THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM

CONTRONYMY (AUTO-ANTONYMY) IN BIBLICAL HEBREW AS A FEATURE OF LINGUISTIC DIACHRONY

BY
JOSHUA SHERRILL

JERUSALEM, ISRAEL
NOVEMBER 2023

CONTENTS

Introduction

An interesting feature of the Hebrew language is its stock of words and roots that contradict themselves. They may appear in one context with a given signification, and then appear in another context with a seemingly opposite signification. This linguistic feature is known as contronymy (among other names), and it is not unique to Hebrew. Two examples found in the English language are its verb "to cleave," meaning both "to join" and "to separate," and its verb "to dust," meaning both "to sprinkle with fine particles (dust)" and "to make free of dust."[1] Before reading this paper, fluent speakers of English will have already organized the relationship of these meanings to one another, to the various forms of the words themselves, to their concepts or referents, and to the contexts in which they are used. Hearing or reading the terms recalls those relationships to mind. This mapping of linguistic meaning is a window into a person's worldview—and books will forever be written about such matters.

Yet, besides the cognitive processes inherent in linguistics, the phenomenon of contronymy is of interest for the study of Hebrew—and of biblical Hebrew in particular—because of what it can reveal about Hebrew etymology and about the relationship of Hebrew to other languages in the Ancient Near East. Because contronymy is a point of access into the semantic development of Hebrew vocabulary, it also pertains to diachronic studies in the language of the Bible. Thereby, the use of a word or root in any text with a meaning opposite to its normal (or majority) usage in the Bible, may on occasion reveal the antiquity or the lateness of a text, and for this reason, contronymy is also of interest to historical criticism of the Bible.

With the preceding factors in mind, the paper at hand undertakes to observe the phenomenon of contronymy under three domains of narrowing focus: general linguistics, comparative Semitics, and Hebrew periodization. The latter includes case analyses drawn up from other scholars. However, since studies to date have been general surveys of the phenomenon rather than focused on the dating of texts, the paper pauses to draw up a methodology before moving on to Hebrew periodization. One final qualification is needed: by nature, the paper focuses on lexicology, but the author acknowledges the other issues concomitant to a diachronic investigation of a given text's language, such as morphology and

[1] Brucu I. Karaman, "On Contronymy," *International Journal of Lexicography* 21, no. 2 (2008): 175; Scott B. Noegel, "Polysemy," *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, ed. Geoffrey Khan (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 3:179.

syntax. It is hoped that the partial analysis and methodology offered here are useful in future studies at the intersection of historical linguistics and historical criticism of the Bible.

Contronymy in General Linguistics

The study of contronymy in linguistics is not prolific.[2] Where it is found, it is complicated by a lack of standardized terminology. Karaman notes the array of terms besides "contronym" by which a case of this phenomenon might be known in English: "contranym," "antagonym," "antilogy," and "auto-antonym."[3] One can add the more technical "enantiosemy" (from Greek *enantios*, "opposite"),[4] the Arabic *ʾaḍdād* ("opposites"), the German *Gegensinn* ("opposite-sense"), and a host of other, longer descriptive expressions, such as "homo-polysemous opposites." "Contronym" is chosen in this paper due to the term's simplicity and clarity, sometimes alternated with "auto-antonym." Besides the name of the concept, then, some other definitions are in order.

Semantics

Discerning opposite meanings is not an exact science. The theoretical approach to meaning that is assumed in this paper's analysis is that of semantic domains or frames. Therein, the meanings of words are understood to be encyclopedic in nature and to relate to overlapping contexts of knowledge in which words categorically relate to one another.[5] The meaning of any

---

[2] For example, the common terms for this linguistic feature are absent from such works as R. L. Trask, *The Dictionary of Historical and Comparative Linguistics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000); Lyle Campbell and Mauricio J. Mixco, *A Glossary of Historical Linguistics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); and Keith Brown and Jim Miller, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). The nearest one comes to finding contronymy is in the latter under "antagonism;" but that is defined not as opposite meanings in a single lexeme but, more broadly, multiple meanings that cannot be intended at once.

[3] Karaman, "On Contronymy," 174.

[4] "A case of polysemy in which one sense is in some respect the opposite of another." "Enantiosemy," *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Linguistics*, ed. P. H. Matthews (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 113.

[5] See Vyvyan Evans and Melanie Green, "The Encyclopaedic View of Meaning," in *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 206–47. Frame semantics (what Evans and Green call the "encyclopedic view of meaning") stands in contrast to the theory of meaning espoused by "componential semantics" (among others within a "dictionary view of meaning"). Componential semantics calculates meaning based on a word's supposed binary attributes or components; "for instance *bachelor* is represented as [+MALE, +ADULT, –MARRIED]" (ibid., 208). The latter, though superficially appealing for the investigation of contronymy, does not, in fact, describe reality insofar as it separates lexical meaning from pragmatic, contextual meaning, as if it

given use of a lexical unit is always dependent upon the dynamic and shared frame or domain in which it is used, rather than being a frozen, discrete, and autonomous value.

It is nonetheless true that semantic categories within their language and cultural contexts retain prototypical members, concepts that are more central to them than are their other members.[6] This means that, despite complexity of meaning, the investigation of contronyms is still a legitimate exercise. A single lexical unit can be found as contradictory members within a single category, such as שׁחר "dawn/darkness" within the category of LIGHT AND DARKNESS (Gen 19:15; Song 5:11) or קדשׁ "holy/defiled" within the category of HOLY AND COMMON (Deut 5:12; 22:9).[7] Such opposite meanings of a single word must simply be investigated as existing within a semantic field, rather than on a linear continuum or in a discrete dichotomy. The further apart the two meanings of a lexical unit stand in the word's field of meaning—in other words, the more extremely opposite its senses are—the more salient will be its significance and the more assured will be its traceability for historical linguistics and the dating of Hebrew texts.

Homonymy vs. Polysemy

The phenomenon of a lexical unit being capable of expressing both a meaning and its opposite is a rare form of either polysemy or homonymy. The latter case is essentially the result of historical accidence. Two lexemes in a given language, though having unrelated etymologies and through independent processes, happen to conform both graphically and audibly in at least one period of that language.[8] Mere homonyms and homophones are excluded from the category of contronymy.

As a form of polysemy, however, the opposite senses attached to a word or to a root are the result of divergent semantic developments of that single lexical unit, which senses persist alongside one another. This occurs through small shifts (like generalization or restriction),

---

were autonomous. To carry the example forward, besides biological sex, age, and marital status, *bachelor* has other stereotypical connotations in actual usage.

[6] Cf. Taylor, *Linguistic Categorization*, 41–83.

[7] These entries and domains are taken from Reinier de Blois and Enio R. Mueller, eds., Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew, United Bible Societies, 2000–2021, accessed November 1, 2023, https://semanticdictionary.org/semdic.php?databaseType=SDBH.

[8] Homonymy can also come about through polysemy, when originally related meanings drift so far apart that their relationship is no longer discernable. John Taylor, *Linguistic Categorization*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 106.

metaphor, or metonymy (use of "the part for the whole") in use of the lexical unit's more original sense.[9] With a polysemic word, the figurative or extended relationship of the various meanings attached to it is usually still discernable by native speakers of the language. With contronymic polysemy, the relationship is discernable on the basis of its inverse nature. However, the same contradictory nature can, be evidence not only of semantic extension (shifts, metaphors, metonymy) but of a common root that underwent opposite semantic developments through divergent branches of a language family, such as Semitic. The latter kind of development is termed an isogloss.[10]

Though distinguishing between homonymy and polysemy is essential for the etymological enterprise, it always retains an element of subjectivity. Recently, the suggestion was put forward by one Hebraist that roots should only be deemed polysemic if a semantic parallel can be found in a cognate language, that is, an etymologically distinct root that evinces the same two (or more) meanings as those that are posed for the root in question.[11] Appreciable is the promoter's critique of "modern logic or… gut feeling" as bases for distinguishing between homonyms and polysemes.[12] But this oversimplifies the linguistic science, and the alternative presented is circular in its reasoning. Resting the determination of one root's nature upon a parallel root's nature (which itself must also be proven by a parallel) is tautological. Nor does it account for the meagerness of the evidence in Hebrew or cognate texts such as Old Aramaic. It is quite possible that only one meaning of a root is extant in writing today, though the root was in fact polysemous. The lexicographer is justified in weighing this possibility among the other

[9] Peter Cotterell, "Linguistics, Meaning, Semantics, and Discourse Analysis," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1:153.

[10] A general definition of isogloss is "a line on a map that represents the geographical boundary (limit) of regional linguistic variants; by extension, isogloss also refers to the dialect feature itself, the actual linguistic phenomenon that the line on a map represents." See "isogloss," *A Glossary of Historical Linguistics*, 87–88.

[11] Haim Dihl, "A Re-examination of Homonymic and Polysemic Roots," *RRJ* 24 (2021): 46–55.

[12] Ibid., 55.

evidence, like morpho-phonetic similarity, collocations, and semantic fields.[13] Thus, objectivity in deciding between homonymy and polysemy must be pursued but remain elusive.[14]

Confirming that very conclusion is the fact that a third way in which a contronym might arrive is by the assimilation of two distinct roots pertaining to the same semantic frame of reference. Such a phenomenon is closer to homonymy than to polysemy in terms of etymology. But, as Blau puts it, for all practical purposes, an "historical homonymy" becomes a "synchronic polysemy" when the two meanings "are felt [by speakers] to be semantic modifications of the same basic idea."[15] Assimilation usually occurs through metathesis, the switching of two adjacent consonants in one of the given roots, so that it becomes identified perpetually with the other root, which had in some sense conveyed the opposite meaning. For example, Gordis suggested that חדל "cease" and חלד "live, endure" may have conjoined overtime, so that חדל could express either sense and, as a consequence, the noun *חֶלֶד could express חֶלֶד "world" [Isa 38:11]).[16] This, then, makes better sense of such texts as Psalm 49:9[8]; Job 10:20; and 14:6.[17]

---

[13] Menaḥem Zevi Kaddari, "Homonymy and Polysemy in the New Modern Hebrew Lexicon of the Hebrew Bible," in *Biblical Hebrew in Its Northwest Semitic Setting: Typological and Historical Perspectives*, eds. Steven E. Fassberg and Avi Hurvitz (Jerusalem; Winona Lake, IN: Hebrew University Magness Press; Eisenbrauns, 2006), 149–53.

[14] This is demonstrated in the essay that the preceding proposal was based upon, which was also more judicious in its methodology:

> [W]hen it appears that a single root gives rise to diverse meanings that are not *clearly* and *obviously* connected semantically, the words are considered homonyms (the default position). Only a parallel semantic development of another etymologically unconnected root with the same two meanings as the original root will serve as decisive evidence (a precedent) that the two terms are polysemous. The second term may be found in BH (first preference) or in any other ancient Semitic language.

