

### III. CULTURAL AND SEMANTIC LOGIC: NO *’ISH* IS AN ISLAND

In Parts I and II, I identified hundreds of instances where *’ish* (or *’anashim*) denotes someone affiliated either with a group or (for an agent) with a principal. Such a meaning pertains even without obvious grammatical clues such as a possessive suffix. How can this evidence be explained? Logically and practically, how can affiliation be the primary sense of the term *’ish*?

#### III.A. Language and the Ancient Israelite Mindset

**III.A.1.** Let me step back from language for a moment to look at Israelite society in general. Certain anthropologists and sociologists categorize societies in terms of “group bonding.” By this they mean the degree to which individuals derive their identity from their household and from society. Using such classification, scholars have observed that in general, ancient Israel appears to have been more *group-oriented* than is modern western society. That is, individuals in ancient Israel strove to reach their full potential more for the benefit of the group than from their own benefit; and they considered their own welfare to be practically synonymous with that of the group. Identity did not stem from within the self as much as from membership in the group, particularly from the corporate household—the society’s basic social and economic unit, in the purview of which most Israelites spent most of their lives.<sup>1</sup>

**III.A.2.** In other words, the Israelite concept of “individual” included a group affiliation. People were not seen in isolation so much as “individual *members*” of their group.

**III.A.3.** To the extent that language expresses a culture’s patterns of thought, one might then expect that *’ish*—the main biblical Hebrew word for “individual”—would have included (as a natural part of its semantic function) a reference to the group to which that individual belonged. And indeed, at least two biblical philologists, apparently working independently, have previously put forward such an idea.

**III.A.4.** In 1960, the late E. A. Speiser, prominent Assyriologist and Bible translator, investigated the kinship-based noun *’am*.<sup>2</sup> He observed that *’ish* refers to the member of an *’am*:

*’am* is a common West-Semitic term. . . . Its individual correlate is *’ish* which, significantly enough, has approximately the same dialectal distribution as *’am*. [p. 160]

Speiser explained this link between *’ish* and *’am* in terms of the political economy of the Levant, wherein individuals were highly dependent upon their kinship group:

<sup>1</sup> Mary Douglas is prominent among these social scientists. Lyn M. Bechtel presents a handy summary of the “group bonding” categories, with sources, on pp. 109–111 of her “A Feminist Reading of Genesis 19.1–11,” in Athalya Brenner, ed., *Genesis: The Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series)* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); see also “Introduction,” and Jerome H. Neyrey, “Group Orientation,” in John H. Pilch and Bruce Malina, eds., *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning: A Handbook* (Hendrickson, 1993), pp. xiii–xxxix, pp. 88–91. On what I call the corporate household, see the Dictionary of Gender in the Torah (appendix to *The Contemporary Torah*), s.v. “household, householder”; and Leo G. Purdue et al., eds., *Families in Ancient Israel* (Westminster John Knox, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> E. A. Speiser, “‘People’ and ‘Nation’ of Israel,” *JBL* 79 (1960): 157–63.

The Hebrew pair *'am* and *'ish* should presuppose a nonurban background, in common with other West-Semitic elements. Now in nomadic society the isolated individual has little chance of survival. Such an environment imposes unremitting group effort and a constant struggle against rival groups. In these circumstances, careful attention to blood ties promises maximum security. The family is paramount; but it will prosper or fail depending upon the initiative and enterprise of its individual members. [p. 161]

In short, among the ancient Western Semites (not only in Israel), an *'ish* did not exist apart from a larger group, conceptually speaking.<sup>3</sup>

**III.A.5.** More recently, the late Alison Grant examined more than two thousand instances of *'ish* in the Bible. Her investigation was a straightforward lexicographic survey to distinguish the usage of *'ish* from the similar term *'adam*. She concluded:

*'ish* . . . relates primarily to an individual as a *member* of a particular group. . . . [An] *'ish* . . . would not be thought of as an individual with an independent existence, . . . but always in relation to his particular group or community” [pp. 9–10; emphasis in the original].<sup>4</sup>

**III.A.6.** In sum, in remote antiquity in the Near East, nobody was viewed as an isolated individual. First and foremost, everyone belonged to—and was identified with—a household, a lineage, a clan, a nation. Alternatively, one could take on a temporary identity as someone else’s agent—a task-specific or role-specific affiliation. But each person was attached to something or someone; and it appears that the biblical usage of *'ish* reflects such a mindset.

