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Polysemy and Homonymy in Biblical Hebrew

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Abstract

In the analysis of Hebrew lexical items there is sometimes a tendency to interpret words exclusively based on their root meaning. In fact, the one-sided etymological analysis of Hebrew words is particularly tempting, because most Hebrew words are constructed around lexical roots consisting of two or three (sometimes four) consonants that are shared in common by a family of related words. Deriving the meaning of a lexical item exclusively from its root meaning while disregarding the phenomenon of semantic shift, which is frequently caused by metonymy, can lead to incorrect interpretations. Hebrew lexicons such as Brown–Driver–Briggs (BDB) sometimes contribute to this error due to interpreting words as polysemous lexical items when they should be interpreted as homonyms with non-related meanings.[1]

1. Definition of Polysemy and Homonymy

In semantic analysis we speak of polysemy when a lexical item has not just one distinct and established sense but multiple senses that are semantically related in some way, e.g. river *bed* and hospital *bed*. Polysemous words may have acquired multiple senses through a process of semantic shift; sometimes this semantic shift is quite dramatic. By contrast, we speak of homonymy when words have the same form but different meanings; their senses are unrelated and they have distinct origins, e.g. *ear* (organ of hearing) and *ear* (seed-bearing head of a plant).[2]

In short,

- *polysemy:* one word, several related meanings.
- *homonymy*: one form, two or more words, contrasting meanings.

2. The interpretation of polysemous lexical items

2.1. The root fallacy

The error of the root fallacy assumes that the true meaning of a word lies in its etymological root meaning. In the analysis of Hebrew, one-sided etymological analysis is common because Hebrew is built around the root of mostly three consonants. However, the interpretation of a word based on its root meaning while disregarding the context can be problematic.

[1] I wish to thank Dr. Steve Daley (SIL) for his helpful comments and corrections.

[2] See p. 236 of David Crystal, *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (1985), and pp. 80,133 of Alan Cruse, *A Glossary of Semantics and Pragmatics* (2006).

2.2. Semantic shift due to metonymy

Semantic shift is frequently caused by metonymy in polysemous lexical items. This phenomenon can influence the meaning of words considerably and needs to be taken into account in the interpretation of polysemous words.

2.3. Definition of metonymy

As a figure of speech, *metonymy* can be defined as the use of a word to stand for a closely related word or concept or for an associated idea. For example, when we say "The pot is boiling," we are using "pot" metonymically in place of water.

2.4. Examples of words with extended meanings

Words that are used in metonymy can develop specialized meanings and widen their semantic range. The following examples will help illustrate this principle.

The word בַּיִת with the basic meaning of "house" can be used in a non-literal sense as "tribe, descendants."[3]

Exod 2:1 וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֵוִי וַיִּקַּח אֶת־בַּת־לֵוִי׃

KJV: And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took [to wife] a daughter of Levi.

REB: A certain man, a descendant of Levi, married a Levite woman.

In Exodus 2:1, "house" stands for a related concept. It is a common phenomenon that a word can develop an extended range of meanings as a result of being used in metonymy. Thus it is understandable that REB translated the meaning "descendant" directly. The LXX had rendered the metonymy בַּיִת semantically by φυλή "tribe, descendant." KJV, however, reflects a literal rendering of "house."

In Exodus 20:17, בַּיִת by metonymy expresses what is in the house.[4]

Exod 20:17 לֹא תַחְמֹד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ לֹא־תַחְמֹד אֵשֶׁת רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדּוֹ וַאֲמָתוֹ וְשׁוֹרוֹ וַחֲמֹרוֹ וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ׃

REB: Do not covet your neighbour's household:[5] you must not covet your neighbour's wife, his slave, his slave-girl, his ox, his donkey, or anything that belongs to him.

The REB translated this figure in Exodus 20:17 as "household: …", i.e., noun plus colon (to indicate that the following items are included). Most English translations render בַּיִת literally as "house" as did the LXX (οἰκία).

The word יָד is—apart from its literal meaning "hand" (e.g. Genesis 3:22)—used as a metonymy for "power, strength, or might," as in Deuteronomy 32:36.

Deut 32:36 כִּי־יָדִין יְהוָה עַמּוֹ וְעַל־עֲבָדָיו יִתְנֶחָם כִּי יִרְאֶה כִּי־אָזְלַת יָד וְאֶפֶס עָצוּר וְעָזוּב׃

KJV: For the LORD shall judge his people, and repent himself for his servants, when he seeth that [their] power is gone, and [there is] none shut up, or left.

NRSV: Indeed the LORD will vindicate his people, // have compassion on his servants, // when he sees that their power is gone, // neither bond nor free remaining.

No English or German translation has rendered יָד literally in Deut 32:36. Also the LXX translated יָד according to its contextual sense by παραλελυμένους αὐτοὺς "they are utterly weakened."

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[3] For figurative use of בַּיִת see W. Gesenius, *Handwörterbuch* (1962:96). Literal renderings are for example in 1Kgs 15:27; Jer 31(LXX: 38):33; 35(LXX: 42):2.

[4] See Harris, Archerand Waltke (eds.), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (1999), p. 105. The *Dictionary of Biblical Languages* (Swanson 1997) has "**7.** LN 57.1–57.21 **possession**, goods, property, i.e., things or real estate which one owns and possesses (1Ki 13:8)."

[5] Definition of "household": "1) occupants of a house as a unit; 2) house and its affairs." *Pocket Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996.

