

## *'Aman*

### **“Confirm, Support”**

The verb *'aman* is studied primarily because of its meaning in the derived (*hiphil*) verbal stem, “to believe.” A close analysis of its etymology and usage not only clarifies this meaning but reveals quite a number of interesting and related ideas.

#### *Etymology*

##### *Definition*

The meanings given for the word by lexicographers include “confirm, support, be firm, steady, trustworthy.” The number of uses in the basic (*qal*) stem is so small that a definition for that verbal stem must be developed by considering its corresponding passive and reflexive (*niphal*) stem. Here we find such meanings as “be established, made firm, confirmed” and “faithful.” The connections in the verbal stems as well as the other Hebrew words related to this verb will enable us to see how the meanings all are related.

##### *Hebrew Derivatives*

There are many words in Hebrew that seem to be cognates, that is, they have the same sequence of root letters and similar or explainable meanings that indicate they are etymologically connected.

One word that illustrates the basic meaning of the word is the noun *'amon* (or *'omman*) which means “a master craftsman, or an “artist” (Prov. 8:30; Jer. 52:15). If this word is indeed cognate to our verb, then it may describe one who is trustworthy, whose work is reliable. Two other non-theological words that are related are *'om<sup>e</sup>nah*, “door-post,” and *'omnah*, “nourishment.” The door-posts may have been seen as reliable supports for the roof or wall (2 Kings 18:16). The noun “nourishment” is used in Esther 2:20 in the report of Esther’s being brought up by Mordecai. The noun conveys responsible care in the process of rearing the child.

Perhaps the best known Hebrew word in this group is *'amen*, “truly, verily.” Worshipers would confirm the truth of something they heard, or their support of it, by expressing “Amen!” (Neh. 5:13; Ps. 106:48; Jer. 28:6). Jesus likewise would make powerful statements with “Verily, verily [truly, truly] I say to you.” So this adverb expresses acknowledgment of the validity of a statement. Accordingly, it is used to close out prayers as well, the one praying simply saying “so be it.”

Similarly we have *'omnah*, an adverb, that means “truly, indeed.”

Another common noun is *'emunah*, “firmness, steadfastness, fidelity.” One good example here is its use in Exodus 17:12 to express the steady uplifted arms of Moses during the battle. It is also used in Habakkuk 2:4, which says, “the righteous shall live by his faith (*be'emunato*). The idea of steadfastness or reliability is in mind here.<sup>1</sup>

Another noun, *'omen*, means “faithfulness.” This occurs in Isaiah 25:1 to describe God’s working wonders in accord with his ancient plans. The fulfillment of the plans is an example of his faithfulness. The meaning of the word here is that one may rely on them.

Likewise we have the word *'emun*, “trusting, faithfulness,” which contrasts in Proverbs 14:5 with “one who can lie.” The word *kazab* describes what is false and therefore unreliable; *'emun* that which is reliable and credible.

*'Amanah* is a noun meaning “faith, support”; it occurs in Nehemiah 10:1 for a firm commitment, and in 11:23 for a fixed provision. Here too the idea of “reliable” is present.<sup>2</sup>

The most common derivative is *'emet*, “truth, firmness, faithfulness.” It is used of things that proved to be reliable and trustworthy. What is true is reliable. When the noun is used of God’s truth or faithfulness, it indicates his dependability. The

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<sup>1</sup> The verse is rendered in the New Testament use of it as “the just shall live by faith.” The word in Hebrew would include both the ideas of faithfulness and faith (can there be one without the other?). Paul simply emphasis the initial part, the faith.

<sup>2</sup> It was the name found in the Song of Solomon that was used by religious sects for refrigerators they made.

word is often used in *hendiadys* constructions.<sup>3</sup> With *shalom*, “peace,” for example, the noun would stress that it is “lasting peace” or “reliable peace” rather than “truth and peace” (cf. Isa. 39:8; 2 Kings 20:19; Est. 9:30; Jer. 14:13; 33:6; Zech. 8:19).

