Lexical Meaning in Biblical Hebrew and Cognitive Semantics: a Case Study

In a recent survey of Biblical Hebrew lexica (1), it was pointed out that the theoretical frames of reference underlying both the older classics such as Brown-Driver-Briggs (=BDB) (2) and Koehler and Baumgartner (=KB) (3), as well as the more recent Dictionary of Classical Hebrew (=DCH) (4), can be called into question (5). Two weaknesses were highlighted. Firstly, the layout and structure of these dictionaries reflect very little of the wealth of insights provided by theoretical lexicography (i.e. the theoretical reflection about the practice of dictionary making) and dictionary criticism in recent years (6). Secondly, the semantic model(s) underlying available Biblical Hebrew dictionaries are either outdated (in the case of BDB and KB), or represent a very narrow and inadequate version of what modern linguistics has to offer for Biblical Hebrew lexicology (in the case of DCH). If one considers, even in very broad terms, recent developments in the field of semantics, in particular cognitive semantics, the shortcomings of bilingual Biblical Hebrew–English dictionaries that provide mere translation glosses (in the case of BDB and KB), or glosses supplemented with lists of the systematic syntagmatic distribution of lexical items (in the case of Clines) soon become evident. For example, if one accepts the insights about the ways in which humans across languages use linguistic terms to categorize their world, and the cultural embedment of languages’ lexical stock, a new perspective emerges on the type of information that is indispensable in a bilingual dictionary of which the source and target languages are remote in time and space. However, although cognitive semantics provides promising new perspectives on the notion of “lexical meaning”, it does not present — as any other linguistic theory does — a ready-made model that can merely be applied to an ancient language like Biblical Hebrew. Issues that are still debated, for example, are the exact role that syntactic and encyclopedic information should play in the analysis and interpretation of lexical items (7).

The aim of this case study is to illustrate some of the insights that can be gained from using a cognitive semantic perspective to describe the meaning potential of a set of lexical items, viz. רד, ח, ו, פ, ה, ו, רד. It is obvious from the information provided in most available BH lexica (mainly “translation glosses”) that some of these terms can often, and others in particular instances, be translated either as “be(come) strong”, “strong”, “strength” or “power(ful)”. It is also clear from most of the lexica that these terms are not absolute synonyms. However, the lexica (as well as available theological dictionaries) do not help one to fully understand the relationship and/or differences between the lexical items.

The notion “meaning potential” occupies a central position in this paper since I hypothesize that it provides a justifiable theoretical frame of reference for capturing the types of information that should be included in bilingual BH lexica. I will focus in this paper on its contribution, alongside that of the notions “prototypical meaning” and “basic level category”, for better understanding the relationships between רד, ח, ו, פ, ה, ו, רד, א, נ, ו, רד (1). The paper is organized as follows: I start with a few general observations on a cognitive semantic approach to meaning. Secondly, I give a brief description of those insights of cognitive linguistics that have played a crucial role (at least consciously) in this investigation. Special reference is made to the concept “folk taxonomy” since it is crucial for understanding the notions “basic level category”, “prototypical meaning” and in particular “meaning potential”. Reasons are also given why the latter notion plays such a central role in this study. Thirdly, I explain why ח may be regarded as the “basic level” items for the conceptual category “strong/strength” in Biblical Hebrew. After describing the meaning potential of ח, I discuss the reasons why the other items in the list are not regarded as “basic level” items. I do not attempt to deal exhaustively with the meaning potential of any of these terms. However, with reference to the description of the meaning potential of ח, and drawing on those of the other items of our set (2), I focus on describing the relationship between ח, ח, פ, ה, ו, רד, א, נ, ו, רד and ח. In conclusion I summarize the contribution that this application of a few basic concepts from cognitive semantics has made towards a better understanding of a set of related BH lexical items.

(1) In an initial survey I considered including נ. However, on account of its relatively specialized connotation of strength that is associated with multiplicity, I decided to exclude it. As far as its distribution is concerned, the adjective נ occurs 31x in the OT. In only 5 cases does it not act as an attribute of ח or נ. For an excellent description of lexical items with the root נ, cf. G. LOHFINK, “נ”, TDOT, XI, 289-303.

(2) Compare H. RECHENMACHER “Kognitive Linguistik und Althebräische Lexikographie”, JNSL 30/2 (2004) 43-59. He does not explicitly use the term “meaning potential”, but does illustrate the value of insights from cognitive linguistics for the better understanding of set of BH items, viz. רו, י, ו, נ, א, נ, ו.רד, א, נ, ו.

