A Response to *Brown, Gray and Gray, The Terms of Translation: A Brief Analysis of Filial and Paternal Terms in the Bible*.[1]

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[*Note from Bob: This paper is a personal response to Brown, Gray and Gray's published article. It does not represent an official position of The Seed Company.*]

In this response, I am not taking issue with the assertions of Brown, Gray, and Gray (BGG) that languages have semantic classes of absolute and relational nouns. I am also not taking issue with their assertions that languages have ways to express social and biological relations using kinship terms.[2] My focus in this response is on their implication that Biblical Hebrew makes lexical distinctions between social and biological son and social and biological father. The article opens, "In 'A New Look at Translating Familial Biblical Terms,' appearing in this issue, we stated that the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible express divine familial relationships by using general and social familial terms rather than biological terms."[3]

It is my contention, based on actual data from the Hebrew text, that this conclusion cannot stand. The meanings of words for the filial terms are contextual, not lexical. That is, for example, *bēn* and *ben*, *yeled* and *yeled*,[4] are distinguished not lexically, but contextually. In addition, BGG's claims for three distinct paternal terms, *yōlēd*, *hôr*, and *āb*, have no basis in the biblical data. Further, I do not believe BGG have established that their three categories, biological – non-social, biological – social, and non-biological – social, are universal and actually reflect the categories of ancient Hebrew speakers. We need to let the data speak.

Filial terms in Hebrew

On p.122, BGG say:
> In Biblical Hebrew, <u>the absolute noun *yeled*</u> signifies a male child or youth, <u>but the relational noun *yeled* (same spelling)</u> signifies a kinship relation of biological son (e.g., 2 Kings 4:1) (underlining mine for emphasis).

The clear implication here is that these are two different words, when in reality, this is the same word, the meaning of which is simply dependent on the context. There is no evidence whatsoever from the biblical text that would indicate there are two different words both spelled *yeled*. This is no different from the common use of the English word *son*, the meaning of which is contextually determined.

Also on p.122, they say:

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[1] Published in IJFM 28:3 (Fall 2011), pp. 121-125
[2] However, I suggest that critical consideration of these two areas be done, and encourage qualified people to do so.
[3] It would be helpful for someone with a strong background in NT Greek to look at the biblical data in order to evaluate BGG's claims about Greek words for father and son.
[4] All transliterations, with the exception of quoted material, are done according SBL standards.

The absolute Hebrew word *bên* signifies a boy, and the plural form signifies children (Isa. 13:18) or youth (Prov. 7:7), while context can add a familial meaning (Gen. 3:16). The relational noun *ben* (different spelling) usually signifies a filial social relation. Unlike the relational noun *yeled*, which signifies a biological relationship to a biological father (genitor), the relational noun *ben* signifies any kind of filial relationship, whether biological in origin (Gen. 4:17) or not (Exod. 2:10), but usually it involves an active social relationship to parents, with rights to inheritance. Since a *ben* is a social son, his sonship and rights can be transferred from a biological father to a non-biological father (Gen. 48:5) (underlining mine for emphasis).[5]

Again, BGG assert a lexical distinction that the evidence does not support. They state that there is some semantic difference based on the absolute state (*bēn*) vs. the construct state (*ben*), where this is actually a morphological difference, not a semantic one.[6] There are some uses of the two forms that are mutually exclusive, for example, *bēn* is not used in names such as *yĕšaʻyāhû ben-ʼāmôṣ* 'Isaiah son of Amoz', but this is not primarily semantic. Based on this, one might suppose that they would also posit a distinction between *yeled* in the absolute state and *yeled* in the construct state but for the fact that both states of this word have the same form. In short, this shows an inconsistency in logic and an inadequate handling of Biblical Hebrew.

In looking at the biblical text for examples of *bēn*/*ben* and the categories used there, we find in occurrences of both *bēn* (singular, absolute state) and *ben* (singular, construct state) the unambiguous meaning of "biological son". Other occurrences of *bēn* (singular, absolute state) give us the meaning of "non-biological, adopted or designated son". Some occurrences of *ben* (singular, construct state) produce a meaning of "non-biological, so-called social son", but perhaps these are better considered some kind of figurative son, not "social" in the human sense. (It is actually quite difficult to find unambiguous examples for this one. In fact, the Hosea example is an extended meaning that may not fit.) Lastly, *ben* (singular, construct state) can mean "member of a group" or "having the characteristics of X" or some other figurative sense.[7]

