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.
2.2. 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.”

Exod 2:1

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.

Exod 20:17

REB: Do not covet your neighbour’s household: 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 (oικία).

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

KJV: For the LORD shall judge his people, and repent himself for his servants, when he seeth that their power is gone, and neither bond nor free remaining.

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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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)”

In Isaiah, 57:8 יָד is used as metonymic euphemism in the sense of “penis” or “genitals.”

Isa 57:8: "thou lovedst their bed where thou sawest it.

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.

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, 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, and is rendered accordingly in most translations.

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,” a sense that it did not have before. 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 (ָֽוֹן) is too great to endure!”

Gen 4:13: "וַיֹּאמֶר קַ֖יִן אֶל־יְהוָ֑ה גָּד֥וֹל ֲוֹנִ֖י מִנְּשֹֽׂא׃

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

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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 (σπέρμα) 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, σπερμοὶ Od.; φλογός Pind.; κακῶν Dem. II. seed, offspring, issue, Trag., etc. 2. race, origin, descent, Ib.”
How should ﬀ 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 ﬀ 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 German16 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

שִׁים שָׁנָ֔ה וְאַרְבַּ֥ע מֵא֖וֹת שָׁנָֽה׃

וּמוֹשַׁ֛ב בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵ֖ל אֲשֶׁ֥ר יָשְׁב֖וּ בְּמִצְרָ֑יִם שְׁ

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 γῆ …

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

The basic senses of the word ﬀ are listed as “seat, assembly, dwelling place, dweller” (BDB,19 TWOT20). 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, ﬀ 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 ﬀ. 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 ﬀ (fem. of ﬀ) is “injustice, unrighteousness, wrong” (BDB), “badness, malice, injustice” (HALOT22) or “perversity, wickedness” (NIDOTTE23), but by metonymy ﬀ 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

הְגֶֽה׃כִּ֤י כַפֵּיכֶם נְגֹאֲל֣וּ בַדָּ֔ם וְאֶצְבְּעוֹתֵיכֶ֖ם בֶּֽﬠָוֹ֑ון שִׂפְתֽוֹתֵיכֶ֙ דִּבְּרוּ־שֶׁ֔קֶר לְשׁוֹנְכֶ֖ם ﬠַוְלָ֥ה תֶ

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 ἄδικαν ἀλεθείαν.

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

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16 Most German translations have “Strafe” (punishment), but EÜ rendered “Schuld” (guilt).
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.”
In order to make good sense of the phrase לְשׁוֹנְכֶ֖ם ﬠַוְלָ֥ה תֶהְגֶּֽה in Isaiah 59:3, the verb תֶהְגֶּֽה should be taken to mean “utters” or “speaks” 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.

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). 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.

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.

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

Prov 24:2: כִּי־שֹׁ֖ד יֶהְגֶּ֣ה לִבָּ֑ם וְ֝ﬠָמָ֗ל שִׂפְתֵיהֶ֥ם תְּדַבֵּֽרְנָה׃
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 (נְּצֹ֣ר) how to answer.”

Prov 15:28: לֵ֣ב צַדִּיק יֶהְגֶּ֣ה לַﬠֲנ֑וֹת וּפִ֥י רְ֝שָׁﬠִ֗ים יַבִּ֥יﬠַ רָﬠֽוֹת׃
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 הָגָה 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: זהל 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 μελετῶντα (= μελετῶν) 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. 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.

Ps 1:6

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 γνώσκει κύριος κόροις οὖν δικαίων, καὶ οὖν ἀσεβῶν ὑπάλληλοι.

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 ידַע, e.g. in HALOT and NIDOTTE. The semantic range of the corresponding word in Greek γνῶσκω is not as broad as ידַע, and covers just the primary meaning, but it does not carry the sense of “caring for.”

In Job 39:28 the verb לין “to spend the night” is used in a wider sense than its primary meaning of “lodging somewhere for the night” due to semantic shift in polysemous lexical items. Here it is more likely that לין 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

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 כי ייץ creates a special effect by playing on a word’s multiple meanings (polysemy).

Prov 30:33

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 ἐσται 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 ייץ in this verse (e.g. RSV, ESV, NIV, NET, REB), even though the semantic range of “pressing” is not as wide as in ייץ. Some translations (e.g. NIV, NLT, CEV), however, render ייץ more

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 ייץ (lín): 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); (hitpālal) hold back overnight, leave overnight (Lev 19:13; Dt 21:23), note: hif form is derived from context, oth as qal; (hitpālal) 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]); (hitpālal) 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); (hitpālal) 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.”
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) בָּרַ is treated as a polysem, 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 ThWQ36), however, בָּרַ has two separate entries in which “kneel” occurs under one entry and “bless, praise” is listed under another entry. That means, בָּרַ is interpreted as a polysem in BDB and as two homonyms in HALOT.

The assumption that Hebrew roots tend to be somehow related has sometimes led us to unreasonable connections and conclusions. Thus Strong’s dictionary reads: “בָּרַ 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 מָוֶת אֱהִי דְּבָרֶי

NASB: O Death, where are your thorns?

NRSV: O Death, where are your plagues?

The word מָוֶת may be understood as bubonic plague or as thorn. In BDB, (C)DCH40 and Gesenius41 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

36 בָּרַ 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.


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


41 מָוֶת m. pl. מְיוֹן, prop. destruction, death, like the Arab. מָוֶת (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). 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

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): ἵστασιν τῆς ζωῆς ἐμῆς ἐγένετο 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 SDBH44 include this homonym in their dictionaries.

Jer 12:5b

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 בּוֹקֵק 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, בּוֹקֵק יִשְׂרָאֵל פְּרִי יְשַׁוֶּה־לּוֹ … פְּרִי יְשַׁוֶּה," LXX. ἀμπελος εὐκληματοῦσα: Vulg. *frondosa*.

Hos 10:1

NRSV: Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit….  
LXX: Αμπελος εὐκληματοῦσα Ἰσραήλ …  
NETS: Israel is a well growing vine …46

Dearman (2010:260–261) also interprets בּוֹקֵק 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 בּוֹקֵק as translated by the LXX. The term’s basic meaning is “to pour out” or “to be empty.”

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43 זִמְרָה f. singing, or music.


45 LXX translates זִמְרָה in the sense of “trust” without assuming a homonym.

46 LEH LXX Lexicon (Lust, Eynikel and Hauspie 1992) interprets εὐκληματός 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 בָּקַק is polysemous and understands its two senses as “ironic and reflective”:

> On the assumption that his audience knew both meanings of בָּקַק …, 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 בָּקַק “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 בָּקַק ‘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 בָּקַק under two homonyms: בָּקַק “lay waste” and בָּקַק “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 בָּקַק “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) Reimier de Blois writes: “There is a growing consensus on a root בָּקַק 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 בָּקַק or whether the word should just be interpreted as another polysem with an extended meaning that is due to symbolic language use.

2Sam 5:1

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

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, בָּקַק: be luxuriant, to proliferate Hos 10:1.”
49 The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew 1:14 (Clines 2011).
50 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 Ἰσραήλ 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 שֵׁבֶט 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 שֵׁבֶּט 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  הָסֵ֤ר מְשׂוּכָּתוֹ֙ וְהָיָ֣ה לְבָﬠֵ֔ר

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 בָּﬠַר: (same root ?)” – although with some uncertainty – with various senses (polysemes), one of which is “to graze.” NIDOTTE too includes the sense of “graze” with בָּﬠַר (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 polysymous 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 הָסֵ֤ר, 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 הָסֵ֥ר I reveal and הָסֵר 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 polysymous 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 שֵׁבֶּט 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).
References


