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**DAVID E. S. STEIN,
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A TERM OF AFFILIATION**

THE NOUN אִישׁ (’îš) IN BIBLICAL HEBREW: A TERM OF AFFILIATION

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“The last place to look for the meaning of a word is in the dictionary.”

—Harold P. Scanlin¹

One of the most frequent nouns in the Hebrew Bible is אִישׁ (and its functional plural, אִישִׁים), appearing well over two thousand times.² Lexicons and grammars generally gloss it as “man” (adult male). However, my own semantic analysis suggests that אִישׁ functions very differently in biblical Hebrew than the conventional view allows. Most often, it seems to be a term of affiliation; that is, the noun denotes relationship either to a group or to another party. Only occasionally and incidentally does אִישׁ connote an “adult male.”

My analysis treats in a more cursory way the feminine counterpart term אִשָּׁה, which appears in the Bible some 781 times, roughly one-third as often

¹ “The Study of Semantics in General Linguistics,” in Walter P. Bodine, ed. *Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), p. 134.

² This article, which I dedicate to the memory of my gracious mother-in-law, Nicole Uffer (d. 3 Feb. 2008), is based on my presentation to the Biblical Lexicography section of the Society of Biblical Literature on Nov. 19, 2007. I thank Prof. Carol Meyers (Duke Univ.) for patiently critiquing several iterations of my understanding of אִישׁ during our work on *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006), for which I served as the revising editor. I am grateful also to Dr. Reinier de Blois (Editor, Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew) for his tutelage, as well as to Rabbis Ivan Caine and Vivie Mayer (Reconstructionist Rabbinical College), Dr. Laurence Kutler, and Professors Adele Berlin (Univ. of Maryland), Alan Crown (Univ. of Sydney, emeritus), Edward Greenstein (Bar-Ilan Univ.), Stephen Kaufman (Hebrew Union College/Cincinnati), Samuel Meier (Ohio State Univ.), Bruce Waltke (Reformed Theological Seminary), and Ziony Zevit (American Jewish Univ.) for their thoughtful responses to my queries on the semantics of אִישׁ. I also thank the anonymous reviewers.

as אִישׁ. It evaluates the semantic correspondences between the two terms mainly for what they say regarding אִישׁ.

PRIOR SCHOLARSHIP ON אִישׁ AS A TERM OF AFFILIATION

More than thirty years ago, the late Alison Grant examined 2174 instances of אִישׁ in the Bible.³ She classified each instance according to the nature of its reference—most basically, whether it was particular or general. Latent in her article are the distributions shown in the following table.

Types of Reference	Frequency of usage
Any or each member of a defined group or class	74%
Particular individual (definite or indefinite)	20%
Anyone (undefined group)	4%
General human reference	1%
	99%

Grant found that at most 20% of all instances of the noun אִישׁ point to a particular individual (with either definite or indefinite reference). In nearly 3 out of 4 cases, אִישׁ denotes any or each member of a defined group or category of persons. The distribution is so lopsided that one can hardly gainsay that most biblical instances of this word *situate the referent in relation to a group*.⁴

Grant drew the following conclusion:

ʾîš . . . relates primarily to an individual as a member of a particular group. . . . [An] *ʾîš* . . . would not be thought of as an individual with an independent existence, . . . but always in relation to [a] particular group or community. (pp. 9–10)

In other words, אִישׁ appears to be a term of affiliation.

Yet Grant’s insight into the nature of אִישׁ hardly figures into recent lexicography, as can be seen by checking six standard lexical reference works published since her article appeared. The first meaning (implicitly or explicitly the primary meaning) listed in those works is as follows:

³ Alison M. Grant, “‘Adam and ʾîš: Man in the OT,” *Australian Biblical Review* 25 (1977), pp. 2–11. Grant checked all instances that she could locate. According to TLOT (below, n. 10), the common noun אִישׁ occurs 2183 times in the Bible; per DCH (below, n. 8), 2179 times; per Accordance 7.4 (Bible software), 2187. The discrepancy of 1% does not affect Grant’s overall results or principal conclusions.

⁴ Grant’s report did not present a complete tabulation of how she categorized every instance of the words under study. Arguably the reader or the present author might well prefer to classify some instances of אִישׁ differently. However, because most instances of אִישׁ are uncontroversial, chances are that any such reclassification would not appreciably affect the basic result.

- “Connotes primarily the concept of man as an individual.”⁵
- “Biologically male nature.”⁶
- “Man in a general sense, with further specification via opposition.”⁷
- “Usually man, person, often without contextual emphasis on gender.”⁸
- “The basic meaning of ^ʾīš is man, and it is the opposite of ^ʾīššā, woman.”⁹
- “The word’s basic meaning is ‘man’ (the mature male in contrast to the woman).”¹⁰

Even such a brief glance is sufficient to show that the lexicographers have not perceived **אִישׁ** to be an intrinsically relational term.¹¹ Although some lexicons do indicate that **אִישׁ** occasionally bears the sense of someone who stands in relationship to a group or party (e.g., “retainers,” “governor,” “escorts”), the cases that they then cite tend to signal affiliation *syntactically*—via a possessive suffix or a genitive construction—rather than stating that **אִישׁ** alone may bear this meaning.

However, Grant’s finding warrants a second look because of other, nonlinguistic scholarship during the past three decades. Various scholars have applied social science methodologies to reconstruct the society of ancient Israel and its neighbors. They have consistently concluded that ancient Near Eastern societies were *group*-oriented rather than *individual*-oriented, and personal identity was viewed in relational terms.¹² Of course,

⁵ *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (1980), edited by R. Laird Harris; entry 83a on **אִישׁ** by Thomas E. McComiskey.

⁶ “biol. männliches Wesen” (my transl.), *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament* (1987), by Wilhelm Gesenius, 18th edn., rev. Rudolph Meyer and Herbert Donner, pp. 50–51.

⁷ “Hombre. En sentido genérico, que se puede especificar por polarización, es decir, contrapuesto a otro” (my transl.), *Diccionario Bíblico Hebreo-Español* [= DBHE] (1993), edited by Luis Alonso-Schökel.

⁸ *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* [= DCH] (1993), edited by David J.A. Clines, Vol. 1: 221–22.

⁹ *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (1997), edited by Willem A. VanGemeren; entry #408 by Victor P. Hamilton, pp. 388–90. This entry cites Alison Grant’s article yet does not engage her conclusions.

¹⁰ *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* [= TLOT] (1997), edited by Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, transl. Mark E. Biddle; entry by J. Kühlewein, pp. 98–104.

¹¹ A more comprehensive examination of the cited articles yields the same result—as does consultation of the following six earlier reference works, listed in chronological order: *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* [= BDB] (1906), based on the work of Wilhelm Gesenius, p. 35; *Enṣiqlopedyā miqrā’it* (1950), ed. Eleazar Sukenik, pp. 273–274; *Oṣar lēshôn ha-miqrā’* (1957), ed. S. Loewenstamm and Y. Blau, pp. 100–101; *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*, ed. Botterweck and Ringgren [= TDOT] (transl. 1974), entry on **אִישׁ** by N. P. Bratsiotis, Vol. 1: 222–35; *Qōnqōrdansyā ḥādāshā* (Hebrew), ed. Abraham Even-Shoshan (1977; 4th edn., 1982), p. 49.

¹² Those scholars’ statements, listed in chronological order, include the

a conceptual group orientation does not necessarily determine the meaning of any particular word in that culture's language. Even so, it does commend to us a procedural preference: when we have a choice between two plausible ways to construe אִישׁ, the one that warrants consideration first is the one closest to ancient Near Eastern realities and concepts.

