

REVIEW ESSAY

THE SHEFFIELD DICTIONARY OF CLASSICAL HEBREW

by

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David J. A. Clines, ed. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. Vol. 1: *Aleph*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993. 475 pp.

It is not difficult to see the massive amount of excellent work that went into the production of this new dictionary of ancient Hebrew. Unfortunately, it is equally easy to see its faults and failings.

First let us set the book under review in the context of other dictionaries of ancient Hebrew. The two standard works of Biblical Hebrew currently in use are BDB (Brown-Driver-Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1907) and HALAT (Koehler-Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament*, 1967–90, this work has now begun to appear in English translation). Both of these are based on older works, the former going ultimately back to Gesenius (1815) and the latter based on an earlier work by the same authors (1953). Most importantly, both works rely heavily on etymologies, and both are limited solely to Biblical Hebrew (with additional sections on Biblical Aramaic).

By contrast, the present project, headed by D. J. A. Clines, calls itself *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (hereafter *DCH*), by which is meant all sources of the Hebrew language up to 200 C.E. Accordingly, this work lists all words occurring in the Bible, inscriptions, Ben Sira, Qumran, Nahal Hever, Wadi Murabba'at, etc. The nonbiblical materials comprise about 15 percent of the corpus. Because of the expanded corpus and because of the larger amount of information it includes, this new dictionary will, upon completion,

be more than double the size of *HALAT* and nearly four times the size of *BDB*. The project plan calls for eight volumes with an estimated 3,835 total pages.

DCH departs from its predecessors in listing no etymologies. The editors (I use the plural form to refer to Clines and his staff of researchers) believe that the presence of cognate material in other dictionaries “is highly problematic, and it is difficult to see what purpose it serves,” and that “data about the meaning of cognate words in Akkadian and Arabic, for example, are strictly irrelevant to the Hebrew language” (p. 17).

Thus, instead of emphasizing the *meanings* of words with attention to etymology, *DCH* emphasizes the *uses* of words. Or in the editors’ words: “we subscribe to the dictum that the meaning of a word is its use in the language. The focus here, then, is not so much on the meanings, or the translation equivalents, of individual words as on the patterns and combinations in which words are used; and attention is paid primarily not to the unusual and difficult words but to the common words” (pp. 14–15). With this in mind, *DCH* displays “in exhaustive detail, all the subjects and objects that are attested for every verb, and for nouns, all the verbs and all the other nouns with which they are connected” (p. 15). (As we shall see with our example below, the information presented is in fact even more complete.) This feature is undoubtedly the most important contribution of this dictionary.¹

To take an example, let us look at the common noun אדם. The entry is divided into four sections, based on the different uses of the word: “humanity, people,” “individual,” “the man” (with article), and “son of a person, individual” (in the specific expression בן אדם). Under the first of these definitions the entry presents the following information: the approximately forty verbs predicated of אדם as subject (חיה, ליץ, דמה, פרה, קרא, זעק, בטא, שחא, טעם, ראה, חטא, ירא, זכר, סתר, and so on); nominal clauses such as מה אדם (Ps 144:3); the approximately thirty verbs of which אדם serves as object (עשה, ברא, גדל, שים, שית, מחא, כרת, etc.); dozens of construct phrases with אדם serving as both *nomen regens* and *nomen rectum* (e.g., אדם רשעה [1QS 11:9], אדם לב אדם [Gen 8:21], etc.); appositional usages (in this case there is but one: אדם פרשים [Isa 22:6]); adjectives attached to אדם (e.g., רע in Ps 140:2); prepositions used with the word (most of the standard ones [ב-, ל-, כ-, מן, etc.]); and finally various collocations (with בהמה, נפש, etc.). Also,

1. The fourth and final volume of *HALAT* moved in this direction, though not with the completeness of *DCH*; see my review in *AJS Review* 18 (1993): 95–102.

scattered throughout the entry are indications of various words found in parallelism with אדם (e.g., איש, ארץ, etc.). And all of this appears only in the first section of the entry, under “humanity, people.” For the following three sections corresponding to the other uses of אדם, the same wealth of detailed information is found. It is the totality of these data that I had in mind when I opened this review by referring to “the massive amount of excellent work that went into the production of this new dictionary.” This approach to the Hebrew vocabulary represents a major departure from all previous efforts in the field of Hebrew lexicography.

But I also referred at the outset to the faults and failings of *DCH*, and it is to these that I now turn my attention.

