

שָׁלוֹם - SHALOM

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Anyone who is interested in modern Israel will certainly want to know at least a smattering of Hebrew, the ancient biblical language that has been reborn in Israel during this century. An increasing number of Christians are also discovering that Hebrew is the keshar - the connection - to the roots of our faith, and that a knowledge of Hebrew can greatly increase our understanding of the Bible. Each word contains a wealth of meaning that translations, however accurate, simply cannot convey.

This article is the first of a series written by David Bivin, an authority on modern Hebrew, in which he describes some of the fascinating biblical and historical background to the living "tongue of the prophets". We hope that these articles will not only help clarify specific words and phrases in the Bible, but also inspire many readers to learn Hebrew themselves.

Hebrew contains twenty-two different letters, all of which are consonants. Vowels exist, and of course are pronounced, but they are not a formal part of the alphabet and were not written until the 6th century A.D. The foundation of almost every Hebrew word is a root composed of three consonants, and each root has its own fundamental meaning. The vowels that fill out the three-consonant root to make a word may be varied in many ways, but something of the basic meaning of the root always remains.

The root of the word שָׁלוֹם (**sha-lom**) is **sheen-lamed-mem**, transliterated in English as **SH-L-M**, and its basic meaning is "wholeness, completeness". Literally hundreds of Hebrew words are built from the root **SH-L-M**, and all of them have some connection to this basic meaning. For example: **ShaLeM** means "complete", and is also the name of the city Melchizedek mentioned in Genesis 14:18 (transliterated in English as "Salem"); **SheLeM** means "peace offering", which was part of restoring a broken relationship with God; **SheeLeM** means "he paid", that is, completely fulfilled his obligation.

Hebrew has a relatively small vocabulary, approximately one-tenth that of English, and one word can often serve a variety of functions. One sees this with the word shalom, which is usually translated "peace", but means more than simply tranquillity or the opposite of war. A quick look at a number of Bible passages shows other meanings of the Hebrew word shalom, meanings that have not always been conveyed in English translations.

FRIENDSHIP: Psalm 28:3 mentions those "who speak **shalom** but harbour malice in their heart", and Psalm 41:9 speaks of betrayal by a "man of **shalom**". Both passages contrast friendship with treachery, not peace with war. Similarly in 1 Kings 2:13, when Bathsheba asked Adonijah, "Is your coming **shalom**?" she was not asking if he had come peacefully, but if he had come with friendly intent. Although he answered "**Shalom**", it was treachery - but not war- that he had in his heart. When Jesus used the expression, "son of **shalom**" (Luke 10:6), he was referring not to the peace-loving man, but to the friendly, hospitable person.

WELLBEING: One sees this meaning in 1 Kings 4:26, where the Shunammite woman was asked by Elisha's servant if it was well with her, her husband and child. In the original Hebrew text the question was simply, "Do you have shalom?" This is a familiar usage in modern Israel where you enquire after a friend's well-being by asking "מה שלומך?" (**ma shlomcha**), literally, "How is your **shalom**?" And if you want the friend to convey your regards to someone else, you simply tell him, דוּשַׁת שָׁלוֹם (**dreeshat shalom**), which means, "Ask about the well-being" of that person.

SAFETY: We read in Judges 11:31 that Jephthah tragically vowed that if he returned from battle "in **shalom**", that is in safety, he would offer as a sacrifice to the Lord the first living thing that came out of his house to meet him. **Shalom** is used with the same meaning in Isaiah 41:3, "He pursues them, advancing in **shalom**..." Jesus used the word **shalom** in the same way in a teaching recorded in Luke 11:21, "When a strong man fully armed guards his own dwelling, his belongings are in **shalom**".

SALVATION: **Shalom** is used as a parallel to other biblical synonyms for salvation, such as **tsedakah** ("righteousness") in Isaiah 60:17 and **yeshuah** ("help") in Isaiah 52:7. This passage from Isaiah 52 receives added significance when we realise that the words which literally mean "peace" and "help" were intended as synonyms for salvation: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger announcing **shalom**, heralding good news, announcing **yeshuah**, telling Zion, "Your God is King!"

The Apostle Paul understood the "**Shalom shalom**" of Isaiah 57:19 as a reference to salvation, not just peace, as his explanation in Ephesians 2:13-18 makes clear. One finds the same implication in the angels' song recorded in Luke 2:14, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth **shalom** to men on whom his favour rests". Even the well-known verse in Psalm 122:6, "Pray for the **shalom** of Jerusalem", would be understood more fully if **shalom** were translated "salvation" rather than "peace". However, we must keep in mind when considering this passage that the word **shalom**, like all Hebrew words for salvation, refers to physical as well as spiritual deliverance - the Hebrews did not compartmentalise things as neatly as we westerners do.

As you can see, **shalom** is a very flexible word and can refer to much more than peace. Yet all of the meanings mentioned about - friendship, well-being, safety and salvation - are clearly related to peace. And they also are all aspects of "completeness", the fundamental meaning of the Hebrew root **SH-L-M**.

In addition to these many sides of **shalom**, every visitor to Israel today quickly learns two further uses for **shalom**. In modern Hebrew it has become the way to say both "hello" and "goodbye" and Israelis bless one another with **shalom** when they meet and when they part.

Until we meet again in these articles, I wish you every sense of **shalom**

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