Abstract:

This paper discusses the interrelation between the question of root and lexeme, the question of polysemy and homonymy, and the perception of diachronic change in meaning, as applied to ancient Hebrew.

Address of the author:
Prof. J. Barr, The Divinity School, Vanderbilt University, Nashville TN 37240, U.S.A.

Response to J. Barr

Takamitsu Muraoka (Leiden)

It gives me a great pleasure to respond to a paper by a scholar whose works over the past three decades or so in the field of Biblical and Hebrew philology I have always found most original and stimulating. Prof. Barr is not merely a theoretician; besides a number of important methodological and detailed studies on select Hebrew (and other Semitic) lexemes, he was, for a number of years, in charge of the Oxford Hebrew Lexicon project.[1]

As you will no doubt agree with me, I believe that Prof. Barr has addressed some of the fundamental issues which every Hebrew lexicographer is bound to face and resolve in one way or another. As usual, the way he analyses and approaches issues contains much that is original, and the paper makes some important points which we all ought to take due note of.

I shall address the three issues raised by Prof. Barr in the same sequence as he himself has discussed them.

(1) Root and lexeme

This question concerning the mode of arrangement and presentation of Hebrew lexicographical data raises at once theoretical and practical questions. Having presented and weighed pros and cons of a root-based approach and a lexeme-based approach, Barr comes down on the side of a root-based approach. Here I agree with him. As an argument for the root-based approach one might add that it occasionally makes for transparency of lexicographical description. A meaning of a Piel verb with factitive force or a denominative verb may be defined as, for

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[1] A recent publication of his, "Hebrew lexicography: informal thoughts," in W.A. Bodine (ed.), Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew (Winona Lake, 1992), pp. 137-51, is based on this personal experience.

instance, *kibbēd* Pi. "to make *kābēd*" or *kihēn* Pi. "to serve as *kōhēn*". This approach is applicable to other parts of speech, too: *kᵉhunnāh* "office of *kōhēn*" or *mizbēaḥ* "a built structure where *zābaḥ* is placed and offered to a divine being or beings". Actually a type of compromise slightly different from the one mentioned by Barr might retain the advantages of the two modes of arrangement, namely all derivative lexemes whose roots can be considered to be reasonably certain could be brought together under the roots in question, while they could also be listed alphabetically as lexemes with cross reference to their roots, as happens occasionally in BDB.

Then Barr makes an important distinction between formally defined roots and semantically defined roots, adding that the former are not necessarily significant or relevant for semantic study.[2] This observation is certainly valid in the case of homonymic roots. I for one have some reservations about the value of seeking to establish "root meaning" in the first place. It is one thing to search for and list lexemes of an etymologically related root as cognates, but it is quite another then to consider and establish the meaning of the Hebrew root concerned. Apart from the danger of what Barr, in his *Semantics of Biblical Language*, called "root fallacy", such an undertaking has sometimes resulted in pronouncements of dubious or, at best, speculative or romantic anthropology, ethnology, sociology, psychology or theology. In addition to the meaning of the root *d-b-r* given in KBL[3] as *summen* as quoted by Barr, we might note that GesB state that this is a highly developed root whose basic meaning may be recognized in Arabic *d-b-r* (*sic*, without vowels) *hinten sein* and Aramaic *d-b-r* (*ditto*) *vorwärts treiben*. Another recent writer who derives Heb. *zākar* "to remember" and *zākār* "male" from one and the same root avers that "the concept of memory and masculinity share the salient characteristic of *active nature, virility*."[3] This is as original and amusing an explanation as the one mentioned by GesB, who connect "to thrust" as the dominant characteristic of male to the act of remembering as that of fixing in memory. Another added difficulty is: why should we consider root meaning in terms of verb? Is the verb the primary part of speech? Isn't a root the common denominator shared by all lexemes brought under it? As such it is above the parts of speech, and its meaning, if there be such, cannot be described as that of a certain verb, noun, or whatever part of speech. I wonder whether in most cases one should not be content with the knowledge that a group of lexemes sharing an identical sequence of consonants (or, following Barr, consonants and vowels in certain cases) also share a certain semantic content. Or am I being a shade too pedantic or overcautious? I take it that Barr himself is not committed to the idea that roots have their own meaning. The problem he raises regarding the Heb. word *gᵉbûl* might be mentioned in this context. The difficulty of defining the meaning of the root is perhaps rooted in the fact that the principal lexeme of the root is a noun, and therefore we are not able to express the meaning of the root as

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[2] I have pointed out elsewhere that, in a language such as Greek in which roots are less transparent, mapping of lexemes according to semantic fields is more important and meaningful for lexical studies than working on derivational grounds: T. Muraoka, A Greek-Egnlish Lexicon of the Septuagint (Twelve Prophets) (Leuven, 1993), p. XI, n. 17.

