Etymological Semantics

Jonas C. Greenfield (Jerusalem)

In many ways I regret that I undertook to discuss this subject. It would have been much easier to have agreed to be the respondent to this or a related topic. I am not a theoretician, nor do I consider myself a trained linguist, but rather a philologist by training and inclination. It is true that the *word* has been an abiding interest in my work, and I consider it a value in its own right to ascertain the meaning and usage of words, without worrying too much if they may properly be described as paroles or mots. In addition James Barr in his books on the semantics of biblical language and on comparative philology,[1] but primarily in his essay on „Etymology and the Old Testament" has delineated the role of etymology.[2] It would be difficult to add to this discussion. Nevertheless, discuss I must. I will follow the various types of etymologies that Barr offers in that survey and will comment on these.

1. Etymology A: Prehistoric Reconstruction.

Barr[3] quotes the parade example *ʾmr* and notes that the evidence about this root is diverse: Heb. *ʾāmar* „say"; Arab. *ʾamara* „command"; Eth. *ʾammārä* „show, know" and Akkadian *amāru* „see". The proposed proto-Semitic sense, variously offered, is „to be clear" (so most recently HAL). Personally I doubt this. I admit to not having opened all the current dictionaries to see if this method is still in use, but it is still a popular method of presenting the evidence. There is nothing truly exceptional in presenting this testimony as part of the treatment of the root *ʾmr*. One may argue, and here I agree with Barr, that this evidence should not be placed at the beginning of the entry, but perhaps at its end, for in this case there is nothing that adds to the „meaning" that is being offered for any verse in which the root occurs. But awareness of the fact that this nexus of meanings is possible in a root may explain the fact that a lesser known root may also have the same possibility. The root *ḥwy* which is found in both Late Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic is pertinent here, at least as far as performance goes. In BH it is „to inform" while in Aramaic it is both „to declare" and „to show". In the Enoch text in Aramaic from Qumran we find *ʾḥwy* and *ʾḥzy* used as a pair.

In the light of the above, examination of the root *klm* would be in order here. In Hebrew the accepted meaning for this verb which occurs in the *nifᶜal* and *hifᶜil* is „to be ashamed, to shame" respectively, while in Arabic *kalama* is „to speak" and also „to wound". There is no doubt that one can wound one's friends or one's enemies with words, but I think that the attempt to establish a semantic

---

[1] J. Barr, The Semantics of Biblical Language, Oxford, 1961; Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament, Oxford, 1968.

[2] In: Language and Meaning, Studies in Hebrew and Biblical Exegesis (OTS 19), ed. A.S. van der Woude, Leiden, 1974, pp. 1-28.

[3] Etymology, pp. 4-7.

relationship between these meanings may be a false step. In Akkadian *kullumu* is „to show, reveal, etc." and this fits with the insight that the *ʾmr* nexus (to speak/to show) provides.[4] Some have sought to interpret, on this basis, certain occurrences of the root *klm* in Hebrew as „to shame (by speech)". But in the following verses for which this meaning has been proposed careful reading would lead to the conclusion that this use of *klm* is a modification of the more frequent usage and that there is no need to assume that Hebrew had both roots. The three instances may be translated: *wĕʾēn maklīm* „without being rebuked" (Job 11:3); *taklīmūnī* „you humiliate me" (Job 19:2); *kī hiklīmō ʾābīw* „for his father had humiliated him" (I Sam 20:34). The proper distinction to be made from the point of view of etymological semantics would be to assume that there were two independent Semitic roots a) *klm* „to speak, show"; and b) *klm* „to injure (wound, shame)". In Arabic we find both root meanings, in Akkadian the first, in Hebrew the second.

2. Etymology B: Historical Tracing within an Observable Development.

Barr used *minḥāh* as an example of this category, and the choice was good.[5] I would like to present a modern instance, that is a word that has entered our learned conscience in the last 40 years – *pešer*, now best known from the interpretative vocabulary of the Qumran scrolls where the phrase *pišrō ʿal* is quite frequent. *Pešer* may be defined as „interpretation" rather than „commentary". In late Biblical Hebrew its sole occurrence is in the construct form *pešer* in Koh. 8:1 with the usual definition being „solution, interpretation". Since the word occurs a few times in Biblical Aramaic for the interpretation of dreams, and the root occurs in various Aramaic dialects, it has been the common wisdom to assume that it is a loan-word from Aramaic. However, this assumption is not necessarily correct. The verb *pašāru* and related nouns are frequent in Akkadian.[6] It is clear that the basic meaning is „to loosen" and its range of meanings includes: „to loosen earth, sell/redeem (*ana kaspim pašāru*), compromise, interpret dreams, loosen curses or bans, free of sins or of oaths, open magical knots, etc. This holds true also for *pšr* in Mishnaic Hebrew – the basic meaning is „to loosen" and its usage includes „to melt, become tepid, compromise/ arbitrate, tear loose, disengage, temper wrath" etc.[7] The usage in Hebrew is wider than that found in Aramaic. I presented Akkadian and Mishnaic Hebrew together, in order to show that it would be natural to apply the verb *pšr* to the loosening and opening of an esoteric text, a meaning that could have easily developed in Hebrew, and which is not found in Aramaic.[8]

---

[4] For *kullumu* see CAD K, pp. 519-525; the verb *nekelmû* „to look angrily, with disfavor" (CAD N II, 152-153) should be related in some manner.