In this article, therefore, I investigate the validity of Grant's conclusion regarding the semantics of אִישׁ, using the tools of modern linguistics. Specifically, I examine whether אִישׁ, in its primary (that is, most frequently attested) sense, *intrinsically* denotes relationship or affiliation.

PARADIGMATIC (COMPARATIVE) ANALYSIS

אִישׁ versus אָדָם

Grant's article mainly contrasts the usage of the noun אָדָם with that of אִישׁ, because both words were usually considered similar enough to lie in the same semantic domain. In conducting that paradigmatic analysis, Grant's interest was to clarify the meaning of אָדָם in Genesis 1–3; she paid attention to אִישׁ because it might shed light on אָדָם. Thus she tallied the referents of all of the Bible's instances of אָדָם in the same way as she did for אִישׁ. After her initial tally, Grant hypothesized that a biblical author would employ the word אִישׁ when thinking of either a particular individual or group of individuals, or any member of a particular group; whereas the text uses the word אָדָם to refer either to humankind, human beings in general, or any human being. She then conducted a second tally. She found that out of some 2700 instances, at most a dozen could possibly be said *not* to fit the hypothesis.

following:

“In the ancient world, . . . individuals were first and foremost members of a group.”

—Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria, and Israel* (1996), pp. 3, 374.

“The primary means of maintaining [social] order [was the] opposition between [competing] groups—families, clans, . . . lineages, and tribes.”

—Paula McNutt, *Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel* (1999), p. 78.

“In kinship-based communities [like ancient Israel], persons . . . interact with one another . . . to a large extent on the basis of blood descent.”

—Timothy Willis, *The Elders of the City: A Study of the Elders-Laws in Deuteronomy* (2001), p. 21.

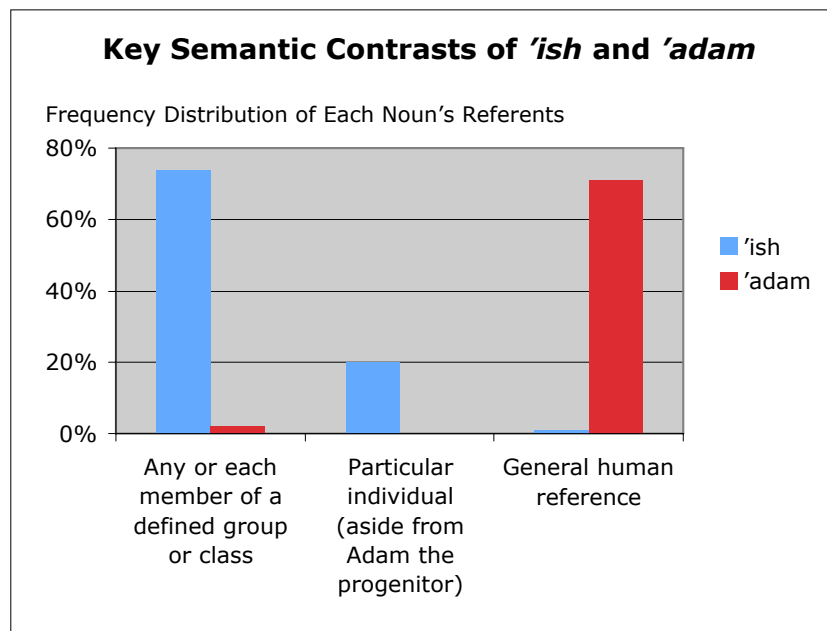
“A person was not an autonomous entity but someone's *father, mother, daughter, son, grandparent*, and so forth. These terms designated behavior as much as biology.”

—Carol Meyers, “The Family in Early Israel,” in *Families in Ancient Israel* (1997), pp. 21–22.

“The ‘household’ . . . provides the template for social interaction at all levels. . . Subordinates are either ‘sons’ or ‘servants’ of the person in authority, [and] superiors are ‘fathers’ or ‘masters.’”

—J. David Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East* (2001), pp. 70–71.

Grant concluded that the two words are employed so differently that the burden of proof would seem to be on those who think that these two words belong in the same semantic domain. The essential semantic distinctions are dramatic and robust. As we have seen, **ישׂ** usually situates its referent as “a member of a group or category,” whereas less than 2% of the instances of **אָדָם** (that is, 13 cases) could possibly be said to refer to someone as part of a group. And whereas 20% of instances of **ישׂ** refer to a particular individual, no instances of **אָדָם** do so, apart from one special case: the mythical progenitor of the human species.¹³ Grant concluded—correctly, in my view—that the terms **ישׂ** and **אָדָם** cannot be considered synonyms.¹⁴ The following chart graphically illustrates Grant’s spotlight on the semantic contrast of the two words.



¹³ Grant cited also Josh. 14:15 as referring to a particular individual, but more precisely it is a class reference to a progenitor.

¹⁴ She wrote: “The two words may be sharply distinguished in meaning . . . almost without exception throughout the whole of the Hebrew OT” (p. 2). In certain situations **ישׂ** and **אָדָם** at first glance do seem interchangeable; the Bible sometimes uses them as a stock word pair (e.g., II Kings 7:10; Isa. 2:9; Jer. 2:6). This apparent synonymy can be explained simply: in such cases, the group of which an **ישׂ** is the member is the entire human race. The two terms (**ישׂ** and **אָדָם**) are then functionally synonymous within that very limited context, even though they approach their referent from different angles. Laurence Kutler, who correctly stresses the biblical use of **ישׂ** as a military term whereas **אָדָם** is not, unfortunately overlooks Grant’s work, whose results undermine his assertion that “**ישׂ** and *’ādām* are close but not identical synonyms. . . . Each verse must be scrutinized on its own merit” (“A Structural Semantic Approach to Israelite Communal Terminology,” *JANES* 14 [1982], pp. 69–77; 73–74).

בֵּן versus אִישׁ

Now let us compare אִישׁ to another noun, בֵּן, which is unquestionably a term of affiliation. Someone who is a בֵּן is not a lone individual, but rather is a בֵּן of somebody or something else. Thus, if אִישׁ is indeed a relational term, its nature should become clearer through our comparison.

As it happens, בֵּן is one of the Bible's most frequently occurring words, appearing nearly five thousand times—more than twice as often as אִישׁ. Fortunately, for the purposes of this article a schematic comparison between אִישׁ and בֵּן will prove to be sufficiently conclusive.

The two nouns seem similar to each other—and unlike אָדָם—in the following six ways:

1. Both אִישׁ and בֵּן can point to a specific party, which enables delineation of relationship.¹⁵

אִישׁ הָיָה בְּאַרְצ־עֹזַן אִיּוֹב שְׁמוֹ (Job 1:1)

וַיִּמָּלֵט בֶּן־אָחִיזָב לְאֶחָיִל לְבָנ־אֶחָטֹב וְשְׁמוֹ אֲבִיגַיִר (I Sam. 22:20)

2. Both of our nouns can ascribe membership in a genus (that is, affiliation with a group) even to non-human entities.¹⁶

מִכָּל הַבְּהֵמָה הַטְּהוֹרָה תִּקַּח־לָךְ שִׁבְעָה שִׁבְעָה אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ (Gen. 7:2)

יָבֵא שְׁתֵּי תְרִים אוֹ שְׁנֵי בָנֵי יוֹנָה אֶל־הַכֶּהֵן (Num 6:10)

3. Both can express relationship with a person, as is made clear by a possessive suffix:¹⁷

אִשְׁתָּה (Gen. 16:3)

בְּנָה (Gen. 21:10)

4. Both can refer to a human being in terms of membership in a category. Here, for example, are instances where the two nouns are treated as roughly parallel in function:¹⁸

¹⁵ The first example introduces the character Job; the second focuses on a priest's sole surviving son. Similarly, both אִישׁ and בֵּן form plurals and are countable entities: שִׁבְעִים בָּנִים (Judg. 8:30); שִׁבְעָה אָנָשִׁים (Jer. 52:25). In contrast, אָדָם is never plural in the biblical corpus and is not countable (cf. Num. 31:46).

