

Modern Lexicography of Biblical Hebrew

Shalom E. Holtz

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The modern lexicography of biblical Hebrew began with the publication of *Hebräisch-deutsches Handwörterbuch über die Schriften des Alten Testament* (Leipzig, 1810-1812) by Wilhelm Gesenius. The main statement of Gesenius's methodology occurs in the introductory essay to the second edition of the dictionary (Leipzig, 1823). Gesenius identifies three main "sources of Hebrew lexicography," which he lists at the very beginning of the treatise, in descending order of importance. These are:

- 1) the *linguistic usage of the Old Testament* itself, in so far as this can be seen from the contexts of the individual instances and from a comparison of all those passages in which a word or a phrase occurs; 2) The *traditional knowledge* of the Hebrew language which has been preserved among *the Jews* and is deposited partly in the *ancient translations*, partly in the *Jewish commentaries* and *dictionaries*; 3) The comparison with *related dialects* . . .

(Gesenius in Smend 2007:64)

In addition to these “sources,” Gesenius formulates six lexicographical “rules and observations,” which include requiring a strict distinction “between what belongs to the sphere of the dictionary and what to the cognate fields of the grammarian and commentator,” and attention to “the constructions and phrases built up with the words” (Gesenius in Smend 2007:65).

The earliest editions of Gesenius’s *Handwörterbuch* were organized in Hebrew alphabetical order by attested form. Only conjugated verbs were grouped together by root; particles and all classes of nouns (proper and common, including participles) appeared in separate entries, rather than as subentries of roots. Roots of nominal forms were shown in parentheses. Words in Hebrew and Aramaic (called Chaldean until the tenth edition, 1886) were listed together.

Gesenius himself oversaw the publication of the first four editions of his German *Handwörterbuch* (Leipzig, 1810-12; 1823; 1828; 1834) and Franz Eduard Christoph Dietrich edited the fifth (Leipzig, 1857), sixth (Leipzig, 1863) and seventh (Leipzig, 1868) editions, all of which hewed close to the original work. The eighth through the

eleventh editions (Leipzig, 1878; 1883; 1886; 1890), by Ferdinand Mühlau and Wilhelm Volck, were the first to include Akkadian in the cognate data. These editions were subject to severe criticism; they followed the faulty etymological method that posited relationships between trilateral roots based on the first two radicals. Franz Buhl, who oversaw the next six editions of the *Handwörterbuch* (Leipzig, 1895; 1899; 1905; 1910; 1915; 1921), corrected many of the previous editions' shortcomings and gave the book its now classic form. Hebrew and Aramaic roots were separated for the first time in the 1895 edition, and the available cognate information was set on solid ground. The appearance of the eighteenth edition (Berlin, 1987-), edited by Rudolf Meyer and Herbert Donner, attests to Gesenius's enduring influence in the field. It adheres to Gesenius's stated lexicographical principles even as it draws on the latest advances in the study of Hebrew and other relevant fields.

Due to the almost immediate English translations of Gesenius's lexicographical works, his influence was felt beyond the German scholarly community. The most enduring example of this influence is *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* by Francis Brown, Samuel Rolls Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs (Oxford, 1907; part

1 appeared in 1892). The authors expressly acknowledge their debt to Gesenius, upon whom they bestow the title "the father of modern Hebrew lexicography." Their work is directly based on Edward Robinson's translation of the Latin version of Gesenius's lexicon; in fact, their dictionary is meant to address the lack, since 1859, of an up-to-date English Gesenius. According to its title page, the dictionary was "edited with constant reference" to the *Thesaurus philologicus Criticus Linguae Hebraeae et Chaldaeae Veteris testamenti*, a Latin work begun by Gesenius and completed by Emil Rödiger in 1858, and also "with authorized use of the latest German editions of Gesenius's Handwörterbuch," which, at the time of publication, meant Buhl's 1899 revision.

The Brown-Driver-Briggs *Lexicon* emphasizes etymology, in addition to meaning. Thus, it is organized throughout by triliteral root, rather than in purely alphabetic order by forms of words. It also includes etymological information for all entries, including personal names, and draws on the full range of comparative philological data available to the original editors. Even though more than a century has passed since its first publication, it remains a standard English dictionary of Biblical Hebrew, known to the scholarly community as BDB. However, unlike the works by Gesenius on it which

it is based, no major revision of the BDB has been published to date. Therefore, the original strengths of the dictionary, especially its etymologies, have become weaknesses, since it does not include the most important advances, such as the discovery of new Hebrew inscriptions, the decipherment of Ugaritic, and the publication of two Akkadian dictionaries. Jo Ann Hackett and John Huehnergard have announced plans for a revision that promises to ensure BDB's now traditional pride of place (2008).

