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THE EXPRESSION “PASS UNDER THE ROD” occurs twice in the Bible—Leviticus 27:32 and Ezekiel 20:37. A third passage, Jeremiah 33:13 (NASB), uses the expression “pass under the hands of the one who numbers them.” Clearly the phrases suggest a shepherding practice, but precisely what? What is the phrase’s significance?

Three different Hebrew words are translated “rod” in the Old Testament. *Qaneh* (ka-NEH) denotes a measuring rod or reed (Ezek. 40:3,5; 41:8). *Matteh* (mah-TEH) designates a wooden rod. Moses used his rod to strike a rock to provide water for Israel (Num. 20:8-11). God caused Aaron’s

rod to sprout to show Aaron’s line was His choice to serve as priests (Num. 17:2-10). A rod also served as an agricultural tool (Isa. 28:27) or an instrument of discipline (Isa. 30:32). *Shebet* (SHAY-vet) has a range of meaning similar to *matteh* and commonly refers to an instrument of discipline or judgment (2 Sam. 7:14; Prov. 22:15; Isa. 10:5). Most significantly for our study, *shebet* is the word translated “rod” in the expression “pass under the rod” (Lev. 27:32; Ezek. 20:37).

Shepherds often used their rods as they tended the sheep. The rod often had a knob on one end, and one could drive nails into the knob to make the rod a better weapon.¹ The rod also provided protection against wild animals that might try to harm the flock (Ps. 23:4).

A shepherd also carried a staff—a stick five to six feet long that often had a crook at one end. The shepherd could use his rod and staff to protect his sheep, as well as to correct straying ones. He might also put the crook around an animal to lift it from a pit.

The expression “pass under the rod” in Leviticus 27:32.—Leviticus 27 deals with the redemption of vows and the determination of what was holy to the Lord. Part of the Lord’s holy portion included the tithe, and Leviticus 27:30-33 explains the procedures for obtaining it. The Israelites were to tithe every crop, as well as all their flocks and herds.

Verse 32 explains that the tithe included every 10th animal that passed under the shepherd’s rod. The random order in which the sheep came

B A C K G R O U N D O F

“PASS UNDER THE ROD”



Ezekiel's description of passing under the rod, along with Leviticus 27:32 and Jeremiah 33:13, reminds us the Lord Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd. As the Good Shepherd, He knows His sheep, and His sheep know Him .

they have not been counted with the rod, or if they have been counted lying down or standing, they are none the less tithed. If a man had a hundred cattle and he took [any] ten from them, or ten and he took [any] one from them, such are not [valid] Tithe (Bekhoroth 8:7).²

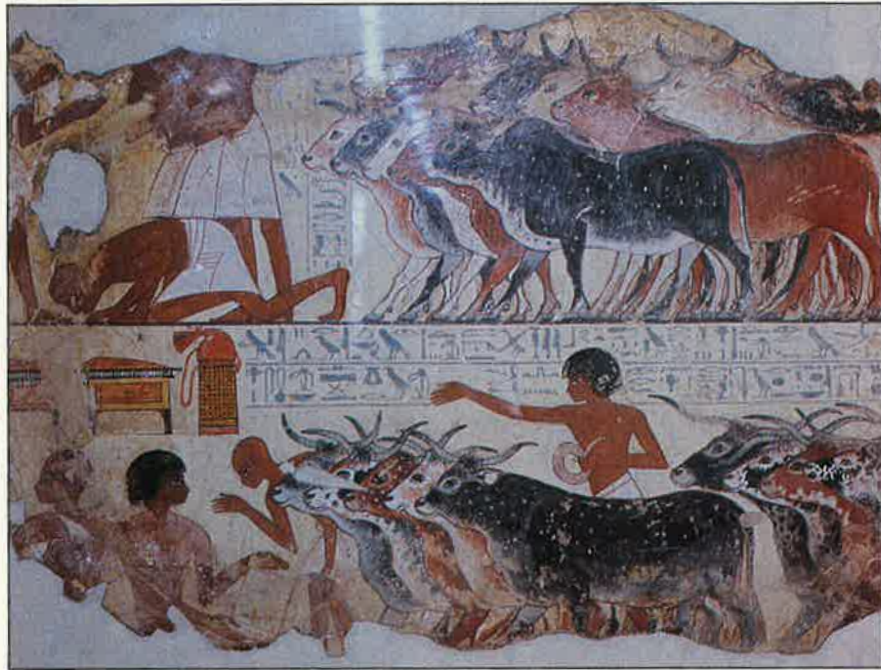
The Mishnah also gives details as to what happens if something unusual happened during the counting process:

If one of them that was already counted jumped in among the others, the others are exempt; if one of them that was marked as Tithe jumped in among the others, they must all be left to pasture until they suffer a blemish, and after they have suffered a blemish they may be consumed by their owners (Bekhoroth 8:7).³

