Caroline Cilento
OT 504—Hebrew Bible and the Eastern Mediterranean World
February 12, 2020

<div align="center">Essay 1: Analysis of a Hebrew Word—שָׁלוֹם</div>

Jeremiah 29:11

NIV—For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans *to prosper* you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

KJV—For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of *peace*, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.

NLT—For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for *good* and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.

RSV—For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for *welfare* and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

While each of these italicized words is positive and likely come from the same word family, each has its own nuance. According to Merriam-Webster, *prosper* means "to succeed in an enterprise or activity, *especially:* to achieve economic success; to become strong and flourishing." A few of the listings for *peace* include "a state of tranquility or quiet; freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions; harmony in personal relations." The top definition for *good* is "of a favorable character or tendency." And *welfare* is defined as "the state of doing well especially in respect to good fortune, happiness, well-being, or prosperity."

The Hebrew word in this verse is *shalom.* According to *Strong's Concordance,* the definition of *shalom* is "שָׁלוֹם **shâlôwm,** shaw-lome'; or שָׁלֹם shâlôm; from H7999; safe, i.e. (figuratively) well, happy, friendly; also (abstractly) welfare, i.e. health, prosperity, peace:— × do, familiar, × fare, favour, friend, × great, (good) health, (× perfect, such as be at) peace(-

able, -ably), prosper(-ity, -ous), rest, safe(-ty), salute, welfare, (× all is, be) well, × wholly." *The*
Abridged Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament defines it as "1.
completeness. 2. *safety, soundness,* in body. 3. *welfare, health, prosperity.* 4. *peace, quiet,*
tranquillity, contentment, 5. *peace, friendship.* 6. *peace* from war. 7. as adj. sacrifice for alliance
or friendship, 'peace-offering.'" According to Brown-Driver-Briggs, שָׁלוֹם is a masculine noun,
and it comes from the root שָׁלַם.

An article on myjewishlearning.com delves into the biblical meaning of *shalom.* The root
meaning of *shalom* has to do with completeness and wholeness, "and its frame of reference
throughout Jewish literature is bound up with the notion of *shelemut*, perfection."[1] The peace of
shalom is not bound only to the absence of political or personal turmoil, rather it encompasses all
areas of life. The article states that the biblical usage mainly refers to a state of affairs.
"*Shalom* is a blessing, a manifestation of divine grace." It can be a way to inquire after one's
well-being, and can also refer to the absence of war.

Strong's outline of biblical use fits the explanation given by My Jewish Learning. The
first entry in the outline is "completeness, soundness, welfare, peace," followed by
"completeness (in number); safety, soundness (in body); welfare, health, prosperity; peace, quiet,
tranquillity, contentment; peace, friendship of human relationships, with God especially in
covenant relationship; peace (from war); peace (as adjective)." Ultimately, it seems, the meaning
at the heart of *shalom* is complete, perfect peace that transcends all areas of life.

According to Strong's, שָׁלוֹם "occurs 242 times in 210 verses in the Hebrew
concordance of the NASB." It is used in every book except for Ruth, Nehemiah, Hosea, Joel,
Amos, Jonah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. Contextually it ranges from political and military

---

1https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shalom/

peace, to prosperity, to relational welfare (between both people and God). It is used in prophecy, poetry, historical narrative, and wisdom literature. In the King James, it is almost always used as a noun. In the New International Version of Jermiah 29:11, it is used as a verb.

Based on the research I was able to conduct on this word, I would say that the King James's use of *peace* or the Revised Standard's use of *welfare* most closely capture the meaning of *shalom.* The New International's use of *to prosper* brings to mind images of monetary or social blessing, which *shalom* can convey, but I believe if we are to consider the overall definition of completeness or wholeness in our translation, it is slightly too narrow a scope. Conversely, I feel that the New Living Translation's use of *good* is a little too broad in meaning. While peace certainly is good, I'm not sure *good* captures the holistic aspects of *shalom,* especially when we consider that *good* is often seen as the absence of bad, or adversity, and we know that isn't always the case in a believer's life.

However, the word *peace,* when understood properly, is something that transcends material gain or good things that happen to us. If we are truly at peace, if the Lord has blessed us with His *shalom,* nothing that happens to us can take that away. We could be facing the worst circumstances of our lives, and God's peace will still reign in our hearts and minds. Similarly, *welfare* indicates that even if things aren't going the way we would like, "we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose," as Paul wrote in Romans 8:28.

In Jeremiah 29:11, *shalom* plays an important role. When I was in college, this verse was on every inspirational mug and planner, and often the word that gets the most attention is *plans,* or *thoughts,* as in the King James Version. We all want to know God's plans for our lives. But after doing this word study, I think the word to focus on is *shalom.* When we focus on the peace

or welfare, we realize that even if God's plans involve suffering and hardship—and we know from other places in Scripture that we will face adverse circumstances—He will give us peace in the midst of that suffering. Understanding the Hebrew word helps us to see the all-encompassing nature of the type of peace God longs to grant us.

This is something that I believe is of utmost importance in our society today. In the United States, we live in a time where politicians vilify one another for holding different beliefs. There is a generational war, especially between millennials and baby-boomers. There is a philosophical civil war that even reaches into our churches, with some denominations interpreting Scripture in one way, and others in another way, and each side calling the other "unchristian" because of it. Our circumstances are not always ideal. Friends, family members, we ourselves get sick and wonder if a cure for our ailments will ever be found. People are still homeless, and others live paycheck to paycheck as they try to make their ends meet.

I believe that the only thing that can fix the ills of society is Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. If we are ever going to heal the division created by politics, ideology, and philosophy, we need Jesus to bring His overwhelming peace into our hearts and lives. The best way to ease the tension within the Church is to look to the One Who bore "the punishment that brought us peace" (Isa. 53:5 NIV). The peace of Christ may not take away our physical illnesses or provide a new job or home, but it can give us hope in the middle of our trials that can't be explained in any way other than Jesus.