WORD PLAY IN BIBLICAL HEBREW:
AN ECLECTIC COLLECTION

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Word play in the Bible takes a variety of forms. The present article presents an eclectic collection of examples of the phenomenon; taken together they serve to illustrate the various types of word play that may be found in the biblical text. More standard surveys of word play in the Bible may be found conveniently in the standard reference works.[1] Most of my examples will deal with the use of a single word bearing two meanings in the same context. But I also include cases of alliteration, an important feature of biblical rhetorical style,[2] and it is with such an example that I begin my presentation.

One does not have to read far in the Bible to encounter word play; indeed the opening words of the Bible present an example: *bĕrēʾšît bārāʾ* "in the beginning of creating" (Gen 1:1). The author has constructed the story so that it begins with the same three letters *b-r-ʾ* that form the root of the verb "create" so crucial to the story.[3]

In a sense, this example from the opening words of the Bible sets the tenor for the Bible as a whole, for the biblical authors consistently opted

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1. For general surveys, see J. M. Sasson, "Wordplay in the OT," *IDBSup* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), pp. 968–70; and E. L. Greenstein, "Wordplay, Hebrew," *ABD* 6, pp. 968–71.

2. I am in the process of writing an extended work on the use of alliteration as a compositional factor in biblical literature, both prose and poetry.

3. S. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (JSOT 70; Bible and Literature Series 17; Sheffield: Almond, 1989; Hebrew original 1979), p. 203.

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for word play, especially the alliterative type, whenever the opportunity arose. When a choice of synonyms was available, the writers typically chose the word that produced the greater alliterative effect. This can be seen especially in the case of rare words, even *hapax legomena*. For example, in Song 4:4 the poet selected the unique word *talpiyyôt*, from the root *l-p-y* "be high," thus meaning "heights," to alliterate with the verse as a whole:

> *kĕmigdal Dāwîd ṣawwāʾrēk bānûy lĕtalpiyyôt*
> *ʾelep hammāgēn tālûy ʿālāw kōl šilṭê haggibbôrîm*

> Like the tower of David is your neck, built to the heights,
> A thousand shields are hung from it, all the weapons of the heroes.

Note how *talpiyyôt* "heights" produces the alliteration with the words *ʾelep* "thousand" and *tālûy* "are hung" in the second stich.[4]

In Ps 137:5 something similar occurs, though here we are dealing with a case of polysemy. The root *š-k-ḥ* bears the common meaning "forget" in Biblical Hebrew, but in this lone passage it also means "be paralyzed," a meaning that this root bears, albeit in metathesized form, in Arabic (*k-s-ḥ* "be paralyzed"). The famous verse reads as follows: *ʾim ʾeškāḥēk Yĕrûšālayîm tiškaḥ yĕmînî* "if I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand be paralyzed." In the first use of the root it bears its common meaning "forget," and in the second meaning it bears the meaning "be paralyzed."[5]

Polysemy plays a special role in the type of parallelism known as Janus parallelism. Cyrus Gordon was the first to identify this type of word play in which a single word bears two different meanings, with "one meaning paralleling what precedes, and the other meaning, what follows."[6] The prime example is Song 2:12:

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4. G. A. Rendsburg, "תלפיות (Song 4:4)," *JNSL* 20 (1994): 13–19, with discussion on the alliteration on p. 17.

5. G. A. Rendsburg and S. L. Rendsburg, "Physiological and Philological Notes to Psalm 137," *JQR* 83 (1993): 385–99, especially pp. 390–92.

6. C. H. Gordon, "New Directions," *BASP* 15 (1978): 59.

hannissānîm nirʾû bāʾāreṣ
ʿēt hazzāmîr higgîaʿ
wĕqôl hattôr nišmaʿ bĕʾarṣēnû

The blossoms have appeared in the land,
The time of pruning/singing has arrived,
The voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

The middle word in the middle stich, *zāmîr*, means both "pruning" and "singing," with the former meaning pointing back to the first stich and the latter meaning pointing ahead to the third stich.

Additional examples of this phenomenon have been identified. For example, Gen 15:1:[7]

ʾal tîrāʾ ʾAbrām
ʾānôkî māgēn lāk
śĕkorkā harbēh mĕʾôd

Do not be afraid, Abram,
I am your shield/benefactor,
Your reward shall be very great.

This example is not as straightforward as the preceding example, because the Janus word *māgēn* as vocalized by the Masora means only "shield." But with another vocalization, such as the *nomen agentis* form *maggān*, or perhaps even with the same vocalization, as in the stative Qal form *māgēn*, the same word means "benefactor" from the root *m-g-n*. In fact, when one recognizes that this root is used a few verses earlier, in Gen 14:20, the word play is enhanced. Of course, since Hebrew literature possessed an oral/aural quality in antiquity, the reader of Gen 15:1 needed to supply one reading only (presumably this is the reading that was retained in the Masora), but the second meaning was present in the text that he or she held.

The greatest collection of Janus passages is to be found in the Book of Job, where the various discussants continually demonstrate their abilities at verbal jousting. Scott Noegel has written an entire monograph on

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7. G. A. Rendsburg, "Notes on Genesis XV," *VT* 42 (1992): 266–68.

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Job,[8] so there is no need to repeat the information here (though see below, pp. ~~152-53~~, for an example). In addition, Shalom Paul has put forward numerous examples from throughout the biblical poetic corpus.[9]

Word play is especially prominent in Hebrew in the presence of proper nouns. Names often are explained by the writer with recourse to a similar sounding word, e.g., the case of *Môšeh* "Moses" in Exod 2:10. Much more subtle is the embedding of like-sounding words in the text in close proximity to proper nouns. This technique has been ably and amply demonstrated by Moshe Garsiel.[10] I present here two examples.

In Num 16:30, Moses' prediction of what will occur to Korah, Dathan, and Abiram includes the rather unusual phrase *wĕʾim bĕrîʾāh yibrāʾ YHWH* "and if YHWH creates a creation." This phrase, which has been unnecessarily questioned by scholars,[11] alludes to the very name *ʾĂbîrām* with an anagram of that character's name. Furthermore, the form of the verbal noun *bĕrîʾāh* is unusual, since the *qĕṭîlāh* form is atypical in standard Biblical Hebrew, occurring more frequently in Israelian (Northern) Hebrew, Late Biblical Hebrew, and Mishnaic Hebrew.[12] Thus, both the

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8. S. B. Noegel, *Janus Parallelism in the Book of Job* (*JSOTS* 223; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

9. S. M. Paul, "Polysensuous Polyvalency in Poetic Parallelisms," in M. Fishbane and E. Tov, eds., *"Shaᶜarei Talmon": Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1992), pp. 147-63; and S. M. Paul, "Polysemous Pivotal Punctuation: More Janus Double-entendres," in M. V. Fox, *et al.*, eds., *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1996), pp. 369-74.

10. M. Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991).

11. See, for example, the critical note in *BHS*, *ad loc.*, which appears to have misunderstood the LXX's rendering. The ancient Jewish-Greek translators do not appear to have had a text significantly different from MT before them when translating this phrase.