In Isaiah, 57:8 יָד is used as metonymic euphemism[6] in the sense of "penis"[7] or "genitals."[8]

Isa 57:8 אָהַבְתְּ מִשְׁכָּבָם יָד חָזִית׃

KJV: thou lovedst their bed where thou sawest it.

NASB: You have loved their bed, you have looked on their manhood.

NET: you love their bed, and gaze longingly on their genitals.[9]

LXX: ἠγάπησας τοὺς κοιμωμένους μετὰ σοῦ "you have loved those who lay with you."

Oswalt (1998:480) writes:

> "What does it mean to *gaze on a hand*? Although the connotation is not paralleled elsewhere in the OT, it does seem likely that the suggestion first put forward by J. C. Döderlein that *hand* is a euphemism for 'penis' is correct. 'Hand' is used in this way in Egyptian, and it appears to be in Ugaritic as well. A similarly explicit (but even cruder) statement is made in Ezekiel (23:20)."

The difficulty of interpreting יָד is reflected in some translations. The KJV tried to solve the problem by using the vague pronoun "it." NET rendered יָד "genitals." The NASB opted for the interpretation "manhood", and some translations, e.g. NIV, (N)RSV, and the NCV preferred "nakedness." Assuming that its Hebrew source text (*Vorlage*) had יָד as well,[10] the LXX, with τοὺς κοιμωμένους μετὰ σοῦ "those who lay with you," likewise reflects an interpretive translation (similarly the CEV).

In Genesis 8:22 (also Leviticus 26:5) the word זֶרַע "seed" is used by metonymy for the time of planting,[11] and is rendered accordingly in most translations.

Gen 8:22 עַד כָּל־יְמֵי הָאָרֶץ זֶרַע וְקָצִיר וְקֹר וָחֹם וְקַיִץ וָחֹרֶף וְיוֹם וָלַיְלָה לֹא יִשְׁבֹּתוּ׃

LXX: πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς γῆς σπέρμα καὶ θερισμός, ψῦχος καὶ καῦμα, θέρος καὶ ἔαρ ἡμέραν καὶ νύκτα οὐ καταπαύσουσιν.

NET: While the earth continues to exist, planting time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night will not cease.

Here the NET has "planting time" and the (N)RSV "seedtime" (also NASB, NIV). The LXX translators, however, did render σπέρμα literally, and because they did so, the semantic range of Greek σπέρμα "seed" was extended to include "planting time,"[12] a sense that it did not have before.[13] This extension of meaning is reflected in the LEH LXX Lexicon (cf. footnote 13 "seed time, time of sowing Gn 8,22").

In Genesis 4:13 Cain complains to the Lord: "My iniquity/sin/punishment (עָוֹן) is too great to endure!"

Gen 4:13 וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן אֶל־יְהוָה גָּדוֹל עֲוֹנִי מִנְּשֹׂא׃

NET: Then Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is too great to endure!

---

[6] Metonymic euphemism = the use of metonymy in combination with polite speech, e.g. "use the bathroom" or "using the toilet" as metonymy and euphemism for defecation.

[7] Clines (ed.), *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (2009:145): "2. perh. **penis**, … you loved their bed(s), you gazed at (their) penis(es) Is 57:8."

[8] *DBL*: "**15.** LN 8.9–8.69 **genitals**, i.e., the sexual organs of the human body (Isa 57:8)."

[9] NET fn: "*Heb* '[at] a hand you gaze.' The term יָד (*yad*, 'hand') probably has the sense of 'power, manhood' here, where it is used, as in Ugaritic, as a euphemism for the genitals. See *HALOT* 387 s.v. I יָד."

[10] Since we do not have the Hebrew Vorlage of the LXX, there cannot be absolute certainty.

[11] See entry on "Agriculture" in the *Lexham Theological Wordbook* (Mangum, Brown, Klippenstein & Hurst 2014).

[12] *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Lust, Eynikel & Hauspie 1996) has the following entry: "**σπέρμα,-ατος**$^{+}$ **N3N 113-27-51-36-53=280** Gn 1,11 (bis).12 (bis).29 *seed* (of plants) Gn 47,19; *seed time, time of sowing* Gn 8,22; *the male seed, semen* Lv 18,21; *seed, offspring* (of men) Gn 9,9; *id.* (of anim.) Gn 3,15; σπέρματα *descendants, children, posterity* 4 Mc 18,1; *crops* 1 Sm 8,15."

[13] *A Lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell 1996) had the following entry: "**σπέρμα**, ατος, τό, (σπείρω) *that which is sown:* **I.** *the seed* of plants, Hes., Hdt., Att.:—also of animals, Pind., Eur. **2.** metaph. of *the germ, origin, element* of anything, σπ. πυρός Od.; φλογός Pind.; κακῶν Dem. **II.** *seed, offspring, issue,* Trag., etc. **2.** *race, origin, descent,* Ib."

How should עָוֹן be interpreted? Although its basic meaning is "sin, iniquity," by metonymy it can refer to the immediate effect of sin, "guilt" (Job 33:9), or to the ultimate consequence, "punishment" (Ezek 35:5).[14] How do we know which meaning should be chosen in Genesis 4:13? If etymology were the determining factor, we would translate עָוֹן by "iniquity," but the context speaks against this interpretation. The focus is not on what Cain has done wrong but rather on its consequences, and so the translation of "punishment" is more appropriate (compare 1 Samuel 28:10).[15] Also most English and German[16] translations choose that option.

2.5. The myth of so-called point meaning

The myth of so-called point meaning is the supposition that even if a word has a range of possible meanings attested in a lexicon, there lies a single "basic" meaning behind all of them.[17] In reality, however, there is no such "basic," "central" or "fundamental" meaning of a word that lies behind every usage of it, because language is dynamic and not static.[18] This fact is further illustrated by the following examples.