(3) A description of the meaning potential of each of the other items can be obtained at the following website: http://academic.sun.ac.za/as/dokumente/VanderMerwe/AddendumtoLexicalmeaningandcognitivelinguistics.pdf
1. Some Basic Assumptions of Cognitive Semantics and its Implications

Cognitive semantics represents an experimental approach to meaning. In some respects it links up with pre-structuralist and romantic approaches to linguistic meaning. It does not believe that the meaning of linguistic expressions can be determined merely by a structural analysis of linguistic signs (e.g. their syntagmatic and paradigmatic distribution) in abstraction from the society that uses them. It also does not regard language and linguistic knowledge as an autonomous human faculty, as is argued in Chomskyean circles, nor that the lexicon of a language is one of a number of independent modules that make up this special human faculty. Instead, a basic assumption of cognitive semantics (which is backed by substantial empirical evidence) is that “the cognitive processes that govern language use, in particular the construction and communication of meaning by language, are in principle the same as other cognitive abilities” (12). Furthermore, “common human experience of maturing and interacting in society motivates basic conceptual structures which make understanding and language possible” (13).

The lexical stock (alongside the grammatical constructions) of a language is regarded as representing a set of conceptual categories that reflect the way in which a society conceptualizes itself and its environment. Geeraerts describes these categories as a “repository of world knowledge, a structured collection of meaningful categories that help us deal with new experiences and store information about old ones” (14). However, this is not a full-scale return to a strong romantic position concerning the relationship between language and thought (15).

Humans tend to categorize the entities of the world in which they live in terms of categories at various levels, e.g. animals>fish>freshwater fish>black bass>large-mouthed bass. Folk taxonomies tend to differ from biological taxonomies, because cultures differ concerning the attributes that they regard as the most salient in the classification process, e.g. a bat’s ability to fly may be more salient than its ability to give birth, so that it would often be classified as a bird rather than as a mammal (16).

However, folk taxonomies also show similarities across cultures (17): (1)

(11) Compare also Van der Merwe, Biblical Hebrew Lexicology: A Cognitive Linguistic Perspective.

(12) W. Croft - D.A. Cruse, Cognitive Linguistics (Cambridge 2004) 2. — This means, among other things, that psychological models of cognition and memory shed light on the way linguistic knowledge is organized, in particular how categorization takes place.


(17) Pre-linguistic image schemes which reflect the way in which humans perceive and experience their bodies as containers also across languages motivate linguistic expressions, e.g. someone is filled with emotions (in English) or filled with a spirit (in Biblical Hebrew: Exod 35,31, Jer 31,23). See Saeed, Semantics, 311-312, for a succinct explanation of “path” and “force” image schemes.
cultures tend to have not more than five or six levels of categorization of biological domains; (2) the relationships tend to be complex, not always forming logically structured hierarchies; and (3) any folk taxonomy has a core, referred to as its basic level, e.g. in the case of animals it will be things like fish, dog, cat, bird, etc. Geeraerts observes as follows in this regard:

... basic level categories exhibit a number of ... characteristics. From a psychological point of view, they are conceptualized as perceptual and functional gestalts (18). From a developmental point of view, they are early in acquisition, i.e. they are the first terms of the taxonomy learned by the child. From a linguistic point of view, they are named by short morphologically simple items. And from a conceptual point of view, it has been claimed that the basic level constitutes the level where prototype effects are most outspoken, in the sense that they maximize the number of attributes shared by members of the category, and minimize the number of attributes shared with members of other categories (19).

Categories tend to have fuzzy borders (20), e.g. they may include items that are regarded as good examples of a category and those that are less typical. In the case of the category fruit, apples and oranges would be regarded by American speakers of English as good examples of the category, while pomegranates, lemons, watermelons and pineapples will be regarded as not such good examples (21). “Good examples” are regarded as prototypes of a particular category. Definitions of categories are as a rule made in terms of the attributes that apply to its prototypical members, e.g. fruit will be described as “the soft and sweet edible entities that grow on trees and bushes” (22).

