

VII. RENDERING AS “MAN”: A MAP THAT CAN LEAD US ASTRAY

VII.A. What a Word Means vs. How It Should Be Translated

I now address a layer of considerations beyond what has so far been discussed: the differences between Hebrew and English. It is such differences that make Bible translation interesting—and a distinct endeavor from either Hebrew lexicography or biblical interpretation.

VII.A.1. In this memorandum I presume that the translator’s intent is historical, or as Phyllis Bird has put it, “to enable a modern audience to overhear an ancient conversation, rather than hearing itself addressed directly.”¹ That is, I am speaking only about translation that seeks to reflect how the text’s composer(s) anticipated that the text’s original audience would take it, rather than viewing the biblical text through the lens of later ideology or dogma. Furthermore, I presume that the translator seeks to convey the text’s plain sense, rather than treating it, say, as allegory or as a reflection of personal spiritual processes.

VII.A.2. Translation is a matter of mapping from one language to another. What a given Hebrew word means in the Hebrew language is one thing; how to represent that word in English is something else again. Hebrew words and English words do not necessarily have the same points of reference, connotations, or collocations (words that go together). Therefore establishing a reliable correspondence between the languages is not a trivial task. Let us now look at several relevant pitfalls—that is, ways that Hebrew and English words do not fully correspond. Such considerations will condition the rendering of *’ish* into English.

VII.B. Semantic Asymmetry: A One-to-Many Correspondence

VII.B.1. Behind a given language’s words is a pattern of thinking. Like any two languages, Hebrew and English *categorize experience* differently. The respective cultures that employ these two languages do not share identical categories of perception. The University of Haifa professor, linguist, and lexicographer Menachem Dagut, drawing upon an image from the French linguist Georges Mounin, wrote that Hebrew “slices up reality” in different ways than English does.² Where the categories do not line up, linguists speak of a *semantic asymmetry* between the two languages. One manifestation of asymmetry is that typically *one* word in Hebrew may be best represented in English by a *variety* of terms.

VII.B.2. It appears that *’ish* is one such word. No translator of the Bible has ever rendered it consistently with the same English word throughout. The idiomatic, contextual type of translation (which values precision over consistency) typically resorts to many English “equivalents.”³ Rela-

¹ “Translating Sexist Language as a Theological and Cultural Problem,” *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (1997).

² Menachem Dagut, *Hebrew-English Translation: A Linguistic Analysis of Some Semantic Problems* (University of Haifa, 1978), p. 21.

³ For the 108 instances of singular *’ish* in Genesis, CJPS rendered via 25 English terms; NJPS, 14; NRSV, 10; and TNIV, 7. The OJPS translation (adapted from the ASV) used 7 English “equivalents” for *’ish* in translating Genesis.

tively speaking, the word-for-word type of translation (which values consistency over precision) relies on fewer “equivalents” for *’ish*—yet still more of them than it employs for perhaps any other Hebrew noun, such as *’ach* or *’adam*.⁴

VII.B.3. The single area of experience covered by *’ish* in Hebrew is distributed in English into a set of smaller pieces, each designated by its own separate term. The English words “each,” “anyone,” and “husband” are all equivalents of *’ish* (among many others), yet they are rarely if ever interchangeable in a given sentence. No one English term will work as a rendering in all contexts. Therefore each time the word *’ish* occurs, the translator must assess and interpret its precise semantic value in that context. Furthermore, sometimes full disambiguation of such a Hebrew term (in terms of English lexical categories) is not possible.⁵

VII.C. Semantic Void: A Restricted Correspondence

VII.C.1. Translation of the Bible also involves mapping from one *social setting* to another, because each language references a culture that has distinct features. To truly understand the language one needs to have a grasp of the culture in which it is the native tongue. In particular, *’ish* is a relational term and thus (when applied to human beings) a social term. This means that its biblical usage took for granted certain aspects of an ancient society that its members constructed differently than English speakers construct their contemporary society. Of the features of Israelite society that are relevant for understanding *’ish*—and which are not spelled out in the biblical text—some have not been not a part of English-speaking societies; therefore such features are absent from the associations and allusions carried by English words. These societal aspects include: primary economic organization by extended-family households; personal ego identification with one’s corporate household; the roles of householders as entrepreneurs and as community elders; and the integral role of messengers in long-distance communication. A given English word may possess some of those nuances but no English word has all of them. Hence the semantic content of *’ish* may be fully translatable into English only via paraphrase, such that a one-word rendering inevitably causes some of the meaning to be lost.⁶

VII.C.2. For example, *’ish* sometimes refers to the married head of a corporate household who holds sole title to the household’s property (apart from what the wife brings in for herself upon marriage), and who at the same time acts as an elder who negotiates, mediates, or decides the communal welfare (e.g., in the first half of Genesis: 14:24; 19:4, 9; 20:7; 24:13; 26:7, 11, 13; and possibly 6:9). Readily grasped renderings include “householder” or “notable” or “man,” but

⁴ Mary Phil Korsak (*At the Start: Genesis Made New*, 1992) approaches translation with an unusually single-minded devotion to word-for-word rendering, regardless of how awkward it sounds in English. For the 108 instances of singular *’ish* in Genesis, she succeeded in rendering via only 3 English terms: “man,” “each,” and “each man.” Likewise Everett Fox and Robert Alter, who forswear contextual meanings except where a mechanical rendering would lead to nonsense, employ 8 and 7 “equivalent” English terms in Genesis, respectively. In contrast, for the 80 instances of *’ach*, the number of “equivalents” used was 1, 2, and 4, respectively; for the 53 instances of *’adam*: 3, 5, and 6, respectively.

⁵ Cf. Dagut, pp. 21–26.

