



Understanding Israel -

the Sieve Analogy

by Tim Kelley

In the previous study we discussed Amos 9:8-12 and came upon the sieve analogy and the question as to whether Israel is shaken out of the sieve or if she remains in the sieve, never to fall to the ground. My understanding of the purpose of the sieve analogy is that Israel passes through the sieve and thus falls to the ground. This understanding is not in line with the main stream view of this passage. Most commentaries, including the Stone Tenakh, the Restoration Scriptures, and Unger's Bible Commentary indicate that Israel remains in the sieve, but they give no clue as to what actually comes out the bottom of the sieve, but if you're going to sift something, something must come out the bottom of the sieve. This leaves one to question why YHVH would use the sieve analogy in the first place.

Part of the difficulty in understanding this passage is that there is an added word designed to make the passage more "understandable". Of course, in many cases, added words tend to muddy up the understanding instead clearing it up. In the King James Version of the analogy there is a phrase that says "like as *corn* is sifted". The New King James version adds the word "grain" instead of "corn", but in either case, the words are printed in italics, which indicate the words were not translated from the Hebrew text, but at best, were implied.

Let's now look at some of the key words used in this verse. The first key word we'll look at is "sieve" which is translated from the Hebrew word "kebarah" (כִּבְרָה Strong's 3531). *Kebarah* is only used one time in the scriptures, that being in this analogy. According to Strong's, it means "sieve" or "sifter". To gain a little more understanding, we can look at the root of the word "kebarah" and find that it is "kabar" (כָּבַר Strong's 3527), another word that is only used one time (Job 35:16) and which, in most every translation is defined as "multiply". So then, it would be proper to say that a "sieve" is a "multiplier". We'll talk more about the purpose of sieve later.

Another key word is "sift". Now that we know that the work "sieve" is indeed the intended translation of the word "kebara", we should find that the word that's translated "sift" should be the *action* that is done with a "sieve". "Sift", and its past tense form "sifted", comes from the Hebrew *root* word "nuwa" (נִוַּע Strong's 5128) which means "to quiver, totter, shake, reel, stagger, wander, etc.". These are all words having to do with moving erratically. When a person uses a sieve, they typically shake it back and forth. In the case of a round sieve (like my mother used to have) she would shake it in all directions – sometimes bouncing it against the palm of her hand. The most common uses of *nuwa* are *shake*, *wander*, and *move*, and the first place it's used in the scripture is when God tells Cain he will be a "fugitive and a vagabond". In Young's Literal Translation, it says he will be a *wanderer*. So to *sift* is to *shake* or *wander*.

The final key word that we'll want to look at is the word "grain" or more properly, "least grain". This phrase appears at the end of the passage and is not italicized, thus there should be a Hebrew word from which it is translated. Whatever word we find it to be, we know that it will not *fall to the ground*. The Hebrew word that is translated "least grain" in the King James Version is the Hebrew word "tserowr"

(צָרוּר Strong's 6872). The word means *bundle, parcel, pouch, (packed) bag, and pebble*. Though not one of Strong's definitions, it is translated *least grain* only one time in the King James Version, that being in Amos 9:9. The word comes from the root word "tsarar" (צָרַר Strong's 6887) which means to *bind, be in distress, besiege, etc.*, words all having to do with something that causes problems. *Tsarar* is most often translated "enemy", and in Exodus 23:22, it is translated "adversary". The gist of the word is that a *tsarar* is an oppressor, an enemy . . . someone who binds you up. In many translations, including the Stone Tnakh, the word *tserowr* is translated pebble. This would be consistent with the context of the passage where *sand* is what is being sifted in the sieve because pebbles, being larger than a grain of sand, can clog the sieve unless they are shaken. There is nothing in the word "tsarar" that would cause it to be translated *least grain* unless comparing the *least grain of sand* to even smaller particles of sand. With that, let's move us to the next point.

What is the purpose of a sieve? The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines sieve as "*a device with meshes or perforations through which finer particles of a mixture (as of ashes, flour, or sand) of various sizes may be passed to separate them from coarser ones, through which the liquid may be drained from liquid-containing material, or through which soft materials may be forced for reduction to fine particles*". In essence, a sieve separates particles of different size, usually with the intent of using the smaller, consistent size particles that pass through the sieve. A good example would be a rock crusher. In order to make gravel rocks are crushed and the resultant stones are placed upon a vibrating screen that has specific sized holes to separate the larger stones from the smaller stones. The stones that pass through the screen are considered useful gravel while the ones that do not are sent back to the crusher for further refinement. Another example is that of the wave omer offering. The Mishnah indicates that the refined barley flour for this offering passed through a series of finer and finer sieves until the particles of flour that passed through the final sieve were so fine they would not stick to the priest's skin. In this example, as in the example of the gravel, the particles that pass through the sieve are the ones that are preserved and used; the particles that remained in the sieve are either re-refined or discarded.

Another use for a sieve is to aerate flour. Flour will normally compact the longer it is kept, especially if it's transported. Compacted flour does not rise quickly because it lacks oxygen. Sifting the flour adds oxygen to it thus speeding up the leavening process. Once flour is aerated, there appears to be more flour than before, simply because the particles of flour have now *spread out*. When sifting flour there are times the particles of flour stick together and won't pass through the sieve. These bunched up particles of flour are usually thrown away, thus, as in the case of the rock crusher and the omer grain offering, the aerated flour is what falls out of the sieve, not what remains in the sieve.

