The Deity in the Definite Article: laššāw’ and related terms for Ba‘al in Jeremiah

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ABSTRACT

The general consensus is that the abstract noun šāw’ (שׁוא) in the HB/OT, with the basic meaning of worthlessness, inefficacy, deceit, emptiness, falsehood, lie, could refer either to these qualities in general (typically translated in the English as “in vain”), or could refer to anti-Yahweh idolatry. The choice has been rather arbitrary and inconsistent, relying on the reader’s view of what the text would want to convey. This study builds on the assumption that the definiteness of the noun determines its semantic value, and should be a major factor in determining the general versus polemic meaning of šāw’ (שׁוא), although this grammatico-semantic distinction is unaccounted for in standard lexicons and most commentaries. The study limits itself to the book of Jeremiah, where šāw’ only appears in its definite form, as laššāw’. Remarkably three other similarly defined nouns are located in the same text blocks in Jeremiah, namely haššeqer, habbošet and hahebel (mostly with prefixed prepositions). The fact that they all have indefinite counterparts in Jeremiah, strengthens the argument that the presence or absence of the definite article is not arbitrary, but noteworthy and meaningful. The fact that these four determined nouns (haššāw’, haššeqer, habbošet and hahebel) all function in the same broader text in Jeremiah, with the deity Ba‘al also mentioned consistently and exclusively in the definite form (mostly singular habba‘al, rarely plural habbe‘alim) leads to the hypothesis that the defined nouns under discussion are all references to Ba‘al, with a suggested rhetorical function of disparagement of the deity. The plausibility of the hypothesis is tested in this particular study by means of an exegetical exercise which zooms in on the interface of the nouns under discussion in a selected range of texts. The exegetical approach is obviously launched from the mentioned theoretical stance, seeking to discover features of the text that support interpretation in line with the hypothesis.

KEYWORDS: Jeremiah; Baal; exegesis.

INTRODUCTION: RATIONALE AND BACKGROUND

This study originates from two curiosities: firstly the well-known wording of the third commandment as “You shall not take the Name of the LORD in vain”,

while it is literally a prohibition to “lift up (the name of yhwh) to the vanity”, laššāw’ (the definite article merged with the preposition لـ preceding šāw’), consequently begging the question what or whom “the vanity” might be. The second curiosity following from this observation is the fourfold appearance of laššāw’ in Jeremiah, once (18:15) for sure in the form of an idol, maybe Ba’al himself. The reading of laššāw’ in the Jeremiah text with the consideration that the Masoretic orthographic signs transformed šāw’ into the definite form by design, is confirmed by the discovery of three similar nouns in the surrounding text, namely haššeqer, habbošet, and haheḇel (mostly with prefixed prepositions) who are all intentionally written in their definite forms, as is evident from the fact that all of them happen to have indefinite counterparts in MT Jeremiah.

The grammatical possibility that nouns in the definite form can be classified as proper nouns (names), the insight that לַשָּׁוְא šāw’ in at least Jeremiah 18:5 refers to an idol, and the multiple occurrences of the name of the deity Ba’al in the definite form habba’al (הַבַּעַל) in MT Jeremiah, beg the question whether all these references or allusions are not pointing to the same subject, namely Ba’al. In the light of the shared semantic fields of these nouns, the rhetorical function of these allusions seems to be ‘naming and shaming,’ disparaging the named candidate (and by implication his associates), typically in the vernacular of our day a ‘disgraced fake’.

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2 In Jeremiah 2:30, 4:30, 6:29, 18:15 and 46:11.