12. M. H. Segal, *A Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), p. 103; and M. Z. Segal, *Diqduq Leshon ha-Mishna* (Tel-Aviv: Devir, 1936), pp. 73-74. Only in the English edition of this work did Segal discuss the northern (=Israelian) origin of this form. A fuller statement will appear

wording itself and the form of the noun raise a red flag to the reader, and the careful reader will sense immediately the connection with the name Abiram.[13]

A second example occurs in 1 Sam 2:36, where the rare verb s-p-ḥ is used in the form sĕpāḥēnî "attach me."[14] The five letters of this ~~name~~ *word* include both the four letters of Ḥopnî "Hophni" and the five letters of Pînḥās "Phineas," the names of the two sons of Eli referred to earlier in v. 34.[15]

At times the biblical writers engage in bilingual word play. Al Wolters noticed an excellent example of this device in Prov 31:27.[16] He noted that throughout the poem in Prov 31:10-31, the 3rd person feminine singular perfect or imperfect is used as the predicate of the woman as subject, except in one instance. The one exception is in v. 27 where the feminine singular participle is utilized. Moreover, the form utilized is not the normal form, which in this case would be ṣôpāh, but rather the unusual form ṣôpiyyāh "she watches." This word choice allows the poet to pun on the Greek word for wisdom sophia. The result is that the stich ṣôpiyyāh hălîkôt bêtāh may be read in one of two ways, either "she watches over the ways of her household" or "Sophia are the ways of her household."[17]

Other examples of bilingual word play may be found in Isa 10:8, where śār "prince" puns on Akkadian šarru "king"; and in Exod 10:10, where rā'āh "evil" puns on the name of the Egyptian sun-god Ra' (more

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in my book (still in the writing stage) on Israelian Hebrew elements in the accounts of the Northern Kingdom that appear in the books of Kings.

13. Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, p. 225.

14. The verb occurs but five times in the Bible; this is the only Qal form.

15. Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, p. 129.

16. A. Wolters, "Ṣôpiyyâ (Prov 31:27) as Hymnic Participle and Play on *Sophia*," *JBL* 104 (1985): 577-87.

17. For further discussion, see C. Gottlieb, "The Words of the Exceedingly Wise: Proverbs 30-31," in K. L. Younger, W. W. Hallo, and B. F. Batto, eds., *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective* (Scripture in Context IV; Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), p. 290, where the Egyptian word sb3yt "wisdom" is introduced into the equation as well.

properly pronounced as a two-syllable word in ancient Egyptian).[18] The settings of the passages serve as a catalyst for the word play: in the first one Isaiah is quoting the Assyrian king, while in the second one the Israelites are enslaved in Egypt.

The presence of the Assyrian king in the Book of Jonah allows the author of this delightful little book to exploit a bilingual pun as well. But in this case it is not Akkadian and Hebrew that is at play, but rather Aramaic and Hebrew. For in Neo-Assyrian times Aramaic had gained the status of a second language in Assyria alongside the native Akkadian. The specific example is Jon 3:7 where the *ṭaʿam hammelek ûgĕdôlāw* "decree of the king and his great-ones" is *ʾal yiṭʿămû mĕʾûmāh* "let them not taste anything." The root *ṭ-ʿ-m* is employed in its normal Hebrew sense "taste" and in its Aramaic sense "decree" (see, for example, in Biblical Aramaic, Dan 3:10, etc.).[19]

An additional example may occur in Exod 16:15, where the presence of *mān* "manna" evokes the question *mān hûʾ* "what is it?" The interrogative *mān* means "who?" in various Semitic languages, e.g., in Aramaic and in Arabic, but it does not mean "what?" Only by extension in later Syriac does it mean "what?"[20] so we should be cautious in reading this

18. For these two examples, see G. A. Rendsburg, "Bilingual Wordplay in the Bible," *VT* 38 (1988): 354–57. For more examples surrounding Hebrew *raʿ/rāʿāh*, see G. A. Rendsburg, "The Egyptian Sun-God Ra in the Pentateuch," *Henoch* 10 (1988): 3–15. This article was encumbered by several critical typographical errors; corrections are presented in G. A. Rendsburg, "Targum Onqelos to Exod 10:5, 10:15, Numb 22:5, 22:11," *Henoch* 12 (1990): 17, n. 11.

19. On the entire passage, see the detailed discussion by J. M. Sasson, *Jonah* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), pp. 252–56. Sasson noted that the verse contains "a pun immediately recognizable to past audiences (as it is also to many contemporary scholars)" (p. 256), but he did not posit a specifically bilingual pun in an Aramaic-speaking environment such as existed in Neo-Assyrian Nineveh.

20. See the examples in J. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1903), p. 280; and see the brief treatment in F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), p. 577.

definition into Exod 16:15.[21] On the other hand, it is quite possible that the Hebrew author was attempting to portray a Semitic language or dialect associated with the Sinai desert (or some other region) that utilized *mān* for "what?" Elsewhere in the Bible we find instances of writers turning to Aramaic, sometimes with a dosage of Arabic as well, to portray the language of the desert environs (admittedly the desert region to the east, not to the southwest),[22] so it very possible that a bilingual word play is effected here. In the very least, we can affirm that *mān* can function as an interrogative (even if attested outside the Bible as "who?" not as "what?"), so the scales are tipped in favor of the word play in this passage.

Another word play involving Egyptian occurs in Genesis 9–10, centered on the name *Ḥām* "Ham," one of the three sons of Noah. The word play is not truly bilingual, since the proper name *Ḥām* "Ham" is simply that, a proper name, and does not have a Hebrew meaning in this context (the meaning "hot" does not fit here). But as the text puns on the meaning of this word in Egyptian—indeed on two meanings that the word bears in Egyptian—it is akin to bilingual word play. Ham, we learn from Gen 10:6, is the progenitor of Kush, Mizraim, Put, and Canaan, that is to say, the extent of the Egyptian Empire during the New Kingdom period. The word *Ḥām* corresponds to the Egyptian word *ḥm* "majesty,"[23] used commonly in the expression *ḥm-f* "His Majesty," used to refer to the Pharaoh.[24] But the same biconsonantal noun *ḥm* also means

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21. As is done, for example, by Greenstein, "Wordplay, Hebrew," p. 971.

22. S. A. Kaufman, "The Classification of the North West Semitic Dialects of the Biblical Period and Some Implications Thereof," in *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies*: Panel Sessions: Hebrew and Aramaic Languages (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1988), pp. 54-55; and G. A. Rendsburg, "Linguistic Variation and the 'Foreign Factor' in the Hebrew Bible," *IOS* 15 (1996): 177-90.

23. I heard this explanation of "Ham" in Genesis 9–10 from my teacher Cyrus H. Gordon during my years as a graduate student in his courses approximately twenty years ago. As far as I am aware, the thought has not been published, and I am happy to present it here in my mentor's name, expanded with my own material.

24. A. Erman and H. Grapow, *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*, Vol. 3 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1929), p. 91.