¹⁶ In the first example, God instructs Noah to take representative animals; the second example refers to birds fit for use in a priestly ritual.

¹⁷ “Her son” and “her husband,” respectively. In contrast, in the biblical corpus אָדָם never takes a possessive suffix.

¹⁸ The first example describes Saul's search for qualified warriors; the second describes the character of those who gathered around a treasonous outlaw. Other examples that indicate membership in a category: בְּנֵי־מִיתָה (I Sam. 20:31) and אִישׁ מָוֶת (I Kings 2:26); בְּנֵי־חַיִל (I Sam. 14:52) and אִישׁ חַיִל (Judg. 3:29); בְּנֵי־נְבִיא (Amos 7:14) and אִישׁ נְבִיא (Judg. 6:8); and בְּנֵי־חֲקָמִים (Isa. 19:11) and אִישׁ חֲקָם (I Kings 2:9). Likewise, a chief servant is called *ben bayit* (Gen. 15:3, Eccles. 2:7) or

וְרָאָה שְׂאוֹל כָּל-אִישׁ גְּבוּר וְכָל-בֶּן-חַיִל וַיֹּאסְפוּהוּ אֵלָיו: (I Sam. 14:52)

וַיִּקְבְּצוּ עָלָיו אַנְשֵׁים רַקִּים בְּנֵי בְלִיעֵל (II Chron. 13:7)

5. Both can refer to a constituent of a group that is signified by a collective term:¹⁹

וַיִּפֹּל מִן-הָעַם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כְּשִׁלְשֶׁת אַלְפֵי אִישׁ: (Exod. 32:28)

לֹא-יָשָׁב שָׁם אִישׁ וְלֹא-יָגֹר בָּהּ בֶּן-אָדָם: (Jer 49:18)

6. Both can refer to a group that is expressed in construct terms—that is, where the group is identified as comprised of its individual members:

כָּל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (Exod. 34:32) כָּל-אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל (Josh 10:24)

From these six similarities I provisionally conclude that *איש* functions like the relational term *בן*. That is, both nouns relate individual members to a group, and vice-versa. And their focus on relationship transcends even the boundary of humankind, to include other entities. Thus it seems to me that these two words may be said to lie in the *same semantic domain* of “relational” terms.

As for contrasts in the usage of the two nouns, I will mention one that seems instructive. When a group is identified via a plural construct term such as *בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל*, one might then expect that its constituent members are identified via the singular *בן*, but that is often not the case. Rather, the constituent member of a *בְּנֵי*-defined group is an *איש*:

אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (I Sam 9:2)

hā-ʾiṣ ʾāšer ʿal hā-bāyīt (Gen. 43:19) or *hā-ʾiṣ* (43:17). Both terms also indicate national membership: *אִישׁ-מִצְרַיִם* (I Sam. 30:11) and *בְּנֵי-מִצְרַיִם* (Ezek. 16:26). In contrast, only once in the biblical corpus does the word *אָדָם* arguably form a construct relation of any kind: *אָדָם בְּלִיעֵל אִישׁ אֹן* (Prov. 6:12), the first two words of which can be likened to *אִישׁ בְּלִיעֵל* (Prov. 16:27) and to *בְּנֵי-בְלִיעֵל* (I Sam. 25:17).

¹⁹ The first example counts the dead after a police operation, treating *איש* as the individual correlate of *עם*—a pairing that E. A. Speiser already noted (“‘People’ and ‘Nation’ of Israel,” *JBL* 79 [1960]: 160) and Kutler affirmed (“A Structural Semantic Approach,” 77; above, n. 14); in the second example, for the collective *אָדָם*, the individual correlate is *בְּנֵי-אָדָם*, a term that occurs more than ninety times. Both Speiser and Kutler assert meanwhile that *אָדָם* is the individual correlate of the collective term *גוי*; the only evidence offered, however, is the expression *וְעַל-גֹּי וְעַל-אָדָם יָחַד*: (Job 34:29), yet this example is inconclusive, because there *אָדָם* can also be read as a general term for “humankind,” like the parallelism of *כָּל-בְּשָׂר* and *אָדָם* in Job 34:15, or between *גוֹיִם* and *אָדָם* in Jer. 49:15 and Ps. 94:10. Nor does the presence of *יָחַד* necessarily imply a subsidiary ordering of terms; cf. Deut. 12:22; II Sam. 14:16; Jer. 48:7; Ps. 49:3.

rather than, say, בֵּן מְבִינֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל or simply בֵּן־יִשְׂרָאֵל. As will be demonstrated below, the usage rule in biblical Hebrew seems to be: whenever a member is *typifying* or *representing* such a group, this is conveyed via אִישׁ, not via בֵּן.

LEXICAL AND CONTEXTUAL MEANINGS

My analysis of hundreds of instances suggests that the primary (most common) sense of the noun אִישׁ refers to types of affiliations and relationships that together in English can be designated only by several overlapping terms. Today one cannot be sure whether the native Hebrew speaker considered these situationally defined types to be distinct senses of the word אִישׁ. (Hebrew did not force the speaker to make a distinction.) At any rate, the remainder of this article will treat what *in English* are three semantic nuances of אִישׁ: participant member, representative member, and representative. All three nuances involve relationship (with another party) or affiliation (with a group). In Hebrew these three nuances may have been considered a single *lexical* semantic domain.

Let me now introduce what I, as a contextually oriented translator, have perceived as distinct English equivalents for the biblical Hebrew usage of אִישׁ, within each of the three aforementioned nuances. A later section will give examples.

Participant Member

An אִישׁ can simply be a *member* of the group in question, as Grant mentioned. Likewise, אִישׁ seems to be the appropriate word choice for situations where a person is a *participant*—such as a party to a marriage, a legal proceeding, a transaction, a contract, or a conflict.

Representative Member

Another nuance of אִישׁ is to refer to a *typical* or *characteristic* exemplar of the group in question. In this sense, any single member “represents” the other members of the group because they are interchangeable for purposes of the discussion. In English translation, these usages are rendered variously as: one, each (one), anyone, or someone.²⁰

Representative on Behalf of Others

The third related nuance is “representational”—that is, an אִישׁ possesses the authority to stand for the group, or to act on behalf of the group, or to act on behalf of another party. In English terms, these meanings include:

²⁰ My classification transcends the distinction drawn by grammarians who discuss “someone” as being a “weak” meaning of אִישׁ, and “each/every” as being a “strong” meaning. See Heinrich Ewald, *Syntax of the Hebrew Language of the Old Testament*, transl. from the 8th German edn. by James Kennedy (London: T & T Clark, 1891; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), §§ 278b, 294b(2); Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, transl. and rev. by T. Muraoka (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1991), Vol. II § 147.b–c.

ruler, leader, notable, or householder; representative, delegate, or commissioner; agent, emissary, or envoy; deputy or subordinate; scion or heir.

PROCEDURAL NOTES

The next section will examine characteristic examples from each of the above three nuances of lexical meaning, in order to further demonstrate my contention that **אִישׁ** is intrinsically a relational or affiliational term—at least in most of its biblical attestations. But first, two procedural notes.

Spotting Both of the Noun’s Referents

A relational term has, in effect, not one referent but two: a *direct* referent and an *indirect* one. In the case of our noun **אִישׁ**, it points directly to the individual (member or party or representative), while indirectly it refers to the group or situation or party with which that **אִישׁ** is affiliated. And our noun functions so as to relate those two referents to each other.

