



Hebrew WORDPLAY

a Seminar by Michael Banks



GOALS OF THIS SEMINAR...

1

WITNESS how God weaves creativity into *literary units* using devices like wordplay!

2

GAIN a greater appreciation of Scripture's unity, and cohesion.

3

RECOGNIZE theological truths we can glean from literary devices.

4

OBSERVE how God uses these techniques in Scripture to reinforce ethics, morals and virtues in the Christian life and spiritual formation.

WHAT IS WORDPLAY?

On the most basic level:

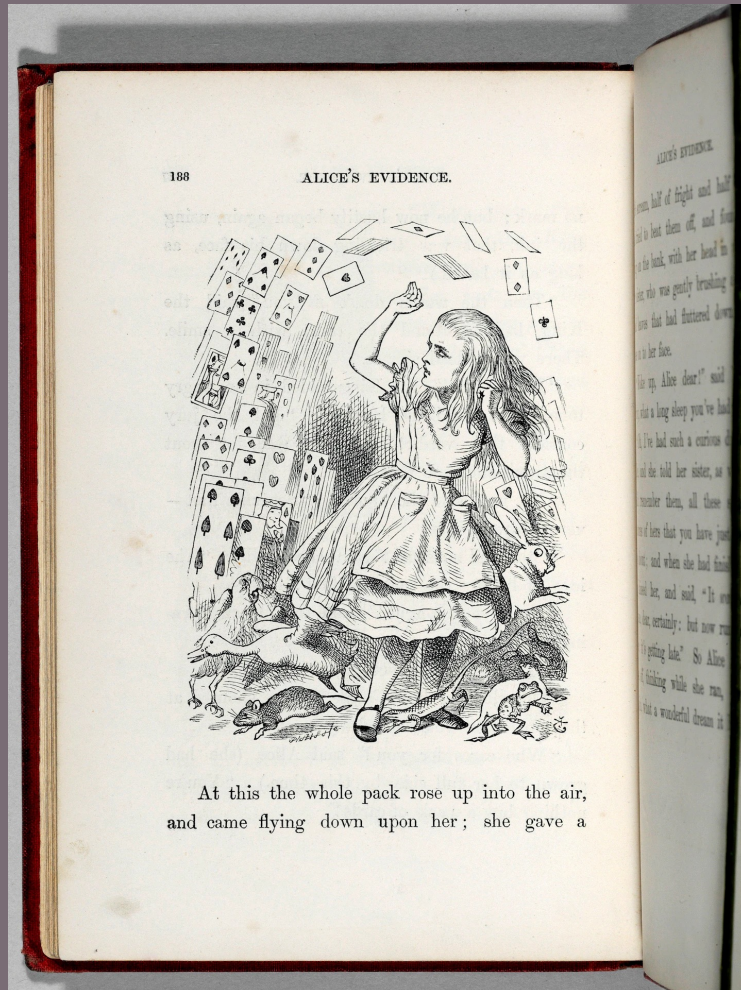
“Wordplay is the creative use of words.”

– Douglas Mangum

Abbot and Costello →



POPULAR LITERATURE



If I had a world of my own,
everything would be
nonsense. **Nothing** would be
what it is because everything
would be what it isn't. And
contrary-wise; *what it is, it*
wouldn't be, and *what it*
wouldn't be, it would.

You see?

In Alice's Adventures in
Wonderland, Lewis Carroll

TELOS (GOAL) OF HEBREW WORDPLAY



DIDACTIC

It teaches us something.
It instructs.

①

CREATIVE

Gives form and function to literary works.
Room for literary ambiguity.

②

THEOLOGICAL

Teaches ethics, morals and objective values to listeners that plays a part in Spiritual formation. It is axiomatic.

③

HUMOROUS

Reminders that our God is a God who created humor.
The Bible instructs us; also a literary tapestry.

④

DEFINING HEBREW WORDPLAY



A WORKING DEFINITION...

“Hebrew Wordplay refers to the Hebrew writers’ use of rhetorical devices like rhymes, puns, or homophones to create a literary effect by playing off sound patterns, ambiguity, or polysemy (multiple meanings a word or phrase could denote).”

