'ADAM AS 'SKIN' AND 'EARTH':
AN EXAMINATION OF SOME PROPOSED MEANINGS IN
BIBLICAL HEBREW

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The noun 'dm appears in the lexicon of L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner with five separate listings for 'dm. In addition to (1) the common meaning of 'humanity'; there is (2) the meaning of 'skin, hide, leather' given for an appearance of 'dm in Hosea 11:4; (3) the personal name Adam; (4) the meaning of 'ground, earth', a variant of 'dm; and (5) the geographic name for a site identified with Tell ed-Dämiye. While the first and third meanings are identifiable in the opening chapters of Genesis; the second, fourth, and fifth are to be considered here in terms of their usefulness in understanding the texts in which they have been found and in terms of their value as additions to the Hebrew lexicon.

1. Meaning 2: 'skin, hide, leather'

This meaning is based on the use of 'dm in Hosea 11:4. The text of the first part of the verse reads:

G. R. Driver proposed the rendering: 'I attached them (as) with bands of leather, drawing them (close as) with bonds of hide'. He bases his translation on Arabic cognates for both 'dm and 'dm. The JPS translation reads: 'I drew them with human ties, With cords of love'. This is acceptable for the context. Although the lexicon of Koehler and Baumgartner cites H. W.

1The research for this paper was done at Tyndale House, Cambridge, England, as part of the Genesis 1-11 Project. It forms part of a paper read to the Tyndale Old Testament Study Group on 10 July 1988, at Tyndale House.


3Cf. Gen. 1-5 and my forthcoming article, 'Splitting the Adam: The Usage of 'ADAM in Genesis i-v', Vetus Testamentum.


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Wolf, the latest edition of his commentary rejects ‘leather’ as a translation for ולע. Such an understanding is supported by the other commentaries, as well. The most common translation is to understand ולע as ‘humanity’ or as an individual human. This is the simplest and most suitable reading of the text. However, even options to read ולע as an emendation in place of ולע demonstrate an alternative view to ולע understood as ‘skin, hide, leather’.

2. Meaning 4: ‘ground, earth, steppe’

This meaning for ולע is suggested by its similarity to the Hebrew word for ‘ground, earth’, ולע. The meaning is based upon M. Dahood’s argument concerning the ולע of Zechariah 9:1. Among the emendations proposed for this phrase was one

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8Zacharia 9, 1, EN 'ÂDÂM, CBQ 25 (1963) 123-4. In addition to the passages discussed here, Dahood argues for this translation in Job 11:12 and Isaiah 38:11:

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relating סְדָם to מִּדְמָם by adding a ה to the word. The translation would then be, ‘surface of the earth’. Dahood accepted this translation but argued that no emendation was necessary since ‘Hebrew possessed a masculine substantive סְדָם, “earth, steppe”’. Thus Dahood would translate Zechariah 9:1 as follows:

The word of the Lord is in Hadrach,
And Damascus is his domicile;
For the Lord’s is the surface of the earth,
As well as all the tribes of Israel.

However, this is not the only translation possible. Indeed, commentators have tended to understand סְדָם as an unemended geographic name (definition 5 of Koehler and Baumgartner’s lexicon),9 or as a slightly emended geographic name, סְדָם.10 In either case, the proposed translation of סְדָם as ‘earth, steppe’ is unnecessary. However, A. Lacocque argues for accepting the text as it is and translating סְדָם as ‘humanity’.11 His translation follows Dahood’s except for the third line, which he renders:


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'Car sur YHWH est l'œil de (tout) homme'. Lacocque's case is supported by the versions and by the reference to eyes in v. 8.

Five other examples are also cited by Dahood. All appear in the lexicon of Koehler and Baumgartner. The first one is Proverbs 30:14b:

Dahood translates: 'To devour the poor from the land and the needy from the earth'. However, it is possible to understand in this verse as 'humanity'. In this case, which is parallel to, should be understood as a poetic metaphor for humanity in general. This is preferable as the context is not concerned with the place of residence for the poor and needy (i.e. the earth), but with that portion of humanity which is least able to defend itself against the type of people described in vv. 11-14a.

Genesis 16:12 contains the expression, which Dahood translates as, 'a wild ass of the steppe'. This translation has not been followed by the commentators who

12p. 148. Cf. JPS: 'For all men's eyes will turn to the LORD'; NIV: 'for the eyes of men and all the tribes of Israel are on the LORD'; and M. Delcor, 'Les allusions à Alexandre le grande dans Zach IX 1-8', VT 1 (1951) 110-24 [112].
find here in אֹזֶן, a description of a particular אָזֶן, the man אֹזֶן. This is the simplest explanation and adequately suits the context. Most commentators understand אָזֶן to form a bound construct relationship (i.e. ‘a wild ass of a man’)\textsuperscript{16}, while others render the text in a periphrastic manner.\textsuperscript{17}

In Job 36:28b, Dahood translates the Hebrew:

ירשם עַל אָזֶן בָּר

as ‘They rain down showers upon the earth’. Although supported by M. Pope,\textsuperscript{18} this interpretation has not been accepted by other Semiticists who have studied Job. N. H. Tur-Sinai’s repointing of the last two words to form בַּר בַּר (‘their rich stream’) has not been followed.\textsuperscript{19} Nor is it necessary to find a hypothetical ‘by-form’ of רְבִיכֵים (‘showers’) in בַּר.\textsuperscript{20} Rather, the remark of R. Gordis is cogent: ‘The traditional rendering “they shower upon all men” is entirely satisfactory; it lacks only the virtue of novelty’.\textsuperscript{21}


\textsuperscript{18}Job. \textit{Introduction, Translation, and Notes} (AB 15; Garden City, New York 31973) 267, 274.

