

LEXICAL MEANING IN BIBLICAL HEBREW AND COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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A recent survey of Biblical Hebrew-English dictionaries (e.g. Brown-Driver and Briggs, Koehler and Baumgartner, Clines et al and Swanson) has shown that most of these BH reference works can benefit from current developments in lexicology. This paper critically examines the contribution a cognitive linguistic model of meaning can make towards the semantic analysis and description of the BH vocabulary. It illustrates that the model can be used to effectively described both concrete and more abstract concepts in BH. Is also shows that the role of syntax in this model needs some further attention.

It commences with a brief description of some of the basic insights provided by cognitive linguistics for a more adequate description of lexical meaning. Attention is paid to the cultural embeddedness of lexical meaning and notions like “the embodiment of meaning”, “folk taxonomy and categorization”, “prototypical meaning”, “purport”, and the “construal of meaning” are explained. The practical implications of these notions are then be illustrated by means of a categorization and a lexical definition of the lexical items, גור, כפיר, שחל, לביא, אריה, ארי.

For these purposes insights provided by Hans Rechenmacher (“Kognitive Linguistik und althebräische Lexicographie”, *JNSL* 30/2 (2004) 43-59) will be used to demonstrate the value of a lexical definition that reflects the cognitive frame(s) of reference of the BH text(s). Compare, the following typical definition of a lion, viz. “a large heavily-built social cat (*Panthera leo* syn. *Leo Leo*) of open or rocky areas chiefly of sub-Saharan Africa though once widely distributed throughout Africa and southern Asia that has a tawny body with a tufted tail and a shaggy blackish or dark brown mane in the male” with that of Rechenmacher “חַיַּית הָאָרֶץ belongs to the big wild animals (חַיַּית הָאָרֶץ), it is very big, strong and dangerous; it kills people and animals from their flocks and herds, it is encountered in the wild, it roars awe-inspiring; can only be challenged by heros; is a symbol of power and strenght.”

Since it may be argued that zoological entities represent a class of lexical entities to which a cognitive model of semantics can easily be applied to, a more problematic class is also analysed and described, viz. lexical entities referring to states and processes that have the attribute of a category that may be labelled “strong” or “powerful”, viz. כַּח, חֹזֶק, עֶז, עֶז, חֵיל, אִמְץ, עֶז. In the process some unsettled issues concerning the role of syntax in a cognitive linguistic model of lexicology are hightlighted.

(The above-mentioned paper draws on my experiences as a “sceptical” co-worker of the new *United Bible Societies* sponsored “Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew” edited by Reinier de Blois.).