Depicted schematically, the meaning of our word has three aspects:



To understand how **אִישׁ** is functioning in a given instance, the listener or reader must discern *both* referents. In many cases, however, the indirect referent is not stated outright; it must be inferred from the situation.²¹

Avoiding Syntactic Markers of Affiliation

In biblical Hebrew, one can easily convey a sense of affiliation between a given noun and something else via *syntactic markers*—either a construct relationship (such as **אִישׁ־דָּוִד**) or a possessive pronominal suffix (such as **דָּוִד וְאִישׁוֹ**). In order to clarify whether **אִישׁ** functions as a term of affiliation *on its own*, the following analysis focuses on instances where the Bible employs **אִישׁ** or **אִישִׁים** as *absolute* nouns.²²

²¹ For more on how to identify the indirect referent of **אִישׁ**, see further below, especially the Discussion.

²² As identified via Accordance 7.4, of the Bible’s 2187 instances of our noun, 73% are in absolute form (1331 singular, 273 plural).

SYNTAGMATIC (CONTEXTUAL) ANALYSIS

Collocated Verbs

Evidence in support of viewing אִישׁ as a term of affiliation comes from looking at the *collocated verbs*. With regard to the proposed nuance of אִישׁ as “participant member (of a group),” one would expect to find אִישׁ correlated with verbs that *presume group membership*. That is, only those individuals who are members of the group in question would be involved in the action described by the verb. For example, consider the verb קָבַץ (“gathered”),

... וַיִּתְקַבְּצוּ אֵלָיו כָּל־אִישׁ . . .
וַיְהִי עִמּוֹ כְּאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת אִישׁ:

The following groups appear in the Bible as *direct objects* of this verb:

פְּלִשְׁתִּים • מִצְרַיִם • יְהוּדָה • יִשְׂרָאֵל • כָּל־הָעָם

And in context, the *constituents* of these groups are designated by the following terms:

אִישׁ • אַח • חֵבֶר • זִקֵּן • בֵּן • בַּעַל

The first five words on this list are relational terms. By virtue of being on such a list, the implication is that the last word, אִישׁ, is a relational term as well.²³

I observed the same phenomenon with regard to other verbs that similarly presume group membership: קָהַל (“assembled”), זָעַק (“mustered”), אָסַף (“brought together”), and לָקַט (“collected”). Examples of where אִישׁ can be construed as a “participant member” include:

וְהָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר בְּבָתִּים אֲשֶׁר עִם־בַּיִת מִיָּה נִזְעָקוּ (Judg 18:22)
וַיִּתְלַקְטוּ אֶל־יַפְתָּח אֲנָשִׁים רַיָּקִים (Judg. 11:3)

Correlated Group Nouns

Another line of evidence to suggest that אִישׁ can denote a “participant member” is its correlation with collective group nouns. For example:²⁴

הָאִישׁ אֲחָד יִחְטָא וְעַל כָּל־הָעֵדָה תִּקְצָף: (Num. 16:22)
כִּי בְּמַצָּעַר אֲנָשִׁים בָּאוּ | חֵיל אֲרָם

That is, the individual correlate of עֵדָה (“community”) and of חֵיל (“army”) is אִישׁ. Similarly, as we saw earlier, אִישׁ is also the individual correlate of עַם

²³ The indirect referent of אִישׁ is thus defined by the verb; that is, the group in question consists of those who are gathered.

²⁴ In the first example, Moses and Aaron speak while trying to calm God down during Korah’s rebellion. *The Contemporary Torah* (above, n. 2) thus reads: “When one member sins, will you be wrathful with the whole community?” The second example is describing the success of Aram’s army against that of Judah.

(“people, fighting force”). Thus, it seems to me that the recurring idiom **כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד** (literally, “like one ’iṣ”) makes sense quite directly if understood to mean “like a group that has only one member.”

וַיָּקָם כָּל־הָעָם כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד (Judg. 20:8)

With the Preposition of Membership

A further line of evidence for a “membership” sense of **אִישׁ** is the frequency and variety of similar constructions in which **אִישׁ**, in context, can only mean “one member out of the specified group.” The preposition **מִן** is a key part of this construction, as these examples show:

וְאִין אִישׁ מֵאֲנָשֵׁי הַבַּיִת שָׁם בְּבַיִת: (Gen. 39:11)

וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֹוִי (Exod. 2:1)

אִישׁ אִישׁ מִבֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל (Lev. 17:3)

וְאִישׁ עָמַד עָלָיו מִנְעָרֵי יוֹאָב (II Sam. 20:11)

Narrative Presumption of Membership

Occasionally, the construction of a narrative seems to presume that **אִישׁ** has a “membership” sense. Consider the case of the **אִישׁ** who is gathering wood on the sabbath day:

וַיְהִי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִדְבָּר
וַיִּמְצְאוּ אִישׁ מְקַשֵּׁשׁ עֵצִים בַּיּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת:

The perpetrator, who is identified only as an **אִישׁ**, is soon stoned to death in punishment for the deed. Now, the relevant laws about observing the Sabbath apply only to Israelites (Exod. 35:1–3). So how is it that the readers are supposed to realize that this fellow is an Israelite? The way that this passage makes the best narrative sense is to presume that *the audience should know* that **אִישׁ** means “a member of the group just mentioned.”²⁵

Partner in Marriage

The universally recognized nuance of **אִישׁ** as “husband,” which occurs in more than seventy biblical instances, can be seen as an expression of our noun’s “participant member” sense.²⁶ That is, the noun **אִישׁ** serves to denote (the male) partner or party to the marriage, which is our noun’s

²⁵ To convey the relational nuance of **אִישׁ** in translation, I have construed the verb impersonally and rendered the clause **וַיִּמְצְאוּ אִישׁ מְקַשֵּׁשׁ עֵצִים** as: “one of their fellows was found gathering wood” (*The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* (NY: URJ Press, 2008).

²⁶ The King James Version (KJV) renders **אִישׁ** as “husband” 77 times. All 12 lexicons cited above list “husband” as a meaning of **אִישׁ**. However, only a few of them (HALOT, TDOT, DBHE; above, nn. 8 and 11) recognize this sense—albeit rarely—even in the absence of a possessive pronoun (e.g., “her **אִישׁ**”).

implied indirect referent. Examples of אִישׁ in the context of marriage, often counterposed with אִשָּׁה, include the following.²⁷

וְנָקָה הָאִישׁ מֵעֹן וְהָאִשָּׁה הֵיחָא תִשָּׂא אֶת־עוֹנָהּ: (Num. 5:31)

וְאִם־הָיוּ תִהְיֶה לְאִישׁ וְנִדְרָהָ עָלֶיהָ (Num. 30:7)

וְקָחוּ לְבָנֵיכֶם נָשִׁים וְאֶת־בָּנוֹתֵיכֶם תִּנּוּ לְאִנְשֵׁים (Jer. 29:6)

In such situations, the sense of “husband” is easily explained by viewing our noun as an intrinsically relational term. Meanwhile, the feminine counterpart term אִשָּׁה likewise is understood to mean “wife” in similar contexts. Such correspondence in usage corroborates the proposed “(male) party to a marriage” interpretation of אִישׁ.²⁸

Party to a Proceeding

The noun אִישׁ is sometimes used conspicuously in the context of a legal proceeding, dispute, or violent conflict.²⁹ Examples include the prescription of legal procedures:³⁰

וְהָשִׁיב אֶת־אֲשָׁמוֹ . . . (Num. 5:7–8)

וְנָתַן לְאִשְׁרֵי אֲשָׁם לֹו:

וְאִם־אִין לְאִישׁ גָּאֵל לְהָשִׁיב הָאֲשָׁם אֵלָיו

וְעָמְדוּ שְׁנֵי־הָאִנְשִׁים אֲשֶׁר־לָהֶם הָרִיב . . . לְפָנֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים (Deut. 19:17)

²⁷ The first example ends the passage about a ritual for a husband who accuses his wife of adultery; the second example conditions a woman’s freedom to make vows on whether she has a husband; and the third example encourages matchmaking.