Exod 12:40 וּמוֹשַׁב בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יָשְׁבוּ בְּמִצְרַיִם שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וְאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה׃

NRSV: The time that the Israelites had lived in Egypt was four hundred thirty years.

LXX: ἡ δὲ κατοίκησις τῶν υἱῶν Ισραηλ, ἣν κατῴκησαν ἐν γῇ …

NETS: Now the residence of the sons of Israel during which they dwelt in the land ….

The basic senses of the word מוֹשָׁב are listed as "seat, assembly, dwelling place, dweller" (BDB,[19] TWOT[20]). If we expressed the general semantic sense of these polysemous lexical items, we would perhaps point out the fact of "(somebody/something) dwelling/staying at a location." In Exodus 12:40, however, מוֹשָׁב is used in an unusual and metonymical sense,[21] referring to the "time of dwelling": "The time that the Israelites lived in Egypt was four hundred thirty years." So this case would not exactly fit the theory of a point meaning, as it goes beyond the "central meaning" or "basic" senses of the word מוֹשָׁב. This is of course due to the literary context. *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (Pietersma and Wright 2009) rendered κατοίκησις as "residence" and did not include the component of time. *Septuaginta Deutsch* (Kraus & Karrer 2009), however, translated it as "Aufenthaltszeit" (time of stay) and thus assumed a semantic extension of the root meaning of κατοίκησις "dwelling *place*" to "*time* of dwelling."

The basic meaning of עַוְלָה (fem. of עָוֶל) is "injustice, unrighteousness, wrong" (BDB), "badness, malice, injustice" (HALOT[22]) or "perversity, wickedness" (NIDOTTE[23]), but by metonymy עַוְלָה stands specifically for speech, e.g. in Isaiah 59:3; Malachi 2:6; Job 5:16; 6:30; 13:7; 27:4 (TWOT). In other words, metonymical use has caused the root meaning to expand from acts to speech.

Isa 59:3 כִּי כַפֵּיכֶם נְגֹאֲלוּ בַדָּם וְאֶצְבְּעוֹתֵיכֶם בֶּעָוֹן שִׂפְתוֹתֵיכֶם דִּבְּרוּ־שֶׁקֶר לְשׁוֹנְכֶם עַוְלָה תֶהְגֶּה׃

NET: For your hands are stained with blood and … your tongue utters malicious words.

LXX: αἱ γὰρ χεῖρες ὑμῶν μεμολυμμέναι αἵματι καὶ οἱ δάκτυλοι ὑμῶν ἐν ἁμαρτίαις, τὰ δὲ χείλη ὑμῶν ἐλάλησεν ἀνομίαν, καὶ ἡ γλῶσσα ὑμῶν ἀδικίαν μελετᾷ.

NETS: For your hands have been defiled with blood and … your tongue plots unrighteousness.

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[14] See *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Chisholm 1998:35).
[15] Chisholm 1998:36.
[16] Most German translations have "Strafe" (punishment), but EÜ rendered "Schuld" (guilt).
[17] See "Part IV: Semantics, Interpretation, and Theology" by Peter Cotterell in the *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (VanGemeren 1997:148–149).
[18] Ibid.
[19] *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Brown, Driver and Briggs 1977).
[20] *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Harris, Archer and Waltke 1999).
[21] See TWOT, also CDCH p. 210: "5. (length of) time of dwelling Ex 12:40."
[22] *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler, Baumgartner, Richardson and Stamm 1994–2000).
[23] *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (VanGemeren 1997).

In order to make good sense of the phrase לְשׁוֹנְכֶם עַוְלָה תֶהְגֶּה in Isaiah 59:3, the verb תֶהְגֶּה[25] should be taken to mean "utters" or "speaks"[26] as is reflected in some translations like REB "utter," NCV "say," in addition to the above mentioned NET Bible rendering, "utters." NETS (Pietersma and Wright 2009) renders "your tongue plots unrighteousness," but *Septuaginta Deutsch* translates "und eure Zunge übt sich in Unredlichkeit" (and your tongue practices dishonesty), which can imply speaking and this is in line with a possible sense of the verb μελετᾷ.[27]

The verb הָגָה speaks actually against the idea of a point meaning. הָגָה has a wide range of related senses: "groan, moan, sigh, utter, speak, meditate, muse, imagine, devise, chirp, mutter" (NIDOTTE).[28] If one believes in a salient point or central meaning that should be considered in all occurrences of הָגָה, some kind of a recognizable sound or "private articulation of base instincts" might be assumed to be inherently attached to הָגָה wherever it occurs.[29]

In such a view the etymological meaning of a word would not allow a widening of the semantic range by means of metonymy. Consequently the accompaniment of a sound would in case of הָגָה be inevitable, even in contexts that are about plotting and contemplating. Such reasoning, however, is quite misguided and fails to recognize the presence of metonymy in polysemous words.[30]

In fact, the occurrence of הָגָה in Proverbs 24:2 does not agree with such supposition:

> Prov 24:2 כִּי־שֹׁד יֶהְגֶּה לִבָּם וְעָמָל שִׂפְתֵיהֶם תְּדַבֵּרְנָה׃
>
> NRSV: for their minds devise violence, and their lips talk of mischief.
>
> LXX: ψεύδη γὰρ μελετᾷ ἡ καρδία αὐτῶν, καὶ πόνους τὰ χείλη αὐτῶν λαλεῖ. "for their hearts contemplate lies and their lips utter trouble."

