

# Semitic, Biblical, and Jewish Studies

in Honor of Richard C. Steiner

edited by

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# Tree and Wood, Polysemy and Vagueness: Detangling the Branches of the Hebrew word עץ

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There is no scientific category that corresponds to the category “tree” in English: the category “angiosperm” includes all flowering plants, and therefore includes both oak trees and tulips, but not pines or cedars, while the “pinaceae” family includes cedars and pines. The natural-language category “tree,” on the other hand, includes all plants that are large and woody,<sup>1</sup> and despite the fact that it does not correspond to any scientific category, such a category exists in virtually all modern languages.<sup>2</sup>

This is an excellent example of a “folk category.” Folk categories reflect the ways in which peoples categorize the world which are not based on explicit scientific thinking, and often (but not always) these categories are encoded in the language.<sup>3</sup> The animal kingdom is a well-studied area of

1 John Dupré, “Natural Kinds and Biological Taxa,” *The Philosophical Review* 90 (1981): 80; Eugene Hunn, “The Utilitarian Factor in Folk Biological Classification,” *American Anthropologist* 84 (1982): 837–38.

2 See the data in Cecil H. Brown, “Folk Botanical Life-Forms: Their Universality and Growth,” *American Anthropologist* 79 (1977): 317–42.

3 When a category is not lexicalized, but is salient to members of a culture, it is called a “covert category.” For discussion, see Brent Berlin, Dennis E. Breedlove, and Peter H. Raven, “Covert Categories and Folk Taxonomies,” *American Anthropologist* 70 (1968): 290–99; Brent Berlin, *Ethnobiological Classification: Principles of*

folk taxonomies, as are the plant kingdom, the seasons of the year, colors, directions, and artifacts such as crockery.<sup>4</sup> Categories tend to reflect a culture's needs and priorities, which sometimes but not always align with science.<sup>5</sup> The category of "tree" persists because it is useful for people to have such a category, whereas the category of "flowering plants," which does not include conifers, is helpful for biological taxonomists but much less so for people using language to make sense of the world. For most human purposes, oaks are better associated with pines and cedars than with tulips. In other words, this is a good example of the anthropocentricity of supposedly natural categories, which is one of the ubiquitous features of folk taxonomies.<sup>6</sup>

The current paper aims to discuss the classical Hebrew words for tree from a cross-cultural perspective. Although the basic data is well known, there are two goals of this discussion: to explore how such cross-cultural studies can aid in the philology of Ancient Hebrew (AH), and to show that dead ancient languages deserve to be studied alongside contemporary far-flung languages by anthropologists and others interested in what can be learned from the structure of languages.

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*Categorization of Plants and Animals in Traditional Societies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 141–81. This is quite an important concept for studying ancient languages, as well; see below, n. 44.

- 4 James P. Mallory and Douglas Q. Adams, *Oxford Introduction to Proto-Indo-European and the Proto-Indo-European World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 113–14. Not all of these categories can be studied in the same ways; see Roy F. Ellen, "Review of 'Language and Living Things' by Cecil H. Brown," *Language in Society* 16 (1987): 123–30. Since the principles of classification depend on cultural norms, expectations, and needs, the categories often differ from culture to culture, which makes the study of these folk taxonomies relevant not only for philologists and linguists but also for ethnologists, anthropologists, and psychologists, among others.
- 5 Jeremy N. Bailenson, Michael S. Shum, Scott Atran, Douglas L. Medin, and John D. Coley, "A Bird's Eye View: Biological Categorization and Reasoning within and across Cultures," *Cognition* 84 (2002): 1–53.
- 6 Dupré, "Natural Kinds and Biological Taxa," 66–90.

## Ancient evidence for words for “tree”

What exactly makes it “useful” for people to have a category of “tree” in their languages? Some folk categories exist not because of any pragmatic use, but because they are interesting.<sup>7</sup> Other categories exist for their functionality; “vegetables” seems to be a good example of this. In the case of trees, the fact that woodiness and large size are part of the definition of the category suggests that the existence of the category is due to the trees’ potential for use as wood, for construction and, especially, for burning.