[3] A. Murtonen, Hebrew in its West Semitic Setting. A Comparative Survey of Non-Massoretic Hebrew Dialects and Traditions. Part One: A Comparative Lexicon. Sections Bb, C, D and E (Leiden/New York/Copenhagen/Köln, 1989), p. 165.

that of a verb. But one cannot fail to notice its obvious connection with Arab. *jabal*; a mountain range often marks a boundary. This link is semantically significant, and if the planned database is to accord some importance to the factor of root, the fact ought to be recorded, although it does not necessarily follow that every *gᵉbûl* mentioned in Classical Heb. has to do with a mountain.

Barr is certainly right in saying that, unlike such active and productive roots as *y-š-b* and *g-b-r*, the root *l-ʾ-k* was hardly functional in Heb. Nonetheless, it does make some sense to make the user of the database aware that the Heb. word *malʾāk* belongs to the genuine Semitic lexical stock, and is not a loan-word such as *mālṣar*, originating outside the Semitic language family, and this can be usefully done by listing lexemes sharing this root and having to do with "sending" from a range of cognate languages, although it is obviously impossible to state with confidence what the root of this Heb. word and *mᵉlākāh* could possibly have meant in Classical Heb. The latter, in some remote past, may have initially meant something like "a mission, assignment". Where to place these Heb. lexemes in the database is a merely technical and practical question.

By adopting the root-based approach one would no doubt come up from time to time against tricky cases, as can be illustrated by the root *d-b-r* mentioned earlier. The root meaning "to buzz" (KBL³, already mentioned in GesB s.v. *dbr*) thought to be shared by *dibber/dābār* and *dᵉbôrāh*, might not seem to be a totally far-fetched reconstruction, for human speech and the buzzing noise of bees do have something in common. Against this, however, one must point out, firstly that in the Biblical literature (and Sir 11:4) the creature is noted for two things, namely the honey it produces and its sting, and secondly that the Heb. words *dibber/dābār* are unique, other cognate languages using totally different roots for words indicating human speech, whilst significantly Syr. has *debborā* and Arab. *dabbūra* for "bees". Despite these and other difficulties, however, I believe that the database under discussion ought to allot space for the question of root, etymology, and comparative perspective.

(2) Polysemy and homonymy

Let us begin by reminding ourselves that in general linguistics one distinguishes two kinds of homonymy, grammatical and lexical. Some languages such as French are notoriously rich in the former with an enormous number, or rather the majority, of words having two or more phonetically identical inflected forms which mark different grammatical categories such as sg. vs. pl., 1st pers. vs. 2nd pers. Hebrew is no exception in this regard, though the phenomenon is far less marked than is the case in French. Many sg. nouns lacking the explicitly fem. ending *-ah* on the one hand and pl. nouns with the ending *-ôt* on the other, taken on their own, make no distinction between their status abs. form and st. cst. form. The analogy of the cst. *malkat* might be taken to suggest that *mäläk* in the st. cst. actually means something different from the same word in the st. abs. Be that as it may, there is no doubt about a type such as /*miqnēnu*/, which can be construed as either sg. or pl. Moreover, there would be countless pairs in which a form of a given lexeme accidentally turns out to be identical with a form of another lexeme: e.g. *ṣûrî*, which can be glossed as "my rock" or "my fashioning" or "my showing hostility".

Lexical homonymy is perhaps better known. Examples are *bar* meaning "son" or "corn" or "pure"; *ṣārāh* "adversity" or "rival wife". More examples can be produced if one disregards orthographic differences: *bārāʾ* "to create" vs. *bārāh* "to eat"; *môrāʾ* "fear" vs. *môrāh* "razor" and so on.

Barr's discussion of homonymy is about a third kind peculiar to Semitic languages, namely root homonymy. In a lexeme-based database one would find three separate entries of *bar* and two of *ṣārāh* respectively one after the other. In a root-based database, however, two of the three entries for *bar* would be found quite a few pages apart from the third.

These three types of homonymy are interrelated to a certain extent. This is especially true of the last two, lexical homonymy and root homonymy, as in the case of the three homonyms of *bar*.