⁶ Dagut calls this phenomenon a “partial semantic void of the lexical type,” pp. 44–45, 65–84.

none of them captures the full sense of the Hebrew term.⁷ Lexically speaking, the closest equivalents in such contexts are “patriarch” and “paterfamilias,” yet for various reasons (the former’s negative connotations, and the latter’s absence from everyday discourse) they are ill suited in biblical translation to convey narration, let alone direct speech.⁸

VII.C.3. As another example, *’ish* sometimes refers to one who is authorized to contract a marriage involving a daughter of the household (Gen. 34:7, 21, 22),⁹ a role that seems to have been filled typically by her brother (Gen. 24:29–31, 50, 55); similarly, it refers to one who serves as the patrilineage’s male agent in a levirate marriage (Deut. 25:7, 9). English seems to lack a one-word equivalent for such roles, leaving a partial semantic void in the translation.¹⁰

VII.D. Semantic Void: Losing the Bigger Picture

VII.D.1. Another aspect of the inadequacy of English in rendering *’ish* is the *conceptual gap* behind the respective languages. Intrinsic to *’ish* are the concepts of affiliation and representation; these concepts are distinct in English but may not be in Hebrew. Furthermore, while some English words also convey those concepts, such words often do not fit the same contexts in which the Bible employs *’ish*. To put it another way, English words that convey affiliation do not cover all the contextual meanings of *’ish*, while conversely the terms that are contextually precise may not properly connote affiliation. For example, *’ish* can designate a (male) party who has been picked to go off to war on behalf of his community; rendering the word as “representative” conveys affiliation yet ill suits a military context, whereas “troop” or “man” suits the context but lacks the aspect of community representation.¹¹

⁷ In the U.S.A. today, the term “householder” usually refers to a rather different situation: Most householders are single rather than married. In community property states, a married householder shares the title to property equally with the spouse; in the other states, spouses acquire assets and liabilities largely independently of each other. Few households consist of more than two generations or more than one nuclear subunit. Citizens have a vote in political decisions even if they are not householders. And most households are not tied to a patrimony.

⁸ In the nine instances cited, CJPS (a contextual, idiomatic translation) employs the following renderings: personage, councillor, householder, leader, notable.

⁹ Dinah’s brothers had been previously referred to as *yeladim* (literally, “children”) or as “Jacob’s sons,” whereas in this passage involving negotiations they are suddenly “the *’anashim*”—a designation that they will not receive again until they head down to Egypt to procure provisions for the second time, as representatives of their father’s household (43:15–44:4, where that designation appears ten times in a row).

¹⁰ CJPS renders *we-yityatzevu ha-’anashim* in Gen. 34:7 as “As the representatives [of Jacob’s house], they were distressed”; it renders *ha-’ish* in Deut. 25:7 as “the [family] representative.” Rendering simply as “the men” or “the man,” respectively, is inadequate English idiom, because the agency sense of “man” is activated only in the presence of a possessive pronoun (e.g., “its man”), which is not an option here because the agent’s principal (the household/family/patrilineage) is implied by the context rather than stated explicitly in the text. This is what prompts the CJPS recourse to a prepositional phrase in the former instance.

¹¹ Likewise, *’ish* can designate a (male) elder who has the authority to represent his group in a parley or other sort of conference; rendering the word as “representative” may not fit the context, whereas “notable” or “man” may be contextually more precise at the expense of connoting community representation. Given the nature of the two languages, such trade-offs are unavoidable.

VII.D.2. The noun *'ish* is one of those terms where English's greater semantic specificity prevents translators from being able to render fully a semantic generality conveyed by the Hebrew word. "In such cases," notes Dagut, "Hebrew makes a *type* of distinction which is *in part* different from any of the distinctions found in English."¹² The translator must sacrifice part of the Hebrew word's meaning because the concept behind *'ish* is broader than any appropriate English word conveys. An English rendering often cannot convey the full resonance of even the *foreground* sense of this Hebrew noun, let alone its background connotations and allusions.

VII.E. The Lexical Grid

To visualize the semantic mapping in translation of Hebrew into English, Dagut employed a schematic diagram of what he called each language's "lexical grid" in order to compare their respective approaches to categorizing reality. Here is my initial sketch of such a diagram for mapping *'ish* onto English, summarizing my semantic analysis in this memorandum:¹³

אִישׁ <i>'ish</i>										
each every	one someone anyone sort type	member fellow affiliate associate person individual	party person participant figure representative	? representative troop negotiator	leader official commissioner administrator notable dignitary councilor	agent messenger envoy emissary deputy	? householder, paterfamilias	husband [+ wife]	staff laborer underling subordinate	? expert specialist
[+ group] [+similar relation] [+distributive ref.]	[+ group] [+ interchangeable members; indiscriminate ref.]	[+ group]	[+ legal proceeding, negotiation, contract, conflict]	[+ selected] [+ representation of a group] [+ specific task]	[+ authority] [+ representation] [+ designated] [+ prominence]	[+ principal] [+ delegated message or task] [+ dispatch]	[+ house, patrimony, wife, heir, autonomy]	[+ subordination]	[+ activity, subject]	

VII.F. Syntactical Asymmetry: Gender Markers in Translation

VII.F.1. A further wrinkle in the map between Hebrew and English is that these two languages do not mark social gender in the same way. This is one of the *syntactical* asymmetries between the two languages. It is another type of void into which some meaning literally gets lost in translation.¹⁴

VII.F.2. Let me explain this concept by recourse to another Hebrew word, *zaqen* ("elder"), which is said to derive from the word for "beard." In definite particular usage the referent is male:

¹² Dagut, pp. 27–28, who would class this as another type of partial interlingual void of the lexical type.

¹³ The brackets with a plus sign indicate a semantic feature whose presence is implicit for *'ish* in certain contexts. The question mark indicates a partial "semantic void"—where English lacks a one-word equivalent for the full semantic content of *'ish* (Dagut, p. 45). Note that a lexical grid for the plural form *'anashim* would be slightly different, because it has some unique resonances.