First, one must question very seriously the decision not to include cognate material. I include here several samples of errors which can arise from such omissions. The *hapax legomenon* אַטִּים in Isa 19:3 is listed as a plural noun meaning “ghosts” under the entry אַטִּי (in brackets to indicate that the form is not attested) with the note “sg. perh. אַט or אַט” (p. 202). Attention to etymology, however, reveals that the word is a borrowing from Akkadian *eṭemmu* “spirit of the dead.”² While it is true that native Hebrew speakers may have understood אַטִּים as a plural noun, there certainly is no absolute proof of this. Since in origin the *mem* is part of the word, listing the entry under אַטִּי and suggesting the above singular forms are both inappropriate.

Similarly, *DCH* assumes that the famous crux אשדה in Deut 33:2 is to be understood as comprising the vocables אש “fire” and דה “law,” though at least the partial disclaimer “appar.” is added (p. 401). But a glance at etymology reveals, as any Hebraist knows, that דה is a Persian loanword in Hebrew. Do the editors of *DCH* assume that Deuteronomy 33 was authored in the Persian period? Clearly the poem is much earlier, and obviously אשדה means something else.³

As these two examples plainly indicate, lexicographical research cannot proceed as if the language in question existed in a vacuum. If the editors wish to eschew cognates, fine, but at the very least loanwords demand special attention. The user of the dictionary is entitled to know, for example, that the *hapax legomenon* אטון “linen” in Prov 7:16 is a loanword from Egyptian,

2. Cf. H. R. [C.] Cohen, *Biblical Hapax Legomena in the Light of Akkadian and Ugaritic* (Missoula, Mont., 1978), p. 42.

3. For a survey of opinions, see G. A. Rendsburg, “Hebrew *šdt* and Ugaritic *išdym*,” *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 8 (1980): 81–84.

especially since this word occurs in the construct phrase אֶטוֹן מְצִרִים in its only attestation (as *DCH* notes [p. 202]). Similarly, the reader would be enlightened to learn that the *hapax legomenon* אֲשִׁוּתִיה “her towers” in Jer 50:15 (listed under אֲשִׁיה in brackets [p. 413]) is a loanword from Akkadian *asītu*,⁴ an important point in light of the fact that the sole occurrence of this word appears in the prophet’s oracle to Babylon as an example of what I call addressee-switching. And, of course, a variety of Persian loanwords attested only in books of the exilic period should be so indicated.

The editors may respond to my criticism with their aforesaid statement that “attention is paid primarily not to the unusual and difficult words but to the common words.” But this disclaimer is no compensation for the kind of omissions (and, in some cases, errors) that I am pointing out regarding rare words.

Furthermore, cognate evidence sometimes affects our understanding even of common words. *DCH* continues the time-honored tradition of translating אֶשָּׁה as “fire offering” (p. 411). But Ugaritic instructs us that we are dealing with different roots, for in this language “fire” is *išt*, and the rarer word *ift* means “gift, offering.”⁵ Thus, אֶשָּׁה should be disassociated from אֶשׁ and instead should be rendered “gift, offering” with no connection to fire.

I turn now to another issue. The editors decided to close their corpus at 200 C.E. The reason for this is clear: to have adjusted it by another few decades would have entailed incorporating a vast amount of additional material from the Mishnah and the Tosefta (perhaps also various tannaitic midrashim, depending on one’s view as to the date of the Mekhilta and other texts). One certainly can empathize with the dilemma, and one can fully understand why these materials were not included in the corpus. To have included tannaitic sources would have made the project all the more massive, and I can imagine that many more years would have passed before this first volume appeared. And yet if the editors were fully to be faithful to their goal of producing a dictionary that “differs from traditional Hebrew lexica in that it designates and defines a phase of the language as Classical Hebrew” (p. 14), they would have included tannaitic texts as well. The phase of the language known alternatively as Mishnaic Hebrew or more properly Tannaitic Hebrew is part and parcel of Classical Hebrew. Some may argue otherwise; but everyone, I

4. See Cohen, *Biblical Hapax Legomena*, pp. 46–47.

5. See most recently J. C. Greenfield, “Etymological Semantics,” *Zeitschrift für Althebraistik* 6 (1993): 26–37, in particular pp. 33–34.