### **III.B. Affiliation as the Common Thread of the Various Senses of *'ish***

**III.B.1.** In biblical Hebrew, the primary meaning of *'ish* appears to have been “an affiliate” or “an associate,” for this is what most handily accounts for all senses of the term—not only the five senses discussed earlier in this memorandum, but also the more well-recognized senses. *The word is always to be understood in reference either to a group (in the case of a member) or to a principal (in the case of an agent).* I will now briefly show how some of the many senses of *'ish* relate to the posited primary meaning.

**III.B.2. Each.** As is well recognized, in the many situations where the grammatical construction is impersonal or distributive, the noun *'ish* can have the force of “someone, anyone, whoever, each one, every one.”<sup>5</sup> Yet such a meaning—while contextually clear—is not readily derivable from *'ish* if “adult male” or even “person” is taken to be its primary sense. However, a meaning of “someone” and the like follows quite naturally if *'ish* is understood as primarily a term of affiliation. For in such situations any member of “the group in question” is as good as any

<sup>3</sup> Speiser did not develop the implications of his insight; his translation *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (1962) typically renders *'ish* as “man” and makes no mention of the term’s implicit sense of affiliation with a larger group: “*'ish* stands for ‘man’ in the sense of an individual being” (p. 30).

<sup>4</sup> Alison M. Grant, “*Adam* and *'Ish*: Man in the OT,” *Australian Biblical Review* 25 (1977): 2–11.

<sup>5</sup> A plural verb with the singular *'ish* is one good indication of such usage. Cf. Harry Orlinsky, “Male Oriented Language Originated by Bible Translators.” In Harry M. Orlinsky and Robert G. Bratcher, *A History of Bible Translation and the North American Contribution* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1991): 267–277; p. 269, n. 6.

other. In impersonal or distributive usage, the group’s members are interchangeable: each (or every) one will do.

**III.B.2.a.** Less well recognized is that the plural can also have a similar force:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֲלֵהֶם	Moses said to them,
אִישׁ אֶל-יָדָיו מִמָּוֶנֶ עַד-בֹּקֶר	“Let no one ( <i>’ish</i> ) leave of it until morning.
וְלֹא-שָׁמְעוּ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה	But they did not listen to Moses;
וַיִּזְתְּרוּ אַנְשֵׁים מִמָּוֶנֶ עַד-בֹּקֶר	<i>’anashim</i> left of it until morning . . . (Exod. 16:19–20)

In this instance, the plural has an indefinite referent, functioning in the same way as *’ish* in verse 19 (“one”)—but conversely, as a kind of mirror image.<sup>6</sup> If *’anashim* is construed as “interchangeable members of the group in question,” the usage makes perfect sense.<sup>7</sup>

**III.B.2.b.** The fungibility of a group’s members likewise explains why biblical Hebrew applies *’ish* in the sense of “each” not only for a set of male individuals, but also for other kinds of sets. The elements of such a set can variously be: households (Exod. 12:4; Num. 1:52, 2:2, 2:34); Israelite clans or lineages (Num. 26:54, 35:8); tribes (Num. 36:9); peoples (Gen. 10:5b; Zeph. 2:11); spiritual beings (2 Kings 18:33; Isa. 36:18; Ezek. 1:9, 11, 12, 23); animals (Gen. 7:2); faces (Exod. 25:20, 37:9); Leviathan’s scales (Job 41:9); and even inanimate objects (Gen. 15:10; Exod. 28:21, 39:14; 1 Kings 7:30, 36).<sup>8</sup> This apparently wide range of usage makes perfect sense if *’ish* is primarily an indicator of affiliation.

**III.B.3. Member.** Even when it has a definite referent, our noun *’ish* can manifest the simple sense of *membership in a group*, and in a context where many scholars admit that the sense of “adult male” does not fit.

קָנִיתִי אִישׁ אֶת-יְהוָה I have created an *’ish* with [the help of] Yhwh (Gen. 4:1)

Eve is speaking just after the very first case of natural childbirth. In context, the plain sense of *’ish* must be designating a neonate.<sup>9</sup> If *’ish* is construed as “a member” and the group in question as the human species, then the usage makes perfect sense.