[5] Etymology, pp. 7-9.

[6] See AHw, p. 842 s.v. *pašāru*.

[7] Note frequent *pěšārā* „compromise".

[8] Indeed the Aramaic usage as typified by Daniel (5:12) where *mpšr ḥlmyn* „interprets dreams" is found together with *mšrʾ qṭryn* „loosens knots" would lead one to believe that the Aramaic usage is based on Akkadian.

3. Etymology C: Identification of Adoptions from another Language.[9]
I do not wish to offer any new identifications. This work has been done over the centuries. Indeed, in the Talmud and Midrash the foreign origins of various words were proposed. We may not find all of these identifications philologically sound today but it is worth noting that languages as diverse as Greek and Arabic were brought into play by the rabbis in their search for the meaning of the Biblical text. This tradition continued into the Middle Ages, when both origins and cognates were listed by the lexicographers. It goes without saying that this effort does not cease today. The publication of a new text, not to speak of the possible addition of a newly discovered member to the family of languages, will elicit this. Soon after the decipherment of Hittite, Edward Sapir, a great American linguist, suggested that *ʾargaz* „chest" and *k/qobaᶜ* „helmet" were words of Indo-European origin.[10] The Indo-European background of the **seren/*soren*, the *tyrannos* of the Philistines (*sarnē pělištīm*) is widely accepted.[11] Numerous Akkadian and Iranian loan-words have been found in Hebrew, either borrowed directly or through an Aramaic intermediary. Kulturwörter have been more exactly identified and the source of *yayin/oinos* and the ferrous nature of *barzel* established. The discovery of West Semitic vocables in the Old Babylonian used by the scribes of Mari and its environs has enlivened this type of etymological research.[12] The lessons to be learned from Ugaritic are also important, for its vocabulary absorbed elements from the other languages such as Hurrian, Akkadian and Hittite which were used at Ras Shamra, an important emporium, and in the neighbouring countries. Also instructive is the Aramaic part of the bilingual inscription from Tell Fekheriye, for it contains Akkadian words otherwise unknown in Aramaic.[13]

A cautionary word is in order, for it is normally difficult to say which words might be loan-words in languages as close as Phoenician and Hebrew. It is only in rare cases that this sort of cross-fertilization of related languages may be perceived. The description of the „Ship of Tyre" in Ezek. 27 may provide at least two words from the sphere of commerce – *ᶜzbwn* „export" (lit: merchandise left behind on deposit for sale) and *mᶜrb* „import" (from *ᶜrb* „to bring in") – that could serve as

---

[9] Barr, Etymology, pp. 8-11.

[10] See E. Sapir, Hebrew *ʾargaz*, a Philistine Word, JAOS 56, 1936, pp. 272-281, for which HAL gives both a wrong meaning and an impossible etymology; for the second, see idem, Hebrew ‚Helmet,' a Loanword, and its Bearing on Indo-European Phonology, JAOS 57, 1937, pp. 73-77, for which HAL, pursuing the recent, has credited a secondary scholar.

[11] This identification has a long history which is not reflected in HAL. Note that *sarnē pělištīm* is translated in the Targum of Jud. 16:4 as *ṭurānē pělištāʾē*.

[12] The most recent listing may be found in A. Malamat, Mari and the Early Israelite Experience, London, 1989, p. 33.

[13] A good example would be *gwgl* „water regulator" (l.2). See A. Abou Assaf – P. Bordreuil – A.R. Millard, La Statue de Tell Fekherye, Paris, 1982; J.C. Greenfield – A. Shaffer, The Akkadian-Aramaic Bilingual Statue from Tell Fekherye, Iraq 45, 1983, pp. 109-116. The reverse is also true. The presence in that inscription of *qlqltʾ* „garbage heap" has enabled us to identify *kiqillatu* in Neo-Assyrian (CAD K, p. 4401a). See J.C. Greenfield – A. Shaffer, QLQLTʾ, Tubkinnu, Refuse Dumps and Treasure Trove, Anatolian Studies 33, 1983, pp. 123-129.

examples.[14] It is Aramaic that has often been marked as the source language for many loan-words borrowed into Hebrew, and this is surely correct. Yet Theodor Nöldeke, the Altmeister of Semitic philology, whose name was attached to that of Strassburg for many years, and whose knowledge of Aramaic was encompassing, wrote a justifiably critical review of Kautzsch's work on Aramaisms in Biblical Hebrew.[15] There is need for caution in assigning the tag „Aramaism" to a word, since we are aware today of a greater number of shared vocables between Aramaic and the Canaanite dialects than before.[16] The language of the Aḥiqar proverbs is a good instance of Aramaic and Hebrew sharing a series of rare words and idioms[17].

