

# How to Use a Hebrew-English Concordance

by

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for

My Brothers in Christ

Who are serious students of the Bible  
at the Washington State Reformatory Unit  
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## Introduction

In this paper, I hope to demonstrate the importance of the definition of words for the proper interpretation of the Old Testament. I hope to show how to find the meanings of a word in the Old Testament using tools that are available in prison. Finally, I hope to model how to find the meanings of a word.

When we carefully study a passage from the Old Testament, we sometimes need to define a word carefully in order to properly interpret the Bible. We do not need to do a careful study of the meaning of every word. For example, I do not know anyone who would want to study the meaning of “the” in the Old Testament. Part of the art of interpretation is finding which words are theologically significant for the interpretation of a passage.

### Example from Isaiah 42:1-4

Isaiah 42:1-4 provides an example of several words worthy of study because of their theological significance. The passage reads as follows:

<sup>42:1</sup> Behold my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my Spirit upon him,  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
<sup>2</sup> He will not cry or lift up his voice,  
or make it heard in the street;  
<sup>3</sup> a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.  
<sup>4</sup> He will not fail or be discouraged  
till he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his law. (RSV)

Some theologically significant words are “justice,” “wait” and “law.” The word “wait” is especially significant for this passage. Some interpreters think that the foreign nations wait with dread for the servant’s law. For example, R.N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) p. 73 states, “**Wait** (*y<sup>e</sup>yaḥêlû*) : the word does not necessarily imply a pleasurable expectation.” Based on this and other factors, Whybray concludes (p. 75) that the nations of the world will be forced to acknowledge God’s power and will be forced to accept the obligation imposed upon them.

Other interpreters think the foreign nations wait expectantly for the servant’s law. For example, Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) p. 97 states, “The verb implies intent expectancy of deliverance or help.”

Based on this and other factors Westermann, pp. 96-97, concludes that among the Gentiles, the Servant’s gospel finds expectancy similar to that which greeted the prophet’s message that Israel’s imprisonment in Babylon had ended. This raises the question; what does the word really mean and how do we define it with any certainty.

### The Meaning of Words Changes Over Time

Words mean what people understand them to mean during a certain period. The meaning of words may change over a period. For example, “suffer” at one time meant “allow” or “permit.” It has nothing to do with causing someone to experience pain. When we attempt to define a word used in the Bible, we must examine its usage. Usage determines meaning.

The etymology of a word may tell us what a word meant at one time, but it does not tell us what it meant in later periods. The term “etymology” means the history of a word. For example, the etymology of the English word “manufacture” is *hand made* since it is a combination of the Latin *manu* (the ablative of *manus* "hand") and *factus* (the past participle of *facere* "to make"). However, as any speaker of modern English knows, "manufactured in Hong Kong" means anything *but* "handmade in Hong Kong." The usage of "manufacture" shows that it means “the making of something in any way, especially when regarded as merely mechanical.”

### How to find the meaning of rarely used Hebrew Words

Etymology may be helpful for the definition of a rarely used term in the Old Testament. However, usage is much more important than etymology in determining the meaning of a commonly used term. Etymology may tell us the denotations (basic meaning) of a word but not its connotations (subtle meanings). Connotations tell us what a word implies.

When scholars study the etymology of a Hebrew word, they consult the meaning of the word in other Semitic languages. The words in other Semitic languages are known as cognates

### Concordances

To determine the meaning of a word, it is necessary to study every time that word is used in the Old Testament. In Bible study, concordances make this easier. A concordance of the Old Testament tells us everywhere a word occurs in the Old Testament. When we look up a word in the concordance, we should study the context in which the word occurs every time it is used. It is best to move from a narrow context to a broad context. The narrowest context is the context of the original author. We should examine each occurrence of the word in our author's literature. The next step is to determine how his audience would have understood the term. In order to accomplish this, we need to investigate how an author's contemporaries used a term. The next step is to find how individuals who were similar to the author employed the term. For example, "hand" might mean one thing to a sailor and quite another to a movie critic. “All hands on deck” means something different from “the audience sat on its hands.” We also need to examine how literature of a similar literary form uses the term. For example, "election" means one thing in a theology textbook and quite another in a political science textbook. Finally, we should examine the usage of term in the remainder of the Old Testament.