¹⁴ Dagut, pp. 84–85; notes 54–55, p. 180; he underscores that this difference between Hebrew and English is not a matter of ideology; it exists apart from any desire to avoid sexist language.

the word's grammatical gender conveys social gender as well (V.B.1). Thus one could justifiably say that “old man” is an accurate rendering of the term. Yet for many biblical contexts in which *zaqen* appears, including the gender marker “man” in translation would be overkill. For example, when Sarah says to herself *wa-'adoni zaqen* (Gen. 18:12), even traditional or highly literal Bible translations don't have Sarah say, “. . . my lord is an old *man*.” Rather, here are renderings of the phrase from translations that paid no particular attention to gender considerations:

KJV, ASV: “my lord being old also”	Fox: “And my lord is old”
NIV: “and my master is old”	RSV, Alter: “and my husband is old”

That is, the meaning-component of *zaqen* that reflects Abraham's gender goes without saying in English idiom, because it is already obvious from the discourse (narrative) context. Thus the “maleness” of the Hebrew term is not reflected directly in the translation. This illustrates a tendency for understatement of social gender in English (relative to Hebrew), which is just the way the language happens to work—completely apart from feminist ideology, political correctness, or the personal preference of the translator.

VII.F.3. To state the issue more generally: Whenever one wishes to refer in Hebrew to a *particular* human being or group, one must almost always express social gender on a syntactic level, by attending to the form of the noun: זָקֵן/זָקֵנָה *zaqen/zeqenah*. This distinction is echoed by the inflections and pronouns that relate to that noun—they must be grammatically masculine or feminine as needed to match it. In contrast, in English, few nouns are intrinsically marked for gender—that is, with social gender as a semantic feature. Rather, English idiom employs an added gender marker—but *only where the context requires an explicit mention*. If gender either is not germane or is understood, then the normative rendering is gender neutral: for *yoneq*, “suckling”—not “male suckling” (Deut. 32:25); for *'ishshah zonah*, “harlot”—not “woman harlot” (Josh. 2:1); and for *tofsei ha-milchamah*, “combatants”—not “male combatants” (Num. 31:27).

VII.F.4. This syntactic asymmetry of the two languages creates the conditions for three types of mapping error: undertranslation, overtranslation, and mistranslation.

VII.F.4.a. *Undertranslation* occurs when in Hebrew the social gender is germane yet goes unmarked in the translation and is not obvious—so that English readers are misled about social gender. In the Hebrew discourse (narrative) context, it went without saying that a noun's referent is male. The translator then has warrant—and even a responsibility—to make the gender explicit in order to avoid misleading the reader if two conditions exist. First, gender must make a difference in interpretation of the story. Second, the contemporary audience's assumptions regarding ascription of social gender must differ distinctly from those of the text's ancient audience, such that the contemporary audience will reliably form an inaccurate picture of social gender.

Consider, for example, the clause *ki tissa' 'et ro'sh benei yisra'el* (Exod. 30:12). Normally, *benei yisra'el* is an expression correctly rendered without a gender marker: “the Israelites”—and not, say, “the sons of Israel.” Yet in this specific context, the Hebrew expression loses its gender-inclusive sense; in Israelite society, women were not counted in censuses, which were employed only as a military muster. Gender is germane, but that fact went without saying. As soon as the ancient audience encountered the words *ki tissa' 'et ro'sh*, they would have reliably taken the next words—the direct object—in a *gender-restricted* sense.

The contemporary audience, however, is used to censuses that count both men and women. With a rendering such as “when you take a census of the Israelites,” they presume that both gen-

ders are in view—which inclines them to read the passage (vv. 11–16) in *gender-inclusive* terms. Depending on the translation, they may encounter later in v. 12 a masculine possessive pronoun, but the construction may still be technically gender neutral (e.g., “each shall pay . . . a ransom for himself”). Due to the undertranslation of gender in the initial noun (“the Israelites”), chances of misunderstanding the passage are high. Thus this situation calls for a gendered rendering: “when you take a census of the Israelite men.”¹⁵

VII.F.4.b. *Overtranslation* occurs when in Hebrew the social gender is germane but already obvious, yet it is marked in the translation anyway. Again, two conditions must exist. First, Hebrew grammatical gender is conveyed in English as social gender. Second, such information is superfluous. This error is illustrated by RSV and NJPS at Exod. 6:12, which rendered Moses’ claim to be *‘aral sefatayim* as “am a man of uncircumcised lips” and “am a man of impeded speech,” respectively: the Hebrew text is not here emphasizing that Moses is male, and readers already know that fact about him.¹⁶ English readers are thus misled into thinking that the biblical text emphasizes social gender more than it actually does.

Again, English idiom calls for the rendering of Hebrew nouns to not specify gender *unless the context requires it*. As we shall see, our noun *’ish* is a frequent victim of overtranslation. Dagut’s caution with regard to modern Hebrew literature applies even more so to ancient texts: “The translator must . . . beware of pleonastic reproduction of the gender-marker.”¹⁷

VII.F.4.c. *Mistranslation* occurs when social gender as it appears in Hebrew (viewed in context) and in English (viewed in context) are otherwise mismatched—as when social gender is not germane in the text but is suggested in its translation. For example, in מַכֶּה אִישׁ וְנִמֹּת *makkeh ’ish wa-met* (Exod. 21:12), *’ish* is indefinite-nonspecific and so does not reflect social gender. The context of a legal proceeding retains the gender-neutral sense of *’ish* as “a party.”¹⁸ In English, it used to be the case that “man” was regularly employed as a generic indefinite pronoun; this was presumably the intent of the KJV rendering here: “He that smiteth a man, so that he die . . .” However, nowadays that gender-neutral usage is confined to clichés, whereas our homicide statutes are expressed in gender-neutral language. The first mental image conjured up by the word “man” is a male one (see below, VII.C.4.c). Contemporary readers know intuitively that gender-inclusive options are readily available to the translator (e.g., “Anyone who strikes and

¹⁵ Even the two leading “gender-accurate” sense-for-sense translations, NRSV (1989) and TNIV (2005), both often overlook this point—as does NJPS. In this case NRSV compounds the error by rendering the possessive pronoun inclusively (“them”), leaving the reader with no clue that only men are in view.

¹⁶ (Alternatively, this can be viewed as poor choice of equivalent English idiom.) Other translations render without gender: KJV/ASV, “am of uncircumcised lips”; NIV/TNIV, “speak with faltering lips”; NRSV, “poor speaker that I am”; CJPS “who gets tongue-tied.” An example of appropriate inclusion of the Hebrew gender marker is *ben me’ah shanah* (Gen. 17:17), where translations including NJPS, NRSV, and TNIV render with gendered English—e.g., “a man who is a hundred years old,” rather than “a one-hundred-year-old.” In that verse, *ben* is counterposed with *bat*—which makes the male component of *ben* germane.

