Double Polysemy in Proverbs 31:19

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Wordplay of various types is widely recognized by biblical scholars. One of the most unique types is what I call double polysemy, in which two key words in a line of poetry both bear double meaning, with both sets of meanings intended by the author. Thus, for example, in Gen 49:6 and in Job 3:6, the word pairs יבִּי/יְבַי and יִּתְּדֵי/יַדְּיִּד mean both 'enter' and 'be united', as well as 'desire' and 'rejoice'.

An excellent example of this device is found in Prov 31:19: יֶדֶהַ שָּׁלֶלָה בַּקָּקֵדָה וּרְמָפֶה תָּמֶכַּה פָּלֶק 'her hands she sends forth to the spindle, her palms take hold of the whorl'. I have translated this passage in the traditional way, recognizing the two words קָקֵד

1. For basic treatment, see Jack M. Sasson, "Wordplay in the OT," IDBSup (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) 968–70.
and pêlek (nonpausal pelek) as technical terms for spinning tools. These are the primary meanings that these words bear in the present passage.

A demur regarding kisôr was raised by W. F. Albright, who claimed that the word does not mean 'spindle', but rather 'skill', from the Canaanite root kšr. As support for this view, Albright noted that the early versions understood the term in this manner (Targum kûšrâ, Peshîṭta kaššâruṭâ; see also Greek symphoronta 'needed things'). To be sure, there are lexicographers who have understood Aramaic kâšrâ (variant kûnsêrâ) in this passage as 'spindle', but in truth there is no independent confirmation of this meaning beyond the targumic rendering of Prov 31:19. The only other place where kâšrâ (again with the variant kûnsêrâ) is used in all of Aramaic literature is in the Targum to Prov 3:8, but here the word refers to a part of the human body ('spine' and 'navel' are the two most common interpretations). In light of these facts, it is understandable that Albright reached the conclusion that kisôr in Prov 31:19 means 'skill'.

In addition, though one cannot be sure, Albright probably found the meaning 'spindle' for kisôr to be problematic due to the lack of an acceptable etymology for the word. But he himself in an earlier treatment discussed two plausible etymologies for kisôr 'spindle', namely Sumerian ki-sûr 'spinning place' and Sumerian giš-su 'spinning instrument'. The former etymology first was proposed by A. Boissier, and he was followed by S. Landerds dor-

3. In translating kisôr as 'spindle' and pêlek as 'whorl', I accept the suggested definitions of Yael Yisraeli, “Mela‘khah: Ma‘al‘khot ha-Bayit: Tevuyah,” Encyclopaedia Biblica 4, cols. 998–1003. In the present article I attempt no further exactitude in defining kisôr and pêlek, and I recognize that cognates of pêlek (on which see below) often are translated 'spindle' in the standard dictionaries.


5. Since the root is properly kîr (cf. Ugaritic), one would expect kîr in Aramaic. Accordingly, one will assume Aramaic kîr to be a borrowing from Canaanite. Some Targum manuscripts read kûnsêrâ, with inserted n. This, in turn, most likely explains the double s in the Syriac form.


7. However, see below the discussion concerning y. Yehanot 12d in the Jerusalem Talmud.


9. W. F. Albright, Die Religion Israels im Lichte der archäologischen Ausgrabungen (Munich: Reinhardt, 1956) 242, n. 68. I have not found this discussion included in any of Albright's books in English of a similar title, and I assume that Albright later surrendered the idea of kisôr = 'spindle' with a possible Sumerian etymology in favor of kisôr = 'skill'. J. Friedrich ("Zum urartäischen Lexikon," ArOr 4 [1932] 69) also noted that kisôr is of foreign origin, but he did not specify the derivation.

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The latter etymology was proposed by F. Cornelius, and it appears (with a question mark) in the dictionary of W. Baumgartner.