Despite the evident usefulness of the category “tree,” words for tree are actually quite late entries into the lexicons of the world’s languages. A large cross-linguistic study found that “several lines of evidence suggest that languages spoken thousands of years ago either lacked a term for ‘tree in general’ or encoded it only at very low levels of salience.”<sup>8</sup> The “low levels of salience” refers to languages that had a term for “tree,” but not an independent one: they had simply taken the word for “wood” and extended it to include the meaning “tree” as well.<sup>9</sup>

The researchers looking at “languages spoken thousands of years ago” looked only at reconstructed languages, but they could have buttressed their findings with data from some of the “languages spoken thousands of years ago” which are directly known.<sup>10</sup> In Egyptian, for example, there was no word in the Egyptian lexicon for “tree” until Late Egyptian,<sup>11</sup>

7 It is obligatory in this context to cite Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (London: Merlin, 1964), 89: “We can understand, too, that natural species are chosen not because they are ‘good to eat’ but because they are ‘good to think.’”

8 Stanley R. Witkowski, Cecil H. Brown, and Paul K. Chase, “Where Do Tree Terms Come From?” *Man* 16 (1981): 1–14, 7.

9 *Ibid.*, 6.

10 This is a common issue. Color terms are an excellent example where philologists and anthropological linguists worked in parallel worlds for a few decades before someone noticed the potential for synthesis. See, for some discussion, David Warburton, “Basic Color Term Evolution in Light of Ancient Evidence from the Near East,” in *Anthropology of Color: Interdisciplinary Multilevel Modeling*, ed. Robert MacLaury, Galina V. Paramei, and Don Dedrick (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2007), 229–46.

11 This was noted by Orly Goldwasser, *Prophets, Lovers, and Giraffes: Wor(l)d Classification in Ancient Egypt* (with an Appendix by Matthias Müller), Göttinger

although *ḥt* had been used for “wood” from the earliest times. In Akkadian, one finds that the word for “tree,” *iṣu*, is also the word for “wood” down through the first millennium BCE: compare *naphar iṣū išḫuma uṣarriṣu papallu* “all kinds of trees grew tall and sent out shoots” (Sennacherib, OIP 2 115 viii 54) and *dalāti iṣi ša ina bītāti... kaspā ebbi ušalbiš* “I had the wooden doors of the temple covered with shining silver” (Nabonidus, VAB 4 282 viii 31ff.).<sup>12</sup> Thus, these languages, too, either did not have a word for “tree” or exhibited wood/tree polysemy and thus did not have an *independent* word for “tree.”

### Wood/tree polysemy/vagueness

Wood/tree polysemy is still quite common across cultures: according to the Database of Cross-Linguistic Colexifications,<sup>13</sup> there are eighty-six known languages in which “wood” and “tree” are “colexicalized,” meaning that the same word is used for both.<sup>14</sup> These languages are spread across thirty-two language families, including Afro-asiatic (represented by Gawwada of southern Ethiopia and Iraqw of Tanzania). A thorough study of languages of Sahul found that in the vast majority “wood” and “tree” were “co-lexicalized,” and concludes that this co-lexicalization has “emerged independently many times the world over.”<sup>15</sup>

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Orientforschungen, IV Reihe: Ägypten 38; Classification and Categorisation in Ancient Egypt 3 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), 41, 46–48; *nht* meant only sycamore.

12 CAD I 214–219.

13 Johann-Mattis List, Thomas Mayer, Anselm Terhalle, and Matthias Urban, *CLICS: Database of Cross-Linguistic Colexifications* (Marburg: Forschungszentrum Deutscher Sprachatlas). Online version 1.0 available at <http://CLICS.lingpy.org>, accessed October, 2016.

14 The CLICS database uses the term “co-lexicalized” to avoid having to decide in each case whether the word is polysemous or semantically vague; see immediately below.

