Scope and Problems in the Semantics of Classical Hebrew

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1. Purpose and prospects of our work.

When we think about an international „workshop" and „network" in the study of semantics in Hebrew, and other dead languages with a restricted corpus of text, and beyond that, perhaps, about the production of a dictionary of a new kind, we are thinking of advance on several fronts. Firstly, we are looking towards a *co-operative* rather than an individual type of decision-making, if that can be achieved. Secondly, we are looking towards the *combination* of several different perspectives and methods in semantic analysis, rather than the, somewhat dogmatic, concentration on one or two. Thirdly, we are looking towards the means by which, especially through electronic processing, the evidences and connections which underlie the semantic interpretation can be *made more evident* through some system of coding built into the presentation of the data in a dictionary entry. In addition to all these, we are looking for a mode in which the *variety* of scholarly opinions can be more fully registered, displayed and made available than the traditional format of dictionaries has made possible.

2. Problems of traditional lexicography.

My own experience in lexicography has emphasized much of this.

There are, indeed, certain elements in the lexicographic task that appear to have a more „objective", empirical character, but even these are commonly shot through with semantic elements of decision which are not so simply empirical. Thus it might, at first sight, appear rather obvious that the collection and presentation of the forms of a word, including plurals, suffixed forms, different tenses of a verb, and the like, is a simple empirical task of collecting and sorting. In Hebrew, however, this is very often not the case. The forms, as they lie in the text, are not „tagged" with a morphological classification or parsing. We as lexicographers *have to decide* whether a form „belongs to a certain word", and therefore must go into the entry for that lexeme, or not. It is not a given fact that there are in Hebrew *two* verbs *y ʾl*, one occurring in the niphal and meaning „be foolish" and the other occurring in the hiphil and meaning „be willing, be pleased, determine [to do something]".[1] If we could see a way in which they belonged together semantically, doubtless we would say that they were one verb. In Ps 90:12 the form *wnb ʾ* does not in itself *tell* us that this is not the word „prophet" but the hiphil of the verb „come" (if it is). Our decision depends upon our syntactic/semantic construction of the sentence: only

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[1] On this subject cf. the learned article of Prof. Hospers in this volume.

after that has been done do we decide that it is indeed this verb form. In classical Hebrew cases of this kind are quite common.

Thus the general semantic analysis implied in a dictionary entry: the ordering of relatable but different meanings, the way in which their interrelation is understood and displayed, and (perhaps most of all) the way in which individual examples are classified and assigned to this or that meaning – these questions remain unclear and difficult. In my own experience I found this hard. In handling many words I felt the need to express myself, not in a conventional dictionary entry, but in a discursive thirty-page journal article which would discuss the problems and argue towards a solution of the problems. But if one writes such an article on every word, the dictionary itself never gets written.

3. Advantages of the „theological dictionary".

This point, incidentally, is relevant in another way, in connection with the genre of „Theological Dictionaries", a genre which is prominent in the study of ancient Hebrew (as of biblical Greek). One might have imagined that the theological dictionaries would by nature be less linguistic in character and provide less depth of linguistic analysis. As one who in the past has been very critical of particular theological dictionaries, I want to say that this is not always true. For semantic study in ancient Hebrew, our theological dictionaries provide very important information. Precisely linguistically, they can be very strong.[2] And one reason for this is that they provide something that the more obviously „linguistic" dictionaries (BDB, GB, KB etc.) do not provide, namely pages of extended discussion of the meanings and semantic interrelations involved. They can do this, of course, only at the expense of leaving aside the large sectors of the vocabulary that are not expressly theological.

4. Eclecticism and authoritarianism.

The usual dictionary handles these problems by a combination of eclecticism and authoritarianism. *Eclecticism* in that meanings can be arranged in historical sequence (e.g. earliest texts first, if such ordering can be known), in order of frequency (beginning with the most frequent), in order of derivation from some assumed starting-point (e.g. a Proto-Semitic meaning based on evidence of cognate languages), in order starting from the most concrete and moving towards the more „abstract" or „transferred", or, pragmatically, in whatever way seems most likely to be helpful to the dictionary user. *Authoritarianism* in that the dictionary editor (or group of editors, but let us talk as if it was a single person) really has had to take a decision on all these matters, and what is communicated to the user is the effect of that decision – not, as a rule, the reasoning that lies behind that decision. Today, I think, we are exploring possibilities whereby that reasoning itself will be laid more open to the user through the form in which the material, the analysis of meaning, and the evidences that bear upon it, are displayed.