Chaim Cohen, "New Directions in Modern Biblical Hebrew Lexicography," in *Birkat Shalom: Studies in the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Literature, and Postbiblical Judaism Presented to Shalom M. Paul on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, eds. Chaim Cohen, et al. (Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 2008), 1:441–73 (quote from pp. 441, 443).

[15] Joshua Blau, *Phonology and Morphology of Biblical Hebrew*, *LSAWS* 2 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 35.

[16] Ernest Klein, "חלד," *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English*, ed. Baruch Sarel (Jerusalem: Carta; University of Haifa, 1987) [hereafter "*CEDH*"], 217; "חֶלֶד," *HALOT*, 293; "חֶלֶד," BDB, 293.

[17] Robert Gordis, "Studies in Hebrew Roots of Contrasted Meanings," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 27, no. 1 (July 1936): 38–41. Zarfati has also proposed assimilation by metathesis for חלש "be weak, worn" and חשל "be strong" in such passages as Deuteronomy 25:18. However, the latter sense of חשל is only apparent in Modern Hebrew (e.g., מחושל "strong man; forged"), and it probably arose by the alternative development that Zarfati himself

Assimilation can also occur through the confusion of a weak root with another root (whether weak or strong), and then essentially becoming a biform of it. Examples include כסה/כסא "cover/reveal" (Ps 81:4[3]; Prov 7:20), אהב/איב "love/hate, be an enemy" (Gen 22:2; Exod 23:22), אצל/נצל "join/remove, withhold" (Gen 31:9; Sir 13:17).[18]

Uses

When its inverse relationship of senses is discernable, contronymy can be consciously used by any speaker in any language in a variety of ways, often subtly or with delayed perception. They can exploit a word's ambiguity in order to conceal meaning (vagueness), to express irony, to express merism ("A to Z") or some other kind of conceptual symmetry (e.g., *lex talionis*),[19] Janus parallelism, or to offend (dysphemism) or to shield from offense (euphemism). Examples of these in Hebrew will be elaborated in the sections below.

Contronymy in Comparative Semitics

Narrowing the focus from within general linguistics, Bible scholars must look at languages related to Hebrew in the Ancient Near East. Some lexical-radical stock was inherited from a Hamito-Semitic (or Afro-Asiatic) ancestor tongue, generally called Proto-Semitic. Then, as subsidiary branches of the family diverged (West Semitic > Central Semitic > Northwest Semitic > Canaanite > Hebrew) the commonality of the lexical stock shared between Hebrew and the other languages shrank. But relations, and even distant ones such as Akkadian, remain discernable through semantic commonalities (besides the morpho-phonetic and syntactic). Self-contradicting polysemes are one example of semantic commonalities that should be of interest to Hebraists. Contronyms do, in fact, occur within the Hamito-Semitic (Afro-Asiatic) family

---

offers as a possibility: שחל "break, weaken" > מחשיל "metalworker" (one who hammers and bends metal) > מחושל (one who is forged and so, strong). There is no need to see assimilation between חלש and חשל. Gad Ben-Ami Zarfati, "One Root or One Word for a Thing and for Its Opposite" [Hebrew], in *"As My People Say:" Studies in the Hebrew Language*, Collections and Introductions 1 (Jerusalem: Academy for the Hebrew Language, 1997), 48–49 / גד בן-עמי צרפתי, "שורש אחד או מילה אחד לדבר ולהיפוכו", ב"כלשון עמי": עיונים בלשון העברית, אסופות ומבואות בלשון א (ירושלים: האקדמיה ללשון העברית, התשנ"ז), 48–49.

[18] Gordis, "Studies in Hebrew Roots," 44–46, 48.

[19] Scott B. Noegel, *"Wordplay" in Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, Ancient Near Eastern Monographs 26 (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2021), 157.

outside of Hebrew, and some in the same roots as those found in Hebrew,[20] though not as frequently as one might expect. A brief overview, therefore, will aid further investigation.[21]

Arabic

By far the most robust use of contronymy among Semitic languages has historically been within Arabic. As already indicated, the term for the concept of contronymy in Arabic is *ʾaḍdād* ("opposites"); a singular auto-antonym is *ḍidd*. Well known examples include *jawn* "white/black," *ṣarīm* "day/night," and *jalal* "significant thing/trifle." In Arabic, it seems the manifold uses of such bipolarity were embraced for the art of literature and rhetoric.

The first scholar to whom a *Kitāb al-ʾaḍdād* ("Book of Opposites") is attributed is Quṭrub (d. 821).[22] Since then, the mainstream of Arabists has seen the phenomenon as betraying linguistic diachrony, i.e., that the original meaning of a *ḍidd* was often one and the same. Bettini culls the arguments of the medieval Arabists who claimed that evidence for a common root often came by way of Arabic dialects:

> …that sometimes the two opposite meanings were attested in the dialect of two different Arab tribes and that they were combined afterwards, e.g. *mušāyiḥ*, which means "who strives [in fighting]" in the dialect of Huḏayl and "cautious, fearing" in Najd, or *sājid*, which means "erect, straight" in the dialect of Ṭayyiʾ and "inclined, bowed" elsewhere.[23]

Dialects are essentially a microcosm of larger language families. In the same way that Arab tribes differed in the semantic development of a given root (from the Central Semitic or Arabian stocks),[24] so too one expects to find Semitic languages differ in the meanings that they attach to a commonly inherited root. Auto-antonyms are also found in Arabic as a development of diglossia: two coexisting varieties of the same language spoken under different conditions,

---

[20] This indicates that the lexical ambiguity of the root likely preceded Hebrew.

[21] Only one Afro-Asiatic language that is non-Semitic is considered in this paper, Egyptian, because of its frequent contact with the Semitic languages in the Levant and beyond. Cf. Thomas Schreiner, *Language Contact in Ancient Egypt*, Einführungen und Quellentexte zur Ägyptologie 16 (Berlin: Lit, 2023), 89–96, 103–6.

[22] Lidia Bettini, "Ḍidd," *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, eds. Lutz Edzard, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 627–28.

[23] Bettini, "Didd," 627–28; citing, for the first example, Ibn as-Sikkīt (d. ca. 858), *ʾAḍdād*, 193; as-Sijistānī, *ʾAḍdād* 125; al-ʾAṣmaʿī (d. 828), *ʾAḍdād* 39; and for the second, Ibn as-Sikkīt, *ʾAḍdād* 196; al-ʾAṣmaʿī, *ʾAḍdād* 43; Ibn al-ʾAnbārī, *ʾAḍdād* 294.

[24] Cf. the taxonomy in John Huehnergard, "Afro-Asiatic," in *The Ancient Languages of Syria-Palestine and Arabia*, ed. Roger D. Woodardf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 228.

one variety considered "higher" and another variety "lower."[25] Such complexities were relished by Arab linguists of the medieval era, and their works greatly influenced the burgeoning science of the comparative lexicography of Hebrew.[26]

However, flaws did exist in the methods behind these first efforts in Arabic. Some cases of contronymy were "discovered" by creative exegesis as a solution to interpretive issues in the Quran. Bettini writes, "Since a Qurʾānic passage must have a dogmatically unambiguous meaning, a verb such as *ḍanna* cannot mean 'to presume' in those passages where an article of faith is concerned, as in Q. 72/12, Q. 18/53, or Q. 69/20; therefore, *ḍanna* is given the *ḍidd* meaning of 'to doubt' and 'to be sure.'"[27] Likewise, disagreement among the scholars arose because of some tendencies towards too loose a definition of the linguistic category. A few cases of *ʾaḍdād* were adduced purely on the basis of textual variants in the Quran. Others were adduced which were simply different vocalizations of the same lexical unit (metaphony, on which, see below).

When it comes to Arabic's contribution to Hebrew lexicography in general, and to contronymy in particular, another error lurks. Kaltner warns:

> Never assume parallel semantic development. If a semantic development has occurred within Arabic one cannot assume that it has also taken place in a related biblical Hebrew form. This is a particularly common error when two words share the same meaning. It is wrong to claim that a development of the meaning which is clearly attested in Arabic must have occurred within Hebrew even though there is no evidence for it. The development of meanings is unique to each language, takes place within a larger semantic field, and cannot be transferred from one language to another.[28]

The polysemous nature or history of a word in Arabic (or any other Semitic language) is no justification for assuming the same of a parallel word in Hebrew, even when sharing the same root (i.e., not a loanword). The evidence must be extant in Hebrew to corroborate a contronym.

---

[25] Campbell and Mixco, "diglossia," *A Glossary of Historical Linguistics*, 45–46.

[26] Kaltner details how prolific Arabists were in composing dictionaries of different varieties—perhaps the first known dictionaries in the world besides those of the Chinese language. John Kaltner, *The Use of Arabic in Biblical Hebrew Lexicography*, CBQ Monograph Series 28 (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1996), 6, 11–17.

[27] Bettini, "Didd," 628, citing Ibn al-ʾAnbārī, *ʾAḍdād* 14–15; citing Hans Kofler, "Anmerkungen," in Quṭrub *ʾAḍdād* (1931–1932), 385–461, 499–544.

[28] Kaltner, *The Use of Arabic*, 101.

Nor should the possibility of contronymy in Hebrew tempt one to assume a parallel in Arabic that confirms it. Errors of both types have been noticed in the comparative lexicographical works of Landau (1896),[29] Guillame (1965),[30] and G. R. Driver (1968).[31]

Other Languages

A survey of contronymy in other Semitic languages is less, but still somewhat, rewarding. According to Noegel, "Contronyms appear to be a rare phenomenon in Mesopotamia."[32] He lists Akkadian *arnu(m)* "crime/punishment" as a possible example, citing a hymn to the god Shamash: "You give the unscrupulous judge experience of fetters, Him who accepts a present and yet lets justice miscarry you make bear his [*arna*]" (ll. 97–98).[33] By parallelism with "fetters," *arna* could be taken to mean punishment; however, with reference to bribery, it could be taken to mean crime. "As such," Noegel writes, "the contronymic polysemy underscores the notion of *lex talionis*."[34] It also serves as a Janus parallelism.

Incidentally, two analogies to this solitary example from Akkadian are found in Genesis 4:13: וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן אֶל־יְהוָה גָּדֹול עֲוֹנִי מִנְּשֹׂא. First, עָוֹן, which is frequently "sin, iniquity" in the Bible, ever since Ibn Ezra has typically been translated in this context as "punishment" (cf. 1 Sam 28:10; Lam 4:6).[35] Second, נשׂא, usually meaning "lift, bear (up)" can mean "forgive" (in this

---

[29] E. Landau, *Gegensinnige Wörter im Hebräischen* (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1896); see the critiques in Theodore Nöldeke, "Wörter mit Gegensinn (Aḍdād)," in *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft*, 67–108 (1910; repr., Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019); and Gordis, "Studies in Hebrew Roots," *passim*.