In the context of Proverbs 24:2 the verb הָגָה is used in conjunction with לֵב "mind": "for their minds contemplate violence." It is actually quite impossible to produce some kind of sound in the mind. In this context μελετᾷ means "contemplate" and not "utters" or "speaks" as in the previous case Isaiah 59:3. Later then in the second half of the verse we learn that their lips speak harm, but the two halves of the parallelism are not exactly synonymous, e.g. "planning" and "speaking" do not correspond one-to-one.

In Proverbs 15:28, there is no reason to assume any involvement of sound in הָגָה in the context of "The mind of the righteous considers (הָגָה) how to answer."

> Prov 15:28 לֵב צַדִּיק יֶהְגֶּה לַעֲנוֹת וּפִי רְשָׁעִים יַבִּיעַ רָעוֹת׃
>
> NRSV: The mind of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil.
>
> LXX: καρδίαι δικαίων μελετῶσιν πίστεις, στόμα δὲ ἀσεβῶν ἀποκρίνεται κακά.
>
> NETS: The hearts of the righteous ponder faithfulness, but the mouth of the impious answers evil things.

Nevertheless *Septuaginta Deutsch* translated "Die Herzen der Gerechten sprechen stets Glaubwürdiges" (The hearts of the righteous always speak truth/truly), which is surprising. The NETS rendering "ponder" makes more sense here.

The verb יָדַע has the basic sense of "to know, be aware, experience," but it displays a very wide range of nuances and also very specialized meanings, as e.g. in Genesis 4:1 where it is used as euphemism for sexual

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[25] Many English translations rendered it "mutter" (e.g. RSV, NASB, NIV).
[26] CDCH p. 85: הגה under 3. utter, speak.
[27] See Liddell & Scott (1968): "**IV.** absol. *to practise, exercise oneself,* the acc. rei being omitted, Thuc., Xen.; ἐν τῷ μὴ μελετῶντι (= μελετᾶν) by want of *practice,* Thuc.:—esp. *to rehearse a speech, declaim,* Plat., etc."
[28] This verb has also a homonym with the meaning of "separate, remove, drive away."
[29] John H. Walton, in his article "Principles for Productive Word Study" in NIDOTTE, argues that "Such an endeavor is diachronic in nature and is unnecessary, unhelpful, and potentially damaging to semantic study" (VanGemeren 1997:168).
[30] Walton, too, speaks against such an approach (ibid).

intercourse.[31] The verb is also used metonymically in the sense of "caring for," "guarding" or "choosing" as e.g. in Psalm 1:6; Deuteronomy 33:9; and Amos 3:2.[32]

Ps 1:6 כִּֽי־יוֹדֵ֣עַ יְ֭הוָה דֶּ֣רֶךְ צַדִּיקִ֑ים וְדֶ֖רֶךְ רְשָׁעִ֣ים תֹּאבֵֽד׃

ESV: for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

NRSV: for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

LXX: ὅτι γινώσκει κύριος ὁδὸν δικαίων, καὶ ὁδὸς ἀσεβῶν ἀπολεῖται.

NETS: because the Lord knows the way of the righteous and the way of the impious will perish.

These are various senses of the one polysemous word יָדַע, e.g. in HALOT and NIDOTTE. The semantic range of the corresponding word in Greek γινώσκω is not as broad as יָדַע and covers just the primary meaning, but it does not carry the sense of "caring for."[33]

In Job 39:28 the verb לִין "to spend the night" is used in a wider sense than its primary meaning of "lodging somewhere for the night"[34] due to semantic shift in polysemous lexical items. Here it is more likely that לִין is not limited to staying for one night but rather that the eagle makes his home or builds his nest. This understanding is chosen by many English translations.

Job 39:28 סֶ֣לַע יִשְׁכֹּ֣ן וְיִתְלֹ֑ונָן עַל־שֶׁן־סֶ֝֗לַע וּמְצוּדָֽה׃

NASB: On the cliff he [the eagle] dwells and lodges, upon the rocky crag, an inaccessible place.

The German Elberfelder translated "horstet" (hatching eggs). The NET rendering "spends the night there" is somewhat surprising and similarly the Luther Revised Version 2017 "nächtigt." Reyburn (1992:735) suggests the translation: "It builds its nest on the highest rocks, and there it has a place where it is safe."

In Proverbs 30:33, the use of מִיץ creates a special effect by playing on a word's multiple meanings (polysemy).[35]

Prov 30:33 כִּ֤י מֵ֣יץ חָלָ֣ב יוֹצִ֣יא חֶמְאָ֑ה וּמִיץ־אַ֥ף יוֹצִ֥יא דָ֝֗ם וּמֵ֣יץ אַפַּ֥יִם יוֹצִ֥יא רִֽיב׃

NRSV: For as pressing milk produces curds, and pressing the nose produces blood, so pressing anger produces strife.

NIV: For as churning the milk produces butter, and as twisting the nose produces blood, so stirring up anger produces strife.

LXX: ἄμελγε γάλα, καὶ ἔσται βούτυρον, ἐὰν δὲ ἐκπιέζῃς μυκτῆρας, ἐξελεύσεται αἷμα, ἐὰν δὲ ἐξέλκῃς λόγους, ἐξελεύσονται κρίσεις καὶ μάχαι.

NETS: Press out milk, and there will be butter, and if you squeeze nostrils, blood will come out, and if you extort words, quarrels and fights will ensue.