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[2] Cf. for instance the excellence in statistics of the work of Jenni and Westermann in THAT.

5. The restriction of the corpus.

What, in any case, are the essential differences that emerge from our „philological situation", from our working with a dead language with a very restricted corpus of text? Clearly, the scholar is not a native speaker of ancient Hebrew. And yet the difference is not an absolute one. The native speaker learns his or her language through membership of a language community, the modern scholar learns it through initiation into a scholarly community and tradition. The processes, though different, are not wholly lacking in analogy. The native speaker's awareness of meanings is much more widely based, and his experience is extensible; his intuitions about meanings are not necessarily infallible, and much depends on the validity of the questions addressed to him. The scholar's awareness is much narrower, but some of its defects are compensated for by the more trained and academic discipline of his study.

The real difference seems to lie in the restriction of the corpus. Moreover, in the case of classical Hebrew this is not an accidental restriction, as in the case of some other languages where only limited fragments from disparate sources have survived: rather, it is – with some qualification at the margins – a restriction to a purposively selected body of literature, a canon of books considered more or less complete, outside of which only limited other materials, mainly inscriptions, are known. It is more like the situation of a native speaker of English whose total experience and knowledge of his own language had been restricted to the works of Shakespeare and nothing else at all, on the grounds that his works were the best literature and conveyed the best ideas about life and reality.

In this respect „dead" languages differ one from another. In classical Hebrew, although the corpus has been extremely narrowly restricted, there has been a tradition of combined linguistic and exegetical study throughout the centuries. A language like Akkadian is much more completely „dead": it has no comparable tradition of scholarship, for no one existed who knew anything about it for two thousand years. On the other hand its materials have expanded very rapidly, so that it seems not to suffer from restrictiveness of the corpus in anything like the degree to which this affects Hebrew.

The restriction of the corpus means that all sorts of statements, however profound and accurate, have to be qualified by the implication: „this is true of the corpus, we cannot say whether it is true of the language". Of this there are some well-known examples. It is often said that the familiar verb *br ʾ* „create" is used only of divine creativity and never of human, and this seems to be true of the corpus, strictly taken; but we cannot be sure it is true of the language as it was. Even within the corpus there are hints: what about the homographic verb which seems to mean „cut down trees"? If we can count a Phoenician inscription as marginally part of the corpus, there may have been a person who was *hbr ʾ*, perhaps „the cutter" (of wood, of stone, of gems?). Possibly there is therefore some human activity remaining as background for the sense „create"; possibly such a sense remained in existence in the language. This illustrates one of the obvious realities of the situation: because the corpus is restricted in this peculiar way, and because it has been so very thoroughly studied in every possible way, and because this thorough investigation still leaves us with numerous riddles and ἀπορίαι, anything that comes from outside

the corpus and seems to offer new, extraneous, information appears at once to gain enormous, perhaps disproportionate, value: it introduces a new word, a new usage, a new meaning, a new perspective, into the tightly-woven network of that which had been there before. Thus the given restriction of the corpus is itself the major reason why comparative philological data, the evidence of newly-discovered inscriptions, and any textual discoveries which at least potentially enlarge the corpus have such great impact.

6. The corpus and the language.

Similarly there are words that very probably existed in the language but do not appear in the texts. We seem to have no word for „bridge", and none for an „hour" of time (though this does appear in the Aramaic of Daniel). There are five or so words for „lion", only dubiously distinguishable in meaning, but, though cats probably existed, there is no word for „cat". (These appear in the later stages of the language, but not within the classical [biblical] corpus.) In general, negative statements, to the effect that such and such „does not exist" or „is impossible" in ancient Hebrew, have to be made with some caution. This may be true not only on the lexical level but also on the grammatical: the advanced student of classical Hebrew has to reckon with isolated, but individually quite numerous, cases of constructions which are „against the rules": $^{\circ}t$ apparently with the subject, and so on.

