military and civil officers, for whereas they adhere to the usual word γραμματεῖς in Deut. 20, they translate by γραμματῶσιςαγωγεῖς in Deut. 1: 15; 16: 18; 29: 10 (9); 31: 28. The latter Greek word appears to mean officials appointed to "introduce" cases in a court of justice.

This collocation of evidence points to the existence of officers for both civil and military duty at the period of the occupation. The evidence is interwoven with laws generally acknowledged as very early.

IN THE WILDERNESS

Particular importance for our inquiry attaches to the words of Moses as given in Deut. 1: 15 f., where he recalls the incident in the wilderness which is related in detail in Ex. 18.

He reminds his hearers that, when he found the burden of administration too heavy for him to bear alone, "I took the heads of your tribes . . . and made them heads over you, captains of thousands, and captains of hundreds, and captains of fifties, and captains of tens, and officers, according to your tribes" (v. 15). In the next verse he proceeds: "And I charged your judges at that time" to judge justly, not to respect persons, and to refer to him any "hard cases". At the end of v. 15 instead of "officers among your tribes" the LXX translate καὶ γραμματῶσιςαγωγεῖς τοῖς κριταῖς ὑμῶν ("and officers for your judges"), which seems to rest upon a text which read *shophetêkhem*, in lieu of MT *shibhetêkhem*.⁷ Whichever reading be adopted, it is evident that the "captains" of v. 15 become the "judges" of v. 16; the distinction between military and judicial duties is at its very beginning.

This is eminently suitable to the wilderness conditions presupposed. The host, like an army on the march, needed leaders; at the same time the people needed to be judged and to be taught

⁶ For "your tribes" in Deut. 29: 10 ("your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers") LXX reads "your judges"—presupposing Heb. *shophetêkhem* instead of MT *shibhetêkhem*.

⁷ As in Deut. 29: 10 (9); cf. n.6.

the divine law. At first the same persons could, with the assistance of *shoterim*, do both, provided they were “wise men, and known” The case would be different when legislating for the invading army, and for justice in the promised land.

The institution of judges and officers by Moses at this time seems to rest on a sound historical basis.⁸ The reminiscences recorded in Deut. 1 are strikingly independent of the narrative in Ex. 18, though the divergence never amounts to contradiction. The meeting between Jethro and Moses is probable enough, and it is unlikely that a late tradition would assign to a foreigner the origin of a well-established Israelite institution.

In Num. 11: 16 the word *shoterim* is applied to the seventy elders who were filled with the spirit in order to assist Moses. There is no specification of duties, and the word may be used loosely in the sense of “overseers”.

IN EGYPT

The earliest scriptural reference to officers is in Ex. 5: 6 (also vv. 10, 14, 15, 19), where the word is applied to Israelite foremen set over the people to keep count of their “tale of bricks”.

The monuments abound in records of the capture of Semitic slaves during the XVIIIth, XIXth and XXth Dynasties (16th to 13th centuries B.C.), who were employed in various kinds of labour,⁹ including brickmaking and building. Further, scores of ostraca have been found containing notes by their overseers such as the following: “In the fourth month of invasion season, day 11, (the man) went to work”, and “in the fourth month of inundation season, day 12 . . . a standstill”.¹⁰ These notes seem to have been reported to the scribes who were responsible for keeping the official records (cf. “scribes and officers”, 2 Chron. 34: 13).

The setting of Ex. 2: 11-16 and 5: 4-19 is true to Egyptian life at that time. It may be taken as certain that Moses was aware of the institution of such officers in Egypt, and perfectly natural that he should appoint them to assist the “captains” as stated in Deut. 1: 15.

CONCLUSION

Summing up the evidence, we have a historical series of occasions on which we read of *shoterim*, ranging from the oppression in Egypt to Josiah’s repair of the temple.

⁸ Cf. M. Buber, *Moses*, p. 100.

⁹ See e.g., Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, II, pp. 407-573.

¹⁰ Ostrakon Cairo 25515, in J. Cerny, *Ostraca Hiératiques, Catalogue du Musée de Caïre*.

Sometimes they are foremen over manual labourers, keeping check of their work ; sometimes non-commissioned officers in the army, issuing the captains' orders or assisting in numbering ; and sometimes helpers of the judges in the cities of Israel. In each case, what is told about them corresponds well with the known background of time and circumstance ; there are no obvious anachronisms.

The correct inference appears to be, not that the institution originated at some period of the Israelite monarchy, but that it was employed in Egypt, adopted by Moses, developed under Joshua and still further by David, and continued under varying and more specific forms under the kings who followed.

There is a congruence and a sequence in these references which testify to the truth of the record.

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