Many English translations imitate the Hebrew by using the same verb 'pressing' to render each of the three occurrences of מִיץ in this verse (e.g. RSV, ESV, NIV, NET, REB), even though the semantic range of "pressing" is not as wide as in מִיץ. Some translations (e.g. NIV, NLT, CEV), however, render מִיץ more

[31] Chisholm 1998:35.
[32] See pages 552-554 of *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Bulinger 1968).
[33] HALOT: "—7. theologically, to **take care of someone** (THAT 1:691f): a) God as subj., to look after someone."
[34] DBL: "**4328** לִין (*lîn*): v.; ≡ Str 3885; TWOT 1096—**1.** LN 67.163–67.200 (qal) **spend the night**, stay overnight, i.e., have or place an object, creature, or oneself to lodge (or stay) in a place during the interval of nighttime (Ge 19:2; Ex 34:25); (hif) **hold back overnight**, leave overnight (Lev 19:13; Dt 21:23), note: hif form is derived from context, oth as qal; (hitpolal) **stay for the night** (Job 39:28+); **2.** LN 85.67–85.85 (qal) **dwell**, live in, remain, stay, i.e., occupy a space daytime and nighttime (Isa 1:21; Ps 55:8[EB 7]); (hif) **harbor**, cause to dwell (Jer 4:14), note: hif form is derived from context, oth as qal; note: some parse Ps 59:16[EB 15] as 4296; **3.** LN 23.78–23.87 (qal) **rest**, i.e., be in a state of not being engaged in an activity, often in a reclining or resting position, as an extension of spending the nighttime, which is of course a period of rest (SS 1:13); (hitpolal) **rest** (Ps 91:1+); **4.** LN 13.1–13.47 (qal) **remain**, spend time, i.e., continue in a certain state or condition (Job 19:4; 41:14[EB 22]; Ps 25:13; 49:13[EB 12]), note: Ne 13:21, see also 4349."
[35] See page 29 of *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Schökel 1988).

naturally by using different verbs: "If you **churn** milk, you get butter. If you **hit** someone's nose, it bleeds. If you **stir** up anger, you get into trouble" (CEV). Even the LXX uses three different verbs to translate מִיץ: ἀμέλγω "to milk out," ἐκπιέζω "squeeze out," and ἐξέλκω "drag out." This fits well with the translation technique of LXX Proverbs (Tauberschmidt 2004).

3. The Analysis of Hebrew Words in Lexicons or Dictionaries

Hebrew lexicons or dictionaries sometimes differ in their analysis of Hebrew words with regard to polysemy and homonymy. This means that in one lexicon, a particular word form may be regarded as polysemous and entered as a single lexical item with several senses, while in another lexicon the same word form may be analyzed as homonymous and entered as two or more (identical-looking) lexical items having distinct meanings. This can have implications for interpretation as we will see below.

3.1. Interpreting homonyms as polysemes

As an example, in BDB (also TWOT) בָּרַךְ is treated as a polyseme, that is, as a single word with multiple senses: "kneel, bless, praise, salute, curse (used euphemistically)." In HALOT (Koehler et al. 1994–2000; also NIDOTTE and ThWQ[36]), however, בָּרַךְ has two separate entries in which "kneel" occurs under one entry and "bless, praise" is listed under another entry. That means, בָּרַךְ is interpreted as a polyseme in BDB and as two homonyms in HALOT.

The assumption that Hebrew roots tend to be somehow related has sometimes led to us to unreasonable connections and conclusions. Thus Strong's dictionary reads: "בָּרַךְ to *kneel*; by impl. to *bless* God (as an act of adoration), and (vice-versa) man (as a benefit)."[37] Because of this, the connection of blessing God by kneeling down is often made.[38]

However, "the Hebrew root *brk* has diverse but unrelated etymological meanings, just as in other Semitic languages."[39] Chisholm writes (1998:14), "BDB's treatment of Semitic cognates is woefully outdated and unreliable in many places," and "BDB often fails to recognize the existence of homonymic roots, many of which have been isolated by more recent linguistic research."

3.2. Examples of homonymic roots

The following examples show that it can be helpful for interpreters if homonymic roots are included in lexicons or dictionaries.

> Hos 13:14 אֱהִי דְבָרַיִךְ מָוֶת
>
> NASB: O Death, where are your thorns?
>
> NRSV: O Death, where are your plagues?

The word דֶּבֶר may be understood as **bubonic plague** or as **thorn**. In BDB, (C)DCH[40] and Gesenius[41] the homonym **thorn** is not included, but it is in HALOT with the sense of "sting, thorn" and also in NIDOTTE "(thorny) sting" and in DBL. Nevertheless, many translations including NRSV did not adopt the meaning "sting" but preferred "plagues" (for example KJV, NET, RSV, NIV, ESV, REB, similarly Luther Bible

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[36] בָּרַךְ is also treated as a case of homonymy in ThWQ, which is *Theologisches Wörterbuch zu den Qumrantexten* (Fabry and Dahmen 2011–2016:522,529). ThWQ discusses only words that occur at least 5 times. This is why we are not able to mention ThWQ frequently in the following examples.

[37] J. Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible* (Vol. 2, Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), page 24.

[38] See for example www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYFlsog0He4.

[39] Quoting K. H. Richards' entry on "Bless/Blessing" in volume 1 of *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (Freedman 1992:753).

[40] Both the *Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* and the *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Clines 2009, 2011).

[41] "דֶּבֶר m. pl. דְּבָרִים (Hos. 13:14), prop. *destruction, death*, like the Arab. دَبَرٌ (see the root No. 4, and Piel No. 3); hence *a plague* (compare מָוֶת No. 3), Ex. 9:3; Lev. 26:25; Deu. 28:21; 2 Sa. 24:13; 1 Ki. 8:37, etc.; LXX. commonly θάνατος; compare Sir. 39:29."