¹⁷ Dagut, p. 85.

¹⁸ The legal context prompts the reader to take the term defining the victim as broadly as possible. Practically speaking, *’ish* applies only to “a member of the Israelite community,” but the prominence of the stricture in Gen. 9:5–6 (couched in terms of *’adam*) would argue for construing *’ish* even more broadly here.

kills *another party* . . .”) and take this fact into account as they read. As a result, the NIV rendering of the victim here (“Anyone who strikes a man and kills him . . .”), which is typical of many prominent translations, is most likely to be construed in a male-only sense. Thus it effectively misrepresents the inclusive social-gender sense of the Hebrew. As we shall see, the broader impact of such renderings is to depict the biblical text as more male-oriented than it actually is.¹⁹

VII.G. “Man” and Its Discontents: Generalizations

VII.G.1. I have just discussed an English rendering that is conspicuously missing from the lexical grid in VII.D: “man.” Because of its enduring popularity as a dictionary gloss and as a rendering for *’ish*, “man” warrants special attention. Although this memorandum has shown that *’ish* does not mean “man” in biblical Hebrew, the appropriateness of employing “man” in English translation is a separate question. So what are the costs, if any, in rendering *’ish* as “man”?

VII.G.2. The word “man” has a wide semantic range. The following is a list of seventeen (!) dictionary denotations of the English word “man”²⁰ that I have correlated with biblical passages containing *’ish*, as translated in NJPS or NRSV:²¹

- **human being** <not a dog shall snarl at any of the Israelites, at *man* or beast —Exod. 11:7>
- **humankind** <When he does wrong, I will chastise him with the rod of *men* —2 Sam. 7:14>
- to distinguish a particular **human aspect** or part
<my brother Esau is a hairy *man* —Gen. 27:11>
- individual who has or assumes **human form**
<Jacob was left alone. And a *man* wrestled with him —Gen. 32:25>
- **male human being** <I have two daughters who have not known a man —Gen. 19:8>
- **category** of male human being (as by birth, residence, or membership)
<Esau became a skillful hunter, a *man* of the outdoors —Gen. 25:27>
- **category** of human being (as by birth, residence, or membership)
<the herdsmen of Abram’s cattle —Gen. 13:7>
- **husband** <if any *man*’s wife has gone astray —Num. 5:12>
- **notable** : a prosperous or successful person : a person of consequence or high estate
<God came to Balaam and said, “Who are these *men* with you?” —Num. 22:9>
- human male **subordinate** <the *man* did as Joseph said —Gen. 43:17>
- **personal attendant** <Saul disguised himself . . . and set out with two *men* —1 Sam. 28:8>
- (*plural*) **the working force** <let heavier work be laid upon the *men* —Exod. 5:9>
- **male individual in question**—used in place of a pronoun
<the *man* grew richer and richer —Gen. 26:13>
- **office holder** : one in a position of prominence
<They replied, “But the *man* kept asking about us and our family” —Gen. 43:7>
- **anyone** <fear no *man* —Deut. 1:17>

¹⁹ The TNIV modification of NIV is “Anyone who strikes someone a fatal blow.” Similarly the CJPS first printing: “One who fatally strikes another person”; projected future printing: “. . . another party.”

²⁰ Adapted (in roughly historical order) from entries in *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged*, Merriam-Webster, 2002; <http://unabridged.merriam-webster.com> (28 Nov. 2005). In contrast, the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (below, n. 25) lists only five relevant senses: an adult human male; a male member of a workforce, team, etc.; a husband or lover; a person; human beings in general.

²¹ In some of these instances I disagree with the interpretations implied by the adduced renderings.

- **required individual**, or the one in mind—used after a possessive
<each killed his *man* —1 Kings 20:20>
- **best individual** (for a particular job or responsibility)
<From a distant land, the *man* for My purpose —Isa. 46:11>

VII.G.3. On the lexical level, the two terms *'ish* and “man” seem largely analogous.²² Indeed, if I were to add “man” to my lexical grid above, it would fit into every category except the first. In practice, however, “man” takes on its various senses in constructions and contexts according to English conventions that are often not the same as for *'ish* in Hebrew. The *contextual* meanings of *'ish* and of “man” do not overlap as neatly as do their *lexical* meanings. Consequently, in cases of asymmetric usage between the two languages, a mechanical rendering of *'ish* as “man” can create confusion.

VII.G.4. NONCORRESPONDENCE IN AFFILIATION

VII.G.4.a. In the following table, a check mark indicates implicit affiliation, whereas a bullet indicates its absence. This tally shows that “man” has only limited abilities to convey a sense of affiliation, even on the lexical level.²³

The Ability of “Man” to Convey Affiliation with a Group or a Principal

LEXICAL MEANING	AFFILIATION
human being (collective adjective or plural)	•
humankind (without an article)	•
to distinguish a particular human aspect or part	•
individual who has or assumes human form	•
male human being	•
category of male human being	✓
category of human being (where gender not germane; general)	✓
husband	✓
notable	•
human male subordinate	✓
personal attendant	✓
(<i>plural</i>) the working force	✓
male individual in question	•
office holder : one in a position of prominence	•
anyone	•
required individual , or the one in mind—used after a possessive	•
best individual (for a particular job or responsibility)	•

²² Perhaps the high correspondence between *'ish* and “man” has increased over time, due to the immense historical impact of the King James Version and other translations themselves on English usage.

²³ The wording in specific contexts can open up other possibilities for suggesting affiliation—or close off the ones shown in the table. As the commercial disclaimer puts it, “local mileage may vary.”

VII.G.4.b. Most senses of “man” do not convey affiliation (including representation) per se; rather, they acquire such a sense in certain constructions such as a possessive pronoun (e.g., “David and his men”; “all men of Israel”) or certain contexts (e.g., “he split the men into two battalions”). Expressions such as “the man of the house” and “our man in Baghdad” suggest that in certain contexts “man” can take on the representationally based senses of “householder” and “agent,” even though *Webster’s* does not mention them as lexical meanings. (But again, lexical equivalence is not enough to establish correspondence between *’ish* and “man”; there must also be equivalence in contextual cues. Thus in each situation “man” must be considered afresh.)