All these related Hebrew terms have a common thread, that of reliability, certainty, or steadfastness.

### ***Cognate Languages***

There is not a great deal of material in the other Semitic languages for the study of this word (but that is not a problem since there is ample usage to use). There is no clear evidence that it existed in Akkadian, Ugaritic, or Canaanite, except for the Akkadian *mar ummani*, “a master workman,” which appears to be cognate with comparable Hebrew words. Apart from that, Hebrew is the primary language to use the verb and all its nouns.

Aramaic has a cognate *'aman*, which means “to trust.” A related term is found in non-biblical usage with the meaning of permanence in duration to time.

Arabic also has a few cognate words. The verbs *'uman*, “to be faithful,” *'aman*, “to trust,” and *'iman*, “to secure,” are all related. The nouns are also cognate: reliable, trustworthy, faithfulness.”

Since most of the cognate material comes from the biblical or post-biblical period, little can be said about the history of the word prior to biblical Hebrew.

### ***Usage***

The categories of meaning for this word correspond rather closely with the verbal stems. This arrangement will be followed here with close attention to the relationships between them. The categories of meaning are as follows:

#### **1. *Guardian, Trustee***

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<sup>3</sup> A hendiadys (Greek for “one through two”) communicates a single idea with two words, the one being the modifier of the other. In English we may use “I am good and mad” to mean “very mad.”

The verb *'aman* occurs in the basic (*qal*) stem in participial forms to describe someone entrusted with the care and support of children. It is used in the feminine in Ruth 4:16 where Naomi became the nurse or foster-mother (*'omenet*) for Ruth's child. The masculine is used of Mordecai, the foster-father or male guardian who was bringing up (*'omen*) Esther (Hadassah; Est. 2:7). The plural is used metaphorically in Isaiah 49:23 of kings: "And kings will be your foster-fathers (*'om<sup>e</sup>nayik*), and their queens your nursing mothers (*meniqotayik*).

*'Aman* may also refer to those who are cared for or brought up. Lamentations 4:5 illustrates this: "Those who were brought up (*ha'emunim*) in purple embrace ash heaps."

So the verb can describe the idea of rearing or caring for a child. The connection with the meaning of "support" is indirect. The guardian is the trustee on whom the infant depends.

One passage that uses the *niphal* stem fits here as well. Isaiah 60:4 says, "your sons will come from afar and your daughters will be carried (*te'amannah*) in the arms." The verb describes the entrusted care of children.

## 2. *Steadfast, Secure*

Various passages use forms of *'aman* in the *niphal* verbal system to describe things that are fixed or sure. The best non-theological illustration of this is in Isaiah 22:23 which uses the simile of the tent peg: "And I will drive him like a peg in a firm place" (*b<sup>e</sup>maqom ne'eman*).

The word is used in this sense with regard to the divine promises for the dynasty of David: "And your house and your kingdom will be established (*w<sup>e</sup>ne'eman*) for ever before you; your throne will be established (*yihyeh nakon*) for ever" (2 Sam. 7:16). The same kind of use occurs in the promise of a lasting priesthood in 1 Samuel 2:35: "and I will build him a sure house (*bayit ne'eman*) and he shall walk before my anointed for ever." The idea in these uses is that what is sure or established is lasting or enduring. In the physical realm the word describes a continual or lasting river (Isa. 33:16) and the moon as a lasting witness (Ps. 89:37). This is also the idea in 1 Chronicles 17:24 where the prayer is the God's name be established and magnified forever.

### 3. *Faithful, Reliable*

Closely related to the above category is that which expresses the faithfulness or reliability of someone. The *qal* stem may be used in this sense, such as in Psalm 12:1 which states that “the Godly man (*khasid*) ceases, and the faithful people (*'emunim*) disappear from among the sons of man.”