"slave" in Egyptian,[25] and this supplies one of the clues for understanding Gen 9:20-27.[26] Ham saw his father Noah in a naked state, the punishment for which is that his son Canaan will be a slave—note the fourfold use of the word ʿebed "slave" (three times in the singular, once in the plural) in vv. 25-27—to his brothers Shem and Japhet. The text no doubt puns on the root k-n-ʿ "be low, be humbled, be subdued" in the word Kĕnaʿan "Canaan," as A. Guillaume noted.[27] But this same scholar wrote as follows: "Canaan had to be written, and not Ham, because the oracle demanded a name with an unhappy entail; and nothing could be done with the name Ham, which presumably would be understood to mean 'hot'."[28] The "Canaan" part of this statement is true—and it serves as a corrective to those scholars who would remove wĕḤām hûʾ ʾăbî Kĕnaʿān "and Ham was the father of Canaan" in v. 18 and ʾăbî Kĕnaʿan "the father of Canaan" in v. 22 as secondary glosses, for they are needed in order for the narrative to work—but the "Ham" part of this statement requires adjustment. Better to assume that the author of the story also had the Egyptian meaning of ḥm "slave" in mind, and that he in turn assumed that his intellectual readership would understand the bilingual word play. True, the ḥ of both Egyptian words, "majesty" and "slave," is a voiceless pharyngeal /ḥ/,[29] whereas the ḥ of Hebrew Ḥām "Ham" represents a voiceless velar or voiceless uvular, that is, Semitic /ḫ/ (a point that can be determined by the Septuagint transcription of the proper name as Χάμ[30]), and thus this word play may operate to its full extent

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25. Erman and Grapow, *Wörterbuch*, Vol. 3, pp. 87-88.

26. See already A. S. Yahuda, *The Language of the Pentateuch in Its Relation to Egyptian* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 267. As is widely recognized, Yahuda's book can be utilized only with great caution, but in the current instance I accept his point.

27. See A. Guillaume, "Paronomasia in the Old Testament," *JSS* 9 (1964): 282-90, esp. p. 283.

28. Guillaume, "Paronomasia in the Old Testament," p. 283.

29. A. Loprieno, "Egyptian and Coptic Phonology," in A. S. Kaye, ed., *Phonologies of Asia and Africa*, Vol. 1 (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), p. 437.

30. The most detailed treatment is J. Blau, *Polyphony in Biblical Hebrew*

only in the written text and not in the text's oral/aural treatment (see Gen 15:1 above for another example). But this issue does not militate against the overall conclusion that *Ḥām* "Ham" and *Kĕnaᶜan* "Canaan" work together in this pericope to produce the desired effect.[31]

This passage most likely includes another word play. Guillaume proposed reading *ʾĕlôhê šēm* in Gen 9:26 as not only "the God of Shem," but also "God of renown," or in his words "Glorious God." The latter meaning already is in the minds of the reader because it is used in Gen 6:4 *ʾanšê haššēm* "the men of renown," and it will be used again in Gen 11:4 *wĕnaᶜăśeh lānû šēm* "so that we will make a name for ourselves." In light of these surrounding usages, the double meaning in Gen 9:26 works well, and in fact operates as a Janus parallelism. The entire line, which may be understood as poetry imbedded into a prose text, reads as follows:

(Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities 6/2; Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982). See now briefly F. W. Knobloch, *Hebrew Sounds in Greek Script: Transcriptions and Related Phenomena in the Septuagint, with Special Focus on Genesis* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1995), pp. 398–99. Traditionally, Hebraists and Semitists have understood /ḫ/ as a voiceless velar fricative, based on its Arabic realization (see, e.g., the following articles all in Kaye, ed., *Phonologies of Asia and Africa*, Vol. 1: G. A. Rendsburg, "Ancient Hebrew Phonology," p. 71; G. Gragg, "Old South Arabian Phonology," p. 163; and G. Gragg, "Geᶜez Phonology," p. 174), but Knobloch correctly suggested that this phoneme may have been a voiceless uvular fricative in ancient Hebrew (thus also in ancient Egyptian as interpreted by Loprieno, "Egyptian and Coptic Phonology," p. 437; and in some modern Semitic languages, for which see in Kaye, ed., *Phonologies of Asia and Africa*, Vol. 1: J. Heath, "Moroccan Arabic Phonology," p. 208; and A. Lonnet and M.-C. Simeone-Senelle, "La phonologie des langues sudarabiques modernes," p. 346 [termed "post-vélaire"]).

31. It would be helpful to know how the two Egyptian words *ḥm* "majesty" and *ḥm* "slave" were differentiated from one another, and whether one or the other or both were pronounced close to the vocalization of Hebrew *ḥām*. But such information is not forthcoming, to the best of my knowledge. Coptic retains only the latter in the compound noun *hont* "priest," derived from *ḥm-nṯr* "servant of god," but this tells us little of the vocalization of this word in pharaonic times, and of course we still would have no evidence for *ḥm* "majesty." On this Coptic term, see W. Vycichl, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue copte* (Leuven: Peeters, 1983), p. 306.

bārûk YHWH ʾĕlôhê šēm
wîhî Kĕnaᶜan ᶜebed lāmô

Blessed be YHWH, the God of renown/Shem,
And may Canaan be a slave unto him.

The meaning "renown" points back to the earlier part of the verse, while the meaning "Shem" anticipates the latter part of the verse. In the two cases of Janus parallelism presented above, Song 2:12 and Gen 15:1, the Janus effect was produced symmetrically, with the pivot word included in the middle line of a tristich. In this case, the poet created an asymmetrical Janus, with the pivot word coming at the end of the first stich, a device attested elsewhere in Janus passages (see the examples brought by Noegel and Paul in the works cited above, nn. 8–9). Finally, the entire unit includes another case of alliteration, with the phrase *ʾĕlôhê šēm* "the God of renown/Shem" echoed in the next verse in *ʾohŏlê šēm* "the tents of Shem" (v. 27).

The example presented by Wolters in Prov 31:27 is one of only several word plays in the poem in Prov 31:10–31. Another is to be found in vv. 21–22, where the word *šānîm* (end of v. 21) operates as the pivot word in an asymmetrical Janus construction:

lôʾ tîrāʾ lĕbêtāh miššāleg kî kol bêtāh lābûš šānîm
marbaddîm ᶜāśĕtāh lāh šēš wĕʾargāmān lĕbûšāh

She does not fear for her house on account of snow,
    for all her house is clothed *šānîm*,
Garments she has made for herself,
    linen and purple are her clothing.