Rather than BGG's claim that "context can add a familial meaning" (p.122), we see from the biblical data that the primary meaning of *bēn*/*ben* is exactly as NIDOTTE (vol.1 p.672) claims, "By far the most usual meaning of בֵּן in the OT is 'son' begotten by a father." The absolute singular form occurs 118 times. Of these it occurs the majority of times in direct connection with the verb *YLD* 'to give birth' or 'to father, beget'[8], most of these as a direct object. The data also indicate that there is no case in which the term can mean biological, but not social son. The term can also be extended to include other close relationships including adopted son, member of a group, having the characteristics of X, and other figurative uses. In short, BGG's claim of a

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[5] In contrast to the first sentence of this statement, see NIDOTTE: "By far the most usual meaning of בֵּן in the OT is 'son' begotten by a father (e.g., Gen 4:1, 25; 21:2), though the designation 'son' could be extended to male children other than a man's own sons. This occurred either through adoption (whose existence in Israel is, however, often questioned, but cf. Esth 2:7, 15; Ps 2:7) or legitimation (often claimed to underlie the custom of giving birth on the mistress's knees [Gen 30:3; cf. 16:2; Ruth 4:16-17])" (underlining mine for emphasis).

[6] A counter-example of BGG's claim is in their own data. On p.122, they write, "The relational noun *ben* (different spelling) usually signifies a filial social relation. Unlike the relational noun *yeled*, which signifies a biological relationship to a biological father (genitor), the relational noun *ben* signifies any kind of filial relationship, whether biological in origin (Gen. 4:17) or not (Exod. 2:10)…" But in Exodus 2:10, it is *bēn* that occurs, not *ben*.

[7] For lists of each of these meanings, see Appendix A.

[8] The Hebrew root *YLD* in the Qal stem has the meaning 'to give birth' and in the Hiphil stem means 'to father, beget'. The root in these two stems make up 419 occurrences out of 498 total for *YLD*.

lexical distinction with regard to *bēn/ben* cannot stand. It is baffling that BGG have not taken into account the majority of the biblical data.

The absolute singular form of *yeled* occurs 41 times. It can mean unambiguously "biological son" or in a few cases an extended meaning related to "biological son", "male child" from newborn to at least 16 years old in which the male child was either biological or adopted son, and "male child" in which sonship is not in focus.[9] The construct singular form (identical to the absolute form) occurs only twice in:

> TNK Genesis 44:20 We told my lord, 'We have an old father, and there is a **child** of his old age, the youngest (Here *yeled* refers clearly to a biological male child.)
>
> CSB Jeremiah 31:20 Isn't Ephraim a precious son to Me, a delightful **child**? (Here *yeled* has the meaning parallel to the extended meaning of 'adopted son'.)

The construct plural form occurs 20 times.[10] Of these, at least three do not have the meaning of "biological children". These together with the two occurrences of the noun in construct singular seem to indicate that the meaning of *yeled* cannot be based on the state of the noun.

On p.122 BGG say:

> In a semantic analysis of nouns, therefore, it is important to keep in mind that absolute nouns (e.g., "look at that *child*"), relational nouns (e.g., "this is my *child*"), and terms of address (e.g., "Yes, *child*?") have different scopes of meaning, even where they have the same form (i.e., *c-h-i-l-d*). So one cannot assume the meaning of a noun in one class is exactly the same as a noun of the same form in another class, unless there is clear evidence for such usage.

Again, the data show that BGG's claims that there are two nouns both spelled *yeled* and that *yeled* means only "biological son" are without basis. The ancient Hebrews did not categorize these concepts in this way.

The interplay between the terms *bēn/ben* and *yeled* is interesting. As I have shown in some of the examples, a *bēn/ben* in one verse can be called *yeled* in the next. BGG claim the following on p.122-123:

> A clear example of the distinction between biological and social sonship occurs in the book of Ruth, in which Naomi's biological sons are each described as her *yeled* "biological son" (Ruth 1:5), but Obed, her levirate son whom Ruth bore for her, is described as Naomi's *ben* "social son" (Ruth 4:17).

But the near context within chapter 1 shows us a different picture. It is true that in 1:5 *yeled* is used to describe Naomi's sons Mahlon and Chilion. But just two verses earlier in 1:3, they are described using *ben* in the phrase *šĕnê bānêhā* 'her two sons'. Again, the data tell us a story different from BGG's claims.[11]

Further, BGG claim on p.123:

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[9] For lists of each of these meanings, see Appendix B.

[10] See list at the end of Appendix B.

[11] It is also true that in 4:17, Obed is called Naomi's *bēn*. But in the previous verse 4:16, Naomi takes the *yeled*, lays him in her lap and cares for him. However, this use of *yeled* is not possessed, so it doesn't give us a clear counter-example.