Practising lexicographers and lexicologists would be the first to agree that one of the most problematic aspects of describing lexical items is that of their sense relationships. Pertinent questions that often arise are: (1) how many senses should be distinguished? (The same question posed from a different perspective: How does one distinguish what are no longer polysemes, but homonyms?) (23) (2) How should the relationships between the different senses of the same lexical entity be interpreted? (3) Should one distinguish a “basic meaning”? What is the relationship between such a “basic meaning”, an “original meaning”, a “prototypical meaning”, and the different senses of

(18) This means that people can form a mental representation of a fish, a dog, etc., but not of an animal.
(20) Cf. CROFT – CRUSE, Cognitive Linguistics, 89.
(22) D. Geeraerts refers to this type of definition of the sense of fruit as its “basic reading”. For him it is “the center of semantic cohesion in the category; it holds the category together by making the other readings accessible. Three features, in short (psychological salience, relative frequency of use, interpretative advantageousness) may be mentioned as indications for the central position of a particular reading (“An overview”, 306)”. However, the prototype theory is not without is shortcomings. Cf. CROFT – CRUSE, Cognitive Linguistics, 87-96.
(23) When one tries to describe the Biblical Hebrew item הָֽרֶם the crux of this problem is evident.
a polyseme? Should only a basic reading be defined, or should each sense be defined? How inclusive should such a definition be? Should a minimum context be assumed, or should the meaning potential in any context be described?

In cognitive semantic circles it has been established that the relationships between polysemes tend to display similarities across cultures, e.g. “thought mapping” is based on similarity from the concrete to more abstract in the case of metaphorical extensions (the fruit of my work, the foot of the mountain), based on a relation of contiguity in the case of metonymy (he drank the whole bottle) as well as specialization (corn = maize (USA) / wheat (England) / oats (Scotland)) and generalization (fruit as the seed-bearing part of a plant) of the sense of a basic reading.

These insights make the definitions of the prototypical or basic reading of a lexical item attractive, since sense distinctions can then be made on the basis of the above-mentioned extensions. However, Allwood rightly points out some of the pitfalls of such an approach (24). In my view the most problematic aspect of such an approach is that tracking the mappings, which can be complicated in the case of multiple mappings and extensions, does not necessarily shed light on the way a particular mapping has become conventionalized. Allwood suggests that “the basic unit of word meaning is the ‘meaning potential’ of the word” (25). In other words, this is the unit that needs to be defined. “The meaning potential is all the information that a word has been used to convey either by a single individual or, on the social level, by the language community” (26). The content of the meaning potential of a word does not distinguish between linguistic and encyclopaedic information. When a word is used, one or more aspect of its meaning potential are activated and the activation takes place “in a context which creates certain conditions for its activation, with these conditions determining the way in which the potential is activated. The result of an activation is normally a structured partial activation of the potential” (27). An example in Biblical Hebrew is the generic word for saying, viz. רָבָּה. In contexts where the content of saying is a question, its potential as a word of asking is activated (28). The same can be said of רָאָה. In a context of promising, that part of its meaning potential may be activated (29). The process in which a “structured partial activation” of a


(25) ALLWOOD, Meaning Potential and Context, 43. — According to W. Cruse and D.A. Croft, “Each lexical item (word form) is associated with a body of conceptual content”. They refer to it as “purport”. Purport “is part of the raw material contributed by the word to processes of construal of an interpretation” (Cognitive Linguistics, 100).

(26) J. Allwood remarks: “Meaning potentials are thus a result of conventionalizations of semantic operations meeting contextual requirements” (Meaning Potential and Context, 50). For Croft and Cruse “purport is some function of previous experience of (construed) occurrences of the word in specific situations (Cognitive Linguistics, 101)”.

(27) ALLWOOD, Meaning Potential and Context, 43. — Cruse and Croft describe such an instance of activation (i.e. word meaning) as “a perspective of our knowledge of the world, as seen through the concept profiled by the word” (Cognitive Linguistics, 30).


(29) 1 Kgs 9,5; Jos 1,3; 14,10; 22,4. In contrast, cf. Deut 19,8.
meaning potential takes place is referred to by Croft and Cruse\(^{(30)}\) as a “dynamic construal of meaning”.

For the purposes of this paper I now hypothesize that (a) an analysis and a systematic description of all the occurrences of the lexical items in our set in the Hebrew Bible will make the identification of the meaning potential of each item possible, (b) each lexical item will display a prototypical reading, (c) the notion “basic level category” will point to the most prototypical lexical items for the concepts “strong/strength” in BH and (d) the notion “basic level category” is pivotal for understanding the relationship between a set of semantically related lexical items.