In this regard a quick glance at different translations and commentaries shows signs of recognition to unspecified deities. One example should suffice: Traditionally translations rendered לַשָׁוא with “in vain” or words to that effect in all five occurrences of the word in Jeremiah (2:30, 4:30, 6:29, 18:15 and 46:11). Its occurrence in Jeremiah 18:15, however, opened up the insight that it may refer to idols. Although most translations of this verse, up to the beginning of the 20th century, maintained forms of “in vain,”6 for לַשָׁוא, since the end of the 19th century it became apparent that translators have been working with the premise that the proposition ל in לַשָׁוא in the combination כְּפַר ל־ indicates the object of worship to which the incense offerings are offered, with the implication that לַשָׁוא cannot simply be describing the futility of the religious ceremony. In other words, לַשָׁוא is acknowledged to be the recipient of sacrifices, therefore a deity other than yhwh. In other words, a vain, worthless, idol7. It should be noted that


7 Translations in this range: Afrikaans 1933 “hulle laat rook opgaan vir die nietige afgode”; Afrikaans 1983 “hulle bring reukoffers vir gode wat nie bestaan nie”; Herziene
long before the modern era, already by 1534, the translators of the Lutheran Bible showed this insight. Although some interpreters of Jeremiah 18:15 connect the idol(s) to Ba‘al, it does not seem to be grounded in the rhetorical implications of the grammatical definiteness of the noun. Even in recent translations the noun is still rendered as indefinite.

As for the other occurrences of $לַשָׁוא$ in Jeremiah (2:30, 4:30, 6:29, 46:11), only a few commentators, but no translations, have considered the possibility that they might be of the same order as Jeremiah 18:15. The obvious rationale is that some form of “in vain” makes translational sense in all the texts apart from 18:15. The latent semantic difference between the definite and indefinite forms of the word is apparently not considered, or the assumption is that the definiteness of the word bears no real semantic value. All or at least most of the lexicons and semantic and theological dictionaries reflect this stance by not distinguishing the indefinite from the definite forms of these nouns. The dictionary entry in Koehler and Baumgartner (KAHAL) of $שָׁוְא$ contains examples of the lexeme with the definite article haphazardly inserted in between the indefinite form. The possibility that there may be a (collective) variation of meaning of the same noun in the definite form, is not perceived. The same applies...
to the entries of the aforementioned related nouns. At the time of this research the online Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew only has the name, which is not helpful. The theological dictionary series at my disposal is likewise of little avail regarding שָׁוְא šaw’, שֶׁקֶר šeqer and בֹּשֶׁׁת bōšet.

15 See the entries in Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, KAHAL, of בֹּשֶׁת (page 85), שֶׁקֶר (page 640). שָׁוְא is mentioned in combination with נִדְרֵי as “Götzen” (idols), as well as בּוֹשֶׁׁת (Jeremiah 14:22), a definite plural genitive construct.


17 NIDOTTE, TDOT, THAT (English: TLOT) and TWOT.


19 M. A. Klopfenstein, "שֶׁקֶר šqr Täuschen," in THAT II, 1010-1019. E. Carpenter & M.A. Grisame, "שֶׁקֶר šeqer (#9213)," in NIDOTTE volume 4, 247-249. Horst Seebass, Stefan Beyerle & Klaus Grünwaldt, “שֶׁקֶר šqr; שֶׁקֶר šeqer.” in TDOT volume 15, 470-477. None of these articles, when discussing the connotation of šeqer to the idols or false prophecy, consider the grammatical form of the word in terms of its definiteness.


B BA‘AL AS CANDIDATE FOR NAMING AND SHAMING

Within the book of Jeremiah, the proper name Ba‘al (in the singular) occurs eleven times\(^22\), plus twice in the plural\(^23\). In all instances, as with the other occurrences of the name for the deity, it is written in the definite form, either as הַבַּעַל or in the construct form, as a combination name\(^24\). Remarkably אָדָם likewise it occurs in Jeremiah only in the preposition-prefixed definite form לַשָּׁוְא (Jeremiah 2:30, 4:30, 6:29, 18:15 and 46:11).

A quick reading of the same text blocks reveals three other abstract nouns in the same formal and semantic category as לַשָּׁוְא, namely שֶׁׁקֶּר šeqer, הֶׁבֶל hebel and בֹּשֶׁׁת bōšet. All of them occur both with and without the article. In their definite forms שֶׁׁקֶּר occurs 12 times\(^25\), הַהֶׁבֶל only in 2:5\(^26\), and הַבֹּשֶׁׁתם twice, in 3:24 and as לַבֹּשֶׁׁת in 11:13\(^27\).