15 Antoinette Schapper, Lila San Roque, and Rachel Hendery, “Tree, Firewood and Fire in the Languages of Sahul,” in *Lexico-typological Approaches to Semantic Shifts and Motivation Patterns in the Lexicon*, ed. Päivi Juvonen and Maria Koptjevskaja-

As is well known, Biblical Hebrew (BH) partakes of this cross-linguistic tendency, as well, since עץ means both “tree” and “wood.” Thus we have, on the one hand, a call to the trees of the forest to praise God: פָּצְחוּ הָרִים בּוֹ עֵץ וְכָל-יַעַר וְכָל-עֵץ בּוֹ רָנָה יַעַר וְכָל-עֵץ בּוֹ “Burst into song, O mountains, O forest and every tree therein” (Isa 44:23), and, on the other hand, a reference to vessels made of wood: מִכָּל-כֵּלֵי-עֵץ אוֹ כְּבֹד אוֹ-עוֹר אוֹ שֶׁקַּיִם “of all vessels of wood or cloth or leather or sackcloth” (Lev 11:32).

Is this really polysemy? Semanticists traditionally distinguish between “polysemy” and “vagueness,” where a polysemous word has two distinct meanings, and a vague word has a single meaning which happens to include two or more contextually specific referents. Thus “child” is vague as to whether it refers to a male (“son”) or female (“daughter”), but “kid” is polysemous in the senses of “young human” and “young goat.”<sup>16</sup> Steiner discussed this theoretical issue, with implications for BH lexicography, in his article on the “Biblical Hebrew Conjunction וְ-,” where he argued that although the lexicons often list multiple meanings for a word (or in that case, a particle), often the word is simply general, or vague, rather than polysemous.<sup>17</sup>

It is not clear that there are tests that can conclusively demonstrate that a certain word or sentence is polysemous as opposed to vague, or vice versa. Sometimes the tests devised to distinguish the two yield conflicting results.<sup>18</sup> But it is worth asking whether BH עץ is polysemous or merely vague. In order for a word to be plausibly vague, there must be “plausibility of lack of specification.”<sup>19</sup> Since it is not plausible that any natural language

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Tamm (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2016), 355–422. See also Hunn, “The Utilitarian Factor,”: 830–47.

16 See Stefan Th. Gries, “Polysemy,” in *Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*, ed. Ewa Dąbrowska and Dagmar S. Divjak (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2015), 472–90, and esp. 477–78 on vagueness and polysemy.

17 Richard C. Steiner, “Does the Biblical Hebrew Conjunction וְ- Have Many Meanings, One Meaning, or No Meaning at All?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119 (2000): 249–67.

18 See Dirk Geeraerts, “Vagueness’s Puzzles, Polysemy’s Vagaries,” *Cognitive Linguistics* 4 (1993): 223–72; also David Tuggy, “Ambiguity, Polysemy, and Vagueness,” *Cognitive Linguistics* 4 (1993): 273–90.

19 Arnold M. Zwicky and Jerrold M. Sadock, “Ambiguity Tests and How to Fail Them,”



could fail to distinguish between “formal dance events” and “spherical objects for play,” it is not likely that English “ball” is vague. Hebrew  $\text{כּוּל}$  is plausibly vague by this test, since “trees” and “wood” are sufficiently closely related that one can imagine that a language may not distinguish between the two senses.

A more promising test that has been proposed to distinguish polysemy from vagueness is to see if there are restrictions on the coordinated co-occurrence of the two meanings in a single sentence.<sup>20</sup> A variation on this is the “and so” test. Most of the work on this has been done on the level of the sentence, rather than the word; sentences that can bear more than one meaning are called “ambiguous” rather than “polysemous.” If we take a sentence that is really ambiguous, such as “The chickens are ready to eat,” and add an “and so” clause, the claim is that the two parts of the sentence cannot rely on the different meanings of the original sentence. Thus, “The chickens are ready to eat and so are the children” can only mean, in a non-cannibalistic context, that the live chickens are now ready for their next meal, while “The chickens are ready to eat and so are the noodles” can only mean that the chickens have been cooked and are now ready to be served.<sup>21</sup>

Putting aside intentional puns, the same works for lexical semantics. “Jill threw a ball, and so did John” is odd if Jill tossed a football down the field while John organized a formal dance. This implies that “ball” (and perhaps “threw” as well) is polysemous, not vague. The sentence “Jill has a child, and so does John,” is not at all strange if Jill’s child is female and John’s is male, which shows that “child” is vague with regard to gender, not polysemous (despite the obligatory marking of gender in such a case in other languages).