Calques on words and idioms also belong to this section. The Qumran Scrolls afford us an instance of a calque in Hebrew on an Akkadian idiom. In the Rule of the Community (1QS 2:9) we read *wlw' yhyh lkh šlwm bpy kwl 'whzy 'bwt*, literally: „may you not have well being in the mouth of all the intercessors". The idiom *'whzy 'bwt* was not understood until Wernberg-Møller compared the frequent Akkadian idiom *abbutta ṣabātu/abbutta aḫāzu* „to intercede" and noted the unique occurrence of this idiom in a Syriac text.[18] Here, too, since the Hebrew text is some four hundred years earlier than the Syriac one it may very well be asked if it is necessary to assume an Aramaic intermediary.[19]

[It is, however, vital to add that we are not free from examining certain Hebrew compositions in the light of Aramaic. Some years ago while I was participating in the preparation of the ‚New Jewish Publication Society' translation of the Psalms, the feeling developed that some of the difficulties in Psalm 139 were due to the fact that it was either written in a dialect that was under strong Aramaic influence, or that it was translated from Aramaic. Our hint was the use of an Aramaism *'essaq* „I will ascend" in v. 8a; on that basis we translated *'aṣī'āh* of 8b as „I will go down". In v. 9a *'eśśā' kanfē šāḥar* was translated „If I take wing with the dawn" on the basis of the insight that in Aramaic *nĕṭal* is the equivalent of both Hebrew *nāśā'* „to lift,

---

[14] See IEJ 32, 1982, pp. 124-125. But not all scholars accept the interpretation of these words proposed there.

[15] E. Kautzsch, Die Aramaismen im Alten Testament untersucht, Halle, 1902. Nöldeke's important but neglected review appeared in ZDMG 57, 1903, pp. 412-420; many of the points raised by Nöldeke can also be made against M. Wagner's Die lexikalischen und grammatikalischen Aramaismen im alttestamentlichen Hebräisch (BZAW 96), Berlin, 1966, a book that has achieved a semi-canonical status in HAL.

[16] G.R. Driver (Hebrew Poetic Diction, VTS 1, 1953, pp. 26-39) has noted the words that are best known in Aramaic, but which serve in Hebrew poetry as parallel words. They may often be vocables used in dialects or colloquial usages. Some of these may occur later in Mishnaic Hebrew.

[17] See J.M. Lindenberger, The Aramaic Proverbs of Aḥiqar, Baltimore, 1983, pp. 287-8; I. Kottsieper, Die Sprache der Aḥiqarsprüche, BZAW 194, Berlin, 1990, p. 244.

[18] P. Wernberg-Møller, Notes on the Manual of Discipline, etc., VT 3, 1953, pp. 195-202, esp. pp. 196-7.

[19] For the Akkadian idiom see now, K. Watanabe, *abbūta(m)/abbuttu ṣabātu*. Zur immanenten und transzendenten Interzession, Acta Sumerologica 12, 1990, pp. 319-338, and pp. 335-6 for the Hebrew and Syriac.

carry" and *nāsa ͨ* „to travel". The ancient translator/adaptor made the wrong choice among these virtually homophonous roots.][20]

4. Etymology D: Analysis of Words into Component Morphemes.

The search for the basic meaning of a presumed root is willy-nilly the ongoing concern of the lexicographer.[21] Even when the imaginary lexicographer adopts a strictly synchronic approach and has to deal with disparate words like Barr's set *šalōm* „peace", *šalem* „whole" and *šillem* „he paid"; or the sets: *sefer* „book" and *mispār* „number"; *sāfar* „he counted" and *sōfer* „scribe"; or more radically, *sipper* „he related" and *sipper* „he cut hair" (Mishnaic and Modern Hebrew) and is aware that they may not be related, the fact that they are ordered in close proximity in a dictionary causes both the compiler of the lexicon and its user to look for non-existent relationships.[22] True, I have stacked the deck, for if I had put *sefer* and *sōfer* together, or *sāfar* and *sipper* (cf. „toll" and „tell"), we would have had at least two pairs with the root letters *spr* that share synchronically the same root structure and are etymologically related. One of the disturbing elements in using HAL is that the search for a *Grundbedeutung* has led to distortion of meaning, the mixing of etymons and cognates, and also the inclusion under the root rubric of a great deal of strange and extraneous material.[23]

I would like, under Etymology D, to present two items that may illustrate this theme and at the same time be seen as examples of how etymological research can be of use. In the first I would like to show that the examination of the possible semantic extension of a root can be aided by a) not limiting oneself to Biblical Hebrew and b) by examining similar words in the cognate languages. The use of *lmd* in BH is well known.[24] In the *qal* it is „to learn, be trained, accustomed to", with the *piel* adding „to teach, train". Both scholar and student when looking at HAL (p. 505) will be confronted by what at best may be considered strange information which they would do best to disregard. On the basis of *malmad* „goad" we are told that the *Grundbedeutung* of *lmd* is „stechen, anstacheln". The assumption being that students learn only when goaded, but an altogether different approach is required. The examination of the use of *lmd* in Mishnaic Hebrew adds a dimension to its meaning for beside the *piel limmed* as „to teach" it is also used for „to join, bind", especially in relation to wood and blocks of stones.