*The expression "pass under the rod" in Jeremiah 33:13.—*Jeremiah 33:13 does not contain the exact phrase "pass under the rod," but the context is similar and helps us understand the practice. In Jeremiah 30–33, the prophet described God's promise to restore Judah. God's grace will lead to society's rejuvenation. God's people will experience cleansing from sin; thus prosperity and celebration will ensue as David's descendant assumes Judah's throne (33:8-16). Society's return to normalcy will also be confirmed by shepherds returning to their daily routine (33:13). Just as sheep pass under the shepherd's watchful eye, so God's people again will come under His tender care. He will protect them from harm and lead them to places of blessing.

Lesson Reference:

BBS: Ezekiel 20:7-11,36-39; 24:13b-14



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Left: Long-haired sheep grazing near a village on the rocky slopes of the Judean hills in Israel. Sheep were the primary animals to "pass under the rod in Israel."

Far above: Inspection of Cattle. From the Tomb of Nebamun in Egypt.

Above: A possible measuring cord. A wooden peg with cord around it, possibly a measuring cord. The date is uncertain. The peg originated in Deir el-Bahri.

ensured no favoritism on the part of the shepherd, and the Law permitted no substitutions. If someone attempted to substitute an inferior animal, both the animal and its substitute became the Lord's (Lev. 27:33).

The Mishnah, a collection of the

comments of ancient rabbis regarding their interpretation of the Scriptures, describes how the Israelites determined the tithe of flocks and herds:

How do they levy the Tithe? They lead the cattle into the pen and make a small outlet for them so that no two can go forth together. And they count with a rod: One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven, Eight, Nine, and the one that comes out tenth is marked with a red mark, and it is said, "This is Tithe." If it is not marked with the red mark, or if

Right: Documents of Marduk-Apal-Iddin II, king of Babylon, pertaining to land grants to a Babylonian aristocrat. The king, on left, with pointed helmet, holds in his left hand a staff. ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/STAATLICHE MUSEEN ZU BERLIN/BERLIN (7/8/19)

The expression “pass under the rod” in *Ezekiel 20:37*.—*Ezekiel 20* presents a sobering prophecy. The prophet described Israel’s judgment and restoration. God earlier brought judgment on Israel’s ancestors who rebelled in Egypt and in the wilderness (20:7-17). When the people arrived in the land, they continued to sin, rejecting God’s ordinances and profaning the Sabbath (20:18-22). Finally, after numerous warnings, God sent them into exile in Babylon, where they remained 70 years (20:23-29).

Ezekiel challenged his hearers to remember this sad testimony from the past. “Don’t be like your ancestors,” he warned God’s people, “and don’t be like your pagan neighbors.” He informed them God would deal with their sin again if they persisted in their evil. God could and would drive them into the wilderness again (20:33-36); they might leave exile, but they would not enter Israel (20:38). Nevertheless, Ezekiel expressed the hope that someday Israel would listen and experience God’s blessing. They might serve their idols now, but one day God would demonstrate His power, and they would come to know Him in a saving way (20:39).

God told the Israelites He would make them pass under the rod and bring them into the bond of the covenant (20:37). This “bond of the covenant” probably refers mainly to God’s judgment. The word “bond” usually denotes oppression or captivity (Ps. 2:3; Isa. 28:22; 52:2).⁴ God would lead the people under His rod to separate those who would receive His punishment. Those who persisted in rebellion would never experience God’s blessing.

Nevertheless, the passage also presents a message of hope. God

would purge the wicked from His flock, leaving only the faithful. When that occurred, God’s purified people could receive the land again.⁵

Ezekiel’s description of passing under the rod, along with *Leviticus 27:32* and *Jeremiah 33:13*, reminds us the Lord Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd (*John 10:11*). As the Good Shepherd, He knows His sheep, and His sheep know Him (*John 10:14*). He also knows those who are not His sheep, and someday He will judge them for their unbelief (*Matt. 25:41-46*). Jesus disciplines us according to His plan—an act that proves His love for us (*Heb. 12:5-6*). He will chasten us when we sin and will lead us through various trials to strengthen us (*Jas. 1:2*

4). But above all, He protects and watches over us, and we can never stray outside His loving care (*Matt. 28:20*).

⁴Fred H. Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953), 149.

⁵Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 543.

⁶Ibid.

⁷The Hebrew word מִסֵּרֶת, *masoret* (ms-SO-ret) occurs only here in the Bible. A common related word, *moser* (mo-SAYR), is the word described here.

⁸John T. Bunn, “Ezekiel” in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 6 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 291; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Ezekiel, Daniel*, vol. 9 in *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1976), 281-82; Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 416.

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