

What is the concept of “faith” in the Old Testament? A Series on What does Faith Mean: Part 1

The biblical concept of faith can be seen in its earliest form in the Old Testament where a variety of Hebrew terms provide a rich and complex definition. As a language of action, Hebrew primitive verbs are “root” verbs.

‘Āman

As a root verb, a word consisting of three consonants, this term conveys the sense of “reliability, stability” and “firmness.” The meaning of the root verb can be modified by changing the vowels or by adding consonants before the root (prefixes), after the root (suffixes) or within the root (infixes).

The **form** of the root verb indicates: a) the person (first - I, second - you, third - he /she), b) gender (m / f), and c) number (singular / plural).

The **stem** of the root verb indicates: a) the voice (active, passive, reflexive) and b) the action (simple, intensive, causative).

The **conjugation** of the verb indicates whether the action was completed, whether it was volitional, whether it functions as a noun or, as a noun, intensifies a verb, or functions as a verbal adjective.

Of the several verbal stems used in Hebrew, two are of interest in the study of faith.

The **hiphil** stem of ‘āman conveys the meaning “to confirm, be certain, sure” or “to be assured” (Gen 15:6; Ex 14:31; Num 14:11; Deut 1:32, 9:23; Ps 78:22; Isa 43:10; Jonah 3:5). When used in the Old Testament, the context indicates that faith has a basis in historical events; faith has an objective basis in fact. “Faith” is not blind belief or a leap into the unknown, but instead founded on a truth certain of a real God and the absolute reality of His words.

Then he believed (‘āman -hiphil) in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Gen 15:6)

When Israel saw the great power which the LORD had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD, and they believed (‘āman -hiphil) in the LORD and in His servant Moses. (Ex 14:31)

The LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe (‘āman -hiphil) in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst? (Num 14:11)

But for all this, you did not trust (‘āman -hiphil) the LORD your God, (Deut 1:32)

When the LORD sent you from Kadesh-barnea, saying, 'Go up and possess the land which I have given you,' then you rebelled against the command of the LORD your God; you neither believed (‘āman -hiphil) Him nor listened to His voice. (Deut 9:23)

Because they did not believe (‘āman -hiphil) in God and did not trust in His salvation. (Ps 78:22)

You are My witnesses," declares the LORD, and My servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe (‘āman -hiphil) Me and understand that I am He before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me. (Isa 43:10)

Then the people of Nineveh believed (‘āman -hiphil) in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. (Jon 3:5)

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The *niphal* stem conveys the meaning “to be true, reliable or faithful” and can be applied to both God and men (i.e. God: Deut 7:9, Moses: Num 12:7, prophets: 1 Sam 3:20, servants: 1 Sam 22:14, messenger: Prov 25:13). When referring to beings, “faith” acquires a meaning of “to be entrusted with.”

Know therefore that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful (**’āman** -niphal) God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments; (of God – Deut 7:9)

Not so, with My servant Moses, He is faithful (**’āman** -niphal) in all My household; (of Moses – Num 12:7)

All Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel was confirmed (**’āman** -niphal) as a prophet of the LORD. (of Samuel – 1 Sam 3:20)

Then Ahimelech answered the king and said, "And who among all your servants is as faithful (**’āman** -niphal) as David, even the king's son-in-law, who is captain over your guard, and is honored in your house? (of a servant – 1 Sam 22:14)

Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest is a faithful (**’āman** -niphal) messenger to those who send him, for he refreshes the soul of his masters. (of a messenger – Prov 25:13)

When referring to objects, the emphasis of **’āman** is placed on the word of God for its “dependability” and its confirmation in subsequent action (i.e. 1 Sam 25:28; 2 Sam 7:16; 1 Kings 8:26; 1 Chron 17:23). This usage is based on God’s promise of a Davidic dynasty and is referred to “an established house”. The fulfillment of God’s promise is not based on the quality of the members of the dynasty; instead, it is an unconditional covenant (see the article: Divine Covenants... the King... at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/1God/CovenantDavidic.aspx).