VII.G.4.c. The lack of full semantic correspondence again shows how misleading it is to state that “*’ish* means ‘man.’” In Hebrew, *’ish* always retains the flavor of affiliation, whereas the English word “man” often lacks that sense. In 1624, John Donne penned the gender-inclusive statement “No man is an island, entire of itself,” which has proven to be memorable English; yet if this were expressed in biblical Hebrew, using *’ish* to render “man” would produce a tautology.

VII.G.5. NONCORRESPONDENCE IN SOCIAL GENDER

VII.G.5.a. As with *’ish* in Hebrew (V.B.), the social-gender sense of the English word “man” cannot be ascertained from the word in isolation. Both words convey gender neutrality (or inclusiveness) in certain situations, and only maleness in certain other situations. Disambiguation in each instance relies upon the grammatical construction, and usually also upon the activity in question. Grammatically speaking, the constructions in which “man” can have a gender neutral sense are more limited. “Man” can convey a generic sense only in the following applications:²⁴

- (1) when humankind is personified as an individual, without an article (e.g., “man against the elements”);
- (2) in general or indefinite usage, either with a collective adjective (e.g., “every man for himself”) or in the plural (e.g., “when men search for God”);
- (3) a member of a particular and usually specified set, if gender is clearly not germane to the relation indicated (e.g., “write to your Congressman”); or
- (4) when used as an indefinite pronoun to mean “one” or “anyone” (e.g., “a man should stand up for what he believes”).

VII.G.5.b. For disambiguation, grammatical clues are necessary but not sufficient: the usage may qualify grammatically as generic even while the discourse context restricts the sense to males (e.g., “every man should grow a beard”). For readers removed from the original communication and thus unfamiliar with “what went without saying,” the social-gender sense may well remain unclear even after consulting the context. Today it is a matter of debate which social-gender sense Thomas Jefferson had in mind in 1776 when he wrote in the *Declaration of Independence* that “all men are created equal.” Likewise for most Bible readers who encounter “herdsmen” as a rendering of *ro’im* (Gen. 13:7), the gender sense remains ambiguous.

VII.G.5.c. In Old English, “man” meant “a human being,” and “waepman” meant “an adult male.” Over time, “man” ceased to be used to refer to individual women, while “man” replaced

²⁴ Adapted from *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged*. The examples are my own.

“waepman” as the specific term referring to an adult male. Meanwhile, “man” has continued to be employed in generalizations about both men and women.²⁵ Yet the gender presumption has shifted. Whereas the word “man” used to conjure up a generic image of human being, that has long since changed.²⁶ Both gender egalitarians and complementarians agree that nowadays the first mental image of “man” is male, which is then broadened as needed to account for a gender-neutral referent.²⁷ In contemporary usage, the word “man” almost always has a male sense. And its only non-human referents are board-game tokens.

VII.G.5.d. In contrast, this memorandum suggests (V.B), in the Bible *'ish* usually has a gender neutral sense; and the constructions in which it takes that sense, grammatically speaking, are broad: *all nonspecific indefinite usage*, and *all nonparticular definite usage*. The word *'ish* is employed for various non-human referents, further dissociating the Hebrew term’s grammatical gender from the social gender of its referent. Most likely, then, in the mind of the ancient Israelite audience the noun *'ish* first conjured up a *non-gendered* concept such as “member” or “party,” which was then narrowed as needed to account for a male-only referent.

VII.G.5.e. If so, then the words “man” and *'ish* approach social gender from opposite directions. Hence, as we shall see, the rendering “man” often comes across with a stronger male sense than the word *'ish* that it represents. To that extent, “man” mistranslates the original text.

VII.H. “Man” and Its Discontents: Specific Examples

VII.H.1. Given the importance of contextual cues for the disambiguation of both *'ish* and “man,” we can get a handle on how well (or poorly) “man” renders *'ish* only by looking at specific examples. Seven instances from Genesis should be sufficient to sketch an unsettling picture. I will discuss each of the following instances in turn.

Rendering of Seven Sample Instances of *'ish* as Found in Seven Translations

#	Passage	Word-for word		Sense-for-sense		Gender-accurate		
		KJV	Alter	NJPS	NIV	NRSV	TNIV	CJPS
1	Gen. 12:20	his men	men	men	his men	his men	his men	deputies
2	Gen. 14:24	the men	the men	the men	the men	the men	the men	the notables
3	Gen. 17:23	the men of	the people of	—*	—	the men of	—	—
4	Gen. 19:8	man	(no) man	a man	a man	a man	a man	a man
5	Gen. 30:43	the man	the man	the man	the man	the man	the man	the householder
6	Gen. 32:7	men	men	men	men	men	men	retinue
7	Gen. 47:2	men	men	—	—	men	—	representatives

* No direct rendering.

²⁵ *Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/man (8 July 2006); Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*, 2nd edn. (2001), p. 12.

²⁶ General perception of an intrinsic maleness for “man” seems to be less than 300 years old; thus the King James Version of 1611 (and even its early revisions) probably presumed a generic sense for “man.”

²⁷ Miller and Swift, p. 13; Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God’s Words* (Broadman & Holman, 2000), *passim*.

1. Gen. 12:20

וַיִּצְוֶנּוּ עָלָיו פְּרִעָה אֲנָשִׁים וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אֹתָם . . .

(On the agency sense of *'ish* here, see I.B.1). Hebrew syntax here differs significantly from English idiom. The sense of “men” that comes to the fore depends upon the construction chosen as equivalent by the translator: In NRSV (“and Pharaoh gave his men orders concerning him”) and TNIV (“then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men”), the insertion of a possessive pronoun conveys the sense of “subordinates”—which is close yet not quite the same thing as persons dispatched with a mission. In the NJPS rendering (“and Pharaoh put men in charge of him”) the agents sound like chess pieces. In Alter’s rendering (“and Pharaoh appointed men over him”) they do come across as agents by implication. Regardless of the construction, however, the agency sense of the noun itself is lost in translation.

