V. SOCIAL GENDER: IS *'ISH* A MARKED MAN?

Isn't the noun *'ish* a male term? Some scholars consider it so because proper grammatical usage matches it consistently with masculine inflections, and also because it has a female counterpart, *'ishshah*. However, a closer look reveals a more decidedly nuanced situation.

V.A. How Grammatical Gender Intersects with Social Gender

V.A.1.   Grammatical gender is not a conclusive indication of social gender in biblical Hebrew. Grammatically feminine nouns such as נפש *nefesh* ("person") and עדה *'edah* ("community; company [of fighters]") can have inclusive or even male social-gender referents; and grammatically masculine nouns can refer to female figures such as רחם *racham* ("maiden"), not to mention the common-gender noun אלהים *'elohim* ("deity; god; goddess"). According to linguists, the primary function of grammatical gender is to link related words in a sentence; it is first and foremost a matter of syntax, not meaning.[1]

V.A.2.   Linguists explain grammatical gender via the concept of *marking*, whose application to Hebrew is nicely laid out by Bruce Waltke and Michael O'Connor: "In general in Hebrew the masculine gender is unmarked, while the feminine is marked. The unmarked member *may* have the same value as its opposite, and thus unmarked masculine nouns may refer to females."[2] Although those authors did not themselves say so, a "masculine" noun such as *'ish* is actually grammatically "unmarked" also for *social* gender; that is, it does not signal social gender until certain grammatical conditions have been satisfied (see below). Just as with ostensibly male kinship terms such as אב *'av* ("father"), אח *'ach* ("brother"), and בן *ben* ("son"), it is not uncommon for *'ish* (or its plural) to connote a mixed-gender group. Consider, for example, how Deut. 29:17 sets up a hypothetical situation:

פֶּן־יֵשׁ בָּכֶם אִישׁ אוֹ־אִשָּׁה . . . אֲשֶׁר . . .   Perhaps there is among you an *'ish* or an *'ishshah* . . . who . . .

Here the phrase *'ish 'o 'ishshah* refers to any member of the community, whether male or female, who fits the ensuing description (not shown). This then becomes the antecedent of "that *'ish*" in verse 19:

יֶעְשַׁן אַף־יְהוָה וְקִנְאָתוֹ בָּאִישׁ הַהוּא   Yhwh's anger and passion will be inflamed against that *'ish*

Here *'ish* has a different referent than it did in verse 17: it includes *'ishshah*. The text is clearly speaking without regard to gender. We must therefore reckon with the grammar of this situation. As our analysis will show, it turns out that grammatically speaking, the word *'ish* here defines a particular class, so that the usage is gender-neutral; in the narrative context, it means something like "party (to the Covenant)." Let us now take a closer look at how such language functions.

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[1] *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (IBHS), § 6.2.2d.

[2] IBHS, § 6.1b.

V.B. How Grammar and Syntax Determine the Social-Gender Force of *'ish*[3]

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the noun *'ish* (or *'av*, *'ach*, *ben*, *'eved*, etc.) is not inrinsically "male"; rather, in certain constructions it takes on a male cast. I can hardly overemphasize biblical Hebrew presumes that its audience infers maleness not from the noun per se but rather from the construction in which it appears. To fix the referent's social gender, the noun may be necessary but it is never sufficient. Social gender is conveyed not by any single word (in the category of common nouns under discussion) but only by a larger linguistic unit, e.g., a phrase or clause. Thus the conventional notion that such a noun has a "literal" meaning—and one that is male—is accurate only in the restricted context of the first and third constructions, below.

Grammatical Form		Referential function	Implied social gender	Example using *'ish*
Singular	Definite	Particular	Male	Gen. 30:43 (I.B.2; VII.H.1)
Singular	Definite	Class	Unspecified	Ps. 1:1 (see below)
Singular	Indefinite	Specific	Male	1 Sam. 1:1 (see below)
Singular	Indefinite	Nonspecific	Unspecified	Gen. 11:7 (see below)
Collective	Definite	Particular	≥1 member is male	Judg. 8:4
Collective	Definite	Class	Unspecified	Deut. 29:9 (see below)
Collective	Indefinite	Specific	≥1 member is male	Gen. 32:7 (VII.H.1)
Collective	Indefinite	Nonspecific	Unspecified	Isa. 2:9
Plural	Definite	Particular	≥1 member is male	Gen. 14:24 (VII.H.1)
Plural	Definite	Class	Unspecified	Gen. 17:23 (see below)
Plural	Indefinite	Specific	≥1 member is male	Gen. 47:2 (I.B.5; VII.H.1)
Plural	Indefinite	Nonspecific	Unspecified	Exod. 16:20 (III.B.2.a)

V.B.1. Constructions Where the Noun *'ish* Reflects Masculinity

V.B.1.a. When *'ish* is used with grammatical *definiteness* to make a *particular* (precise) identification, then the grammatical gender of *'ish* matches the social gender of its referent.