2017). However, NASB translated "thorns" and similarly did Elberfelder "Dornen" (thorns). The recent Luther Bible 2017, on the other hand, did not follow its own tradition and instead translated דֶּבֶר as "Seuche" (plague).[42]

In BDB the meaning for זִמְרָה is "melody, song, in praise of" and similarly in Gesenius.[43] HALOT, however, added a homonym with the sense of "protection" or "strength." Also in NIDOTTE there is a long article about the homonym זִמְרָה "strength." (C)DCH too included זִמְרָה "refuge" as homonym.

Ps 118:14 עָזִּי וְזִמְרָת יָהּ וַיְהִי־לִי לִישׁוּעָה׃

RSV: The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.

NRSV: The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

LXX (Ps 117:14): ἰσχύς μου καὶ ὕμνησίς μου ὁ κύριος καὶ ἐγένετό μοι εἰς σωτηρίαν.

NETS: My strength and my celebration is the Lord and he became deliverance for me.

Nevertheless most translations hold to the traditional understanding "psalm, song," e.g. NIV, RSV, NASB, NCV, ESV, NLT, KJV, LXX including most German translations; this interpretation is supported by the LXX. Some translations, however, adopted the sense of "protection" or "strength," e.g. NRSV, TEV, CEV, NET.

In Jeremiah 12:5, HALOT suggests that בָּטַח is a homonym with the meaning "to fall on the ground." Also NIDOTTE, (C)DCH and SDBH[44] include this homonym in their dictionaries.

Jer 12:5b וּבְאֶרֶץ שָׁלוֹם אַתָּה בוֹטֵחַ וְאֵיךְ תַּעֲשֶׂה בִּגְאוֹן הַיַּרְדֵּן׃

NASB: If you fall down in a land of peace, How will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?

NET: And if you feel secure only in safe and open country …?

LXX: καὶ ἐν γῇ εἰρήνης σὺ πέποιθας …; "And (if) you trust in a land of peace …?"

NASB interprets בָּטַח as homonym – as most English translations do – and translates "fall down."[45] German translations, however, translate the traditional way with the meaning of "trust," as does NET. NET even holds that "the evidence for this homonym is questionable because both passages can be explained on other grounds with the usual root." In BDB and Gesenius this homonym does not exist and neither did the translator(s) of LXX consider it.

Gesenius interprets בקק as a polyseme with two related senses "(1) to pour out, to empty" and "(2) intrans. *to be poured out, to be spread wide*, used of a spreading tree; Hos. 10:1, גֶּפֶן בֹּקֵק 'a wide spreading vine;' LXX. ἄμπελος εὐκληματοῦσα: Vulg. *frondosa*."

Hos 10:1 גֶּפֶן בּוֹקֵק יִשְׂרָאֵל פְּרִי יְשַׁוֶּה־לוֹ׃

NRSV: Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit.…

LXX: Ἄμπελος εὐκληματοῦσα Ισραηλ …

NETS: Israel is a well growing vine …[46]

Dearman (2010:260–261) also interprets בקק as a polyseme and writes:

> The verse begins with the description of Israel as a *luxuriant vine;* at least *luxuriant* is the sense of the adjective *bōqēq* as translated by the LXX. The term's basic meaning is "to pour out" or "to be empty."

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[42] LB2017: "Sollte ich sie aus der Hölle erlösen und vom Tod erretten? Tod, wo ist deine **Seuche**; Hölle, wo ist deine Pest? Meine Augen kennen kein Mitleid." The previous version LB1984 translated **Gift** (poison): "Aber ich will sie aus dem Totenreich erlösen und vom Tode erretten. Tod, ich will dir ein **Gift** sein; Totenreich, ich will dir eine Pest sein; Rache kenne ich nicht mehr." In fact, LB2017 differs considerably from LB1984 in this verse.

[43] "זִמְרָה f. *singing*, or *music*."

[44] *Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew* (de Blois). Available online at www.sdbh.org/dictionary/main.php.

[45] LXX translates בָּטַח in the sense of "trust" without assuming a homonym.

[46] LEH LXX Lexicon (Lust, Eynikel and Hauspie 1992) interprets εὐκληματέω as "to grow luxuriantly; neol.?"

> It is clear from another use of the term that it can be applied to plants (Nah. 2:2 [MT 3]), but its use there is of no assistance in the present context. Possibly the sense of "spread out" with the meaning of "fertile" or "productive" is intended by the prophet in his metaphorical description.

Stuart (2002:159) likewise accepts that בקק is polysemous and understands its two senses as "ironic and reflective":

> On the assumption that his audience knew both meanings of בקק …, the metaphor of Israel as a vine would at once address two considerations: Israel's prosperity, a gift from Yahweh (cf. 2:10[8], and Israel's misuse of her blessing from Yahweh (cf. 2:7[5]). The first sense of the double-entendre in גפן בוקק "spreading vine" might have reminded Hosea's audience of the metaphorical comparison of people to flora or fauna in tribal blessings such as Gen 49 and Deut 33 (e.g., Gen 49:21, 'Naphtali is a spreading terebinth'). This first meaning would convey the fact that Yahweh had abundantly prospered Israel, as a basis for the following words about what Israel did with her prosperity (lb). The other sense of גפן בוקק 'barren vine' would serve to adumbrate Israel's coming fate. A barren vine is good for nothing and must be destroyed (cf. Matt 7:19). This 'vine' has not fulfilled its purpose, which was to serve its role as Yahweh's faithful people (cf. Isa 5:1–7; Jer 2:21).