In the same way, when the Bible says that Isaac was Abraham's *ben yachîd* 'only son' (Gen. 22:2, 12, 16; Heb. 11:17), it means his only social son, because Abraham had another biological son, his *yeled* Ishmael, but he had sent Ishmael away with his mother when he divorced her (Gen. 21:14).

BGG here are ignoring much of the data from Gen 21. In 21:2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, Isaac is called *bēn/ben*. But in v8, he is called *yeled*. Ishmael is called *bēn/ben* in vv9, 10, 11, 13, *yeled* in vv14, 15, 16, *na'ar* in vv12, 17, 18, 19, 20. Perhaps the slightly different use of words for Ishmael had something to do with the fact that he was thirteen years older than Isaac. Evidence for this can be found in Abraham's use of *na'ar* to describe an older Isaac in Gen 22:12.

If somehow BGG think that a switch from *bēn/ben* to *yeled* somehow indicates a switch from social to non-social, then Jochebed would have had to be disowning Moses when the text switches from *bēn* in Exo 2:2 to *yeled* in vv3, 6, 7, 8, 9(2x), 10. And then in v10, he actually is adopted as the princess' *bēn*. The data do not support the lexical distinction that BGG propose.

Paternal terms in Hebrew

On p.124, BGG claim there are three words for 'father' in Hebrew: *yōlēd*, *hôr*, and *āb*. Again, let's look at the data.

yōlēd – masculine singular participle from *YLD*; occurs 4 times:
  Prov 17:21 'one-begetting (*yōlēd*) fool' // 'father-of (*āb*) stupid-one'
  Prov 23:24 'father-of (*āb*) righteous-one' // 'one-begetting (*yōlēd*) wise-one'
  Jer 30:6 'bearing (*yōlēd*) male?' ("Can a man bear (*yōlēd*) [a child]?") a <u>verbal</u> use
  Dan 11:6 [disputed text – HOTTP recommends 'the-one-begetting-her' (*yōlēd* + 3fs suffix);
    but BHS recommends 'her child' (*yeled* + 3fs suffix)]

So we can see from these data that the latter two are certainly not dependable examples of the use of *yōlēd* as a term for 'father'. And both of the occurrences in Proverbs are poetic parallelisms used as synonyms for *āb*. This shows clearly that, at the very least, *yōlēd* is not a commonly used word for 'father' in Hebrew, and does not provide evidence for BGG's claim.

hôr – Possible participle from *HRH*; occurs 1 time in Gen 49:26; listed in Even-Shoshan, but no entry in BDB. Here we have no evidence at all of another Hebrew word for 'father'. Sarna (345) writes:
  my ancestors Hebrew *horai* is so rendered based on postbiblical usage. However, the stem *h-r-h* in the Bible can only mean "to become pregnant" and is, of course, solely used in the feminine. Seeing that "mountain(s)"—"hill(s)" is a fixed pair of parallel terms in Hebrew poetry, occurring more than thirty times in that order, Rashbam is undoubtedly correct in connecting *horai* here with *har*, "mountain." The Septuagint indeed reads here "ancient mountains," joining the word to the following *'ad*. The phrase *harere 'ad*, "ancient mountains," appears in Habakkuk 3:6 in parallel with *give'ot 'olam*, "eternal hills." The Blessing of Moses to Joseph in Deuteronomy 33:15 employs the same imagery, though in variant form: "With the best from the ancient mountains, / And the bounty of hills immemorial. . . ." Therefore, it is best to render here, "the blessings of the ancient mountains."

āb – Noun; occurs <u>1215</u> times (according to Even-Shoshan)

This word that BGG cite as the third word in Hebrew for 'father' is, except for the two parallelisms in Proverbs, the only word in Biblical Hebrew for 'father', and it occurs more than 1200 times in all contexts. Again it is baffling, in fact, it is startling, that BGG have not taken into account the majority of the biblical data.

Further, BGG have taken their unfounded conclusions and placed them into Table 3 on p.124, stating that *yōlēd* and *hôr* can mean "biological, non-social father" and that *āb* cannot mean that. However, there are no unambiguous examples of *hôr*, and only two unambiguous occurrences of *yōlēd*, both of which are directly parallel with *āb*. So again, it is easily seen that BGG's categories, biological – non-social, biological – social, and non-biological – social, are not universal and do not reflect the categories of ancient Hebrew, and that their claims about the paternal terms in Hebrew cannot be maintained.

Conclusion

The actual biblical data show that BGG's claims for paternal terms in Hebrew are without basis. The data also show clearly that the meanings of the filial words *bēn*/*ben* and *yeled* are not distinguished lexically, rather any difference in meaning is contextual. Therefore, their statement on p.123, "In summary, Hebrew and Greek have relational nouns that signify a biological son, but they are not used in the Bible to express divine sonship" cannot be maintained for Hebrew.