think, would agree that if a dictionary were to include Nahal Hever and Wadi Murabba'at texts, then certainly tannaitic texts should be included too. To illustrate this point, in its entry for אחראי "guarantor" (p. 195), *DCH* lists just one attestation, Murabba'at 30 2:24. But this word occurs several additional times in the Mishnah and Tosefta, and the user of *DCH* would benefit from this knowledge. Again, I understand how much more work would have been involved by extending *DCH*'s corpus to the Mishnah and related texts; but on the other hand the database already exists in microfiche form in *The Historical Dictionary of the Hebrew Language: Materials for the Dictionary*, Series I: 200 BCE–300 CE (Jerusalem, 1988), produced by the Academy of the Hebrew Language. In fact, the editors state that they utilized this valuable resource for most of the Dead Sea Scrolls vocabulary (p. 31).

Another criticism I shall raise concerns emendations. The editors of *DCH* decided "as a rule to include all emendations that are adopted" in *BDB*, *KB/HALAT*, and *BHS* (p. 17). "But we never say whether we agree with an emendation or not; . . . our policy has been to avoid making judgments on such issues" (*ibid.*). I am in full agreement with this position, but one must question why list proposed emendations at all. The editors state clearly that "unlike previous dictionaries [*DCH*] has a theoretical base in modern linguistics" (p. 14). I know of no linguistic approach which would waste time and space dealing with proposed emendations. Avi Hurvitz is absolutely correct when he states that "a linguistic study whose central purpose is to seek facts and avoid conjectures, should base itself on actual texts—difficult though they may be—rather than depend on reconstructed texts."⁶ And while I do not accuse *DCH* of basing itself on emendations, the very mentioning of them in the entries of individual words will lead users of the dictionary away from the work's stated goal.

There are some very useful features in this work. Each entry begins with the number of occurrences in each of the subcorpora. For example, we learn that אָן occurs 790.55.228.3 times, referring, respectively, to the Bible, Ben Sira, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and inscriptions. In addition there is an exhaustive table listing "Words Beginning with Aleph in Order of Frequency" (pp. 67–88), taking us from the ubiquitous אה with 11,826 occurrences to the several hundred instances of words which occur only once (most of these are proper names).

6. *A Linguistic Study of the Relationship Between the Priestly Source and the Book of Ezekiel* (Paris, 1982), p. 19.

As just indicated in the parenthetical remark, *DCH* includes all proper names, both personal names and toponyms. The former appear in large numbers not only in the Bible, but also in inscriptions, especially seals. It is a major advance of this dictionary to include all such data. When we combine this exhaustiveness with the distribution given, we learn at an instant that a name such as אֵלִיָּאֵר, occurring 0.0.0.3 times, appears only in inscriptions. The entry then lists the specific occurrences, one of which is in Arad ostrakon 21 and two of which are on seals (p. 290). Toponyms are included with specific geographic information where available. Thus, for example, since little or nothing is known about אֶתְמָא, the entry states simply “second station of exodus” (p. 461); in contrast to the entry for אֶדְמָא, which states “town in Jordan Valley, appar. ident. with Adamah, T. ed-Dāmye, S of confluence of Jabbok and Jordan” (p. 129).

The volume closes with a reverse English-Hebrew index. It appears that only words representing primary glosses are included. Thus, for example, to cite some of the words discussed below, neither “lamb” nor “army” is listed in this index.

I append here comments on selected entries, recognizing fully that some of my remarks devolve from attention to cognate usage (I have omitted references to secondary literature):

אֵי/אָי: This Ketiv/Qere occurs in Prov 31:4, but means neither “or” (p. 147) nor “where?” (p. 202). The best interpretation is “any” (related to the negative particle אֵי “not”) as both the context and the Ugaritic cognate *ay* demonstrate.

אֶרְל (p. 151): The gloss given is “body or perh. belly”; but given the use of this word in Ugaritic, specifically in Krt 88, 178, where it refers to a large army, the meaning “body” is assured and “belly” can be dismissed.

אֶרְר (p. 164): *DCH* errs in continuing the identification of Ur of the Chaldees with the famous Ur “in southern Babylon, on right bank of Euphrates, mod. T. el-Muqayyar.” There simply is no evidence for this identification. Instead, Abraham’s Ur should be identified with modern Urfa in southern Turkey (near Harran), which not only accords with local Jewish and Muslim tradition, but truly is “beyond the River,” to use the biblical expression.