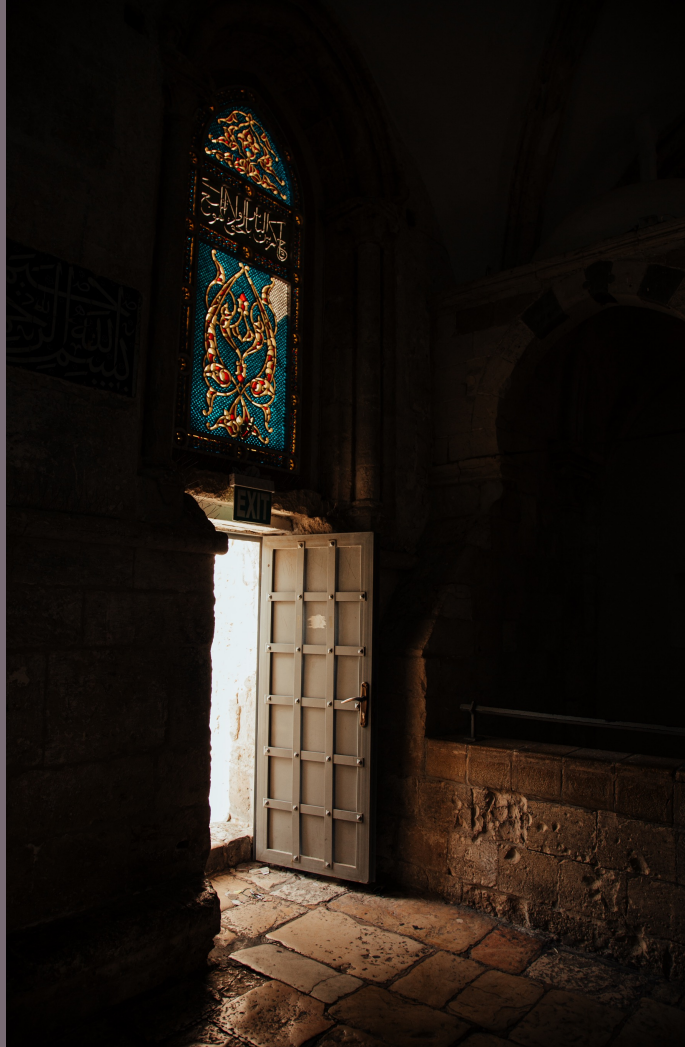
J. N. Tindall

The Lexham Bible Dictionary

“Wordplays are playful but significant uses of one and the same word or phrase with *different meanings* or of different words or phrases with the *same meanings*. Such imaginative, exciting and surprising uses of words or phrases can operate on the level of *sentences, paragraphs or whole poems*.”

K. Heim & Tremper Longman III
Dictionary of the Old Testament pg. 925

GENERAL CATEGORIES



❖ General categories—parameters:

❖ **Lexical wordplay**—“uses the **range of meanings** of a term or phrase to expose multiple layers within a narrative, piece of poetry, or wisdom saying.”

❖ **Phonological wordplay**—“focuses on the direct or indirect **similarity of sounds** between multiple terms and, through contrast, creates literary tension within a text.”

DEFINING TERMS...

POLYSEMY

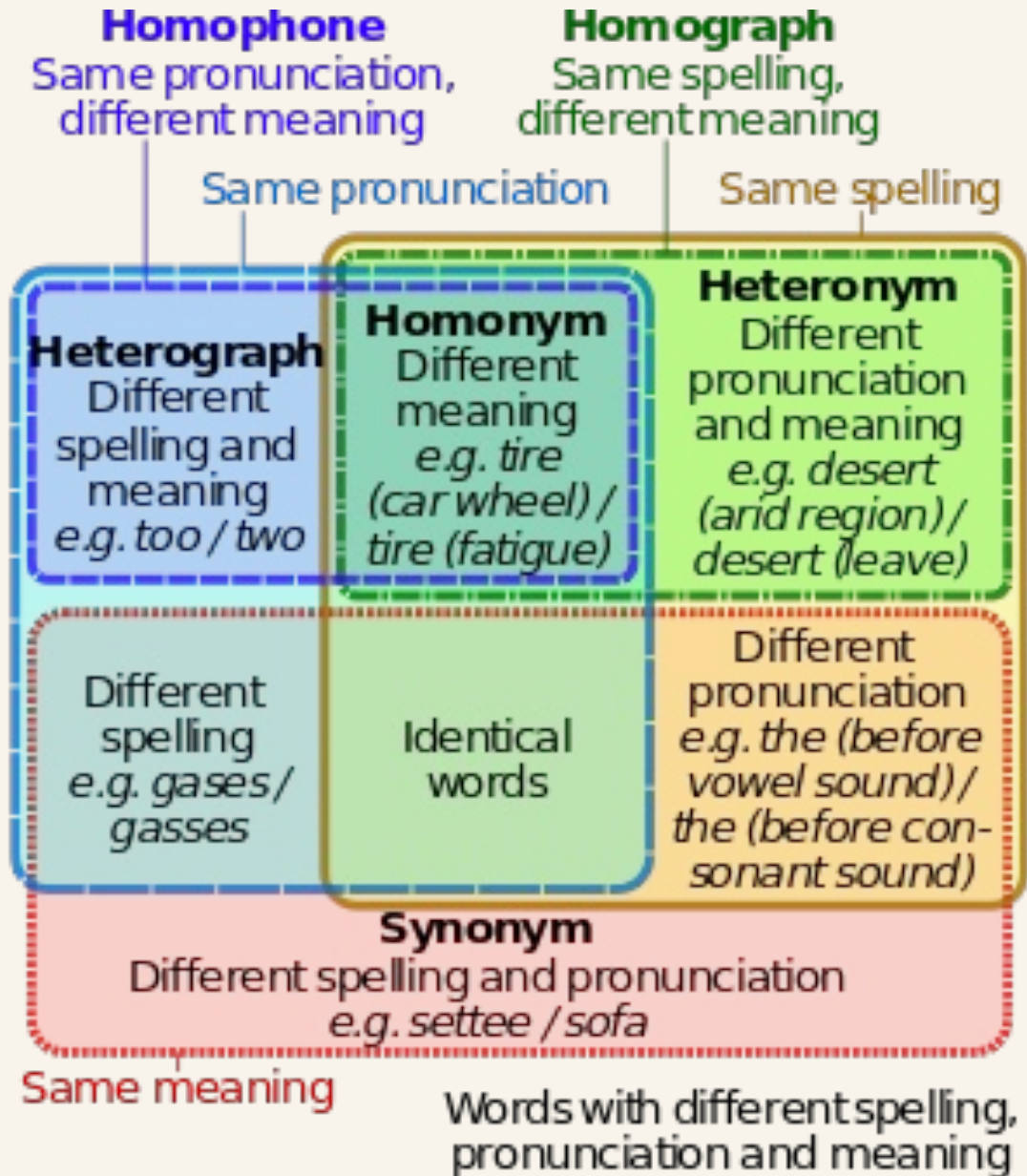
- Polysemy occurs when a word form carries more than one meaning.
- Various meanings expressed by an individual word (polysemy).
- **Ex:**
 - One of the bird's wings is broken = parts of a bird for flying.
 - The hospital is building a new wing = a new part of a building.
 - **A river bank; a bank**