But most of the uses of the verb in this category belong to the Niphal stems. A substantial number of passages use this word in reference to man's faithfulness. For example, God said, “I will raise up for myself a faithful priest (*kohen ne'eman*) who will do what is in my heart” (1 Sam. 2:35). The LORD was deposing one family of priests in favor of another that could be trusted to do the work of the LORD. Nehemiah 13:13 also uses the word to describe those who are reliable: “And in charge of the storehouses I appointed . . . because they were considered faithful” (*ki ne'emanim nekhshabu*).”

When individuals are unfaithful, then God must deal with their iniquity. Psalm 78:37 in telling the history of God's people says, “For their heart was not steadfast (*lo' nakon*) with him, nor were they faithful (*w'lo' ne'eman*) in the covenant.” By not obeying the Law the Israelites had proven to be unreliable and untrustworthy. This failure is dramatically heightened in the imagery of Isaiah: “How the faithful city (*qirya ne'emana*) has become a prostitute; it was full of justice; righteousness lodged in it; but now assassins” (1:23). The once righteous inhabitants of the holy city are here pictured as a queen city turned bad. But the prophet holds out the prospect that she will once again be a faithful city (2:28). So faithfulness with God is a description of those who conform to his righteousness. This goes beyond being reliable or dependable in some specific function to being faithful in covenant responsibilities in general.

God is faithful. Deuteronomy 7:9 says, “Know therefore that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God (*ha'el hanne'eman*) who keeps his covenant and his loyal love to a thousand generations with those who love him and keep his commands.” So God's faithfulness is expressed by his covenant loyalty to his people.

Moreover, what his word promises is dependable. The psalmist says, “The works of his hands are truth and justice [dependably just] (*'emet u-mishpat*); all his precepts are sure (*ne'emanim*)” (Ps. 111:7). And the prayer of Solomon includes the following: “Now O LORD God, let your promise to David my father be fulfilled

(*ye'amen*)” (2 Chron. 1:9). The prayer is for God to show his faithfulness by fulfilling the promise.

It may be concluded that these *niphal* uses describe things that are permanent or stable, or people who are or prove to be reliable or faithful.

#### 4. *Believe*

The next major category includes the *hiphil* uses of the verb which are most often translated by the English words “trust” or “believe.”

The first group of verses to be recorded here are those in which individuals believe other people. For example, when Moses brought the message and did the signs, “the people believed”(*wayya'amen*; Exod. 4:31). It is interesting to note that very few examples are of positive confidence or belief--most examples are negative. For example, the Queen of Sheba did not believe the reports about Solomon before she saw for herself (1 Kings 10:6-7); Gedaliah did not believe the report about the attempt on his life (Jer. 40:13-14); and Moses was afraid the people would not believe him (but see Exod. 4:8). Moreover, people were advised not to believe the deceitful person (Prov. 26:24-25). In most cases before one could believe the words proof had to be supplied. Achish believed David after he saw that he, David, had made himself odious among the Israelites (1 Sam. 27:12).

So in the first group the belief is in a person’s words or message and is based on some proof. Given the nature of man it is not difficult to see that others would be skeptical until convinced of the reliability of the words. In fact, life itself with all its difficulties inspires little confidence, as Deuteronomy 28:66 states.

The *hiphil* of *'aman* is also used to express confidence in God. In this group of verses the individuals are said to believe in God with or without immediate signs. The people of Nineveh believed (*wayya'aminu*) in God when they heard Jonah preach (Jon. 3:5). The Israelites believed (*wayya'aminu*) when they saw the victory at the Sea. This must mean that their confidence was strengthened. At other times their lack of faith was evident; Numbers 14:11 says, “How long will this people spurn me? And how long will they not believe in me (*lo'ya'aminu bi*), despite all the signs that I performed in their midst.”