**III.B.3.a.** Other instances with the meaning of “member” include: Gen. 2:23; Exod. 2:1, 21; Lev. 24:10; Num. 15:32, 35; 16:22, 26, 30; 32:14; Deut. 27:14; Judg. 14:19; and 2 Chron. 30:11.

<sup>6</sup> KJV/ASV/RSV/NRSV, OJPS, NJPS, and NIV/TNIV sensibly render *’anashim* as “some (of them)”; the group in question is identified as “the Israelites” in verse 17.

<sup>7</sup> Harry Orlinsky remarked in 1991 that “all the word for word versions would be expected to render *’anashim* by ‘men’; instead they all read ‘some’—an indication that the translators knew what the Hebrew text was saying, but, all too rarely, felt free to remove the straitjacket that their philosophy of translation constituted” (p. 269, n. 6). Orlinsky was wrong in one respect: already in 1986, Everett Fox had rendered as “(some) men,” and in 2004 Robert Alter would proffer “some men.”

<sup>8</sup> DCH, like BDB before it, notes that *’ish* can designate inanimate objects. (Cf. the grammatical feminine equivalent *’ishshah* in Exod. 26:3; Ezek. 1:9.) Inexplicably, Robert Alter writes that “*’ish* . . . is a word applied to animate beings, not to things” (at Gen. 15:10), an assertion already disproved by Ibn Ezra, ad loc. (Isaiah 40:26 may not be conclusive in regard to inanimate objects, because although *’ish* there connotes the stars, the poetry appears to be personifying them as human.)

<sup>9</sup> E. A. Speiser renders *’ish* here as “a life”; NJPS as “a male child”; U. Cassuto, N. Sarna, and I. Pardes all remark on the oddity of the term in this context, where in its plain sense *’ish* designates a neonate.

These examples illustrate how “the group in question” can vary widely, including (in order of appearance): the human species; the tribe of Levi; the Egyptian people; the people of Israel; the community (*'edah*); the townspeople of Ashkelon; and three of Israel’s tribes.

**III.B.4. Party.** “The group in question” sometimes consists of only *two* members. Such is the case in judicial settings:

וְעָמְדוּ שְׁנֵי־הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר־לָהֶם הָרִיב    The two *'anashim* who have the dispute shall go stand . . .  
 לְפָנֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים    before the priests. (Deut. 19:17)

The word *'anashim* is followed here by a phrase introduced by a relative pronoun (*'asher la-hem ha-riv*) that specifies the group, disambiguating the preceding term (see further Part IV).<sup>10</sup> Thus *'anashim* here references the universe of disputants, as NJPS and NRSV recognized in their idiomatic renderings: “parties (to the dispute).” Other plausible instances of “party” (such as to a legal proceeding or negotiation) include: Gen. 31:50, 32:25, 34:21, 22; Exod. 21:18, 22; Num. 5:8; Deut. 17:12, 21:22, 22:16, 18, 26, 29; 24:7, 11, 12; 25:1, 5; 1 Kings 20:20; and Ezek. 18:8.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the same usage pertains in larger-scale conflicts:

אִישׁ רִיב הָיִיתִי אִנִּי וְעַכְשָׁי    I, with my people, was an *'ish*-in-a-dispute  
 וּבְנֵי־עַמּוֹן מְאֹד    with the Ammonites, intensely. (Judg. 12:2)

אִישׁ מִלְחָמוֹת הָיָה הַדְּרֵעֹזֶר    Hadadezer had been an *'ish*-of-wars with Toi. (2 Sam. 8:10)

In the first case, the chieftain Jephthah is referring to a territorial dispute that ended in battle. In the second case, the two named persons were neighboring kings. In both cases, *'ish* is employed in a construct chain in which the genitive establishes the fact of conflict: *'ish* thus means “a party (to conflict).” It is difficult to derive this meaning if the noun’s primary sense is taken to be “adult male.”<sup>12</sup> Yet such a meaning follows naturally from *'ish* as a “member of the group in question.”