HOMONYM

- One of two or more words spelled and pronounced alike but different in meaning
- Identity in sound between two or more words (homonymy)
 - **Ex:** Cache - Cash; Scents - Sense; Chile - Chili; Choir - Quire; Site - Sight; Facts- Fax

PARONOMASIA

- Similarity in sound between two or more words (paronomasia).
- "The use of a word in different senses or the use of words similar in sound to achieve a specific effect, as humor or a dual meaning; punning."
- Ex: "I used to be a tap dancer until I fell in the sink."
 - "**Champagne** for my real friends and **real pain** for my **sham** friends."
(credited to Tom Waits)



NOTE THE DIFFERENCE...

"The term **polysemy** identifies words that have two or more *related senses*, while the term **homonymy** identifies words that have two or more *unrelated senses*."

K. Heim & Tremper Longman III
Dictionary of the
Old Testament pg. 925



MARKERS

- **Literary devices:**
 - Repetition
 - (consonance, assonance, rhyme, and alliteration)
 - **Unusual word pairings**
 - (puns/paronomasia, oxymora)
- **Look for:**
 - Rhetorical Devices
 - Rhymes, Puns, or Homophones, Onomatopoeia



Lexical WORDPLAY

Section 1



LEXICAL WORDPLAY

Lexical wordplay – “uses the **range of meanings** of a term or phrase to expose multiple layers within a narrative, piece of poetry, or wisdom saying.”

- ❖ EX: Polysemantic pun is subtle & subdue.
- ❖ “Because of the resemblance between the senses, their collision is less violent” (Leech, 212).
- ❖ It “gives two meanings for the price of one, and so adds to the poem’s density and richness of significance” (Leech, 212).

EXAMPLES OF LEXICAL WORDPLAY:

צִיּוֹן (Tsywn)

or “Zion” in Jer. 30:17



One author writes, “**Jerusalem** was perfect. It was close to the road that ran all the way up the Judean mountains. It was in a central location, and it would be easy to defend. There were steep slopes on three sides. The main entrance to the town was from the north, along a narrow ridge. And, like any decent fortress, a good-sized wall protected the thousand or so people inside. Well, almost perfect. It was on the edge of a desert. No wonder they called it **ZION**, meaning ‘**parched place.**’ ”

EXAMPLES OF LEXICAL WORDPLAY:



צִיּוֹן (Tsywn)

or “Zion” in Jer. 30:17

- ❖ “A **double meaning** can be brought to one’s attention via a repetition of the same sequence, first in one sense and then in another” (Leech, 210).
- ❖ One word can be used in **multiple senses** to convey a CONTINUITY of thought or a CONTRAST in thought.
- ❖ Zion is an essential focus of the text, yet it carries a second meaning, “**dryness, parched ground.**” (See: Lexicon :: Strong's H6726 - *šîyôn*)
- ❖ The **two meanings** of this word are held in tension with one another...there is the effect of Yahweh’s judgment looming as a warning.

MULTIPLE MEANINGS

Proverbs 30:33 utilizes repetition plays on a word's **polysemy** (or **multiple meanings**) to create a memorable effect.

אַף (aph) can = “nose” or “anger”
depending on context

הֶמָּאָה (hemach) = sounds like another
word for anger (חֵמָה chemah)

Three parallel phrases are evident →

For **pressing** milk **brings** forth curd

כִּי מִיץ חֶלֶב יוֹצִיא חֶמְצָה

And **pressing** the nose **brings** forth
blood

וּמִיץ-אַף יוֹצִיא דָּם

And **pressing** anger **brings** forth strife

וּמִיץ אַפַּיִם יוֹצִיא רִיב

WORDPLAY INVOLVING A **SINGLE** WORD

- The verb שָׁמַר *shamar* is repeated twice
- Two different senses
- **Polysemantic** wordplay
 - Correlation between deed & consequence

Proverbs 19:16a

šōmēr miṣwâ **šōmēr** napšô

(“he who **keeps** [= **observes**] the command will **keep** [= **preserve**] his life”).