The questions here involved were vividly expressed by E. Ullendorff in his title „Is Biblical Hebrew a Language?" And perhaps something can be done, even from within the strictly delimited corpus of biblical Hebrew, to extend oneself beyond its limits. It may be, for instance, that *conversational* usage even within the Bible may reveal tendencies that differ from those general in narration or in legal texts. Notice, for instance, how frequently hl° „is it not the case that?" occurs in conversations. Again, I have noticed that the conjunction $^{\circ}bl$ in older texts occurs in conversation only: thus Gen 42:21 $^{\circ}bl$ $^{\circ}šmym$ $^{\circ}nhnw$ „well, we are to blame" but in later texts appears in narrative also, and the sense there shifts more to the adversative „but", which is also the familiar Mishnaic Hebrew meaning. This sort of observation should receive more notice in dictionaries. Similarly, the well-known phenomenon of the relative particle $š$, which is familiar in later biblical texts but also occurs sporadically in apparently older ones (several in Judges and Kings) is most naturally explained by the supposition that this form was in colloquial use in some sectors throughout the biblical period but in the main classical period, for some reason, was overlaid by $^{\circ}šr$, and revived in use in the late biblical period.

7. An example: $npš$ and „soul".

Now in this opening lecture it does not seem to be my task to offer even preliminary suggestions about how this is all to be done. It seems appropriate rather to call attention to some examples of the problems, examples of different kinds where different approaches to a solution have been in existence.

A very prominent word, and one presenting difficult problems, is the familiar $npš$, conventionally glossed as „soul". Westermann in his excellent THAT article

provides a classification of meaning (THAT II,73) under six departments (I retain his German terms, but simplify his Gliederung of the meanings):

1. concrete basic meaning: Hauch, Atem, Kehle, Schlund
2. Gier/Begier/Verlangen
3. Seele
4. Leben
5. Lebewesen/Mensch
6. Leiche

But much depends on which examples are assigned to which meaning. The key question involves no. 3, the soul. Modern opinion emphasizes the psychosomatic totality of the human being, and tends to depreciate ideas of a separate or separable „soul". Not only so, but apparently the ancient Hebrews thought the same way. A key passage, quoted innumerable times, is Gen 2:7. The first man, Adam, was formed by God, dust from the earth; God breathed into this muddy object the breath of life, and the man became *npš ḥyh*, a living being. Many commentators have argued that this shows that man, as a totality, „is" a living „soul": he does not „have" a soul or possess one, he „is" one.

But this seems to be a mistake. *Npš* here, by the argument itself, belongs to the sense *Lebewesen*: the man, receiving breath, becomes an animate being. The collocation *npš ḥyh* seems always to have this sense. But, precisely because this is the sense, the expression does *not* tell us about sense 3, the soul. Far from emphasizing a psychosomatic union, the sentence may well be a dualistic one: the man consists of two distinct substances, mud or dust and breath. As a living being he has these both together; if the breath ceases, he ceases to be a *Lebewesen*. The passage expressly does not tell us about the nature of the soul, sense 3. The traditional argument is confused because, while arguing (rightly) that sense 5 is here the correct one, it has continued to reason as if the information given is about sense 3 – sense 3 being dominant because it, „soul", is the ancient traditional gloss.[3]

This being the case, and with so particularly prominent a piece of evidence, consideration has to be given to the possibility that the meaning „soul" has been understated and that there is more evidence of a meaning, not necessarily of a soul totally separable from the body, but at least of one at the other end of the spectrum from it. Collocations such as those where a person addresses his own soul, or where *npš* and *bśr* appear to be at opposite extremes (*mnpš w ᶜd bśr yklh* Is 10:18), or where a person prays that *npšy*, „my soul", will not be left in Sheol, should be further investigated. In addition, the analogy of other peoples and anthropological evidence cannot be disregarded: many ancient peoples seem to have had quite

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[3] It is interesting that Westermann, though counting „Seele" as only one among six main senses, and within that maintaining that the rendering as „Seele" is often a Notbehelf, so that only a comparatively small group really correspond with the meaning of German „Seele" (col. 84), still places *Seele*, and no other word, as the term in the title of his article. This is, I think, significant: in spite of all that has been said, the reader is looking in such an article for something about the „soul" and what the Hebrews had to say about it.

complex theories of something like a „soul".[4] Why could the Hebrews not have had something of the same? I do not claim to have proved that they did; but if we even envisage the possibility of it, then it adds to the complexity of our classification of meanings.