**III.B.5. Representative.** In certain situations, *'ish* designates someone who is not only a *member* of the group but also its *representative functionary*. Biblical Hebrew often uses *'ish* in the sense of “a representative,” that is, of “one authorized to stand in or act for another person or group.” The representation may be either temporary or ongoing. This meaning is shared in common by the many instances in which the usage of *'ish* corresponds to that of English terms such as leader, dignitary, expert, householder, agent, emissary, warrior, subordinate, commissioner, and more. (Having discussed such meanings earlier, I will not dwell on them further here.)

<sup>10</sup> Actually, *'ish* may be employed the same way already in verse 16; arguably the mention there of a legal witness provides sufficient context to establish the sense of *'ish* as a legal “party.”

<sup>11</sup> Most translations render mechanically in these instances as “man” or “men.” However, NRSV reflects an understanding of *'ish* as “party” indirectly in Exod. 21:18 (by specifying as a “party” an implied subject whose antecedent is *'ish*), and directly in Num. 5:8, Ezek. 18:8. Note that the corresponding term for referring to female affiliates, *'ishshah*, has the sense of “party” in Deut. 22:14.

<sup>12</sup> KJV/ASV/RSV/NRSV, OJPS, NJPS, and NIV/TNIV do not render *'ish* directly, preferring paraphrase.

**III.B.6. Husband.** The noun *'ish* means “husband” in many instances—a sense that has been widely accepted even in a few cases where affiliation is *not* signaled grammatically, such as via a possessive suffix (“her *'ish*”).<sup>13</sup>

Until recently I believed that the meaning of “husband” was another case of the aforementioned sense as “representative”—much like “householder.” For in Israelite society, a husband could in most situations speak or act for his wife, but outside of the household, a wife could represent her husband only if he were unavailable or incapacitated.

However, such an explanation does not explain a frequent biblical usage of the corresponding term *'ishshah*. As everyone agrees, when the text says that a man “takes a woman *le-'ishshah*,” it means that he takes her to wife. In other words, both *'ish* can mean “husband” and *'ishshah* can mean “wife” even in absolute form (i.e., in the absence of grammatical markers of affiliation such as possessive suffix or genitive construction). Such complementary usage is easily explained by understanding both *'ish* and *'ishshah* as simple terms of affiliation, such that a woman’s “(male) affiliate” (*'ish*) was understood to be her husband, and likewise a man’s “(female) affiliate” (*'ishshah*) was understood to be his wife.<sup>14</sup> (The usage would be roughly analogous to the contemporary English term “[domestic] partner.”) At any rate, according to the schema proposed in this memorandum, the meaning of “husband” is not a semantic extension of *'ish* as “adult male.”

**III.B.7. Humankind.** All of the dictionary entries cited in II.F.2 indicate that *'ish* can designate a human being without regard to gender, or the human species in general. According to the view proposed in this memorandum, such usage is not—as others have claimed—because the adult male automatically represents all of humankind. Rather, it is the result of our term’s appearing in a context in which “the group in question” is the human species.

**III.B.8. 'Ish (ha-)’Elohim.** The phrase *'ish 'elohim* (or its variant *'ish ha-'elohim*) occurs more than 70 times in the Bible, a fixed technical expression that is mostly used as an epithet. Its application is restricted: it appears with reference to just 11 individuals. One of them is a person mentioned only in passing, so that we gain little information from that context. Of the rest, 9 clearly function as God’s agents, such as by delivering messages. In 2 Kings 1, Elijah pointedly

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<sup>13</sup> HALOT lists one instance of *'ish* in its absolute form under the gloss “husband” (Num. 30:7; rendered as “husband” by KJV, ASV, RSV). TDOT lists several more, such as Jer. 29:6 (rendered as “husband” by KJV, ASV, OJPS). BDB listed both of those cases and noted that a suffix is not necessary. (TWOT and DCH give “husband” as a sense but without specifying instances.)