Turning back now to BH, this should mean that were we to find sentences where the two meanings of  $\text{כּוּל}$  are both activated in a coordinated way,

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in *Syntax and Semantics* 4, ed. John P. Kimball (New York: Academic Press, 1975), 1–36, 5.

20 Ibid., 17–20.

21 This was proposed by George Lakoff, “A Note on Vagueness and Ambiguity,” *Linguistic Inquiry* 1 (1970): 357–59, and see the discussion in Zwicky and Sadock, “Ambiguity Tests,”: 19–20.

this could establish that the word is vague, not polysemous. We do find, **וְלֹא-יִשְׂאוּ עֵצִים מִן-הַשָּׂדֶה וְלֹא יִחַטְּבוּ מִן-הַיְעָרִים** “they shall not carry wood (עצים) from the field, and they will not chop from the forest” (Ezek 39:10), in which **עצים** is clearly gapped in the second clause. Unfortunately, it has been argued that **לחטב עצים** does not mean “to chop down trees,” but rather “to chop into pieces of wood,”<sup>22</sup> in which case the whole sentence utilizes the same sense of **עצים**.

I am inclined to the position that the BH word **עץ** is vague, not polysemous. Another sense of **עץ** may support this, by filling in the semantic space between “tree” and “wood”: **עץ** also means “wooden post,” as is most clear in Esther 5:14, **וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ זֶרֶשׁ אִשְׁתּוֹ וְכָל-אֶהְבִּיּוֹ יַעֲשׂוּ-עֵץ גְּבוּהַ חֲמִשִּׁים, וַתַּעַשׂ הָעֵץ** “His wife Zeresh and all his entourage said to him, ‘Let them make a wooden post (עץ) that is fifty cubits tall’... He made the post (עץ).” The same sense is probably reflected in all the examples of “hanging” or “impalement” (תל"י) on an **עץ**, elsewhere in Esther and throughout the Bible.

## Aramaic and later Classical Hebrew: Separation of ‘tree’ from ‘wood’

Returning to traditional philological concerns, it is also well known that the vagueness (or polysemy) that existed in BH did not exist in Aramaic or Mishnaic Hebrew. The Aramaic of Daniel distinguishes between **אילן** “tree”<sup>23</sup> and **אע** (< **עע** < **עק** [cognate with **עץ**] by dissimilation<sup>24</sup>) “wood.”

22 See Aaron Koller, *The Semantic Field of Cutting Tools in Biblical Hebrew: The Interface of Philological, Semantic, and Archaeological Evidence*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly-Monograph Series 49 (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 2012), 29.

23 The word is presumably related etymologically to Hebrew **אלון** “oak” and **אֵלֶה** “terebinth.” For these trees, see, for example, Michael Zohary, *Plants of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 108–09.

24 On the vicissitudes of this lexeme, see Tania Notarius, “*ʿzq(n)* ‘wood’ in the Aramaic Ostraca from Idumea: A Note on the Reflex of Proto-Semitic /\*ṣ/ in Imperial Aramaic,” *Aramaic Studies* 4 (2006): 101–09. For thoughts on the phonetic realization of the word in Old Aramaic that led to the spelling **עק**, see Richard C. Steiner, “Addenda

For example, the people *שִׁבְחוּ לְאֱלֹהֵי דְהַבָּא וְכֶסֶפָּא נְחֹשֶׁא פְּרֻזְלָא אַעָא וְאַבְנָא* “praise gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone” (5:4), but Nebuchadnezzar reports that in his dream, *וְאָלוּ אֵילָן בְּגוּא אַרְעָא* “there was a tree in the middle of the Earth” (4:7).<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, the surviving Imperial Aramaic texts preserve no examples of *אֵילָן* “tree,” but there are many examples of *עֵק* “wood,” such as:

חזי עקא זי [הושר]ת לכי ביד פמן.