In terms of social gender, the Hebrew could have used a more clearly “male” word like *gevarim* or *gibborim* but did not. That is, the wording does not make an issue of gender when it could easily have done so. Gender does not matter to the story one way or the other.²⁸ Via the indefinite-nonspecific use of the term *'anashim*—the sole mention of these characters—they are defined by their function only. In contrast, in English the word “men” retains its default sense as “adult males.” Its usage implies that gender is indeed germane; it suggests that this squad of characters is made up of burly goons. In short, “men” mistranslates *'anashim* by ascribing gender that is not stated in the source language.

2. Gen. 14:24

. . . וַחֲלֹק הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר הָלְכוּ אִתִּי עִנְרֵי אֲשָׁפֶל וּמְמַרְא . . .

The grammatically definite-particular plural usage signals that at least one party is male.

In the narrative context, Abram is speaking to the king of Sodom after having successfully rescued the populace. In such a situation Abram might be expected to emphasize his allies’ esteemed status as wealthy householders (with the wherewithal to make treaties and provide troops). That is how I construed *'anashim* in CJPS (“notables”). (So, too, Stern: “leaders.”) Another plausible possibility is “householders.” Yet I now believe that here the indirect referent—the group in question—is defined more straightforwardly by the qualifying phrase that follows *'anashim*: “. . . who went with me” (or: “. . . who went under my command”). Thus here *ha-'anashim* simply means “the parties (to the expedition).”²⁹ At any rate, the foreground sense is the referents’ role, not their gender.

²⁸ Recall that grammatically, the indefinite use of *'ish* is gender neutral; any male cast would have to come from the audience’s presumption that a pharaoh would not deputize women for such a task. Such a presumption seems difficult to prove. First, it was a commonplace that a royal agent’s authority derived from the power of the throne and thus didn’t necessarily require muscle. Second, an Egyptian work of historical fiction about Wenamun the priest, composed at the same time as the Israelite monarchy, tells of a pharaoh’s dispatching a particular woman to assist the protagonist when he was stuck in Phoenicia. From this we can infer that a woman’s serving as a royal emissary was thus plausible to the Egyptians themselves. Whether it would have been plausible to the Hebrew text’s audience is not clear, but there is no reason to rule out the possibility. At any rate, given this lone and indefinite mention of *'anashim*, the text does not seem to ask readers to dwell on this issue.

²⁹ In accord with ancient Near Eastern convention, the character of Abram refers to those other parties (corporate households) in terms of the householders who represent them.

For translation into English, “men” does have a similar lexical sense of participation (“category of human being”); however, it is not evoked in the context of the English phrase “the men who went with me” or the like. Rather, “men” there means “adult males” or even “(male) subordinates,” the sense of participation intrinsic to the noun itself being lost in translation.

In terms of the social gender of the referents (Abram’s allies), in Hebrew it is definitely male. Yet their gender is not at issue, being already obviously male—both for the reader (14:13) and for the king who is Abram’s addressee in the story. Therefore “men” overtranslates the Hebrew term’s social-gender component.

3. Gen. 17:23

... כָּל־זָכָר בְּאַנְשֵׁי בֵּית אַבְרָהָם וַיִּמָּלְ אֶת־בְּשָׂרָם עֶרְלֹתָם . . .

(On the membership sense of *’ish* and its gender neutrality here, see V.B.3.b.). Rendering the phrase here as “every male among the men of Abraham’s house” is technically correct both in terms of describing the referents’ role and in terms of establishing their gender. A lexical sense of “men” does fit in this context: “category of human being (as by birth, residence, or membership)”—without regard to gender. Upon reflection, it must be the case that “men of” is being employed in its rare gender-inclusive sense. Such usage is established by reading “men of” in light of the preceding phrase “every male.”

However, “men of” remains a poor translation because of its awkwardness: because “men” nowadays usually has a male referent, at first glance “every male among the men . . .” reads like a tautology. At best, contemporary readers are confused and must read the passage again. For such readers, the translators have obscured the gender neutrality here of *’anshei*.

Meanwhile, other readers will predictably misread the text; they will conclude wrongly that the biblical text either has employed a male term to refer to women (sexism in language) or else has disregarded women altogether (sexism in message): why otherwise would the translator have employed the male-oriented term “men of” to refer to a gender-inclusive group when gender-neutral terms were readily available? (A more literal rendering than “men” exists that requires even less effort at disambiguation: “members,” which is perfectly idiomatic English.) For these readers, “men of” mistranslates *’anshei* by using a primarily gendered term that is not present in the source language—and in so doing needlessly alienates those readers from the biblical text.

The foregoing considerations explain why some translations (see table, above) avoid the term “men” here—including even the one by Alter, who disdains contextual renderings.³⁰

4. Gen. 19:8

... הִנֵּה־נָא לִי שְׁתֵּי בָנוֹת אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדָעוּ אִישׁ . . .

Here *’ish* retains its simple sense as “member of the group in question,” the latter comprising only two members: a sexual couple. Thus the phrase *’asher lo’ yad’u ’ish* means “who have not intimately experienced a partner.” Because of the indefinite-nonspecific usage, the grammatical gender of *’ish* has no bearing on the social gender of its referent. Rather, the partner’s male gender is left to be inferred from the subject’s being female and from the sex act that the Hebrew expression politely only alludes to. Now, Lot could easily have employed a term such as *gever* or

³⁰ Professor Alter writes that “the cardinal principle” of his translation is “not to translate according to context” (*The Five Books of Moses*, p. xxxiii). Meanwhile he holds that “though *’ish* . . . doesn’t always mean ‘man’ in the gendered sense, I still think that remains its primary meaning” (pers. comm., 9/11/06).

zakhar that would make the partner’s maleness explicit. Rather, that maleness goes without saying—and the fact that it is not stated outright seems intentional and significant.