[30] Alfred Guillaume, *Hebrew and Arabic Lexicography: A Comparative Study* (1959–1965; repr., Leiden: Brill, 1965); see the critique and other works of Guillame cited in Gordis, "Studies in Hebrew Roots," 33–58; and Kaltner, *The Use of Arabic*, 78–80, 88.

[31] G. R. Driver, "Hebrew Poetic Diction," in *Congress Volume Copenhagen 1953*, eds. G. W. Anderson, et al., 26–39, VTSup 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1953). See the sources and critiques in Kaltner (*The Use of Arabic*, 82–86, 88–92), who, again, appreciates Driver's contributions but critiques flaws in many works of the latter's prolific career.

[32] Noegel, *Wordplay*, 157.

[33] Text from "The Šamaš Hymn," *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, ed. W. G. Lambert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 133. Lambert simply translates *arna* as "punishment," without discussion.

[34] Noegel, *Wordplay*, 157.

[35] "עָוֹן," *HALOT*, 800; so Ibn Ezra in Michael Carasik, ed., *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, trans. by Michael Carasik, *The Commentators' Bible: The Rubin JPS Miqra'ot Gedolot* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2018), 52.

case, "be forgiven").[36] Possible renderings are then, "My sin is too much to forgive" (an unprecedented idiom; *pace* the idiom עָוֹן נָשָׂא as in "forgiving iniquity" in Exod 34:7; Num 14:18; Ps 85:3) or "My punishment is too much to bear" (cf. וְנָשָׂא עֲוֹנוֹ as in "he will bear his punishment" in Lev 5:1, 17; 17:16). The combination of semantic and phonetic similarities of עָוֹן and *arnu(m)* are striking. Also striking are Cohen's two observations regarding the similar collocations of these roots (a) the previous idiom is an exact parallel to Akkadian *arna(m) našû* found elsewhere[37] and (b) "the three main Akkadian terms for 'crime, iniquity,' namely *ḫīṭu(m)*, *arnu(m)*, and *gillatu(m)* (in ascending order of severity, corresponding respectively to BH חטא, עון, and פשע) each occur with the additional meaning 'punishment, fine' (for the respective type of crime involved)."[38] Indeed, חַטָּאת/חֵטְא (though not פֶּשַׁע) also occurs with the opposite meanings, "crime/punishment" (Ezek 23:49; Prov 10:16). The etymology of עָוֹן is a problem that cannot be solved in this short study.[39] But it has highlighted the fact of contronymy in Akkadian and a category in which it shares with Hebrew.

Ancient Egyptian poses inherent challenges to finding contronyms. Since the phonology of the language is still largely a mystery, so too must be the extent to which contronymy is found; linguists cannot be sure that proposed cases are not merely homonymy or paronomasia. The contronyms claimed by Carl Abel (1885)[40] have more recently been argued to have arisen from separate Afroasiatic roots, e.g., Egyptian *ḥm* "servant/majesty" likely derives from Semitic

---

[36] נָשָׂא, *HALOT*, 726.

[37] E.g., Code of Hammurabi §§4, 13: *aran dīnim šuāti ittanašši* "the punishment of that case he will bear." "RIME 4.03.06.Add21 (Laws of Hammurapi) Composite Artifact Entry," Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI), May 24, 2014, accessed November 4, 2023, https://cdli.ucla.edu/P464358.

[38] Chaim Cohen, "Jewish Medieval Commentary on the Book of Genesis and Modern Biblical Philology. Part I: Gen 1–18," *JQR* 81, no. 1/2 (1990): 5.

[39] If the root of עָוֹן is עוה, the equivalent may be in Arabic *ġwy* "err," in Akkadian *ewûm* "burden" (so *HALOT*, 796–97), and in Ge'ez *ʿayaya* "err" (so Leslau, 38). In that case, the etymon of all three items in proto-Semitic was a verb of I-*ġ* (ע$_2$), not I-*ʾ* (ע$_1$). But Akkadian *arnu(m)* must descend from a I-*ʾ* or I-*h*. It is possible that Hebrew אָוֶן "trouble, sorrow, sin" is related to *arnu(m)* and that the semantic development of אָוֶן and עָוֹן influenced each other. Some lexicons also suggested a homonymic עוה root, corresponding to Arabic *ʿawāy* "bend" and Ge'ez *ʿāwa* "bend" (so BDB, 730–31; Leslau, 38) and based on certain uses of עוה meaning "twist" (Lam 3:9; Job 33:27). It may be that two or more roots dealing closely in overlapping semantic frames all with an initial guttural were confused at times. Wolf Lesau, "עוה," *Ethiopic and South Arabic Contributions to the Hebrew Lexicon*, University of California Publications in Semitic Philology 20 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), 38.

[40] Carl Abel, "Über den Gegensinn der Urworte," in *Sprachwissenschaftliche Abhandlungen*, ed. Georg Curtius, 311–67 (Leipzig: Verlag Wilhelm Friedrich, 1885).

ʿamm "folk" and *ḫam* "patron," respectively.[41] Further study in this arena is needed from Egyptian linguists.[42]

Noegel briefly notes that Ugaritic gives no evidence of contronymy. However, the same restriction concerning the philology of Egyptian applies to Ugaritic; the script records no vowels.[43] Because of Hebrew's close relation to Ugaritic, this absence is perhaps surprising. Indeed, no contronyms are notable in Huehnergard's glossary (1987)[44] nor in the more recent, comprehensive dictionary of Olmo Lete and Sanmartín (2015).[45] Perhaps the feature obtained in Ugaritic but simply has not survived in the two hundred some witnesses that are extant today.

Finally, however, Hebrew's nearest language kinship, Aramaic, contains incontestable cases of contronymy. One of them is פרק "destroy/save." Historically, "destroy" was the Old Aramaic usage, though it continued in the Imperial and Jewish Aramaic periods at least. "Save" was an attested use from Imperial Aramaic onward.[46] With Hebrew פרק, which witnesses a similar semantic development to that of Aramaic among a broader range of uses, it is difficult to say which language influenced the other or whether both uses of פרק were in circulation in either language from the proto-Semitic root onward.[47]

---

[41] Thomas Schneider, "Contextualizing the Tale of the Herdsman," in *Egyptian Stories: A British Egyptological Tribute to Alan B. Lloyd on the Occasion of His Retirement*, eds. Thomas Schneider and Kasia Szpakowska, AOAT 347 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2007), 311–12n12. Compare H. R. Abu-Baker, "Contronyms (Opposites) in Ancient Egyptian Language" [Arabic], *JGUAA* 23, no. 1 (2022): 331–45; however, Abu-Baker, an archaeologist, provides only a survey of text types and periods in which six given contronyms are believed to occur (*ʾ*, *ḥb*, *ḥm/ḥmt*, *ḫws*, *ḫnp*, and *sḏn*). He does not explore the Semitic origins of roots thereof, but leaves *ḥm*, for example, to be assumed as polysemic (its two uses being the result of semantic development by extension) rather than homonymic.

[42] The comprehensive work by Gábor Takács (*Etymological Dictionary of Egyptian*, 3 vols., HdO 48/1–3 [Leiden: Brill, 1999–2007]) is highly praised but has as yet only produced three volumes of introductory material and lexical entries for items beginning with *b*-, *p*-, *f*-, and *m*-.

[43] Noegel, *Wordplay*, 158.

[44] John Huehnergard, *Ugaritic Vocabulary in Syllabic Transcription*, HSS 32 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987).

[45] Though, *ḫnp* "impiety, sin" is compared to Arabic *ḫanaf* "a natural wryness, distortion/a right tendency" (p. 393). It is possible this use obtained in Ugraitic but has not survived in any witness. Gregorio del Olmo Lete and Joaquín Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition*, 3rd rev. ed., trans. and ed. Wilfred G. E. Watson, HdO 112 (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

[46] "פרק," *HALOT*, 5:1959; "פרק," *HALOT*, 1:973.

[47] Cf. Driver, "Hebrew Poetic Diction," 28.

A Method of Analysis

In the two domains observed above, the beginnings of a methodology have already begun to form. It is impossible, however, to move on to the third domain, the analysis of contronymy in Hebrew periodization, without pausing to further develop a methodology. Since the design of this paper is to direct the exemplary cases that have been culled by other scholars into a more useful template for future studies, certain frequently encountered terms must be refined and the potential pitfalls sought out.

Defining "Aramaisms" and "Archaisms"

Two terms in particular must be refined. The first of these, "Aramaisms," popularly refers to "linguistic elements whose appearance in the Hebrew Bible could be attributed to the influence of (late) Aramaic."[48] Aramaisms represent a subcategory of loanwords, but may also include non-lexical aspects of the language, like grammar or even orthography. Yet, whereas uncovering Aramaisms was, in Hurvitz's words, "one of the favorite topics of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century biblical scholarship," and whereas the scholarship generally took Aramaisms to indicate late composition in every case, more recent discoveries of Aramaic inscriptions dating to the beginning of the first millennium BCE—including some found in Northern Palestine[49]—have now positioned scholars to overturn the older view completely.[50] The inscriptions demonstrate that Aramaic enjoyed high prestige and widespread use in the pre-exilic period, and that it had ample opportunity to influence Hebrew, especially in the north of Israel where Arameans were in closer contact than in the south.

---

[48] Avi Hurvitz, "Hebrew and Aramaic in the Biblical Period: The Problem of 'Aramaisms' in Linguistic Research on the Hebrew Bible," in *Biblical Hebrew: Studies in Chronology and Typology*, ed. Ian Young, JSOTSup 369 (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 27.

[49] Ibid., 27–28. Fitzmyer lists the following inscriptions as representatives of "Old Aramaic" in the 10th–8th centuries BCE: "the Tell Halaf inscription, the Bir Hadad inscriptions, the 'Ein Gev jar inscription, the Tell Dan Bowl, the Haza'el Ivory inlay, the Ördek Burnu inscription, the Hamath graffiti, the Zakir inscription, Hadad, Panammu, the Sefire inscriptions, eight Bar Rākib inscriptions, the Hazor sherd, the Calah ostracon, the Nērab inscriptions, and possibly the Luristan Bronzes I–II and the Nineveh Lion Weights." Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., "The Phases of the Aramaic Language," in *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays*, SBLMS 25 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 61.

[50] Cf. the survey and similar conclusion of Richard Dean, "Aramaisms: Not What They Used to Be," *Journal for Semitics* 25, no. 2 (2016): 1083–93.

