



Double Polysemy in Proverbs 31:19

Gary A. Rendsburg

Wordplay of various types is widely recognized by biblical scholars.¹ 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 *tb³/yb³* and *thd/yhd* mean both ‘enter’ and ‘be united’, as well as ‘desire’ and ‘rejoice’.²

An excellent example of this device is found in Prov 31:19: ידיה שלחה *yādehā šillēḥâ bakkîšôr wēkappēhā tāmēkû pālek* ‘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 *kîšôr*

1. For basic treatment, see Jack M. Sasson, “Wordplay in the OT,” *IDBSup* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) 968–70.

2. Gary A. Rendsburg, “Double Polysemy in Genesis 49:6 and Job 3:6,” *CBQ* 44 (1982) 48–51.

and *pālek* (nonpausal *pelek*) as technical terms for spinning tools.³ These are the primary meanings that these words bear in the present passage.

A demur regarding *kīšôr* was raised by W. F. Albright, who claimed that the word does not mean ‘spindle’, but rather ‘skill’, from the Canaanite root *kšr*.⁴ As support for this view, Albright noted that the early versions understood the term in this manner (Targum *kûšrā*², Peshitta *kaššîrûtā*²; see also Greek *sympheronta* ‘needed things’).⁵ To be sure, there are lexicographers who have understood Aramaic *kûšrā*² (variant *kûnšērā*²) in this passage as ‘spindle’,⁶ but in truth there is no independent confirmation of this meaning beyond the targumic rendering of Prov 31:19.⁷ The only other place where *kûšrā*² (again with the variant *kûnšērā*²) 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 interpretations⁸). In light of these facts, it is understandable that Albright reached the conclusion that *kīšôr* in Prov 31:19 means ‘skill’.

In addition, though one cannot be sure, Albright probably found the meaning ‘spindle’ for *kīšôr* 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 *kīšôr* ‘spindle’, namely Sumerian *ki-sur* ‘spinning place’ and Sumerian *giš-sur* ‘spinning instrument’.⁹ The former etymology first was proposed by A. Boissier,¹⁰ and he was followed by S. Landersdor-

3. In translating *kīšôr* as ‘spindle’ and *pelek* as ‘whorl’, I accept the suggested definitions of Yael Yisraeli, “Melaḥkha: Maḥkhot ha-Bayit: Ṭevuyyah,” *Encyclopaedia Biblica* 4, cols. 998–1003. In the present article I attempt no further exactitude in defining *kīšôr* and *pelek*, and I recognize that cognates of *pelek* (on which see below) often are translated ‘spindle’ in the standard dictionaries.

4. W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1968) 136 and n. 67.

5. Since the root is properly *ktr* (cf. Ugaritic), one would expect *ktr* in Aramaic. Accordingly, one will assume Aramaic *kšr* to be a borrowing from Canaanite. Some Targum manuscripts read *kûnšērā*², with inserted *n*. This, in turn, most likely explains the double *š* in the Syriac form.

6. J. Levy, *Chaldäisches Wörterbuch über die Targumim* (Cologne: Melzer, 1959 [reprint of the 1866 edition]) 374; and M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (2 vols.; London: Luzac, 1903) 1.622.

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

8. For ‘spine’ see Levy, *Wörterbuch*, 374. For ‘navel’ see Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 1.622–23; and G. H. Dalman, *Aramäisch-Neuhebräisches Handwörterbuch zu Targum, Talmud und Midrasch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1938).

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 *kīšôr* = ‘spindle’ with a possible Sumerian etymology in favor of *kīšôr* = ‘skill’. J. Friedrich (“Zum urartäischen Lexikon,” *ArOr* 4 [1932] 69) also noted that *kīšôr* is of foreign origin, but he did not specify the derivation.