Note the wood I sent you in the hand of Paman (TADD 7.5–6).

עקן במנין 1+203 / עק ארז סי 5 / עק ארז מלות 50 / עק ארז פק 53 / עק ארז פעמי 24 / לקן 53 בגו / לקן חרתן 50 / לקן עתיקן 3 / עק סמכת 19  
Wood numbering 204 / cedar wood *beams* 5 / cedar wood *boards* 50 / cedar wood *planks* 53 / cedar wood *p'my* 24 / oars 53, including / new oars 50 / old oars 3 / wooden *supports* 19 (TADC 3.7 G2.20-24+3.1–4).

[מ]ה ישפטון עקן עם אשה בשר עם סכין איש עם מן[ך]

How could wood contest with a fire, or meat with a knife, or a commoner with a king? (TADC1.1 [Aḥiqar] 88)<sup>26</sup>

וְהוּא מִתְבְּנָא אֶבְנֵי גִלְלֵי וְאֵעַ מִתְשֵׁם בְּכַתְּלֵי

It is being built with dressed stones,<sup>27</sup> and wood is being placed in the walls (Ezra 5:8).

to *The Case for Fricative Laterals in Proto-Semitic*,” in *Semitic Studies in Honor of Wolf Leslau*, ed. Alan S. Kaye (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1991), 1500–1501.

- 25 See Gad Ben-Ami Sarfatti, *העברית בראי הסמנטיקה*, *Asuppot u-Mevo'ot be-Lashon* 5 (Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language, 2001), 33; Simcha Kogut, “עץ” נטעי אילן: מחקרים בלשון, in *ו'אילן' במקרא*, בתרגומיו הארמיים ובעברית הבתר-מקראית” *העברית ובאחיותיה מוגשים לאילן אלדר*, ed. Moshe Bar-Asher and Irit Meir (Jerusalem: Karmel, 2007), 73.
- 26 For some comments on possible wordplay in this proverb, see Shamir Yona, “אבני חכמות עמודיה שבעה: עיונים,” *דרך בחקר הסגנון, המבנה והרטוריקה במשלי אחיקר*, בספרות החכמה במקרא, ביהדות הבתר-מקראית ובמזרח הקדום, ed. Yona Shamir and Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, Beer Sheva 20 (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University, 2011), 125–39, 139.
- 27 The phrase *אֶבְנֵי גִלְלֵי* is not sufficiently clear. Based on contextual considerations, I would propose “quarried stones,” which are rough and not finished like ashlar; this would be an indication of the poor state of the materials used in the construction of

יִתְנַסֵּחַ אֶע מִן־בֵּיתָהּ וְזָקִיף יִתְמַחֵהָ עָלֶיהָ

A wooden beam is to be removed from his house and he shall be impaled on it (Ezra 6:11).

By the Roman period, Hebrew עץ had been limited in its meaning to “wood” through the introduction of a new word, אילן, into the lexicon. The borrowing of אילן into Hebrew seems to have taken place in late Second Temple times: the word is not attested in Qumran Hebrew, but is attested in an ostrakon found at Qumran, where (in a draft of a legal document) we read the phrase [והתאנים הדקל?] וכולאילן אחר].<sup>28</sup> Contracts provide ample opportunities for the mention of “trees” in the fields being sold. As Yardeni noted, similar phrases are found in other real estate contracts from the first two centuries CE in Hebrew (P. Yadin 46:4: ותשאר אילן), Nabatean (Naḥal Hever 2:6: ותמרין ושקמין ואילן), and Aramaic (Naḥal Hever 7:48: וכות כל תמרין ואילן).<sup>29</sup> In the Aramaic papyrus from Dura Europos, too, we find mention of the obligation of the heir to irrigate the trees (ארוי אילנני).<sup>30</sup> In P. Murabba‘at 30:18, on the other hand, we find