HALOT, however, groups the senses of בקק under two homonyms: בקק "lay waste" and בקק "be luxuriant, to proliferate." The latter is explained on the basis of an Arabic cognate that means "to be fertile."[47] This homonym is also mentioned in NIDOTTE בקק "grow luxuriantly" and in (C)DCH "flourish, be widespread" in connection with the vine in Hosea 10:1. Even in BDB the words are homonyms, although the sequence of these two words differs,[48] and the same is true for TWOT.[49] Furthermore, the editor of the *Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew* (SDBH) Reinier de Blois writes: "There is a growing consensus on a root בקק II 'to flourish, spread wide' (cf. HALOT, (C)DCH)." Many English translations are based on this positive sense, including NRSV, NASB, ESV, RSV, as are many German translations, for example "üppiger Weinstock" in LB, Elb, GNB, EÜ.

This means that supporters of the proposed homonymy, including DCH and de Blois, base their evidence on a cognate language like Arabic (baqqa), although this speaks against Clines' claim not to include any comparative data from other Semitic languages and that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language."[50] There is nothing wrong with Clines' principle, and one needs to be careful with explanations for words from related languages, but, in reality, there is often not enough language data that can be used to explain rare words.[51]

3.3. Less certain cases of homonyms

In the following cases it is more difficult to decide in favor of an existing homonym.

In the first example the question is whether an additional homonym should be proposed for שֵׁבֶט or whether the word should just be interpreted as another polyseme with an extended meaning that is due to symbolic language use.

2Sam 5:1 וַיָּבֹאוּ כָל־שִׁבְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־דָּוִד חֶבְרוֹנָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֵאמֹר

NASB: Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said,….

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[47] "Arb. *baqqa* to be (cause to be) plentiful (Humbert ZAW 62:200). **qal**: pt. בּוֹקֵק: be luxuriant, to **proliferate** Hos 10:1."
[48] BDB: "I. [בָּקַק S[1238] TWOT[272, 273] GK[1327, 1328]] **vb. be luxuriant (**Arabic بَقَّ (*baqqa*) *be profuse, abundant* (v. especially Conjj. i. iv, Lane**)—Qal** Pt. בֹּקֵק *luxuriant* Ho 10:1 (fig. of Isr. as vine).
II. [בָּקַק S[1238] TWOT[272, 273] GK[1327, 1328]] **vb. empty (**cf. probably Arabic بَقَّ (*baqqa*) *make a gurgling noise*, of a mug dipped in water, or emptied of water**)—Qal** *Pf.* וּבִקֹּתִי Je 19:7, בָּקְקוּם Na 2:3; *Pt.* בּוֹקֵק Is 24:1, בֹּקְקִים Na 2:3 *empty, lay waste* land, acc., Is 24:1 Na 2:3, also abs. v 3; fig. *make void* (obj. עֵצָה) Je 19:7. **Niph.** *Pf.* וְנָבָקָה (cf. Ges[§ 67 dd]) Is 19:3; *Impf.* 3 fs. תִּבּוֹק Is 24:3; *Inf.* abs. הִבּוֹק Is 24:3;—*be emptied* (laid waste) Is 24:3 תִּבּוֹק הִבּוֹק, of land (‖ הִבּוֹז תִּבּוֹז); fig. of spirit, courage Is 19:3. **Po.** Impf. יְבַקְקוּ Je 51:2 *empty out* (devastate) land."
[49] "**272** בָּקַק (*bāqaq*) **I, *be luxuriant*** (Hos 10:1). **273** בָּקַק (*bāqaq*) **II, *empty***."
[50] *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* 1:14 (Clines 2011).
[51] For further information see G. Tauberschmidt, "Considerations for OT Translation" in the *Journal of Translation* 1:1 (2005), page 61.

CEV: Israel's leaders met with David at Hebron and said,….

LXX: Καὶ παραγίνονται πᾶσαι αἱ φυλαὶ Ισραηλ πρὸς Δαυιδ εἰς Χεβρων καὶ εἶπαν αὐτῷ …

NETS: And all the tribes of Israel came to David at Chebron and said to him,….

BDB has one entry for שֵׁבֶט with the senses 1 "rod, staff, club, sceptre" and 2 "tribe," and similarly HALOT. The LXX translated as the second sense πᾶσαι αἱ φυλαὶ "all the tribes." However, Hubbard, Barker, Watts and Martin (1998:75) argue that "the Hebrew שבט may well stand for two apparent homonyms, one meaning 'tribe, staff,' the other 'ruler, judge'." The sense of "ruler" can also be found in DBL: "6. **ruler**, formally, scepter or staff, i.e., a person who rules, as a figurative extension of an ornamental staff as a symbol of rulership (2Sa 7:7)." According to (C)DCH, however, שֵׁבֶט is interpreted as a polyseme, not as two homonyms. Similarly ThWQ gives evidence of שֵׁבֶט as polyseme being used symbolically for rule (Herrschaftssymbol).[52] There is at least one English translation, the CEV, which rendered "leaders" instead of "tribes," and similarly one German translation, the GNB: "die Vertreter (aller Stämme)." So CEV and GNB differ from most translation, but whether they differ because of interpreting שֵׁבֶט as two homonyms or one polyseme may not be so important at this point, though the homonymous interpretation of שֵׁבֶט does seem less likely.

A second example of a less-certain case of homonymy involves the verb בָּעַר as in Isaiah 5:5.