Of significance is that all four these abstract nouns in their definite forms are possible allusions to Ba‘al. The indefinite forms of שֶׁׁקֶּר šeqer, הֶׁבֶל hebel and בֹּשֶׁׁת bōšet are mostly adjectives describing other nouns, and therefore not specifically references to Ba‘al, but possibly to an idol or idols: שֶׁׁקֶּר appears 23 times\(^28\), הֶׁבֶל five times\(^29\) and 10:8 in the plural, and בֹּשֶׁׁת four times\(^30\).


\(^23\) Jeremiah 2:23 and 9:13. In Jeremiah 37:13 הַבַּעַל פְקִדֻת refers to Irijah son of Shelemiah son of Hananiah, the sentinel or head of the guard that arrested Jeremiah. See Gerhard Lisowsky, *Konkordanz*, 270-271.


\(^26\) Also, as בּוּלֶל מְכֹר in 8:19 and בּוּלֶל יְבִיר in 14:22 where they are recognised as idols.

\(^27\) בּוּשֶׁׁת in Jeremiah 3:25 is defined by the pronominal suffix and בּוּשֶׁׁת פְנֵיהֶׁם in Jeremiah 7:19 by the construct state צְלַע פְנֵיהֶם. These are syntactic and not morphologic indicators, presenting an ambiguity. See exegetical discussion on Jeremiah 3:21-25.

\(^28\) In 3:10, 6:13, 8:8, 10; 9:2, 4; 10:14, 14:14 (2x), 16:19, 23:25, 32; 27:10,14,16; 28:15, 29:9, 23, 31; 37:14, 40:16, 43:2 and 51:17.

\(^29\) In 10:3, 8, 15; 16:19, 51:18.

\(^30\) In 2:26, 3:25, 7:19 and 20:18.
### Hypothesis

The above-mentioned observations and preliminary investigation suggest the following hypothesis:

1. The Masoretic punctuation and vocalisation system serves as an indicator of the Masoretes’ interpretation of the unvocalized, unmarked Proto-Masoretic text[^31^]. It seems that one such indication in MT Jeremiah is an identification marker for the deity in opposition to the God of Israel.

specifically by the vocalisation of לשָׁוּא. The MT vocalisation of לשָׁוּא as לַשָּׁוּא and not לְשָּׁוּא marks it as a definite noun, formally in line with the definite nouns השֶׁׁקֶׁר, הַהֶׁבֶל, הַבֹּשֶׁׁת (and their preposition-prefixed forms). This formally coincides with תַבִּיל (and its preposition-prefixed forms) in MT Jeremiah. The interpretational implication of the Masoretic vocalisation of לשָׁוּא brings it into the orbit of the deity Ba‘al, while at the same time distinguishing it from the indefinite forms of השֶׁׁקֶׁר, הַהֶׁבֶל and הַבֹּשֶׁׁת which are numerousaly presented in MT Jeremiah as descriptions of falseness and disgrace in general (without excluding the possibility that the indefinite forms might also function as indicators of idol worship).

2. The deity in opposition to יי mostly referred to in Jeremiah, is הבַעַל habba‘al (twice in the plural הבַעַלִים habbe‘alîm). The name of this deity is always written in MT Jeremiah with the article, formally on par with the definite nouns under discussion (הַשֶׁׁקֶׁר, הַהֶׁבֶל, הַבֹּשֶׁׁת). Quantitatively the occurrence of הבַעַל together with multiple occurrences of one or more of the aforementioned terms (or the certainty that the term refers to an idol, e.g. habbošet in Jeremiah 11:13) in the co-text is a good indication that – apart from the formal similarities – these terms, understood as proper nouns, are references to the deity.

3. The shared rhetorical value of these nouns in terms of their overlapping semantic fields resorts to the category of denigration. If understood as proper nouns referring or alluding to the deity, they could serve the function of demeaning, derogatory, disparaging names for Ba‘al, emphasizing the deity’s lack of status, integrity, power, and reliability.