Among the factors causing root homonymy Barr mentions phoneme merger. By its very nature this is a diachronic dimension. Precisely for that reason it raises a problem or two. The question is in what ways and to what extent diachrony is to be allowed to play a role. Suppose the homonymic roots *ʿ-n-h* "to answer" and *ʿ-n-h* II "to sing" have resulted from the merger of two distinct Proto-Semitic phonemes /ʿ/ and /ġ/. If we allow for the possibility that at an early stage in its history Hebrew still possessed these two phonemes, does *ʿ-n-h* II cease to be homonymic up to that period, whenever it may have been? Or do we take as our starting point the final product of the entire Old Testament canon (if the database confines itself to Biblical Hebrew)? If this last should be our kind of synchrony, we might have to take seriously the possibility that readers of this late corpus recognised in the two a single root as in GesB's alternative: "antworten, einen Gegengesang anstimmen". In other words, diachronically based scientific etymology might at times have to give way to synchrony which in this case some might be tempted to regard as nothing better than folk etymology, just as in the case of the pair *ʾîš*/*ʾiššāh* in the creation story. Surely folk etymology embedded in our corpus itself ought to be valued as a reflection of how the language functioned rather than dismissed as un- or pre-scientific? Equally tempting would be the pair *ḥ-r-b* I as in *ḥārāb* "sword" (Arab. /ḥarb/ "war" and /ḥarba/ "spear") as against *ḥ-r-b* II as in *hāhᵃrîb*, "to bring about destruction and desolation" (Arab. /ḥariba/ "to be in ruins"). A good example from English is the pair "ear" I as an organ of the body and "ear" II as in "the ear of the corn." Historically the two nouns can be traced back to two distinct Middle English words; but some modern English speakers might see them as two different meanings of one word.

The second cause of root homonymy mentioned by Barr, polysemy leading to eventual loss of connection and thus to homonymy, must remain a theoretical possibility, though most likely to have been a productive cause of homonymy. By its nature it is practically impossible to demonstrate and prove. The best one can resort to is informed speculation. Regarding one example mentioned by Barr, *bāśār* "meat" *biśśar* "to bring good news", a recent writer has this to say: "we may confidently date the origin of this single root to prehistoric times of hunter-gathering communities, when the return of the hunting party to the encampment

with game was undoubtedly good news".[4] Even if one granted the writer the benefit of the doubt, one wonders if such an explanation is relevant and meaningful for a synchronic – synchronic taken even in its rather broad sense – description of Hebrew as used in the ancient Israelite society which must have been rather removed from the classic hunter-gatherer society. This is not to speak of the fact that in none of the 23 passages where the verb is used in the OT and the six where the noun *bᵉśôrāh* is used was the occasion for joy some game brought home by a hunter. The only exception is 2Kg 7:9 where the noun is used of four lepers who, during a famine, feasted themselves on what had been left behind by Aramaeans put to flight by a divine intervention.

Agreeing with Barr that polysemy was probably an important cause of homonymy, I might nonetheless add that lexical polysemy rather than root polysemy is easier to grasp and more likely to have actually caused homonymy. I would have thought that the meaning of a root is mostly not polysemous. This sort of homonymy is more likely to have occurred at lexeme level rather than at root level.

Barr suggests that the loss of one meaning of a polysemous lexeme could lead to eventual blurring of semantic connection between the remaining meanings of the lexeme in question. Such blurring could also occur where one meaning of a given lexeme is quite different from another. Is it really outrageous to suggest that *dābār* "word, speech" and *dābār* "matter" are nearly homonymous? Most languages I know gloss the word with two different lexemes. Hence the use of λόγος in the LXX as equivalent of *dābār* "matter" is often cited as an example of a Semitism. The use of the upper case **A** and **B** as two main subdivisions of the senses of *pāqad* Qal in BDB is indicative of such uneasiness and uncertainty: **A** "to attend to, visit, etc." vs. **B** "to appoint." GesB unify the two by interpreting **B** as "Aufsicht und Sorge übergeben," but it had to make the verb causative, when Hif. *hipqîd* means exactly the same thing. This apparent lack of coherence between several meanings of a given lexeme may also be caused by ellipsis: *hēšîb* "to answer" (Job 13:22 +) would be a case in point, whilst the full phrase elsewhere *hēšîb dābār* enables us to establish a link between this meaning of the verb and its main meaning. The same is true of the occasional omission of *bᵉrît* from the collocation *kārat bᵉrît*. Another possible source for innovative homonymic development is a highly specialised sense or nuance a given lexeme could develop in connection with some significant or spectacular event or incident. When the corpus is limited, however, as is in our case, such innovations cannot always be traced back to their origin and explained.

On the other two causes discussed by Barr as leading to homonymy, I have little to add except to say that under influence of foreign words I would like to mention the phenomenon of semantic calques. The word *massāh*, for instance, as used in ModHeb in the sense of short piece of literary writing, is presumably under the influence of Engl. "essay" with its now obsolete meaning of "to try, attempt." Likewise *šappaᶜat* "flu" due to *hišpîaᶜ* "to influence".