2. Lexical Items with the Label “Strong/Strength”

I had compiled all the BH words that are normally translated into English — this is of course a solely heuristic procedure — as “strong, powerful, strength, mighty, etc”. I ended up with the following list, viz. אדם, כוחות, חזות, חזון, חסידות, כוחה, כוחות, חסידות. The first question is, of course: does one use roots or word forms as point of departure? I opted for the first position, primarily as a heuristic procedure.

As a next step I used the theoretical frame of reference of De Blois\(^{(1)}\), and the electronic template Vocabula 3.3 to record, where relevant, the morphological features, the syntagmatic distribution, semantic features, near-synonyms and antonyms. Particular attention was paid to the recording of the contextual frame of each occurrence of the above-mentioned lexical items. On the basis of these data, I then described the meaning potential of each of the lexemes, paying special attention to (1) the major distinctions that warrant different definitions as far as their meaning potential is concerned, and (2) prototypical use(s) of each of these distinctions. This was, however, easier said than done.

After this semasiological analysis of a list of lexical items, the crucial question from an onomasiological point of view was: are there any specific word form(s) that can unequivocally be regarded as the basic level reading(s) of the category “strong/strength” in Biblical Hebrew? Since we have no mother-tongue speakers of Biblical Hebrew to consult, frequency of use and the widest possible combinational properties that may be an indication of its generic quality were used as criteria. I also considered the observation by Geerarts that basic level items tend to be named by “short morphologically simple terms”\(^{(32)}\). If the latter would be the point of departure, לש may be our first candidate and, depending on how one understands “short morphologically simple terms”, יה may also be a candidate. However, on the basis of an interplay of all three criteria, I found יה and the verbal forms and adjectives

\(^{(30)}\) CROFT – CRUSE, Cognitive Linguistics, 97-98.


with the root הָיָה to be the most basic level terms. הָיָה has by far the widest distribution. As a verb הָיָה occurs 370 times and as an adjective 58 times (35). The two basic level terms הָיָה and הָיָה display similarities respectively with their English counterparts “strength” and “strong, to be strong, to strengthen”.

I will not further deal with הָיָה here. An example from Amos 2,14 will have to suffice. It reflects well the relationship between הָיָה and הָיָה, viz. הָיָה הָיָה הָיָה.

The meaning potential of הָיָה, which occurs (only as a noun) 127 times in the Hebrew Bible, can be described as follows:

1a. הָיָה is often an attribute of humans, God or animals (or parts of them, typically their hand(s), arm(s) and legs). Sometimes הָיָה is an attribute of their voices (34) or emotions. It prototypically denotes the ability to perform actions, prevail in, or endure situations that require the exertion or mustering of an effort/force (35), e.g. manual work (36), fighting opposing forces (37), ruling a kingdom (38), oppressing other people (39), acquiring wealth (40), or giving birth (41). It often refers to the ability/energy humans need to face the challenges or hardships of life (42), express emotions (e.g. cry) (43) or the ability to do specialized work (44).

Living entities may typically have various measures of this ability. Abundant measures of the ability are associated with young healthy beings (45), soldiers (46), large numbers of people (47), big armies (48) big animals (49) and God. In the case of people it is an ability that may be absent (50), drained (51) or used up (52). God, however, has huge measures of this ability (53). He can give the ability to humans (54) (and big animals) (55), or take

(35) It is significant that the lexical item occurs frequently in Chronicles (98x, in other words, more or less 20% of all occurrences).

(36) Ps 29,4; Isa 40,9.

(37) Ps 12,11; 18,19; 30,17; 71,19; 102,24; Prov 24,10; Isa 40,29,31; 41,1; 44,12; 49,4; Jer 48,45; Lam 1,14; Dan 10,8; 10,16 and 17. In Ezra 10,13 a specific task is involved, viz. standing in the rain for days. In Job 6,11 and 12 God is implied as the cause of the hardship.

(38) 1 Sam 14,15; 30,4.

(39) 1 Chr 26,8 and Dan 1,4.

(40) Prov 20,29.

(41) Josh 14,11.

(42) Josh 17,17.

(43) Dan 11,25.

(44) Job 39,11; 39,21; Prov 14,4. In Dan 8,1 a feature of a big animal’s rage is denoted.