This same word illustrates another traditional, but problematic, practice: the over-emphasizing of „concrete" or physical meanings in the presentation of lexical material. H.W. Wolff (Anthropology of the Old Testament, London 1974) writes a chapter of sixteen pages on *npš* and out of these devotes only one to „soul", over four to „throat" and „neck". I do not in the least dispute the existence of these meanings, but am inclined to think of them as marginal. The really clear cases are mythological: the underworld opens wide its throat, Is 5:14. But when Ps 69:2 cries to God for help because the waters came *ᶜd npš*, this could conceivably mean „up to the throat" or „up to the neck" but I do not see why it could not mean „right up to the very soul". Few of the cases where *npš* is said to refer to the human throat seem to me to be certain. Here we could be helped by these non-existent native speakers, who would tell us whether one could say „I have a sore *npš* this morning" or „he has a fishbone stuck in his *npš*". I rather doubt if such sentences were spoken.

8. „Sin" and „missing the mark".

A similar case, with another central term, is *ḥṭ ʾ*, familiar as the general term „sin". It is common practice to give some prominence to the (actually rather infrequent) cases where the sense is „miss the target (when shooting)"; the analogy of Greek, obviously, favoured the emphasis given to this. This can easily give the impression that „miss the target" is the Grundbedeutung, and therefore that the (far more frequent) usage for ritual or moral „sin" expresses it as a missing of the mark. This seems to me to be questionable. It would be more likely that the meaning is „do wrongly" and that the case of shooting, throwing stones etc. is a particular extension of that. Though not having researched the question, I have a suspicion that the same is the case in Greek.

9. Ghosts and necromancers.

The decision to identify how far words and senses „belong together" is often complex and obscure in Hebrew. Take the term (or terms?) *ʾwb*. It is agreed that it lies in the general field of „ghosts" of the dead. But does it mean the ghost itself, or the person who communicates through the ghost, or some aspect of the technique of communication? The common collocation with *yd ᶜny* may well suggest a human person who „knows", thus a necromancer. But a collocation like Dtn 18:11 *š ʾl ʾwb wyd ᶜny* may suggest that the *ʾwb* is the ghost itself, and if so the *yd ᶜny* may well be the same. But what about the *ʾwb* of Job 32:19, apparently a leathern bottle? This may be a totally unrelated word; but others have interpreted the term for „ghost" or „necromancer" in the light of it, following the ancient interpretations that

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[4] I have in mind particularly the evidence of early Greek usage, for example the picture of the underworld given by Homer in Odyssey xi. The modern fashion has been to discount Greek evidence as being the standard *opposite* to Hebrew thinking, but these habits have to be rethought.

involved ventriloquism. Moreover, the place-name Oboth, though interpreted as „water-skins" by BDB p. 15, seems much more likely to have been a place once known for its divinatory practices.

10. Parallelism.

Everyone recognizes that parallelism is a striking feature of Hebrew, and any future lexicographical project will want to do all that is possible to register the relevant materials in the most informative way: for example, words that often function as „B-words" should be registered as such against their common „A-words". The parallelisms are clearly significant for semantic analysis of any kind. Unfortunately, they are often not only significant, but also *ambiguous*. As has long been recognized, while some parallelisms come close to a semantic synonymy (mountain/hill, wave/billow, ^{c}mym/l,mym), others may equally be contrastive: day to day/night to night (Ps 19:3), eat flesh/drink blood (Ps 50:13). The basic underlying structure of parallelism appears to be syntactic: a noun parallel with a noun, a verb with a verb, etc., in certain patterns. These structures commonly carry semantic information, but if the meaning of the individual elements is not clear the specific semantic contribution of the parallelism may remain doubtful. Thus, to take another case involving *npš*,

       Job 14:22 ,k bśrw ^{c}lyw yk,b wnpšw ^{c}lyw t,bl one may ask: does the parallelism suggest that the „soul" is very close to the „flesh" and support an understanding in terms of their being two aspects of the same thing, or does it suggest that they are two opposite extremes, the point of the verse being that these two quite different realities are doing the same thing? Parallelisms generally have *some* semantic content but only sometimes do words occurring in parallelisms have virtual semantic identity (= interchangeability without change of semantic effect); in more cases all one can say is that there is *some element* of meaning in common: e.g. Ps 72:11 „all kings will worship him/all peoples will serve him": both kings and peoples are expressions of national power, but their co-occurrence does not mean that „king" means „people". One of the things we should be considering, therefore, is a mode by which parallel expressions might be coded so as to indicate how far they seem to be synonymous, antonymous, or otherwise complementary.