\textsuperscript{19}\textit{The Book of Job. A New Commentary} (Jerusalem, Kiryath Sepher 21967) 504.


The Hebrew text of Jeremiah 32:20 includes the phrase, ננה-ל ספת. This is the sixth of Dahood's examples. He translates, 'both in Israel and in the steppe'. The verse describes 'signs and wonders' which God has done in Egypt, in Israel, and ספת. The result of these signs has been the establishing of a name (בְּכֶם) for God. The verse is part of a section involving praise to God for the deliverance of the people of God. The context therefore is appropriate for an expression which describes God's universal fame. Thus the generic use of ספת ('humanity') would be entirely fitting for such praise, whereas a description of God's renown as extending to the steppe would seem out of place, indeed rather strange in a context of concern for peoples rather than places.

The last example cited by Dahood is Zecharaiah 13:5, where the Hebrew of the second half of the verse reads:

תבל אשתותב אתכה אלהי כי אהת הוקח ממקינו

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Book of Job Translated from a Critically Revised Hebrew Text with Commentary (Dublin, Brown and Nolan 1939) 249, 252; S. Terrien, Job (CAT XIII; Neuchatel, Delachaux & Niestlé 1963) 238-9; E. Dhorme, A Commentary on the Book of Job (trans., H. Knight; London, Thomas Nelson 1967) 553-4; F. Hesse, Hiob (ZBK AT 14; Zürich, Theologischer Verlag 1978) 188, 190; N. C. Habel, The Book of Job. A Commentary (OTL; London, SCM 1985) 511, who notes: The rain falls on ספת, "humankind," rather than on the ספת, "dry ground," as we might expect from other contexts. . . . The reference to ספת in v. 25 indicates that Elihu's focus is on human beings who experience these mysteries in person; nevertheless the ספת/ספת wordplay lies in the background as in Gen. 2:4-7.

Dahood translates: ‘A tiller of the earth am I for the earth possessed me from my youth’. However, most commentators have been satisfied to follow J. Wellhausen’s emendation of this difficult text.²³ Wellhausen proposed to redivide the מָצַר and to add a yodh between the two nuns. This yields, מַצַר, i.e. ‘the land has been my possession’. This seems plausible, although the suggestion of H. L. Ginsberg should also be considered.²⁴ He takes מַצַר as the root meaning, ‘to be red’, and repoints the verb as a passive form. His translation is: ‘I was plied with the red stuff from my youth on’; the ‘red stuff’ here being wine.


3. Meaning 5: a geographic name

The existence of a geographic site with the name כַּרְמָה is established by both Egyptian and Hebrew sources. It has been identified with Tell ed-Damiye, a site in the Jordan Valley. Its appearance in Joshua 3:16 is certain. Suggested appearances elsewhere are conjectural.

4. Conclusion

The results of this survey of the various definitions listed for כַּרְמָה have led to conclusions that cast doubt on two of the five meanings suggested by L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner's lexicon. Although it may be possible to find the root 'דמ with the meanings of 'skin, hide, leather' or 'earth, steppe' in cognate Semitic languages, their appearance in Biblical Hebrew is hypothetical at best. This is not to say that the texts cited do not possess grammatical and syntactical problems. However, obscurity should not be the rationale for the introduction of a new semantic category. Indeed, replacing one noun with another does not lessen the grammatical problems which exist in some of the passages discussed. Nor is the claim made that passages such as Proverbs 30:14b are not well suited for the translation of כַּרְמָה proposed by Dahood and followed by Koehler and Baumgartner. Rather, it is more important to understand that adequate renderings exist within the recognized Hebrew semantic range of כַּרְמָה with the meaning,

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'humanity' in all of the examples above. Because this is the case it is unwise to introduce new meanings into the Biblical Hebrew lexicon. Other orthographically distinct forms of the 'dm root provide an adequate semantic range for the meaning, 'earth, land', as used throughout the Hebrew Bible. Therefore it is probable that, whatever the original meaning of the Hebrew word כְּלָי, its understood meaning among Hebrew speakers and writers during the Biblical period need not be found through the introduction of previously unrecognized meanings from cognate languages.

27 This is not to discount the obvious word play between כְּלָי and כְּלָי in Genesis chapter 2, a word play which reflects a concern to portray humanity's origin and association with the earth. Cf. Delitzsch, Genesis 117-18; Driver, Genesis 37; Speiser, Genesis 16; Westermann, Genesis 199-207.