שָׁמַר מִצְוָה שָׁמַר נַפְשׁוֹ

IN POPULAR LITERATURE

MERCUTIO: "Nay, gentle Romeo, we must have you dance."

ROMEO: "Not I, believe me. You have dancing shoes
With nimble **soles**; I have a **soul** of lead
So stakes me to the ground I cannot move."

Shakespeare, Romeo & Juliet

WORDPLAY INVOLVING TWO OR MORE WORDS

- Two verbs **nšr** and **šmr**
- Overlapping **meaning**; juxtaposed
- npš literally refers to the “throat” (denotation) but metaphorically is used for “life” (connotation).
- Deeper reflection, consideration.

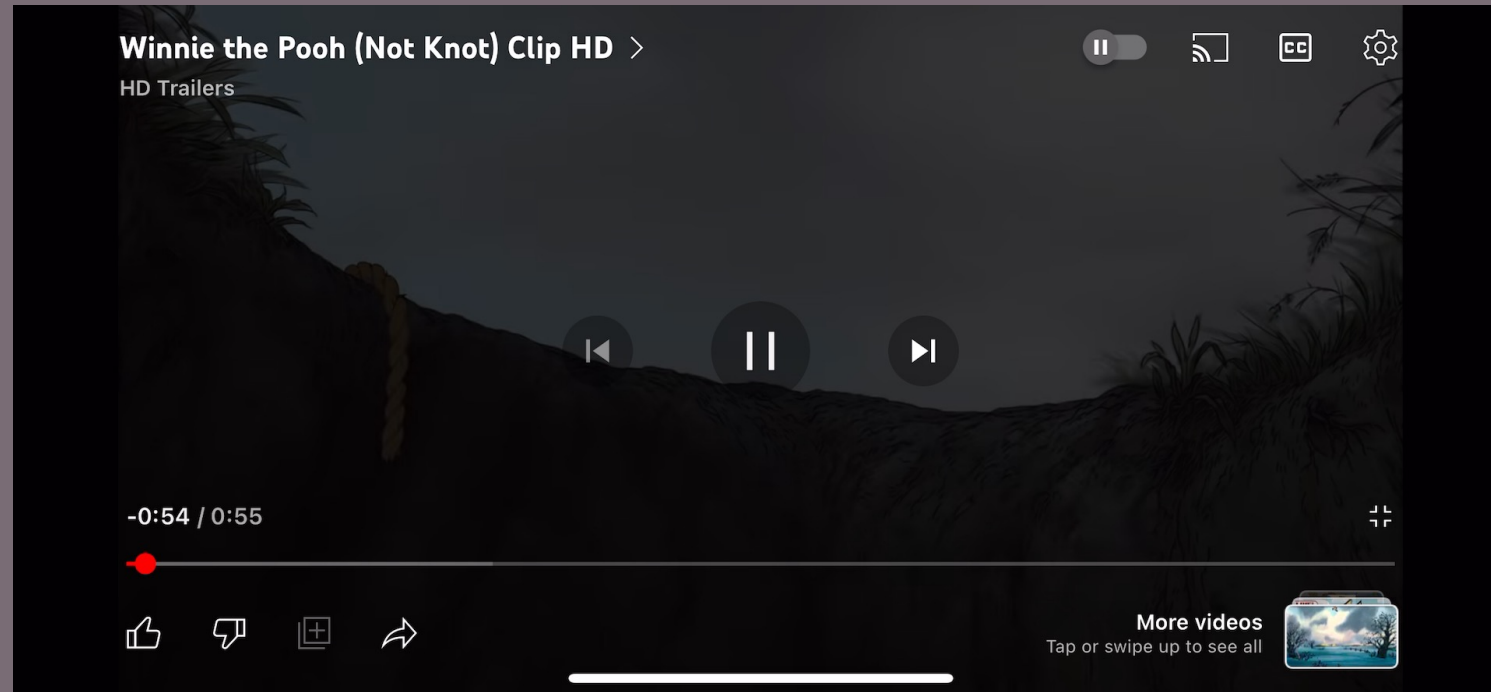
Proverbs 13:3

נִצֵּר פִּי שֹׁמֵר וּפִנְשׁוֹ

nōṣēr pîw **šōmēr** napšô

(“he who **guards** his mouth **protects/saves** his **throat/life**”)

UNTYING KNOTS – DANIEL AND PIGLET



"I cannot, knot." – Piglet

UNTYING KNOTS

- Meanings build a theme.
- Juxtaposition is used with the words:
 - The verb **שָׁרָא** (shera', “loosen”) for “loosening knots”.
 - The noun **קֶטֶר** (qetar, “knot”).
 - Used three times in Dan 5 with two different senses.
 - **Belshazzar’s fear** contrasted with **Daniel’s ability**.