In Num. 5:12–31, KJV, OJPS, NJPS, RSV/NRSV, Baruch Levine, Richard Friedman, NLT, and Robert Alter all have made unwarranted distinctions due merely to the presence of a possessive suffix: they rendered *'ish* in absolute form as “man” (vv. 12, 15, 30, and 31), whereas *'ish* with a possessive suffix (*'ishah* or *'ishekh*) they rendered as “husband” (vv. 13, 20, 27, and 29). NIV/TNIV has a mixed record in this passage, e.g., “man” in v. 30, “husband” in v. 31. Yet the text is clearly referring to the same adult male throughout this passage, and it is employing the same term to do so. NJPS’s contextual, plain-sense approach in particular should have called for rendering *'ish* as “husband” consistently whenever the context suggested that meaning, regardless of possessive suffix. Furthermore, “man” is an imprecise rendering in this context: this passage applies only to a man who is married—that is, to a husband.

<sup>14</sup> To nuance the latter statement a bit, the Bible does sometimes employ *'ishshah* to refer to a concubine or slave-wife, implying that “female affiliate” remained also a more general term than “wife.”

echoes the term repeatedly while establishing his status as God’s agent.<sup>15</sup> The agency sense of *’ish* is evoked not only by the contexts but also the expression’s structure as a construct chain.

**III.B.8.a.** The crux of the matter is the one remaining exemplar, King David—who is neither a prophet nor said to deliver messages from God. With reference to David, the expression is nonetheless employed by late sources, yet only where he is being credited with the establishment of certain Temple practices. The effect is to present those particular practices as having been divinely sanctioned—as if God had said to David, “This is how I am to be worshiped . . .” (Such a presumption builds upon the biblical depiction of David as the founder of the Israelite sanctuary in Jerusalem.) David is thus portrayed as having served—in an earlier age—as God’s agent, just like the others styled as *’ish (ha-) ’elohim*.

**III.B.8.b.** In order to account for the expression’s application to David, it is not necessary to posit, as some scholars have, a historical development or semantic drift.<sup>16</sup> Rather, the technical expression *’ish (ha-) ’elohim* appears to arise naturally out of the agency sense of *’ish*, meaning “a representative of divinity” or “. . . of the deity (in question).”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> As pointed out by Jay A. Holstein in his article, “The Case of “*’ish ha ’elohim*” Reconsidered: Philological Analysis versus Historical Reconstruction,” *HUCA* 48 (1977):69–81, p. 71. In this passage Elijah pointedly delivers a message from God, and so I cannot account for why Prof. Holstein proceeds to cite this passage as proof that *’ish (ha-) ’elohim* does not mean “messenger” (p. 75). I have received no reply to my two queries on this matter.

<sup>16</sup> Frédéric Gangloff, “L’homme d’Elohim (*’ish ha-Elohim*),” *Biblische Notizen* 100 (1999): 60–70, concludes that originally the expression referred to a charismatic shaman, and then later to a proto-prophet, until it finally became “une formule de vénération ou de respect désignant le serviteur idéal de Dieu” (a formula of veneration or respect designating the ideal servant of God; p. 70). Earlier, Holstein cited—and took issue with—a number of historical reconstructions in the latter part of his article, although his own philologically based conclusion was essentially the same as Gangloff’s final formula: an honorific bestowed on exceptionally worthy men.

<sup>17</sup> The first rendering takes into account the fact that the Hebrew expression employs the adjectival genitive *’elohim* (an abstract noun with the generic meaning “deity, divinity”) rather than the deity’s name. Perhaps the term *’ish (ha-) ’elohim* was applied to persons credited with taking a stand against the grain of human expectation or human authority: representing the permanent or absolute truth known to divinity, as opposed to the temporary or relative truth ordinarily perceived by humankind. Alternatively, *ha- ’elohim* might in this expression simply have the force of “the deity (in question),” as it does elsewhere.

Holstein considers it a conspicuous fact that *’ish (ha-) ’elohim* is never used as a self-attribution (*ibid.*, p. 70). That a person would say “I am a prophet” (1 Kings 13:18, 18:22; cf. also the negated versions in Amos 7:14, Zech. 13:5) but not “I am a ‘representative of divinity’” can be explained thus: the latter is too general to be a useful self-identification, and too removed in its perspective to be a natural one. Indeed, the Bible employs it mostly in hindsight. To put the matter in a broader context, however, it should be noted that in the Bible the word *’ish* is only seven times used in self-reference of any sort (*’anashim ’achim*, Gen. 13:8; *’ish chalaq*, Gen. 27:11; *’ish devarim*, Exod. 4:10; *’ish riv*, Judg. 12:2; *’ish rash*, 1 Sam. 18:23; *’ish tame’ sefatayim*, Isa. 6:5; and *’ish ’oved ’adamah*, Zech. 13:5; cf. also the negated terms *’anshe chayil*, Jer. 48:14; *’ish-ah* [her husband], Hos. 2:4). One’s being an *’ish* is much more often an identification made by others—especially the narrator.