אֶרְח “weigh” (p. 170): Somewhere the reader should be apprised that the Semitic root of “weigh” is *wzn*, not to be confused with the word for “ear,

hear,” whose root is *'dn*. Note that these two words have only one root consonant in common.

אכל “eat” (pp. 240–245): Somewhere in this long entry should be a reference to the sexual usage of this verbal root, seen most clearly in Prov 30:20, but also in Gen 39:6 and perhaps in Exod 2:20.

אלהים (pp. 277–286, especially p. 286): The word appears 2,848 times in the corpus. According to *DCH* it always means “God, god, gods, etc.,” except in 1 Sam 28:13 **אֱלֹהִים מִן הָאָרֶץ**, where *DCH* uses the gloss “ghost,” though it renders the phrase “a god (Samuel) I have seen rising from the ground.” This is an admittedly difficult phrase, but the usage is clear. In Egypt and elsewhere in antiquity, and no doubt in popular belief in ancient Israel, the dead were considered divine. These words in the mouth of the medium of Endor indicate that she considered the deceased to be gods, and in any case the plural verb shows that **אלהים** needs to be a plural subject. I suggest “gods (i.e., the deified dead) I have seen rising from the ground.”

אלקים (p. 300): This word is a *hapax* appearing in Prov 30:31. The gloss reads “God, i.e. var. of **אלהים**,” after which appear several suggestions based mainly on emendations. Only at the end of the entry does *DCH* note “the army” as a possibility. In my estimation, this is the only meaning that makes any sense in the context, though “the kinsfolk” or “the tribe” would be more precise. This understanding is based on Arabic, where the phrase *al-qawm* means “the kinsfolk” or “the tribe.” Note that Prov 30:1–31:9 are the words of Massaite kings of the Syrian Desert, whose language in antiquity would have had much in common with both Aramaic and Arabic, as a quick glance at these chapters demonstrates. This factor explains the presence of a pure Arabism in the Bible.

אמרי שפר: This phrase occurs in Gen 49:21 and has elicited much discussion. *DCH* assumes it means “words of beauty” (p. 326) or through emendation “branches/antlers of beauty” (p. 314), and only tertiarily suggests “lambs of beauty.” I find this last interpretation the most convincing by far, and the word deserves its own entry (on p. 326 under **אמר** the reader is directed elsewhere). The word is cognate to the common Aramaic word for “lamb,” and it is no surprise to see this lexeme in the words about Naphtali, one of the northernmost tribes. It stands, therefore, as an exemplar of Israelian Hebrew.

אראל “hero” (p. 365) and **אריאל** “altar hearth” (p. 377): Somewhere the reader should learn that **אראל** occurs in Mesha Stele, line 12, which has been interpreted as either of these rare words.

I am quite sure that the scholars responsible for this dictionary will read my review and claim that I have misunderstood their goals of concentrating on *uses* of words instead of *meanings*, and of devoting most of their efforts to the common words in the language. I understand these points; I commend the researchers involved in this project for the major strides taken to achieving their stated goals; and I recognize the major contributions that this important reference work makes. My negative comments are a reaction mainly to the claim that cognates “are strictly irrelevant to the Hebrew language,” as I hope to have demonstrated in this essay. Admittedly I have concentrated my efforts in this review on the rare words in the language, something which *DCH* professes not to have done. But then one might ask, why bother including rare words at all, especially the hundreds of proper names? If the dictionary wished to deal mainly with the uses of a word, and not its meanings, presumably a critical mass of data is necessary by which to ascertain such information. The point is that *DCH* chose to be exhaustive, and to include all words in the language (as opposed to dealing only with words which occur, let us say, at least ten times in the corpus). Having made that choice, I believe that the project needs to devote additional energies to these rarer lexemes, and of course it is specifically these items which require an eye to cognate usages.

In sum, one is tempted to recall H. L. Ginsberg’s dictum concerning Ugaritic studies and apply it to Clines and his staff: the only ones who have not made errors in writing dictionaries are those who have not attempted to do so. Clines himself anticipated some of the criticisms of this essay with the following words: “Critics can easily think of many things we might have done, and blame us for these omissions. They have already started to make such criticisms, and most of their criticisms are valid. In the end, though, we have to say that we prefer our way of writing a Hebrew dictionary to their way of not writing a Hebrew dictionary” (p. 10). Yet, at the same time, I cannot help but feel that just a little more work in selected areas would have increased the value of this project immensely.

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