²⁸ The correspondence in usage also explains why the feminine term is used even for slave-wives and concubines (Gen. 16:3; 25:1 [in light of v. 6]; 30:4; Judg. 19:1). Further, it undercuts a statement by Carol Meyers in *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* (above, n. 25), which infers from a lexical fact—that אִשָּׁה means both “woman” and “wife”—that “a woman’s identity was virtually inseparable from her status as a married woman” (p. xli). Rather, the primary sense of אִשָּׁה appears to be “(female) affiliate,” for which the most salient English rendering in marriage-related contexts is “wife.” Thus, what the word אִשָּׁה says about “a woman’s identity” is only that the Bible almost always expresses that concept in relational terms—just as it does for a man’s identity.

²⁹ “Conspicuous” usage means that the noun could be either omitted or replaced with a pronoun and the passage would still make grammatical sense.

³⁰ The first example discusses how a party is to be compensated for having been wronged; the second example discusses the disposition of a legal dispute.

The same conspicuous usage of **אִישׁ** is found in direct speech:³¹

מִה־יַעֲשֶׂה לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִכֶּה אֶת־הַפְּלִשְׁתִּי הַלֵּז (I Sam. 17:26)

כִּי בְזֻמּוֹת הָאִישׁ הָעֵשָׂה זֹאת: (II Sam. 12:5)

וְהוֹשִׁיבוּ שָׁנִים אַנְשִׁים בְּנֵי־בְלֵעַל נְגֻדּוֹ (I Kgs. 21:10)

Similar to such instances are those that designate both parties as **אִישׁ**:³²

מִשְׁפָּט אָמַת יַעֲשֶׂה בֵּין אִישׁ לְאִישׁ: (Ezek. 18:8)

וְנִגַּשׁ הָעָם אִישׁ בְּאִישׁ וְאִישׁ בְּרֵעֵהוּ (Isa. 3:5)

וַיִּכּוּ אִישׁ אִישׁוֹ (I Kgs. 20:20)

Both types of usage are easily explained by viewing our noun as an intrinsically relational term, whose indirect referent is the set of interested parties to the proceeding in question, while the direct referent is one of the parties. Meanwhile, the feminine counterpart term **אִשָּׁה** likewise is used conspicuously to mean a “party” in similar contexts.³³ Such correspondence in usage corroborates the proposed interpretation of **אִישׁ**.

As Characteristic of a Group of Human Beings

Let us move to the second basic nuance of **אִישׁ**, namely, where it denotes a typical or characteristic exemplar—what I call a “representative member.” By all accounts, one frequently attested meaning of **אִישׁ** is “each one” in a group. Consider this example from the episode in which Abram and his nephew Lot part company:

וַיִּפְרְדּוּ אִישׁ מֵעַל אָחִיו: (Gen. 13:11)

If **אִישׁ** is intrinsically about affiliation, then this usage is easy to explain. As stated earlier, **אִישׁ** functions so as to relate a direct referent to an indirect one. It points (indirectly) to the *group* and (more directly) to its *individual members*. Here—as defined by the plural verb—the “group in question” consists of those kin who are now separating from each other. The individual members of that group, as they part ways, are momentarily

³¹ The first example is young David’s question regarding the reward for whoever challenges Goliath, who has twice demanded an **אִישׁ** with whom he can fight (vv. 8, 10); the second example is King David’s condemnation of the guilty party in Nathan’s parable; and the third example is Queen Jezebel’s secret instructions to arrange for false witnesses so as to condemn Naboth.

³² The first example states that doing justice is part of the characterization of a righteous person; the second example, that divine punishment of the Judahites will involve mutual oppression; and the third example describes the progress of a battle. Compare the construct expressions **אִישׁ רִיב** (“disputant”) in Judg. 12:2, Isa. 41:1, Jer. 15:10, and Job 31:35; and **אִישׁ מִלְחָמוֹת** (“party to war”) in II Sam. 8:10 (= I Chron. 18:10), Isa. 42:12, and I Chron. 28:3. See also I Sam. 2:25.

³³ E.g., Exod. 2:7; Deut. 22:14; I Kings 3:16; Ezek. 23:2.

interchangeable with regard to the action described. It is in this sense that each one is an אִישׁ.³⁴

Corroboration of this understanding of אִישׁ comes from the corresponding usage of אִשָּׁה in distributive or reciprocal references within a specifically female group.³⁵

As Characteristic of a Group with Non-Human Members

On some two dozen occasions, אִישׁ means “each one” in a group that is defined by the verb—as discussed above—yet that group comprises direct referents that are *not individual human beings*. For example:

כִּי-אִישׁ בְּנַחְלָתוֹ יִדְבְּקוּ מִסּוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: (Num. 36:9)

Here our noun אִישׁ relates a group (“those who shall remain attached” to their landholding) to its members, but the group’s members are not individuals. Rather, each member is one of “the tribes” of the Israelites. Biblical Hebrew similarly applies אִישׁ to the elements of many other *abstract sets*: households (Exod. 12:4; Num. 1:52, 2:2, 2:34); Israelite clans or lineages (Num. 26:54, 35:8); nations (Gen. 10:5b; Zeph. 2:11); foreign deities (II Kings 18:33; Isa. 36:18); and spiritual creatures with wings and multiple faces (Ezek. 1:9, 11, 12, 23).

Our noun also designates various *concrete inanimate objects*: split halves of animal carcasses (Gen. 15:10); Leviathan’s scales (Job 41:9); engraved stones on the high priest’s breastplate (Exod. 28:21); brackets for bronze lavers (I Kings 7:30); images of cherubim (Exod. 25:20, 37:9); and stars in the sky (Isa. 40:26).³⁶

This remarkably wide range of application makes perfect sense if אִישׁ is indeed a term of affiliation. It then functions in all such cases according to its primary sense as “representative member”: whenever one has in view a group or set that is comprised of *interchangeable* members, אִישׁ is the word that enables a Hebrew speaker to refer to each of them.

As Alison Grant noted, the scope of such entities cited above “suggests that the word אִישׁ itself carries the meaning ‘each one (of a group)’ rather than meaning ‘man.’” (p. 9). This is a strong argument in favor of construing אִישׁ as a relational term.³⁷ And further corroboration

³⁴ Alternatively, rather than describing the situation in English in terms of member-and-group, one could characterize Abram and Lot as *parties to the proceeding*, that is, to the action being described. See the previous sub-section.

³⁵ Exod. 3:22; Jer. 9:19; Ruth 1:8.

³⁶ Inexplicably, Robert Alter states in his commentary (*The Five Books of Moses: A Translation and Commentary* [NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004]) that אִישׁ “is a word applied to animate beings, not to things,” an assertion already disproved circa 1160 by Abraham Ibn Ezra, ad loc.

³⁷ The sense of “each” is conventionally explained as a case of semantic extension, whereby אִישׁ was initially used to mean “a man,” and then “each man,” and later “each human,” and eventually “each member” of some non-human set. While such development is possible, it would have required greater conceptual

comes from the fact that the feminine equivalent אִשָּׁה is used in a corresponding manner.³⁸

Representing a Group as Its Authority

As stated above, a third nuance of אִישׁ is as a “representative”—one who is authorized to stand for the group (or another party), or to act on their (or its) behalf. Grant does not mention this sense as intrinsic to אִישׁ, nor do the lexicons cited above. Yet even without proceeding systematically, I have found that more than 10% of the instances of אִישׁ employ it in a grammatically absolute and syntactically conspicuous manner in this sense.³⁹ Representational function is thus a significant part of the semantic range of this noun.