4. A small number of abstract nouns in this group is not grammatically determined by the definite article but by a pronominal suffix or in status constructus bound to a definite noun. Formally they are not classified as proper nouns and can strictly speaking not function as pejorative nicknames (of the deity). If, however, they appear in tandem with their article defined counterparts, two possible functions could be ascribed to them: (1) referring or alluding to a deity or deities; (2) signifying the generally accepted lexical meaning of the noun. This assumption is based on the phenomenon within MT Jeremiah that šeqer, bošet and hebêl occur in both their definite and indefinite forms. These two referential functions do not necessarily exclude each other. Bošet נבּ in וּבָּשְׁתֵנ in Jeremiah 3:25 comes to mind as an example.

33 See exegetical discussion on Jeremiah 3:21-25.
C TESTING AND DEMONSTRATING THE PLAUSIBILITY OF THE HYPOTHESIS EXEGETICALLY

The plausibility of the hypothesis is to be tested by means of an exegetical exercise which zooms in on the interface of the nouns under discussion, while at the same time demonstrating new interpretational possibilities of the text. The semantic connectivity of the relevant terms is to be established in text blocks where the interface of these terms is significant. For practical reasons this study has to be limited to a brief discussion of Jeremiah 2:4-13, 3:21-25, 5:30-31, 7:4-9, 11:9-13 and 18:13-17. The demarcations are partly determined by the logic of literary context. If perceived historical background, origin and use of the text is mentioned, it is simply meant as background information. The discussion starts out with Jeremiah 1:16 as basis, followed by the first part (v 4-9) of the temple sermon in Jeremiah 7, and then the rest of the passages in chapter order.

1 Introduction

The reason for God's judgement by word of Jeremiah (1:16) is the worship of “other gods”, אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים:

וְדִבַרְתִי מִשְפָּטַי אֹּותָם עַל כָּל־רָעָּתָם אֲשֶׁר עֲזָּבֻנִי וַיְקַטְרוּ לֵאלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וַיִשְתַחֲוּ לְמַעֲשֵׂי יְדֵיהֶם׃

And I will utter my judgements against them, for all their wickedness: they abandoned me and made incense offerings to other gods, and worshipped the works of their own hands.

“Other gods”, אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים, is a key term in Jeremiah occurring throughout the book 34 as object of Israel's idolatrous worship 35, and noteworthy for our study, as it appears to be one of many allusions to the (non-Israelite) deities. The introduction of this term in 1:16 is explicated in the so-called temple sermon in Jeremiah 7 (in verses 6 and 9).

2 Jeremiah 7:4-9 (within 7:1-15)

The condition is set for Israel to be allowed by YHWH to remain in the land: they have to reform their ways, act justly with one another, and stop following “other gods” (7:6). The rhetorical question (in verse 9 and 10) makes it clear that Israel is indeed guilty of immorality, and did “follow other gods”, וּיִשְתַחְוּ לְמַעֲשֵׂי יְדֵיהֶם.

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35 As object of קֹרֶנֶה (burning incense to) in Jeremiah 1:16, 19:4, 44:3, 5, 8, 15; as object of נָשַׁמַּה (outpouring of libation offerings to) in 7:18, 19:13, 32:29; as object of עֵדֶר (service to) in 16:13, 44:3; as object of worship (דַּתּוּת) in 22:9.

and then feel safe in the house of yhwh! The reason and source for the self-deception is already repudiated in Jeremiah 7:4 (אֲלִֽהָ֖ים נַפְשֵֽׁיכֶּ֑ם וּלְהָבִֽיא בָּֽה֖וֹן אֱלֹֽהִים), now stated in verse 8 as follows:

The standard translation of this phrase is:

“Look, you trusted in deceptive words which are of no avail”

However, grammatically does not qualify as an attributive adjective to דִּבְרֵי. Deceptive words = דִּבְרֵי שֶׁקֶר, while הַשֶׁקֶר is a definite noun, one of the nouns possibly understood by the MT as a derogatory or disparaging name for Ba’al. In fact, the people's unwarranted trust is in “the words of The Deceptive One”. Instead of listening to and trusting in the Word(s) of Yahweh, they put their trust “in the words of The Lie” as John A. Thompson renders the expression, with the following remark: “One wonders whether Jeremiah may not have been making use here of the expression *The Lie* to describe some pagan deity like Ba’al...”

