

THE MEANING AND FUNCTION OF זָכַר IN GENESIS

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Hebrew word זָכַר is basically translated as “to remember.”¹ The word זָכַר appears about seventy-three times in the Old Testament and ten times in Genesis. It is observed that the term זָכַר has three groups of meanings: 1. For completely inward mental acts such as “remembering” or “paying attention to,” 2. For such inward mental acts accompanied by appropriate external acts, and 3. For forms of audible speaking with such meanings as “recite” or “invoke.”²

Besides, most examples of the Qal of זָכַר refer to inner mental acts, either with or without reference to concomitant external acts. Examples of internal mental acts are the Jews’ recollection of Jerusalem (Ps. 137:1) and their remembrance that they had been slaves (Deut. 5:15).³ Also, for men, “remembering” leads to action. “Remembering” may imply repentance (Ezek. 6:9) or observing the commandments (Num. 15:40) especially that of the Sabbath (Exod. 20:8). In political relations, not remembering a treaty is to break it (Amos 1:9).⁴

Further, on the human level, זָכַר denotes reflection, especially on what is in the past. Such reflection may lead to regret or relief, or more actively appreciation and commitment.⁵

¹Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Vol 1 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1997), 381.

²R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol 1 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 241.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Willem A. VanGemeren ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* Vol 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 1101.

In many of the cases with human subjects, changes of life situation stir up memories of relief or nostalgia (Job 11:16; Num. 11:5; Ps. 137:6; cf. 42:4).¹

Remembering can connote gratitude. Example is when Abigail urged David to remember her in his future time of blessing, after she had brought food and wine to him and his men (1 Sam 25:31). Not remembering someone's former benefits is condemned in the OT as an act of ingratitude.²

In the Hebrew scriptures, זָכַר is often used in expressions about God "remembering" His covenant with His people (Gen. 9:15-16; Exod. 6:5; Lev. 26:42, 45; Ps. 105:8, 42; 106:45; Ezek. 16:60).³ There are seventy-three instances in the Old Testament where God is said to "remember."⁴

זָכַר denotes "remembering." When it is used of God, does it mean his cognitive capacity or what does it imply? Does the use of זָכַר for God mean he is limited in knowledge or is it an anthropomorphic term? This paper seeks to examine all the occurrences of the word זָכַר in Genesis in order to discover its meanings and functions. The major emphasis will be based on factual elements and evidence from the Scriptures.

This work will explore the word זָכַר in its contexts. In order to determine the meaning and function of the term in its context, this exegetical work will examine all its occurrences in Genesis. This study is restricted to an examination of the term זָכַר in Genesis and it

¹ibid.

²ibid., 1102.

³Doug Ward, "The Biblical Concept of Rememberance" <http://graceandknowledge.faith.com/זָכַר.html>. assessed on 20 August, 2015.

⁴Victor P. Hamilton "Genesis" in *The Baker Illustrated Bible Commentary*, Gary M. Burge and Andrew E. Hill eds. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: BakerBooks, 2012), 19.

considers its usage in the Hebrew Scriptures. This research has no intention to explore all the occurrences of זָכַר in the entire Old Testament. Also, it is beyond the scope of this work to delve into the etymology of this term or its derivatives in other Semitic languages.

זָכַר in Genesis

The following table shows the occurrences of זָכַר in the book of Genesis.

NO	CHAPTER/VERSE	TERM	NIV	NKJV
1	Gen. 8:1	וַיִּזְכֹּר	(But God) remembered	(And God) remembered
2	Gen. 9:15	וְזָכַרְתִּי	(I will) remember	(And I will) remember
3	Gen. 9:16	לִזְכֹּר	Remember	(that I may) remember
4	Gen. 19:29	וַיִּזְכֹּר	(he) remembered	(God) remembered
5	Gen. 30:22	וַיִּזְכֹּר	(Then God) remembered	(And God) remembered
6	Gen. 40:14	זָכַרְתִּינִי	Remember (me)	(but) think (of me).
7	Gen. 40:23	וְלֹא-זָכַר	(did not) remember	(but) forgot (him)
8	Gen. 41:9	מִזְכִּיר	(I am) reminded	(I do) remember
9	Gen. 42:9	וַיִּזְכֹּר	(Then he) remembered	(And Joseph) remembered

זָכַר in Genesis 8:1

וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת-נֹחַ

And God remembered Noah...