11. Some other semantic difficulties.

In general, much care is needed in the expression of meanings, for statements can often be misinterpreted by the hasty reader, and subtle distinctions have to be observed and noted. Thus it is not wrong to say that ,*dm* means „human being", but it is not quite right either: for, unless I am mistaken, there is a difference here. A woman is a human being but a woman alone, or when with other women, would not be called ,*dm*. A woman is always called ,*šh*, women are called *nšym*. The word ,*dm* means rather „man", alone or collective, and including women when they are in the same group with men. Thus the case of Greek ἄνϑρωπος is not parallel at this point, for it can be, and is, used of an individual woman.

A difficult case to handle are the words involved in the linkage of sin/retribution, the so-called Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang or Act-and-consequence Syndrome. A word like ‘wn may be regarded as having (say) three zones of meaning: 1. iniquity 2. guilt of iniquity 3. consequence of, or punishment for, iniquity (I quote from BDB, p. 730f., who confess themselves perplexed and aware that these are difficult to distinguish). But the distinguishing of them is at least one possible policy. On the other side it has been argued that these are all one thing, all one meaning, that the whole point is that the iniquity is in itself the guilt and is also the nasty consequence that follows. This of course is controversial, and one or other argument may be simply wrong. But any attempt to present this sort of material in dictionary form will have to think carefully about how to display these possibilities.

12. A syntactic approach to presentation of data.

I set out above (p. 7) the mode by which Westermann displayed the range of senses of *npš* in his fine THAT article. In principle that is a *semantic* type of classification, set out under a series of *senses*. The problem with this, of course, is that if particular cases are assigned to the wrong sense, or if there is doubt about them, it is difficult for the user to separate these cases out from the context in which they have been placed and see them as (potential) instances of another sense. It might sometimes be better procedure, from the semantic point of view itself, if the entry were organized on a *syntactic* basis, i.e. not under different meanings but under different types of collocation. Thus an article on *bryt* might be arranged as follows (I did this as a preparatory example in my own lexical work):

1. Covenant is, was, with, between etc.
2. *krt bryt*, the familiar and perhaps dominant case, divided under:
    A. with *’t* „with“
    B. with *‘m*, also „with“
    C. with *l*
    D. Two persons together as subject
    E. Other
3. Initiate covenant, with other verbs:
    hqym (but may be rather „fulfil“, see below)
    ntn
    bw’ bbryt
    ‘br bbryt plus others
4. Maintain, support, fulfil, acknowledge covenant:
    hqym
    šmr
    zkr
    ‘md plus some others
5. Annul, abandon, covenant:
    hpr
    hll
    ‘br
    škh, ‘zb

6. With other verbs, a few cases
7. Following a noun:
   Persons
   Objects and institutions
8. With following noun:
   Deity
   Persons
   Community
   Institutions
   Perpetuity
   Religious qualities, e.g. justice, mercy, reliability
9. Finally, some disputed cases, e.g. suggestion that there is a *bryt* II „light, splendour" Is 42:6 49:8 (parallel with *ʾwr* 42:6).
10. List of contiguous terms, e.g. *ʾlh šbwʿh; hzh hzwt; ʾmnh; ʿdwt; ʿdh.*

A plan of this kind could be combined with the more directly semantic form of display: e.g. at the beginning of an article a series of glosses could be set out, each with a number, and the various examples in a syntactically-based display could be tagged with such a number, and with a question mark where necessary. This might be a way in which several different approaches might be combined.

