THE USE OF THE ARAMAIC WORD *bar* ("son") AS A NOUN OF RELATION IN THE BOOK OF DANIEL

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The common noun *ben* ("son")[1] is one of the most frequently used words in the Hebrew Bible and with some 5,000 occurrences it "is easily the most frequent substantive in the O[ld] T[estament]."[2] Its Aramaic counterpart *bar* is well attested in the Aramaic portions of Ezra and Daniel. Usually, this word is translated as "son," while at times its meaning is more gender-inclusive and as such it corresponds to the English word "child." In several places, the non-literal meanings of this word seem to fit well the contexts in which it is found. In such instances, *bar* may mean "descendent," "grandson," " follower," and so forth.[3]

The function of the words *ben* and *bar* as a noun of relation (*nomen relationis*) has long been recognized by Hebrew and Aramaic scholars. Ernestus Vogt, for example, noticed that there are times when the Aramaic *bar* stands as a construct noun (*nomen regens*) in the construct chain and should be translated as "a member of a certain category or a group of people."[4] At times, some scholars

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[1] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the NIV.

[2] J. Kühlewein, *"ben* son," *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 1:238. Kühlewein's list indicates that this noun is used 4,929 times in the OT. See also, Elmer A. Martens, *"bēn"* *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr. and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:114, who claims that the word occurs "almost five thousand times." Larry A. Mitchel, *A Student's Vocabulary for Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 1, puts the number of occurrences at 4887.

[3] Francis Brown, with S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (BDB), based on the lexicon of William Gesenius (1952), s.v. *"ben."* Cf. W. L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (1988), s.v. *"ben."*

[4] Ernestus Vogt, ed., *Lexicon Linguae Veteris Testamenti* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1971), 31, *"indicat plura vel individuum"* ("indicates several individuals or a single individual").

leave this word untranslated altogether, or they may choose to render the whole phrase in which the word is found by a single English word or by an idiom.[5]

In the Aramaic text of Daniel, *bar* is attested ten times. In only two of these cases the word may literally mean "son(s)" (Dan 5:22;[6] 6:24).[7] In the remaining eight instances, the word clearly functions as a noun of relation (*nomen relationis*), a fact that is often overlooked by the translators of some ancient and modern versions of the Bible. A wider recognition of *bar* as a noun of relation needs to be advocated by scholars in order to gain a clearer understanding of the meaning of this word in biblical Aramaic, as well as in the other biblical and extra-biblical Aramaic texts. This in turn will lead to a more consistent way of translating *bar* in English and other modern languages. In this short article each of the eight occurrences of *bar* as a noun of relation is examined in its context. A suggestion is also given on how these *nomen relationis* examples should impact on modern translations of the text of Daniel.

Designating a Person's Belonging to a Group

In the Aramaic of Daniel, whenever the word *bar* is found in a phrase which designates a person's belonging to a group of people, its plural construct form is used. It is also placed as a construct noun (*nomen regens*) in the construct chain and it is often preceded by the preposition *min* ("from"). The absolute noun (*nomen rectum*) that follows normally comes in the plural form, unless that noun is an abstraction, and then it is used in its singular form. In either case, the noun takes the definite article (*status determinatus*). For example, the student of Biblical Aramaic can easily recall some well-known parallel expressions from Biblical Hebrew, such as *benê-yisrael* ("the children of Israel," or "the Israelites"),[8] or *bat-sîyyôn* ("the daughter of Zion," or "the inhabitants of Zion"). In such cases the construct noun (*nomen regens*) clearly functions as a noun of relation (*nomen relationis*), a fact important to remember in the process of translating the text of the Bible.

In no less than five verses, *bar* is used in Daniel as a noun of relation with the purpose of designating a person's belonging to a certain group of people ("gentilic role"). Three of these verses contain the phrase *benê galûta'* ("the children of the

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[5]Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, trans. and rev. by T. Muraoka (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1991), 2:469.

[6]In Dan 5:22 *ben* is used in reference to Belshazzar as Nebuchadnezzar's son, a highly problematic situation. For a brief survey of the possible solutions to these problematic statements, see Zdravko Stefanovic, "Like Father, Like Son: Belshazzar's Relationship to King Nebuchadnezzar," *Asia Adventist Seminary Studies* 1 (1998): 27-31.

[7]Outside of the Aramaic of Daniel this meaning of *bar* is found in Ezra 5:1,2 and 6:14. See also Dan 9:1 (Hebrew).

[8]The Hebrew equivalent is found in Dan 1:3, 6.

exile," or "exiles"), a general designation for the group of Jewish exiles in Babylon. Thus, in the first instance found in 2:25, Arioch, who seems to be unaware of Daniel's previous contact with the king (1:18-20), introduces Daniel as *gebar min-benê galûta'* ("a man from among the exiles from Judah").[9] Likewise, in 5:13, King Belshazzar seems to ignore Daniel's brilliant career in Babylon and instead of addressing him by a customary title, opts to call him *dî-min-benê galûta' dî yehûd* ("one fromthe exiles from Judah"), an expression that is absent from the speech made in Belshazzar's presence by the queen-mother.[10] Finally, this same expression *benê galûta'* is found once more in 6:14 (Eng. 6:13) where the jealous satraps, who devise a scheme to trap Daniel in order to be able to destroy him, describe him exactly the same way as Belshazzar did, *dî min-benê galûta' dî yehûd* ("one from the exiles from Judah").