The Masora transmitted the Janus word as *šānîm* "scarlet," but as G. R. Driver pointed out, "scarlet is neither more nor less warm than other colours for clothing in snowy weather; further, the present form of *šānîm* is peculiar, if not impossible."[32] The LXX and the Vulgate suggest

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32. G. R. Driver, "On a Passage in the Baal Epic (IV AB iii 24) and Proverbs xxxi 21," *BASOR* 105 (1947): 11. The text cited by Driver in the title of his article is now read differently by most scholars; *KTU* 1.10 (*UT* 76) iii 24 reads

an alternative; both versions understood the word as "double," no doubt reading the word as if it were pointed *šnayim* "two."[33] This, of course, makes much more sense, for with double layers of clothing the woman's household would be better protected from the cold of a snowy day. But the Masoretic reading of the word should not be discarded altogether (nor should the plural form be considered impossible).[34] Indeed, it foreshadows the mention of *šēš wĕᵓargāmān* "linen and purple" (most likely a hendiadys here meaning "purple linen"), the perfect parallel expression to *šānîm* (see the well-known collocation of these three terms in the Tabernacle account [Exod 25:4, 28:5, etc.]). Thus I suggest, especially in light of the above discussion concerning Janus parallelism, that the consonantal string *š-n-y-m* at the end of v. 21 bears two meanings: with the meaning "double" it looks back to the first part of the verse, and with the meaning "scarlet" it looks ahead to the next verse.

A word play of another type occurs in the same poem at v. 19, which reads as follows: *yādehā šillĕḥāh bakkîšôr wĕkappehā tāmĕkû pālek*. A traditional translation of the verse reads as follows: "Her hands she sends forth to the spindle, her palms take hold of the whorl."[35] But when one realizes that the root *k-š-r* is attested elsewhere in Hebrew

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wtksynn.btdh (with the last three letters in question). But another Ugaritic passage may be more helpful: KTU 1.4 (*UT* 51) ii 6–7, where the expression *tn npynh* most likely means "her two garments"; the general scene is Asherah washing her garments in the sea. My thanks to Mark Smith of St. Joseph's University for pointing this passage out to me. Regardless of how the Ugaritic passage is read and understood, our analysis of the biblical passage can proceed independently.

33. For further discussion, albeit with a demurral to Driver's suggestion, see W. McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), pp. 668–69.

34. The plural form *šānîm* occurs again in Isa 1:18. True, 1QIsaᵃ reads the singular *šny* but that is no reason to emend MT. For discussion, see E. Y. Kutscher, *Ha-Lashon ve-ha-Reqaᶜ shel Megillat Yeshaᶜyahu ha-Shelemah mi-Megillot Yam ha-Melaḥ* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1959), p. 301.

35. In translating the two *termini technii* as "spindle" and "whorl," respectively, I accept the suggested definitions of Yael Yisraᵓeli, "Melaᵓkhah: Malᵓakhot ha-Bayit: Ṭevuyyah," *EM* 4 (1962), cols. 998–1003.

(Qoh 2:21 etc., and more frequently in post-biblical Hebrew) with the meaning "skill," and that the various skills of the woman figure in this poem are the main point of the composition, it becomes clear that the poet intended double meaning in the word *kîšôr*. For balance, one would expect the same or similar double meaning to be inherent in the parallel term *pelek*, for such are the workings of Hebrew poetry. And while a parallel meaning is not attested elsewhere in Hebrew for the root *p-l-k*, the root *flk* does bear the meaning "clever" in Jibbali (a modern South Arabian language). Now at first glance it might seem far-fetched to invoke a Jibbali cognate to substantiate a meaning in Biblical Hebrew. But it should be noted that quite a few words attested in ancient Northwest Semitic have cognates only in modern South Semitic languages (South Arabian and Ethiopian).[36] Accordingly, we suggest the following translation for our passage, unfortunately encumbered by the slash marks to bring out the double polysemy:

> Her hands she sends forth to the spindle/with skill,
> her palms take hold of the whorl/with cleverness.[37]

This type of word play is called "double polysemy," with two parallel terms each bearing two meanings.

Other examples of this technique are to be found in the Bible. Two good examples, with the same set of double polysemy operative, are Gen 49:6 and Job 3:6.[38] In the former, *ʾal tābôʾ* means both "do not enter" (from the root *b-w-ʾ*) and "do not desire" (with a different vocalization necessary, deriving from the root *ʾ-b-y* on which see more below on Prov 1:10); and *ʾal tēḥad* means both "do not be united" (from the

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36. For examples and for a more detailed discussion of this verse, see G. A. Rendsburg, "Double Polysemy in Proverbs 31:19," in A. Afsaruddin and A. H. Mathias Zahniser, eds., *Humanism, Culture, and Language in the Near East: Studies in Honor of Georg Krotkoff* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), pp. 267–74.

37. Presumably the preposition *b-* in the first stich serves as a double-duty preposition, thus yielding the second reading "with cleverness."

38. For fuller details, see G. A. Rendsburg, "Double Polysemy in Genesis 49:6 and Job 3:6," *CBQ* 44 (1982): 48–51.

root *y-ḥ-d* [with *ḥ* as the second root letter]) and "do not rejoice" (again, with a different vocalization necessary, deriving from the root *ḥ-d-y* [with *ḥ* as the first root letter]). Thus the entire couplet means, again with slash marks to indicate the double polysemy:

> Let my soul not enter/desire their council,
> Let my spirit not be united with/rejoice in their company.

Obviously, the Masora could transmit only one vocalization, as recorded in the MT, in this case "enter" and "be united," but the written text allows both readings to work simultaneously.

The same set of wordpairs is present in Job 3:6. Here the Masora transmitted the reading "may it not desire" for the consonantal string *ʾl yḥd*, but again the alternative interpretation "may it not be united" (stemming from a different vocalization) is inherent as well. Similarly, the parallel expression *ʾal yābôʾ* means both "may it not enter" and "may it not desire" (the latter again requiring a different vocalization). Thus, the passage as a whole, including the first stich in the verse, is to be translated:

> That night, may gloom seize it!
> Let it not be united with/rejoice in the days of the year,
> In the number of months let it not enter/desire.

In the two examples just presented, it is important to note the following, continuing the above discussion on *Ḥām* "Ham." While the proto-Semitic phonemes /ḥ/ and /ḫ/ both are written with the letter *ḥ*, we know that the two individual sounds still were pronounced distinctly in ancient Hebrew.[39] Thus the spellings *yḥd/yḫd* actually hide two separate pronunciations. Once more, because of the text's oral/aural quality, the reader needed to supply one reading only, but the second meaning was intended as well. This will be true not only of word plays involving the letter *ḥ*, when it stands for two separate phonemes, but also the letter *ᶜ*, when it stands for two separate phonemes, in this case /ᶜ/ and /ġ/.[40] Below we will address a related phenomenon, the manner in which two

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39. For details, see Blau, *On Polyphony in Biblical Hebrew*.
40. Again, for details, see Blau, *On Polyphony in Biblical Hebrew*.

phonemes coalesce, not only in the orthography but in the phonology as well, and we will see how this permits Hebrew poets to produce word play to an even greater extent.