Further, the idea that the ancient Hebrews would have had a concept that a biological son would not also have been a social son, as BGG assert, is without basis. BGG make an attempt to defend this idea in Endnote 2: "Biological sonship was no guarantee of social sonship in the ancient world, nor was non-biological sonship a lessor (*sic*) bond. Under the law of the Roman empire, a biological son could be disowned, but an adopted son could not be disowned." However, this refers to Roman custom, not ancient Israelite culture. Their categories are faulty, as all Israelite persons called "son" would have been considered social sons, whether biological or non-biological.

Works Consulted

[All Bible quotations and occurrence statistics (unless otherwise noted) are taken from Bible Works for Windows version 7, 2007.]

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Appendix A

The meanings of *bēn*/*ben* (The English translations of the words are underlined and bolded):

bēn (singular, absolute state) – (unambiguously) "biological son"

[NIV] **Genesis 4:25** ¶ Adam lay with his wife again, and she gave birth to a **son** and named him Seth

[NIV] **Genesis 38:3** she became pregnant and gave birth to a **son**, who was named Er.

[NIV] **Exodus 1:16** "When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a **boy**, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live."

[NIV] **Leviticus 12:6** ¶ "'When the days of her purification for a **son** or daughter are over,

[NIV] **Numbers 27:4** Why should our father's name disappear from his clan because he had no **son**?

[NIV] **Deuteronomy 21:15** ¶ If a man has two wives, and he loves one but not the other, and both bear him sons but the firstborn is the **son** of the wife he does not love,

[NIV] **Judges 8:31** His concubine, who lived in Shechem, also bore him a **son**, whom he named Abimelech.

[NIV] **Ruth 4:13** ¶ So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went to her, and the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a **son**.

[NIV] **1 Samuel 1:20** So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a **son**. She named him Samuel

[NIV] **1 Kings 3:6** Solomon answered, "You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a **son** to sit on his throne this very day.

ben (singular, construct state) – (unambiguously) "biological son"

[NIV] **Genesis 4:17** ¶ Cain lay with his wife, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch. Cain was then building a city, and he named it after **his son** Enoch.

[NIV] **Genesis 37:33** He recognized it and said, "It is **my son**'s robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces."

[NIV] **Exodus 6:15** The sons of Simeon were Jemuel, Jamin, Ohad, Jakin, Zohar and Shaul the **son of** a Canaanite woman. These were the clans of Simeon.

[NIV] **Leviticus 24:10** ¶ Now **the son of** an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father went out among the Israelites

[NIV] **Numbers 4:16** ¶ "Eleazar **son of** Aaron, the priest

[RSV] **Deuteronomy 13:6** ¶ "If your brother, the **son of** your mother

[NIV] **Judges 8:22** ¶ The Israelites said to Gideon, "Rule over us-- you, **your son** and **your grandson**-

[NIV] **1 Samuel 1:23** "Do what seems best to you," Elkanah her husband told her. "Stay here until you have weaned him; only may the LORD make good his word." So the woman stayed at home and nursed **her son** until she had weaned him.

[RSV] **1 Kings 1:5** ¶ Now Adonijah the **son of** Haggith

bēn (singular, absolute state) – "non-biological, adopted or designated son"

[NIV] **Exodus 2:10** When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her **son**. She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water."

[NIV] **2 Samuel 7:14** I will be his father, and he will be my **son**. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men.

[NIV] **1 Chronicles 17:13** I will be his father, and he will be my **son**. I will never take my love away from him, as I took it away from your predecessor.

[NIV] **Psalm 80:15** the root your right hand has planted, the **son** you have raised up for yourself.

[NIV] **Jeremiah 31:20** Is not Ephraim my dear **son**, the child in whom I delight? [Note the parallelism with 'child' (Hebrew *yeled*).]

[RSV] **Ruth 4:17** And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "**A son** has been born to Naomi."

ben (singular, construct state) – "non-biological, so-called social son", but perhaps better considered some kind of figurative son, not "social" in the human sense. It is actually quite difficult to find unambiguous examples for this one. In fact, the Hosea example is an extended meaning that may not fit.

NIV **Psalm 2:7** I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are **<u>my Son</u>**; today I have become your Father.

