What Does It Mean to Be a "Man"? The Noun *'ish* in Biblical Hebrew: A Reconsideration (*cont'd*)

IV. DISAMBIGUATION IN CONTEXT: OUR *'ISH* ON THE SCENE

IV.A. The Role of Context

IV.A.1. As scholars have long recognized, in biblical Hebrew the referential scope of kinship terms and of group terms is contextually defined. For example, *'av* typically means "father" yet sometimes it means "grandfather" or an even more remote ancestor. Similarly, the book of Numbers opens with the instruction to take a census of *kol 'adat benei yisra'el*, "the whole community of Israel"; yet the context quickly makes clear that the *'edah* to be counted consists only of men who are twenty years and older, excepting those in the tribe of Levi. This is the "community" only insofar as it is the fraction that potentially represents the entire nation on the field of battle. Although we are accustomed to say that the noun *'edah* means "community," it appears that to the ancient Israelites it often meant "the community's duly authorized representatives." At any rate, the reader must often rely on textual clues to fix the meaning of such terms precisely.

IV.A.2. Similarly, the biblical text treats the term *'ish* as flexible in referential scope. Consider Num. 14:22–23, which reads in part (per NJPS): "None of the *'anashim* who have seen My Presence and the signs that I have performed in Egypt and in the wilderness . . . shall see the land that I promised on oath to their fathers." From the plain-sense narrative context we learn that in this instance, the referent of *'anashim* includes men and women but not children, excepting (again) the tribe of Levi. In other words, the Torah treats *'ish* as not having a fixed meaning such as "man" or "adult" but rather as indicating affiliation, such as "member of the group in question" or "agent of the principal in question." And that group's boundaries must be gleaned from the context.

IV.A.3. In other words, the meaning of *'ish* in any given context results from a two-pronged reference: *directly* to the individual or class in question, and *indirectly* to the group (or principal) in question with which that individual or class is affiliated. For *'ish* is a relational term, and a relationship by nature requires that more than one party be involved.

IV.A.4. Schematically, we can depict the meaning of the word *'ish* as involving three aspects:

The attributes of all three of these aspects are gleaned from textual features—grammar, syntax, and narrative context—together with unstated assumptions regarding the nature of Israelite society ("what goes without saying"), which must be supplied by the reader.

IV.B. Disambiguating Syntactic Structures

IV.B.1. *Anaphoric Reference.* Much of the time, the group in question (or, for an agent, the principal in question) is already implicit in the Bible's narrative context. Occasionally, though, its identity is established explicitly just before *'ish* is mentioned, as we saw in one of our examples in Part I, *u-mi-qtzeh 'echaw laqach chamishshah 'anashim* (Gen. 47:2); there the phrase *u-mi-qtzeh 'echaw* ("from [the set] bounded by his brothers") defines the group that the selected *'anashim* will represent. Another example of group identification in advance is Gen. 7:2, which twice has God offer Noah the formulation "from Group X, take Y specimens both male and female (*'ish we-'ishto*)."[1]

IV.B.2. *Cataphoric Reference.* In many other cases, the nature of the affiliation is often defined by what follows the noun. Possessive suffixes and genitive constructions of course provide such an indication. A couple of other formulations also deserve mention.

IV.B.2.a. *Relative clause.* Sometimes a disambiguating phrase follows *'ish* and is introduced by a relative pronoun. We saw one such example in Part III, *sh'nei ha-'anashim 'asher la-hem ha-riv* (Deut. 19:17); as stated earlier, the phrase *'asher la-hem ha-riv* ("who have the dispute") defines which *'anashim* the text is talking about: those who have become associated with each other by dint of conflict—that is, the parties to the dispute. The construction *'ish 'asher* (including *'anashim 'asher*) is fairly frequent; it occurs 136 times in the Bible.

IV.B.2.b. *Apposition.* At other times, the disambiguating phrase that follows *'ish* stands in apposition to it. One example is *ha-'anashim ha-tzov'im* (Num. 31:42), "the representative members arrayed [in battle]," that is, those troops who participated in the campaign. Grammarians would call this construction a *sortal apposition*, "a broad class term followed by a somewhat narrower term, of the same type," understanding *'ish* and *'ishshah* as "the broadest possible generic terms for people."[2] My proposal would retain the grammarians' terminology of "sortal apposition" yet characterize the construction differently: the noun *'anashim* is a generic term of affiliation, and the apposition specifies what "sort" of group is in question.

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You may well ask: What difference does all of this make for social gender? Is *'ish* not a male term regardless? The issue of the relationship between our noun and the social gender of its referent is of course the primary concern of a "gender-sensitive" translation project, yet I first needed to establish how our noun actually functions and its semantic range. Having done so, I can at last make gender the subject of the next section, Part V.

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[1] It is the sense of group membership inherent to the nouns *'ish* and *'ishshah* that explains why the text there employs those terms rather than *zakhar* ("male") and *neqevah* ("female"). The foreground concern in that verse is species representation on Noah's ark; the later continuation of those species via sexual reproduction is merely a background concern.

[2] IBHS § 12.3b. Alternatively, this case can be understood as a participle used adjectivally via the relative use of the article (§ 13.5.2d).