Daniel 5:6—5:12—5:16

The word emphasizes **Belshazzar’s fear** in the phrase...

וְקִטְרֵי תַרְצֵה מִשְׁתָּרִין

(weqitrey chartseh mishtarayin)

“and the knots of his loins were loosened”
(Dan 5:6).

The exact words are used to describe Daniel as “the one who loosens knots”...

מִשָּׂרָא קֶטְרִין

(meshare' qitrin)

acknowledging **Daniel’s problem-solving ability**
(Dan 5:12, 16).

UNTYING KNOTS

“An author can also use lexical wordplay to connect literary units. The repetition of a term or phrase often reinforces the unity of a collection as a whole...The use of קטר (qtr, “knots”) serves as a pun upon the previous literary context and also as a tool for advancing the literary **motif of Daniel's use of his God-given abilities.**”

Wolters, “Untying the King’s Knots,” 117–18



Phonological WORDPLAY

Section 2



PHONOLOGICAL WORDPLAY

Phonological wordplay – “focuses on the direct or indirect similarity of sounds between multiple terms and, through contrast, creates literary tension within a text.”

- ❖ EX: Homonymic puns sometimes “contrived or farfetched.”
- ❖ Different words pronounced OR spelled in identical or similar fashion.
- ❖ “The extreme example of the homonymic pun jumps out of its setting, yapping, and bites the Master on the ankles.” (Empson, 108).

SIMILARITY OF SOUNDS

Say: '**Issue**' with an British accent.

Now make the noise for **sneezing**...

...you get the idea.

– Winnie The Pooh



INTENTIONAL RHYMES



תָּהוּ וָבֹהוּ in Genesis 1:2

- Take for example the most basic example of soundplay using rhyming from the Pentateuch:
 - Genesis 1:2 the primordial heavens and earth are described in what is certainly an intentional rhyme:
 - **tōhû wābōhû** ("**formless and void**")

STRANGE WORDS + AMBIGUITY



וְבִהְיוֹת (uvehawwath) in Proverbs 11:6b

- ❖ וְבִהְיוֹת can be interpreted both as “desire” or “disaster”
- ❖ Both interpretations are attested in the books of Proverbs and Psalms
- ❖ Might be an example of intentional ambiguity or a simultaneous reference to both meanings.

WHAT'S THE POINT?



"Sound patterns...are part of the Hebrew poets' strategy for **ornamenting their language** and occasionally **supporting their message** or, even more frequently, **imposing cohesion** on a poetic unit, particularly the line."

T. Longman III "Sound Patterns"
Dictionary of the Old Testament:
Wisdom, Poetry & Writings, 772.

SIMILAR SOUNDING PHRASES

Micah 6:3-4:

The LORD demands justice not ritual
YHWH employs rhetoric of similar
sounding phrases to make the point:

**"How have I wronged you based on
my action in the past?"**

Parallel and similar sounding phrases

A **question** paired with a **statement**→

YHWH's **question**:

וַמָּה הֵלֵאֲתִיךָ

umah hel'ethikha

“and how have I wearied you”?

& HIS **statement**:

כִּי הֵעֲלֵתִיךָ

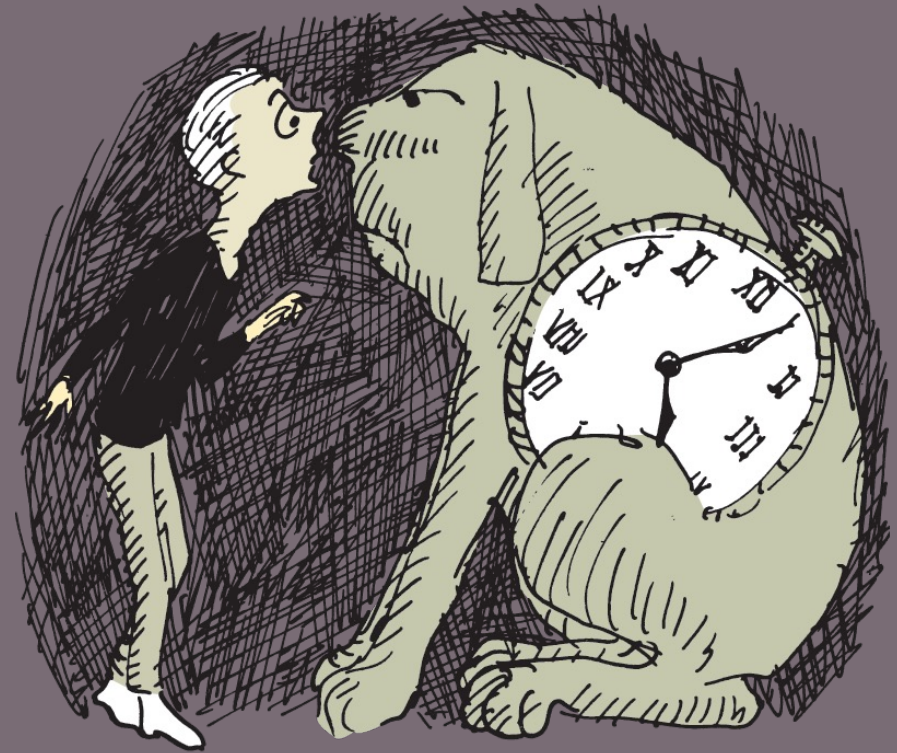
kiy he'elithikha

“for I brought you out”

SOUNDPLAY TANGLES WORDS

"I'm the **Whether** Man, not the **Weather** Man, for after all it's more important to know **whether** there will be **weather** than what the **weather** will be."