אֶת־בִּתִּי נָתַתִּי לָאִישׁ הַזֶּה לְאִשָּׁה   To this party [*la-'ish ha-zeh*] I gave my own daughter to wife

(Deut. 22:16)

מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם   Moses—the leader [*ha-'ish*] who brought us from the land of Egypt

(Exod. 32:1)

This is a straightforward matter of grammatical gender concord, as is normal in Hebrew. Thus the same principle applies when a woman is the subject of a precise identification, calling for the corresponding grammatically feminine term, *'ishshah*:

אֶת־הָאִשָּׁה הַזֹּאת לָקָחְתִּי   This is the party [*ha-'ishshah*] whom I took [to wife]. (Deut. 22:14)

The word *'ish* is never used to refer *definitely* to a *particular* female human being; it is not one of biblical Hebrew's few common-gender nouns.

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[3] Terminology in the following discussion is based in large part on "Gender" and on "Definiteness and Indefiniteness," chapters 6 and 13 of IBHS. Unfortunately that reference work does not address the intersection of those two grammatical features, which I have inferred directly from the biblical text.

V.B.1.b.   Similarly, when *'ish* is used *indefinitely* but *specifically*, then the grammatical gender of *'ish* matches the social gender of its referent:

וַיְהִי֩ אִ֨ישׁ אֶחָ֜ד . . . וּשְׁמֹ֣ו אֶלְקָנָ֑ה   There was a certain householder [*'ish*] . . . and his name was Elkanah

(1 Sam. 1:1)

Because of the convention of gender concord, *'ish* is not used to refer *indefinitely* to a *specific* female person; rather, the text employs the corresponding term, *'ishshah*:

וַתַּשְׁלֵ֞ךְ אִשָּׁ֥ה אַחַ֛ת פֶּ֥לַח רֶ֖כֶב   A certain (female) party tossed down an upper millstone (Judg. 9:53)

The plural form also conveys social gender, but to a more limited extent:

וּמִקְצֵ֣ה אֶחָ֔יו לָקַ֖ח חֲמִשָּׁ֣ה אֲנָשִׁ֑ים   And selecting five *'anashim* from among his brothers,

וַיַּצִּגֵ֖ם לִפְנֵ֥י פַרְעֹֽה׃   he presented them to Pharaoh. (Gen. 47:2)

The usage of *'anashim* is indefinite yet specific: Joseph picked particular brothers. Grammatically speaking, we know that at least one of referents is male.

V.B.1.c.   The usages defined above, combined with the convention of gender concord, allow a reader to infer social gender if such has not otherwise been specified by the text. In 1 Sam. 1:1, the affiliate noun *'ish*, in combination with the syntax, functions to establish the character's social gender. It is among the first characteristics that the text discloses about him.[4]

V.B.1.d.   Narrative context can disambiguate the social-gender possibilities of the plural form. Thus, with regard to Gen. 47:2, the narrative of the Joseph Cycle has until that point consistently used *'achim* to mean "brothers" (i.e., males) as opposed to Joseph's siblings more generally; furthermore, it is the (male) heads of households who would customarily be presented to a ruler, representing the rest of their households. Because the group is composed entirely of men, readers can safely infer that all five representatives of the group in question are male.

V.B.2.   The Noun *'ish* as a Gender-Neutral Term

V.B.2.a.   In the Bible, the affiliating noun *'ish* often has a generic function with regard to social gender. This feature is not unique to *'ish* but rather is possible with many grammatically masculine nouns (such as *'eved*, "male" slave or servant), when employed in certain grammatical patterns.

V.B.2.b.   When *'ish* is used *indefinitely* but *nonspecifically*—referring to anyone or everyone in a given *class*—then the grammatical gender of *'ish* per se does not reflect, predict, or establish its referent's social gender.