Neither of these combinations of vocables occurs in extant Sumerian texts, but they are perfectly in keeping with Sumerian formations. The words ki and giš appear in a variety of Sumerian terms connected with the textile industry, and sur is the common word for 'spin'. Of these two suggestions, I prefer the latter one since giš-sur 'spinning instrument' yields the desired meaning 'spindle' more appropriately than ki-sur 'spinning place'. At the same time, however, I accept the possibility that ki-sur 'spinning place' in time could have come to mean 'spindle'.

In either case, there are no phonological difficulties with these derivations. If ki-sur is posited as the etymology of kišör, the only issue that requires attention is the use of Hebrew š to represent a Sumerian s. Note, however, that there are many instances of Semitic (Akkadian) borrowings of Sumerian words with š rendering the Sumerian s.

If giš-sur is accepted as the etymology of kišör, two issues require attention. First is the correspondence of Sumerian g and Hebrew k, but this is typical of Sumerian loanwords in Semitic. For example, Sumerian barag 'chamber' = Akkadian parakkū; Sumerian ē-gal 'temple' = Akkadian ēkallu, Ugaritic ḫk, Hebrew ḫēkāl; Sumerian gu-za 'chair' = Akkadian kussū, Ugaritic ks, Hebrew kisse. There are also particular examples of Sumerian words with giš entering Akkadian as kiš-, for example, giš kin.ti = kiškat-tum 'workers, artisans, forgers'.

The second issue is the sibilant correspondence. Here too there is no difficulty. We cannot be sure exactly how the combination of Sumerian š and s

14. See the listings in the index of H. Waetzoldt, *Untersuchungen zur neusumerischen Textilindustrie* (Rome: Istituto per l'Oriente, 1972) 287–88. I am grateful to my colleague David I. Owen for referring me to this very useful volume.
(as in giš-sur) was realized, but a Sumerian loanword in Akkadian allows us to see what transpired when the borrowing of a word with these adjoining sibilants took place. I refer to Sumerian gar-äs-an 'leek' which is borrowed into Akkadian in a number of forms: giršanu, girišanu, geršanu, and so forth. In all these variations, the Semitic equivalent is written with a single š (as in kisör) and not as a geminated sibilant (either šš or ss).

In light of the above options, I find it perfectly reasonable to assume that the ancient Hebrew lexicon included a word kisör 'spindle' of Sumerian origin. This meaning for kisör certainly has been the favored interpretation in the Jewish exegetical and lexicographical traditions. For example, Rabbi Nathan ben Yehiel of Rome (1035–1110) in the Arukh defined the rare Hebrew word immáh, which appears in Mishna Kélim 11.6, 21:1, as a sewing or weaving tool and then equated it with the Biblical Hebrew word kisör.

Moreover, there is a passage in the Jerusalem Talmud that needs to be considered, for it may solidify the case for accepting the existence of kisör ‘spindle’. In y. Yebamot 12d, a story is related that describes the disguised Rabbi Yohanan ha-Sandalari asking the imprisoned Rabbi Aqiva a legal question using coded language (so that the Roman authorities would not realize that Jewish scholars were engaging in discussions of Jewish law). Rabbi Aqiva, in turn, replied with his own coded language: "y'yt lk kwyn y't lk k'yr 'Do you have spindles (kwyn)? Do you have kasher (is it valid)"

19. I recognize, of course, that it is a bit speculative to posit a Sumerian etymon for this word, especially when neither of the desired Sumerian forms (giš-sur or ki-sur) appears in the extant literature. I would point out, however, that our knowledge of Sumerian continues to expand, often from unexpected sources. For example, the textual finds at Ebla in some instances present entirely new Sumerian forms and constructions. In general, see M. Civil, “Bilingualism in Logographically Written Languages: Sumerian in Ebla,” in II Bilinguismo a Ebla (ed. L. Cagni; Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1984) 75–97 (for particular examples where “the Sumerian shows major modifications or is even unattested in standard lists,” see p. 88). Moreover, with the finds from Ebla, we need not postulate Akkadian intermediation in the movement of the word for ‘spindle’ from Sumerian to West Semitic. The process could have been direct and could have occurred as early as the third millennium B.C.E. To be perfectly honest, of course, one can still uphold the presence of kisör = 'spindle' in Hebrew without recourse to Sumerian. I could state that there is no reason to depart from the traditional interpretation of the word and leave it at that. Thus, for example, O. Pföger, Sprüche Salomos (Proverbia) (BKAT; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 1984) 372: “kisör und pelek sind Hapaxlegomena und in ihrer Bedeutung unsicher, haben es aber wohl mit der Weitachtigkeit zu tun” (though he partially errs in calling both words hapax legomena, since pelek also occurs in 2 Sam 3:29). But inasmuch as philologists prefer to discuss the origins of words and their meanings, I believe my discussion of the potential Sumerian etyma is warranted.