— Norton Juster, The Phantom Tollbooth



THE PHANTOM
TOLLBOOTH JR.

SOUNDS SUPPORTING MEANING

Nahum 1:10

Consonance is formed by sibilants
(aka: stream of air directed through a
narrow passage in the mouth toward
the teeth: *ṣādê, sāmek, šîn, šîn, zayin*)

Supports the passage's meaning:

Drunkards are the focus...

"superabundance of sibilants" mirrors
and mimics slurry drunken speech →

כִּי עַד-סִירִים סְבֻכִּים וְסֹבְאִים
סְבוּאִים אֶכְלוּ כֶּקֶשׁ יָבֵשׁ מָלֵא:

kî 'ad-*sîrîm sěbūkîm* ûkěsob'ām *šebû*'îm
'ukkělû kěqaš yābēš mālē'

**Like thorns they are entangled,
like drunkards stinking of drink;
they will be fully consumed like dry stubble.**



8th Century Prophets & WORDPLAY

Section 3



THEOLOGY + WORDPLAY IN THE 8TH CENTURY PROPHETS

Scripture Reference in 8th Century Prophets:

Theological Significance:

Hosea 8:3, 5; Amos 5:10, 15; Isa.
1:19-20; Hosea 7:13, 9:17; Micah
2:5,10

EXEGETICALLY, to show
correlations, contrast, or reversal.

Micah 4:11-13; Micah 6:3-4

THEOLOGICALLY, to highlight
the sharp differences between
divine and human perspectives.

Micah 2:5,10; Isa. 24:17-18

JUDGEMENT & JUSTICE:
punishment announced by God
fits the crime committed.

Isa. 5:1-7; Micah 6:3-4

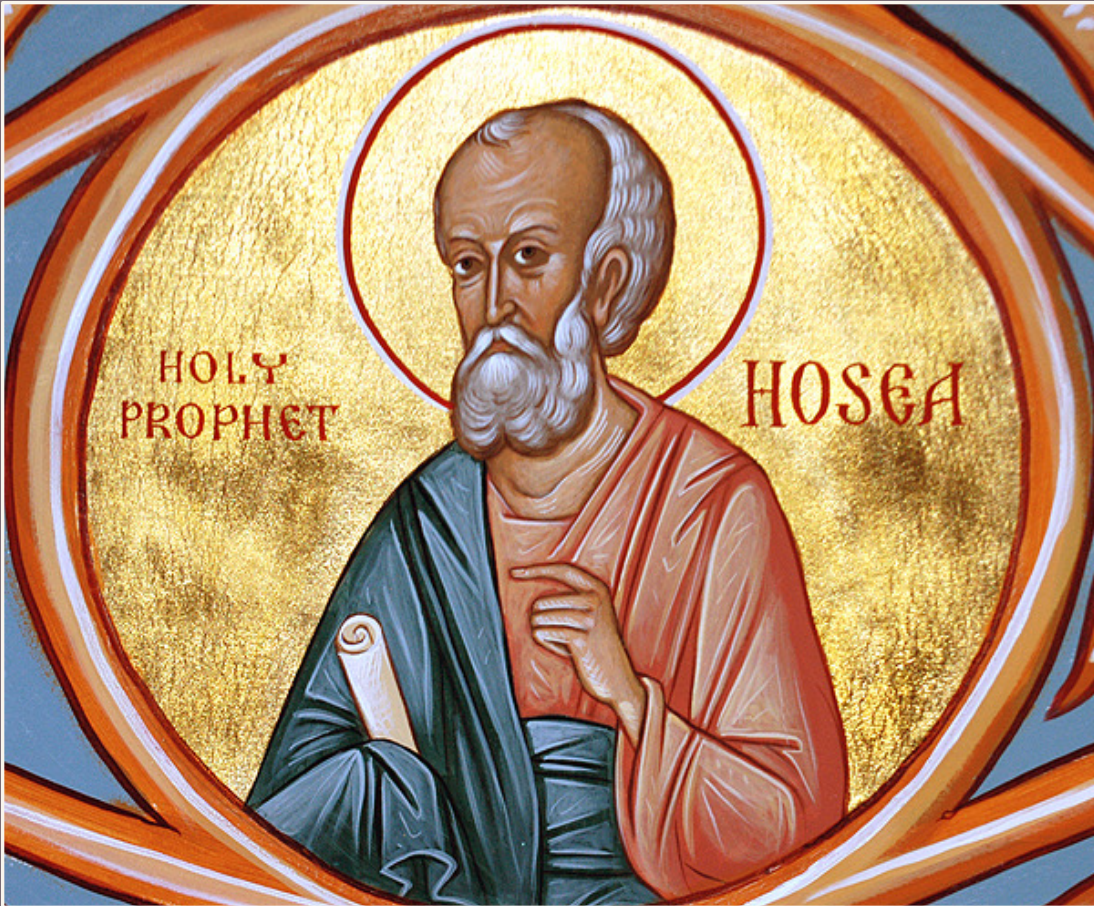
CONTRASTING two or more
persons, objects or issues.

