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Biblical Word of the Month - Righteous

By: Jeff A. Benner

The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous, and his ears toward their cry. (Psalm 34:15 RSV, verse 16 in the Hebrew Bible)

Who are the righteous and what is righteousness? As our verse above indicates God sees and listens to the righteous so it would be in our best interest to know for sure what righteousness is. Every Hebrew word in the mind of the Ancient Hebrews paints a picture of action. By doing a little investigation this picture can be found.

The first step in finding a more concrete meaning to a word is to find it being used in that context. For example the word barak is almost always translated as "bless" but being an abstract word we need to find it being used in a more concrete manner which we do in Genesis 24:11 where it means "to kneel". This gives us a more concrete picture of the word. The problem with the word tsadiyq is that it is never used in a concrete manner.

The next method is to compare its use in Hebrew poetry where words are commonly paralleled with similar meaning words. A common form of Hebrew poetry is the

expression of one idea in two different ways as we see in the passage below where the word righteous is paralleled with the word upright.

Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart! (Psalm 32:11 RSV)

The Hebrew words tsadiyq (righteous) and yashar (upright) are paralleled many times in the Bible indicating that in the Hebrew mind they were similar in meaning. Upright is another abstract word but it is used in a concrete manner such as in Jeremiah 31:9 where it means "straight" as in a straight path.

Another common form of Hebrew poetry is to use opposites in parallel such as in the following verse.

For the arms of the wicked shall be broken; but the LORD upholds the righteous. (Psalm 37:17 RSV)

Here we find the word wicked (rasha) being used as an antonym (opposite in meaning) to the word righteous (tsadiyq). These two words are also commonly used together in poetical passage indicating the Hebrews saw these two words as opposites. While the word is an abstract we can find its concrete meaning in the verb form, also pronounced rasha. The verb form means to "depart" in the sense of leaving God's way as seen in Psalm 18:21.

We now have a few clues into the meaning of a tsadiyq. He is one who is straight and does not depart from the way of God. The next step is to understand thise concepts from the Ancient Hebraic culture, lifestyle and thought.

The Ancient Hebrews were a nomadic people who often traveled the same paths to pastures and campsites. Anyone leaving these straight paths can become lost and wander in the wilderness. A wicked person is seen as one lost on a crooked path while a righteous person is one who remains on the straight path.

The next question is how do we know what the path is in our lives as we attempt to remain on God's path?

And what great nation is there, that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law (Torah) which I set before you this day? (Dueteronomy 4:8 RSV)

The Torah, literally meaning the teachings, of God is the path. When we remember to show love, honor and respect to others and their property we are on the path of righteousness (a tsadiyq or righteous person) but when we forget the ways of God we are leaving the path and if we do not get back onto that path we are in danger of becoming lost (a rasha or wicked person).

Name of the Month - Shem

By: Jeff A. Benner

We are not given much history of Shem or what type of person he was but his name does provide us with a clue. Unlike our names, a Hebrew's name was a word with meaning. This meaning was a reflection of the person himself and his character. The Hebrew word "shem" is most often translated as "name" and the name of Shem in English is Name.

The word shem means much more than just a name. A related word in Hebrew is the word "neshemah" meaning "breath". In the Hebrew mind the breath is much more than the exchange of air in the lungs but was the seat of one's character. The word "shem" is also used in the manner as seen in the passage below where the word "fame" is the Hebrew "shem".

For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol; and his fame was in all the nations round about. (1 Kings 4:31 RSV)

This is similar to our desire to "have a good name". This has nothing to do the actual name but the character of the one with the name.

As Shem's name means character we can conclude that he was a man of character and this is what we see in the one story about him. Shem and his brother Japheth (yaphet) go backwards into the tent of his father with a robe to cover the nakedness of his father after it had been exposed by Ham. It should also be noted that "the uncovered nakedness of the father" is not the nakedness of the father but is an idiom for sexual relations with the mother as mentioned in Leviticus 18:8.

You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is your father's nakedness.

It had always bothered me that Ham was the one who uncovered the nakedness of his father, but it was his son Canaan that was cursed for it. That is until I discovered that Canaan was the product of the union between Ham and his mother. This demonstrates how a simple reading of the text does not always reveal what the text is actually stating.

Question of the Month – Earth Age?

By: Jeff A. Benner

Q: Does a Bible believer have to believe that the earth is older than the rest of the universe as the earth was created in Genesis 1 and the sun, moon and stars are created in Genesis 1:16?

A: In our western minds we are accustomed to relating all things to a chronological order. A novel is a chronological order of events, we tell stories in chronological order, etc. If one reads Genesis one as a chronology then we would conclude that the earth was made first then later the sun, moon and stars came. But, there is a problem with this perspective.