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[4] But this does not mean that Elkanah's maleness should necessarily be conveyed explicitly *in translation* (see Part VII). By definition, indefinite usage calls attention to the referent's class rather than to a particular identity. Thus the most salient feature that the word *'ish* discloses about Elkanah is his status as the head of a corporate household, not his being a man. It is social status more than gender that enables him to have two wives and to make autonomous decisions—when to bring sacrificial offerings to the sanctuary, how much meat to apportion to each wife, and so forth. His being a man is a necessary but not sufficient condition. (Men who are not householders cannot do such things.) The sense of "householder" comes from the narrative context, which mentions his relationship to a particular tribal territory and to "his" household.

V.B.2.c.   Similarly, when *'ish* is *definite* in order to mark out a unique and determined *class*,[5] then the grammatical gender of *'ish* says nothing about its referent's social gender.

V.B.2.d.   In cases that meet either of the criteria in *b* and *c* above, *'ish* functions as a generic (gender-neutral) term. And what makes it so—what signals the gender neutrality—is precisely its grammatical masculinity.[6]

V.B.2.e.   In gender-neutral usage, the affiliating sense of *'ish*—as "member, party, agent, representative," and so forth—obtains without respect to social gender. That is, the reader establishes the social gender of the referent not from the word *'ish* itself but rather from the linguistic and narrative context. In such instances, biblical Hebrew uses *'ish* as an empty vessel whose social-gender content is filled by the context.

V.B.3.   Examples of Gender-Neutral Usage

Some examples may help clarify how *'ish* is used generically with regard to social gender.

V.B.3.a.   *Indefinite-nonspecific usage*. Often *'ish* is employed to focus attention on the referent's membership in a *class* without pointing at particular individuals. One of the most common such usages is the distributive:

וַיְהִי כָל־הָאָרֶץ שָׂפָה אֶחָת . . .	Everyone on earth had the same language . . .
הָבָה נֵרְדָה וְנָבְלָה שָׁם שְׂפָתָם	Let us go down there and confuse their speech,
אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שְׂפַת רֵעֵהוּ:	so an *'ish* will not perceive another's speech. (Gen. 11:1, 7)

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[5] IBHS refers to this function as "generic" definite use (§ 13.5.1f); Joüon, as "imperfect determination" (§ 137m). I will refrain from employing the term "generic" so as to avoid confusion with social gender.

[6] The employment of "masculine" forms and inflections as generics is so widespread in Hebrew that it must be considered basic to that language's system of grammatical gender. The "masculine" form, by being unmarked, is the logical candidate for gender-inclusive expression; and the "masculine" inflections of verbs and suffixes then logically correspond to those nouns for the sake of grammatical gender concord.

Conventionally, however, this concept has been expressed rather differently. GCK § 122g states that "the masculine as *prior gender* includes the feminine" and then notes that "the Arab grammarians call this use . . . *taghlib* or *the making* (the masculine) *prevail* (over the feminine)." The latter statement may reflect an interpretation of the masculine gender's property of inclusiveness in terms of hierarchy, in which the male is viewed as "over" the female. If so, then from GKC it is not clear whether such an interpretation is already a medieval (Arab) one or only a modern (European) one.

At any rate, IBHS goes one step farther along that treacherous path, but it disguises such movement by looking backward (in time) while walking forward. First it explains, "Grammarians speak of the masculine gender as '*the prior gender*' because its form sometimes refers to female beings" (§ 6.5.3a). Unfortunately, IBHS then walks off the cliff when it says: "This priority of the masculine gender is due in part to the intensely androcentric character of the world of the Hebrew Bible . . . [and] to Israel's religion." It seems not to have been among the authors' most lucid moments when they advanced the latter claim of causation, which is of course nonfactual by nature. IBHS also states that the unmarked-gender quality of grammatically masculine terms *alone* does not explain why they take priority in gender-inclusive expression in Hebrew (and in the other languages in which this linguistic phenomenon exists)—offering no supporting evidence for that claim, either. At least IBHS was on firmer ground, and did its readers a great service, when it made and defended the counterintuitive points that masculine nouns are unmarked (normative in form; § 6.1a–b), and that "grammatical gender . . . is chiefly a syntactic feature" (§ 6.3.1a, f).