As intimated above, the derivation of *ʾal tābôʾ* in Gen 49:6 and *ʾal yābôʾ* in Job 3:6 from the root *ʾ-b-y* "desire" requires comment. On the surface, one would understand these usages from the root *b-w-ʾ* "come," and of course that is what the Masoretic vocalization presents. But the very same consonants *ʾl tbʾ* appear in Prov 1:10 with the vocalization *ʾal tōbēʾ* "do not desire" (the expected form, of course, is *ʾal tōʾbeh*). These words are a cipher for what appears five verses later, where the text states *bĕnî ʾal tēlēk bĕderek ʾittām* "my son, do not go on the path with them" (v. 15) referring to the *ḥaṭṭāʾîm* "sinners" of v. 10.[41] When one realizes that one of the purposes of the book of Proverbs is *lĕhābîn māšāl ûmĕlîṣāh dibrê ḥăkāmîm wĕḥîdôtām* "to understand proverb and saying, the words of the wise and their riddles" (Prov 1:6), it is clear that the reader can expect to find various types of word plays, including ciphers such as the present example, included in the collection.

Much of word play in world literature centers on sexual euphemism, and the Bible is no exception.[42] One of the most well-known examples occurs in Genesis 39. The author states the following about Potiphar: *wayyaʿăzōb kōl ʾăšer lô bĕyad Yôsēp wĕlôʾ yādaʿ ʾittô mĕʾûmāh kî ʾim halleḥem ʾăšer hûʾ ʾōkēl* "he left all that he had in the hand of Joseph, and he had no concern about anything with him, except for the bread that he ate" (v. 6). However, in response to Potiphar's wife's advances toward him, Joseph says the following: *hēn ʾădōnî lôʾ yādaʿ ʾittî mah babbāyit wĕkōl ʾăšer yeš lô nātan bĕyādî...wĕlôʾ ḥāśak mim-mennî mĕʾûmāh kî ʾim ʾôtāk baʾăšer ʾatt ʾištô* "behold, my master has no concern with me about what is in the house, and all that he possesses he has placed in my hand...and he has not withheld from me anything, except for you because you are his wife" (vv. 8–9). Now according to the narrator's third-person presentation of the facts, Potiphar excluded

41. See C. H. Gordon, "New Light on the Hebrew Language," *HA* 15 (1974): 29.
42. The best entree to the subject is E. Ullendorff, "The Bawdy Bible," *BSOAS* 42 (1979): 425–56.

his food from Joseph's charge (for which various explanations have been offered, e.g., differences in dietary habits), but when Joseph speaks he refers to Potiphar's wife as beyond his control. The difference is explained when one realizes that *leḥem* "bread" is a euphemism for "wife, woman" and that the verb *ʾ-k-l* "eat" is a euphemism for "engage in sexual intercourse" (as it is in vulgar English as well). Most likely the surface meaning of "bread, food" is intended in v. 6, but the sexual connotation is clear too. The clever reader will gain both understandings of this double-entendre when he or she reads v. 6; the slower reader will realize this when he or she reaches v. 9.

This interpretation, incidentally, was put forward already in late antiquity (*Gen Rabbah* 86:6[43]) and repeated in the Middle Ages (most famously by Rashi). Support for understanding *ʾ-k-l* as "engage in sexual intercourse" is forthcoming from Prov 30:20: *kēn derek ʾiššāh mĕnāʾāpet ʾāklāh ûmāḥătāh pîḥ wĕʾāmĕrāh lôʾ pāʿaltî ʾāwen* "such is the way of an adulterous woman: she eats, wipes her mouth, and says, 'I have done no wrong'." Indeed, in a discussion in the Talmud Bavli, Ketubbot 65b, on whether the phrase in Mishna Ketubbot 5:9 *wĕʾôkelet ʿimmô* "and she eats with him" refers to actual eating or to sexual intercourse, Prov 30:20 is invoked to support the latter position.[44] By extension, *leḥem* means "wife, woman." And while there is no explicit evidence for this understanding elsewhere in the Bible, the phrase in Prov 6:26 *kî bĕʿad ʾiššāh zônāh ʿad kikkar lāḥem* "indeed for a harlot woman, until a loaf of bread" (my translation is a bit too literal, but I prefer not to interpret for the moment) may allude to this usage as well (it is thus under-

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43. J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, *Bereschit Rabba*, Vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1965), p. 1059, includes an extended discussion of rabbinic sources with this understanding of our passage. The Talmudic passages to be discussed below are cited by Albeck in the same work, Vol. 3, p. 142 of the section entitled "Einleitung und Registrar, Teil II." My thanks to Dr. Sol Cohen of the Center for Judaic Studies of the University of Pennsylvania for his guiding me through the rabbinic sources.

44. The same issue is raised in the Talmud Yerushalmi, Ketubbot 30b (Venice ed.), but with only a brief statement *bĕlāšôn nĕqiyyāh* "in euphemistic language," without further discussion.

stood by the rabbinic source Midrash ha-Gadol in its comments to Gen 39:6).[45]

The example from Genesis 39 is well known. Less well known is the same word play in Exod 2:20. Moses has rescued the seven daughters of Reuel from the sheep rustlers who attempted to steal their sheep. The girls return home to their father, who then says: *wĕʾayyô lāmmāh zeh ʿăzabten ʾet hāʾîš qirʾen lô wĕyôʾkal lāḥem* "and where is he? why did you leave the man? call him that he may eat bread." The very next verse describes not a meal, but Moses' decision to dwell with the man and to marry his daughter Zipporah. Thus once more the words *ʾ-k-l leḥem* "eat bread" serve as a double-entendre. In light of typical bedouin hospitality, we should understand these words literally, that is, Reuel is indeed inviting Moses to have a meal. But in light of the situation—a man living in the desert with seven daughters and a real hero happens by—and given what v. 21 details, the reader is to understand two meanings in Reuel's words. Certainly he was playing the hospitable host in offering Moses a meal, but clearly he had other things on his mind as well when uttering the words *wĕyôʾkal lāḥem* "that he may eat bread." Once more this interpretation is to be found already in rabbinic sources, most prominently in Shemot Rabba 1:32.[46]

Another example of double-entendre, with a plain surface meaning and a second sexual meaning, occurs in 2 Sam 11:8. Uriah has just returned from the battlefront for the supposed purpose of reporting to the king. After their discussion (not recorded by the author! one expects this information in the "gap" between vv. 7 and 8), David commands Uriah *rēd lĕbêtkā ûrĕḥaṣ ragleka* "go down to your house and wash your feet." After the long journey from Rabbah in Ammon to Jerusalem, a trek across the desert on both sides of the Jordan River, it would be very nat-

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45. M. Margaliot, ed., *Midrash ha-Gadol*, Vol. 1/2 (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1947), p. 659.

46. I have checked numerous modern commentaries on Exodus and none of them realizes the word play at work here. But I was happy to see that V. P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18–50* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 461, referred to the word play in Exod 2:20 in his comments to Gen 39:6.

ural to instruct the traveler to wash his feet, as per typical Near Eastern practice. So the words are to be understood literally. But at the same time, David's goal is to get Uriah to sleep with his wife Bathsheba. The word *regel/raglayim* "foot/feet" means "sexual organ(s)" elsewhere in the Bible (Isa 6:2, 7:20, Ruth 3:4 etc. [in this set of examples the form is *margĕlôtāw* "his feet"], Song 5:3 [in this case once more with the verb *r-ḥ-ṣ* "wash"]).[47] Accordingly "wash your feet" also means "have intercourse." That Uriah understood David correctly may be seen from his retort in v. 11. When David asked Uriah why he had not gone to his house (end of v. 10), Uriah responded (after the initial part of his explanation): *waʾănî ʾābôʾ ʾel bêtî leʾĕkōl wĕlištôt wĕliškab ʿim ʾištî* "and I should go to my house to eat, and to drink, and to sleep with my wife" (v. 11).