Let us apply this procedure to the interpretation of the meaning of the term "wait" in Isa. 42:4. We consult first the King James Bible since most important concordances are based

on the King James Version. There are two important concordances for the Old Testament. They are *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, New York: Abingdon Press, 1890) and George V. Wigram, *The Englishman's Hebrew Concordance of Old Testament: Coded with Strong's Concordance Numbers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996). I will abbreviate *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* with *Strong's*. I will abbreviate *The Englishman's Hebrew Concordance of Old Testament: Coded with Strong's Concordance Numbers* with *Englishman's*. *Strong's* is the least expensive and most easily available concordance. One is even available in the chapel library at Washington State Reformatory Unit. Unfortunately, *Strong's* is more difficult to use.

### *Strong's Concordance*

With *Strong's*, we begin by looking up the word "wait" on pp. 1102-1103. We find that the King James Bible translated several Hebrew and Greek words "wait." Since the author of Isaiah 42:4 wrote in Hebrew instead of English, we want to study the usage of the Hebrew word translated "wait" in Isaiah 42:4 instead of all of the times "wait" occurs in the English Bible. The English Bible translates several Hebrew and Greek words "wait." We find that Isa. 42:4 uses Hebrew word # 3176. *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* has a Hebrew Dictionary at the back of the book. When we look up word # 3176, we find that this word is translated in different places as "hope", "be pained," "stay," "tarry," "trust," and "wait." If we use *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, we have to look up each of these words and record every time word # 3176 occurs. We also have to look up every variation of these words such as "waited, waiteth, waiting, hope, hopes, hopeth, hoping, etc."

### *Englishman's Concordance*

Even though *Strong's* is important since it provides numbered words that other tools use, it is not the easiest concordance to use. *Englishman's* is an easier way of finding all of the occurrences of a Hebrew word. Again, we start with the King James Bible since it forms the basis for *Englishman's*. We begin by looking in the English and Hebrew index (pp. 1459-1632). We find that according to *Englishman's*, the Hebrew word for wait begins on pages 346, 426, 523, 955, 1095, 1196, and 1300. Please note that the listing of the uses of a word may continue on following pages. *Englishman's* renders the word it examines in italics. When we look on page 346 and 426, we find that Isa. 42:4 is not found. However we find that on page 523 "wait" in Isa. 42:4 is used.

According to *Englishman's*, the Hebrew word translated "wait" occurs several places. Note the number in parentheses refers to the verse reference in the Hebrew Bible when it differs from that of the English. When listing Hebrew verbs, *Englishman's* identifies the verbal stem of each example.

Hebrew has five major verb stems. They are the *Qal*, the *Niphal*, the *Piel*, the *Pual* and the *Hiphil*. The *Qal* is the simple verb stem. The *Niphal* is the passive verb stem. In general,

the *Piel* is the intensive verb stem. In general, the *Pual* is the passive intensive verb stem. The *Hiphil* is the causative verb stem.

If “hit” were a Hebrew verb, hit in the *Qal* stem would mean “he hit.” Hit in the *Niphal* stem would mean “he was hit.” Hit in the *Piel* stem would mean “he hit hard.” Hit in the *Pual* stem would mean “he was hit hard.” Hit in the *Hiphil* stem would mean “he caused someone to be hit.”

### *yāḥal* in the *Piel*

We need to examine these references in order of significance. *Englishman’s* tells us that the verb *yāḥal* occurs in the verb stems *Niphal*, *Piel*, and *Hiphil* and that in Isa. 42:4 “wait” occurs in the *Piel*. Since Hebrew verbs can mean different things in different verb stems, we ought to pay special attention to the uses in the *Piel*. Of these usages, Isa. 51:5 is the most significant since the author of Isa. 42:4 also wrote it. Isaiah 40-55 is a literary unit.

Isa. 51:5

<sup>5</sup>I will bring near my deliverance swiftly,  
my salvation has gone out  
and my arms will rule the peoples;  
the coastlands wait for me,  
and for my arm they hope.

In this passage, “wait” and “hope” are synonymous. Like Isa. 42:1, foreigners are the subject of the verb. God is the object of the verb here. God’s servant is the object of the verb in Isa. 42:1. This difference is not very significant since God works through his servants. According to this reference, *yāḥal* connotes “wait with hope.”

Next in importance is Ezek. 13:6. It comes from the period of the Babylonian exile and it is prophetic poetry.

<sup>6</sup>They have envisioned falsehood and lying divination; they say, “Says the LORD,” when the LORD has not sent them, and yet they wait for the fulfillment of their word!

Surely false prophets hope for the fulfillment of their predictions. According to this reference, *yāḥal* connotes “wait with hope.”