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the Temple. This agrees in large part with the view of Raymond.A. Bowman, “אבן גלל,” in Doron, ed. Israel T. Naamani and David Rudavsky (New York: National Association of Professors of Hebrew, 1965), 64–74; idem, *Aramaic Ritual Texts from Persepolis*, Oriental Institute Publications 91 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 44–49, and is not far from what is suggested, for other reasons, by Lawrence E. Stager, “The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 260 (1985): 1–35, 13. For discussion and other views, see Hugh G. M. Williamson, “’eben gēlāl (Ezra 5:8, 6:4) Again,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 280 (1990): 83–88; and Jonas C. Greenfield, “Notes on the Early Aramaic Lexicon,” *Orientalia Suecana* 33–35 (1984–1986): 149–56 = Greenfield, *Al Kanfei Yonah: Collected Studies of Jonas C. Greenfield on Semitic Philology*, ed. Shalom M. Paul, Michael E. Stone, and Avital Pinnick (Leiden: Brill, 2001), vol. 1, 251–57, at 254–56.

28 This is the corrected reading of the ostrakon from Qumran by Ada Yardeni, “A Draft of a Deed on an Ostrakon from Khirbet Qumrân,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 47 (1997): 233–37, ll. 7–8.

29 These examples are collected by Yardeni, “Draft,”: 233.

30 Józef T. Milik, “Parchemin judéo-araméen de Doura-Europus, an 200 ap. J.-C.,” *Syria* 45 (1968): 101 and 103.

אילן העץ, apparently reflecting the older formula. The word אילן is found also in all literary corpora from Roman times and later.

The word עץ, on the other hand, has its meaning generally restricted to “wood” by Mishnaic times (although there are exceptions).<sup>31</sup> In m. Bava Meši‘a 8:5, for example, we read of someone who is מוכר את זיתיו “sells his olive trees for their wood.” In m. Ševi‘it, אילן is used for standing trees (e.g., 1:2: (איזה הוא שדה האילן? כל שלושה אילנות לבית סאה)), but עצים is used for wood (e.g., 4:1: מלקט הוא אדם עצים ואבנים ועשבים: (מתוך שלו)). And in the formula of the *berakha* on tree fruits, there seems to be a distinction between the word used by the Tanna in formulating the law, and the word utilized in the archaizing and biblicizing *berakha* itself: ‘אילן) פירות האילן הוא אומר ‘בורא פרי העץ’ “on the fruit of the tree (אילן) one says ‘who creates the fruit of the tree (עץ)’” (m. Ber 6:1).<sup>32</sup>

Cross-linguistically, just as wood-tree polysemy is common, so too is the *loss* of this polysemy. According to Brown, “An increase in the salience of tree over time may lead to loss of polysemy through development of overt marking.”<sup>33</sup> Brown writes that speakers of languages with wood/tree polysemy “usually lived in small-scale, traditional societies while speakers of languages separating [the terms] usually live in large nation states.”<sup>34</sup> The loss of the polysemy is said to especially accompany advances in woodworking technology.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, Brown claims that the situation seen in the transition from BH to Mishnaic Hebrew reflects a rise in the salience of the independent categories “tree” and “wood” in the minds of the speakers of AH, which then led to the rise of independent lexemes for those categories. Such a rise

31 Again, see Kogut, “‘עץ’ ו‘אילן,’” 74–75.

32 Ibid., 73–74.

33 Brown, “The Growth of Ethnobiological Nomenclature,”: 3; see also Witkowski, Brown, and Chase, “Where do Tree Terms Come From?”: 8–10.

34 Cecil H. Brown, “Lexical Typology from an Anthropological Point of View,” in *Language Typology and Language Universals: An International Handbook*, ed. Martin Haspelmath, Ekkehard König, Wulf Oesterreicher, and Wolfgang Raible (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), vol. 2, 1178–90, 1180b.