Eskhult concurs with Hurvitz. He claims that loanwords from Aramaic, Akkadian, and Egyptian are too often assumed *a priori* to indicate the late date of the texts in which they are found.[51] "Whereas Akkadian and Egyptian culturally and politically could influence Hebrew from the oldest time, Persian had little possibility to do so before the sixth century BCE."[52] Loanwords from the far-off Persia, therefore, are especially effective criteria for the linguistic dating of texts. But the pitfall of assumptions is especially poignant with Aramaic. For, although the Aramaic portions of the Bible literarily date themselves well within Imperial Aramaic period (ca. 700–200 BCE),[53] there had already been continual and close contact between Hebrew and Aramaic from the Old Aramaic period onward (ca. 925–700 BCE).[54] Eskhult concludes:

> The enrichment of the [Biblical Hebrew] vocabulary follows a pattern that by and large fits into the political history of Ancient Israel, as described in the biblical texts. … [T]here is a concurrence between the time factor and the borrowings, so that late words occur in those texts where they are, so to speak, supposed to be found.[55]

Likewise in Hurvitz's words, "the linguistic background that emerges from the descriptions found in the biblical literary tradition… is also the basic picture that emerges from the linguistic testimony of [Biblical Hebrew]" (cf. Gen 31:46–47; 2 Kgs 18:26–27; Ezra 4:6–7; Neh 13:23–24).[56]

In other words, the archaic phase of Aramaic overlaps with the archaic and classical phases of biblical Hebrew (on which, see below). Therefore, the "loaning" of Old Aramaic words and forms may explain unusual features in many texts, whether or not the texts are believed by scholarly consensus or attested by the literary chronology to pertain to those periods. However, the above discussion also demonstrates that several other types of "Aramaisms" can

---

[51] Mats Eskhult, "The Importance of Loanwords for the Dating of Biblical Hebrew Texts," in *Biblical Hebrew: Studies in Chronology and Typology*, ed. Ian Young, JSOT Sup 369 (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 18–19.

[52] Ibid., 21.

[53] Literary dating pertains to the historical setting described in the texts, rather than the critical analysis of the linguistic form of the text. The portions of Ezra 4:6–6:18; 7:12–26; Daniel 2:4–7:28; and the one sentence in Jeremiah 10:11 are all well within the period when Aramaic had attained the status of *lingua franca* in the Ancient Near East. The outlier is the two-word Aramaic name given to the border monument in Genesis 31:47.

[54] Periodization given by Fitzmyer, "The Phases of the Aramaic Language," 60–61.

[55] Eskhult, "The Importance of Loanwords," 22–23.

[56] Hurvitz, "Hebrew and Aramaic in the Biblical Period," 27.

arise, which may indicate antiquity and not lateness, or which may simply be "devoid of chronological implications." Hurvitz lists four of them:

- Those appearing in archaic biblical poetry (see below)[57]
- Those preserving dialectical usage (e.g., in Song of Songs?; Jonah?)
- Those describing the speech of foreign characters (e.g., 2 Kgs 6:8–19)[58]
- Those identifying with the Wisdom Literature tradition of the East (cf. Num 23:7; 1 Kgs 5:10; e.g., Job, Proverbs)[59]

Another possible reason behind Aramaisms in the Bible was offered in a recent article by Dean.[60] Building on the work of Rezetko and Young, he provided an important qualification to chronological assumptions.[61] Whereas in the Scrolls, scholars have typically attributed the Aramaisms to influence of the scribe and not the author, in the Bible, the same was not true; the Aramaisms were almost always attributed to the author of the text, and therefore its lateness of composition, not transmission. Dean's study, therefore, underscores that by analogy to the Dead Sea Scrolls transmission could also be a reason for Aramaisms.

Such parsing of the issue of Aramaisms is typical of scholarship today, including both those who are critical of the linguistic diachronic approach and those who are contributing to it.

---

[57] It was the special observation of Driver that "the percentage of words found otherwise only in Aramaic is far higher in poetry than in prose," that many if not most of these "probably descended from the old common Semitic stock," and that "the bulk of these so-called Aramaisms are found in poetry only because poets normally employ an extensive and recondite vocabulary which naturally makes considerable use of archaisms." Driver, "Hebrew Poetic Diction," 35–36.

[58] To this example Mishor would add the speech of Jethro, the Midianite, in Exodus 18. Mishor writes that the editor "had a foreign stock of linguistic material ready for stylistic use at his disposal, which could be used to characterize a foreigner from a neighboring country as substratal lapsus" (Mordechay Mishor, "On the Language and Text of Exodus 18," in *Biblical Hebrew in Its Northwest Semitic Setting: Typological and Historical Perspectives*, eds. Steven E. Fassberg and Avi Hurvitz [Jerusalem; Winona Lake, IN: Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Eisenbrauns, 2006], 228). To this list, Kutscher would also add the speech of the Edomite-Arab speakers in Isaiah 21:11–14 (cf. E. Y. Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, ed. Raphael Kutscher [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982], 72–73).

[59] Hurvitz, "Hebrew and Aramaic in the Biblical Period," 23–33.

[60] Dean compared the biblical texts containing lexical items widely held to be Aramaisms against the same texts found in the Dead Sea Scrolls; and he compared the reverse, those texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls widely held to contain lexical Aramaisms with parallel texts in the Bible. The majority of the Aramaisms tested showed no variation between the Bible (MT) and the Scrolls. But occasional variants occurred in both directions. But the scholarly analysis of these variants was consistently, directly related to the variant's direction. This reveals underlying assumptions in the scholarly consensus that need challenging. Dean, "Aramaisms: Not What They Used to Be," 1080–1103.

[61] Robert Rezetko and Ian Young, "Cross-Textual Variable Analysis: Samuel Manuscripts," in *Historical Linguistics & Biblical Hebrew: Steps Toward an Integrated Approach*,

In Hurvitz's words, the "term 'Aramaism' is polysemous and associated with a variety of phenomena."[62] Yes, it must be used accordingly.

A second, albeit less complicated, term that needs refinement is "archaism." Many use this term simply to mean genuinely archaic features of a text, i.e., features that betray its antiquity. On the other hand, characteristic of the older view of Aramaisms, prominent scholars viewed the biblical authors as having borrowed Aramaic words in order to give their poetry an *aerugo vetustatis* ("old age").[63] This is the intended meaning of "archaism" by many analysts of Hebrew diachrony today.[64] It is synonymous with "pseudoclassicism" and used to explain as artificial the features of a text that appear older than its surroundings. It means an imitation of older writers or their works either for style, for authority, or to pretend antiquity.[65]

However, in reality semantic development is sometimes circulatory, resurrecting older words that had been abandoned or older meanings of words that had since undergone development.[66] Driver gives the example of "hike," an old English word, which having become obsolete, was reintroduced as an "Americanism" into the English speech of the mid-twentieth century.[67] Such a language change may be natural and not pretentious. Moreover, some lexemes even made two entrances into Hebrew through different cognate languages. For example, אַרְגָּמָן "purple" is found frequently in the Bible, apparently borrowed from Akkadian into both Hebrew and Ugaritic, but then אַרְגָּוָן is found in 2 Chronicles 2:6[7], reflecting the Old Babylonian

---

[62] Hurvitz, "Hebrew and Aramaic in the Biblical Period," 37; cf. Driver, "Hebrew Poetic Diction," 36.

[63] Ibid.

[64] E.g., Hendel and Joosten cite טֶרֶם "before" as an archaism. For though it is found regularly in CBH and contemporary inscriptions, it is never in LBH; yet it reappears in Ben Sira and QH. Ron Hendel and Jan Joosten, *How Old is the Hebrew Bible?: A Linguistic, Textual, and Historical Study*, AYBRL (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 68. They list other proposed examples on pp. 94–95.

[65] Ibid., 85–97.

[66] Notarius, "Lexical Isoglosses of Archaic Hebrew," 84; Driver, "Hebrew Poetic Diction," 27. Similarly, Kutcher identified recirculating features as "mirage forms," that is, archaic features that were preserved only in Aramaic but then reintroduced into Hebrew under Aramaic influence. Kutcher, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, 38–39; Chaim Cohen, "Diachrony in Biblical Hebrew Lexicography and Its Ramifications for Textual Analysis," in *Diachrony in Biblical Hebrew*, eds. Cynthia Miller-Naudé and Ziony Zevit, *LSAWS* 8 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 362.

[67] Ibid., 37n1.

intervocalic *w* which in the first millennium shifted to *m*.[68] This spelling does not necessarily reflect the early date of 2 Chronicles 2:6 (or of its *Vorlage*), but rather frequent language contact.

The preceding observations have implications for the study of contronymy as a diachronic marker in Hebrew. For, as descendants of their Northwest Semitic predecessor, Aramaic and Hebrew inherited a common stock of lexical roots. Some of those roots took divergent paths of semantic development and became isoglosses, but then some of the Aramaic roots, being orthographically and phonetically indistinguishable from the Hebrew, (re)appeared in the Bible alongside the Hebrew.[69] Alternatively, the original sense of a Northwest Semitic root could have been preserved through all phases of the Aramaic language, but was only used in a biblical text before it was abandoned by the Hebrew language. Alternatively again, a Canaanite root could have taken divergent paths in northern and southern Israel, becoming isoglossic of two distinct dialects, but then both of its two antonymic meanings still found use in biblical texts, which arose from or described speakers of different localities. In such cases, apparent Aramaisms do not reflect lateness, but may reflect the antiquity of the texts in which they appear.

Phenomena to Be Excluded

To rightly assess the value of a contronym for the linguistic periodization of a biblical text, a number of phenomena must be categorically excluded from analysis. First, as mentioned above, mere homonyms or homophones are not contronyms. These tools are used by skillful authors to express paronomasia,[70] which is close to contronymy but not equal. For example, in Qohelet 7:6, כִּי כְקוֹל הַסִּירִים תַּחַת הַסִּיר כֵּן שְׂחֹק הַכְּסִיל, the homonym סִיר expresses both "thorn" (plural) and "pot" (singular), and then its sound is mimicked in the near homophone כְּסִיל,

[68] Eskhult, "The Importance of Loanwords," 19–20; "אַרְגָּמָן," *CEDH*, 53; John Huehnergard, *A Grammar of Akkadian*, 3rd ed. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 597. This is close to the phenomena of *Wanderwörter* ("travelling words"), which are known in all Semitic languages and some of which are shared outside the Semitic family. Examples are שַׂק "sack(cloth)," בַּרְזֶל "iron," and פִּילֶגֶשׁ "concubine." The etymology of these words is nearly impossible to determine. Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, 47.

[69] Notarius highlighted this possibility, that certain senses of a lexical unit may be isoglosses, identifying distinct phases of Hebrew. For example, when a lexical unit is found in both ABH and CBH (or some later phase), but the ABH meaning is not retained, it is an isogloss. Tania Notarius, "Lexical Isoglosses of Archaic Hebrew: פְּלִילִים (Deut 32:31) and כֵּן (Judg 5:15) as Case Studies," *Hebrew Studies* 58 (2017): 81–98.

[70] I.e., the combination of a similarity of sound with a dissimilarity of meaning for such uses as: pun or wordplay, rhetoric, ritual, and performance. Scott B. Noegel, "Paronomasia," *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, ed. Geoffrey Khan (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 3:24.

