

From Start To Finish (Part One)

by Charles Whitaker (1944-2021)
Forerunner, "Ready Answer,"

Listen, Jacob. Listen, Israel—
I'm the One who named you!
I'm the One.
I got things started and, yes, I'll wrap them up.
Earth is my work, handmade.
And the skies—I made them, too, horizon to horizon.
When I speak, they're on their feet, at attention.

—Isaiah 48:12-13 (*The Message*)

At least three times in the Old Testament and four in the New, God explicitly declares Himself the First and the Last: Isaiah 41:4; 44:6, 48:12; Revelation 1:17; 2:8; 21:6; 22:13.¹ By that count, the formula “the first and the last” becomes not only one of the most obvious merisms in God’s Word but also one of the most common. Since the members of a merism are, by definition, comprehensive, opposites which imply “everything in between” (as in the sentence, “He looked high and low for his wallet”), the phrase implies that God begins and completes His work—and *stays with it all the way through*.

The translators of the *Jubilee Bible* catch the essence of the merism in their rendering of Isaiah 41:4: “I the LORD, the first, and I, Myself am with those who are last.” God brackets time. Looking at time narrowly or broadly—from an individual’s perspective or a historical one—God is always there for His people (Hebrews 13:5).

A far less obvious expression of these same opposites—first and last—appears in the biblical usage of two verbs, one Hebrew, the other Greek. Ferreting out the implicit merism stated in these two verbs is at once interesting and instructive.

Christ's quotation of Psalm 8:2, recorded in His words in Matthew 21:16, provides the lynchpin of the implied merism. We will look at both passages, beginning with Christ's source material in Psalm 8: "From the mouths of little children and infants, You have built a fortress against your opponents . . ." [*God's WORD Translation (GWT)*]. The Hebrew verb translated "built" is *yacad*.² *Yacad*, which means "to found" or "to begin," is the verb that corresponds to the first member of the implied "first-last" merism. It relates to the concept of first.

We find the second member of this implied "first-last" merism in Matthew 21:16,³ where Christ quotes Psalm 8:2 at the time of His triumphal entry into Jerusalem:

. . . and they said to Him, "Do you hear what these are saying?"
And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read,

'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies You have prepared praise'?"

In Christ's quotation, the Greek verb translated "prepared" is *katartizo*,⁴ whose meaning we will examine more fully in Part Two. *Katartizo* is the verb that corresponds to the second member of the implied "first-last" merism, relating to the concept of last.

So, the "first-last" merism is implied in the Hebrew verb *yacad* and the Greek verb *katartizo*, respectively.

***Yacad* —The Beginning**

Here in Part One, we will focus on the Hebrew verb *yacad*. To begin, we will consider the context of Christ's quotation, Psalm 8:2-4 (GWT):

From the mouths of little children and infants, You have built [*yacad*] a fortress against your opponents to silence the enemy and the avenger. When I look at Your heavens, the creation of Your

fingers, the moon and the stars that You have set in place—what is a mortal that You remember him or the Son of Man that You take care of Him?

Two themes unfold in this passage:

- God’s *initial* creation, the work of His fingers. This sense, we will see, is the thrust of *yacad*.
- God’s ongoing maintenance of His creation, in this case, His attending to the needs of mortals as well as “the Son of Man.” In Part Two, we will find this “dressing and keeping” aspect of His work (see Genesis 2: 15) to be the major part of the meaning of *katartizo*.

With the idea of initial creation in mind, we need to sharpen the focus of *yacad*, the Hebrew verb behind the word “built” in Psalm 8:2. According to Gesenius’ *Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon*, the *-cad* of *yacad* is related to Sanskrit *sad*, meaning “to sit,” as well as to the English infinitive “to set.” Hence, the root *cad* informs the English idioms “set a table” or “set a foundation,”⁵ or letting concrete or glue “set.”

Yacad means “to build,” “to found,” “to establish,” or, as it most commonly appears in the King James Version, “to lay a foundation.” Most importantly, in its uses in the Old Testament, it carries the idea of “beginning” or “founding.” Do not contractors build the foundation of a building first—before the roof garden? Yes, there are design activities before construction, followed by soil tests and excavation, but it is not the rooftop heliport the workmen build first. It is the foundation.

Consider it in terms of the “setting” of a concrete sidewalk. Such a walkway might last for years if its owner cares for it competently: if he power-washes it from time to time and ensures that encroaching tree roots do not undermine it—slow but sure. Those things—and more—constitute ongoing maintenance activities. But all those activities would not even be possible if the sidewalk’s concrete had not cured properly, that is, had not set up. That

“setting” process is part of the *initial* creation of the sidewalk, on day one, one could say. The setting of the concrete takes place at the beginning. The following scriptures help us catch the meaning of *yacad*:

- Exodus 9:18. This first use of *yacad* clearly illustrates the concept of beginning. The general context is Egypt’s seventh plague: “So, at this time tomorrow I will send the worst hailstorm that has ever happened in Egypt since the beginning of its history” (GWT). God is referring to the time He “set up” Egypt as a nation, its founding.
- I Kings 6:37. The New King James Version approaches this passage from a literal perspective, using the noun *foundation*, although that noun does not appear in the Hebrew text: “In the fourth year the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid, in the month of Ziv.” The *Contemporary English Version* (CEV) catches the sense of *yacad* better: “Work began on the temple during Ziv, the second month of the year . . .”
- Zechariah 12:1. *The Voice* manages to catch the essential meaning of *yacad* by avoiding terms like “laid the foundation” of the earth: “This is the message with which the Eternal burdened His prophet concerning Israel—the Eternal One, who began existence [*yacad*] by stretching out the sky and founding the earth.”
- Isaiah 48:13. The CEV (and at least ten other versions⁶) gets to the heart of this scripture by translating *yacad* as “founded”: “My hand founded the earth; My strong hand spread out the heavens. When I call to them, they all stand up.”
- Job 38:4. Here, God asks Job: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” The translators rendered *yacad* with the three English words, “laid the foundation,” even though the Hebrew noun for “foundation” does not appear in the original text at all. The sense is that of a beginning. The *New Life Version* better mines the meaning of *yacad* by rendering verse 4, “Where were you when I began building the earth?”

- I Kings 16:34. By way of background, after God miraculously handed Jericho to the children of Israel, Joshua cursed the city, prophesying that the person who rebuilt its foundations would do so at the cost of his eldest son (Joshua 6:26). I Kings 16:34 is a historical footnote, capping the ancient story of Jericho: “During Ahab’s time, Hiel from Bethel rebuilt the town of Jericho. When Hiel started work on the city, his oldest son Abiram died” (*Easy-to-Read Version*). The term “started work” is the paraphraser’s rendering of *yacad*, indicating initial action, a beginning.
- Zechariah 4:9. *The Message* handles this occurrence of *yacad* well: “After that, the Word of God came to me: ‘Zerubbabel started [*yacad*] rebuilding this Temple and he will complete it.’”
- Zechariah 8:9. As the last example, note this translation from the *Living Bible*:

The Lord Almighty says, “Get on with the job and finish it! You have been listening long enough! For since you began laying the foundation [*yacad*] of the Temple, the prophets have been telling you about the blessings that await you when it’s finished.”

The Founded Foundation

Isaiah 28:16, a well-known passage by virtue of its citation by Paul in Romans 9:33 and by Peter in I Peter 2:6, provides an instructive usage of *yacad*:

Therefore the Lord God said: “Look, I have laid a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation; the one who believes will be unshakable.” (*Holman Christian Standard Bible*)

Yacad is present in this passage, but not in the words “I have laid a stone.” It is hiding elsewhere. Let us flush it out.

The term “sure foundation” is *yacad muwcad* in Hebrew. *Muwcad*⁷ is one of the Hebrew nouns for “foundation.” The *-cad* of *muwcad* is the same *-cad* of *yacad*. So, the root *cad* appears twice in the phrase. Most translators render *yacad muwcad* as “firm foundation” or “sure foundation,” which is not incorrect. The term “sure foundation” stresses strength and resolute integrity, implying that the foundation is reliable, fit for supporting the building.⁸ As such, it is an *acceptable* translation.

However, “sure foundation” is neither the preferable nor the best translation. We have seen that the thrust behind the root *cad* is “beginning” or “founding.” So, the best way in English to catch the Hebrew words’ meaning and flavor is to render *yacad muwcad* as “a founded foundation.” That is precisely what one translation, the *Lexham English Bible*, insightfully does.

The difference in emphasis between “sure foundation” and “founded foundation” is marked. The translator’s use of a past participial phrase (that is, “founded foundation”) stresses that an unnamed “someone” established the foundation.

We, of course, understand that “someone” to be God. From the beginning, He established Christ as the foundation. That was part and parcel of the Father’s plan from the outset. This role the Father played in establishing Christ is essential, and it is a concept we will revisit in Part Three when we look at the use of *katartizo* in Hebrews 10:4-5.

But, before we get there, we need to “lay a foundation” of understanding regarding *yacad*’s Greek counterpart, *katartizo*. That will be the subject of Part Two.

End Notes

1 Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural citations are from the *English Standard Version*.

2 *Yacad* is *Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon* #3245. It appears 42 times.

3 As a parallel passage, see Mark 1:19.

4 *Katartizo*, which appears 13 times, is *Strong's Greek Lexicon* #2675. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, renders *yacad* as *katartizo* in Psalm 8:2.

5 However, it is a more acceptable in English idiom to refer to “laying a foundation.”

6 Other English versions that replace the formula “laid the foundation” with the verb *founded* include the *Amplified Bible*, the American (1899) *Douay-Rheims*, the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*, the *Jubilee Bible 2000*, the *Lexham English Bible*, the *New American Standard Bible*, the *New English Translation*, the *Tree of Life Version*, the *Wycliffe Bible*, and *Young's Literal Translation*.

7 *M uwcad* (*Strong's* #1443) appears only twice in the Old Testament: II Chronicles 8:16 and Isaiah 28:16.

8 The apostle Paul completes the analogy in I Corinthians 3:10-15 (*Good News Translation*):

Using the gift that God gave me, I did the work of an expert builder and laid the foundation, and someone else is building on it. But each of you must be careful how you build. For God has already placed Jesus Christ as the one and only foundation, and no other foundation can be laid. Some will use gold or silver or precious stones in building on the foundation; others will use wood or grass or straw. And the quality of each person's work will be seen when the Day of Christ exposes it. For on that Day fire will reveal everyone's work; the fire will test it and show its real quality. If what was built on the foundation survives the fire, the builder will receive a reward. But if your work is burnt up, then you will lose it; but you yourself will be saved, as if you had escaped through the fire.