When Genesis describes the growth of Jacob’s wealth, the usage of אִישׁ is anomalous enough (per the conventional view) that the critical scholar Claus Westermann opined that “there is no reason for the designation.”⁴⁰

וַיִּפְרֹץ הָאִישׁ מְאֹד מְאֹד (Gen. 30:43)
וַיְהִי־לֹ צֹאן רְבוֹת וּשְׁפָחוֹת וְעֶבְדִים וְגַמְלִים וְחֹמְרִים:

In this passage, the direct referent of הָאִישׁ is evidently the previous verse’s last noun, which is יַעֲקֹב. But the usage is conspicuous: if in our verse the stated subject הָאִישׁ were left out, its two verbs (with their masculine inflections) would still unquestionably refer back to Jacob. The wording prompts the text’s audience to construe אִישׁ in some meaningful sense—which would not be “adult male,” because Jacob’s social gender is neither in question nor particularly germane.

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 (בַּיִת)” (v. 30, transl. Speiser). That is, Jacob was a householder responsible for four wives and many children, yet he lacked an independent means of supporting them. Now, however, we are told that his wealth increases (literally “bursts”)—and it is Jacob who becomes the trustee of all the assets detailed. The context thus suggests that the sense of אִישׁ here has to do with his position as representing the entire corporate

leaps than the hypothesis offered here.

³⁸ E.g., Exod. 26:3 (cloths); Isa. 34:15 (buzzards); Ezek. 1:9 (wings); Zech. 11:9 (sheep).

³⁹ For a list of more than two hundred instances, see my memorandum “What Does It Mean to Be a ‘Man’? The Noun *’ish* in Biblical Hebrew: A Reconsideration,” <http://home1.gte.net/res0z77f/ContempTorahpg.htm> (Part II). Furthermore, such usage is consistent with the way that the Bible employs the term’s bound forms in dozens of instances. See also Anton Jirku, “Der ‘Mann von Tob,’” (II. Sam 10:6.8),” *ZAW* 62 (1950): 319; Alan D. Crown, “An Alternative Meaning for אִישׁ in the Old Testament,” *VT* 24 (1974): 110–112; Marvin L. Chaney, “Whose Sour Grapes? The Addressees of Isaiah 5:1–7 in the Light of Political Economy,” *Semeia* 87 (1999): 112, 116.

⁴⁰ *Genesis 37–50: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), p. 484.

household.⁴¹ The term conveys his relationship to that household (v. 30), which is the indirect referent of אִישׁ in our verse.

In short, the text's composer(s) apparently presumed that its original audience would grasp that אִישׁ here means something like the English term “family patriarch.”

Selecting a Certain Number of Representatives from a Group

A second example from the book of Genesis further illustrates the sense of אִישׁ as a duly authorized “representative.” The narrator relates that after Joseph's father Jacob and his extended family arrive in Egypt, Joseph the vizier prepares them for an audience with the king:

וּמִקְצֵה אֶחָיו לָקַח חֲמִשָּׁה אַנְשִׁים וַיִּצְגֵם לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה: (Gen. 47:2)

This usage of אַנְשִׁים is conspicuous; the initial clause could easily have omitted the term, saying וְלָקַח חֲמִשָּׁה מִקְצֵה אֶחָיו (“having taken five from among his brothers”). In other words, the text has gone out of its way here to employ אַנְשִׁים, giving the word extra significance: those who are chosen are not merely אֶחָים (“brothers”)—they are more specifically אַנְשִׁים. The co-text further strengthens the importance here of אַנְשִׁים: as the late E. A. Speiser pointed out, the word מִקְצֵה (“from among”) serves to emphasize Joseph's selectivity.⁴² And in the context of a larger pool of available candidates, the verb לָקַח connotes an act of conscious selection. Taken together, the verse's wording prompts the audience to read אַנְשִׁים meaningfully—and not as “adult males,” for that fact is both known and irrelevant.

The narrative context conveys that Joseph is designating some of his brothers to represent them all. Such a sense for אַנְשִׁים fits the verse's syntax perfectly, in contrast to any other recognized sense, yielding: “Having from among his brothers selected five representatives, . . .”

In short, the text's composer(s) presumed that its original audience would grasp that אַנְשִׁים relates the selected individuals to the larger group of brothers (the indirect referent) whom they will be representing.

Choosing Representatives: Various Verbs and Various Groups

For selecting a specified number of representatives from a group, the Bible includes eleven other instances with the same basic construction that uses the verb לָקַח.⁴³ The various human groups from which selection is made

⁴¹ TDOT (above, n. 11) recognizes the meaning “office or rank” for אִישׁ, but only with a genitive construction. HALOT (also n. 11) recognizes “rank” or “position,” but only with a genitive or an appositive construction.

⁴² *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1962), ad loc. Nevertheless, Speiser did not render אַנְשִׁים directly in this clause, translating it as follows: “he had picked several of his brothers and presented them to Pharaoh.”

⁴³ Gen. 7:2 (which is discussed separately, below, page 18); Deut. 1:23; Josh. 3:12; 4:2; Judg. 4:6; 6:27; I Sam. 24:3; Jer. 38:10; 52:25; Ezek. 33:2; and Ruth 4:2.

include: Israelite tribes; Gideon's servants; Israelite warriors; the king's servants; privy counselors; citizens of another country; and resident elders. (Arguably all of those chosen are men, but maleness is incidental to the activity of selection.) Four similar cases that employ *different* verbs, all of which use **אִישׁ** conspicuously in a selection from a larger pool of persons, are:

אֶסְפָּה־לִּי שְׁבָעִים אִישׁ מִזְקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (Num. 11:16)
 וַיִּקַּם יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וְכָל־עַם הַמִּלְחָמָה . . . (Josh. 8:3)
 וַיִּבְחַר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ שְׁלֹשִׁים אָלֶף אִישׁ גְּבוּרֵי הַחַיִּל
 וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ בְגִידָן | מִמִּשְׁפַּחְתָּם חֲמִשָּׁה אַנְשִׁים מִקְצוֹתָם (Judg. 18:2)
 וַתֹּן־לָנוּ שְׁבָעָה אַנְשִׁים מִבְּנֵי (II Sam. 21:6)

Again the groups to be represented are varied: elders, troops, a tribal clan, and descendants. Most striking is an instance using **לָקַח** for selection from a group, in which our noun **אִישׁ** refers not to humans but rather to animals:

מִכָּל | הַבְּהֵמָה הַטְּהוֹרָה תִּקַּח־לָךְ שְׁבָעָה שְׁבָעָה אִישׁ וְאַשְׁתּוֹ (Gen. 7:2)

These animals are headed onto Noah's Ark, where they will represent their species, not only as typical specimens but also as those *designated to act on behalf of their species* as progenitors. As with the non-human applications of **אִישׁ** discussed earlier, this one makes perfect sense if we construe **אִישׁ** as a relational term.

Note that **אִשָּׁה** (highlighted in green) functions the same way as does **אִישׁ** in this passage. It designates a specifically female representative of each species.⁴⁴ Once again, the usage of **אִשָּׁה** corroborates the relational nature of **אִישׁ**.