10. A. Boissier, “A Sumerian Word in the Bible,” *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology* 35 (1913) 159–60.

fer.¹¹ The latter etymology was proposed by F. Cornelius,¹² and it appears (with a question mark) in the dictionary of W. Baumgartner.¹³

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,¹⁴ and *sur* is the common word for 'spin'.¹⁵ 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 *kîšôr*, 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*.¹⁶

If *giš-sur* is accepted as the etymology of *kîšôr*, 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 *parakku*; Sumerian *é-gal* 'temple' = Akkadian *ēkallu*, Ugaritic *hkl*, Hebrew *hēkāl*; Sumerian *gu-za* 'chair' = Akkadian *kussû*, Ugaritic *ks²*, Hebrew *kissē*.¹⁷ There are also particular examples of Sumerian words with *giš* entering Akkadian as *kiš-*, for example, *giš.kin.ti* = *kiškat-tum* 'workers, artisans, forgers'.¹⁸

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*

11. S. Landersdorfer, *Sumerisches Sprachgut im Alten Testament* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1916) 45.

12. F. Cornelius, cited in Albright, *Die Religion Israels*, 242 n. 68.

13. W. Baumgartner, *HALAT* (Leiden: Brill, 1974) 451.

14. See the listings in the index of H. Waetzoldt, *Untersuchungen zur neusumerischen Textil-industrie* (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.

15. B. Hübner and A. Reizammer, *Inim Kiengi II: Sumerisch-Deutsches Glossar* (Marktredwitz: Self-published, 1986) 916; and A. W. Sjöberg, ed., *The Sumerian Dictionary of the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: University Museum, 1984) 2.28 (see citations listed under *babbar* 'white'), 2.64–65 (see citation listed under *bala* 'spindle').

16. A. Falkenstein, "Lexikalisches Archiv," *ZA* 42 (1934) 153; I. J. Gelb, *Old Akkadian Writing and Grammar* (MAD 2; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) 35; and most exhaustively, S. J. Lieberman, *The Sumerian Loanwords in Old-Babylonian Akkadian* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977).

17. For discussion of the phonetics involved, see M.-L. Thomsen, *The Sumerian Language* (Mesopotamia 10; Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1984) 43.

18. I. J. Gelb, *Glossary of Old Akkadian* (MAD 3; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957) 154; and Lieberman, *The Sumerian Loanwords*, 296.

(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 *ga-ra-š₃-san* ‘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 *kīšôr*) 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 *kīšôr* ‘spindle’ of Sumerian origin.¹⁹ This meaning for *kīšôr* certainly has been the favored interpretation in the Jewish exegetical and lexicographical traditions.²⁰ For example, Rabbi Nathan ben Yehiel of Rome (1035–1110) in the *ʿArukh* defined the rare Hebrew word *ʿimmāh*, which appears in *Mishna Kelim* 11:6, 21:1, as a sewing or weaving tool and then equated it with the Biblical Hebrew word *kīšôr*.²¹

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 *kīšôr* ‘spindle’. In y. *Yebamot* 12d, a story is related that describes the disguised Rabbi Yohanan ha-Sandlar 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: *אית לך כושין אית לך כשר* *ʿyt lk kwšyn ʿyt lk kšr* ‘Do you have spindles (*kwšyn*)? Do you have *kasher* (is it valid)?’²²

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 *Il 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 *kīšôr* = ‘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. Plöger, *Sprüche Salomos (Proverbia)* (BKAT; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984) 372: “*kīšôr* und *pelek* sind Hapaxlegomena und in ihrer Bedeutung unsicher, haben es aber wohl mit der Webtätigkeit 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, *Millon ha-Lashon ha-ʿIvrit* (Berlin: Langenscheidt, n.d.) 5.2351 n. 2.