(45) 2 Chr 14,10; 20,12, Dan 11,15. The construction used is הָיָה הָיָה. Cf. also Job 26,2 and Dan 8,7.

(46) 1 Sam 28,20.


(48) Job 9,19; 36,22 and 37,23 and Isa 40,26.

(49) Ps 33,16 and Zech 4,6 (as a near-synonym of הָיָה, as second item of the pair). Implied in Judg 6,14.

(50) In Job 40,16 הָיָה is a near-synonym of הָיָה.
it away from them (56). This attribute of God is associated with what “belongs” to Him (57) and sometimes with His great wisdom (58). It makes Him dangerous to confront (59), but also the one who can do great deeds in creation (60) and for His people (61). This even includes His ability to forgive (62).

Someone who has ṣwb is described as ṣwb (63). ṣwb, however, is an ability that needs to be mustered [_changes (64) or ṣwb (65)]. It appears to be unmarked in most contexts as far as the quantity that is involved is concerned. This is in contrast to ṣwb, which always implies a huge measure of “strength”. ṣwb can be modified as far as quantity is concerned (66), e.g. ṣwb, ṣwb (“with great strength and a strong hand”) (67), ṣwb (68) (“force of strength” = great power”), ṣwb (69) (greatness/abundance of strength”) or ṣwb (69) (“His strength will be extremely great”) (70). In other contexts, it appears to be marked as far as quantity is concerned (71) and then is regarded as a near-synonym of ṣwb (72). A relationship similar to that which is displayed in the hierarchy: “dog” and “dog – bitch” may be involved (73).

1b. ṣwb refers to the accumulative effect of humans’ ability to perform actions that require effort (74). It can be the resources or ability they have to give back to the Lord as a tithe (75), the wealth they have acquired (76), or the produce of the land they cultivate (77).

If one now considers the other terms in our list, the follow picture emerges:

ṣwb is a near-synonym of ṣwb, but is the only term in our list that never co-occurs with ṣwb. ṣwb has a more specialized distribution than ṣwb. In 76% of the cases of its use, it denotes an attribute of God to do powerful deeds in order to provide a safe refuge for His people. The cultural model “God is a safe
refuge” appears often to be present. Jer 16,19 testifies explicitly in this regard לְדוּתָה לְעַמָּته: כְּעַד. Like הבֵּית it is an ability that sometimes needs to be mustered or invoked. In Ps 93,1 it is said that God “clothed” himself with יִתְנַשֵּׁף, while in Isa 51,9 he is asked to clothe Himself with יִתְנַשֵּׁף. When יִתְנַשֵּׁף is used to describe an attribute of humans or animals, it refers to specially endowed humans (trained warriors, kings, and Lady Wisdom) or big animals.

In contrast יִתְנַשֵּׁף, which is evenly distributed through the entire Hebrew Bible, is never an attribute of God, but an attribute of people (a nation, king, an enemy), big animals and natural forces. A frame of aggression, fierceness or destructiveness is nearly always present. It is significant that the verbal root יִתְנַשֵּׁף tends to share the distribution and meaning potential of יִתְנַשֵּׁף and not יִתְנַשֵּׁף.

A feature of the pair יִתְנַשֵּׁף/יִתְנַשֵּׁף, which it shares with יִתְנַשֵּׁף and יִתְנַשֵּׁף, is that the pair is relatively evenly distributed in the Hebrew Bible. Unlike יִתְנַשֵּׁף, יִתְנַשֵּׁף is never modified and prototypically describes the ability to perform actions that require a huge measure of force or an extreme effort — more or less in the same way as the English expression “very powerful”. In other words, unlike יִתְנַשֵּׁף, it is always marked for a huge measure. A significant feature of יִתְנַשֵּׁף as a near-synonym of יִתְנַשֵּׁף or יִתְנַשֵּׁף is that in all the cases that they are used in the same context (mainly in semantic parallelisms) יִתְנַשֵּׁף is mentioned second. I regard this feature of יִתְנַשֵּׁף as a confirmation of my hypothesis that it is the more specialized or marked item of יִתְנַשֵּׁף or יִתְנַשֵּׁף.

The pair יִתְנַשֵּׁף is also evenly distributed throughout the Hebrew Bible. It often co-occurs with יִתְנַשֵּׁף. It is significant that it is always the second member of the pair, which may suggest that יִתְנַשֵּׁף/יִתְנַשֵּׁף are the more specialized terms. This possibility is underlined by the fact that יִתְנַשֵּׁף has a more focused distribution than יִתְנַשֵּׁף in the sense that it occurs primarily in contextual frames of conflict.