20. See the discussion and the sources cited in E. Ben Yehuda, Mil løn ha-Lashon ha-’Ivrit (Berlin: Langenscheidt, n.d.) 5.2351 n. 2.


22. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Samuel Morell of the State University of New York at Binghamton for the reading and understanding of this talmudic passage. For a recent English
The word *kw'yn* in this passage is known from eastern Aramaic, where the singular *kāšā* means 'reed', but by extension 'spindle'. It is possible, of course, that this word is to be seen in the *kw'yn* of *y. Yeḥamot* 12d, even though it appears nowhere else in the rather large corpus of western Aramaic material. But as Y. N. Epstein noted, the coded expression of Rabbi Akiva would be more readily realized if the word were *kw'ryn*, that is, an Aramaic cognate to Hebrew *kišōr*, presumably to be vocalized *kāšōrin*. So, even though no manuscript of the Jerusalem Talmud reads *kw'ryn* — all witnesses have *kw'yn* — one is inclined to accept Epstein's emendation of the text from *kw'yn* to *kw'ryn*, that is, through simple addition of *r*. This has already been done by M. Sokoloff in his recent dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic. Accordingly, in this lone passage of the Jerusalem Talmud, if the textual emendation is granted, we gain an independent witness to an Aramaic form *kāšār* (presumed vocalization). This, in turn, solidifies the case for the Hebrew word *kišōr* 'spindle' (and suggests that the targumic rendering *kāšār* in Prov 31:19 may mean 'spindle' after all).
Acceptance of kiššôr ‘spindle’ in the Hebrew lexicon, however, does not require us to oppose Albright’s suggestion to interpret kiššôr in Prov 31:19 as ‘skill’, for this meaning is perfectly appropriate in the context of the verse in particular and the poem in general. That is to say, in my view, the poet intended both meanings of the word. It is to be understood simultaneously as both ‘spindle’ and ‘skill’.28

If this is true of kiššôr, it also should be true of its parallel member pâleḵ. The meaning ‘whorl’ is established from the cognate terms Akkadian pilakkû, Aramaic pilkâ,29 Arabic jalâk (see also Elbaite pilak(k)u, Ugaritic-Phoenician plk).30 But the meaning ‘clever’ is also inherent in the word, with the cognate evidence forthcoming from the root flk ‘clever’ in Jibbâli (a Modern South Arabian language).31 Now at first glance it might seem far-fetched to invoke a Jibbâli cognate to substantiate a meaning in Biblical Hebrew. In defense of this methodology, I hasten to add that quite a few words attested in ancient Northwest Semitic have cognates only in Modern South Arabian or in Modern Ethiopian.32 This phenomenon is due no doubt to “the very close affinity of were made from wood; see Yisraeli, “Mela‘kḥah: Ma‘akhot ha-Bayit: Tevuyyah,” col. 1000. If Modern Western Aramaic xûra is related in some way, then one has to posit that the word was borrowed by ancient Aramaic from Sumerian with the meaning ‘spindle’, but eventually developed into a word for ‘wood, piece of wood’, presumably because one of the common uses of wood was the manufacture of spindles. The Ma‘lîla Aramaic terms for ‘spindle’ are ma‘la and martau (the latter borrowed from Arabic mardân). I thank both Otto Jastrow and Werner Arnold of the University of Heidelberg for kindly supplying me with the lexical data culled from Arnold’s fieldwork in Syria (letter from Prof. Jastrow dated January 10, 1992).