In this first example of indefinite-nonspecific usage, the group in question—what I called in Part IV the "indirect referent"—is humankind (*kol ha-'aretz*, v. 1; the passage treats this as a collective) who have assembled in Shinar (v. 2, not shown). Here *'ish* refers directly to any member of that group. Both syntactically and logically, that referent includes both genders.[7]

מַכֵּה אִישׁ וָמֵת   [Anyone who] strikes and kills an *'ish* (Exod. 21:12)

In this second example, *'ish* has the sense of "a(nother) party." The referential function is non-specific: anyone who meets the stated criteria, namely, having been fatally struck. Grammatically speaking, the sense is therefore gender neutral. The noun *'ish* is widely employed in this indefinite-nonspecific manner in legal passages. (See further the footnote at VII.F.4.c.)

V.B.3.b.   *Definite usage that points to a class.* The three instances that follow all focus on a decided referent as a class, but they do so via a different grammatical structure in each case.

. . . אַתֶּם נִצָּבִים הַיּוֹם כֻּלְּכֶם   You are standing [here] today, all of you, . . .

. . . כֹּל אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל   every *'ish* of Israel . . . (Deut. 29:9)

In this first example, *'ish* is made definite by the genitive with which it is in construct. And *'ish* is employed as a collective term. Grammatcially, the social gender is unspecified. Yet we can infer from the construct chain and from the narrative context that the group in question is those who are authorized to represent the Israelite people for purposes of covenant making. Given both the usually gendered nature of group representation throughout the ancient Near East and the fact that women are explicitly listed separately (v. 10), the referent of *'ish* is most probably male.[8]

אַשְׁרֵי־הָאִישׁ   Blessed is [any] *'ish*

אֲשֶׁר ׀ לֹא הָלַךְ בַּעֲצַת רְשָׁעִים   who does not proceed according to the advice of the wicked (Ps. 1:1)

In this second example, *'ish* is an individual specimen singled out to represent the genus, which is marked by the generic article of class.[9] The group in question: anyone who meets the condition stated after the word *'ish*. The psalm's succeeding masculine inflections that refer back to *'ish* are purely for grammatical concord; nothing attributed to this *'ish* suggests a restriction of gender.[10] (In Deut. 29:19—discussed in V.A.2—*'ish* functions similarly, but with an anaphoric referent.)

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[7] God presumably knows that to confound communication only among men but not among women would fall short of the stated goal. In other words, social gender is not at issue according to the text's plain sense.

[8] Here *'ish* does not necessarily designate *all* Israelite men. It may refer to leaders, notables, militia, or householders. Moses is not reported as being concerned to be too specific about the nature of the representation; his point is simply that the populace is fully represented for the purpose at hand.

[9] An alternative analysis is that proffered by Harry Orlinsky: whatever noun follows the word *'ashrei* is a singular collective ("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* [1991], p. 271).

[10] Some might posit that the desire for, and the continual uttering of, divine teaching was understood in ancient Israel to be a male-only preoccupation, yet this would be a difficult hypothesis to sustain in light of various biblical passages, such as Gen. 25:22 and the description of the ideal wife in Prov. 31:26, 30.

כָּל־זָכָר בְּאַנְשֵׁי בֵּית אַבְרָהָם   every male among the *'anashim* of Abraham's household (Gen. 17:23)

In this third example, class is indicated by the plural form *'anashim*, made definite by the genitive construction. The group in question is defined by the construct chain *beit 'avraham*: Abraham's enormous household, of which the *'anashim* are its members. And the linguistic structure logically requires that *'anashim* be a gender-inclusive term—otherwise the initial specification of a male subset would be superfluous.[11]

V.B.4. Maleness Is Not Semantically Intrinsic to *'ish*

Some contemporary scholars contend that *'ish* is intrinsically or fundamentally a male term. One proof offered is that in biblical usage all *definite and particular* referents of *'ish* are male. Yet as we have now seen, this reason is unconvincing because it takes into account only part of the evidence, omitting other types of referents—for which different rules of grammar apply.

V.C. When *'ish* Appears with *'ishshah*

V.C.1. Another proof offered for the semantic maleness of the noun *'ish* is the fact that it is sometimes counterposed with *'ishshah*, which clearly refers only to a woman. By binary logic, it is said that such a syntactic structure shows that *'ish* means "male."

V.C.2. Functionally speaking, *'ishshah* is indeed the feminine counterpart of *'ish*. (According to modern linguists, the two terms are related only by assonance, not by etymology—a fact evidently known also to ancient and early medieval scribes, given that they preserved distinctions both in orthography and vocalization.) The biblical text employs *'ish* for grammatically masculine referents (whether human, animal, or inanimate) or socially gender-neutral (human) referents, while *'ishshah* is for referents marked as either grammatically or socially feminine.

