

EVIL

One of the great words in the Old Testament is the word for *evil*, one which linguists dispute over. Strong, who completed his landmark work a century ago has been updated by the Brown Driver Briggs lexicon. Most of the time, whereas Strong might see two or three words, there is, in reality, one Hebrew word. This is one of the few situations where BDB finds three words where Strong saw but one. There is strong disagreement among scholars as to whether there are three words and when is it this word and not that word? Here is what the disagreement breaks down to: BDB sees this word as an adjective, as a masculine substantive and as a feminine substantive whereas Strong saw it as an adjective which could be, and often was, used as a noun. In the Hebrew, a adjective, in general, will agree with the noun in gender and in number (with some exceptions when it comes to number¹). With a word this great, used hundreds of times in the Old Testament, I do not yet feel qualified to make final, sweeping judgement. We could, however, study how it has been used thus far in Genesis. In the masculine, the word is ra' (רַע) [pronounced *rah*] and it means *adversity, affliction, calamity, evil, displeasing, misery, distress*. The feminine form is râ'âh (רַעָה) [pronounced *raw-AWH*]. To add to the confusion, there is a verb râ'a' (רַעַא) [pronounced *raw-AH*] which means *to be bad, to be evil*, and, unfortunately is not easily distinguished from the adjective or noun when it is in the Qal perfect 3rd masculine singular.

How to organize this, even in the book of Genesis, is tough. I want to classify it by how it is used, in which of the three ways; but then I want to classify it under its various meanings (as is done in a lexicon); but a chronological usage, as revelation is progressive, would be a possible choice.

I. Evil as a masculine substantive:

1. We are introduced to evil when God causes to grow out of the ground the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (see the appropriate doctrine). Prior to the eating of this tree, man lived in what is termed *innocence*. There was but one sin and that was partaking of this tree. Gen. 2:9
2. Man was warned that if he ate from this tree, in that day, dying he would die. Gen. 2:17
3. Satan tempted the woman by telling her that if she ate from this tree, she would become like God, understanding good and evil. Gen. 3:5
4. After Adam and the woman ate of the tree, God said that *they have become like us [possibly, him], knowing both good and evil*. Gen. 3:22
5. Man's *wickedness* or *evil* was great on the earth in Gen. 6:5 (since this is modified by an adjective, we can ascertain that *evil* here is a substantive). This gives us some clue as to the meaning of *evil*. The earth was filled with violence and all flesh had become corrupted (Gen. 6:11–12)
6. In a passage where it would be disputed whether ra' is an adjective or a substantive, Laban points out to Jacob that he could do him *harm*, meaning that he could take his life and then take his wives and children back with him (Gen. 31:29).
- 7.

II. Evil as a feminine substantive:

1. The first use of evil as a feminine substantive is found in Gen. 19:19. Lot is basically a city person who is told to flee Sodom. He does not want to go to the mountains because some *disaster* might befall him. That is the word ra'ah. It is an evil not in the sense of vile, insidious and pernicious but circumstantial, causing either death or great discomfort to Lot². This use is completely different from what we have already studied.

¹Adjectives will be in the singular or plural, but not in the dual (the plural form of the adjective is used when found in conjunction with a noun in the dual. Also, a plural noun, e.g. Elohim, will have both singular and plural adjectives

²This verse provides us with great insight into Lot's character and choices. He always wanted to have his way, which God many times allowed. In this way, Lot always chose God's second best, which was a choice far inferior to God's first choice for him.

2. The second time we find this adjective in the feminine, it again is clearly a weaker use of the word *evil*. Isaac and Abimelech are having disagreements over the wells and Abimelech realizes that God is with Isaac. He then takes an oath from Isaac to do him no *harm*. Gen. 26:28–29
- 3.

III. Evil as an adjective:

1. Every purpose and impulse of man was continually evil in Gen. 6 (Gen. 6:5) (we know that this is an adjective since it is modified by an adverb).
2. Man's the purposes and impulses of man's heart is evil from his youth up (Gen. 8:21). This means that even prior to the age of God-consciousness, man's old sin nature is fully functioning³.
3. God classified the men of Sodom as evil; their evil was so great, that God had to wipe out five cities in that area. Their evil manifested itself in homosexual lust and sex crimes, in this case, homosexual rape (Gen. 13:13)
4. This word is not always used for unbelievably insidious evil. When asked by Abraham's slave to give Rebekah to him for Isaac, Laban said, "This matter comes from the Lord, so we cannot speak to you *bad* or good." Gen. 24:50
5. Although many translations translate this use of evil as a verb, we have the feminine adjective when describing the wives of Esau in Gen. 28:8. As a substantive, the feminine seems to weaken the strength of the concept of *evil*, and here seems to be a similar usage. In Isaac's eyes, these two Canaanite women *were not pleasing*.
6. While Laban is pursuing Jacob, God warns Laban in a dream not to speak to Jacob in a manner which is bad or good. It sounds as though he has been enjoined not to pass judgment over Jacob and what Jacob did, however that is the first thing he does, following it by a recounting of his dream and what God said to him. So there is more to this than just speaking *good or evil*. What is implied is that Laban passes legal judgement over Jacob and uses his superior force to enact punishment. However, Jacob himself offers to execute the person guilty of stealing the household idols (Gen. 31:19–32).
7. We find the adjectival use of *ra'*, matched with the feminine of the word pillar, when Laban and Jacob erect a pillar to demarcate the boundary between them, so that neither one would cross over that boundary to do the other one *harm*. Gen. 31:52
8. Joseph takes to his father an *unfavorable* report concerning his brothers in Gen. 37:2. The adjective *ra'a* and the noun are both in the feminine gender.
9. It is used to describe an animal in vv. 20 & 33; both are in the feminine and this could be conceivably translated a *wild* beast as contrasted with a domesticated animal.

IV. Evil used as a verb:

1. The verb is found for the first time in Gen. 19:7 & 9 when Lot attempts to dissuade the crowd of degenerates from raping the two angels which have come to Sodom. In the causative stem, he is asking these degenerates to not cause evil to the strangers. In v. 9, the men in the crowd tell Lot that they will cause evil to him as well.
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V. Conclusion:

1. In most cases, *ra'*, when used as a masculine substantive, implies degenerate evil, often with sexual degeneracy overtones.

³Now, why did God destroy all mankind from the earth in Gen. 6, but then says He will never again destroy every living creature? It sounds as though man hasn't changed; and if God is omniscient, why would He do it then and not later? It is simply because in Gen. 6, man had become corrupted by angelic creation

2. As a masculine adjective, the meaning may be softened somewhat by the context.
3. As a feminine substantive, the meaning is definitely softened into meaning *harm, bad, unfavored*.