The reference to Song 5:3 in the preceding paragraph raises the major question of the book of Song of Songs. This article is not the place for an extended discussion, but any treatment of word play, especially one that traverses the trail of sexual double-entendre, cannot omit reference to this remarkable composition. Scholars disagree as to how much of the book should be read with sexual connotation; personally I am on the "more" side rather than on the "less" side, especially in my reading of Song 5:1–6.[48] In this particular section, the poetry works on two levels: in her dream world, the protagonist at once prepares to make love and engages in the sexual act as well. The scene opens with *qôl dôdî dôpēq* "hark! my beloved knocks" (5:2), with "knock" to be understood both literally, that is, her lover approaches, and in a sexual sense (compare

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47. Not all scholars would agree that *regel/raglayim* "foot/feet" means "sexual organ(s)" in these verses, but in my estimation the evidence is prima facie. However, this is not the opportunity to present all the evidence to substantiate this claim.

48. For much of what follows, see also M. H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (Anchor Bible; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 514–19. For scholars more on the "less" side, see J. M. Sasson's review of Pope, "On Pope's Song of Songs (AB 7C)," *Maarav* 1 (1979): 177–96; and M. V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 144–45. Pope responded to Sasson in "Response to Sasson on the Sublime Song," *Maarav* 2 (1980): 207–14.

English "knock," albeit with a somewhat vulgar tone). Next we encounter the expression *rāḥaṣtî ʾet raglay* (5:3) referred to above. These words are to be understood literally "I have washed my feet," but also "I have had intercourse." A similar word play occurs in the next verse: *dôdî šālaḥ yādô min haḥôr ûmēʿay hāmû ʿālāw* "my beloved sends his hand through the hole, and my innards emote for him." In this case, *yād* means literally "hand," and *ḥôr* means literally "hole," with the image of the male lover attempting to enter the room by reaching his hand through the door hole to open the lock (recall *dôpēq* "knock" in v. 2). But at the same time *yād* means "penis," in which case *ḥôr* must mean "vaginal opening." For *yād* = "penis," the best biblical reference is Isa 57:8 *ʾāhabt miškābām yād ḥāzît* "you have loved their bed, (their) penis you have seen" (see below for another reference to this verse); in post-biblical literature see 1QS 7:13 and 11QT 46:13.[49]

While every language in the world has the potential for word play, the Hebrew language is particularly well suited for this device. I refer to the fact that various sets of proto-Semitic phonemes have coalesced in Hebrew. The Hebrew *ṣ*, for example, represents three proto-Semitic phonemes, /ṣ/, /ẓ/, and /ḍ/.[50] Thus the poet in Job 19:11 can invoke *kĕṣārāw* and have it serve two meanings in a Janus construction: "as his enemies" echoes God's anger in the first stich of v. 11, while "as his besiegers" anticipates the military terminology in v. 12.[51] The first mean-

49. See M. Delcor, "Two Special Meanings of the Word יד in Biblical Hebrew," *JSS* 12 (1967): 230–40, especially pp. 234–40, with reference to Ugaritic *yd* = "penis" as well. For recent discussion of the Qumran passages, see E. Qimron and J. H. Charlesworth, "Rule of the Community," in J. H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek Texts with English Translations*, Vol. 1: *Rule of the Community and Related Documents* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr; and Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 33, n. 185.

50. For a basic introduction to Hebrew phonology, see G. A. Rendsburg, "Ancient Hebrew Phonology," in A. S. Kaye, ed., *Phonologies of Asia and Africa*, Vol. 1 (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), pp. 65–83. (I cited this article above in n. 30, though without full bibliographic details at that point.)

51. Noegel, *Janus Parallelism in the Book of Job*, pp. 63–65.

ing derives from the root *ẓrr* "be an enemy," and the second derives from the root *ṣrr* "besiege," both attested in Arabic.

Another illustration of the same is Isa 23:16.[52] Here the phrases *zônāh niškāḥāh* and *lĕmaʿan tizzākērî* are parallel. The first expression means both "harlot forgotten" (from the root *š-k-ḥ*) and "harlot sexually active" (from the root *t-k-ḥ*, attested in Ugaritic[53]);[54] in standard Biblical Hebrew the proto-Semitic phoneme /t/ has shifted to /š/, so the single word *niškāḥāh* pronounced in one fashion would speak both meanings.[55] The second expression means both "in order that you may be remembered" (from the root *z-k-r* with its standard meaning "remember") and "in order that you may be fornicated" (from the homonymous root *z-k-r*, but with the sense "fornicate," related to the meaning "male"). The latter connotation of the root *z-k-r* underlies two Hebrew nouns meaning "male member": *zikrôn* (bound form) in Isa 57:8 (a pas-

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52. For what follows, see Z. and S. Rin, *ʿAlilot ha-ʾElim: Kol Shirot ʾUgarit* (Philadelphia: Inbal, 1996), p. 379.

53. C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967), p. 501, with reference to *UT* 132:1, 132:2.

54. There have been attempts to locate this root elsewhere in Hebrew; see L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, *HALAT* 4, pp. 1381–82. Isa 23:16 is not listed or discussed there, yet I find it to be the most convincing example. Most likely it is not a coincidence that a reflex of this root, best known from Ugaritic, appears in the prophet's address to Tyre. On foreign elements in prophetic speeches to foreign nations, see G. A. Rendsburg, "The Strata of Biblical Hebrew," *JNSL* 17 (1991): 81–99; G. A. Rendsburg, "*Kabbîr* in Biblical Hebrew: Evidence for Style-switching and Addressee-switching in the Hebrew Bible," *JAOS* 112 (1992): 649–51; and most comprehensively Rendsburg, "Linguistic Variation and the 'Foreign Factor' in the Hebrew Bible," pp. 177–90. On the close relationship between Ugaritic and Phoenician, forming a Phoenic group within Canaanite, see H. L. Ginsberg, "The Northwest Semitic Languages," in B. Mazar, ed., *Patriarchs* (World History of the Jewish People; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970), pp. 102–24, especially pp. 108–10.

55. I say "standard Biblical Hebrew," and not simply "Biblical Hebrew," because in Transjordan the phoneme /t/ was retained. See G. A. Rendsburg, "More on Hebrew *Šibbōlet*," *JSS* 33 (1988): 255–58; and G. A. Rendsburg, "The Ammonite Phoneme /T/," *BASOR* 269 (1988): 73–79.

sage that we discussed above), and *zākār* in Ezek 16:17.[56] In short, our brief discussion of Isa 23:16 reveals that the passage may serve to exemplify several points raised in this article: two roots have coalesced to enable the root *š-k-ḥ* to bear two meanings, double polysemy is at work, and sexual connotation is present.