יִתְנַשֵּׁף is a frequently occurring item (245x), but it has a more specialized connotation than יִתְנַשֵּׁף and יִתְנַשֵּׁף. If one leaves out of consideration the substantial number of cases that it refers to (1) a specialized skill (81), (2) (in a few cases) the ability to act with courage in a morally and ethically correct way, i.e. a “worthy” person, (3) the objects that people possess and that are greatly valued, “wealth” or an attribute of people who possess these objects, the following is clear: it is predominantly an attribute of able-bodied men, in particular soldiers. It refers to their ability to fight well, in other words, they are skilled warriors, and this ability often accompanies a degree of inner strength, i.e. bravery. יִתְנַשֵּׁף also often refers to people who provide (political) strength, a large group of people, often armed for fighting. In a few cases no contextual frame of warfare is directly involved. This lexical item is seldom

(80) Ps 65,7; 1 Chr 29,12; 2 Chr 20,6; Job 26,12; Mic 3,8.
(81) Ps 21,14.
(83) 1 Chr 26,8 reads יִתְנַשֵּׁף.
used to denote an attribute of God. When this does happen, it provides a frame of God as warrior or One who enables His people to face hostile forces.

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The notion “semantic potential” was used in this study to capture the activation potential for all the information (linguistic and encyclopaedic) connected with each of a set of semantically related lexical items in the Hebrew Bible, viz. שָׁמַיִם, חֲבָלֵי, חַסְדָּי, חֲטָא, חֲסֵדָי, חֳדָסָה, כָּרוֹד, מְרֹדַּק, בַּעַר, אֱלִיָּהוּ, מִשְׁמַר, כֹּהַנִּים. Commencing with the “basic level items” of the set, describing the distribution, the prototypical use and accompanying contextual frames of each term, the following picture emerged:

— and פִּים/זַמִּים are the basic level terms for the conceptual category “strong/strength” in Biblical Hebrew.

The prototypical reading of פִּים appears to be: פִּים denotes the ability — typically unmarked for quantity — which living beings may have various quantities of, and which they need to muster, to perform actions, prevail in, or endure situations that require the exertion or mustering of an effort/force.

The term אָזֶד does not co-occur with פִּים. It occurs primarily in poetic sections and very often denotes an attribute of God, viz. to do powerful deeds in order to care for His people. It also often invokes the contextual frame: “God is a safe refuge”.

The term אָזֶד nearly always has the connotation of fierceness and/or destructiveness. It never denotes an attribute of God.

— is always marked for an abundant measure of strength, viz. "(very) powerful".

יִזָּה has various senses. The connotation with strength is mainly that of the ability of able-bodied men to fight well (with skill) and often accompanies a degree of inner strength, i.e. bravery.

— often co-occurs with צַעַר and appear to be the more specialized of the two. It occurs predominantly in contextual frames of conflict.

This is certainly not the last word on the meaning of the above-mentioned set of lexical items. I have not paid any systematic attention to the distribution of the lexical items in the diachronic layers of BH, nor to the contribution that comparative philological evidence can make towards a better understanding of any of these lexical items. More insights into the way(s) the speakers of BH conceptualized their world in general may also contribute to a refinement of the above-mentioned results. Questions that arose in the course of this investigation, and which I have not addressed are: Can a lexical item have more than one prototypical reading (e.g. פִּים in 1a and 1b above), do prototypical readings always correlate with frequency of use, and what status should be assigned to a “prototypical” reading in a particular corpus (e.g. the books of Chronicles)?
SUMMARY

This paper examines the contribution that a cognitive linguistic model of meaning can make towards the semantic analysis and description of Biblical Hebrew. It commences with a brief description of some of the basic insights provided by cognitive semantics. The notion “semantic potential” is used to capture the activation potential for all the information (linguistic and encyclopaedic) connected with each of a set of semantically related lexical items in the Hebrew Bible, viz. תנינא, יֵלָל, יִשְׂרָאֵל, בֵּית, יְהוָה, בֵּית יְהוָה, יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֲדֹנָי. Commencing with the “basic level items” of the set, describing the distribution, the prototypical use and accompanying contextual frames of each term, the prototypical reading of and relationship between these terms are then identified.