V.C.3. When the biblical text juxtaposes *'ish* with *'ishshah*, the two terms do not necessarily mean simply "man/woman" or "husband/wife" in that context. Their complementarity can be more nuanced. Consider, for example, Gen. 26:11, in which the role of householder rather than maleness is the foreground sense of *'ish*:

וַיְצַו אֲבִימֶלֶךְ אֶת־כָּל־הָעָם לֵאמֹר   Abimelech charged all the people:

הַנֹּגֵעַ בָּאִישׁ הַזֶּה וּבְאִשְׁתּוֹ מוֹת יוּמָת׃   "Whoever harms this *'ish* and his *'ishshah* shall be put to death."

Here our noun is definite, identifying a particular individual. The group in question—the indirect referent of *'ish*—is the corporate household of which Rebekah is a member.[12] According to the norms of the ancient Near East, a household's *'ish* (representative member) is its head. The king would logically identify any household by its head—its public face. What is at stake here is potential harm not only to Isaac personally but also to any aspect of his household—especially his wife. Moreover, it is in his capacity as householder that Isaac would be publicly acknowledged anyway, for is the head of an extraordinary household: commanding immense wealth (24:35; 25:5, 8–9, 11), he is a notable whom the king takes the trouble to consult (vv. 9–10) and to make

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[11] I thank Reinier de Blois for pointing out to me the significance of this example.

[12] Specifically, she is his *'ishshah* (affiliate)—that is, his wife.

whole (v. 14). In the ancient Near East, a king would certainly refer in public to such a party via a status term; the word *'ish* is just such a term.[13] In conclusion, to imagine that the king is referring to Isaac merely as an "adult male" is to sell the narrative short.

V.C.4.   The proximity of *'ishshah* is just another piece of information among many that a reader needs to consider in establishing the contextual meaning of *'ish*. If I could make conscious the (unreflective) disambiguating thought process of a hypothetical ancient Israelite, and express it with technical precision in modern English idiom, I believe it would go something like this, using Gen. 2:24 as an illustration:

1. עַל־כֵּן יַעֲזָב־אִישׁ *'al ken ya'azov 'ish* (Therefore an *'ish* leaves behind)—the verbal inflection is masculine for grammatical gender concord with the unmarked noun, but given the indefiniteness of the construction, *'ish* refers to a category; therefore I do not yet know whether social gender is restricted, nor with which group or principal this *'ish* is affiliated;

2. אֶת־אָבִיו וְאֶת־אִמּוֹ *'et 'aviw we-'et 'immo* (both father and mother)—the pronominal suffixes match the grammatical gender of the noun; social gender is still not clear, although I learn that the group in question is where father and mother reside, namely, the corporate household; meanwhile, the act of "leaving behind both father and mother" suggests a subject who is no longer a child: a full member of the household;

3. וְדָבַק בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ *we-davaq be-'ishto* (and clings to a female affiliate)—the gender-marked (feminine) noun *'ishshah*, made grammatically definite by the possessive suffix, alludes to the social institution of marriage, as does the verb. Together, they imply that *'ish* in this verse means the other half of the marriage equation, or more precisely: "member of the MALE segment of the household," yielding a definite social gender; and

4. וְהָיוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד׃ *we-hayu le-vasar 'echad* (so that they become one flesh)—which alludes to the "flesh" of verse 21 that God had split into two persons, one implicitly male and one explicitly female, thus confirming the inference as to the male social gender of *'ish*.

The conclusion that here the referent of *'ish* is a man was reached by winnowing, via contextual reading. It came at the end of a disambiguation process whose result applies only to this context.

To a contemporary reader who has been taught to know that "'*ish* means 'man,'" the foregoing strategy of reading will no doubt appear unduly convoluted and complex. Yet it is consistent with the procedure by which Hebrew speakers disambiguate other terms. Furthermore, it appears to be the only strategy that is consistent with all biblical usages of *'ish*. And with practice such a procedure proves easier to employ, and eventually becomes automatic—as it must have been for the text's ancient Israelite audience.