Finally, according to Joel Burnett, the cognate term *’ish ’elim* appears as an epithet in a late Phoenician inscription (Cooke 150.5; fifth–fourth century BCE) where the meaning “representative” is appropriate (Joel S. Burnett, *A Reassessment of Biblical Elohim* [SBL, 2001], p. 27).

**III.B.9. Fighter.** Often the noun *'ish* refers to those who engage in battle, e.g., 2 Kings 25:23; Jer. 6:23, 26:22; 2 Chron. 24:24. Indeed, *'ish* sometimes appears conspicuously in military contexts, as when Philistine soldiers on the battlefield, facing national catastrophe, urge each other to “become *'anashim*” (1 Sam. 9:4, twice); and Goliath, who is twice designated an *'ish ha-beynayim* (champion; 1 Sam. 17:4, 23), demands that an Israelite *'ish* meet him in combat (1 Sam. 17:4, 8, 10, 26, etc.). It appears also that the anonymous (*ha-*)*'ish* (*ha-*)*mitzri* whom Benaiah ben Jehoiada killed in David’s time (2 Sam. 23:21; 1 Chron. 11:23) was a war champion who represented his nation in battle. (The Bible repeatedly refers to Goliath not by name but as *ha-pelishti*, “the Philistine,” as befits a representative.) That is, *'ish* and *'anashim* can connote persons called to violence in defense of, or on behalf of, their group: in that capacity, they are representatives of their tribe or nation.

**III.B.9.a.** The group that certain fighters sometimes are representing is not only their nation but also—and more specifically—its militia, as in Exod. 17:9:

בַּחֲרֵנוּ אֲנָשִׁים וְיָצְאָ הֵלָתָם בַּעֲמָלֵךְ Choose for us *'anashim* and go out to do battle with Amalek  
 Moses is charging Joshua to choose not “men” at random from the populace, but rather to identify the most suitable fighters from among an already trained and equipped militia. The language and narrative context thus evoke the sense of *'anashim* as “representatives” who will enter the fray on behalf of others. That is, *'ish* can refer to troops who are drawn from a larger pool, as indicated by verbs like *bachar* (choose, Exod. 17:9; see Ibn Ezra), *hachalitz* (pick, Num. 31:3; see Rashi), *laqach* (select, Josh. 8:12; 1 Sam. 24:3; 2 Kings 3:26), and *hifqid* (appoint, Josh. 10:18).

**III.B.9.b.** In these instances, to construe *'ish* in the customary manner as “adult male” results in a rather colorless understanding of what it is that sets these *'anashim* apart from the other adult males in the militia. And it begs the question as to why the text uses this term alone rather than a more specific designation for combatants, such as *'anshe chayil*.<sup>18</sup>

**III.B.9.c.** According to the view propounded in this memorandum, the connotation of *'ish* or *'anashim* as “troop(s)” does not derive from *'ish* as “man, person, individual” (as most authorities would have it) nor even from *'ish* as a “subordinate.” Rather, it follows naturally from the word’s primary denotation as an “affiliate” and then as a “representative member.”

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We have now see what appears to be a wide semantic range for *'ish*. How would the biblical text’s original audience—that is, ancient Hebrew speakers—have gone about determining which particular nuance of this word would obtain in a particular instance? That question will be the subject of Part IV.

*Thus ends Part III of a projected seven-part series.*

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<sup>18</sup> Although DCH lists one sense of *'ish* as being “armed man, warrior,” the 37 biblical instances it cites are all construct chains: *'ish milchamah*; *'ish chayil*; *'ish ragli*; etc. Such instances are of limited value for establishing the semantic range of the noun *'ish* itself. In contrast, in the six cases cited here (three singular and three plural), *'ish* appears in the absolute.