"fool."[71] Yet, none of these terms are related to one another etymologically. Similar is the use of חֲמוֹר in Judges 15:16 to denote both "donkey" and "heap," two unrelated lexemes which are accidentally identical and exploited for the author/speaker's rhetorical flourish.

Also mentioned above, metaphony is excluded from the present analysis. By this is meant not the historical shifts that led to alternate vocalizations (i.e., umlaut) but the variety of the vocalizations itself.[72] For example, while the spelling change in Hebrew's third-person feminine singular pronoun from consonantal הוא to היא is of chronological interest, the opposite meanings of "he/she" attached to הוא in the Pentateuch is not. The Masoretes preserved a metaphony (הוּא vs. הִוא) in their vocalization; but such is an epicene, not a proper contronym. Counting metaphonies as contronyms was one of the shortcomings of some analyses of *'aḍdād* by medieval Arabists.

Close to metaphony is inflection, "the variation in form of a word that reflects different morphosyntactic categories."[73] The most basic application of inflection for contronymy is the perspectival shift from active to passive, or indicative to causative/factitive, which is accomplished through different stems of the same root (Qal, Niphal, Piel, Pual, Hiphil, Hophal, etc.). Another application of inflection is a certain use of the Piel stem in denominative verbs. Zarfati adduces the following examples from Biblical Hebrew: דִּשֵּׁן "remove fat," זִנֵּב "remove tail," סִעֵּף "remove branches," סִקֵּל "remove stones," and שִׁרֵּשׁ "uproot."[74] One could add to these, the heavily used חִטֵּא "cleanse from sin, purify" from a root that normally means "sin" (Exod 23:6; Lev 14:49, 52; Ps 51:9; Ezek 43:20, 22). Zarfati writes, "the Hebrew language does with stems and nominal patterns what the Indo-European languages do with prefixes," such as anti-,

---

[71] Ibid.

[72] "Metaphony," *Dictionary of Historical and Comparative Linguistics*, 211.

[73] "Inflection," *Cambridge Dictionary of Linguistics*, n.p.

[74] Zarfati, "One Root or One Word," 48–49. However, two qualifications should be noted. First, several of these verbs are not found in the Qal (ground stem) in the Bible; they only exist in the Piel. While the Bible's lexical repository is nowhere near exhaustive of a living language, and so a spoken use of the Qal that simply did not survive in writing is possible, yet it would be difficult to conceive of an additive use in some of these roots (e.g., זנב "tail [something]?"). Second, in the roots given by Zarfati, he recognizes that the Piel is not always used with a subtractive nuance. For example, the Piel of 2 Samuel 16:6 וַיְסַקֵּל is equivalent to the Qal of 1 Kings 21:10 וְסִקְלֻהוּ; both mean "throw stones at (someone)."

un-, in-, or dis-.[75] Such a meaning in a verb's morphology, however, is not indicative of a contronymic root, nor is it prohibitive. In fact, a given root may have been contronymic and yet one or both of its meanings may only be extant in one stem. A possible case is מרץ, which Radak found, on the basis of the Niphal stem, to relate to "strength and vigor" (cf. Job 6:25; Micah 2:10; 1 Kgs 2:8),[76] but which in the Hiphil means "be sick" (Job 16:3; cf. מָרָץ "agony" in Qumran [1QH3.11, 6.21]).[77]

A fourth category to be excluded is that of antiphrasis, including euphemism and dysphemism. Antiphrasis is simply saying one thing but intending to communicate the opposite. It is often ironic or humorous, and can be either offensive or polite. Hebrew well knows the kind of ironic, potentially glib euphemism. For instance, physical defects tend to be expressed with somewhat disparaging irony. Gordis catalogs the following cases:

- אלם – "bind (be strong?)" (hence, אֲלֻמָּה "sheaf;" Gen 37:7) / "be mute" (hence אִלֵּם; Exod 4:11; etc.); cf. Aram. אַלִּים "strong," Akkad. *almanu* "strong," *almattu(m)* "fortress"[78]
- חגר – "gird (be strong)" (Jdgs 18:11) / "be lame" (hence חִגֵּר; 4QD[a] 17.18; *m. Pe'ah* 8.9; *m. Sanh.* 8.4)[79]
- פסח – "leap, dance, spring" (1 Kgs 18:26) / "limp, be lame" (hence חִסֵּחַ; Lev 21:18; Mal 1:8)[80]
- עור – "(be) awake" (Job 41:2) / "be blind" (hence עִוֵּר; Exod 4:11; Lev 19:14)[81]
- נור – "light" (hence נֵר/נֶר "lamp;" מְנוֹרָה "lampstand")[82] / "be blind" (hence סַנְוֵרִים; Gen 19:11; 2 Kgs 6:18); cf. such rabbinic expressions as סגי נהורא, מאור עינים, and רואה;[83]

---

[75] Ibid., 49.

[76] David Kimchi, *Sefer HaShorashim* [Hebrew], eds. Jo. H. R. Biesenthal and F. Lebrecht (repr., Berlin: Bethge, 1847), 201 / דוד קמחי, ספר השרשים; Zarfati, "One Root or One Word," 50.

[77] "מָרָץ," *DCH,* 5:492.

[78] "אלם," BDB, 47; Gordis, "Studies in Hebrew Roots," 46–48.

[79] "חִגֵּר," *DCH,* 3:161; Gordis, "Studies in Hebrew Roots," 49–50.

[80] "פסח II," *DCH,* 6:723; Gordis, "Studies in Hebrew Roots," 54.

[81] Cf. "עור I, II," *DCH,* 6:314–16; Gordis, "Studies in Hebrew Roots," 52–53.

[82] "נור," BDB, 632–33.

[83] *b. Ber.* 58a; *Ḥag.* 5b; "cf. the Karaite teacher Joseph ben Abraham al Bassir, *Haroeh* of the 11th century" (Gordis, "Studies in Hebrew Roots," 52n61).

> cf. Aram. נוּרָא “fire,” Arab. *nur* “light,” *nara* “gave light,” Akkad. *nūru* “light,” *nawāru* “give light”[84]

The pitiable state of “widowhood” is likewise expressed with a variety of nouns that appear to be from the root אלם (cf. Gen 38:11; Isa 47:9; Jer 51:5), thus indicating that the root may mean both “bind” and “sever,” as perhaps does also שׁכל (cf. אֶשְׁכּוֹל “cluster,” שָׁכַל “be bereaved”).[85] These might be considered euphemisms, but whether a word is meant to shield from offense or to overtly offend is a matter of contextual nonverbal communication. Gordis also suggests that רְפָאִים “Rephaim (= giants)” (cf. Deut 2:10, 11, 20; 3:11) was a “cacophony” (by which probably he meant a dysphemy), since רפה, a biform of רפא (cf. 2 Sam 21:16–22), is associated with weakness (cf. Aramaic רְפָא “be weak;” Ugaritic *rpy* “become weak[?], sink”). The insulting moniker, “weak ones,” may have arisen so as to avoid calling the Rephaim what they actually were—“giants.”

On the other hand, there are antiphrastic terms in the Bible that are neither ironic nor insulting but reverential. These are intended to shield the reader or auditor from the full impact of the negative implications of some word or phrase that is being replaced. Mangum argues that such is the case with Job’s use of ברך, usually “bless,” when “curse” is intended in the narrative (Job 1:5, 11; 2:5, 9).[86] For, in each of these four occurrences, God is the object of the ברך. The synonyms for curse, ארר or קלל, were apparently too offensive to express for the speakers, authors, or scribes involved. The argument is convincing, because in the only other two uses of ברך where “curse” is certainly intended, the object is again God (1 Kgs 21:10, 13).[87]

---

[84] “נור,” *CEDH*, 410; Gordis, “Studies in Hebrew Roots,” 52.

[85] Ibid., 47–48. However, the multiple uses of יבם “perform the duty of a levir” and its nouns (“[widowed] sister-in-law,” “[deceased] brother-in-law;” Deut 25:5–9; Ruth 1:15) is another case of perspectivization of an implicature (Taylor, *Linguistic Categorization*, 128). A contronym though the root may be, it has little value for diachronic analysis as such. Michael Carasik, ed., *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, trans. Michael Carasik, *The Commentator’s Bible: The Rubin JPS Miqra’ot Gedolot* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2015), 168.

[86] Douglas T. Mangum, “Euphemism in Biblical Hebrew and the Euphemistic ‘Bless’ in the Septuagint of Job,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 4 (2020): 1–7.

[87] Psalm 10:3 contains a seventh possible case when it says כִּי־הִלֵּל רָשָׁע עַל־תַּאֲוַת נַפְשׁוֹ וּבֹצֵעַ בֵּרַךְ נִאֵץ יְהוָה׃. But here it is not certain that “curse” is the intended sense of ברך. It may rather be that בֹּצֵעַ “greedy one” (or בָּצַע “[greedy] gain”) is the object, not ה׳, and in such a case “bless” is fitting (i.e., בצע ברך [את] ... רשע). The Masoretic pointing suggests the latter; however, the acrostic nature of Pss. 9–10 complicates the strophe divisions here. Cf. the various views espoused: ברך is a euphemism with ה׳ as object (Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids;

None of the opposite meanings of the above taboo terms reflect independence from their counterpart; one sense is always dependent on the auditor's consciousness of the other. As long as this is true, the lexeme is not of interest for a diachronic periodization of a Hebrew text. If and when the lexeme is no longer used with a consciously antiphrastic nuance, then it would become of interest.[88] For, then, semantic development reflects diachrony, and it could contribute to the dating of a text. Still, the only way one could say whether that development has obtained for a word is if both of its uses were well attested in the Bible. But such is not the case with ברך.

Another phenomenon to beware of in this analysis is false opposites. For example, לְאָחוֹר was recently cited as evidence of Late Biblical Hebrew in Isaiah 40–66, since it is used there in the sense of "future" (Isa 41:23; 42:23) but in the sense of "backward" in Classical Biblical Hebrew (Jer 7:24; Ps 114:3, 5).[89] However, there are two issues to be considered. First, the semantic development in this phrase's meaning is figurative/extensive. That is, the shift to "future" from "backward" likely derives from אָחוֹר "behind, afterwards" > אַחֲרִית "end" > אַחֲרִית הַיָּמִים "the latter days," rather than from a polysemic nature of the root אחר. The same association was present in Akkadian, as far back as Old Babylonian, between *aḫāru*/*uḫḫuru* "be behind; be late" and *aḫrâtu* "future."[90] The Hebrew equivalent, therefore, is likely not a late development in the present author's judgment.