SUMMARY OF THE EVIDENCE

1. Construing **אִישׁ** as a relational term is preferable to the conventional view, for affiliation is more consistent with ancient Near Eastern thought categories and Israelite social structure.
2. **אִישׁ** hardly behaves like the standalone term **אָדָם**, whereas it characteristically behaves like the relational term **בֵּן**.
3. Even without syntactic markers of affiliation:
 - the Bible deploys **אִישׁ** with verbs that presume group membership;
 - the Bible collocates **אִישׁ** with collective nouns as the individual correlate;
 - the Bible uses **אִישׁ** in constructions that single out one of the members of a group; and

⁴⁴ For another instance where **אִשָּׁה** designates non-human representatives, see Zech. 5:9.

- the Bible places **אִישׁ** conspicuously in constructions and situations that prompt the reader to construe it as a term of affiliation.
4. The widely recognized biblical nuances of **אִישׁ** as “husband” and as “each” or “any” member (of a group or category) are easily explained by construing **אִישׁ** as a term of affiliation. These usages account for >3% and 74% of all instances, respectively.
 5. More than 1% of biblical instances of **אִישׁ** refer to entities other than individual human beings. Such usage is easily explained by construing **אִישׁ** as a term of affiliation.
 6. More than 1 out of 10 biblical instances of **אִישׁ** bear a representational sense that is best understood as a type of affiliation.
 7. All told, at least 87% of biblical instances of **אִישׁ** can be accounted for by construing it as a term of affiliation, and some usages are best explained in just this way.

DISCUSSION

This article began with the suggestion that **אִישׁ** intrinsically conveys affiliation. It tested the word’s usage to see how far this hypothesis could be sustained. It presumed a semantic coherence for **אִישׁ** unless the linguistic evidence would compel us to conclude otherwise.

We have seen that not only does the Bible seem to employ **אִישׁ** most of the time in a manner consistent with a relational sense, but also a sense of affiliation repeatedly generates meaning from what are otherwise anomalous or conspicuous usages of **אִישׁ**.⁴⁵ Thus the hypothesis appears to offer a simple yet elegant explanation for how **אִישׁ** usually functions—an explanation that seems superior to the conventional view that the primary meaning of **אִישׁ** is “adult male.”

The analysis has treated biblical Hebrew as a single linguistic system. Although Robert Holmstedt has rightly called such an approach into question,⁴⁶ the hypothesis that **אִישׁ** is primarily a relational term is not

⁴⁵ In expecting **אִישׁ** to be a meaningful term, I draw a contrast with the linguist Martin Joos’s rule of thumb that lexicographers should assume the least possible meaning for a hapax (otherwise unknown) word in context, due to the “redundancy of natural language” (see Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning*, rev. edn. [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994], pp. 153–155). To this editor’s eye, the Bible is a carefully crafted work, in which the artifice and economy of wording make it rather unlike natural language. When **אִישׁ** is repeatedly conspicuous by its presence or is employed as a leading word, such usage indicates a semantic significance.

⁴⁶ “Issues in the Linguistic Analysis of a Dead Language, with Particular Reference to Ancient Hebrew,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, Vol. 6, Art. 11 (2006),

sensitive to this assumption. It is therefore a valid simplification for the purposes of this article. Furthermore, my research thus far seems to confirm the assumption of uniformity with regard to **אִישׁ**. The usage within the Bible is strikingly consistent. The three lexical nuances discussed above appear repeatedly across the whole range of biblical genres, registers, dialects, postulated source documents, and historical stages.

Application to Other Instances

The fact that the Bible's composers usually employed **אִישׁ** as a term of affiliation is no guarantee that they *always* did so. Words can have senses that are unrelated to each other. Without having examined every instance of **אִישׁ** in the Bible, I mean only to claim that the affiliational aspect of **אִישׁ** is its primary (most frequent) sense.

Being the primary sense, it is the first one to try upon encountering a given instance of the word in question.⁴⁷ The burden of proof is then on whoever would assert that the context justifies construing **אִישׁ** as something other than a term of affiliation.

Our noun's relational aspect may not be obvious in many cases. Contemporary readers—who are accustomed to viewing **אִישׁ** as a standalone term—will easily spot the noun's *direct* referent, yet they may find its *indirect* referent relatively challenging to identify. In the simplest cases, the text designates the indirect referent explicitly. Sometimes it is stated before the word **אִישׁ** (as shown here in blue; “the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob [as their paterfamilias]”):

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם אֶת יַעֲקֹב
אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ: (Exod. 1:1)

In other instances, the indirect referent appears after the word **אִישׁ** (here, “members of the household”):

וְאִין **אִישׁ מֵאִנְשֵׁי הַבַּיִת** שָׁם בְּבֵית: (Gen. 39:11)

Often, however, the indirect referent is only implied. It may require some practice to perceive how **אִישׁ** functions in such an instance to relate its two referents to each other. To triangulate an implied referent, the text employs a wide variety of constructions, as three further examples will illustrate.

1. Joseph (as the vizier of Egypt) employs **אִישׁ** in order to single out a member of the group:

הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר נִמְצָא הַגְּבִיעַ בְּיָדוֹ הוּא יְהִי־לִי עֹבֵד (Gen. 44:17)

pp. 2–21.

⁴⁷ Mark Strauss, “Current Issues in the Gender-Language Debate,” in Glen G. Scorgie et al., eds., *The Challenge of Bible Translation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), pp. 133–34.

In so doing, Joseph refers implicitly to all of his eleven brothers—for the stated condition applies in potential to any of them (“the one [in whose possession the goblet is found]).” The indirect referent is thus the entire party of travelers.

2. The narrator employs אִישׁ to point at the unnamed party who attacks Jacob:

וַיִּתֶּר יַעֲקֹב לְבָדוֹ וַיֹּאבֶק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר: (Gen. 32:25)

In the process, the narrator defines an indirect referent: the group consisting of participants in that conflict. (In this regard, Jacob could likewise be termed an אִישׁ.)

3. When counterposed with a term for the Deity, אִישׁ refers indirectly to the human species (of which any given אִישׁ is a member), as in Balaam’s poetic pronouncement:

לֹא אִישׁ אֵל וַיִּכְזֹּב וּבָרַךְ אָדָם וַיִּתְּנָחֵם (Num. 23:19)

In this case, humankind as a divisible group is implicitly contrasted with God’s singularity.

Implications for Stating English Equivalence

In English dictionaries, grammars, and commentaries on the Bible it is a common practice to gloss אִישׁ as “man.” The foregoing analysis suggests that such a practice is misleading, because the two words correspond poorly with regard to affiliation. In biblical Hebrew, אִישׁ generally (and perhaps always) retains the flavor of affiliation, whereas the English word “man” often lacks that sense. In 1624, the English poet John Donne famously penned the gender-inclusive statement “No man is an island, entire of itself”; yet if a biblical Hebrew writer were to express such a thought using אִישׁ, it would be a tautology. While the word “man” does convey affiliation in certain constructions, it unfortunately fails to do so in most of the contexts in which אִישׁ appears in the Bible.⁴⁸ Given such a limited semantic correspondence between אִישׁ and “man,” a more fitting general gloss would appear to be an “affiliate,” or possibly “participant” or “party.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ See further § VII.G.4 of my memorandum “What Does It Mean to Be a ‘Man?’” (above, n. 39).

⁴⁹ On why a gloss for אִישׁ in English should be gender neutral (despite the existence of a feminine counterpart to אִישׁ), in Part V of my memorandum “What Does It Mean to Be a ‘Man?’” (above, n. 39) or—more formally and precisely—my article “The Grammar of Social Gender in Biblical Hebrew,” *Hebrew Studies*, Vol. XLIX (forthcoming).