I agree with Barr's concluding observation: "there is no absolute distinction between polysemy of one item and recognition of several homonyms". Even though the general understanding is that homonymy and polysemy are two diametrically

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4 Murtonen, op. cit., p. 123.

opposed phenomena, the line between them can become rather thin, and indeed, it cannot be otherwise, if one can cause the other. This is because, as Bloomfield rightly points out, "the degree of nearness of the meaning is not subject to precise measurement".[5] Related to this is the question when one meaning of a given lexeme becomes separate from another meaning of the same lexeme. BDB as well as KBL[3] list four principal meanings of the word *dābār*, whilst GesB have only two. Such examples can be multiplied considerably.

(3) Diachronic aspects

I suppose everyone would go along with Barr's insistence on the need to distinguish "comparative" from "diachronic". He is certainly right in saying that, where one is talking about a common word (such as, say, *ʾēm*), there is not much to be gained by listing a whole range of Semitic languages all of which share the same root with the same meaning. In such a case it is enough to mark the lexeme as common Semitic, much in the same way as Brockelmann, in his Syriac lexicon, uses the symbol "AR" for "common Aramaic".

Regarding truly diachronic semantic investigation of Biblical Hebrew, I can well appreciate the need to replace the crude binary division of Early BH and Late BH by a tripartite division of Archaic, Classical and Late BH, just as the late E.Y. Kutscher proposed with his Archaic, Standard, and Late BH, though Kutscher's ABH encompasses more than Barr's, for under ABH Kutscher includes the poetry of the early prophets, the precise extent of which is not specified.[6] The conventional J-E-D-P scheme is now controversial, not just because (as Barr says) even those who do not accept it can use it and understand its implications. Recent years have witnessed serious attempts to overhaul the whole scheme. A number of people appear now inclined to date the traditionally latest source, P, much earlier.[7] Importantly, much of their argument is based on linguistic and stylistic considerations. At the other end of the scale there are those who argue for dating a source such as J appreciably later than has been the case until fairly recently. In view of these developments and also because ABH does not provide a sufficiently broad base for comparison, I hesitate to depart from the admittedly crude EBH/LBH binary scheme.

Under this heading Barr also mentions an issue which appears to me to be of considerable importance, and yet about which no decision seems to have been taken yet in the Network. The issue is that of Mishnaic Hebrew. I for one would speak for its inclusion, at least the so-called Mishnaic Hebrew Alef. Inscriptions and Qumran materials should certainly be included. The discovery in this century of so much old non-biblical written materias makes the notion of Biblical Hebrew rather

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[5] L. Bloomfield, Language (New York, 1933), p. 436.

[6] E.Y. Kutscher, A History of the Hebrew Language (Jerusalem/Leiden, 1982), p. 12.

[7] See, for instance, M. Paran, Forms of the Priestly Style in the Pentateuch. Patterns, Linguistic Usages, Syntactic Structures [in Heb.](Jerusalem, 1989); J. Milgrom's commentary on Numbers (1990), and more recently on Leviticus 1-16 (1991). The latter, in agreement with an Israeli scholar Knohl, concludes that P was composed not later than the mid 8th century [his Anchor Bible commentary on Lv, p. 28].

outmoded and excessively restrictive and narrowly focused. I have always found it a great pity that no current lexicon of Biblical Hebrew has incorporated the Hebrew vocabulary of ancient Hebrew inscriptions, fragments of Ben Sira or Qumran writings systematically except when Biblical words occur there. Even this occurs haphazardly. The BH hapax *qadmôn* occurs in Sir 41:3, but is not mentioned in any of the current BH lexica.[8] Is it because it means "former, earlier", unlike "eastern" in BH? But *ʾahᵃrôn*, which occurs in Sir ib. parallel to *qadmôn*, means in BH "latter, later". Eschewing a discussion of political or confessional perspectives, I have some reservations about calling Classical Hebrew a dead language. Notwithstanding some irregularities in the course of its long history, Hebrew is certainly not a dead language in the sense that Akkadian, Punic, Hittite or Etruscan are dead languages. Even when one's interest is confined to the early phase of Hebrew, to think that we are dealing essentially with a dead language does not seem to be entirely right. Even during the protracted period of dormancy it was maintained with much appreciation and empathy by people who identified themselves with the ancient Hebrew speech community.

Abstract:

This contribution consists of a number of disparate observations on the three main topics discussed by Prof. J. Barr in his contribution. The respondent is largely in agreement with the position represented by Prof. Barr.

Address of the author:
Prof. T. Muraoka, Faculteit der Letteren, Rijksuniversiteit te Leiden, Postbus 9515, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands

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8   Except in L. Alonso Schoekel, Diccionario Bíblico Hebreo-Español (Valencia, 1990-92).