If we have looked forward in time, it would not be wrong also to look backwards. I have proposed, and this seems to have achieved some acceptance (except in HAL

---

[20] There are indeed other examples of Aramaic influence in this Psalm.

[21] Etymology, pp. 11-15.

[22] F. Rundgren, La Lexicographie Arabe, in: P. Fronzaroli, Studies on Semitic Lexicography (Quaderni de Semitistica 2), Firenze, 1973, pp. 145-159 noted (pp. 156-157) that the two sets of *safara* a) „ôter le voile" and b) „luire" have nothing to do with each other despite their proximity in the dictionary. The mode of listing in the traditional type of Arabic dictionary „est apte à détruire d'une manière assez déplorable la structure du champ sémantique".

[23] If HAL is mentioned it is because it is so widely used; but one could with equal ease point to other offenders.

[24] Forgive me if I call upon work done some years ago to substantiate this point.

s.v. *lmd*), that Ugaritic *mdl*, which is found in parallelism with *ṣmd*, „to bind, saddle" is the cognate of *lmd*.[25] True, Ugaritic knows both *lmd* for „apprentice" and *tlmd* for „student", but otherwise the root is unknown in Ugaritic. If correct *mdl* would be a metathesis of *lmd*. It is clear that in Aramaic *lmd* as „to learn/teach" is indeed rare, if not non-existent. But Syriac *lmd* (and we disregard *talmed* and its forms) provides food for thought; here too the meaning of „to attach, join together, compile" is prevalent.[26] The semantic range of *lmd* then would have to include both „to learn", and „to join, bind". Can this revised view of the range of the semantics of *lmd* be of use in the understanding of Biblical verses? I believe that it enables us to understand the subtleties of Biblical composition in at least one verse: in Cant 3:8 *kullām ʾăḥūzē ḥereb melummădē milḥāmā* can be translated „All of them girt with swords, trained for war" or a variation thereof. If *ʾhz* is seen in the light of its Akkadian cognate *aḫāzu* it has the range „to seize, hold, know, learn". The phrase *ʾăḥūzē ḥereb* can take on the additional meaning of „trained in warfare", while *mĕlummădē milḥāmā* can in turn mean „girt with weapons". This possibility of double meaning adds to the subtlety of the verse.

An excellent semantic parallel to *lmd* would be Aramaic *ʾlp/ʾallep* „to learn/to teach" on one side, and its Arabic cognate *ʾalafa* „to frequent a place, be accustomed to, be friendly with", *ʾallafa* „to unite, bring together, connect, gather" on the other.[27] This bifurcation of meaning found in the Aramaic/Arabic *ʾlp* compares to the combining of the meanings in *lmd*.

The second example displays some of the problems of etymological semantics. The need to distinguish among the various etymological elements that combine in the same root letters may be seen in the various contributions to the discussion of the root *mkr*. HAL is once again a poor guide, for it lists in the etymological rubric under mhe., ja., sy., md., the meaning „kaufen". In Mishnaic Hebrew *mkr* is the normal word for „to sell". But *mkr* is not known in any dialect of Aramaic where *zbn* means in the *pĕʿal* means „to buy" and in the *paʿel* „to sell".[28] Thus one very important element of etymological work – correct etymology – has been shunted aside by HAL. A second important element is the pursuit of *Grundbedeutung*. Rudolf Meyer has suggested that the *Grundbedeutung* of *mkr* is „im Handel einsetzen" since it contains the „Doppelsinn von ‚kaufen' und ‚verkaufen'".[29] Besides the fundamental error in meaning, that *Grundbedeutung* would put the cart before the horse. If constrained to find a *Grundbedeutung*, careful analysis of the textual material would indicate that the primary meaning of *mkr* is „to hand over" (note

---

[25] Ugaritic *mdl* and its cognates, Biblica 45, 1964, pp. 527-534.

[26] C. Brockelmann, Lexicon Syriacum (ed. sec.), Halle, 1928, p. 367.

[27] At least two of the Hebrew uses of the root *ʾlp* fit with this meaning: *ʾalluf* „companion" and *ʾelef* „clan".

[28] However, except for the exceptional meaning of „verloben", that is, „to betroth, espouse" (*afʾel*: „give one's daughter in marriage"), the root does not exist in Aramaic, and that usage, contra HAL, is not found in any Jewish Aramaic dialect. E. Lipiński reminds me of the very plausible supposition that Syr. *mĕkar*, in which the kaf was pronounced with *rukkakha*, was borrowed from Akk. *maḫāru* „to receive".

[29] See his short monograph Gegensinn und Mehrdeutigkeit in der althebräischen Wort- und Begriffsbildung, Jb. sächs. Akad., Phil.-hist. Kl. 120/5, 1979, pp. 10-11.

mkr byd in Jud. 2:14, 3:8, etc. and the skillful use of *mkr//hsgr* in Deut 32:30); the basic meaning of *mkr* may best be described in terms of opposition to *qnh* „to acquire, possess". A nuance was given to both verbs with the addition of *běkesef* – so that in Hebrew *mkr* „to sell" and *qnh* „to buy" emerged.