Second, the alternate meanings proposed are not "future/past" nor "forward/backward" but "future/backward." The Hebrew conception of the future, as throughout the ANE, is a spatial metaphor of something that is behind one, not in front of one; it cannot be seen and therefore

---

Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2014], 132n18); ברך is an implied reflexive with the greedy as object (Charles A. Briggs and Emilie Grace Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, International Critical Commentary [New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1906–1907], 77); and ברך is the homonym "kneel down, worship" with the object under ellipsis (Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms 1–50: Introduction, Translation and Notes*, Anchor Yale Bible Series 16 [New York: Doubleday, 1965], 62).

[88] Cf. Alessandro Bausani's distinction in *'aḍdād* "between the conscious use of ambivalent words, for rhetorical or philological purposes, and the possible existence of remnants of an ancient bipolarity in Arabic as well as in other languages." Alessandro Bausani, "Osservazioni sugli *'aḍdād* arabi," in *Actes du Ve Congrès international d'arabisants et islamisants, Bruxelles 31 aot–6 septembre 1970* (Bruxelles: Publications du Centre pour l'Etude des Problèmes du Monde Musulman Contemporain, 1971), 97–106; cited in Bettini, "Ḍidd," 628.

[89] Shalom M. Paul, "Signs of Late Biblical Hebrew in Isaiah 40–66," in *Diachrony in Biblical Hebrew*, eds. Cynthia Miller-Naudé and Ziony Zevit, *LSAWS* 8 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 298. Note that Paul did not cite לאחור as a contronym; it merely serves as a convenient example here.

[90] "אחר," BDB, 29; "*aḫāru*," *CAD*, 1:170, 193–94; "*uḫḫuru*," *CAD*, 20:42–43.

cannot be known.[91] Thus, even if לְאָחוֹר did evince a diachronic semantic development, it is not a contronym. Interpreters should beware of such false opposites, especially when investigating languages of a cognitive worldview different from their own.

Contronymy in Hebrew Periodization

With the above definitions and guidelines in view, a survey of contronymy in the different phases of Hebrew can be done. The notice of contronyms in Hebrew can be found in medieval Hebraists, such as Menahem ben Saruk (fl. tenth century), Judah ben David Hayyuj (ca. 945–1000), Abu al-Walid ibn Ganah (= Jonah ibn Janah; fl. eleventh century), Joseph Kara (b. ca. 1060), Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164), and R. David Kimchi ("Radak"; ca. 1160–1235).[92] Most prominent among them is Radak, for the published work he called ספר השרשים, an etymological dictionary drawing on the earlier writings of Hayyuj and ibn Janah.[93] Radak, and other medieval commentators such as Rashi (ca. 1040–1105), occasionally identified trouble words in the Bible with their Aramaic (or Syriac) equivalents. However, contronymy subsequently fell out of interest, until the late nineteenth century. The topic revived in the works of Abel and Landau (mentioned above), and to these were added the contributions of Nöldeke (1910), Zeidel (1935), Gordis (1936), Driver (1953), and Kopf (1956).[94]

Then, the analysis of contronyms began to intersect with the periodization of biblical Hebrew that arose in the early twentieth century. Scholars such as Albright, Cross, and Freedman began to recognize an archaic phase of biblical Hebrew[95] that plausibly evinced the earlier dating of many texts than the dating that had been given them by contemporary critical scholars. This

---

[91] Cf. Andrew E. Hill, "אַחֲרִית," *NIDOTTE*, 1:362.

[92] Gordis, "Studies in Hebrew Roots," 33; dates are taken from *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 16 vols. (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972).

[93] David Kimchi, *Sefer HaShorashim* [Hebrew], eds. Jo. H. R. Biesenthal and F. Lebrecht (repr., Berlin: Bethge, 1847) / קמחי, דוד. ספר השרשים.

[94] Nöldeke, "Wörter mit Gegensinn (Aḍdād)," 67–108; משה זיידל, חקרי לשון (ירושלים: תרצ"ב, 1953); Gordis, "Studies in Hebrew Roots," 33–58; Driver, "Hebrew Poetic Diction," 26–39; Lothar Kopf, "Das Arabische Wörterbuch Als Hilfsmittel Für Die Hebräische Lexikographie," *VT* 6 (1956): 286–302.

[95] This includes today: Genesis 49 (The Blessings of Jacob); Exodus 15 (The Song of Moses); Numbers 23–24 (The Oracles of Balaam); Deuteronomy 32–33 (The Prayer and Blessing of Moses); Judges 5 (The Song of Deborah); 1 Samuel 2:1–10 (The Prayer of Hannah); Habakkuk 3; various psalms, e.g., Psalm 18 // 2 Samuel 22; Psalm 68. Alice Mandell, "Biblical Hebrew, Archaic," *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, ed. Geoffrey Khan (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1:324–29.

grew out of factors such as inner-biblical changes that were generally traceable according to the literary chronology, historically verified waves of contact with surrounding languages at known points in that chronology, and epigraphic evidence deciphered or discovered in the twentieth century. The three phases of Hebrew that became conventional in the latter half of that century—Archaic (ABH), Classical (CBH), and Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH)—are a helpful structure in analyzing a lexical unit's contribution to the dating of a text, at least in its final form. These are essentially contiguous with the generally recognized post-biblical phases of the language, Qumran Hebrew (QH),[96] Rabbinic or Mishnaic (RH), Medieval (MeH), and Modern (MH).

Not each of these phases can be examined in the final pages below. Yet, seeing as debate largely hinges around the archaic and late phases, and as the postbiblical phases of the language can yield insights for the circular development of semantics and for the interpretations of speakers closer in time and context than many present scholars are, examples from the archaic/classical and post-biblical stages are drawn up for further analysis below.

Archaic/Classical Biblical Hebrew

חֶסֶד

The noun חֶסֶד is the true workhorse of the positive moral behavior domains in biblical semantics. It is used in variegated senses including "loyalty," "faithfulness," "kindness," "love," "mercy," "graciousness," and "goodness,"[97] appearing some two hundred thirty times in the Bible. Notably, only a single use of any verb חסד "be loyal" can be found (Ps 18:26[25] // 2 Sam 22:26)—it must, then, be denominative. But חֶסֶד and חסד also appear with the negative sense "(bring) shame, disgrace" in a handful of instances in biblical and Second Temple literature (Lev 20:17; Prov 14:34; 25:10; Sir 14:2; 41:22; 1Q33 iii.6). This handful is of interest, because it mirrors the Aramaic verb חסד "curse, treat with dishonor, behave with dishonor," which was quite common, and its many derived nouns relating to shame, dishonor, reproach, and disgrace.[98]

---

[96] But see Shelomo Morag, "On Some Concepts in the World of Qumran: Polysemy and Semantic Development," in *Diggers at the Well: Proceedings of a Third International Symposium on the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Ben Sira*, eds. T. Muraoka and John F. Elwolde, STDJ 36 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 178–92.

[97] Cf. "II חֶסֶד," *HALOT*, 336; "חֶסֶד I," *DCH*, 3:277.

[98] See the entries following and including Stephen A. Kaufman, "ḤSD," *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*, accessed November 4, 2023, https://cal.huc.edu/.

Conversely, positive senses of חסדא, like "devotion, grace," as in the Hebraic concept, do not appear in Aramaic texts until the Targumim.[99] It seems, then, that חֶסֶד/חסדא was an ethno-linguistic isogloss between Hebrew and Aramaic until postbiblical times.

All major lexicographers list two separate roots and two homonyms called חֶסֶד in Hebrew. This seems to be a conservative safeguard, since the etymologies of these lexical items are all largely unknown. Some have relations in Arabic *ḥašada* "come together" (and thus "loyal") and/or Arabic *ḥasada* "envy (someone)" (and thus "shame").[100] Though these are not altogether satisfying, the dearth of cognate evidence and the striking absence of חסד as verb in biblical Hebrew could commend the homonymic assumption, as far as Hebrew is concerned. But a common Semitic root undergoing divergent semantic development in Hebrew and Aramaic remains likely, since the two terms always resided within the same domain of moral behavior.

There is also diachronic payoff to a closer look at the distribution of חֶסֶד "shame, disgrace" in the Bible. Wagner sees the occasions in Leviticus and Proverbs as loanwords in "relatively old passages."[101] Regarding Proverbs, its genre as Wisdom Literature decisively undermines the scholar's ability to date its text based on Aramaisms.[102] However, if it be allowed that Leviticus 20:17 (חֶסֶד הוּא וְנִכְרְתוּ לְעֵינֵי בְּנֵי עַמָּם) is pre-exilic, as recent scholars have argued the Holiness Code to be,[103] then it becomes another witness of an old Aramaism that fell out of use but was later reintroduced into Hebrew in such texts as Ben Sirah and the Dead Sea Scrolls. In such later uses as Jewish Aramaic,[104] for example, the meanings were apparently felt to relate to

---

[99] See the sources listed in the entries "ḥseḏ, ḥesdā;" "ḥsdn;" "ḥswd," *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*.

[100] So "II חֶסֶד," *HALOT*, 336.

[101] M. Wagner, *Die lexikalishen und grammatikalischen Aramaismeni m alttestamentlichen Hebräisch* (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1966), 93.

[102] חֶסֶד is absent from Qohelet, Song of Songs, and Lamentations, and only חֶסֶד "loyalty, etc." is found in Job and Psalms.

[103] *Pace* A. Hurvitz (*A Linguistic Study of the Relationship between the Priestly Source and the Book of Ezekiel* [Paris: Gabalda, 1982]).

[104] *Tg. Ps.-J.* 20.17 (ca. fourth c. CE) seems to have leveraged a midrash on Psalm 89:3[2], which read עוֹלָם יִבָּנֶה חֶסֶד to mean "the world will be built up through *ḥesed*." Thus, the Targum compared Leviticus's legal proscription of incest to the allowance God made for the first humans in Genesis 4. Thus, for the Targum's author, the two sense of חֶסֶד were simply the opposite sides of grace. Cf. Rashi's commentary in Michael Carasik, ed., *Leviticus: Introduction and Commentary*, trans. Michael Carasik, *The Commentators' Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2009), 161.

the same basic idea. חָסָד would be a case of isogloss and of Blau's so-called "synchronic polysemy."

סכל/שׂכל

Zarfati is correct to observe that there are two distinct roots in the Bible, שׂכל "be wise" (Ps 119:99) and סכל "be foolish" (Qoh 2:19).[105] The latter is related to the Akkadian *saklu(m)* "stupid" and metathesized once as a Hebrew verb כסל (Jer 10:8) but also in the deverbal noun כְּסִיל "fool" and others.[106] Conversely, שׂכל is used once to relate "folly" in Qohelet 1:17. Yet, the distinctness of the roots is confirmed in Ps 49:8: בִּינוּ בְעָרִים בָּעָם וּכְסִילִים מָתַי תַּשְׂכִּילוּ. The assonance of שׂכל for "getting wisdom" addressed to כְּסִילִים "Oh fools" rhetorically enhances the author's complaint by ironic contrast. The question must be, then, how the confusion around שׂכל is explained. Zarfati explains it by the antiquity of one text relative to the other:

> At the time of the first verse [Psalm 119:99], when there were three distinct phonemes שׂ, שׁ, ס – these two roots differed from each other in pronunciation. However, when, following the Aramaic, שׁ and ס merged into one phoneme, the two roots became homophonic, that is, they differ only in writing but not in pronunciation.[107]

According to Hendel and Joosten, the ס and שׁ pronunciations fell together among most dialects of Hebrew sometime between the eighth and third centuries BCE.[108] That means the spelling of שׂכל in Psalm 119 reflects a pronunciation, at least, that was common before the eighth century. Whereas the psalm is often considered linguistically late, שׂכל/סכל is one counterargument that should qualify the discussion.