Isa 5:5 הָסֵר מְשׁוּכָתוֹ וְהָיָה לְבָעֵר

NET: I will remove its hedge and turn it into pasture

LXX: ἀφελῶ τὸν φραγμὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἔσται εἰς διαρπαγήν

NETS: I will remove its hedge, and it shall be plundered

The verb בָּעַר is interpreted "burn, consume" (also figuratively for destruction) in BDB, but HALOT lists a homonym "II בער: (same root ?)" – although with some uncertainty – with various senses (polysemes), one of which is "to graze." NIDOTTE too includes the sense of "graze" with בער (II).[53] NET based their translation on this analysis: "I will remove its hedge and turn it into pasture." Similarly EÜ: "Ich entferne seine schützende Hecke; so wird er zur Weide." But NIV (and similarly most English and German translations) did not rely on the proposed homonym and rendered "I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed" and similarly LXX ἀφελῶ τὸν φραγμὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἔσται εἰς διαρπαγήν (I will remove its hedge and it shall be plundered).

3.4. Increasing homonyms in some lexicons and dictionaries

Whereas works like HALOT and NIDOTTE treat more words as homonyms, BDB, Gesenius and to some extend also (C)DCH list fewer homonyms and interpret words more often as polysmous lexical items. Clines and team are now undertaking a full-scale revision of the *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew Project*. In "The Future of the Dictionary of Classical Hebrew Project" (2017) David Stec writes:

> Very occasionally it is necessary to split what was one lemma in the original DCH into two lemmata in DCHR. This is because in DCH we followed BDB in giving two very distinct meanings under a single lemma, but we now believe that each should be given a lemma of its own. An example of this is the verb גלה, which was treated as having the meanings of both reveal and go into exile. But we now take the view that these belong to separate words, and so in DCHR we have split these into גלה I reveal and גלה II go into exile, the latter being treated as a 'new' word (though of course its meaning was registered by BDB). Splitting a word in this way always makes my job more difficult in that it involves splitting the morphology between the two lemmata and providing occurrence statistics for each.

Splitting common words (that have already been in BDB) into homonyms when they are indeed not polysemous is, of course, necessary. The bigger challenge is how to interpret rare words. Generally, Clines

[52] Similarly ThWQ (Fabry and Dahmen 2016:814) gives evidence of שֵׁבֶט being used as symbol for rule (Herrschaftssymbol), also not as homonym.
[53] ThWQ does not have a homonym with the meaning "graze."

thinks that it is problematic to seek meaning for Hebrew words externally, that is, in cognate languages such as Akkadian and Arabic. Instead, he emphasizes that the meaning of words should be determined by usage within the Hebrew language itself. Clines' approach works well for the more common words, but it would be difficult to interpret unusual and difficult words without including cognate material.[54]

4. Conclusion

Polysemy is a common feature of Hebrew as of other languages, and it is quite common that polysemous lexical items acquire multiple senses through a process of (sometimes a rather dramatic) semantic shift. This makes it difficult to maintain that a certain root meaning should be automatically attached to a word. Therefore, polysemous words should not be automatically tied to one common central meaning. Though understandable, this reflex overlooks the fact that words do develop specialized meanings and do widen their semantic range, particularly through the process of metonymy.

Rather, it is important to bear in mind that words are by no means static. They are dynamic and tend to expand in range of meaning. The literary context of a word likewise plays an important role and contributes significantly to the semantic development. Interpreters and Bible translators will benefit by keeping this in mind.

Lexicons vary in their analysis with regard to treating a certain word as a polysemous lexical item or as separated homonyms. One lexicon may have fewer entries, because it treats more words as polysemous; another lexicon may have more entries because it recognizes additional homonyms that were found due to comparative studies with related languages. Often the challenge is how rare words should be interpreted. Including cognate material can prove helpful if it is done with caution.

A guide on Hebrew Dictionaries for exegetes and translators:

An early Hebrew Dictionary is by H.F.W. Gesenius, first produced 1806–1807, and the widely used 17th edition was published in 1915 (now 18th edition by Springer, 1987). Another early Hebrew Dictionary is by Brown, Driver and Briggs (BDB), based on Gesenius and first published 1906 (now with Strong's numbering by Hendrickson Publishers, 9th printing 2005). Both of these dictionaries are still widely used. A new era in Hebrew lexicography was announced by Koehler and Baumgartner (KBL) in 1953 (now HALOT, in 5 volumes, 1994-2001) that includes material from Ras Shamra and from Qumran.

Until James Barr wrote *The Semantics of Biblical Language* in 1961, and for some time afterwards, approaches to Old Testament word studies have shown etymological and theological biases. A new dictionary is *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (NIDOTTE) by VanGemeren (1997), to which several leading OT scholars have contributed. It is based on a more linguistic approach and tries to avoid etymological biases.

NIDOTTE is made up of four volumes of lexical dictionaries and a fifth volume of helpful indexes of Semantic Fields, Hebrew Words and Phrases, Scripture Index, Subject Index, and Numbering System Indexes of Strong's Numbers and Goodrick/Kohlenberger Numbers. The first volume includes also a "Guide to Old Testament Theology and Exegesis" with some very useful articles e.g. on how to interpret the Old Testament using linguistic approaches. The volumes of lexical dictionaries discuss Hebrew words in the context of the Ancient Near East (ANE), its use in the Old Testament (OT), its relationship to post-Biblical Hebrew (P-B), and also NT usage and developments of Greek equivalents. Hebrew words are transliterated and can be read by readers without any knowledge in Hebrew. Exegetes and Bible translators will greatly benefit from this excellent work

[54] For some illustrations see Rendsburg's review of the DCH (1996:111–118).

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