

What Does It Mean to Be a “Man”?

The Noun *’ish* in Biblical Hebrew: A Reconsideration

One of the most frequently occurring nouns in the Hebrew Bible is *אִישׁ* *’ish* (and its functional plural, *אֲנָשִׁים* *’anashim*), appearing well over two thousand times. As nouns go, *’ish* is considered mundane—seldom is it made the subject of translators’ notes or remarked on in exegetical commentary.¹ Its basic sense is typically said to be decidedly masculine: “man” as opposed to “woman” or to “child.”²

In this memorandum I suggest a way of looking at *’ish* that creates vivid semantic color where in modern eyes that term has been bleached of meaning. The key to understanding *’ish* is to see it as a term of association more than of gender. In my view, the primary sense of our noun in biblical Hebrew is “an affiliate” or “an associate,” comprising the English concepts “a member of the group in question,” “exemplar,” and “representative.”

I will now make an initial case for that lexicographic suggestion, as well as for secondary senses of *’ish* that are generally considered rare if not overlooked altogether.³ In so doing, I implicitly explain how *’ish* was handled in a new Pentateuch translation, *The Contemporary Torah*:

¹ Translations that I consulted with some regularity include, in alphabetical order: Robert Alter; Everett Fox; Baruch Levine (Numbers); Jacob Milgrom (Leviticus); Stephen Mitchell (Genesis); New Revised Standard Version (NRSV); William Propp (Exodus); E. A. Speiser (Genesis); Chaim Stern (Genesis); and for Genesis, Today’s New International Version (TNIV). Plain-sense commentators consulted with some regularity include, in chronological order: Saadia, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, Kimhi, Nachmanides, Bachya ben Asher (Genesis), Sforno, Benno Jacob (Genesis), Claus Westermann (Genesis), Nahum Sarna (Genesis), Baruch Levine (Leviticus), Jacob Milgrom (Numbers), and Jeffrey Tigay (Deuteronomy).

² *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (BDB; 1906) based on the work of William Gesenius, p. 35; *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (HALOT; 1967), edited by Koehler, Baumgartner, Stamm (transl. Richardson, 2001), Study Edn., Vol. 1: 43–44; *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (TDOT; 1974), ed. Botterweck and Ringgren (transl. 1974), entry on *’ish* by N. P. Bratsiotis, Vol. 1: 222–35; *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (TWOT; 1980), ed. R. Laird Harris, entry 83a on *’ish* by Thomas E. McComiskey.

Another, less gendered view is expressed in *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (DCH; 1993), edited by David J.A. Clines, Vol. 1: 221–22. Its initial gloss reads: “usually **man, person**, often without contextual emphasis on gender.” Stephen Kaufman has privately expressed a largely concurring opinion: “The primary sense of the word *’ish* is ‘person’—indeed in Aramaic it is used almost exclusively in that sense. [Its] secondary sense is ‘someone, anyone’—including not human (distributive) use. The tertiary meaning: ‘husband.’ In legal use in particular, however, there is no question that structurally it echoes Akkadian *awelum*, which is ‘a male person of the independent class.’” He quickly adds: “The problem is, how do we determine which meaning is meant in any specific case, in particular in the laws” (pers. comm. 3/1/06). The various senses given by each of the four most recent reference works cited will be listed later in this memorandum, where we consider how best to tie together all the connotations of the term in question.

³ I thank Dr. Reinier de Blois (*Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew*) and Rabbi Ivan Caine, as well as Professors Alan Crown (University of Sydney, emeritus), Edward Greenstein (Tel Aviv University), Stephen Kaufman (Hebrew Union College/Cincinnati), Samuel A. Meier (Ohio State University), Bruce K. Waltke (Reformed Theological Seminary), and Ziony Zevit (University of Judaism) for our e-mail exchanges as I worked through the material discussed here. The conclusions presented here are my own.

A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, forthcoming in August 2006; hereinafter: CJPS), for which I served as the revising editor.⁴

The proposal can be simply put: to alter how we perceive one Hebrew word. Yet if this proposal withstands scrutiny, it should revise significantly the prevailing view not only of gender ascriptions in the Hebrew Bible but also the exegesis of famous passages in the biblical text.