35 Ibid.; also Brown, “The Growth of Ethnobiological Nomenclature,” and Witkowski, Brown, and Chase, “Where do Tree Terms Come From?”

in salience could be the result of new cultural practices, new technologies, or other factors. In the case of Hebrew, it does not seem provable that wood took on any extra significance in Roman times than earlier. The woodworking vocabulary of Iron Age Hebrew was quite developed,<sup>36</sup> and the woodworking techniques available in ancient Egypt do not compare unfavorably to those from Roman times.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the fact that Aramaic already lexically encoded the distinction between “tree” and “wood” at least by the late Achaemenid period suggests that whatever salience was needed for “trees” and “wood” to deserve their own words already existed in the Levant at that time.<sup>38</sup>

Instead, the development of separate words for “tree” and “wood” was likely the result of language contact. For Hebrew, this is a simple story to tell: as contact between Hebrew and Aramaic deepened over the course of the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods,<sup>39</sup> it became more important for speakers to be able to make the same semantic distinctions in Hebrew that they could make easily in Aramaic. Thus, under the influence of the semantic structure of Aramaic, the concept “wood/tree” was divided into two in Hebrew, as well. The word עץ, which had originally only meant “wood,” returned to that narrower sense, and the semantic space for “tree” was filled by אילן, borrowed from Aramaic.

For Aramaic, the question is somewhat harder, in part because the history of the two lexemes is less well known. It is possible that the word אילן is

36 Koller, *The Semantic Field of Cutting Tools*, 21–74.

37 Cf. Geoffrey Killen, *Egyptian Woodworking and Furniture* (Buckinghamshire: Shire, 1994), or idem, “Wood: Technology,” in *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, ed. Paul T. Nicholson and Ian Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 353–68, and Roger B. Ulrich, *Roman Woodworking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). There were, of course, differences in technology; the plane, the saw-pit, the drawknife, and other woodworking knives and tools were all Roman inventions. But this does not make a qualitative difference in the salience of woodworking.

38 I do not think it is likely that trees were more important in Aramean society than contemporary Israelite society.

39 See Aaron Koller, “Hebrew and Aramaic Language Contact,” in *A Companion to Ancient Near Eastern Languages*, ed. Rebecca Hasselbach-Andee (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, forthcoming).

a neologism in late Imperial Aramaic, as well, in which case language contact during the time of the Persian Empire, perhaps in Egypt (which had long distinguished between *nht* “tree” and *ht* “wood” by then) would be a plausible hypothesis. Somewhat earlier, the Assyrians in the eighth century consciously dominated the trade in the timber from the Lebanon.<sup>40</sup> This may have had the effect of raising the salience of trees and wood within the Levant.<sup>41</sup> Phoenician evidence could be instructive in detangling the origins of this semantic distinction in the languages of the Levant, but unfortunately none is forthcoming from the extant texts. If the lexical distinction between אילן and עץ\* within Aramaic is even older than the Neo-Assyrian period, then of course some other sort of explanation must be sought.

### Tree > wood or wood > tree?

A final question that may be asked of the Hebrew material is whether עץ originally meant “wood” and was then extended to mean “tree” (later to be replaced in this sense by אילן), or if it originally meant “tree,” and then came to mean “wood,” as well—in which case the original meaning was lost with the introduction of אילן, and only the secondary meaning preserved. Brown had claimed that wood/tree polysemy was “invariably” the result of the extension of the word for “wood” to include also the

- 40 See the discussion of the actions of the Neo-Assyrian official Qurdi-Assur-lamur in Shigeo Yamada, “Qurdi-Assur-lamur: His Letters and Career,” in *Treasures on Camels’ Humps: Historical and Literary Studies from the Ancient Near East Presented to Israel Eph’al*, ed. Mordechai Cogan and Dan’el Kahn (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2008), 296–311. In one letter, Qurdi-Assur-lamur explicitly forbids the sale of timber to the Egyptians or Phoenicians so that the Assyrians can monopolize its trade. See also the discussion of the cutting of trees in Shawn Zelig Aster, “אחת דיבר סנחריב, שתיים – לעיבוד המקורות האשוריים בסיפור הנבואי על מלחמת סנחריב ביהודה” *Shnaton* 19 (2009): 105–24, 109–12. For more on Mesopotamian sources of timber, especially in the Neo-Assyrian period, see P. R. S. Moorey, *Ancient Mesopotamian Materials and Industries: The Archaeological Evidence* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 347–61.
- 41 I am indebted to Shawn Zelig Aster for suggesting the Neo-Assyrian period as a potentially fruitful time for tree vocabulary to rise in importance.