Individuals such as Abraham also believed. Genesis 15:6 reports that he

“believed in the LORD (*w<sup>e</sup>he’emin ba’adonay*), and He reckoned it to him, namely, righteousness.” Abraham knew that God’s promises were reliable and so he acted by faith in leaving for the promised land. But even among such true believers there might be lapses of faith that prompted disobedience. To Moses God said, “Because you have not believed me, to treat me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you shall not bring this congregation into the land that I have given to them” (Num. 20:12).

The use of *’aman* in the *hiphil* then describes someone’s confidence in or reliance on someone’s words. This is obviously not just a simple causative use of the *hiphil* stem. Rather, it is either an inner causative or a declarative use. Some uses look like they might be inner causative, i.e., cause oneself to be firm. But the majority of the cases would fit the declarative use better. The individual makes a decision about what is reliable or what deserves confidence, and then acts accordingly. To believe means to consider something reliable and act on it.

There are a couple of passages that require further explanation. First, this verb lends itself to effective word plays. Isaiah 7:9 says, “if you do not believe (*ta’aminu* [*hiphil*]) you will not be confirmed (*te’amenu* [*niphal*]).”<sup>4</sup> The word play reinforces the actual connection between belief and security, whether the lexical connection between the two was known or not. The same play comes in 2 Chronicles 20:20, which advises, “Put your trust (*ha’aminu*) in the LORD and you will be established (*w<sup>e</sup>te’amenu*).”

The verb used in Job 39:24 more closely approximates the simple causative idea in relation to the *niphal*. It says of the horse: “with shaking and rage over the ground, he does not stand still (*w<sup>e</sup>lo’ ya’amin*) at the sound of the trumpet.” The meaning is that of showing stability.

### *Synonyms*

Several synonyms exist for the different stem translations of this word. For the *niphal* uses, *nakon* (from *kun*), “steadfast, established,” is the most obvious synonym. It primarily has the idea of “being firmly fixed, prepared, or steadfast” in its *niphal*; in its *hiphil* it means “to make firm, prepare.” It does not stress the aspect of

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<sup>4</sup> The NIV tried to capture this with “if you do not stand firm, you will not stand at all.” That works, but it may give the idea that the king was a believer and just weak--he was no believer.

faithfulness, however.

For the synonyms for “believe,” *batakh* is the best parallel. It means “to trust, be secure.” It has more of an emphasis on the feeling of security and safety in trusting. It can be used of misguided trust in false gods, whereas *'aman* stresses faith in something reliable. Other synonyms are *khasah*, “to take refuge” in something or someone in a time of need. And *qawah* and *yakhal* both emphasize the expecting faith, waiting and hoping in the LORD. This is faith, but it anticipates a future realization.

### ***Translations***

The Greek most often used *pisteuo* and *pistis* in the translation of *'aman* and its derivatives. The same ideas of belief, fidelity, and reliability may be seen in the uses of these words. These translations, however, offer no greater insight into the meaning of our word.

The English translations of the word group vary greatly. Perhaps the idea of “trust” serves as a common idea. The guardians or foster-parents are “trustees”; reliable and faithful people are “trustworthy”; and believers “trust” in the object of their faith they consider reliable. Of course this is a simplification of the wide range of uses for the words, but may be helpful. The *AHD* defines “trust” (the noun) as “a firm reliance on the integrity, ability, or character of a person or a thing.” The verb comes to mean “to rely, depend, be confident, hope.” The word may come from the Old Norse *traust* meaning “confidence, firmness.” In fact, the Indo-Germanic root *der* shows up in “trust, true, endure.”

The word “believe” means “to accept as true or real, to have confidence, to trust.” It has more of the idea of thinking or considering something reliable. So where the emphasis might be on considering something dependable, “believe” would be better than “trust.”

### ***Conclusion***

The word *'aman* has the basic idea of “firm, support.” The *niphal* uses denote the reliability or faithfulness of a person, or the steadfastness or certainty of a thing. The *hiphil* denotes the confidence of believing, or the act of believing, that is, considering something reliable and acting on it. A believer, therefore, is one who is sure that God is trustworthy.