I. RECONSIDERATION NEEDED: THE TROUBLE WITH “MEN” IS . . .

I.A. The noun *'ish* (or *'anashim*) often contributes little or nothing, literarily speaking, if construed according to the conventional wisdom. As we shall see, however, in dozens of passages the word's syntactic and narrative contexts demand that it mean one of several roles of varying social status: “agent,” “householder,” “official,” “subordinate (attendant),” “representative,” and the like. Yet otherwise well-regarded dictionaries do not allow for such meanings in these passages. According to their lexicographers, our noun does not even have an intrinsic aspect of association or affiliation with another party; such can come only from additional syntactic markers, such as a pronominal (possessive) suffix.⁵

I.B. Let me lay out the issues concretely via five examples of where the conventional understanding of *'ish* runs into trouble. I have taken all these cases from Genesis, which is probably the Hebrew Bible's most intensively studied book. Yet I intentionally selected instances where *'ish* or *'anashim* has almost no impact on the overall story, and therefore has drawn relatively little attention. I have chosen them in order to illustrate the semantic issues without interference from the reader's concern for exegetical import. Grammatically speaking, in all five cases, the term in question is unbound to another noun or to a pronominal suffix. In other words, the syntax does not markedly associate *'ish* with other terms. (For these passages I display a sense-for-sense translation because that type best highlights the semantic challenges.)

I.B.1. Genesis 12:20

וַיִּצַן עָלָיו פַּרְעֹה אֲנָשִׁים	Pharaoh then issued orders
וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אֹתוֹ	and they drove him way,
וְאֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ	with his wife
וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ :	and all that he owned.

—transl. Chaim Stern⁶

⁴ Professors Carol L. Meyers (Duke University) and Adele Berlin (University of Maryland) served as consulting editors for the adaptation project, along with JPS editor-in-chief Ellen Frankel.

⁵ The words *'ish* and *'anashim* do often appear with a pronominal suffix, e.g., Gen. 24:59. Other frequent syntactic markers of association include: a modifier such as *'asher 'itto* (“who were under his control,” Gen. 24:32); a genitive construction such as *'anshei X* (“the troops of person or place X”), as in Judg. 9:28; or apposition with another substantive, such as *ha-'ish 'adonei ha-'aretz* (“the *'ish* who is lord of the land,” Gen. 42:30). But it is *'ish* or *'anashim* appearing by itself that is most revealing for our purposes.

⁶ Published posthumously in W. Gunther Plaut, general ed., and David E. S. Stein, revising ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, revised edition (URJ Press, 2005).

I.B.1.a. Of interest here is precisely what’s not so evident in this translation: the opening clause contains the Bible’s first instance of the functional plural, *’anashim*. In the ancient Near East, the social gender of Pharaoh’s agents would have not been at issue, and Stern apparently noticed that the Hebrew text was not making an issue of maleness. Presumably because in English idiom it would be overtranslating to state that the appointees were adult males, Stern did not render *’anashim* directly; that Pharaoh’s orders have recipients is only implied.⁷

I.B.1.b. The problem is that Stern has overlooked a salient syntactic fact. The usage of *’anashim* is conspicuous: if that word were left out, the verse would still make perfect grammatical and narrative sense.⁸ In other words, the text has gone out of its way to employ the term in question. The syntax thus prompts a careful reader to construe *’anashim* here in some meaningful sense.

I.B.1.c. The narrative context supplies the meaning. It conveys that Abram has become an unwelcome guest in Egypt. The verse’s two verbs express the exercise of authority and power, if not of outright force. Apparently the point of *’anashim* is to emphasize that Pharaoh effected the departure of Abram and his household by taking no chances: he dispatched others who presumably saw their charges to the country’s border.

I.B.1.d. In short, the text’s composer(s) presumed that its original audience would grasp that *’anashim* here means something like the English word “agents.”⁹ The problem is that at least four recent English-language dictionaries do not seem to allow for such a thing. The role of agent is not acknowledged as a specific sense of *’ish* or *’anashim*.¹⁰

I.B.2. Genesis 30:42b–43

וְהָיָה הָעֲטֹפִים לְלָבָן	42b And so the feeble ones went to Laban
וְהַקְּשָׁרִים לְיַעֲקֹב :	and the sturdy ones to Jacob.
וַיִּפְרֹץ הָאִישׁ מְאֹד מְאֹד	43 Thus the man (<i>’ish</i>) grew exceedingly prosperous,

⁷ Other translations equally gloss over the syntactic anomaly by instead adding a possessive pronoun: “and Pharaoh gave his men orders concerning him” (RSV/NRSV); “then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men” (NIV/TNIV).