Another question is what is meant by the term 'fall to the ground' (NKJ) or 'fall to the earth' (KJV). Does it mean "that which falls to the earth will die - - cease to exist", or does it mean "that which falls to the earth will begin to sprout and bring forth new life"? These are questions that would need to be answered in order to understand this analogy.

There are a number of passages where the phrase "fall to the earth" is used to indicate that a person will die. For instance, in 1 Kings 1:52, Adonijah, David's son, is begging for his life before King Solomon. The King responds by saying "*If he will shew himself a worthy man, there shall not an hair of him fall to the earth: but if wickedness shall be found in him, he shall die.*" In this case, *to die* is a logical understanding of this phrase. But what if we're talking agriculture? What happens to seed that does not

fall to the earth? Does it ever sprout and multiply? Can it grow and increase if it never hits the ground? Yeshua makes this statement in regards to Himself:

^{NKJ} John 12:24 "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.

Every farmer knows that seed that's left in the bag serves no purpose, but seed that is sown in the ground produces much fruit. Being sown in the ground is an analogy that is often used of Israel, especially the northern tribes which are commonly referred to as the House of Israel or Ephraim. Because of their refusal to walk in God's ways, they were destined to be scattered throughout the earth, not scattered to die, but scattered to multiply. There are numerous references in the Tnakh about Israel being scattered and sown in the earth. Here are just a few examples –

Jeremiah 31:27-28 " Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, that I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast. ²⁸ "And it shall come to pass, that as I have watched over them to pluck up, to break down, to throw down, to destroy, and to afflict, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD.

1 Kings 14:15 "For the LORD will strike Israel, as a reed is shaken in the water. He will uproot Israel from this good land which He gave to their fathers, and will scatter them beyond the River, because they have made their wooden images, provoking the LORD to anger.

Zechariah 10:7-9 Those of Ephraim shall be like a mighty man, And their heart shall rejoice as if with wine. Yes, their children shall see it and be glad; Their heart shall rejoice in the LORD. ⁸ I will whistle for them and gather them, For I will redeem them; And they shall increase as they once increased. ⁹ "I will sow them among the peoples, And they shall remember Me in far countries; They shall live, together with their children, And they shall return.

Deuteronomy 28:64 Then the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods, which neither you nor your fathers have known -- wood and stone.

Nehemiah 1:8 Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations;

Those who understand that Israel and Judah were scattered for a purpose tend to think that this "fall to the ground" passage refers to Israel. They know that YHVH will never leave or forsake Israel, so they assume Israel will not "fall to the ground". But as you can see, unless Israel does fall to the ground in the agricultural sense, they will never be able to fulfill their purpose. So who is it that *will not fall to the ground?*

Verse 10 is the answer.

^{NKJ} Amos 9:10 All the sinners of My people shall die by the sword, Who say, 'The calamity shall not overtake nor confront us.

The ones who discount and oppose the message of the prophets are the ones who will not fall to the ground. Those who attempt to sway others into thinking God will not be true to His word, either in blessings or curses, are not useful to YHVH (unless of course, they repent). Since only useful particles

pass through the sieve, these sinners that sway the people remain in the sieve, otherwise, if they fall to the ground, they would grow and multiply as well. These *tsarar*, *adversaries*, *sinner of my people* must be silenced so the people will come to realize that they have been scattered because of the sins of their forefathers, and that's exactly what Amos says will happen.

Finally, the King James Version use the emphatic word "yet" to tie the final thought of the *tsarar* not falling to the ground with the House of Israel. This is unfortunate, because the Hebrew word is simply a *vav* (ו) and should have been translated "and" or "but" as it was in most other translations.

Let's now paraphrase verse 9 by substituting the definitions we've found by searching the Hebrew, for the English words found in the New King James version –

"For surely I will command, and will *multiply* the house of Israel among all the nations as if it were shaken and multiplied with a sieve. Israel will fall to the ground and bear fruit, but no adversary or enemy shall fall to the ground but will remain in the sieve to be discarded."

With our understanding of what YHVH is doing with Israel, this makes a lot more sense than to think that Israel remains in the sieve. But wait – isn't grain actually separated in a sieve. Isn't that how it's separated from the chaff? No. In the day and age when this prophecy was written, grain was beaten and winnowed in order to separate it from the unwanted chaff. The grain and the chaff were together thrown into air and the lighter chaff was blown away by the wind, while the good, heavier grain fell to the earth where it was collected.

There is a process of grading grain by using a sieve. In this process, a sieve is chosen that has holes just a little smaller than the minimum size grain that is considered good grain, then a sample of grain is put in the sieve and the grain particles that fall through the sieve are collected and counted. Thus, the smaller – inferior grain is what falls out of the sieve. But this is used simply for grading. And what's more, it is a rather recent process. Grain was not graded as such back when Amos' prophecy was written.

As most Hebraic minded Bible students understand, Hebrew words often have multiple meanings. As I mentioned earlier, the Hebrew word for sift is *nuwa*. Besides meaning *to shake*, the word can also mean *to wander*. This meaning could also fit the verse 9 passage as well, because Israel, once they were taken captive, had no place to go. They knew they couldn't return to Samaria, so they began to wander all over the earth. Thus, YHVH sifted Israel through the nations by causing them to wander all over the place. Once some of them got to a place they liked, they planted themselves. Others continued to wander until they wandered across the oceans and found new lands.

In the last two verses of this prophecy, YHVH said that when He begins to rebuild the Tabernacle of David, He will bring the captives back. He'll find all those Israelites that He sifted throughout the nations and bring them back to Israel. It is then that He'll *plant* them in the land of their fathers.

Shalom Alecheim