V.D. Disambiguation Protocol Regarding Gender

Upon encountering the noun *'ish*, we have seen that a basic question to ask of the given grammatical situation is whether *'ish* refers to a class, or rather to a specific individual. Apart

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[13] In the Bible, the banner example of using *'ish* to convey status is *gam beney 'adam, gam benei 'ish / yachad 'ashir v'evyon,* "both low and high / rich and poor together," Psalms 49:3 (NRSV; so understood by R. Menachem Meiri [who glosses *benei 'ish* as "important ones"], R. David Kimhi, Dahood, and Kraus).

from that issue, if we approach the biblical text with the mindset of an ancient Israelite, it then seems to me that we must entertain two further orienting questions, each having two parts:

1a. What is the group to which this noun refers *indirectly* as a matter of affiliation?

1b. Does that group have a defined social gender, according to the norms of society? If so, then the *'ish* in question is presumed to share that gender. (For example, the priesthood consists only of men; therefore an otherwise unidentified member of that group can be presumed male.)

2a. To whom does this noun refer *directly*? Is this particular *'ish* a typical member of an undifferentiated group? Alternatively, do any attributed qualities, roles, or activities make this particular *'ish* distinct from the remainder of the larger group?

2b. Does such a distinction, if it exists, bear a defined social gender? (For example, a household consists of men, women, and children; but if the *'ish* in question is a member of the household *who takes a wife*—which is something that only men do—then that *'ish* can be presumed male.)

V.E. Why *'ish* Does Not Mean "Man"

V.E.1. It is worth reminding the reader why I have concluded that the primary sense of *'ish* is not "man" (adult male). In Parts I and II, my main argument was on semantic grounds: the text repeatedly presumes that *'ish* conveys affiliation, a meaning that is absent from "adult male." And in Part III, my argument was lexicographic: construing the primary sense of *'ish* as "man" is a relatively clumsy way to account for the full semantic range of the Hebrew term.

V.E.2. Let me offer another example to reiterate those earlier observations:

Hebrew	English
. . . וַיֹּאמְרוּ֩ עַבְדֵ֨י פַרְעֹ֜ה אֵלָ֗יו	Pharaoh's courtiers said to him,
. . . שַׁלַּח֙ אֶת־הָ֣אֲנָשִׁ֔ים וְיַֽעַבְד֖וּ	"Let the *'anashim* go to worship . . ."
וַיּוּשַׁ֞ב אֶת־מֹשֶׁ֤ה וְאֶֽת־אַהֲרֹן֙ אֶל־פַּרְעֹ֔ה	So Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh,
וַיֹּ֣אמֶר אֲלֵהֶ֔ם לְכ֥וּ עִבְד֖וּ . . . אֱלֹהֵיכֶ֑ם	and he said to them, "Go and worship your God . . . ;
מִ֥י וָמִ֖י הַהֹלְכִֽים׃	who in particular are the ones to go?" (Exod. 10:7–8)

Many scholars read the negotiations in this passage (vv. 7–11) as being in terms of "the men" versus "the whole people" (= men, women, and children). The problem with such a reading is that it fails to explain why Pharaoh then asks Moses, "Who in particular are the ones to go?" Furthermore, even before Pharaoh's question in v. 8, one would reasonably predict that, in the context of negotiations, the Egyptian government is going to offer its despised Israelite subjects as little as possible; thus the text's audience would be expected to take *'anashim* in v. 7 in its most restrictive sense. This is another argument against construing *ha-'anashim* as "the men" in general (not to mention against the NRSV rendering as "the people"), as well as against what I have posited as a rendering elsewhere, "members of the group in question."

V.E.3. However, a more narrow sense of *'anashim* that fits the context beautifully is "(authorized) representatives." The article evokes that meaning; because the reference of *'anashim* is based neither on previous mention nor on further clarification, the article here must mark the noun as being "definite in the imagination," designating what is understood to be present be-

cause it is *situationally pertinent*.[14] It is as if the courtiers are saying: "That people whom Moses keeps harassing us about must surely have a recognized body of elders or officials who would normally represent the people before its god. So send off those notables . . ." Thus, Pharaoh asks for a specific list. As Rabbi Moses ben Nachman commented some 740 years ago: "Pharaoh initially wanted [only] leaders and elders to go—*'anashim* who would be identified by name."