13. Hapax legomena and hopeless cases.

Sometimes, on the other hand, we have to register and deal with something that is in the text but, we strongly suspect, was not part of the language at all: in other words, the form existent in the corpus is the product of a textual error and/or loss of memory of the lexeme originally present. A prominent case in the Torah is the K *ʾšdt*, Q *ʾš dt* of Deut 33:2. Since *dt* „law, religion" is agreed to be a Persian LW and too late in Hebrew to be conceivable for this (doubtless very ancient) poem, we are justified in rejecting the „fiery law" type of interpretation, though it has to be mentioned for its historical importance through the Targum, Vulgate etc. The context gives us a fairly assured frame such as: „He [God] appeared from Mount Paran, he came from the myriads of holiness [or, with LXX: of the place Qadesh]; from his right hand [is, was?] *ʾšdt* to them". We can thus register various suggestions:

1. another place-name (Nyberg)
2. plural of a noun *ʾšd** cognate with ESA *ʾsd* „warrior", cf. Arabic *ʾasad* „lion", in the sense of „divine warriors", i.e. angels, cf. LXX ἄγγελοι (Beeston)
3. participle of a verb *ʾšd* cognate with Aramaic *ʾšd* „pour", hence „being poured", so „streaming along" NEB
4. conjecture *ʾš dlqt* „blazing fire"
5. admit that no reasonably close explanation is known or knowable.

In this, as in many cases, it seems as if we work with the material as if it stood in various grades of clarity and certainty. The „context" helps us in so far as it itself has materials of higher certainty; and yet a new idea or a new discovery that offers a

new interpretation of the most obscure element may show that the supposedly certain contextual elements were actually deceptive.

14. Diachronic change of meaning.

The diachronic changes of meaning within the corpus are an obvious area of difficulty. The difficulty is unequal as between directions: at the end of the period there is fairly high agreement in the recognition of „LBH" (Late Biblical Hebrew) because certain texts are unquestioned as „late" in this sense. Quite a large number of items can thus be definitely labelled as „LBH". When we go back to early stages the same agreement is often lacking. Almost all would agree that certain poems are archaic: e.g. Gen 49, Ex 15, Judg 5; but temporal sequences as between the traditional Pentateuchal „sources" remain − or, better, have increasingly become − controversial. Nevertheless, since the *stylistic* features of J, E, D and P are rather obvious and widely accepted, it seems best to continue to indicate them, and this means also, to imply a historical difference between them, even if one does not commit oneself to any particular statement of that historical difference. This can make a difference in the semantics of individual words. Sometimes fairly sharp differences in meaning can be observed: a familiar case is *mnḥh*, used for any kind of gift in the old sources, as between humans, specialized as a cereal offering in Leviticus. Again, in the case of *bryt* it has often been observed that in some sources God's making a covenant is very similar to a personal agreement between human persons, while in others it is more like a unilateral establishment of a principle, and in the latter case it is perhaps less well indicated by the rendering „covenant".

15. Midrash and decontextualization.

Diachronic change has to be considered also, however, in another form: the mode in which earlier materials within the corpus may have come to be understood by writers and readers within the later stages of the corpus. This process of „inner-biblical" understanding and exegesis has attracted much attention in recent times. On the whole lexicographers have placed the primary emphasis on the meanings attached to items in the time and context of the composition of the texts; if we ask, how a passage, written (say) around 900 BC, was understood by a writer of 400 or 300, we enter upon an additional complication. Thus Professor Sawyer, discussing „Hebrew terms for resurrection", considered a number of passages which, he recognized, did not imply any thought of resurrection in their original context, but were likely to have been so understood by later readers.[5] The same, I would suggest, might apply to the ideas of the separability and immortality of the soul. The Dead Sea Scrolls provide a number of instances in which biblical words and phrases are taken up and reused in senses that may possibly be quite remote from those of their original literary setting.

The collecting, classification and display of such material, however, presents serious problems which have not as yet, it seems, been fully explored. The later, inner-biblical, exegetical reading was of course done by native speakers and deserves

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5 J.F.A. Sawyer, Hebrew Words for the Resurrection of the Dead, VT 23, 1973, 218-234.

respect on these grounds. But native speakers are not infallible, for much depends upon the methods of reading that they employed. If we have taken context as a primary guide, we have to observe that some at least of this exegetical reading went in exactly the opposite direction, being guided by a radical decontextualization: this is one of the obvious primary features of Midrash, that it explains words by taking the meanings they would have in *any context other* than that in which they stand in the passage being read. It may be right that a dictionary should register such interpretations, which have sometimes been very significant historically, but there must be some mode in which they are distinguished from contextually serious understanding. In any case, these considerations make us realise that the interpretations of the „native speaker", far from being authoritative, are likely to be highly fallible.