Some problems remain, for not every occurrence fits under the friendly umbrella of *mkr* „to hand over, sell". A nominal usage **měkērā* in *kělē ḥāmās měkērōtēhem* (Gen. 49:5) remained particularly troublesome. The „ancients" were no longer sure of its meaning. The rabbis attempted to interpret it by means of Greek *mákhaira* „sword", which fits the context.[30] The influence of this interpretation may still be felt in NRSV „weapons of violence are their swords" or NJPS „their weapons are tools of lawlessness". Those who seek Canaanite-Aegean connections have used this word as a proof text. The correct understanding of this noun, however, was put forward some years ago when the Ethiopic *mäkärä/amkärä* „to advise, counsel" was submitted once again as the cognate by Eduard Ullendorff, with reference to earlier proposals.[31] A translation similar to that proposed by him, „strong weapons are their counsel", seems proper, especially in light of *sōd* and *qāhāl* in the following verse. Admittedly this introduces *mkr* II, a homonymous root, but despite the proper warning against the making of many roots, a good case can be made for this one.[32] A proposed semantic development should somehow deal with all the occurrences of a root. In the case of *mkr* there remains the seemingly strange expression *hitmakker laᶜăśōt hā-rāᶜ* found in I Kings 21:20.25 and II Kings 17:17. Translating this literally is not as disturbing to some scholars as it is to me, as witness the NRSV translation of I Kings 21:20: „Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord".[33] Over 50 years ago D. Winton Thomas proposed an interpretation in which the pitfalls of etymologizing can be clearly seen.[34] Thomas turned to the Arabic use of *mkr* for these verses. In Arabic the verb *makara* means „practised deceit, guile"; its related nouns indicate deceit and craftiness. Thomas would connect *hitmakker* in these three verses with this usage and translates the idiom „who showed himself deceitful by doing evil." The text, however, provides no rationale for this translation. In addition, Thomas speculated whether *mkr* „to sell" and *mkr* „to practise deceit" were not really one root since „the Oriental seller habitually tries to deceive the buyer".[35] I would maintain that these roots are homophonous, and that this particular meaning is not pertinent to Hebrew. For *hitmakker* we should look, rather, to *mkr* II, „to advise, counsel". The translation would be „to take counsel" with the reflexive intent of „to decide to". The

---

[30] Genesis Rabbah 99:6. There remain those who still espouse this strange idea, e.g. O. Margalith, VT 34, 1984, pp. 101-102, with a list of „authorities".

[31] The Contribution of South Semitics to Hebrew Lexicography, VT 6, 1956, pp. 190-198, esp. p. 194.

[32] Worthy of note here is the recent article of D.J.A. Clines on *ʾbl* (VT 42, 1992, pp. 1-10) where an *ʾbl* II is eliminated .

[33] The translation of *hitmakker* in the NJPS, „commit one's self", has too modern a ring to it, and probably goes back to the idea of ‚selling'.

[34] JTS 1936, pp. 388-89; 1952, p. 214, recorded by HAL, p. 551.

[35] Ibid., p. 389, n.6.

Targum and the Peshiṭta used forms of *ḥšb*, for *hitmakker*, e.g. *ḥšabtā* for I Kings 21:20, and this was close to the truth.[36]

5. Etymology E: The Use of a Cognate Language to Discover the Sense in Hebrew.[37]

There are many examples of the phenomenon in which, to use Barr's words, „the appeal to Ugaritic or Arabic or Akkadian has brought about a drastic change of acceptation as against an older understanding of a word, or has furnished a meaning for a word formerly taken to be unintelligible". I do not wish to add to the possible examples. All those who have the requisite training experience the etymological urge when they read texts in one of those languages or in Hebrew, Biblical or otherwise. I would like to repeat some examples that have been known for some time that might show how an additional insight has been added. I shall use material that comes from discoveries made during this century, some earlier, some later.

1) The verb *št ʿ* is found only in Isa. 41:10,23, both times in parallel with forms of *yr ʾ*. It was easier for translators and commentators to deal with the first occurrence, for the order was *ʾal-tīrāʾ* // *ʾal-tišta ʿ* and the context clear; the second occurrence was more enigmatic. Before the discovery of Ugaritic both were usually considered forms of *š ʿh*.[38] With the discovery of the root *yr ʾ* in parallelism with *tt ʿ* in Ugaritic, the verbal root *št ʿ* „to fear" was firmly established. The argument was clinched by the occurrence in the Karatepe Inscription of *nšt ʿm* and *yšt ʿ* (both surely *nif ʿal*) where the context (*wbmqmm ʾš kn lpnm nšt ʿm ʾš yšt ʿ ʾdm llkt drk* „in those places which where they previously were afraid, where a man would fear to walk the road") clearly confirmed the meaning „to fear" for *št ʿ*.[39]

2) *ʾiššeh*. This word is a good example of the perils of semantic etymology versus cognate comparison. It is frequent in this form (*ʾšh*), or in the construct plural *ʾiššē* (*ʾšy*), in sacrificial contexts. The derivation from *ʾeš* was natural, the unusual masculine form being explained as a means of distinguishing it from *ʾiššā* „woman". In BDB it is listed under *ʾeš* and described as „an offering made by fire". In the recent „Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament" (Eng. transl. of TWAT) s.v. *ʾesh*, p. 424, we read: „Among the sacrificial terms, we encounter the word *ʾishsheh* over 60 times, mainly in priestly texts. From the LXX on this term has been associated with *ʾesh* „fire", and is usually translated „offering made by fire." But this meaning is uncertain and more recent exegetes find other etymological explanations." The reference is to J. Hoftijzer who compared Ugaritic *ʾtt* with Heb.