On day one God separated light from darkness (Genesis 1:4 And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.) but on day four God again separates the light from the darkness (Genesis 1:18 and to divide the light from the darkness: and God saw that it was good). From a chronological perspective this makes no sense, how can God separate light from darkness on two different days?

The Ancient Hebrews did not think in chronological order as we do, in fact they perceived time in much the same way as space. Words related to time are the same words used for space.

For example the word qedem means "where the sun rises" and can mean "the east" or "ancient time". Imagine yourself standing in the desert of the near east facing the rising sun (In ancient time all things were oriented to the east whereas we use the north). What is before you is "the east" and it is "the past" it is all there for you to see. (While we see the past as behind us, the Ancient Hebrews see the past as in front of us and the future behind us). But the farther east you look the hazier it is and more difficult to see. What is obscure or unseen at the horizon is called the "olam" (usually translated as eternity). The origins of the world to the Ancient Hebrews are like the fuzzy horizon in front of you that is difficult to see.

The Ancient Hebrews did not attempt to clear up the image of the past; instead they just understood it as olam (at or beyond the horizon). It is only our western mind that needs to clear up this image; we need to know precisely how the origins of the world came about. The Ancient Hebrews did not care; they just knew that it was.

As I mentioned Genesis 1 is not a chronological order of events. The Ancient Hebrews think in blocks of events. Let me demonstrate with the following paragraph from a western perspective.

"I got up and ate breakfast and read the newspaper. I then drove to work. While at work I read yesterday's reports. At noon I walked across the street for lunch. While there I read a magazine. Back at work I read my emails. After work I drove home and had dinner."

Now let me rearrange this paragraph in block form, the way the Hebrews would have conveyed this same story.

"I drove to work and walked across the street and I drove home and I ate breakfast and I ate lunch and I ate dinner and I read the newspaper and I read the reports and I read a magazine and I read my emails."

There is no way you can make any chronological sense out of this narrative. Instead you can easily see what I "did". Genesis 1 is written in the same fashion of "blocks".

When I read the Bible I try not to read it from a modern western perspective. Instead I try and read it from an ancient eastern one. The question, "Which came first, the earth or the sun and moon?" is an irrelevant question to the Ancient Hebrews and therefore not a question that can be answered from the Biblical text.

Verse of the Month – Psalm 1:6

By: Jeff A. Benner

כִּי־יוֹדֵעַ יְהוָה דֶּרֶךְ צַדִּיקִים וְדֶרֶךְ רְשָׁעִים תֹּאבֵד:

For Jehovah knoweth the way of the righteous; But the way of the wicked shall perish.
(ASV)

This translation is filled with abstract words which require mental understanding alone. The ancient Hebrews on the other hand used physical images of action to express ideas. It is our goal here to discover these physical images in order to reveal the true meaning behind the translation.

כִּי (kiy)

This word means "because" and is used to explain what came previously.

יוֹדֵעַ (yo-dey-ah)

This is the verb yada meaning "to know" but written in the participle form meaning "knowing" a present action. In Hebrew the verb yada means much more than to know. It means to have an intimate and interactive relationship with its subject.

יְהוָה (yhwh)

This is the name of God. There are many theories as to the origin and meaning of this name but most likely comes from the verb HWH (hawah) meaning to exist. The yud added to the beginning identifies the object of the verb as first person, masculine, singular, imperfect tense or "he exists".

דֶּרֶךְ **(de-rekh)**

While this word is often translated as "way" implying a course of action it is more literally a "road" which is traveled to a destination.

צַדִּיקִים **(tsa-diy-qiym)**

This is the word we discussed in the "Word of the Month" meaning "one who walks the straight path". The "iym" is the masculine plural suffix.

וְדֶרֶךְ **(ve-de-rekh)**

The previx "ve" means "and" and the again we have the word meaning a road.

רְשָׁעִים **(re-shah-iym)**

The base word is "rasha" and was also mentioned in the "Word of the Month" above. It means one who has strayed from the path and become lost. The "iym" is the masculine plural suffix.

תֹּאבֵד **(to-ved)**

The base word is the verb avad. This word is usually translated as perish or destroyed but literally means to be lost in the sense of wandering around in bewilderment or despair out of sight of others. The prefix "to" identifies the object of the verb as third person, feminine, singular, imperfect tense or "she is lost" or "she will be lost". The object of the verb is the "derek" (a feminine word) of the "rasha".

The following is a literal rendering of this verse from its Hebraic meaning.

Because the one who exists is intimately familiar with the road of the ones who remain on the path and the road of the ones who stray from the path is lost from his sight.