⁸ That is, the recipients of the command would be present by implication, and the plural verb would be construed impersonally. Such a construction is in fact found in Gen. 42:25; Exod. 36:6; and 1 Kings 5:31.

⁹ CJPS renders as “deputies,” whose connotation fits the security operation as perceived here by Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Kimhi. Other translators apparently construe a sense here of “subordinates,” conveying that in English with a possessive that is absent in the Hebrew: “his men” (RSV/NRSV and NIV/TNIV, like the KJV of 1611 but not the ASV of 1901). On why that approach misses the mark, see the next two notes.

¹⁰ HALOT, TDOT, and TWOT offer no sense that meaningfully fits this context at all. In contrast, DCH does list a few examples under the gloss “servant, member of retinue” in which *’anashim* or *ha-’anashim* is uninflected, unbound, and unmodified—as here. Even so, that sense does not suit the present instance, in which *’anashim* are tasked to represent Pharaoh on a specific mission. That those agents may well have been among Pharaoh’s “servants” or “retinue” is beside the point, according to the construction of the verse.

וַיְהִי־לּוֹ צֹאן רְבֹזֹת and came to own large flocks,
 וַיִּשְׁכְּחוּת וַעֲבָדִים וַגְּמָלִים וַחֲמֹרִים : maidservants and menservants, camels and asses.

—transl. E. A. Speiser (*Anchor Bible*)

I.B.2.a. In this passage, *'ish* in verse 42 clearly refers to Jacob in verse 43. But the usage is conspicuous: if the subject noun were left out from verse 43, its two verbs (with their masculine inflection) would still unquestionably refer back to Jacob. The wording prompts the text's audience to construe *'ish* in some meaningful sense—which is not “adult male,” because Jacob's social gender is neither in question nor particularly germane.

I.B.2.b. Looking to the narrative context, we see that Jacob has expressed a concern that drives this whole passage: “It is high time that I do something for my own household (*bayit*)” (v. 30, transl. Speiser). That is, Jacob had four wives and many children yet no independent means of supporting them. Now, however, we are told that due to proprietary techniques of animal husbandry, his wealth grows (literally “bursts”)—seemingly overnight—and it is Jacob who becomes the trustee of all the assets detailed. The context thus suggests that the sense of *'ish* here has to do with his position as representing the entire household.

I.B.2.c. In short, the text's composer(s) presumed that its original audience would grasp that *'ish* here means something like the English term “family patriarch.”¹¹ The problem is that at least four recent dictionaries do not mention such a possibility.¹²

I.B.3. Genesis 43:3

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו יְהוּדָה לְאָמֹר But Judah said to him,
 הָעֵד הָעֵד בְּנֵי הָאִישׁ לְאָמֹר “The man (*'ish*) warned us solemnly,
 לֹא־תֵרְאוּ פָנַי ‘You will not see my face again
 בְּלֹתִי אֶחָיִכֶם אִתְּכֶם : unless your brother is with you.’”

—transl. NIV

I.B.3.a. In dialogue with his father, Judah refers to the persona of Joseph by calling him simply “the *'ish*.” This usage is pointed: if the term were omitted, Judah's statement would still make perfect grammatical and narrative sense, having the force of “We were solemnly warned . . .” This prompts the careful reader to construe *'ish* in some meaningful sense—which is not “male,” because that is clear enough from the verbal inflections, if not from the story line.

I.B.3.b. The narrative context provides meaning by conveying that Judah is emphasizing the harsh condition laid down by that Egyptian official whom they had encountered. Judah is daring to object to a direct order from his father to return to Egypt (uttered in the previous verse). In so doing, he must be emphasizing the final authority of the person whom he's quoting. It's not pos-

¹¹ CJPS renders idiomatically as “as a householder” in order to avoid the ambiguity of “patriarch” in the Genesis narratives. English lacks an exact equivalent term for this ancient Near Eastern role.

¹² DCH and TWOT do not recognize the possibility at all; TDOT recognizes it only with a genitive construction; HALOT recognizes it only with a genitive or an appositive construction.

sible to go see a different official, nor to appeal to a higher authority, because other than Pharaoh there is no higher authority: there is no alternative but to oblige him. Yet the term that Judah employs to express this is not a term of unquestioned specificity such as *sar* (“official,” used more than two dozen times in Genesis), *shalit* (“vizier”; Gen. 42:6), or *nitzav* (“viceroy”; 1 Kings 22:48). Nor does he repeat the appositional locution of the previous passage, where the brothers twice mentioned *ha-’ish ’adonei ha-’aretz* (“the *’ish* who is lord of the land”; 42:30, 33). Rather, it is simply “the *’ish*.”

