

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

WORD STUDY: COMPLETION

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Hebrew Language Tools

by

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Identifying the Word

The word chosen for this word study, from the passage in Genesis 22:1-19, is found in verse 12. It is the Hebrew word יָרֵא, or yare'. One of its possible, and more common, translations is “fear.” While it appears only once in this particular passage, it is a defining moment in the story, explaining why the Lord instructs Abraham to not sacrifice his son.

“He said, ‘Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you **fear** [emphasis added] God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.’” Genesis 22:12 (NASB)

This word appears in its Hebrew root form 402 times in the NASB Old Testament, and is translated in a variety of ways. It is a challenge to fully understand, and as a result is often highlighted in different versions of the Bible with alternate potential translations, or wordings. It’s Strong’s number H3372.

Some of the various ways that יָרֵא, or yare', is translated in Genesis 22:12 include:

- Literal:
 - NASB, “fear”
 - ESV, “fear”
- Dynamic Equivalent:
 - NIV, “fear”
 - NET, “fear”
- Free:
 - NLT, “fear”
 - NCV, “trust”
 - TEV, “honor and obey”
- Paraphrase:
 - MSG, “fearlessly you fear”

The Free and Paraphrase translations begin to frame the question; what does “fear” in this passage truly mean? While the literal translation of the Hebrew word may be “fear,” as demonstrated in the Literal and Dynamic Equivalent translations cited, even they translate it in

other ways elsewhere in scripture. The Free and Paraphrase versions begin to hint at a deeper understanding of this word, seeming to indicate a greater depth of meaning that would contribute deeply to the understanding of this passage as a whole.

Range of Meaning

According to Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, there are 402 occurrences of the word in 373 verses, spread out over the Old Testament.

Distribution of occurrences by number of verses:

- OT Law: 84 verses
- OT History: 103 verses
- OT Poetry: 101 verses
- OT Prophets: 85 verses

As translated in the KJV:

- Fear (188 times)
- Afraid (78 times)
- Terrible (23 times)
- Terrible thing (6 times)
- Dreadful (5 times)
- Reverence (3 times)
- Fearful (2 times)
- Terrible acts (1 time)
- *Misc.* (8 times)

Definitions¹:

- To fear, revere, be afraid.
 - (Qal)
 - To fear, be afraid
 - To stand in awe of, be awed
 - To fear, reverence, honor, respect
 - (Niphal)
 - To be fearful, be dreadful, be feared
 - To cause astonishment and awe, be held in awe
 - To inspire reverence or godly fear or awe
 - (Piel) to make afraid, terrify

¹ Francis, D.D., D.Litt. Brown, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), 431.

- (TWOT) To shoot, pour.

The following are some examples of the use of אָרַךְ in scripture. Because of the sheer volume of occurrences of the word, the following are some selected examples to represent the whole. Because of its common usage, for the purposes of this paper examples of its usage will be selected from the works of Moses. As the author of Genesis, looking at his treatment of the word 84 times throughout the books of the law will give a clearer understanding of his intended definition of the word. Verses are from the NASB translation, with translations of אָרַךְ in bold and italicized:

- Genesis 3:10; He said, “I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was *afraid* because I was naked; so I hid myself.”
- Genesis 20:8; So Abimelech arose early in the morning and called all his servants and told all these things in their hearing; and the men were greatly *frightened*.
- Genesis 31:31; Then Jacob replied to Laban, “Because I was *afraid*, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force.
- Genesis 42:18; Now Joseph said to them on the third day, “Do this and live, for I *fear* God.
- Genesis 42:35; Now it came about as they were emptying their sacks, that behold, every man’s bundle of money was in his sack; and when they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were *dismayed*.
- Exodus 14:31; When Israel saw the great power which the LORD had used against the Egyptians, the people *feared* the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in His servant Moses.
- Exodus 15:11; “Who is like You among the gods, O LORD? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, *awesome* in praises, working wonders?”
- Exodus 34:10; Then God said, “Behold, I am going to make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform miracles which have not been produced in all the earth nor among any of the nations; and all the people among whom you live will see the working of the LORD, for it is a *fearful thing* that I am going to perform with you.
- Leviticus 19:3; ‘Every one of you shall *reverence* his mother and his father, and you shall keep My sabbaths; I am the LORD your God.
- Leviticus 19:30; ‘You shall keep My sabbaths and *revere* My sanctuary; I am the LORD.
- Numbers 14:9; “Only do not rebel against the LORD; and do not *fear* the people of the land, for they will be our prey. Their protection has been removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not *fear* them.”
- Deuteronomy 1:19; “Then we set out from Horeb, and went through all that great and *terrible* wilderness which you saw on the way to the hill country of the Amorites, just as the LORD our God had commanded us; and we came to Kadesh-barnea.