21. A. Kohut, *ʿArukh ha-Shalem* (2 vols.; New York: Pardes, 1955) 1.69.

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 *kwšyn* in this passage is known from eastern Aramaic, where the singular *kūšā*²³ means ‘reed’, but by extension ‘spindle’.²³ It is possible, of course, that this word is to be seen in the *kwšyn* of y. *Yebamot* 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 Aqiva would be more readily realized if the word were *kwšryn*,²⁴ that is, an Aramaic cognate to Hebrew *kīšôr*, presumably to be vocalized *kūšārîn*. So, even though no manuscript of the Jerusalem Talmud reads *kwšryn*—all witnesses have *kwšyn*—one is inclined to accept Epstein’s emendation of the text from *kwšyn* to *kwšryn*, that is, through simple addition of *r*. This has already been done by M. Sokoloff in his recent dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic.²⁵ Accordingly, in this lone passage of the Jerusalem Talmud, if the textual emendation is granted,²⁶ we gain an independent witness to an Aramaic form *kūšār* (presumed vocalization). This, in turn, solidifies the case for the Hebrew word *kīšôr* ‘spindle’ (and suggests that the targumic rendering *kūšrā*²⁷ in Prov 31:19 may mean ‘spindle’ after all).²⁷

translation of the pericope, see J. Neusner, *The Talmud of the Land of Israel: Yebamot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 387.

23. See, e. g., C. Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895) 156. The term continues to the present day in various dialects of Modern Eastern Aramaic; see A. J. Maclean, *Dictionary of the Dialects of Vernacular Syriac* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1901) 129; A. J. Oraham, *Dictionary of the Stabilized and Enriched Assyrian Language and English* (Chicago: Consolidated Press, 1943) 210; and G. Krotkoff, *A Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Kurdistan* (AOS 64; New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1982) 132. My thanks to Robert Hoberman of the State University of New York at Stony Brook for his assistance on this matter. The cognate form *kūš* occurs in post-biblical Hebrew.

24. Y. N. Epstein, *Mavo² le-Nusah ha-Mishna* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1948) 422 n. 1.

25. M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1990) 254.

26. The reader familiar with my work in biblical studies will know that I am characteristically reticent to emend the Masoretic Text of the Bible; see, for example, my *Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) 16–17. It may seem a bit odd, therefore, for me to accept an emendation of a word in the Talmud. But the history of the textual transmission of the Bible is quite different from that of the Talmud. Furthermore, I invoke this emendation of *kwšyn* to *kwšryn*, not of my own accord but based on the great authority of a giant in the field, Y. N. Epstein, and with the recognition that M. Sokoloff has also accepted it. Presumably, the tradition to read *kwšyn* in y. *Yebamot* 12d arose due to contamination from eastern Aramaic, the dialect of the Babylonian Talmud, and from Hebrew. The word *kūšā*²/*kūš* was more common in texts written in eastern Aramaic and in Hebrew, and Jews traditionally read the Babylonian Talmud and Hebrew sources more frequently than they read the Jerusalem Talmud. Thus, it may have been quite natural to replace the hapax legomenon *kwšryn* in the Jerusalem Talmud with the better-known *kwšyn*. On western Aramaic texts “which due to the copyists are influenced by Eastern Aramaic,” see E. Y. Kutscher, *Studies in Galilean Aramaic* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1976) 7, though I realize that, in the present instance, even the best manuscripts of y. *Yebamot* read *kwšyn*.

27. Is Maʿlūla Aramaic *xšūra* ‘wood, piece of wood’ (from the root *kšr*) to be related? From both the artwork and the archaeological remains, especially from Egypt, we learn that spindles

Acceptance of *kīšôr* 'spindle' in the Hebrew lexicon, however, does not require us to oppose Albright's suggestion to interpret *kīšôr* 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 *kīšôr*, it also should be true of its parallel member *pālek*. The meaning 'whorl' is established from the cognate terms Akkadian *pilakku*, Aramaic *pilkā*²⁹, Arabic *falak* (see also Eblaite *pilak(k)u*, Ugaritic-Phoenician *plk*²⁹). But the meaning 'clever' is also inherent in the word, with the cognate evidence forthcoming from the root *flk* 'clever' in Jibbālī (a Modern South Arabian language).³⁰ Now at first glance it might seem far-fetched to invoke a Jibbālī 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.³¹ This phenomenon is due no doubt to "the very close affinity of

were made from wood; see Yisraeli, "Mela³khah: Mal³akhot ha-Bayit: Ṭevuyyah," col. 1000. If Modern Western Aramaic *xšūra* 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 Ma³lūla Aramaic terms for 'spindle' are *ma³zla* and *martna* (the latter borrowed from Arabic *mardan*). 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).