V.E.4.   Another argument against the conventional "*'ish* is male" view is anthropological or sociological rather than semantic: the activities that the biblical text attributes to an *'ish* do not fit Israelite society's own picture of what a "man" in general would do. It seems unlikely that the text's ancient audience would have perceived some of the attributes that an *'ish* displays—of authority, autonomy, and representation in particular—as "natural" outgrowths of maleness per se. Quite simply, in the social world of the Bible—and in Israelite society, too, judging from other ancient Near Eastern societies—most adult males did not normally possess such traits or fill such roles. Rather, most men were economic and legal dependents within corporate households headed by a few other men. It was only the latter who had the authority and control of resources to behave the way that an *'ish* often does in the Bible—and usually they were groomed for that role from birth. Therefore to imagine that the ancients construed a basic term for "adult male" in some contexts as "notable; member of the elite" seems at odds with the reality of men's lives—that is, with the ancient construction of social gender—even if their notables were presumably male.[15]

V.F. The Approach Taken by Halakhic Midrash

V.F.1.   Recognition of the gender-inclusive usage of *'ish* is not new. Well over fifteen hundred years ago, the early rabbis were taking that fact for granted. In the seven works of halakhic midrash, the Sages frequently paused to define *'ish* (or *'anashim*) in context. When the biblical text mentioned *'ish* in a legal passage, the Midrash typically posed a question such as:

<div dir="rtl">

אין לי אלא איש, אשה מנין?
</div>

"At first glance it appears that the law applies only to a man;
how do we establish that here *'ish* connotes also a woman?"

(Mekhilta Bahodesh 3 at Exod. 19:13)

The Sages understood that our noun did not have a fixed meaning with regard to social gender. In his review of the rabbinic treatment of these terms, Michael Chernick found the Sages' treatment of *'ish* to be consistent with the view that its social-gender sense is inherently "ambiguous unless *'ish* is contrasted with *'ishshah*, a woman, or refers to someone male."[16]

V.F.2.   Chernick concluded that "the meaning or ambiguity of *'ish* in a verse or pericope had to be established before the work of Midrashic interpretation could begin. This meant that the Midrashic interpreter had to engage in serious *peshat*-exegesis in order to gain the plain meaning

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[14] Here I am using the language of IBHS § 13.5.1a, e, f.

[15] If the above arguments regarding *'ish* withstand scrutiny with regard to Hebrew, then perhaps they should be applied as well to the cognate terms in other ancient Near Eastern languages, such as Akkadian.

[16] "*'ish* as Man and Adult in the Halakic Midrashim," *Jewish Quarterly Review* LXXIII, No. 3 (Jan. 1983): 254–80, p. 254.

of *'ish* and then turn to its interpretation."[17] While I agree with the author that the Sages spent a great deal of effort defining *'ish*, I am not convinced that they derived their answers via a plain-sense reading of the text. For the Sages classified *'ish* almost exclusively according to the standard rabbinic categories of obligation: man versus woman; adult versus child; free versus slave; and native versus convert. It seems to me that the Sages' act of definition was itself already a midrashic move—interpreting the text in terms of their own era. And as I have demonstrated, in the eyes of the biblical text's ancient Israelite audience, the plain sense would not have been construed in terms of the rabbinic categories. Rather, in the Torah's legal passages where *'ish* has an indefinite referent, its plain sense typically designates a "party" to the legal proceeding, or a "member" of the community; and so its social-gender sense derives from contextual clues apart from the word's intrinsic nature.

V.G. Summary

How was it that *'ish* came to have gender-neutral referents? Traditionally, scholars have understood that its gender-inclusive sense is the result of a semantic extension of the noun's intrinsic maleness, as if men were the measure of all things—or at least of all human beings. However, my analysis suggests that the answer is fundamentally a matter of grammar and syntax. Meanwhile, we did face a semantic challenge: we had to recognize that "man" (adult male) is not the primary sense of *'ish*.

In conclusion, I will borrow from linguistic terminology: rather than call *'ish* a male term, it is more accurate to say that this noun is "unmarked for social gender." The maleness of *'ish* is a grammatical feature rather than a semantic one.

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This memorandum has investigated what *'ish* means in Hebrew by exploring its usage in context. The next issue it will take up is that of sketching the place of *'ish* within the semantic field of Hebrew nouns that refer to people—a paradigmatic analysis. That is the subject of Part VI.

After that, we can address the issue of translation: how best to render our noun into clear, idiomatic English. In so doing I will need to contrast how the two languages convey both social gender and affiliation, examine the enormous semantic range of the English word "man," and assess the costs when employing "man" as a rendering for *'ish*. Those are the subjects of Part VII.

Link to Part I Link to Part VII Link to Home Page

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[17] Ibid., pp. 279–80. For the present purpose, the Sages' answers are less important than their questions.