By the middle of the twentieth century, both Buhl's latest German edition of Gesenius and BDB had grown out-of-date. Francis Zorell began to address this need in his *Lexicon hebraicum et aramaicum Veteris Testamenti* (Rome, 1940-1959), completed by Louis Semkowski, and its Aramaic volume, completed by Ernest Vogt (Rome, 1971), but the drawn-out publication and its Latin definitions limited its usefulness. The Swiss scholars Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner collaborated to publish *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden, 1953), with Koehler responsible for the Hebrew section (pp. 1-1044) and Baumgartner responsible for the Aramaic (pp. 1045-1138). A second edition, edited by Baumgartner alone, appeared in 1958, with the addition of a

supplement, which included a German-Hebrew and a German-Aramaic glossary, lists of botanical and zoological terms, and corrections to the first edition. The entries in these first two editions are organized by form, rather than by verbal root, and provide definitions in both German and English. In the third edition, bearing the title *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexicon zum Alten Testament*, the English definitions were dropped and the material from the *Supplement* was incorporated into the body of the entries. The third edition draws on the latest available scholarship, especially pertaining to the post-biblical history of the Hebrew language, provides extensive bibliographic references, and abandons many of the conjectural emendations proposed in the earlier editions. This German-only edition appeared in six fascicles from 1967 to 1996, edited at first (1967) by Baumgartner and Johann Jakob Stamm, and subsequently by Stamm alone, with the assistance of Benedikt Hartmann, Ze'ev Ben-Ḥayyim, Eduard Yechezkel Kutscher and Philippe Reymond. As the German fascicles were appearing, William L. Holladay used them together with the earlier editions to produce *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, 1971), with abridged entries in English only. A complete English translation, *The Hebrew and*

Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, appeared under the supervision of M.E.J.

Richardson (Leiden, 1995).

There has also been lexicographical work on Biblical Hebrew written in Modern Hebrew. The first three volumes of the *Thesaurus of the Language of the Bible* (Jerusalem, 1957, 1959 and 1968), by Samuel E. Loewenstamm and Joshua Blau, cover all entries through the letter *ṭet* in a combined dictionary and concordance. Definitions are in Modern Hebrew and English, with the Hebrew providing bibliographic references and, when it is probative, selected information from extra-biblical Hebrew and other cognate languages. After the publication of the third volume, when this project was suspended, Menahem Zevi Kaddari, who was responsible for the entries for the letters *ḥet* and *ṭet*, retained all the materials. He has published *A Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew (Alef-Taw)* (Ramat Gan, 2006; Hebrew), which covers all words in the Hebrew Bible. In this work, the definitions are in Modern Hebrew only and the concordance has been removed. Kaddari updates all entries written after he became involved with this project (from the letter *ḥet* on); entries written earlier are republished without updated bibliography. Both Kaddari's *Dictionary* and the earlier

Thesaurus rely extensively on the information in the Hebrew *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (Jerusalem, 1950-1982).

By including data from cognate languages, all of these dictionaries maintain philology's traditional etymological focus. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, edited by David J.A. Clines, which began to appear in 1993 (Sheffield), explicitly rejects this focus in favor of an approach informed by modern linguistics. The meanings of words are determined strictly according to usage in context, without any mention of cognates. In addition to translating words into English, entries report words' relationships to others by including such information as the subjects and objects of verbs, adjectives that regularly modify nouns, and words' synonyms and antonyms. In its effort to "view Hebrew simply as a language like any other ancient language," this dictionary greatly expands its textual sources to include everything written in Hebrew before 200 CE, most importantly Ben Sira and the original compositions from Qumran. The Spanish *Diccionario bíblico hebreo-español*, by Luis Alonso Schökel (Madrid, 1994) shares a similar focus on Biblical Hebrew usage in context, rather than etymology.

The most extensive lexicographical effort to situate Biblical Hebrew within the long history of the language remains *Thesaurus totius hebraicitatis et veteris et recentioris*,

begun by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (vols. 1- 7) and edited after his death by M.H. Segal (vols. 8 and 9) and Naphtali Hertz Tur-Sinai (vols. 10-16) (New York and London, 1960; first volume, Berlin, 1910), with definitions in Hebrew, but with glosses in German, French and English.

In addition to these comprehensive dictionaries, there are others that provide specialized information. These include the two main “theological” dictionaries, the *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Stuttgart, 1970-1981; translated into English by John T. Willis as *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids, 1972-1981]) and *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, edited by Ernst Jenni with Claus Westermann (Munich, 1971-1976; translated into English by Mark E. Biddle as *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Peabody, 1997]). Both are devoted to explicating the particular meanings of words as they are used to discuss religious concepts, a natural direction of research given Biblical Hebrew’s place as the language of foundational religious texts. *An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew*, by Hayim ben Yosef Tawil (Hoboken, 2009), is another specialized dictionary with the

express purpose of exposing the meaning of Hebrew lexemes and idioms by turning to etymological or semantic equivalents in Akkadian.

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