בטח

The sometimes circularity of semantic development was called out earlier. Jeremiah 12:5 may contain an example that is also contronymic:

כִּי אֶת־רַגְלִים רַצְתָּה וַיַּלְאוּךָ וְאֵיךְ תְּתַחֲרֶה אֶת־הַסּוּסִים
וּבְאֶרֶץ שָׁלוֹם אַתָּה בוֹטֵחַ וְאֵיךְ תַּעֲשֶׂה בִּגְאוֹן הַיַּרְדֵּן׃

[105] Zarfati, "One Word or One Root," 50–51.

[106] "כסל," *HALOT*, 489.

[107] The quotation is the author's translation of Zarfati ("One Word or One Root," 50) from Hebrew.

[108] Hendel and Joosten, *How Old Is the Hebrew Bible?*, 14–16.

The verse contains two proverbs in parallel, each arguing from the lesser to the greater.[109] But if בטח were taken in its usual CBH meaning, "be confident, secure" (e.g., Judg 18:7), then the parallelism here would be inverted, and the verse would become rhetorically senseless. The prophet would not be safer in the jungle of the Jordan than in the land of peace, and besides, one would expect from the first line that the scenario illustrated will get worse in the second, not better. The best solution is found in Arabic *baṭaḥa* "fall (upon the face)," which interpreters have noticed since the tenth century pointing to a shared Semitic root *bṭḥ* "fall."[110] According to Blau, the root became contronymic in Hebrew through semantic development ("to fall" > "to lie" > "to lie in security, be secure;" cf. Ps 22:10–11[9–10]), but then the more original meaning became forgotten.[111] Jeremiah seems, then, to have resurrected an old meaning of בטח, which is found only twice among the Bible's nearly two hundred uses of the root. Perhaps this is because Jeremiah was citing an archaic proverb, even if modernized grammatically.[112]

Post-biblical Hebrew

מִצְוָה

Vergari traces the development of מִצְוָה from CBH through RH.[113] She notes that the noun—derived from the verb צוה "command, order"—underwent semantic shift from meaning "command" to meaning "duty, obligation." The shift can be discerned beginning in LBH historical-narrative texts (e.g., Neh 10:33[32]; 11:23), but being realized fullest in the halakhic-

---

[109] Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYBC 21A (New York & London: Anchor Yale Bible, 1999), 647.

[110] Ibid.; William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1986), 1:263.

[111] Blau, *Phonology and Morphology of Biblical Hebrew*, 29; but two separate roots are supposed by *HALOT* (cf. "II בטח," *HALOT*, 120).

[112] To the author's knowledge, this conclusion has not been reached by recent scholars. They generally see the poetic texts of Jeremiah as the prophet's compositions, interjected with later prose commentary. The *nota accusativi* את is almost totally absent from ABH texts, and it could be a modernization for Jeremiah's transitional Biblical Hebrew era; though, את is also reduced in the poetic genre overall, and so it is not decisive. It must also be noted that two uses of בטח "be confident, secure" are found in Deuteronomy 33:12, 28, a text widely held to be ABH. But this only indicates that in the period of composition, בטח could still have been effectively polysemous; it does not negate the possibility of בטח "fall" being current then also.

[113] Romina Vergari, "From Polysemy to Semantic Change: Remarks on the Lexeme *miṣwà* in Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew," *Quaderni di Linguistica e Studi Orientali* 7 (2021): 233–62.

rabbinic discourse tradition after biblical times (e.g., *m. Yebam.* 4.5, 12.6, *m. Yoma* 8.4, *m. ʾAvot* 2.1, *m.Suk.* 2.7, *m. Pes.* 3.7). Its development is prime example of what Vergari calls "converseness:" "a subclass of oppositeness implying a mirror-image relation between a pair of lexical items."[114] The opposites are essentially a difference in perspective, which are thus also called "relational opposites." In this case, a contronymic development begun late in biblical history is confirmed by the continued arc of Hebrew usage in rabbinic history.

שׁוב

Opposite uses of שׁוב are found in the Bible: used negatively "turn back (from the good), backslide" (e.g., Num 14:43) and positively "return (to the good), repent" (e.g., Hos 6:1). Their oppositeness is dependent on the direction of the subject in motion. The root itself does not reflect ambiguity; for, whether to the good or to the bad, the subject always "turns around." Backsliding/repentance are metaphorical extensions. However, Zarfati noticed that in the post-biblical period, the concrete meaning, "turn around," was abandoned (being replaced by the verb חזר), but the extended uses were retained in certain inflected, derived forms—a kind of semantic shift involving the restriction or specification of a general term. Zarfati writes, "In this way the meaning of שוב, which was neutral or even negative in the rebuke of the prophets (משובה ["backsliding"], שובב ["apostate"]), it became positive (תשובה ["repentance"]) in the teachings of our sages."[115] The root became contronymic through technical usage of its derivations.

קלס

A final example is the root קלס, found in the Bible exclusively with the meaning "mock" (2 Kgs 2:23; Ezek 16:31; Jer 20:8). The same usage is found in Ben Sirah 11:4: אל תהתל ואל תקלס במרירי יום.[116] However, by the early Middle Ages, קלס evinces the meaning "praise, extol, laud" such as in Leviticus Rabbah 30.3 and in the Sabbath Morning Prayer, ובמקהלות, that continues in

[114] Ibid., 250. Other types of antonymous relations include contradictory (symmetrically exclusive opposites), contrary (asymmetrical opposites), and reversive (directionally dynamic opposites); see M. Lynne Murphy, *Lexical Meaning*, Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 119–21.

[115] The quotation is the author's translation of Zarfati ("One Root or One Word," 52) from Hebrew.

[116] Martin Abegg, transcriber, "Manuscript A," The Book of Ben Sira, n.d., accessed November 4, 2023, https://bensira.org/navigator.php?Manuscript=A&PageNum=7.

disparate traditions today (*m. Pes.* 10.5).[117] The turn of phrase "לְעַלֵּה וּלְקַלֵּס" is commonplace in the siddurim without, Gordis notes, the question as to its meaning having ever being raised. He concludes, it must be an old meaning of the word.[118] However, it seems likely no older than the Hellenistic Period. For, קָאלוֹס, a transliteration of Greek καλῶς "excellent, beautiful," begins to emerge in the Talmud (*b. Shabbat* 108a.12), as does the apparently related noun קִילוֹס "praise:" כָּל־הַקִּילוּסִין שֶׁיִּשְׂרָאֵל מְקַלְּסִין לְהַקָּדוֹשׁ (*y. Shabbat* 16:1.7).[119] This seems to reflect the path of a semantic shift toward a contronymic polysemy "mock/praise" in post-biblical Hebrew only, which should warn against the scholar too quickly reading RH back into biblical Hebrew.

Conclusion

This paper has narrowed in on the little-discussed linguistic phenomenon of contronymy in the Hebrew language. Besides providing insights into the cognitive worldview of Hebrew speakers, contronymy can also be useful in the diachronic study of the Hebrew Bible and in the dating of texts and in the lexicographic and etymological interests of Hebrew speakers today.

In the preceding sections, contronymy was first explained in a broader linguistics context. The mechanics of semantics, the differences between homonymy and polysemy, and the uses of contronymy were laid as a foundation. Second, contronymy was searched out from among other Semitic languages. Some phenomena were found parallel to Hebrew in Arabic, Akkadian, and Aramaic, and methodological concerns were furthered along by observance of historical errors. Then, before turning to specific examples in the periodization of Hebrew texts, steps toward a methodology were suggested, regarding terms to be defined and pitfalls to be avoided. Finally, six examples were adduced, demonstrating the fact that contronymy can give Hebraists a distinct item for the tracing of semantic development and the mapping of inter-linguistic relationships.

Many other cases could be called up for analysis. Many have been called up by the few scholars who are both interested in this subject and skilled in other Semitic languages. One benefit from the paper at hand is its collection and synthesis of scholarly and source material. But beyond that it is hoped that the paper will be helpful in the researcher's own future

---

[117] Zarfati, "One Root or One Word," 56.

[118] Gordis, "Studies in Hebrew Roots," 54–55.

[119] Zarfati, "One Word or One Root," 56–57; "לקלס – שבח וגנאי במקום אחד?," Academy of the Hebrew Language, accessed November 4, 2023, https://hebrew-academy.org.il/2022/11/01/לקלס-שבח-וגנאי-במקום-אחד/#_ftn2.

diachronic analysis, and to prepare others for more circumspect contributions to the field as well—not the opposite.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Commentaries

Briggs, Charles A. and Emilie Grace Briggs. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*. International Critical Commentary. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1906–1907.

Carasik, Michael, ed. *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, translated and annotated by Michael Carasik, *The Commentator's Bible: The Rubin JPS Miqra'ot Gedolot*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2015.

———. *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, translated and annotated by Michael Carasik. *The Commentators' Bible: The Rubin JPS Miqra'ot Gedolot*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2018.

———. *Leviticus: Introduction and Commentary*, translated and annotated by Michael Carasik, *The Commentators' Bible*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2009.

Dahood, Mitchell. *Psalms 1–50: Introduction, Translation and Notes*. Anchor Yale Bible Series 16. New York: Doubleday, 1965.

DeClaissé-Walford, Nancy, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth Tanner. *The Book of Psalms*. New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2014.

Lundbom, Jack R. *Jeremiah 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Yale Bible Commentary 21A. New York & London: Anchor Yale Bible, 1999.

McKane, William. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*. International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1986.

Concordances, Dictionaries, and Encyclopedias

Brown, Keith, and Jim Miller. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Campbell, Lyle and Mauricio J. Mixco. *A Glossary of Historical Linguistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

Encyclopaedia Judaica Jerusalem. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. 16 vols. Jerusalem: Keter, 1972.

Trask, R. L. *The Dictionary of Historical and Comparative Linguistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000.

Matthews, P. H., ed. *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

VanGemeren, Willem. *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.

Grammars

Huehnergard, John. *A Grammar of Akkadian*. 3rd ed. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011.

Lexicons

Brown, Francis, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs. *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.

Clines, David J. A., ed. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press; Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993–2011.

De Blois, Reinier and Enio R. Mueller, eds. "Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew." United Bible Societies. Accessed November 1, 2023, https://semanticdictionary.org/semdic.php?databaseType=SDBH.