---

[36] I would add to the elucidation of this root the fact that in a slightly different guise it is already known in Hebrew – i.e. the use of *mlk* in the *nif ʿal* for „to take counsel". This usage is found once in Late Biblical Hebrew (Neh. 5:7) and is widespread in Mishnaic Hebrew. The verb *mlk* as „to advise" is known from various Aramaic dialects and from Akkadian. We have then *mkr/mlk* which involves admittedly both a metathesis and an interchange of consonants.

[37] Barr, Etymology, pp. 15-16.

[38] See HUCA 29, 1958, pp. 226-228 for a survey of suggestions.

[39] The occurrence in the Amman citadel inscription remains obscure due to the fragmentary nature of that inscription.

ʾishsheh.[40] He noted KRT 201 and the royal letters 117.15, 1013.14. In the first of these passages the verb *ndr* is first associated with *iṭṭ*, and Keret then promises to give a certain amount to the goddess if he takes Hurriya as his wife. In the other passages the phrases are:

a) *bm. ṯyndr* (15) *iṭṭ.ʿmn.mlkt*

b) *ʿmn* (13) *mlk b. ṯyndr* (14) *iṭṭ*

The meaning may be „by means of the *shay* that was vowed there is a ‚gift' for the king"; note too the collocation of *ndr* and *shay* in Ps. 76:12. The conclusion is that Heb. *ʾiššeh* means, like the more frequent *qorbān*, „a gift". Nevertheless, there are scholars – most recently J.-L. Cunchillos who take *ṯyndr* as a personal name.[41] This, however, does not take account of the many subtleties of the text.[42]

3) The root *ʿdn* can serve as another example of a cognate clarifying the semantic range of a Hebrew root. The noun *ʿedna* (Gen.18:12) has been variously translated, ranging from „pregnancy" to „delight" (sexual, so BDB, p. 726; HAL, p. 749 „Liebeslust"). The etymon usually quoted (e.g. BDB, HAL) is Arab. **ǵadana* a root that indicates „delicateness, softness". The next step, a semantic leap, is „ergötzen", noted as the root meaning by HAL. Now it is true that in late Biblical Hebrew (already Neh. 9:25 *wayyitʿaddenū* „and they luxuriated" NJPS), in Mishnaic Hebrew and in Syriac *ʿdn* (*piel/pael*) is used for „to indulge in delicacies", but in all likelihood this is a late development. The clue to the semantic background was provided by the Tell Fekheiye bilingual where Aram. *mʿdn mt kln* (1.4-5) is an epithet of the god Hadad and is equated with Akk. *mutaḫḫidu kibrāti* „who makes luxuriant the land";[43] the context is that of bringing luxuriant growth by means of rain. The unique Ugaritic verbal use of *ʿdn*, although not totally sure, is also in the context of rain.[44] Akkadian *tuḫḫudu* is used of making things „moist" or „fat" by means of water, oil, or honey. The use of *ʿdn* in Mishnaic Hebrew is important here. Besides the reference to eating delicacies noted above, it is used for lubricating the skin with oil (BT Pes. 43a), and there is the contrast between dried, wrinkled skin, and smooth, fresh skin. The terms used are *nitʿadden* and *nitpaššet* (BB 120a). Also the action of the *rĕbībīm* (Deut. 32:2) is to bring luxuriant growth, which is also phrased as *mʿdn* (Sifre a.l.). In Gen.18:12 Sarah contrasts her condition (*bĕlōtī*) to having *ʿednā*. I have elsewhere proposed, on the basis of the use of *ʿdn*, the term „lubriciosity" for the condition that it describes.[45] This certainly fits the use of *ʿădīnā* for Babylon in Isa. 47:8. The next step would have to do with the etymology of Eden, and proposals have been made to fit Eden, as a place of

---

[40] J. Hoftijzer, Das sogenannte Feueropfer in: Hebräische Wortforschung (Festschrift W. Baumgartner), VTS 16, 1967, pp. 114-34.

[41] J.-L. Cunchillos, Textes ougaritiques II, Correspondence, Paris, 1989, pp. 322-323.

[42] Lipiński, OLP 12, 1981, translates *bm. ṯy.ndr* (15) *iṭṭ.ʿmn.mlkt* (note *ṯy.ndr* as two separate words) „avec le cadeau promis j'ai été auprès de la reine", but *iṭṭ* as „j'ai été" through ingenious is not plausible.