28. Additional support for retaining 'spindle' is the use of this item as a symbol of femininity in the ancient Near East. See H. A. Hoffner, "Symbols for Masculinity and Femininity: Their Use in Ancient Near Eastern Sympathetic Magic Rituals," *JBL* 85 (1966) 326–34. I owe this reference also to D. I. Owen.

29. These cognates can be found in the standard dictionaries. The Eblaite term appears as NE-a-gu in a bilingual text, for which see G. Pettinato, *Testi lessicali bilingui della biblioteca L. 2769* (MEE 4; Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1982) 251 (VE 459). This is read as either *bil-a-gu* (Sjöberg, *Dictionary*, 2.65) or *bi-a-gu* (G. Conti, *Il sillabario della quarta fonte della lista lessicale bilingue eblaita* [Miscellanea Eblaitica 3 = Quaderni di Semitistica 17; Florence: Università di Firenze, 1990] 133). In the latter interpretation, the // is not indicated in the writing system, as occurs elsewhere in Eblaite orthography. In either case, the word is clearly *pilak(k)u*. On *plk* in Ugaritic, see the discussion of S. Ribichini and P. Xella, *La terminologia dei tessili nei testi di Ugarit* (Rome: Consiglio Nazionale della Ricerche, 1985) 59–60.

30. T. M. Johnstone, *Jibbālī Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 57. For a related meaning, see T. M. Johnstone, *Mehri Lexicon* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1987) 93.

31. For examples, see E. Ullendorff, "Ugaritic Marginalia," *Or* 20 (1951) 273–74; W. Leslau, "Observations on Semitic Cognates in Ugaritic," *Or* 37 (1968) 347–66 (in particular nos. 526, 607, 655, 869a, 1215, 1575, 1721, 1985); G. A. Rendsburg, "Modern South Arabian as a Source for Ugaritic Etymologies," *JAOS* 107 (1987) 623–28. See also G. A. Rendsburg, "Hebrew *RHM* = 'Rain,'" *VT* 33 (1983) 357–62 (the main cognate evidence is Modern South Arabian, but there is also support from Arabic dialects).

Semitic tongues, which are no less similar to each other than languages belonging to one branch of Indo-European.”³²

Accordingly, I understand Prov 31:19 as containing a double polysemy. The words *kîšôr* and *pālek* 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.³³ 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.³⁴

We cannot say how the words for ‘skill’ and ‘cleverness’ would have been vocalized, but probably the original text simply read the consonants *kšr* and *plk* (the latter is written thus still in the Masoretic Text), and the reader would garner both meanings from these graphemes.³⁵

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,³⁶ and which also treats a subject of long-standing interest to our honoree,³⁷ as a token of my esteem for my friend Georg Krotkoff.

Addendum

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

32. J. Blau, “Hebrew and North West Semitic: Reflections on the Classification of the Semitic Languages,” *HAR* 2 (1978) 22.

33. For another example of artistry of a high order, see A. Wolters, “*Šôpiyyâ* (Proverbs 31:27) as Hymnic Participle and Play on *Sophia*,” *JBL* 104 (1985) 577–87; and the ensuing discussion in my “Bilingual Wordplay in the Bible,” *VT* 38 (1988) 354–57.

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

35. The real issue is with *kšr*, which in the MT is written *plene* as *kyšwr*. This orthography, with both *waw* and *yod* as medial vowel letters, most likely would have developed in postexilic times. See the discussion in Z. Zevit, *Matres Lectionis 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 nn. 23 and 27.

37. See G. Krotkoff, “Das Weberhandwerk in Bagdad,” *ZDMG* 112 (1962) 319–24.

entitled “The Meaning of *kîšôr* (Proverbs 31:19),” read at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, San Francisco, November, 1992.

Wolters’s main point is that *kîšôr* 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.³⁸ 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 *kîšôr*.

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

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