Isa. 24:17-18; Isa 1:4-7; Micah 2:1-5;
Amos 6:1-7

LITERARILY, to attention poetic
nature of divine justice.

EX 1: POETIC JUSTICE / WARNING

Hosea 12:11—Phonological Wordplay



11 Is there idolatry in **Gilead** (גִּלְעָד)?
Certainly its inhabitants will come to nothing!
Do they sacrifice bulls in **Gilgal** (בְּגִלְגָּל)?
Surely their altars will be like
stones heaped up (כְּגִלְיִם) on a plowed field!

גִּלְעָד
בְּגִלְגָּל
כְּגִלְיִם

Through Hosea, the LORD refuses false claims of innocence! **Language mirrors** the imminent destruction that is threatened if repentance does not entail. **G's and L's seem to fly** all over the page just as **stone altars would crumble** to piles of rubble and heaps of stone!

בְּגִלְגָּל

GL
GL GL
GL GL
GL GL GL

כְּגִלְיִם



EX 2: REVERSAL / CONTRAST

Isa. 1:19–20—Lexical Wordplay

19 If you are willing and obedient,
you shall **eat the good of the land**;
20 but if you refuse and rebel,
you **shall be eaten by the sword**;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Obedience to God’s commands brings blessing
(cf. vv. 16–17) and agricultural prosperity (v. 19).

If Israel rejects Yahweh’s demands it would result
in judgment (v. 20).

19 אִם-תֹּאבְדוּ וְשָׁמַעְתֶּם טוֹב הָאָרֶץ תֹּאכְלוּ

20 וְאִם-תִּמְאָדוּ וְיָרִיתְכֶם תִּרְבַּ תֹּאכְלוּ

Obey: The people would **eat (tō’kēlû)** the good things of the land.

Disobey: unrepentant sinners would **be destroyed (lit. “eaten,” te’ukkelu)** by the sword (symbolic of enemy invasion and military might).

’ākal used in two distinct senses
(“eat”/“destroy”)

contrast between the promise and the threat, a contrast which corresponds to the opposite responses in 19–20.

EX 3: ETHICAL INSTRUCTION

Isa. 5:1–7—Paronomasia

Isaiah uses **paronomasia**—based on the similarity in sound between certain words.

God demanded justice (cf. **mišpāt** and **ṣedāqâ** in v. 7), which corresponds to the good grapes of verses 2 and 4.

God witnessed only bloodshed (**mišpāḥ**), v. 7) and cries of distress (**se'āqâ**, v. 7).

7 Indeed Israel is the vineyard of the Lord who commands armies,
the people of Judah are the cultivated place in which he took delight.

He waited for **justice** (לְמִשְׁפָּט),
but look what he got—
disobedience (מַעֲשֵׂה)!

He waited for **fairness** (צְדָקָה),
but look what he got—**cries for help** (צַעֲקָה)!

EX 3: ETHICAL INSTRUCTION



Isa. 5:1–7—Paronomasia Continued...

"Just as מִשְׁפָּח and צִדְקָה are semantically significant phonological alterations of לְמִשְׁפָּח and צִדְקָה, respectively (note the identical vowel patterns which are retained, even when some of the consonants are changed)...

...so Judah's treatment of the poor was an **ethically significant alteration** (in this case "perversion" is preferable because of the moral connotation) of God's requirements."

Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Wordplay in the Eighth-Century Prophets,"
Bibliotheca Sacra 144 (1987): 49.

A HELPFUL ARTICLE TO READ:

BSac 144:573 (Jan 87) p. 44

Wordplay in the Eighth-Century Prophets

Robert B. Chisholm Jr.

Assistant Professor of Semitics and Old Testament Studies
Dallas Theological Seminary

A variety of literary and rhetorical devices fill the writings of the Old Testament prophets, lending vividness and emotion to their powerful messages. Through these devices the prophets often expressed their theological themes. One of the most common techniques they employed was wordplay.

Wordplay can be based on repetition, various meanings expressed by an individual word (polysemy), identity in sound between two or more words (homonymy), or similarity in sound between two or more words (paronomasia).