Please forgive the transgression of your maidservant; for the LORD will certainly make for my lord an enduring (**’āman** -niphal) house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the LORD, and evil will not be found in you all your days. (1 Sam 25:28)

Your house and your kingdom shall endure (**’āman** -niphal) before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever. (2 Sam 7:16)

Now therefore, O God of Israel, let Your word, I pray, be confirmed (**’āman** -niphal) which You have spoken to Your servant, my father David. (1 Ki 8:26)

Now, O LORD, let the word that You have spoken concerning Your servant and concerning his house be established (**’āman** -niphal) forever, and do as You have spoken. (1 Chron 17:23)

Over time, a root verb may morphologically change over time and become a source for derivative words. Arising from the root verb **’āman**, several derivative nouns provide a nuanced conceptual meaning to “faith.”

’ōmen (faithfulness)

The noun is used to describe God’s counsel (Isa 25:11).

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‘ēmūn (faithful, trusting)

When used of nations, it is a standard by which to measure of their righteousness and acceptability to God (Deut 32:20; Isa 26:2).

When used of human beings, it is a model that is contrasted to the bad (Prov 13:17) and the false (Prov 14:5).

‘ēmûnâ (firmness, fidelity, steadiness)

This term basically applies to God Himself (Deut 32:4) to express His total dependability. It is frequently listed among the attributes of God (1 Sam 26:23; Ps 36:5; Ps 40:10; Lam 3:23) and is used to describe His works (Ps 33:4) and His words (Ps 119:86; 143:1).

It is also used to refer to those whose lives God establishes and in whom He expects to see faithfulness from (Prov 12:22; 2 Chron 19:9). Such faithfulness or a life of faith is characteristic of those justified in God’s sight (Hab 2:4). God’s word of truth establishes man’s way of truth or faithfulness (Ps 119:30).

The Believer is entrusted with the duty of being faithful personally and faithfully responsible to carry out his office (1 Chron 9:22; 2 Chron 31:15).

‘ēmet (firmness, truth)

This term carries underlying sense of certainty and dependability, and it is used directly or indirectly of God. It is applied to God as a characteristic of His nature (Gen 24:27; Ex 34:6; Ps 25:5; 31:5), and it is a term applied to God’s words (Ps 119:142, 151, 160).

As a characteristic of God revealed to men, it becomes the means by which men know and serve God as their Savior (Josh 24:14; 1 Kings 2:4; Ps 26:3; Ps 86:11), and a characteristic to be found in those who have come to God (Ex 18:21; Neh 7:2; Ps 15:2).

Because it is an attribute of God which is manifest in man’s salvation and life of service as God’s child, the word is often coupled with another attribute of God related to our salvation: mercy or love (Gen 24:27; Ps 61:7; Prov 14:22).

Because these attributes of God’s truth and mercy lead to God’s peace toward sinful men, saved by God’s grace, the word is also often coupled with peace (Isa 39:8; Jer 33:6).

Bāṭaḥ

Another Hebrew root verb figuring prominently in the concept of “faith,” **bāṭaḥ** means “to trust, rely upon” or “to put confidence in”. With a **qal** or **hiphil** verb stem, **bāṭaḥ** expresses the sense of well-being and security which results from having a certain trust in something or someone. It is the act of believing in something so strongly that a confidence is generated from that trust; for example, God is the true basis of security (2 Kings 18:30; Jer 39:18).

nor let Hezekiah make you trust (**bāṭaḥ**-hiphal) in the LORD, saying, "The LORD will surely deliver us, and this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria." (2 Ki 18:30)

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For I will certainly rescue you, and you will not fall by the sword; but you will have your own life as booty, because you have trusted (**bāṭaḥ**-qal) in Me," declares the LORD.' (Jer 39:18)

Trust (**bāṭaḥ**-qal) in Him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us. Selah. (Ps 62:8)

In its various contexts, the Old Testament introduces the concept that “faith” is a belief in historical and factual events and leads to the conclusion that all truth comes from God, and is truth because it is related to God. With this objective basis, the concept of “faith” includes a human response that entails the subjective nature of trust. Genuine faith recognizes the historical reality of God and the reliability of His words and engenders a subjective trust within human beings.

By the time Hebrew is translated into Greek, the Hebrew concept of “faith” expands in the New Testament when describing the relationship between God and human beings.

The Hebrew root *’āman* is translated in the LXX (Greek Old Testament) uniformly with the Greek term “*pisteuō*”, which means “faith” in English.

While the Hebrew root “*bāṭaḥ*” is translated in the LXX with the Greek term “*elpidzō*,” which means “to hope,” it is also translated with the Greek term “*pepoitha*”, which means “trust” or “rely upon” in English.

References:

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