Mic. 5:7 is next in order of importance since it is prophetic poetry although it was written prior to the Babylonian exile.

<sup>7</sup>Then the remnant of Jacob,  
surrounded by many peoples,  
shall be like dew from the LORD,  
like showers on the grass,  
which do not depend upon people  
or wait for any mortal.

This reference is not so important for our purposes since the subject of the verb is rain. In Isaiah 42:4 people are the subject of the verb. This reference tells us only what the word denotes (the basic meaning of the word) and not what it connotes (implies). The verb denotes “wait.”

The examples in Psalms (31:24, 33:18, 22, 69:3, 71:14, 119:43, 49, 74, 81, 114, 147, 147:11) and Job (6:11, 13:15, 14:14, Job 29:21, 29:23, 30:26) come next in order of importance since they like Isaiah 40-55 are written in poetry. Of these two, Psalms is more significant since the author of Isaiah 40-55 often made use of Psalms (Bible dictionaries and commentaries provide this information).

#### Psalm 31: 24

<sup>24</sup> Be strong, and let your heart take courage,  
all you who wait for the LORD.

#### Psalm 33:18

<sup>18</sup> Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,  
on those who hope in his steadfast love,

#### Psalm 33:22

<sup>22</sup> Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us,  
even as we hope in you.

#### Psalm 69:3

<sup>3</sup> I am weary with my crying;  
my throat is parched.  
My eyes grow dim  
with waiting for my God.

#### Psalm 71:14

<sup>14</sup> But I will hope continually,  
and will praise you yet more and more.

#### Psalm 119:43

<sup>43</sup> Do not take the word of truth utterly out of my mouth,  
for my hope is in your ordinances.

#### Psalm 119: 49

<sup>49</sup> Remember your word to your servant,  
in which you have made me hope.

Psalm 119:81

<sup>81</sup> My soul languishes for your salvation;  
I hope in your word.

Psalm 119:74

<sup>74</sup> Those who fear you shall see me and rejoice,  
because I have hoped in your word.

Psalm 119:114

<sup>114</sup> You are my hiding place and my shield;  
I hope in your word.

Psalm 119:147

<sup>147</sup> I rise before dawn and cry for help;  
I put my hope in your words.

Psalm 147:11

<sup>11</sup>but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,  
in those who hope in his steadfast love.

According all of these references, *yāhal* connotes “wait with hope.” None of them implies “wait with dread.”

Job 6:11,

<sup>11</sup> What is my strength, that I should wait?  
And what is my end, that I should be patient?

Job 13:15

<sup>15</sup> See, he will kill me; I have no hope  
but I will defend my ways to his face.

Job 14:14

<sup>14</sup> If mortals die, will they live again?  
All the days of my service I would wait  
until my release should come.

According all of these references, *yāhal* connotes “wait with hope.” At this stage of the story, Job hopes for his death. Later he hopes for an opportunity to confront God.

Job 29:21

<sup>21</sup> They listened to me, and waited,  
and kept silence for my counsel.

This single reference does not tell us whether those who wait do so hopefully. However, considering the context of Job 29:23, it is likely that *yāḥal* implies hopefulness

Job 29:23

<sup>23</sup> They waited for me as for the rain;  
they opened their mouths as for the spring rain.

Here the verb, *yāḥal*, connotes “wait with hope.” Israel’s economy depended upon agriculture, which depended upon rainfall.

Job 30:26

<sup>26</sup> But when I looked for good, evil came;  
and when I waited for light, darkness came.

Here the verb clearly means “wait with hope.”

#### *yāḥal* in other verb stems

Since we have examined the uses of *yāḥal* in the *Piel*, we are free to examine the usage in other verb stems. However, these examples are less significant for the interpretation of Isaiah 42:4. These examples are less probable to show that *yāḥal* means “wait with dread” in Isaiah 42:4. Of these examples of *yāḥal*, the occurrences in Ezek. 19:5, 13:6 and Jer. 4:19 are the most important since like Isaiah 40-55, they are both written during the Babylonian exile and they are prophetic poetic literature.

Ezek. 19:5

<sup>5</sup> When she saw that she was thwarted,  
that her hope was lost,  
she took another of her cubs  
and made him a young lion.

Ezek. 13:6

<sup>6</sup> They have envisioned falsehood and lying divination; they say, “Says the LORD,” when the LORD has not sent them, and yet they wait for the fulfillment of their word!