Exegetical Analysis

The first occurrence of זָכַר is in Gen. 8:1 with God as the subject: “God remembered Noah ...: and God made a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters assuaged.”¹

“God remembered Noah” is the highest point of the flood story. The following structure and analysis portrays this:

Transitional introduction (6:9-10)

1. Violence in creation (6:11-12)
2. First divine speech: resolve to destroy (6:13-22)
3. Second divine speech: “enter ark” (7:1-10)
4. Beginning of flood (7:11-16)
5. The rising flood (7:17-24)

God remembers Noah

6. The receding flood (8:1-5)
7. Drying of the earth (8:6-14)
8. Third divine speech: “leave ark” (8:15-19)
9. God’s resolve to preserve order (8:20-22)
10. Fourth divine speech: covenant (9:18-19)

Transitional conclusion (9:18-19)²

¹Merril F. Unger and William White Jr., eds. “Remember” *Vine’s Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. www.ultimatebiblelibrary.com/vines_ExpositoryDictionary.pdf assessed on 23 August 2015.

²Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15 Vol 1* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), 156.

Context

In Genesis 6, it is recorded that wickedness was on the increase in the world. Man became wicked that “every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time” (Gen. 6:5 NIV). God resolved to wipe out the human race. However, Noah found favour in the eyes of God (6:8) and was preserved and his family. God commissioned Noah to build an ark. After the completion of the task, waters flooded the earth for a hundred and fifty days (7:24). Noah’s family becomes the means through which God preserves the human race as well as visible symbol of how a just and good God distinguishes between the faithful and the disobedient.¹

Genesis 8:1 then records, “But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded” (NIV). Hamilton posits that this remembrance moves God to send a wind over the earth.² Further, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* comments that זָכַר in Genesis 8:1 does not imply that God had forgotten Noah for a time. It is an expression indicating divine solitude and grace.³

¹Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 1998), 69.

²Hamilton, 19.

³Francis D. Nichol ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Vol 1 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1978), 259.

Meaning/Function:

It appears that the word “remember” in Genesis 8:1 does not mean to call something to mind that may have been forgotten. God cannot forget anything because he is omniscient. Rather, it means “to pay attention to, to fulfill a promise and act on behalf of somebody.”¹

The text does not suggest that God remembered Noah’s righteousness and obedience, otherwise, saving him would have been basically because of his character, a character that merited deliverance.² In this clause – “God remembered Noah” – the subject and the verb are more crucial than the object.³

זָכַר in Genesis 9:15 and 16

זָכַר in Gen. 9: 15 and 16 are in the same context. Thus, they will be treated together and attention will be paid to possible nuances of each reference.

וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי (9:15)

and I will remember My covenant (9:15, NAS)

הַיְתֵהּ הַקֶּשֶׁת בְּעַנְנוֹ וּרְאִיתֶיהָ לִזְכֹּר בְּרִית עוֹלָם בֵּין אֱלֹהִים וּבֵין כָּל־נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה בְּכָל־

בְּשָׁר אֲשֶׁר אֶשֶׁר עַל־הָאָרֶץ: (Gen. 9:16).

"When the bow is in the cloud, then I will look upon it, to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." (NAS).

¹Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: Old Testament* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Publisher, 2007), 41.

²Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 229.

³ibid.

Analysis

The covenant God promises to “remember” in Gen. 9:15, he emphasizes in 9:16 that he would “remember” when he sees the rainbow. The covenant in 9:15 is described as the “everlasting covenant” in 9:16.

Genesis 9:8-17 forms a literary unit. It contains a unit of thought. These verses are enclosed by reference to the covenant being established (v. 8) and, in a final peroration, to having been established (v. 17) with all flesh. In this periscope, God stands as the subject of the verbs throughout; God establishes/makes the covenant, sets the bow in the clouds, and remembers the covenant.¹

Genre: The passage is a descriptive prose.

Structure:

The recipients of the covenant – Gen. 9:8-10

The content of the covenant – 9:11

The sign of the covenant – 9:12-13

God’s remembering when the bow is in the clouds – 9:14-15a

Essence of the covenant – 9:15b

God’s remembering when the bow is in the clouds – 9:16

Conclusion – 9:17

Context

After the flood, the Lord instituted a covenant with Noah (9:1). What God had once said to Adam (Gen. 1:28), he repeats to Noah.² This underlines the parallel between the first creation described in Genesis 1 and the recreation of Genesis 8-9.³ As a sign of the covenant,

¹Terence E. Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Leander E. Keck ed., Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 399.

²Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005), 69.

God set a rainbow in the clouds and whenever rainbow appears in the clouds (9:14), “I will “remember” my covenant between me and you and all living creatures.....Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and “remember” the everlasting covenant between God and all the living creatures....(9:16 NIV).

It is observed that the rainbow was not only appointed by God but for God (9:6). Philip Eveson asserts that the rainbow sign is in the first instance for God’s benefit which he believes is an anthropomorphic language.¹ Fretheim states that God did not create the rainbow for this moment; it had existed but was now filled with new significance for the future.² When God sees the rainbow, God remembers the covenant. This does not mean he forgets in between rainbows. Everson stresses that God does not need any external reminder. The effect of putting it in this way is to emphasize that God will never go back on his word. Everything about this sign appears to be an encouragement to Noah that God will stand by his commitment.³

Hamilton observes the play on words in the flood story. The flood began with God “seeing” (6:5, 12) the unrestrained evil in the world. It ends with God “seeing” the rainbow. The flood story reaches a turning point when God “remembers” Noah (8:1). And it reaches a climatic point when he “remembers” his covenant (9:15, 16).⁴

³Gordon J. Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Pentateuch*, Vol 1 (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 2003), 29.

¹Philip H. Eveson, *The book of origins* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2001), 196.

² Fretheim, 400.

³Everson.

⁴Hamilton, *Bakers Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 20.

In Genesis 9:15, God gives the rainbow a new significance. The rainbow would be a continual reminder of God's covenant promise to never send a flood to destroy all living creatures on the earth.¹

James Boice posits that God remembered Noah in three ways. First, he removed the water (Gen. 8:1, 2, 4). Second, God gave him a sign and the third way God remembered Noah was that he gave him a word of blessing (Gen. 9:16, 17).²

Meaning/Function

Hamilton points out that “remember” in this context is an anthropomorphic language. God does not need to remind himself of his promise by seeing the rainbow. God's promises are believable and his words are trustworthy. He backs up his word with an act to eliminate even the possibility of forgetfulness.³ Further, God's remembering entails more than mental activity; it involves action with specific reference to a prior commitment (see 8:1; Exod. 2:24; 6:5; Lev. 26:42).⁴

זָכַר in Genesis 19:29

וַיְהִי בְּשִׁחַת אֱלֹהִים אֶת־עָרֵי הַכְּפֹר וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־אֲבֵרָהֶם וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶת־לוֹט
מִתּוֹךְ הַהֶפְכָּה בְּהַפֹּךְ אֶת־הָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר־יָשָׁב בָּהֶן לוֹט:

¹Stanley M. Horton ed., *The Complete Biblical Library: Genesis* (Springfield, Missouri: World Library Press Inc., 1994), 83.

²James Boice, “Remembered by God” <http://www.oneplace.com/ministries/the-bible-study-hour/read/article/remembered-by-god-11789.html>. Assessed on 20 August 2015.

³Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 319.

⁴Fretheim, 400.

Translation

So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew where Lot had lived (NIV).

Exegetical Analysis

זָכַר as it occurs in this text is in qal form, imperfect tense, and 3rd person masculine singular. God is the subject of the verb זָכַר and Abraham is the direct object of the verb. That is, God performs the action of “remembering.”

Context

From the larger context, in Genesis 13, Abram and Lot separated because “the land could not support them while they stayed together” (Gen. 13:6). Lot pitched his tents near Sodom (Gen. 13:12). The wickedness of the people of Sodom was great and God decided to annihilate them. However, Abraham pleaded for Sodom (Gen. 18:16-33). The people of Sodom and Gomorrah were bent on iniquities and could not be saved.

Thus, “when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he “remembered” Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities... (Gen.19:29).

The context of this text indicates that when God “remembers,” it means he breaks into the situation to do something about it. God sent His angels to bring Lot out of Sodom, not because Lot deserved it, but for Abraham’s sake. Thus, although Sodom was not spared, the intent of Abraham’s intercession was answered.¹

¹Horton, 277.

Eveson points out that the substitution of “Abraham” for “Lot” in Genesis 19:29 emphasizes the grace of God in delivering Lot, not on account of his own righteousness, but through the intercession of Abraham.¹

Meaning/Function

Contextually, זָכַר in this text does not imply that God initially forgot. Rather, it suggests that God answered Abraham’s request and acted to deliver Lot on Abraham’s account.