The ingenuity of biblical writers in matters of word play is limitless. Our next two examples are extremely subtle, for they entail clues imbedded into the text of narrative accounts. The first of these examples is the use of the verb *ʾ-w-t* "consent," used three times in Genesis 34. First the sons of Jacob state in v. 15: *ʾak bĕzōʾt nēʾôt lākem* "but only with this we will consent to you," after which they describe the rite of circumcision that the Shechemites must perform. When Hamor and Shechem then speak to their fellow citizens, they state as follows: *ʾak bĕzōʾt yēʾôtû lānû hāʾănāšîm lāšebet ʾittānû* "but only with this will the men consent to us, to dwell with us" (v. 22), restated as *ʾak nēʾôtāh lāhem wĕyēšbû ʾittānû* "but only if we consent to them, and they will dwell with us" (v. 23).[57] This verb occurs only once more in the Bible (in 2 Kgs 12:9); the much more common verb for "agree, consent" is the root *ʾ-b-y* (discussed above re Prov 1:10). This raises the question: why did the author select the verb *ʾ-w-t* here (and then use it three times). Moreover, this verb is conjugated in an irregular manner; assuming it is a Qal (the Niphʿal is also possible), it shares with a few other verbs (*b-w-š* "be ashamed," for example) the characteristic *ô* vowel (not the typical *û* vowel). But this unusual quality in this uncommon verb allows the author to invoke the noun *ʾôt* "sign," a word that is central to the context. For the Israelites, the rite of circumcision was the *ʾôt* "sign" of the covenant, a point made explicit in Gen 17:11,[58] and thus the author of Genesis 34 places this word, in the form of a syllable within *nēʾôt* "we

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56. Koehler-Baumgartner-Stamm, *HALAT* 1, p. 260.

57. On the literary aspects of these repeated phrases, see A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), p. 78.

58. On circumcision as "sign," see the detailed study of M. V. Fox, "The Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Light of the Priestly *ʾôt* Etiologies," *RB* 81 (1974): 557–96.

will consent" in v. 15, in the mouth of Jacob's sons as they address Shechem and Hamor. When the latter two repeat the syllable, in the forms *yēʾōtû* "they will consent" in v. 22 and *nēʾōtāh* "we will consent" in v. 23, no doubt unaware of the key word *ʾōt* "sign" that they are invoking, we can imagine the Israelite audience of this story enjoying the word play.[59]

Our second illustration is an example of "visual word play," for it is forthcoming solely from the written form of the text.[60] I refer to 2 Sam 11:1 where the text provides the unique spelling *hammēlāʾkîm* for "kings." The orthography, of course, suggests "messengers," but the context—and the Masora[61]—make it clear that "kings" is to be understood (thus the ancient versions; for earlier evidence see 1 Chr 20:1). Why such a unique spelling at this point? As one reads the entire account of David and Bathsheba, one realizes how central messengers are to the narrative.[62] The word *malʾākîm* "messengers" appears in v. 4, when David sends messengers to fetch Bathsheba. But other messengers appear in the story as well, even if the word itself does not appear. I refer to v. 3 where David first inquires about Bathsheba's identity, and to v. 5 where Bathsheba informs David that she is pregnant. All of this was accomplished through messengers, a piece of information that the read-

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59. On the centrality of circumcision to the story in Genesis 34, see H. E. Goldberg, "Cambridge in the Land of Canaan: Descent, Alliance, Circumcision, and Instruction in the Bible," *JANES* 24 (1996): 9–34, especially pp. 22–24. On p. 24, Goldberg observed that "While the people of Shechem seem to offer all the signs of alliance, including the exchange of daughters, it is suggestive that, correlative to the feigned agreement, nowhere is the term *berit* used." The same is true of *ʾōt* "sign" as well, as just noted, except that the author managed to allude to this term by using the verb *ʾ-w-t* "consent" three times in the story.

60. On "visual word play," see S. B. Noegel, "Wordplay in the Tale of the Poor Man of Nippur," *ASJ* 18 (1996): 169–86, in particular pp. 177–82.

61. Most importantly, that of the Aleppo Codex, the most reliable medieval witness of the biblical text.

62. I no longer recall whether my graduate student Colin Smith suggested this to me or whether I realized this point independently of his discovery. But he deserves credit regardless, for his discussion with me served as the catalyst for my further thoughts on the topic.

er keeps in mind when he or she begins to wonder whether or not Uriah knows about the tryst between his wife and the king.[63] But the most important messenger that appears in the story is the one who dominates the stage in vv. 19–25. Why do we learn so much detail about the manner in which the messenger reported the news of the battle and of Uriah's death to David? Why did the author simply not write something like "And Joab sent word to David about the war and about Uriah's death." My answer to this question is indebted to Meir Sternberg's treatment of the story, but he did not, in my opinion, develop the thought fully. Sternberg noticed, quite correctly, that the messenger did not carry out Joab's instructions as commanded (he changed the description of the battle to make the Israelites look better than they actually were, etc.), in the same manner that Joab did not carry out David's instructions as commanded (not only Uriah but other innocents were killed as well, though of course Joab could not orchestrate the battle in the way that David demanded).[64] By extending the chain of command further, the reader realizes that David did not follow God's commands, specifically the prohibitions against adultery and murder (most succinctly in Exod 20:13–14, Deut 5:17–18). The messenger, accordingly, plays a crucial role. He serves to point the reader to the lesson of the story. When the king abrogates God's command, generals no longer listen to the commander-in-chief, and privates (i.e., messengers) no longer listen to generals. All of this, I submit, is anticipated by the author in the enigmatic orthography *ml'kym* in v. 1. The reader—in this case literally the reader, that is, the individual actually reading aloud with written text in hand—understands that "kings" is intended, but questions why "messengers" is spelled. As he or she proceeds through the story, the reader keeps this piece of information in the back of the mind, and recalls it as "messengers," especially the last and most important messenger, play a significant role in the narrative.

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63. On the possibility, indeed the strong possibility, that Uriah knew that something had occurred, see M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 201–13.

64. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 213–19.

