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Thesis Proposal
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(1) RATIONALE

What is a proper interpretation of the Hebrew word *elep* throughout the Pentateuch when it appears to refer to large numbers of Hebrews?

This thesis will demonstrate that the best understanding of the Hebrew word *elep* within the Pentateuch is a numerical interpretation. This understanding is supported by comparing the syntactical structure of both *elep* and the lexical items juxtaposed to *elep* in the common uses of the word to those instances of *elep* that are problematic, i.e., those that appear to contain large numbers in reference to people. More clearly stated, this thesis will attempt to ascertain the possibility of alternative linguistic interpretations of *elep* within the said “problem passages” that appear to contain evidence for large numbers of Hebrews in the Exodus and thereafter by presenting *elep* as it appears in the text, in context, and with the application of standard lexicographical principles.

In order to properly develop a linguistic interpretation of *elep*, three key questions must be answered: 1) what parameters must be set in order to avoid linguistic pitfalls, 2) what syntactical structure surrounds the use of *elep* and other lexical items in context, and 3) how does this syntactical structure relate between common uses of *elep* and uses within the problematic passages?

Before these can be answered, though, we need to limit the scope of this research to linguistic aspects only. This is not to declare either archaeological evidences or internal-biblical and external textual evidences as devoid of interpretative help, but it is merely to set these aside for later research and study. Concerning the topic of large numbers in the Old Testament,

archaeological research and internal-biblical and external textual support can be both complementary and corrective, but we do not have the space here to dabble in these additions. Let it suffice to assume, at present, that both of these complement large numbers in the problem passages – if only to allow for an unbiased examination of the linguistic material. In doing so we are not committing ourselves to this assumption as these additional “legs on our stool” are quite necessary to a full and complete understanding of the topic, and therefore much should be said – in the future – on applying those finds to this study.

Something should be said, here, about the difference between “common” uses and “problematic” uses of the word *elef*. By “common,” I mean those common uses of which there is little interpretive question: money, sheep, donkeys, and other “items” counted. By “problematic,” I mean those uses of which most interpreters have raised questions or doubts – when the “items” counted are in fact Hebrews and appear to be in large numbers. The premise of this linguistic study and argument is that lexicographical principles suggest that when an interpreter is uncertain of the meaning of a particular word in context, then one should set that word and context aside and determine the meaning of the same word in other more clearly understood contexts. Since the word in question appears multiple times throughout the Pentateuch in reference to Hebrews “in large numbers,” then the best approach to our study would be simply to set aside every instance in which *elef* appears to be used in reference to large numbers of Hebrews and then to turn our attention to the same word used in other contexts in order to determine any similarities in syntactical structure – including lexical items, grammatical features, etc. Only after that analysis has been made can we make any interpretive leaps.

By way of example, this approach is commonly used within theological circles when the word studied is of theological significance. Because theological terminology can contain much

baggage, interpreters sometimes assume the meaning of a word based on later theological, specifically referenced meanings (e.g., *logos* in John 1). While we are not here pursuing a topic of deep systematic theological importance, we are working within a language and therefore must be careful to tread lightly and only where the language allows us to tread. Just as the theological terminology can be based on specific references and inferences, so it is also possible to translate non-theologically significant words in the same fallacious manners.

Finally, while space cannot be given to attend to a full JEDP analysis of each common and problematic use of the term in question, there is enough consistency throughout the Pentateuch to simply set this issue aside as future, additional research. A quick glance through Friedman's rubric set forth in his work *Who Wrote the Bible?* reveals a startling consistent priestly use for many if not most of the passages at issue, including those problematic uses found in Numbers 1, 2, and 26 (major sections containing lists of large numbers of Hebrews) and the common use found in Numbers 31 (listing booty taken). Since a major portion of the comparison will be from these passages, nothing more need be said concerning the Documentary Hypothesis.

(2) OUTLINE AND SUMMARY

Chapter 1 will introduce the topic, as well as review scholarship on the issue. Research on the issue will be somewhat limited to that which pertains to the Pentateuch/Torah.

Chapter 2 will argue that certain limitations must be placed upon the interpreter in order to avoid philological and lexicographical pitfalls.

In Chapter 3, we will examine the non-critical uses of *elef* in context in order to determine whether there is a standard syntactical structure to be found.

Chapter 4 shall reveal that there is in fact a standard syntactical structure used and that

this structure, along with identical lexical items, is being used in critical uses of *elef*.

Chapter 5 will conclude that the comparison of critical and non-critical uses of *elef* through the above-prescribed syntactical analysis should bring us to an identical interpretation between the non-critical and critical uses – namely that in both uses the understanding should be numerical.

Outline in thesis statement form:

A LINGUISTIC STUDY OF THE HEBREW WORD *ELEF* WITHIN THE PENTATEUCH APPEARS TO SUPPORT A NUMERICAL INTERPRETATION AS EVIDENCED BY COMPARING THE SYNTACTICAL STRUCTURE OF *ELEF* AND THE LEXICAL ITEMS JUXTAPOSED TO THE NON-CRITICAL/COMMON USAGES OF THE WORD TO THOSE OF THE PROBLEM PASSAGES, I.E., THOSE THAT APPEAR TO CONTAIN LARGE NUMBERS IN REFERENCE TO HEBREWS.

1. Introduction; Review of Scholarship on large numbers in the Pentateuch and the Hebrew word *elef*.
2. Certain limitations must be advanced in this linguistic study of *elef*, namely a separation of the second and third homonyms and a limit upon the scope of the study to the Pentateuch.
 - a. Limiting the scope to the Pentateuch.
 - b. An examination of the homogenous nature of *elef*
3. Studying the non-critical/common usage passages in which *elef* appears brings an understanding of numerical significance.
 - a. Identifying the non-critical/common uses of *elef* in the Pentateuch and their juxtaposed lexical items.
 - b. Identifying the syntactical structure of the non-critical/common uses of *elef*.
4. The critical/problem passages contain the same lexical items and the same syntactical structure as the non-critical/common usage passages, and therefore an identical interpretation should be advanced.
 - a. Identifying the critical/problem uses of *elef* and a comparison of their juxtaposed lexical items to those used within the non-critical uses.
 - b. Comparing the syntactical structure of the critical/problem uses of *elef* to those of the non-critical uses.
5. Conclusion: The critical/problem passages contain the same lexical items and the same syntactical structure as the non-critical/common usage passages, and therefore a numerical significance as compared to the common usage should be understood.

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