16. Metaphor.

Metaphorical usages also require investigation. On the whole, I think the lexicographical tradition in Hebrew has used the category of metaphor too easily and carelessly. Some „metaphors" may have been created through mistakes within lexicography itself. One example I have recently discussed is the case of *qn* „nest".[6] The word is used of birds' nests and also, „metaphorically", of various human dwellings, especially those of eastern, „cliff-dwelling", peoples like the Edomites. But there is some evidence from cognate languages that the root could mean any kind of settlement or dwelling. In that case the sense „nest" is a particular application of a general term for a dwelling, the human dwellings of Edomites and others are not metaphorical at all, and, finally, if this is right, we can also accommodate the *qnym* of Noah's ark (Gen 6:14), which otherwise has to be made into a quite separate lexeme. By later times the older general meaning „dwelling" had come to be forgotten, and „nest" was understood as the basic sense; this understanding necessarily generated the „metaphorical" view of the uses of this term for human abodes. I do not insist that my argument is necessarily right, but it illustrates the sort of problems that can arise.

17. Meanings as we know them and meanings as they knew them.

It seems desirable that modern semantic study should distinguish adequately between elements of meaning that were relevant to the speakers and writers and elements that may be validly perceived through modern linguistic methods but that were probably unknown to the actual language users. Our etymological interests may reveal ways in which terms are related, ways that may be interesting to the modern reader, but these same ways may have been quite outwith the consciousness of native speakers and writers in ancient times. It may be interesting to us that *qwh* may have meant „twist", hence giving *qw* „cord, line" and also *tqwh* „tension > hope", but one may regard it as likely that this information was unknown to anyone who actually used the words.

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[6] J. Barr, Is Hebrew קן "nest" a Metaphor? in: Semitic Studies I (FS Leslau, Wiesbaden 1991), 150-161.

18. Personal names.

A good illustration of this can be seen in the personal names. Hebrew names, being in many cases semantically transparent, provide much useful matter for semantic discussion. But they also leave much room for misunderstanding. Many of the attempts to state the meanings of names in the traditional dictionaries are old-fashioned and misleading. There are names, like *zkryhw*, which were certainly fully transparent to people at the time: it was obvious that it said „The Lord has remembered" (or something to that effect). But there are other names which we, with our philological methods, can plausibly interpret, but which to them in their own time were probably opaque: could they interpret a name such as *bl ᶜm*, for instance? Very likely the name was meaningful to those who first gave it to this person, but it is doubtful that it was meaningful to those who wrote the Balaam saga that we now possess, still more doubtful for those who read and reread it some centuries later. The same would probably be true of Job. There are foreign names like Nebuchadnezzar which we can interpret through our knowledge of Akkadian but which would be opaque to Hebrew speakers unless they had special information on the matter. There are also names – for instance the „Amorite" names of Genesis, like the name Jacob – of which we can at least hazard an interpretation but where our interpretation is likely to be far remote from that which the biblical writers offer, because they interpreted them as if they were Hebrew-language names, working from within the normal lexicon of Hebrew. Or, to put it in another way, we have to distinguish between, on one hand, meanings of names which were probably valid as meanings understood at the time, and on the other hand the popular etymologies of names which the texts themselves furnish, which in almost all cases are false explanations, given precisely because the names were *not* understood, and derived from incidents and features of the accompanying story (so for example *mšh*, similarly *y ᶜqb*).

19. Conclusion.

I have not attempted any systematic treatment of our theme, and have tried rather to gather together some problem areas which are likely to be met with in our work and to provide some examples which may be useful as a basis for discussion. I hope that this will be helpful to us in starting off our enquiries.

Abstract:

The paper discusses general questions of semantic analysis in ancient Hebrew. Examples of words that present difficulties are given: in particular *npš* „soul" can be analysed and classified in several different ways. Problems in the past lexicographical tradition are mentioned, and suggestions are made for a mode in which various possibilities might be more „objectively" set forth. Problems with special categories, such as metaphorical expressions and personal names, are also briefly mentioned.

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