Even in the context of sexuality, *’ish* does not denote an adult male (V.C). Yet in English translation, rendering as “who have not known a man” can be justified because “who have not known anyone” is too vague; rendering *’ish* as “man” compensates for the contextual ambiguity in English of “known” (relative to the Hebrew verb *yad’u*). In other words, such a translation adjusts Lot’s statement according to the needs of English idiom, relying upon a momentary connotation of the Hebrew noun rather than a direct rendering of its denotation. And so something is lost in the translation: the delicacy of the Hebrew expression.

Gender does of course make a difference in interpretation of the story. Yet this is not one of those cases where the contemporary audience’s assumptions regarding ascription of social gender as so different from those of the text’s ancient audience that the former will reliably form an inaccurate picture of social gender. The translator has no warrant to make the gender explicit, because a neutral rendering poses no risk of misleading the reader. Therefore “a man” mistranslates *’ish* by ascribing gender that is not stated in the source language, but in this case the only casualty is the distortion of Lot’s voice.

Among the translations surveyed, KJV stands out by its rendering without an article: “. . . daughters which have not known man.” The sense of “man” is then clearly and appropriately gender neutral (esp. in terms of the English of its day). However, the result still involves a shift in meaning, from “any partner” in the Hebrew to “any human being” in the KJV rendering.

5. Gen. 30:43

וַיִּפְרֹץ הָאִישׁ מְאֹד מְאֹד . . .

(On *’ish* here in its sense of “householder,” see I.B.2.) In English the word “the man” can mean “the householder” in certain idioms (e.g., “the man of the house”). Also “man” has a lexical sense of “prosperous or successful person.” However, neither such sense is evoked in this translation context (e.g., “thus the man grew exceedingly rich,” NRSV). Rather, “man” takes on its lexical sense of “the male individual in question.” This shift in meaning reflects a semantic void (of the cultural type) between Hebrew and English: those aspects of *’ish* that show affiliation or representation get lost in translation.

Furthermore, the referent (Jacob) is definite and particular, so *ha-’ish* conveys his social gender. However, that gender is not in question in this verse. Having recently married four women and sired twelve children, this patriarch remains decidedly male, which anyway has nothing to do with the topic—namely, his ability to increase his household’s assets via remarkable animal husbandry. The narrator can hardly be pointing to Jacob’s maleness. Therefore “the man” overtranslates the Hebrew term’s social-gender component.

6. Gen. 32:7

בָּאֵנָה אֶל-אֶתְחִיבֵי אֶל-עֵשָׂו וְגַם הַלֵּד לְקַרְאֲתָהֶן וְאַרְבַּע-מֵאוֹת אִישׁ עִמּוֹ :

The Hebrew construction “number of *’ish* (as a collective) + ‘with’ + ‘him’” means here that these *’ish* are at the disposition of the person who is the antecedent of “him,” namely, Esau. (This is confirmed in 33:15 when Esau offers to “assign” to his brother some of this retinue.) That is, this usage of *’ish* evokes its sense as “subordinates” (compare 24:32b; see I.B.4). The linguistic emphasis is on their relationship to Esau—their social gender being left open by the grammatically indefinite usage.

The narrative context is pointedly ambiguous about the nature of this retinue—the infinitive *liqra't* being equally capable of meaning “meet (in battle)” or “welcome (in peace).”³¹ Therefore social gender must still be left open, for if Esau’s intent is perhaps to honor Jacob and his household, how could he not involve women—the public voices of celebration, song, dance, and rhythm in that society? Their participation would go without saying.

In translation into English, “men” has a lexical sense as “subordinates” that would fit here. However, in the English construction, the identification remains indefinite yet specific, such that the social-gender sense of “men” is male—that is, that *all* of Esau’s retinue is recognizably male—which goes farther than the Hebrew implication, that *at least one of them* is male. Thus “men” mistranslates *'anashim* by ascribing gender that is not stated in the source language.

Here, such mistranslation affects interpretation of the central characters’ motives; the male-only sense of “men” undercuts the ambiguity regarding Esau’s intent. Because readers are then likely to miss the possibility that Esau’s motive may well be benign, they therefore misconstrue Jacob’s reaction as well.

7. Gen. 47:2

וּמִקְצֵה אֶתְיוּ לָקַח חַמִּשָּׁה אַנְשִׁים וַיִּצְגְּם לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה :

(On the representative sense of *'ish* here, see I.B.5.) If *'ish* were rendered as “men,” the Hebrew noun’s representative sense would be lost in translation. In this construction and context, “men” takes on its default sense as “adult males.” However, it can hardly be the case that what the narrator means to call attention to is these brothers’ distinctive maleness. The overtranslation of gender is obvious. Presumably that is why some of the sampled translations (see table, above) do not render the term *'anashim* directly here.

VII.H.2. The seven cases detailed above can be summarized in the following table.

Translation Impact of Rendering as “Man” or “Men” for Seven Instances of *'ish* in Genesis

#	<i>'ish</i> (or <i>'anashim</i>)						“man” (or “men”)			Shortcomings in translation	
	Grammatical type			Social gender		Contextual sense	Closest lexical sense	Contextual sense	Social gender	Role	Gender
	(Number, Form, Definiteness)	Per grammar	Per content								
1	Pl.	Abs.	IN	—	None	Agents	—	(Various)	Male	Shifted	MT
2	Pl.	Abs.	DP	≥1 Male	Male	Participants	Participants	Subordinates	Male	Shifted	OT
3	Pl.	Bnd.	DC	—	Both	Members	Members	Members	Neutral	Awkward	O/MT
4	Sg.	Abs.	IN	—	None	Participant	Anyone	Adult male	Male	Shifted	MT
5	Sg.	Abs.	DP	Male	Male	Householder	Notable	Individual	Male	Shifted	OT
6	Col.	Abs.	IS	≥1 Male	None	Subordinates	Subordinates	Subordinates	Male	Biased	MT
7	Pl.	Abs.	IS	≥1 Male	Male	Representatives	—	Adult males	Male	Shifted	OT

KEY: Pl. = plural; Sg. = singular; Col. = collective; Abs. = absolute; Bnd. = bound; IN = Indefinite-nonspecific; DP = Definite-particular; DC = Definite-class; IS = Indefinite-specific; MT = mistranslation (VII.F.4.c); OT = overtranslation (VII.F.4.b); O/MT = obscure/mistranslation

³¹ The commentators Radak, Plaut, and Sarna construed the language as reporting Esau’s hostile intent; Rashbam and Chizz’kuni, as reporting his intent to show honor. (The larger the retinue, the greater the display of honor.) All of them missed the fact that the ambiguity here is narratively significant, for it frames the import of what follows—namely, Jacob’s panicked reaction to the ambiguous report—which thus signals to the reader his guilty conscience.