זָכַר in Genesis 30:22

וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־רַחֵל וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶלֶיהָ וַיִּפְתַּח אֶת־רַחְמָהּ:

Translation

Then God remembered Rachel, and God gave heed to her and opened her womb.
 (NAS).

Exegetical Analysis

Again, the subject in this text is God while Rachel is the direct object of the verb “remembered.” The result of God remembering Rachel is that he “opened her womb.” This can be diagrammatically represented as:

Passage	Subject	Action	Object	Result
Gen. 30:22a	(And) God	remembered	Rachel	
Gen. 30:22b	(and) God	Hearkened	To her	And opened her womb.

¹Eveson, 338.

Context

Jacob married two sisters (Leah and Rachel) by circumstance (Gen. 29:15-30). Leah conceived and bore children (Gen. 29:32-35) but Rachel could not (Gen. 29:31). Rachel gave Bilhah her handmaid to Jacob and she conceived and bore him a child (30:3-5). In Genesis 30:22, “God remembered Rachel, and God hearkened to her, and opened her womb” (KJV).

Meaning/Function

The words “God remembered” implies that God acted on her behalf in light of past commitments.¹ Further, it is noted that when “God remembers” it does not mean he had forgotten. Instead, it means that it was God’s time and he actively entered the situation to do something about it. This intervention was to answer Rachel’s prayers.²

Brevard S. Childs points out that the phrase “God remembers” which employs a finite verb in the 3rd person, had its original context within the structure of a hymn in which the object of God’s remembrance is his covenant people. Especially in the early prose narrative, as in Genesis 30:22, the object of God’s memory is occasionally a single individual.³

It is observed that despite the fact that surrogate provision of Dan has theoretically provided vindication for Rachel, getting pregnant herself finally completes the process of erasing her public disgrace (30:23).⁴

¹John E. Hartley, *New International Biblical Commentary: Genesis* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2000), 266.

²Horton, 277.

³Brevard S. Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel* (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1962), 41.

⁴John H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2001), 588.

זָכַר in Genesis 40:14; 23; 41:9

זָכַר in Gen. 40:14; 23; 41:9 are in the same context. Thus, they will be examined together.

כִּי אִם־זָכַרְתָּנִי אֶתְּךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר יֵיטֵב לָךְ

וַעֲשֵׂיתָ־נָא עִמָּדִי חֶסֶד וְהִזְכַּרְתָּנִי אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵאתָנִי מִן־הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה:

Translation

But “think” on me when it shall be well with thee, and shew kindness, I pray thee, unto me, and make “mention” of me unto Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house:

(Gen 40:14 KJV)

Exegetical Analysis:

זָכַר appears twice in this text. In the first clause, KJV translates it as “think” and NIV translates it as “remember.” In the second clause, זָכַר is translated “mention” in both KJV and NIV.

Doug Ward states that זָכַר is the Hebrew word for both “think” and “mention”.¹

These variations in translation give an indication that זָכַר includes both thought and deed.¹

זָכַר in the first clause is qal perfect, 2nd person masculine singular with a suffix 1st person common sing. In the second clause, זָכַר appears in hiphil form, waw consec singular with suffix 1st person common singular.

¹Doug Ward “The Biblical Concept of Remembrance” <http://graceandknowledge.faithweb.com/זָכַר.html> Assessed on 20 August 2015.

Context

Joseph, a beloved son of Jacob, was hated by his older brothers because of his dreams (Gen. 37:5-11). Consequently, his brothers sold him into Egypt where he became a slave in the house of Potiphar (37:12-36). Potiphar's wife lusted after Joseph but he refused considering that it is a wickedness against God (39:9). He ran away from home when his master's wife wanted to force him. The woman lied against Joseph which led him to be incarcerated (39:11-20).

At prison, Joseph met Pharaoh's chief butler and his baker. He interpreted their dreams. Joseph told the butler that he would be restored by the king in three day. However, he made a request. "But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. (Gen 40:14 NIV)

It is however observed that the phraseology used by Joseph "remember" is more commonly applied to divine action than to human action in Genesis (8:1; 9:15; 19:29; 30:22; Exod. 2:24).¹

Gen. 40:23

וְלֹא-זָכַר שָׂרֵה־הַמִּשְׁקִים אֶת־יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁכַּח־הוּ:

Translation:

The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.