I.B.3.c. In short, the text’s composer(s) presumed that its original audience would grasp—for the audience’s own sake, as well as those of the characters Judah and Jacob—that *ha-’ish* here means something like the English expression “the authority in question.”¹³ The problem is that at least four recent dictionaries fail to account for that sense.¹⁴

I.B.4. Genesis 45:1

וְלֹא-יָכֹל יוֹסֵף לְהִתְאַפֵּק	Then Joseph could no longer control himself
לְכָל הַנִּצָּבִים עָלָיו	before all those who stood by him,
וַיִּקְרָא הוֹצִיאוּ כָל-אִישׁ מֵעָלָי	and he cried out, “Send everyone (<i>kol ’ish</i>) away from me.”
וְלֹא-עָמַד אִישׁ אִתּוֹ	So no one stayed with him
בְּהִתְוַדַּע יוֹסֵף אֶל-אֶחָיו:	when Joseph made himself known to his brothers.

—transl. NRSV

I.B.4.a. Joseph’s usage of the term *’ish*, reiterated by the narrator, is conspicuous: if the text’s composer(s) had intended for Joseph simply to command “everyone” to leave (as NRSV has it, following RSV), this could have been accomplished more easily by omitting the phrase *kol-’ish*, yielding “Go out, away from me!” Alternatively, Joseph could have been made to drop *’ish* and simply inflect the word *kol*, that is, *hotzi’u kulkhem me-’alai* (“Go away—all of you—from me!”; cf. Isa. 48:14). The construction prompts the audience to read *’ish* meaningfully.¹⁵

I.B.4.b. If we were to look at Joseph’s three-word instruction in isolation, we could easily think that he wanted to be left alone. However, what follows in the same verse precludes that understanding. The story line is conclusive, as Harry Orlinsky pointed out: “it was only his Egyptian attendants who left Joseph’s presence, his brothers remaining where they were.”¹⁶ But if that were what Joseph had meant, wouldn’t we find a more specific term such as *’eved* (“servant”) or *nitzav* (“attendant”) or *na’ar* (“assistant”; Gen. 14:24)?

¹³ CJPS renders as “the official,” which on reflection was understated.

¹⁴ TDOT, TWOT, and DCH say nothing about leadership or authority. In contrast, HALOT does list a few examples apiece under the senses “indication of rank” and “indicates a public office,” but in all the examples cited, *’ish* (or *’anashim*) is in either a genitive or appositional construction.

¹⁵ The fact that the story’s situation would have required Joseph to have actually issued his command in Egyptian, rather than Hebrew, is conveniently overlooked here—as I think it would be by readers both ancient and contemporary. It is Hebrew that the reader is given to work with.

¹⁶ *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah* (JPS, 1969), ad loc.

I.B.4.c. In short, the text’s composer(s) presumed that its original audience would grasp, for the audience’s own sake as well as those of all characters present in the scene, that *kol-’ish* means “all subordinates” and refers to the *nitzavim* (NJPS: “attendants”) just mentioned by the narrator.¹⁷ The problem is that at least four recent dictionaries do not register such a usage.¹⁸

I.B.5. Genesis 47:2

וּמִקְצֵה אֶחָיו לָקַח חַמִּשָּׁה אָנָשִׁים	And selecting a few (lit. “five ‘ <i>anashim</i> ”) of his brothers,
וַיִּצְגַּם לְפָנָיו לְפָרֹעֹה:	he presented them to Pharaoh.

—transl. NJPS

I.B.5.a. As in our first example, the word of interest is not directly reflected in the translation displayed. NJPS apparently overlooks that the usage of *’anashim* is conspicuous; the initial clause could easily have omitted the term, saying *v’laqach chamishshah ’echaw* (“he had taken five of his brothers”) rather than *u-miktzeh ’echaw laqach chamishshah ’anashim*.¹⁹ The text has gone out of its way to employ *’ish* (via its functional plural), giving the word extra significance: those chosen are not merely brothers, they are *’anashim*. The wording prompts the audience to read *’ish* meaningfully. (But not as “adult males”: aren’t *all* of his brothers adult males? And doesn’t that fact go without saying?)