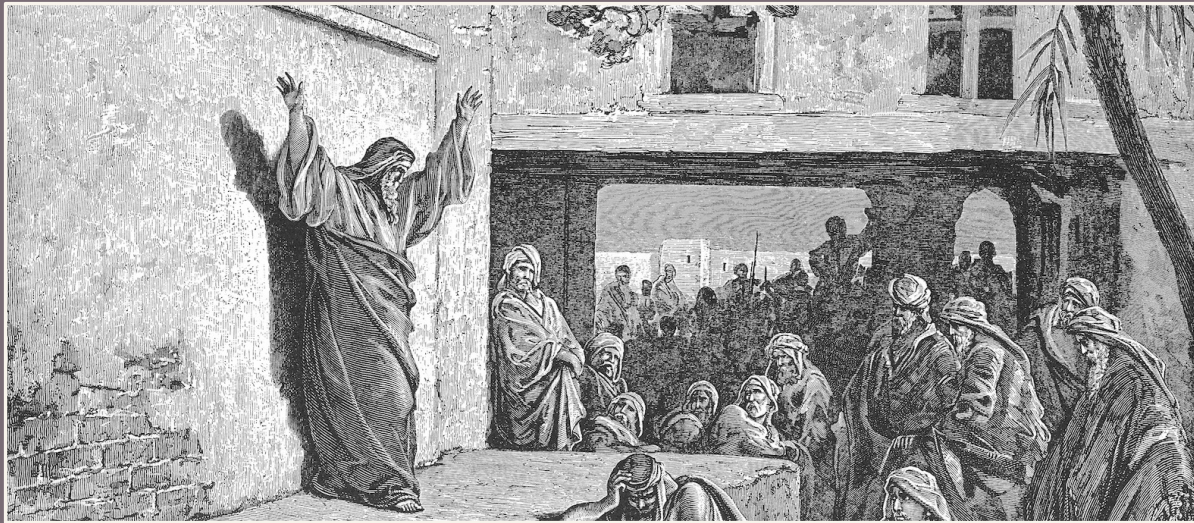
Various systems for the classification of wordplay have been proposed.¹ In this study the following categories will be used (though this list is not intended to be exhaustive or definitive by any means).

“Theologically speaking, **wordplay often highlights the sharp distinction between the divine and human perspectives.** God’s erring people fell short of His holy standard (Amos 5:10, 15) and failed to evaluate properly His sovereign actions (Micah 6:3–4)...**The same God who appropriately judges sin promises to reverse completely the effects of that judgment.”**

Robert B. Chisholm Jr., “Wordplay in the Eighth-Century Prophets,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144 (1987): 52.

EX 4: PUNISHMENT FITS THE CRIME

Micah 2:5, 10—Homonymy



- ❖ Word for “destruction” in v. 10 is from the verb **hābal**, “to destroy”) functions as a **homonym of hebel**, “measuring-cord” (v. 5)
- ❖ Unfulfilled ambition (by the sinful real estate owners) and appropriate punishment (God has dispossessed them and taken away their representation in future allotment of the land).
- ❖ AKA poetic justice.

תַּחֲבֵל וְתַבֵּל VS תָּבַל

5 Therefore you will have none to **cast the line by lot** in the assembly of the Lord.

(mašlîk **hebel** begôrāl, lit. “one casting a measuring-cord by lot”)

10 Arise and go, for this is no place to rest,
because of **uncleanness that destroys with a grievous
destruction** (תַּחֲבֵל וְתַבֵּל)

destructive illness (tôm’â teḥabbēl weḥebel nimrāš, lit. “uncleanness which brings destruction, even irreversible destruction”)



IN SUMMARY WORDPLAY IS USED TO:

EXEGETICALLY, to show correlations, contrast, or reversal.

THEOLOGICALLY, to highlight the sharp differences between divine and human perspectives.

JUDGEMENT & JUSTICE: punishment announced by God fits the crime committed.

CONTRASTING two or more persons, objects or issues.

LITERARILY, to draw attention to poetic nature of divine justice.

A CLOSING REFLECTION

Hear, O Israel! יהוה is our God, יהוה alone.

(*ESV*: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”)

You shall love your God יהוה with all your heart
and with all your soul and with all your might.

Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day.

— *The Contemporary Torah, JPS*

4 שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד:

5 וְאַהֲבָתְךָ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדְךָ:

6 וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֶנִּי מְצַוְנֶךָ הַיּוֹם עַל-לִבְבְּךָ:

Deut. 6:4-9



BIO PAGE



MICHAEL
GRIFFITH
BANKS

DEGREE TRACK: THM
DALLAS SEMINARY
OLD TESTAMENT STUDIES

michaelgriffithbanks@gmail.com
<https://michaelgriffithbanks.com>

I'm a current ThM student in the Old Testament studies department at Dallas Theological Seminary.

I aspire to make theological education accessible in the global missions field through writing, research, and teaching.

My interests pertain to systematic theology, apologetics to the Islamic world, and research topics in the Old Testament.

I desire to pursue a PhD in biblical studies. I'm married to my wonderful wife, Rebekah, and we live in Dallas, Texas.

Reach out...



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***Photos: Taken by my wife, Rebekah, all in the land of Israel.