

The Hebrew Corner

In Biblical Hebrew, context is very important to determining the meaning of words. In fact, a Hebrew word may take on a variety of meanings depending on context. As an example of this, we will look at the Hebrew verb *natan* (נתן, nah-TAHN) in various passages of the Tanach, starting with 1 Samuel 10:3-4:

“Then shalt thou go on forward from thence, and thou shalt come to the plain of Tabor, and there shall meet thee three men going up to God to Bethel, one carrying three kids, and another carrying three loaves of bread, and another carrying a bottle of wine: And they will salute thee, and give thee two loaves of bread; which thou shalt receive of their hands.”

Natan in this passage is translated as “give.” It is clear that the loaves of bread are being handed over to Saul as a gift, and so *give* is an accurate translation.

Now let's look at another usage of *natan* (Deuteronomy 18:14):

“For these nations, which thou shalt possess, hearkened unto observers of times, and unto diviners: but as for thee, the LORD thy God hath not suffered thee so to do.”

Here the clear meaning is that God would not permit the Israelites to consult with astrologers or wizards, and so “suffered” is a translation that fits this context. Next *natan* is used concerning the

voice (Jeremiah 22:20):

“Go up to Lebanon, and cry; and lift up thy voice in Bashan, and cry from the passages: for all thy lovers are destroyed.”

From the context here, the directive is to make a loud sound with the voice, and so “lift up” is a translation of natan that renders this meaning. Sometimes natan is used in the sense of reporting of information, as in this passage (2 Samuel 24:9):

“And Joab gave up the sum of the number of the people unto the king: and there were in Israel eight hundred thousand valiant men that drew the sword; and the men of Judah were five hundred thousand men.”

Natan in this verse is translated as “gave up,” and since Joab was reporting a census, the context is that he was reporting his count of men to King David. (As a side note, the name of a prophet that David consulted was Nathan, or in Hebrew natan).

Another variation of meaning for natan is exhibited in the following passage (Genesis 41:42):

“And Pharaoh took off his ring from his hand, and put it upon Joseph's hand, and arrayed him in vestures of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck;”

Natan is translated as “put” (the first instance), with regard to the ring that Pharaoh placed on Joseph's hand. Note that another Hebrew verb, seem (שׂים, SEEM) is also translated as “put” later in the verse, this time with regard to a gold chain placed around his neck.

Finally, natan is used in yet another context in this passage (Jeremiah 9:11):

“And I will make Jerusalem heaps, and a den of dragons; and I will make the cities of Judah desolate, without an inhabitant.”

Here natan appears twice, and is translated “make” in both instances. Thus natan can also be used to signify making or establishing a state or condition.

So we see that Hebrew words can often take a variety of meanings, depending on the context, and it is important to understand this when learning the language. May you have a month full of the grace of God.