¹⁷ CJPS renders as “all of the staff” for the sake of English idiom. Now, it seems to be standard usage that in the context of a high official, the expression *nitzavim ’alaw* is an idiom that refers to attendants (1 Sam. 22:6, 7, 17; cf. 1 Sam. 4:20), as the plain-sense commentators Rashi and Ramban noted many centuries ago. For the expression also applies more generally to those who wait for instruction (Gen. 18:2; Exod. 18:14), and it is a synonym of the similar idiom *’amad lifnei*, literally “to stand before” = “to serve under the authority of” (e.g., Gen. 41:46; Zech. 3:4). Secondly, the preposition *’et* (which appears in the third part of the sentence, *we-lo’ ’amad ’ish ’itto*) often means not simply “with” but also “under the direction of” (e.g., Num. 1:5; Gen. 24:32 in light of 24:59; 1 Sam. 21:2). Thus some of the verse’s language is not as vague as NRSV (and ASV and KJV before it) depicts. Rather, the word choice seems tailored to match the direction of the story. In short, not only the plot but also the collocated language suggests that the noun *’ish* here refers specifically to Joseph’s subordinates. However, note that the text presumes *’ish* to be understood as “subordinates” in 2 Sam. 13:9, where the surrounding verbal cues are absent.

¹⁸ TDOT and TWOT say nothing about subordination. HALOT lists the sense “in association with someone,” but this applies only to the plural form, *’anashim*. DCH offers “servant, member of retinue, *always plural*.” Yet it cites 2 Sam. 13:9, in which *’ish* is singular, perhaps a collective. When I queried the editor, David J.A. Clines, about the discrepancy, he conceded that “usually plural” would have been a better note. However, he expressed doubt that the present instance in Gen. 45:1 belonged in this category, explaining that “with senses of a word such as this, there are no hard and fast lines of distinction, and the fact that a person who is a servant is sometimes called an *’ish* does not necessarily mean that *’ish means* servant. There’s the matter of denotation and connotation to take care of” (pers. comm., 2/25/06).

¹⁹ Speiser points out that the first word, *u-miktzeh*, serves to emphasize Joseph’s selectivity (ad loc.). This strengthens the point that I am about to make. (Nevertheless, like the NJPS on which he also worked, Speiser did not render *’anashim* directly: “he had picked several of his brothers and presented them to Pharaoh.”) Yet even the verb *laqach* alone implies an act of selection, in the context of a larger pool of available candidates—as will be discussed further, below.

I.B.5.b. The narrative context meanwhile conveys that Joseph is designating some of his brothers to represent the entire group; they are to serve as the group's representatives. Such a sense for *'anashim* fits the verse's syntax perfectly, in contrast to any other recognized sense of the word: "and from among his brothers he had selected five representatives."²⁰

I.B.5.c. In short, the text's composer(s) presumed that its original audience would grasp that *'anashim* here means something like the English word "representatives."²¹ The problem is that at least four recent dictionaries give no indication of such a usage.²²

I.C. From Five Paradigmatic Examples to a Paradigm Shift

I.C.1. What I have presented so far is only the start. We must consider that scholars have offered other explanations of at least some of the above usages—explanations that are consistent with the standard view of *'ish* as primarily "adult male." Other scholars dismiss anomalous instances of *'ish* as the result of poor editing. And still others apparently shrug at certain instances of *'ish*, as if to say that not every word in the Bible is redolent with meaning. I will examine these arguments in Part II.

I.C.2. But what if the Bible includes dozens of instances of each of the five senses of *'ish* posited in I.B? What if such instances are found across various genres, and in all the sources posited by higher-critical scholars? What if such usages of absolute forms are also consistent with the way that the term's bound forms are employed? If so, then my few odd cases become more of a real issue for Bible scholarship. And so in Part II, I will adduce and assess further evidence for *'ish* as a term that conveys affiliation in one sense or another.

Thus ends Part I of a projected seven-part series.

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²⁰ In English, "representatives" means both "serving as a typical or characteristic example" and also "standing in or acting for another person or group." Here, both senses are pertinent, which makes this usage distinct from *'anashim* in the sense of "agents" discussed in the first example.

²¹ CJPS renders as such.

²² HALOT, TDOT, TWOT, and DCH say nothing about representation.