- Deuteronomy 6:13; “You shall *fear* only the LORD your God; and you shall worship Him and swear by His name.
- Deuteronomy 7:21; “You shall not dread them, for the LORD your God is in your midst, a great and *awesome* God.

It is fascinating to note the range in meanings that are implied throughout just Moses’ use of the word. In total, he uses the word 84 times between his five books; the above passages are representative of his usage of it. He frequently uses it to describe fear of outside forces or enemies. In those passages, it is consistently translated “fear,” “afraid,” and along those lines. It seems to be a very traditional understanding of the word fear and how modern English speaking societies would understand it.

Where the use of the word gets fascinating is in connection to God and/or the divine. At times it is still translated “fear,” “afraid” and variations of those words, but it is also translated as “awesome,” “reverence,” and “revere.” There does not seem to be anything to indicate that the reader should understand these types of words associated with reverence to be understood when used to describe earthly forces of evil and sources of fear, and yet it consistently appears as an interpretation when used in reference to God and His Kingdom. It is as though the word has the same usage as today with regards to earthly sources of fear, but expands to include something more, something beyond being simply afraid when associated with the divine.

Mounce highlights the contrasts in the word’s usage in his expository dictionary, writing that it “denotes both a sense of terror and a sense of awe and worship.”² He goes on to make the case that how it is understood, whether as a sense of terror, or as a sense of awe and worship, is based on the context of the verse and the use of the word. It is a strange split in meanings for one

² William D. Mounce and general editor, *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 1.

word that can be confusing to the English speaker, but was most likely easily understood by Hebrew speakers.

Bruce Waltke explains Moses' use of אָרַךְ in Genesis 22:12 specifically as referring to an “obedience to God’s revelation of His moral will, whether through conscience or Scripture, out of recognition that He holds in His hands life for the obedient and death for the disobedient.”³

There is a reverence implied, such that Abraham’s reverent fear of God allowed him to obey and trust in God’s provision in spite of dread for sacrificing his son.

John Walton provides some additional cultural context to the passage, pointing out that in the secular cultures of the day the idea of child sacrifice was a common one, and a practice performed by many.⁴ Often times it was connected to pagan gods of fertility as a way to guarantee continued fertility. It is an interesting additional context, making God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice his son a culturally relevant practice – and yet, over the course of the story God twists the ending to change expectations and demonstrate yet again that He is not like the false gods created by men. Abraham’s reverent fear then reflects an obedience and a commitment to God in spite of seemingly overwhelming circumstances and demands. And yet, there is an aspect to Abraham’s faith that reflects a different expectation than then his secular counterparts; he trusted God’s plan to continue his family through his son Isaac, not yet-unborn heirs. He had faith to obey with the reverent trust that God would provide a way.

Another commentator notes that Abraham’s fear in this passage is “obedience which does not hold back even what is most precious, when God demands it, and commits to God even that

³ Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: a Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 308.

⁴ John Walton, *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 509.

future which he himself has promised.”⁵ He also points out that the use of אָרַךְ in verse 8 of the same chapter refers to God’s provision, while verse 12 points to Abraham’s fear, providing a subtle play in words. The emphasis, again, however is Abraham’s obedience, his reverent fear of God.

Ross gives the most direct explanation of the use of אָרַךְ in verse 12, noting that it was both a positive statement and a revelation of Abraham’s commitment. He goes on to say “the expositor must explain the concept of the fear of God, for it is at the heart of this test, and it is a predominant theme in the biblical narratives about worship and service. The true worshiper fears the Lord, that is, the true worshiper draws near the Lord in love and adoration and reverence but shrinks back in fear of such an awesome deity.”⁶

Conclusion

What does אָרַךְ, or “fear,” truly mean in this passage? Ultimately, it seems to be a combination of reverence and fear, a healthy and appropriate respect for the power and authority of God, and Abraham’s place in reflection of that. It does not carry the negative connotations of fear that typically come to mind; a terror of something evil or unknown in a negative way. Instead, there is a love and awesomeness to God that triggers an overwhelming sense of reverence, perhaps which triggers some of the same bodily reactions or feelings of negative fear yet with a positive prompt.

⁵ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), Kindle location 2538.

⁶ Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: a Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1997), 1.

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