Del Olmo Lete, Gregorio and Joaquín Sanmartín. *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition*. 3rd revised edition. Translated and edited by Wilfred G. E. Watson. HdO 112. Leiden: Brill, 2015.

Gelb, Ignace J., Benno Landsberger, A. Leo Oppenheim, Erica Reiner, A. Leo Oppenheim, Martha Tobi Roth, et al., eds. *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*. 21 vols. Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1956–2011.

Huehnergard, John. *Ugaritic Vocabulary in Syllabic Transcription*. HSS 32. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987.

Kaufman, Stephen A., et al. *The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*. Accessed Nobember 4, 2023, https://cal.huc.edu.

Kimchi, David. *Sefer HaShorashim* [Hebrew]. Edited by Jo. H. R. Biesenthal and F. Lebrecht. Reprint, Berlin: Bethge, 1847. / קמחי, דוד. ספר השרשים.

Klein, Ernest. Edited by Baruch Sarel. *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English*. Jerusalem; Haifa: Carta; University of Haifa, 1987.

Koehler, Ludwig, Walter Baumgartner, M. E. J. Richardson, and Johann Jakob Stamm. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. 5 vols. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000.

Takács, Gábor. *Etymological Dictionary of Egyptian*. 3 vols. HdO 48/1–3. Leiden: Brill, 1999–2007.

The Academy of the Hebrew Language. “The Historical Dictionary for the Hebrew Language” [Hebrew]. Ma’agarim. October 23, 2023. Accessed November 1, 2023, https://maagarim.hebrew-academy.org.il/Pages/PMain.aspx. / האקדמיה ללשון העברית. המפעל המילון ההיסטורי ללשון העברית. 23 אוקטובר 2023. גישה 1 נובמבר 2023.

Journals, Essays, and Articles

Abel, Carl. “Über den Gegensinn der Urworte.” In *Sprachwissenschaftliche Abhandlungen*, edited by Georg Curtius, 311–67. Leipzig: Verlag Wilhelm Friedrich, 1885.

Abu-Baker, H. R. “Contronyms (Opposites) in Ancient Egyptian Language” [Arabic]. *Journal of the General Union of Arab Archaeologists* 23, no. 1 (2022): 331–45. / هبة رجب أبو بكر. الأضداد في اللغة المصرية القديمة. مجلة الاتحاد العام للآثاريين العرب المجلد ٢٣ العدد ٢٠٢٢م.

Bettini, Lidia. “Ḍidd.” *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, edited by Lutz Edzard, et al., 1:626–29. Leiden: Brill, 2009.

Cohen, Chaim. “Diachrony in Biblical Hebrew Lexicography and Its Ramifications for Textual Analysis.” In *Diachrony in Biblical Hebrew*, eds. Cynthia Miller-Naudé and Ziony Zevit, 361–75. *LSAWS* 8. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012.

———. “Jewish Medieval Commentary on the Book of Genesis and Modern Biblical Philology. Part I: Gen 1–18.” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 81, no. 1/2 (1990): 1–11.

———. “New Directions in Modern Biblical Hebrew Lexicography.” In *Birkat Shalom: Studies in the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Literature, and Postbiblical Judaism Presented to Shalom M. Paul on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, edited by Chaim Cohen, et al., 1:441–73. Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 2008.

Cotterell, Peter. “Linguistics, Meaning, Semantics, and Discourse Analysis.” In *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemeren, 1:134–60. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.

Dean, Richard. “Aramaisms: Not What They Used to Be.” *Journal for Semitics* 25, no. 2 (2016): 1080–1103.

Dihl, Haim. “A Re-examination of Homonymic and Polysemic Roots.” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 24 (2021): 46–55.

Driver, G. R. “Hebrew Poetic Diction.” In *Congress Volume Copenhagen 1953*, edited by G. W. Anderson, et al., 26–39. VTSup 1. Leiden: Brill, 1953.

Eskhult, Mats. “The Importance of Loanwords for the Dating of Biblical Hebrew Texts.” In *Biblical Hebrew: Studies in Chronology and Typology*, edited by Ian Young, 8–23. JSOT Sup 369. London: T&T Clark, 2003.

Fitzmyer, Joseph A., S.J. “The Phases of the Aramaic Language.” In *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays*, 57–84. SBLMS 25. Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979.

Gordis, Robert. “Studies in Hebrew Roots of Contrasted Meanings.” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 27, no. 1 (July 1936): 33–58.

Huehnergard, John. “Afro-Asiatic.” In *The Ancient Languages of Syria-Palestine and Arabia*, ed. Roger D. Woodard, 225–46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Hurvitz, Avi. “Hebrew and Aramaic in the Biblical Period: The Problem of ‘Aramaisms’ in Linguistic Research on the Hebrew Bible.” In *Biblical Hebrew: Studies in Chronology and Typology*, ed. Ian Young, 24–37. JSOT Sup 369. London: T&T Clark, 2003.

Kopf, Lothar. “Das Arabische Wörterbuch Als Hilfsmittel Für Die Hebräische Lexikographie.” *VT* 6 (1956): 286–302.

Karaman, Brucu I. “On Contronymy.” *International Journal of Lexicography* 21, no. 2 (2008): 173–92.

Mangum, Douglas T. “Euphemism in Biblical Hebrew and the Euphemistic ‘Bless’ in the Septuagint of Job.” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 4 (2020): 1–7.

Mandell, Alice. “Biblical Hebrew, Archaic.” *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, edited by Geoffrey Khan, et al., 1:325–29. Leiden: Brill, 2013.

Mishor, Mordechay. “On the Language and Text of Exodus 18.” In *Biblical Hebrew in Its Northwest Semitic Setting: Typological and Historical Perspectives*, eds. Steven E. Fassberg and Avi Hurvitz, 225–30. Jerusalem; Winona Lake, IN: Hebrew University Magnes Press; Eisenbrauns, 2006.

Morag, Shelomo. “On Some Concepts in the World of Qumran: Polysemy and Semantic Development.” In *Diggers at the Well: Proceedings of a Third International Symposium on the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Ben Sira*, edited by T. Muraoka and John F. Elwolde, 178–92. STDJ 36. Leiden: Brill, 2000.

Noegel, Scott B. “Euphemism in the Hebrew Bible.” In *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, edited by Geoffrey Khan, et al., 1:869–71. Leiden: Brill, 2013.

———. “Paronomasia.” *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, edited by Geoffrey Khan, 3:24–29. Leiden: Brill, 2013.

———. “Polysemy.” *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, edited by Geoffrey Khan, 3:178–86. Leiden: Brill, 2013.

Nöldeke, Theodore. “Wörter mit Gegensinn (Aḍdād).” In *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft*, 67–108. 1910. Reprint, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019.

Notarius, Tania. “Lexical Isoglosses of Archaic Hebrew: פְּלִילִים (Deut 32:31) and כֵּן (Judg 5:15) as Case Studies.” *Hebrew Studies* 58 (2017): 81–98

Paul, Shalom M. “Signs of Late Biblical Hebrew in Isaiah 40–66.” In *Diachrony in Biblical Hebrew*, edited by Cynthia Miller-Naudé and Ziony Zevit, 293–99. *LSAWS* 8. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012.

Schneider, Thomas. “Contextualizing the Tale of the Herdsman.” In *Egyptian Stories: A British Egyptological Tribute to Alan B. Lloyd on the Occasion of His Retirement*, edited by Thomas Schneider and Kasia Szpakowska, 309–18. AOAT 347. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2007.

Vergari, Romina. “From Polysemy to Semantic Change: Remarks on the Lexeme *miṣwà* in Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew.” *Quaderni di Linguistica e Studi Orientali* 7 (2021): 233–62.

Zarfati, Gad Ben-Ami. “One Root or One Word for a Thing and for Its Opposite.” In *“As My People Say:” Studies in the Hebrew Language*, 48–63. Collections and Introductions 1. Jerusalem: Academy for the Hebrew Language, 1997. / צרפתי, גד בן-עמי. ״שורש אחד או מילה אחד לדבר ולהיפוכו״, ב״כלשון עמי״: עיונים בלשון העברית, 48–63. אסופות ומבואות בלשון א .ירושלים: האקדמיה ללשון העברית, התשנ״ז.

Zeidel, Moshe. *Hikrei Lashon*. Jerusalem, 1953. / זיידל, משה. חקרי לשון .ירושלים: תרצ״ב.

“לקלס – שבח וגנאי במקום אחד?” Academy of the Hebrew Language. Accessed November 4, 2023, https://hebrew-academy.org.il/2022/11/01/לקלס-שבח-וגנאי-במקום-אחד/#_ftn2.

Monographs

Blau, Joshua. *Phonology and Morphology of Biblical Hebrew: An Introduction*. *LSAWS* 2. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010.

Ellenbogen, M. *Foreign Words in the Old Testament: Their Origin and Etymology*. London: Luzac & Co., 1962.

Evans, Vyvyan, and Melanie Green. *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.

Guillaume, Alfred. *Hebrew and Arabic Lexicography: A Comparative Study*. 1959–1965. Reprint, Leiden: Brill, 1965.

Kaltner, John. *The Use of Arabic in Biblical Hebrew Lexicography*. CBQ Monograph Series 28. Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1996.

Kutscher, E. Y. *A History of the Hebrew Language*. Edited by Raphael Kutscher. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982.

Landau, E. *Gegensinnige Wörter im Hebräischen*. Berlin: S. Calvary, 1896.

Lesau, Wolf. *Ethiopic and South Arabic Contributions to the Hebrew Lexicon*. University of California Publications in Semitic Philology 20. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958.

Murphy, M. Lynne. *Lexical Meaning*. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Noegel, Scott B. *"Wordplay" in Ancient Near Eastern Texts*. Ancient Near Eastern Monographs 26. Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2021.

Robertson, D. A. *Linguistic Evidence in Dating Early Hebrew Poetry*. SBLDS 3. Missoula, MT: SBL, 1972.

Schreiner, Thomas. *Language Contact in Ancient Egypt*. Einführungen und Quellentexte zur Ägyptologie 16. Berlin: Lit, 2023.

Taylor, John R. *Linguistic Categorization*. 3rd ed. Oxford Textbooks in Linguistics. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Wagner, M. *Die lexikalishen und grammatikalischen Aramaismeni m alttestamentlichen Hebräisch*. Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1966.

Ancient Texts

"The Šamaš Hymn." *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*. Edited by W. G. Lambert, 122–38. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960.

"RIME 4.03.06.Add21 (Laws of Hammurapi) Composite Artifact Entry." Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI). May 24, 2014. Accessed November 4, 2023, https://cdli.ucla.edu/P464358.

Abegg, Martin, transcriber. "Manuscript A." The Book of Ben Sira, n.d., accessed November 4, 2023, https://bensira.org/navigator.php?Manuscript=A&PageNum=7.