



“ Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

— Matthew 28:18-20

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Today we’re going to take a super-quick pass through words used in the Old Testament to express different aspects of leadership. Many words in Hebrew are interestingly nuanced, and it is telling that the catch-all English “leader” is represented by the varied words below.

The Hebrew word *nasi’* is frequently translated as leader, prince, captain, or ruler. It has the meaning of “one who is lifted up.”¹⁵ This resonates with many of our stereotypical modern ideas of leaders as the one in the spotlight, the person on the pedestal, the figurehead.

Nasi’ is similar to another word translated as leader, prince, ruler: *nagid*. Like *nasi’*, the root of *nagid* also indicates being lifted up, but here specifically being “placed high, conspicuous before a person.”¹⁶

A form of *nagid* — *l’neged* — is used in verses such as 2 Samuel 22:23: “*For all his ordinances were before me, and from his statutes I did not turn aside.*” The *nagid* leader can therefore be seen as one who is held up before the people to be an example.

The Hebrew *ro’sh* is translated leader, but its literal meaning is “head.”¹⁷ This does overlap with the above two words, as the head is the top — the “lifted up part” — of the body. The understanding of the “head” as the one in charge is reflected in the English language, as well (e.g., department head, headquarters). Variations of *ro’sh* are also used in other contexts to speak of people and things that are the first, the highest, the best.

Mashal means to rule, have dominion, to govern.¹⁸ This word, used in Genesis 45:26 to refer to Joseph's governance of the land of Egypt, is also used in the description of the fourth day of creation: "*God set them [the sun and moon] in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night...*" The flavor of this word is of organization, administration, direction.

In addition to these, there are words translated as "leader" which have a much more confined sense, such as *melek* ("king") and *sar* ("prince").

We also have the Hebrew *'ayil*. This word is used in several other places in the Old Testament as simply "ram."¹⁹ This word is used in Exodus 15:15 as leader, as in "leader of a flock." This is the only instance of the word being used in this way in the Old Testament, and it is not used politely: "*Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed; trembling seized the leaders of Moab; all the inhabitants of Canaan melted away.*" But even this once-off, negatively-portrayed metaphor for leadership has interesting implications: the preponderance of Old Testament verses using *'ayil* reference not leadership per se, but a ram used as a sacrifice for forgiveness of sins.

QUESTION:

How do you see each of these playing out in the leadership of Jesus you see in the New Testament? How do you see them reflected in the actions of other people in scripture? In our world today?

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