The phrase *benê-'enaša'* ("sons of men," or "humankind") is found in two places in the Aramaic section of Daniel, 2:38 and 5:21. In the first reference, the phrase describes all the inhabitants of the world who, along with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air, are subject to the God-given universal rule of king Nebuchadnezzar. In the second reference, the identical phrase is used in relation to this king who was punished by God and driven from among *benê-'enaša'*, "the humans" or "people," because of his pride.

The examples given above lead us to a conclusion that it is best *not* to translate the word *benê* literally whenever it functions as a noun of relation (*nomen relationis*) for the purpose of designating a person's belonging to a group of people. The whole phrase in which this word is found should be rendered in another language by a corresponding expression which can aptly convey the idea or the concept that lies behind the phrase. While most translators have kept this fact in mind in the case of *benê galûta'* ("the exiles"), some have overlooked this fact and have rendered the phrase *benê 'enasha'* as "the sons of men,"[11] instead of the more correct "the human beings."[12]

Stating a Person's Age

Dan 6:1 (Eng. 5:31) gives the age of Darius the Mede at the time when he assumed the role of Babylonian ruler. The Aramaic idiom used in this verse is a typical Semitic idiom found throughout the OT.[13] The expression, *kebar shenîn*

[9]Notice the difference between Nebuchadnezzar's introductory words to Daniel, "Are you able . . . .?" (2:26) and Belshazzar's, "Are you Daniel . . . .? (5:13).

[10]All the references made to Daniel by the queen-mother in this chapter are highly respectful in regard to the prophet's position in Babylon.

[11]See the New King James Version (NKJV) and the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

[12]See the NRSV and the NJB. The NIV translates the phrase as "mankind" or "people." For a Hebrew parallel to this phrase see Dan 10:16.

[13]Virtually all Hebrew reference grammars take note of this idiom.

shittîn wetartên, if translated literally, would mean "as a son of years sixty and two." It is a construct chain in which the word *bar* functions as the construct noun (*nomen regens*) preceded by a preposition of comparison *ke* ("as", "like," "according to"). The noun *bar* is then followed by another noun, *shenîn*, which is the plural of *shenâ* (a year), and then follows the numeral. The noun *bar* in this instance may again be considered to function as a noun of relation (*nomen relationis*), since it is a part of a construct chain and its meaning is not literal. In this case, the translators of the Bible are unanimous in considering this whole phrase as being an idiom. Biblical linguists, however, should recognize this function of *bar* as that of a noun of relation.

Describing a Person's Rank

In two rather famous verses of Daniel, the word *bar* is used as a noun of relation in order to describe a person's rank. In both of these cases, *bar*, which stands as the construct noun (*nomen regens*) in a construct chain, is preceded by a preposition, while the absolute noun (*nomen rectum*) that follows is ·in the absolute state, either in the singular or the plural.

Dan 3:25 records king Nebuchadnezzar's reaction to the triple miracle that took place in the fiery furnace on the plain of Dura. The author states that the last of the three miracles was the presence of a companion to the three young men, and his appearance is laconically described as *dameh lebar 'elahîn*, which literally means "looking like a son of the gods." The presence of the preposition *le* ("to", "unto") can be best explained as a preposition that follows the participial form *dameh*. The word *'elahîn* ("gods") is sometimes understood as referring to a singular person much like the Hebrew *'elohîm*,[14] but it is safest to assume that the plural was intended by the author in this case, given the fact that Nebuchadnezzar was a polytheist. The suggested translation in this case would be "one resembling a divine being," or "looking like a member of the divine family," or simply "looking like a divine person."[15]

The second example comes from 7:13 where a person is described as *kebar 'enaš*, literally "as a son of a man." This being is portrayed in the chapter in sharp contrast to the four beasts shown to the prophet in a night vision. The presence of the accompanying clouds suggests the divine nature of this person, while the phrase *kebar 'enaš* is used in this text to point to this person's link with the universal human family on earth of which the reader of Daniel's book is a member.

While the translation "a son of man" is widespread, it is best to see the noun *bar* here as functioning as a noun of relation used to describe a person's rank. A more fitting translation in this context would be to say "a human-like person" or

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[14]The KJV reads "like the Son of God," while the NIV reads "like a son of the gods."

[15]The translation, "a divine being," is even more direct. See F. Rosenthal, *A Grammar of Biblical Aramaic* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1983), 80.

"a member of the human family," thus omitting the use of the word "son" altogether.[16] The often cited extra-biblical parallels from Old Aramaic Inscriptions (Inscriptions of Sefire) and Late Aramaic (Genesis Apocryphon) support this way of translating the phrase *kebar 'enaš.*[17]

Conclusion

It may be affirmed that whenever the Aramaic word *bar* is used as a noun of relation (*nomen relationis*) in the book of Daniel, it is best *not* to translate it literally as "son," but rather to consider it as a part of the whole idiom or phrase in which it is found in the text. Moreover, there is a need for further study of the use and function of the Hebrew noun *ben* as a noun of relation in the text of the OT. This is in order to better appreciate the ways in which the people in biblical times thought and expressed themselves, and also in order for modern readers to better understand the meaning of the biblical text. Finally, a number of similar nouns in Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic that are used and function as nouns of relation need to be carefully and systematically studied so that we may have a more complete picture of the presence and significance of this phenomenon in biblical languages.

[16]For example the KJV reads "like the Son of man" and the NIV reads "like a son of man." For a Hebrew parallel see Dan 8:17.

[17]See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1967); idem, *The Genesis Apocryphon of Cave I: A Commentary*, 2d rev. ed. (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971); idem, *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays* (Missoula: Scholars, 1979), 143-60. See also, Zdravko Stefanovic, *The Aramaic of Daniel in the Light of Old Aramaic* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 56.