As interpreted by Joseph, the cupbearer was restored on the third day (40:21). However, he forgot Joseph and his plea. Thus, Joseph is left bitterly disappointed in as

¹Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50* Vol. 2 (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1994), 383.

hopeless a situation as he was when first cast into prison at the end of the proceeding episode (39:20). He stays in prison for another two years (41:1).¹

Gen. 41:9

וַיִּדְבֹר עֶשֶׂר הַמְשָׁקִים אֶת-פַּרְעֹה לֵאמֹר אֶת-חַטָּאֵי אֲנִי מִזְכִּיר הַיּוֹם:

Translation:

Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, "Today I am reminded of my shortcomings.

(Gen 41:9 NIV)

Exegetical Analysis

KJV translates זָכַר in this text as "(I do) remember," NIV, "(I am) reminded" while NAS translates it as "(I would make) mention."

Context

Pharaoh had two dreams that his magicians could not interpret (41:1-8). Then, the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, "I do remember my faults this day... (41:9).

The sin that the cupbearer admits to "remember" is Joseph's plea to him to mention him to Pharaoh but which he forgets. To Pharaoh, the cupbearer was just recalling the offence for which he was imprisoned.²

Genesis 42:9

וַיִּזְכֹּר יוֹסֵף אֶת הַחֲלֻמוֹת אֲשֶׁר חָלַם לָהֶם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מְרַגְלִים אַתֶּם לִרְאוֹת אֶת-עֲרֹנֹת הָאָרֶץ בְּאַתְּמֶם:

¹Ibid., 384.

²Wenham, 391.

Then he remembered his dreams about them and said to them, "You are spies! You have come to see where our land is unprotected." (Gen 42:9 NIV)

Exegetical Analysis

זָכַר in this text is in qal form, consecutive imperfect, 3rd person masculine singular. Joseph performs the function of "remembering" thus, he is the subject of the sentence. אֵל, the direct object marker shows the חֲלֻמֹת (dream) is the object receiving the action.

Context

When Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream, he was made a ruler in Egypt (41:37-44). The time of plenty in Pharaoh's dream came to pass and "Joseph gathered corn as the sea... (41:49). However, the seven years of plenty ended (41:53) and the years of famine spread to the neighbouring countries.

Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to get food. Joseph's brothers did not recognize him again. They "bowed down themselves before him" (42:6). "And Joseph remembered the dreams which he dreamed of them... (42:9). As the sight of his brothers bowing before him with the deepest reverence reminded Joseph of his early dreams of the sheaves and stars, which had so increased the hatred of his brothers towards him as to lead to a proposal to kill him.¹

It is interesting to note that when Joseph had his firstborn, he called him Manasseh saying "For God has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house" (41:51). However, when he saw his brothers, all his memories come flooding back.²

¹Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* Vol 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 272.

²Wenham, 406, 407.

APPLICATION

The meaning and function of זָכַר in Genesis indicates that it is an action or practical word. When “God remembers,” he acts. He intervenes in the situation of man. This is comforting and reassuring. The Creator God cares for his creation and never abandons his own. He “remembered” Noah and brought him out of the ark. God “remembered” Rachel and opened her womb. This term does not suggest that God at any time forgets. Rather, the term connotes God’s grace and mercy towards men.

One should walk in the Lord and trust his promises for he never leaves or forgets his own. In time of trial and in the moment of trouble, it is comforting to know that God will always “remember” his people and act in their favour.

It is interesting to note that the only thing God will not “remember” is sin of his people (Isa. 43:25 cf. Heb. 8:12).

CONCLUSION

From this study, it is evident that the Hebrew term זָכַר has some nuances. When it is used of God, it appears that it does not mean God’s cognitive capacity, but rather God’s character.¹ Most often it is demonstrated that God’s remembrance is interpreted more as an action directed toward someone, rather than as a psychological experience of the subject.² Further, it is discovered that זָכַר in four instances, the term denotes inward mental acts (40:14, 23, 41:9; 42:9), two occurrences of the term זָכַר is used of God in an anthropomorphic manner (9:15,16) while three of the occurrences appear as inward mental

¹Donald E. Gowan ed., *The Westminster Theological Wordbook of the Bible* (Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 418.

²Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 299.

acts accompanied by external acts (8:1; 19:29; 30:29). Theologically, to be remembered by God is to be the object of God's saving and life-giving concern.¹

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