[43] L. 4. See Abou Assaf – Bordreuil – Millard, La Statue (above, note 13), Paris, 1982; Greenfield-Shaffer, Iraq 45, 1983, pp. 112-113.

[44] In the Baʿal Epic, CTA 4, V 68-69. See my remarks in the article referred to in the next note.

[45] A Touch of Eden, in: Orientalia J. Duchesne-Guillemin Emerito Oblata, Leiden, 1984, pp. 219-224.

luxuriant growth, into this picture.[46] I shall not presume that our root lies behind the original meaning of Eden, but rather that the interpretation of Eden at various places in the Hebrew Bible assumes that it is a) a well-watered place; and b) a place of luxuriant growth. As to *ᶜednā* it has acquired in recent years a fine cognate in Aram *ᶜdynh*, which occurs in the form *ᶜdynty* in Gen.Apoc. 2: 9,14. The translation „sexual pleasure" fits functionally the needs of the text.[47]

4) Finally, an instance of how an epigraphic discovery puts the use of a term in Biblical Hebrew into perspective. In this case it is the well-known verb *šqr*. Its meaning „to lie, be unfaithful" does not require comment. The supposed cognates from Akkadian, Arabic or Tigre that HAL proposes are not worth considering. It is only in Aramaic, as one might expect, that a cognate is found, which may indeed be a Canaanitism in Aramaic.[48] But the use of this verb in the Sefire Inscriptions has proven instructive. It was noted soon after the inscriptions were published that a) they distinguish between *šqr l* „to be unfaithful to someone (the suzerain)"; and *šqr b* „to break one's covenant with someone" and b) that this distinction holds true for Biblical Hebrew.[49] There is no reason to assume with HAL, p.1520, that the *Grundbedeutung* of this verb is to be found in the specialized meaning connected with covenants.[50]

6. Etymology F: Simple Comparison of Institutions with Cognate Names.[51]

Barr remarked that comparing the institution without comparing the word itself would do. „Is it not probable that the comparison of the two sets of phenomena would assist us in the understanding of both? The answer of course is „yes". It is a question, however, if this is a real case of etymology; or, to put it in another way, to include this would extend the term „etymology" far beyond the point where it continues to be distinctive and therefore useful." He goes on to remark that this type has often been associated with „true etymology", e.g. type A.

On general principles this is a correct observation. However, listing these comparisons under type A etymology, which we have discussed above, obscures the matter. I shall use the well-known root *nḥl* as my example. There is no question about its „true etymology". BDB listed Arabic *naḥala* „to give a thing freely, to give for one's own, bestow" and also Sabean *nḥl* with the same meaning. The information in HAL is richer. It has added mhe. „in Besitz nehmen"; Ug. *nḥl* „Erbsohn", *nḥlt* „Besitz"; and Akk *naḥālu* „besitzen" and then Arabic and Old South Arabic *nḥl* as „schenken", that is, „to grant".

---

[46] A.R. Millard, The etymology of Eden, VT 34, 1984, pp. 103-105.

[47] J.A.Fitzmyer, The Genesis Apocryphon², Rome, 1971, pp. 86-87. H.L. Ginsberg's „pregnancy", Theological Studies 28, 1967, p. 575, followed by Beyer's „Schwangerschaft", does not fit the context.

[48] The usual Aramaic word for „to lie, etc." is *kdb* (Heb. *kzb*).

[49] Did Aramaic also make a further distinction true of Hebrew, i.e. that *šqr l* is in the *qal*, while *šqr b* is in the *piel*?

[50] One should add that *ᶜdyʾ* of the Sefire Inscriptions has enabled the restoration of *ᶜadīm „covenant" (Isa. 33:8//*bryt*) to the vocabulary of Biblical Hebrew, see J.A. Fitzmyer, CBQ 20, 1958, p. 456; D.R. Hillers, HTR 64, 1971, pp.257-258.

[51] Barr, Etymology, p. 17.

Some of the above is dubious. The root *nḥl* has no life of its own in Mishnaic Hebrew since it occurs only in legal formulae and is used only of an heir. The reference to Akkadian is misleading for all the occurrences are in Mari texts and represent a particular idiolect. In addition the „Sabaic Dictionary" of Beeston et al. prefers „grant, lease; louer à bail" for this word and for the noun *nḥlt* „grant, lease; concession, bail".[52] Obviously related but nuanced.

Now, it is worth noting that Heb. *nḥl* (qal, hifʿil) has a specific use, involving either divine possessions or human grants of a limited nature – that is lands possessed and divided or given as inheritance in an inalienable manner. This in distinction to *yrš* (qal, hifʿil) which is used for taking possession of property and inheriting it, without the element of inalienability; thus Zion is *har naḥlātō*, not *har yĕrušātō*. This is also true of Ugaritic *nḥlt*. It is the particular possession of a deity, be it Baʾal *bqdš.bǵr nḥlty* [ʿnt III 27(=IV 64)], or Mot: *ḥḥ.arṣ.nḥlth* [51 VIII 13-14;67 II 16]. The exact use of the noun *nḥl* remains enigmatic, for the texts do not unambiguously allow a clear translation „his heir" for *nḥlh*. The phrase *eqlāt* (A.ŠÀ.MEŠ) *na-ḥa-li*, found in PRU III, p. 109 (No. 251.16), l.7 is a good example of the enigmatic nature of this vocable. It was taken by Nougayrol, who published the text, and by others, to be „patrimonie".[53] However, J. Huehnergard argues plausibly for this being *naḥal* „wadi, ravine".[54]