Implications for Translation

What affects an isolated gloss can also affect the contextual translation of certain passages. For example, the subject of Judg. 18:7 is a small band of warriors on a mission:

וַיֵּלְכוּ חֲמִשָּׁת הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיָּבֹאוּ לַיִּשָּׁה

for which חֲמִשָּׁת הָאֲנָשִׁים is rendered as “the five men” almost universally, even in translations that have attempted to be gender-sensitive (NRSV, NLT, TNIV).⁵⁰ When the NIVI rendition appeared (England, 1996) and rendered the phrase as “the five of them,” D. A. Carson objected that because the referent is to warriors (who are presumably males), “there is no good reason to change from ‘men’ to some gender-neutral form.”⁵¹ However, construing אִישׁ as a term of affiliation provides such a reason.

Without questioning the presumption that these five figures are all males, it should be noted that the narrator refers to them via a term that clearly calls attention to their affiliation with their tribe (as well as to the non-feminine social gender of at least one of their number). When the narrator first identified these אֲנָשִׁים (in verse 2 of the passage; see above), the sense of affiliation was specifically representational. The NIVI rendering as “the five of them” signifies affiliation, and thus it conveys the Hebrew term’s most relevant meaning, which the conventional rendering does not. In this respect, rendering Judg. 18:7 with the word “men” sacrifices some accuracy in translation.

Another example of how the findings of this article affect translation is in Exod. 32:28, which, as we saw above, treats אִישׁ as the individual correlate of עַם. In other words, עַם is here the indirect referent of אִישׁ:

מִזֶּהָעַם ... כִּשְׁלֹשָׁת אֲלָפֵי אִישׁ:

This verse’s wording says nothing about social gender; in context, our noun simply means “members of the group in question.”⁵² Rendering the phrase as “of the people . . . three thousand men” (KJV) may have been defensible in 1611, when the word “men” still had a primarily gender-neutral cast. In contemporary English, however, “men” is predominantly a male term, so that a similar rendering today (“three thousand men among the people,”

⁵⁰ Key to abbreviations in this subsection (in order of their appearance): NRSV = New Revised Standard Version; NLT = New Living Translation; TNIV = Today’s New International Version; NIVI = New International Version, Inclusive Language Edition; KJV = King James Version; HCSB = Holman Christian Standard Bible; ESV = English Standard Version; NJPS = New Jewish Publication Society version.

⁵¹ *The Inclusive-Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), p. 139.

⁵² Mark L. Strauss correctly notes that in this case “it is difficult to discern whether to take *’ish* as inclusive or exclusive” (*Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998], p. 107). The text’s wording itself is agnostic on this question, while context gives little indication as to the social gender of the עַם in view.

HCSB; “three thousand men of the people,” Alter, ESV) overtranslates the male gender-marker of **אִישׁ**.⁵³ A rendering that expresses affiliation (e.g., “three thousand of the people,” NJPS, NRSV, NIV, TNIV; or “three thousand of the men”⁵⁴) more accurately conveys the main semantic feature of our noun, albeit at the cost of one-to-one correspondence with Hebrew wording, which some translators seek.

Implications for Exegesis

Construing **אִישׁ** as a term of affiliation solves a number of exegetical cruxes that have resulted from understanding it as “adult male.” For example, at Gen. 4:1, when Eve first gives birth, she bestows the name Cain and explains it via the clause “...**קָנִיתִי אִישׁ**.” Claus Westermann notes the classic difficulty, “namely that the word **אִישׁ** cannot mean the newly born child and that it never occurs with the meaning ‘male child.’” He therefore opines that Eve “sees in the child she has borne the (future) man.”⁵⁵ However, in light of the Bible’s abiding interest in population increase, the ancient audience would probably perceive this inaugural infant as remarkable foremost for his being *an addition to the human species*. And if **אִישׁ** is a term of affiliation, then what Eve is saying would make perfect sense in context: “I have created a member [of humankind] . . .”

Likewise in Exodus, when Pharaoh’s courtiers conspicuously propose that “**הָאֲנָשִׁים**” of the Israelite slaves be dispatched to worship their deity

... **שְׁלַח אֶת־הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ** (Exod. 10:7)

they do not mean “the men” (as opposed to “the women”; so translations such as RSV, NJPS, NLT, ESV, HCSB), nor do they mean “the people” in general (so NRSV, NIV, TNIV). Rather, the courtiers take for granted that every ethnic group recognizes that particular officials or elders can represent the populace on certain occasions. Thus the courtiers’ proposal is: send their authorized *representatives*. This reading explains why Pharaoh then asks Moses, “Who in particular are the ones to go?” (**מִי וּמִי הֵהֶלְכִים**; v. 8). As Rabbi Moses Nachmanides commented more than seven hundred years ago: “Pharaoh initially wanted [only] leaders and elders to go—**אֲנָשִׁים** who would be ‘designated by name’” (at 10:8, quoting Num. 1:17).

As biblical words go, **אִישׁ** is not a trivial term. It functions as a theme word in the book of Genesis, and it is a key term in the interpretation of

⁵³ On how the male gender-marker in **אִישׁ** is suppressed by the grammatical construction of this verse, see “The Grammar of Social Gender in Biblical Hebrew” (above, n. 49). That article’s findings, when taken in combination with the findings of this article, call into question § A.4 of the Colorado Springs Guidelines for Translation of Gender-Related Language in Scripture (1997), which states that **אִישׁ** “should ordinarily be translated ‘man’ and ‘men.’” The guidelines are available at www.bible-researcher.com/csguidelines.html.

⁵⁴ This would be the more accurate translation if one were to argue that the particular **אִישׁ** in view was entirely male (as is sometimes the case).

⁵⁵ *Genesis 1–11: A Continental Commentary* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1994), p. 290.

certain passages. Consequently, if this article's thesis withstands scrutiny it should significantly affect the prevailing plain-sense exegesis of famous verses in the biblical text.⁵⁶

It should also alter our contemporary view of androcentrism in the Hebrew Bible. At least linguistically, the Bible does not treat adult males as “the measure of all things,” despite the claims of many contemporary interpreters—both feminists and complementarians among them.

CONCLUSION

This article confirms the thrust of Alison Grant's (largely ignored) finding that an **אִישׁ** would “be thought of always in relation to [a] particular group or community.” It has also confirmed Grant's perception of a “membership” sense of **אִישׁ**.

Our conclusions go further than did Grant's, in two main respects. First, we have identified related nuances for **אִישׁ**—most importantly, that this noun can convey *representation*. Taken together, the “affiliational” nuances account for at least 87% of all biblical instances of the word. And we have added to Grant's list of instances that seem to be best explained by construing **אִישׁ** relationally. Therefore, it appears that in biblical Hebrew, **אִישׁ** intrinsically denotes affiliation.

The second conclusion beyond Grant's work is an ancillary one. In the process of investigating the behavior of the word **אִישׁ** we have seen that its feminine counterpart, **אִשָּׁה**, functions in much the same way. This correspondence suggests that **אִשָּׁה** is also a term of affiliation.

Lexically speaking, the relational meaning of **אִישׁ** exists independently of the male semantic content that **אִישׁ** can bear by virtue of its having a feminine counterpart. Although **אִישׁ** can connote “an adult male,” that meaning is found in a small minority of the word's instances, as determined by the context. In most cases, the maleness of the word **אִישׁ** is not a salient feature.

Construing **אִישׁ** as a term of affiliation (and for the same reasons also **אִשָּׁה**) holds great promise and thus bears further investigation—in biblical and epigraphic Hebrew, in subsequent versions of Hebrew, and in other Semitic languages in which a cognate term appears.

⁵⁶ For application to the interpretation of three such passages (Gen. 18:2, 19:5, and Num. 30:3), see Part VIII of my memorandum “What Does It Mean to Be a ‘Man?’” (above, n. 39).