

The Hebrew Word יָדָע (*yada'*) As a Covenant Term in the Bible and the Ancient Near East

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The Hebrew word “know” (*yada'*), which is a common root in the semitic languages, has a wide range of meanings depending upon the context in which the word is found. Like our word “know” in English, the Hebrew word can indicate mental knowledge, that is, that a person “understands” or “has knowledge” of something, as when we say “I know that 2 + 2 is 4”. But the concept of “knowing” something or someone takes on a special meaning in the semitic languages, and this specialized meaning has to do with relationship, and primarily a relationship that is based upon the making of a covenant. We know this not only from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament or Tanach) but also from literature outside of the Bible from the Ancient Near East.

In the Bible, we can see how the Hebrew word “know” (*yada'* – Strong's #3045) can have the meaning “enter into covenant together” in a verse like Gen 18:19. Many of the modern English translation (such as the NASB, NIV, ESV) use the word “chosen” to translate *yada'* in this verse, in which God is speaking of Abraham (I've underlined our word *yada'* in the following):

“For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him.” (NASB)

For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” (NIV)

For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.” (ESV)

The old KJV, in this case, translates more our verse more literally:

For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him. (KJV)

What does God mean when He says that “I have known him (speaking of Abraham)”? He means “I have entered into a covenant relationship with Abraham.”

It is clear from other literature of the Ancient Near East that the semitic root *yada'* (to know) was used in this covenant sense. For instance, in a Hittite treaty between the Great King Suppiluliumas (who refers to himself as “the Sun”) and a Vassal king, Hugganas, whom he is installing to serve him, we read:

And you, Hugganas, know only the Sun regarding lordship: also my son of whom I, the Sun, say, “This one everyone should know...”, you, Hugganas, know him! Moreover, those who are my sons, his brothers, or my brothers...know as brother and associate. Moreover, another lord...do not know. The Sun alone know! Moreover, any other do not know! [See H. B. Huffman, “The Treaty Background of Hebrew יָדָע” *BASOR* 181 (1966), pp. 31–37 for further study on this Hittite treaty].

So what does the word “know” mean in this ancient Hittite Treaty or Covenant? It means to be loyal to the stipulations of the covenant that is being enacted between a Great King and his vassal. This informs what is meant in Gen 18:19 when God says that He has “known” Abraham. Obviously He is not saying that He “knows about Abraham” or simply that He “has knowledge about Abraham.” Moses, in writing this text, is using the word “know” (*yada'*) in a common way that the word was used in the Ancient Near East and at the time he lived.

But why would the word “know” (*yada* ‘) be used to denote a covenant relationship between two people? It is because in the Ancient Near East, a covenant between two people or between a King and his people was considered to be a relationship that could not be broken and that if it were to be broken, there would result severe consequences (the curses of the covenant).

From the beginning of the Bible, we discover that God is the One Who established marriage between one man and one woman. Marriage does not just occur naturally in the created world. In cultures where the Bible has not been the foundation, we see all manner of male-female relationships. Even in some African cultures, men swap wives annually, and in other cultures, polygamy is the norm. In the animal kingdom, the phenomenon where one male animal selects one female as a life-long mate is extremely rare. But when God created Eve, He brought her to Adam, and Adam exclaimed: “This time it is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh,” and Moses gives us the inspired conclusion: (Gen 2:24), “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and they shall be one flesh.” Thus, from the beginning, marriage is cast as a joining together in covenant of one man and one woman. This is why the prophet Malachi emphasizes that God hates divorce:

This is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. Yet you say, ‘For what reason?’ Because the LORD has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly offspring? Take heed then to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. For I hate divorce,” says the LORD, the God of Israel, “and him who covers his garment with wrong,” says the LORD of hosts. “So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.” (Mal 2:13–16)

Thus, when Moses writes in Gen 4:1 that “Adam knew his wife Eve and she conceived...”, he is using the word “know” (*yada* ‘) in its covenant sense: Adam was faithful to the covenant of marriage into which he and Eve had entered, a covenant which meant he would have a spiritual and physical oneness with her and she with him, and they would have no such relationship with anyone else. The physical relationship in marriage is an essential part of the “being one” which God intends in marriage. But the physical relationship does not exhaust the meaning of “know” in its covenant sense relating to marriage. To “know” one’s spouse means to be faithful to one’s spouse, not only in the physical relationship but also in all aspects of the marriage: support, comfort, friendship, service to each other, etc.

Moreover, in the Scriptures (as well as in non-biblical Ancient Near Eastern literature), there is a difference between “knowing someone” and “knowing something.” Since the word “know” in semitic languages can mean “to have knowledge of something,” to “know something” means “to understand it, to be aware of it, to be able to explain it to someone else, etc.” In other words, to “know something” means “to have intellectual understanding of something.” But more often than not, however, in the semitic cultures and languages, to “know someone” means to have a relationship with that person, and very often, to have a covenant relationship with that person.

Another important thing to remember about studying the Bible and the words in the Bible: words, in and of themselves, do not have meaning. Words gain their meaning by the context in which they are found. So just because the word “know” (*yada* ‘) is found in one place (e.g., Gen 4:1) does not mean that its meaning in another context will be the same.

For instance, the Hebrew word *yada* ‘ (יָדָע) is found 6 times in Psalm 139:

- 1 O LORD, You have searched me and known [me].
- 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar.
- 4 Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, O LORD, You know it all.
- 14 I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Your works, And my

soul knows it very well.

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts;

Now, in this specific Psalm, you will notice that I have put the word “me” of v. 1 in square brackets because it is actually not in the Hebrew—it’s been supplied by the translators. Literally the verse reads: “Adonai [יהוה] You have searched me and You know.” Then, if you will look carefully at the other 5 times the word *yada* ‘ is found in the Psalm, it never has the Psalmist himself as the object of the verb but always the object of the verb is something (not someone):

1. “You know when...” = “You know all of the movements of my life” (when I sit; when I stand). Also, note that in the second phrase of v. 2, the word “understand” (*beiyh*, יָדַעַ) is parallel with the word “know” (*yada* ‘), so this is describing knowledge about something.
2. “You know it” = You know the words I’m about to speak, even before I speak them.
3. “My soul knows it very well” = recognizes the majestic work of God in creating mankind
4. “know my heart” = I willfully acknowledge and openly display my heart (my thoughts, intents, wishes, etc.) before You, O God, because I know that nothing is hidden from You. You know my heart.
5. “know my anxious thoughts” = You even know what I’m unable to fully express, and I acknowledge that You know all of these things.

So even in Psalm 139, the use of the word “know” (*yada* ‘) does not relate specifically to an intimate relationship as in the marriage relationship. Surely, the Psalmist (who is David) had a covenant relationship with God, and even a relationship of kingly covenant with God, for God had appointed him to his throne. It is in the context of covenant, then, that we should also understand the word “know” in this Psalm. David is acknowledging and therefore affirming that he is maintaining loyalty of the covenant with God, for he is not hiding anything from God, and knows that he cannot hide anything from Him. David therefore confessing full covenant faithfulness to God as king over Israel, and pledges his ongoing faithfulness to God, the Great King (cf. Ps 47:2; 48:2).