VII.I. Discussion of the Specific Examples

VII.I.1. We have looked at specific examples of *'ish* in various grammatical permutations (singular vs. plural; absolute vs. bound; definite vs. indefinite) and referents' social gender (male-only or otherwise). Across a wide range of situations, rendering *'ish* as “man” resulted in significant collateral damage:

- The thrust of the designation can be lost in translation, as the rendering subtly replaces one role with another (##1, 2, 4, 5, 7).
- The rendering can collapse semantic ambiguity where the source text has established it with apparent care—thereby prejudicing readers' exegesis (#6).³²
- In cases where “man” conveys role and gender accurately, it may still be awkward (#3).
- When “man” is employed in a Bible translation in its rare gender-neutral sense, it prompts temporary confusion at best; at worst it risks alienating the reader from the text (#3).
- When “man” is employed in a Bible translation in its usual male sense, it can either over-emphasize or misrepresent the Hebrew text's ascription of social gender (##1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7). Such distortions risk alienating the reader from the text.

VII.I.2. That *'ish* in some cases is poorly represented by “man” is, in itself, not a controversial claim. For example, *none* of the seven sampled translations renders the term *'anashim* directly in Gen. 13:8, where Abram describes himself and Lot as *'anashim 'achim* (see II.C.1.a). In that context, rendering as “men” would evoke its default sense as “adult males”; however, what Abram means to point out to his nephew is surely not their mutual maleness. By all accounts, “men” is an inadequate rendering there.³³ The issue is how far such a zone of inappropriateness extends. What this memorandum adds to the debate about that zone's boundary is this claim: Rendering *'ish* as “man” often injects testosterone into a Bible translation, resulting in a more hirsute image of maleness than the original audience would have perceived.

VII.I.3. Whether the costs of employing the word “man” are worth the benefits requires comparison with the other English alternatives. (Those alternatives presumably have costs and thus involve trade-offs as well.) The answer may vary depending upon the goals of the particular translation. Here I will make two general observations about the translation process: (1) As a matter of intellectual integrity, translators who employ “man” should begin by acknowledging to themselves that we will usually pay a price for doing so. (2) Translators who *regularly* render *'ish* as “man” owe it to their audience to disclose the male-amplifying impact of their approach.

VII.I.4. In some situations, *'ish* can with minimal complication be represented as “man” (adult male) in English. I discussed one such case in V.C.4: in Gen. 3:24, *'ish* is contextually defined as “a member of the unmarried adult male portion of the household.” A slightly more problematic case is discussed above in VII.H.1(4): in Gen. 19:8, the translation loss is stylistic. Such

³² In Part VIII, in my treatment of Gen. 18:2 I hope to illustrate also the converse situation, where rendering as “man” can create semantic ambiguity where none exists in the source text.

³³ Similarly, Wayne Grudem, Vern Poythress, and others hold that while it normally means “man” (“in distinction from woman”) and should usually be rendered accordingly, *'ish* may nevertheless be correctly translated by other words “in special idioms.” Cf. the Colorado Springs Guidelines, Sept. 9, 1997.

instances of equivalence, however, are relatively rare—which explains why of the 108 instances of singular *'ish* in Genesis, CJPS renders as “man” only 6 of them, compared to 46 in NJPS.

VII.J. Rendering Preference as a Function of Translation Philosophy

V.J.1. For a given biblical instance of *'ish*, determining the best English rendering depends in part upon the type of translation. For example, in Gen. 19:8 (*'asher lo' yad'u 'ish*), a closer equivalent than the NJPS rendering “who have not known a man” might be “who have not known a [sexual] partner” for a rigidly word-for-word translation. And a translation that accounts more for literary style and spoken idiom would incline toward something like this: “who’ve never had [carnal] knowledge of anyone.” (Either of these options would better convey the delicacy of Lot’s expression than would the use of “man”; see VII.H.1(4).)

V.J.2. *Word-for-word Translation.* This type of translation (sometimes called literal) emphasizes consistency of rendering at the expense of English idiom; it strives to convey what the Hebrew text *says* more so than what it *means*. Such a translation would rely on a rendering that most closely tracks Hebrew usage: “affiliate” or “party.” These renderings are often more accurate than the “man” or “person.” They are of course appropriate renderings for the many cases in which the Bible employs the term *'ish* without regard to gender.

V.J.3. *Sense-for-sense Translation.* This type of translation (sometimes called idiomatic) emphasizes English idiom at the expense of the structure of Hebrew modes of expression; it strives to convey what the Hebrew text *means* more so than what it *says*. Recognizing “the greater reliance of Hebrew on context, as against the preference of English for the more specific term,” the idiomatic translation seeks contextual precision. English idiom expects the translator to disambiguate *'ish* where that is possible—and where ambiguity is not an evident literary feature of the Hebrew text. Like NJPS before it, CJPS is a translation of this type. But unlike the former, the latter was predicated upon a new understanding of the ancient usage of *'ish*—as described in this memorandum, it appears to be primarily a term of affiliation. Hence the range of English renderings for *'ish* is far greater than in NJPS or other previous translations.³⁴

* * *

This memorandum set out to account for how I handled *'ish* in the preparation of *The Contemporary Torah*. It has discussed Hebrew lexicography and translation. What remains is to show how an affiliate reading of *'ish* prompted me in certain places to weigh in on one particular side in a longstanding exegetical debate—quite apart from consideration of a character’s social gender. Occasionally the impact on the plain sense of the narrative was quite profound. We would do well to examine a few examples. That will be the task of the final part of this memorandum.

Thus ends Part VII of an eight-part series.

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³⁴ For statistics, see above, page 1, note 3.