According to these references, *yāḥal* connotes “wait with hope.”

Jer. 4:19

<sup>19</sup> My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain!  
Oh, the walls of my heart!  
My heart is beating wildly;  
I cannot keep silent;  
for I hear the sound of the trumpet,  
the alarm of war.

Although *Englishman's* lists this as an example of this Hebrew verb, Jer. 4:19 actually uses another Hebrew verb. *Englishman's* alerts us to this possibility when it says "(see also לָחַץ)." Commentaries also can alert us to this.

The uses in Lam. 3:21, 24 are significant since Lamentations was written during the Babylonian exile and it is poetic literature. Mic. 7:7 is important since it is prophetic poetry although it was written before the Babylonian exile. The uses in Psalms (38:16, 42:5, 43:5 and 130:5) are important they are poetic and since Isaiah 40-55 often draws upon the Psalms. The uses in Job (32:11, 16) are important since they are poetic.

Lam. 3:21

<sup>21</sup> But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:

Lam. 3:24

<sup>24</sup> "The LORD is my portion," says my soul,  
"therefore I will hope in him."

In Lamentations, *yāḥal* connotes "wait with hope."

Mic. 7:7

<sup>7</sup> But as for me, I will look to the LORD,  
I will wait for the God of my salvation;  
my God will hear me.

Here, *yāḥal* connotes hopeful waiting.

Psalms 38:15 [16]

<sup>15</sup> But it is for you, O LORD, that I wait;  
it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer.

Psalms 42: 5-6

<sup>5</sup> Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help <sup>6</sup> and my God.

Psalms 43:5

<sup>5</sup> Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.

Psalm 130:5

<sup>5</sup> I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,  
and in his word I hope;  
<sup>6</sup> my soul waits for the Lord  
more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who watch for the morning.

According to all of these references, *yāḥal* connotes “wait with hope.”

Job 32:11

<sup>11</sup> “See, I waited for your words,  
I listened for your wise sayings,  
while you searched out what to say.

Job 32:16

<sup>16</sup> And am I to wait, because they do not speak,  
because they stand there, and answer no more?

As we saw Job 29, the speakers hoped the other person would be quiet so that they could speak. Therefore, in these examples, *yāḥal* “wait with hope.”

Next comes 1 Sam 10:8, 13:8 *twice*, 2 Sam 18:14 and 2 Kings 6:33 since these were written during the Babylonian exile. However, these texts, unlike Isaiah 42:4 are prose instead of poetry. These usages are even less significant for the interpretation of Isaiah 42:4. These examples are even less probable to show that *yāḥal* means “wait with dread” in Isaiah 42:4.

1 Sam 10:8

<sup>8</sup> And you shall go down to Gilgal ahead of me; then I will come down to you to present burnt offerings and offer sacrifices of well-being. Seven days you shall wait, until I come to you and show you what you shall do.”

1 Sam 13:8

<sup>8</sup> He waited seven days, the time appointed by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and the people began to slip away from Saul.

2 Sam 18:14

<sup>14</sup> Joab said, “I will not waste time [wait] like this with you.” He took three spears in his hand, and thrust them into the heart of Absalom, while he was still alive in the oak.

Note, the brackets and text within the brackets are mine and explain the translation.

## 2 Kings 6:33

<sup>33</sup>While he was still speaking with them, the king came down to him and said, “This trouble is from the LORD! Why should I hope in the LORD any longer?”

In all of these examples except 2 Kings 6:33, *yāḥal* denotes “wait” and connotes neither “wait with hope” nor “wait with dread.” In 2 Kings 6:33, *yāḥal* connotes “wait with hope.”

Finally, we need to consider the usage in Genesis 8:12. We consider this reference last because it is written in prose and Old Testament scholars are uncertain when this and other texts from the Torah were written.

<sup>12</sup>Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him any more.

Here *yāḥal* denotes “wait” and connotes neither “wait with hope” nor “wait with dread.”

After an examination of all of these uses of *yāḥal*, we can conclude that this verb denotes “wait.” It never connotes “wait with dread”. It often connotes “wait with hope.”

Whybray’s interpretation of Isaiah 42:1-4 is mistaken. The foreign nations welcome the servant’s justice and law.

## Conclusion

I hope this paper has demonstrated the importance of the definition of words for the proper interpretation of the Old Testament. I hope it has demonstrated how to find the denotations and connotations of a word using tools that are available in prison. Finally, I hope it has modeled how to find the denotations and connotations of a word.