meaning “tree.”<sup>42</sup> This claim of “invariably” was challenged by others, who pointed to examples where there was evidence that the term meant originally “tree” and was later extended to “wood.”<sup>43</sup>

Can this question be answered for Hebrew? No certainty is possible, but besides the likelihood, based on cross-linguistic data, that  $\text{ָעֵץ}$  originally meant “wood,” there is intriguing indirect evidence from Egyptian that “wood” was the central meaning of the term. The writing system of Ancient Egyptian is quite helpful for questions of folk taxonomy, since nouns (like most other words) are written with concluding “determinatives,” signs which effectively label the word just written as belonging to a certain category. From the Old Kingdom on, all trees were labeled with the “tree determinative” ( $\text{𓂏}$ ), which was the hieroglyph for the sycamore.<sup>44</sup>

There is an exception, though: the word  $\text{ִשׁ}$ , which does not refer to a specific species, but is a generic for some categories of trees, and which Steiner has argued persuasively originated in Semitic  $\text{ָעֵץ}$ .<sup>45</sup> It is clear from Egyptian texts that the  $\text{ִשׁ}$  was imported for use as wood,<sup>46</sup> and indeed about a third of the time,  $\text{ִשׁ}$  is written with the [timber] determinative ( $\text{𓂏}$ ) rather than the [tree] determinative.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the Egyptians at least perceived that

42 Brown, “The Growth of Ethnobiological Nomenclature,” 3.

43 Thilo C. Schadeberg, “Comment on Cecil H. Brown, The Growth of Ethnobiological Nomenclature,” *Current Anthropology* 27 (1986), 15, pointing to Bantu, where the word for tree and wood is formally marked as belonging to a grammatical gender which has sometimes been called “‘tree gender’ because it contains not only the word for ‘tree’ but also many different specific tree names.”

44 As mentioned, Egyptian did not have a term for “tree,” but the use of the tree determinative shows that Egyptian scribes were cognizant of the category, and that “tree” was therefore a covert category; see above, n. 3.

45 Richard C. Steiner, *Early Northwest Semitic Serpent Spells in the Pyramid Texts*, Harvard Semitic Studies 61 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 11–12, observing that the final consonant, in the third millennium BCE, was pronounced [ʃitʔ], with a glottalic (ejective) lateral fricative.

46 Peter Ian Kuniholm, “Wood,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, 5 vols., ed. Eric M. Meyers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), vol. 5., 347–49. Steiner quotes John Baines as saying that  $\text{ִשׁ}$  is “probably generic, rather than referring to only one species”; see Steiner, *Early Northwest Semitic*, 12, end of n. 58.

47 Goldwasser, *Prophets, Lovers, and Giraffes*, 54.



the central meaning of Semitic עץ was “wood,” and they even marked it as “timber” even when they imported whole trees.

## Conclusion

The philological data that has long been known to Hebraists is not only important for its own sake, but is also useful information for scholars interested in cross-linguistic tendencies. At the same time, the findings of anthropological linguists and others scholars studying languages around the world can helpfully inform the questions that can be asked of the Hebrew data. Prof. Steiner has long modeled how linguistics and philology can be mutually beneficial fields, and this small contribution in that vein is offered as a tribute to a master scholar and teacher.

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# מחקרים בשפות שמיות, מקרא ומדעי היהדות מוגשים לראובן שמחה שטיינר

עורכים:

אהרן קולר, מרדכי כהן, עדינה מושבי



הוצאת הספרים של ישיבה יוניברסיטי  
ע"ש מיכאל שרף



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