NIV **Hosea 11:1** ¶ "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called **<u>my son</u>**.

ben (singular, construct state) – "member of a group" or "having the characteristics of" or some other figurative sense

NIV **Genesis 5:32** ¶ After Noah was 500 years old (lit., **<u>son of</u>** 500 years)

NIV **Genesis 15:2** But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" (lit., the **<u>son of</u>** the possession of my house)

NIV **Exodus 12:43** ¶ The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "These are the regulations for the Passover: "No foreigner is to eat of it. (lit., no **<u>son of</u>** foreignness)

NIV **Leviticus 12:6** ¶ … and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering. (lit., **<u>son of</u>** pigeon or dove)

NAS **Amos 7:14** ¶ Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, "I am not a prophet, nor am I the **<u>son of</u>** a prophet

<u>Appendix B</u>
The meanings of *yeled* (The English translations of the words are underlined and bolded):

unambiguously "biological son"

RSV **2 Samuel 6:23** And Michal the daughter of Saul had no **<u>child</u>** to the day of her death.

NIV **2 Samuel 12:15** ¶ After Nathan had gone home, the LORD struck the **<u>child</u>** that Uriah's wife had borne to David, and he became ill. (*yeled* is cognate accusative of verb *yāldâ* 'she had borne')

RSV **1 Kings 14:12** Arise therefore, go to your house. When your feet enter the city, the child shall die. (This same boy was called *na'ar* in vv3, 17, *ben* 'her son' in v5, and *yeled* here.)

extended meaning of "biological son"

NIV **Isaiah 9:6** For to us a **<u>child</u>** is born, to us a son is given (*yeled* is cognate accusative of passive verb *yullad* 'is born'; *yeled* is parallel with *bēn* in the second clause)

"male child" from newborn to at least 16 years old; in these contexts, the male child was either biological or adopted son:

NIV **Genesis 21:8** ¶ The **<u>child</u>** grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. (Weaning occurs at around 3 years. In the verse immediately preceding, this child is the object in the clause, "I gave birth to a son (*bēn*)")

NIV **Genesis 21:14** Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the **<u>boy</u>**. (If Ishmael was 13 when Isaac was born, and it took about 3 years, then Ishmael would have been 16 yrs old at this time.)

NIV **Genesis 37:30** He went back to his brothers and said, "The **<u>boy</u>** isn't there! Where can I turn now?" (16-17 years old?)

NIV **Exodus 2:3** … Then she placed the **<u>child</u>** in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. (3 months)

NIV **Ruth 4:16** Then Naomi took the **<u>child</u>**, laid him in her lap and cared for him. (newborn)

NIV **1 Kings 3:25** He then gave an order: "Cut the living **<u>child</u>** in two and give half to one and half to the other."

NIV **2 Kings 4:18** ¶ The **<u>child</u>** grew, and one day he went out to his father, who was with the reapers. (In the verse immediately preceding, this child is the object in the clause, "she gave birth to a son (*bēn*)")

"male child"; sonship is not in focus

RSV **Exodus 2:6** When she opened it she saw the **<u>child</u>**; and lo, the babe was crying. She took pity on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children."

^{NIV} **1 Kings 17:21** Then he stretched himself out on the **<u>boy</u>** three times and cried to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this **<u>boy</u>**'s life return to him!" (In this case, *yeled* is not referring to a biological son.)
^{NIV} **Ecclesiastes 4:13** ¶ Better a poor but wise **<u>youth</u>** than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning. (In this case, *yeled* is not referring to a biological son.)
^{RSV} **Joel 3:3** and have cast lots for my people, and have given a **<u>boy</u>** for a harlot, and have sold a girl for wine, and have drunk it.

The term *yeled* in the plural construct occurs in the following: Gen. 30:26; 32:23; 33:2(2x), 6, 7; Exod. 2:6; 21:4, 22; Ruth 1:5; 2 Ki. 4:1; Job 21:11; 38:41; 39:3; Isa. 2:6; 11:7; 29:23; 57:4; Lam. 4:10; Hos. 1:2. The primary sense seems to have been the simple sense of "children of a parent". I would question whether or not there was an intended distinction between "biological" and "social" children in these occurrences. In at least three cases, it is not used not as "biological children". In these three, it seems to have been used as a class marker as in Isa 57:4 *yildê-peša'*, similar to the use of *ben* as member of a class or having the characteristics of X:
^{NIV} **Isaiah 2:6** You have abandoned your people, the house of Jacob. They are full of superstitions from the East; they practice divination like the Philistines and clasp hands with pagans (lit., "the **<u>children</u>** of foreigners", see NKJV).
^{RSV} **Isaiah 57:4** Of whom are you making sport? Against whom do you open your mouth wide and put out your tongue? Are you not **<u>children</u>** of transgression, the offspring of deceit,
^{NIV} **Hosea 1:2** ¶ When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, "Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and **<u>children</u>** of unfaithfulness