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The subject of "visual word play" brings me to my concluding example. What follows cannot be substantiated for ancient Israel itself. In fact, most likely this example of visual word play developed at a later time in Jewish history, but I find it so attractive that I take the opportunity to present it here. There are different variations within the Jewish tradition on how to write, according to proper scribal practice, the text of Exodus 15. One such variation employs a delightful visual play in v. 19. The line break is placed after the word *mê* "waters of," after which the scribe creates the following line:

hayyām   ûběnê yiśrā'ēl hālěkû bayyabbāšāh bětôk   hayyām

The passage translates as "the sea, and the Israelites walked on the dry-land in the midst of the sea," with the two occurrences of *hayyām* "the sea" (the first of which belongs to the preceding phrase) left and right justified, and the remaining phrase "and the Israelites walked on dry-land in the midst of" in the middle of the line. The effect is to give a visual image of the Israelites walking in the midst of the sea. Both the Kennicott Bible of 1470 C.E. and the edition of J. H. Michaelis of 1720 C.E. produced the text in this fashion,[65] and it is also the standard format in Torah scrolls in use today, at least in the Ashkenazic tradition.[66] We cannot know how old this practice is—our only Qumran fragment with this verse

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65. *The Kennicott Bible*, intro. B. Narkiss and A. Cohen-Mushlin (London: Facsimile Editions, 1985), folio 44r, line 6; and J. H. Michaelis, *Biblia Hebraica, ex aliquot manuscriptis* (n.publ.: n.pl., 1720), p. 58a, top line. I also have found two other early editions with this layout: E. van der Hooght, *Biblia Hebraica*, Secundum Editionen Belgicam (Leipzig: Wolfgang Deer, 1740), p. 115, top line; and *'Arba'a ve-'Eśrim, 'im [Perush] Yedidya Shelomo mi-Norzi...Minḥat Shai* (Mantua: Licenza de Superiori, 1742), folio 40r. My thanks to the staffs of the Rare Book Rooms of Olin Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y., and of the Center for Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa., for access to the collections.

66. *Tiqqun Soferim la-Qore' ba-Torah* (Tel-Aviv: Sinai, n.d.), 113. This text is based on an edition printed in Amsterdam in 1866. For an halakhic codification of this practice, see Shelomo Ganzfried, *Sefer Qeset ha-Sofer* (originally published in Ungvar, Hungary, 1835, 2nd edition 1871; reprint: Brooklyn: Moriah, 1985), pp. 272–73. My thanks to Sol Cohen for bringing this work to my attention.

uses a different format;[67] and alas our most reliable early medieval manuscript, the Aleppo Codex, is missing most of the Torah.[68] But regardless of when the practice arose, it demonstrates that later Jews also understood that a scribe/author could play with the visual form of the text no less than with the oral/aural nature of words.

Finally, I take the opportunity to direct our attention to a very similar scribal effect in a classical Egyptian text. The text is the Shipwrecked Sailor, a Middle Egyptian (12th Dynasty) composition known from a single papyrus, P. St. Petersburg 1115. Towards the end of the tale, the sailor promises to the snake, "I will have brought to you ships laden with all treasures of Egypt, like that which is done for a god who loves [his] people in a distant land that the people know not" (lines 146–48).[69] The

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67. The text is 4QExod[a], published by J. E. Sanderson in E. Ulrich, *et al.*, *Qumran Cave 4*, Vol. VII: *Genesis to Numbers* (Discoveries in the Judaean Desert 12; Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), p. 118 and Plate XIX. The only other Qumran text with our passage, 4QRP[a], breaks off right at this point; see E. Tov and S. White, "Reworked Pentateuch," in H. Attridge, *et al.*, eds., *Qumran Cave 4*, Vol. VIII: *Parabiblical Texts*, Part I (Discoveries in the Judaean Desert 13; Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), p. 268 and Plate XXIII.

68. Maimonides' description of the layout of Exodus 15 in his Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Sefer Torah, chapter 8, suggests that the Aleppo Codex would not have utilized the visual image layout described above. But one must consult reliable editions of this work, such as the facsimile edition of the 1509 Constantinople printing: S. Z. Havlin, ed., *Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon (Maimonides): Code of Jewish Law (Mishne-Torah)* (Jerusalem: Makor, 1972), p. 31a. Modern printed editions typically alter the text to make it conform with modern Torah scrolls; thus, for example, Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah* (New York: Shulsinger, 1947), p. 45a (=p. 89). My thanks to Moshe Simon, a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania, for assisting me in researching this point.

The second most reliable manuscript, and the earliest complete codex of the Bible, the St. Petersburg (Leningrad) manuscript, presents a different format; see *Pentateuch, Prophets and Hagiographa: Codex Leningrad B 19a*, intro. D. S. Loewinger (Jerusalem: Makor, 1971), p. 83, line 10. The layout reproduced in A. Dotan, *Torah, Nevi'im, u-Khtuvim, Meduyyaqim Heṭev ʿal pi ha-Niqqud ha-Ṭeʿamim ve-ha-Masora shel ʾAharon ben Moshe ben ʾAsher bi-Khtav Yad Leningrad* (Tel-Aviv: Adi, 1973), p. 88, is incorrect, as comparison with the aforecited facsimile edition makes clear.

69. My rendering of this difficult line follows the lead of W. K. Simpson, "Amor

signs at the end of this sentence, quite uncharacteristically, are displayed one after another in horizontal fashion, with little attempt to place one over the other as is normally the case in Egyptian scribal practice. This string begins with *w3i* "distant," whose three signs, it is true, could only be written in consecutive fashion. But it continues with *n rḫ sw rmt*, whose eleven signs take up ten "spaces" (only the two alphabetic signs of *rḫ* are written one above the other). The impact is one of distance. This is indeed "a distant land that the people know not," and that distance is portrayed in the very writing of these words.

This technique is employed again a bit later when the Snake says *ḫpr is iwd-k tw r st tn* "it will happen, indeed, you will separate yourself from this place" (line 153). The first thirteen signs are written out in horizontal fashion, and only at the end are the last two signs of *st* "place" and the two signs of *tn* "this" placed in vertical fashion, one over the other. This example is not as clear as the one above, where the effect was to create "a distant land." But our first example may provide a clue to the elucidation of the second example. I would suggest that the writing scheme used here is intended to show the physical separation that the sailor will sense once he leaves the island to return home.[70]

This article has surveyed the various uses of word play in the Bible, presenting, as its title adumbrated, an eclectic collection of examples. But ancient Israelite culture did not exist in a vacuum, and thus I have taken the opportunity here, at article's end, to present two instances of

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dei: *ntr mrr rmt m t3 w3* (Sh.Sai. 147–48) and the Embrace," in J. Assmann, E. Feucht, and R. Grieshammer, eds., *Fragen an die altägyptische Literatur: Studien zum Gedenken an Eberhard Otto* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1977), pp. 493–98. See also his abstract "Amor dei," *ARCE Newsletter* 95 (Fall 1975-Winter 1976), pp. 11–12. For further discussion, see E. S. Meltzer, "The Setting of the Shipwrecked Sailor," *GM* 22 (1976): 50, n. 15. For general discussion, see A. Loprieno, "The Sign of Literature in the Shipwrecked Sailor," in U. Verhoeven and E. Graefe, eds., *Religion und Philosophie im alten Ägypten: Festgabe für Philippe Derchain zu seinem 65. Geburtstag am 24. Juli 1991* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 39; Leuven: Peeters, 1991), pp. 216–17.

70. I owe this suggestion to my former graduate student Kirsten Fudeman.

"visual word play," perhaps the subtlest type of word play that authors/ scribes employ, from an ancient Egyptian text.[71]

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71. This and many additional examples of word play and alliteration in Ship-wrecked Sailor are presented in G. A. Rendsburg, "Literary Devices in the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor" *JAOS* 120 (2000), in press.

PUNS AND PUNDITS

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IN

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