29. These cognates can be found in the standard dictionaries. The Elbaite term appears as ne-e-gu in a bilingual text, for which see G. Pettinato, Testi lessicai bilungui della biblioteca L. 2769 (MEE 4; Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1982) 251 (VE 459). This is read as either bil-a-gu (Sjoberg, Dictionary, 265) or bi-a-gu (G. Conti, Il sibilario della quarta fonte della lista lessicale bilungui elbaite [Miscellanea Eblatina 3 = Quaderni di Semitistica 17; Firenze: Università di Firenze, 1990] 133). In the latter interpretation, the /b/ is not indicated in the writing system, as occurs elsewhere in Elbaite orthography. In either case, the word is clearly pilâk(k)u.


Semitic tongues, which are no less similar to each other than languages belonging to one branch of Indo-European."

Accordingly, I understand Prov 31:19 as containing a double polysemy. The words קִשְׂר and פָּלֶק mean ‘spindle’ and ‘whorl’ as well as ‘skill’ and ‘cleverness’. The author of Prov 31:10–31 was obviously a master poet who incorporated into his text not only the present instance of artful use of language, but others as well. The following English translation, unfortunately encumbered by the slash marks, illustrates the wordplay:

Her hands she sends forth to the spindle / with skill,
her palms take hold of the whorl / with cleverness.

We cannot say how the words for ‘skill’ and ‘cleverness’ would have been vocalized, but probably the original text simply read the consonants קִשְׂר and פָּלֶק (the latter is written thus still in the Masoretic Text), and the reader would garner both meanings from these graphemes.

Our honoree has distinguished himself throughout his career by paying particular attention to the Semitic languages still spoken in the Near East. The present article demonstrates that such research can yield unexpected dividends, for not only do we gain insights into contemporary Semitic speech communities, often we can apply the findings, especially the lexical information culled, to elucidate problems in ancient texts. I offer the present article, which utilizes material from Modern South Arabian in particular, which also treats a subject of long-standing interest to our honoree, as a token of my esteem for my friend Georg Krotkoff.

Addendum

Several months after this article was submitted to the editors, Al Wolters (Redeemer College) was kind enough to send me the written version of his paper


34. Presumably the preposition ב in the first stich is a double-duty preposition, thus yielding the second reading ‘with cleverness’.

35. The real issue is with קִשְׂר, which in the MT is written плень as плўр. This orthography, with both וָאָו and וָאֹד as medial vowel letters, most likely would have developed in posttextic times. See the discussion in L. Zevit, Matres Lecitantis in Ancient Hebrew Epigraphs (ASORMS 2; Cambridge, Mass.: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1980) 33–36.

36. In addition, I am happy to be able to cite Neo-Aramaic evidence as well, in an. 23 and 27.


Wolters's main point is that kīšōr means specifically 'doubling spindle', that is, a large type of spindle used especially for doubling already-spun single-ply yarn, and that pelek refers to the 'drop spindle', a simpler instrument. In n. 3 above, I stated that I am not interested in the exact definitions of these terms, so to a great extent Wolters's proposal has no direct bearing on the present paper.

Of greater interest for the concerns of the present paper is a tangential point raised by Wolters. He astutely noted that the Sumerian form ki-sur is now attested in the bilingual dictionaries from Ebla. Unfortunately, in all four occurrences of ki-sur, no Eblaite equivalent is given. Of the two possibilities raised above, I stated a preference for giš-sur over ki-sur. With the attestation of the latter now in a Sumerian-Eblaite lexical text, clearly ki-sur claims the position of most likely candidate for the etymology of Hebrew kīšōr.

38. See Pettinato, Testi lessicali bilingui della biblioteca L. 2769, 213 (VE 141).