Before discussing the Mari usage one should note that in Akkadian proper there is no word as such for inheriting/giving as inheritance or for giving as a possession. In Akkadian one says simply *zittam zâzu* „to distribute a share". Akkadian also does not have a proper word for heir so that in a Neo-Babylonian text, where a word for „heir" was needed, the word *yāritu*, a loan-word from Aramaic is used.[55] In the Mari texts we find the seemingly strange request of the god Adad of Kallassu (a section of Aleppo, it would seem.) for a *niḥlatu*. The god is quoted as saying „Now, since I have restored him to the throne of his father's house *niḥlatum ina qātišu eleqqê*".[56] The CAD (N II, p. 219) translated *niḥlatu* as „property handed over" and this phrase as „I can take out of his hand what was handed over". However, Moran's translation, following Landsberger *apud* Malamat, is more appropriate: „I should receive from him a *niḥlatum*".[57] Following Malamat and Moran one might venture that the priests of Adad wanted a specific plot of land for their temple which would be the *niḥlatu*, the patrimony of their god. We may perhaps assume that it was land that had previously belonged to the god, and that they wanted it returned to him. This *niḥlatu* of Adad would match the *nḥlt* of Baʿal at Ugarit and that of YHWH at

---

[52] A.F.L. Beeston – M.A. Ghoul – W.W. Müller – J. Ryckmans, Sabaic Dictionary, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1982, p. 95.

[53] E.g. Malamat, JAOS 82, 1962, p. 147, n. 22, follows Nougayrol and also quotes Ugaritic *nḥl* „heir". This is taken up again by Malamat in: Mari and the Early Israelite Experience, London, 1989, pp. 48-52.

[54] J. Huehnergard, Ugaritic Vocabulary in Syllabic Transcription, Atlanta, 1987, p. 152.

[55] CAD I/J, p. 325b, s.v. *jaritu*.

[56] The full text has now been published by B. Lafont, Le roi de Mari et les prophètes du dieu Adad, RA 28, 1984, pp. 7-18, text, pp. 7-10. Lafont suggests that *niḥlatum* means „propriété, possession, domain".

[57] ANET, p. 625.

Zion. In return we are told that Hadad would give Zimri-Lim a true reward which is phrased as „throne upon throne, palace upon palace, territory upon territory, city upon city".

The translation given by the CAD for *naḫālu* B (N I, p. 126) as „to hand over (property)" is also not adequate. Again in light of the use of this verb in Hebrew, Malamat's suggestion „assign (hereditary) property, apportion"[58] seems in place. He justifies this by analysis of ARM VIII 14:3-4, in which what is obviously patrimony is transferred *inḫilu* by members of a family to Yarim-Lim, an important person who is obviously fictionally adopted into that family. In another tablet the same Yarim-Lim receives property from the royal house (ARM VIII 12), and in two other texts (13,14) he acquires property under special circumstances, the term *naḫalum* being used. In another instance a daughter of Zimri-Lim complains that her parents had not granted her (*inḫilunini* „not granted me") a field and a garden (ARMT X 90: 3ff). Patrimony was by interpretation non-alienable. It could be transferred but only by a sort of subterfuge, thus proving the rule.[59] The term *niḫlatu* is sparsely attested and Ugaritic *nḫlt* is found in a very limited phrase, whereas Hebrew *naḫălāh* is frequent. This, as well as other presumably shared institutions, may best be studied also in the light of the terms used for them.

I would agree that there is a great deal of arbitrariness in the choices made by the etymologist. It is indeed easy to err and there are many pitfalls, since we all suffer from limited knowledge and lack of experience with all the languages that are of necessity involved in our work. We will not be able to do a perfect job, but we are not free of the obligation to try our best.

Abstract:

This paper deals with 'etymological semantics' following the criteria that James Barr set up in his studies of this subject: a) Prehistoric reconstruction; b) Historical tracing within an observable development; c) Identification of adoptions from another language; d) Analysis of words into component morphemes; e) The use of a cognate language to discover the sense in Hebrew; f) Simple comparison of institutions with cognate names. Examples of these categories were discussed in detail with an attempt to show the usefulness of some of these criteria in adding to our appreciation of the meaning of the Biblical text. The article also criticizes the misuse of etymology in current lexica and the search for a *Grundbedeutung* for Hebrew roots.

Address of the author:
Prof. J.C. Greenfield, Department of Semitic Languages, The Hebrew University, Mount Scopus, 91905 Jerusalem, Israel

---

[58] JAOS 82, pp. 147-50; Mari and the Early Israelite Experience, p. 49.
[59] The phrase *ša ina niḫlatim ikulu* in ARM XXIII, 73, ll. 40-41 remains difficult.