It is noteworthy that הַשֶׁקֶר is repeated in the fourth of six charges against Israel, as the guarantor and (divine) witness of an oath (משבעת שֶׁקֶר). If this charge is understood as swearing by “The Deceptive One” (instead of by Yahweh), and

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36 The phrase הַלַֹּּךְ אַחְַרֵי occurs in Jeremiah 9:11, 11:10, 13:10, 16:11, 25:6, 35:15. The combination [הלך אחרי + object=idol/s] also occurs in Jeremiah 2:5 (וַיִּלְכֶּֽהוּ אֲחֵרִים). It appears to be an identification marker for the subject under discussion. John A. Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 167 makes the remark “that in the secular treaties of the day a rebel vassal who 'went after' some other ruler was understood to have renounced allegiance to his overlord. Indeed, the expression 'go after' meant 'serve as a vassal'. “ (with reference to W. L. Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” CBQ 25 (1963), 77-87, for examples.).


not as perjury per se\(^{41}\), it appears that the legal charges consist of two categories of three charges each: In the first category three sins against fellow-human beings are mentioned, namely stealing, murder and adultery. The second category is that of idolatrous practices, of whom three are mentioned: swearing by “The Deceptive One” (instead of by Yahweh), in the second instance קַטֵּר לַבַעַל (offering incense to Ba‘al) and finally הָׁלֹךְ אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים (following other gods, cf. 1:16).

The explicit mentioning of (The) Ba‘al, הַבַעַל, directly after a repetitive הַשֶׁקֶׁר is noteworthy. Is this not a confirmation that “the other gods” are indeed understood to be הַבְעַלִים (Jeremiah 2:23 and 9:13), with special reference (in most other places) to (The) Ba‘al of Jerusalem, according to Jeremiah הַשֶׁקֶׁר "The Deception/Lie"?

If הַשֶׁקֶׁר is an allusion to Ba‘al, as assumed, the adjectival phrase וְלָבֵל הַשֶׁקֶׁר after דִבְרֵי הַשֶׁקֶׁר in Jeremiah 7:8 is a helpful link in the chain of Ba‘al references. Indeed [ הַשֶׁקֶׁר + negator ] already appeared in Jeremiah 2:8 in the plural form within the phrase וְהַנְבִיאִים נִבְאוּ בַבַעַל וְאַחֲרֵי לֹא־יוֹעִלוּ הָׁלָׁכוּ (to be discussed below).

3 Jeremiah 2:4-13

Studies with diachronic interest tended to perceive this chapter as a collection of early prophecies of Jeremiah (2:4 – 4:2/4)\(^{42}\) against Northern Israel from 627-609 b.c.e., re-applied to pre-exilic, and post-exilic Judah\(^{43}\). Recent

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\(^{41}\) Niv translates with “perjury”, with the footnote “swear by false gods”. Jack R. Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20 translates “swear to The Lie” (page 22, footnote 453) with the comment “I.e. swear to Ba’al instead of to Yahweh. It also means swearing falsely” (page 465). He refers to his comment on Jeremiah 3:23 “Because laššeqer has the definite article, it is better translated as 'The Lie,' i.e. Ba’al. The term occurs with the definite article in 5:2, 31; 7:9; 8:8; 13:25; and 20:6, where in each case the meaning is probably the same. The confession then is a sober re-evaluation of the pious supplications to Ba‘al in v21a...” (page 322).

\(^{42}\) Jeremiah 2:1-3 connects the introductory speeches in chapter 1 with this collection, while 4:3-4 serves the same function. The division is therefore made from 2:1 or 2:3 to 4:2 or 4:4. As Jeremiah 2:4-4:2 e.g. Joel S. Burnett, “Changing Gods: an Exposition of Jeremiah 2,” Review and Expositor 101/2 (2004), 290. As Jeremiah 2:1-4:4 e.g. William L. Holladay, Jeremiah 1, 47ff. and Jack R. Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 221ff – with the heading “People of a forgotten covenant”, taking into account that thematically this collection stands in tension with the promise of “the new covenant” (Jeremiah 31:31-34) within the so-called Book of Consolation (Jeremiah 30-31). See Joel S. Burnett, “Changing Gods”, 289.

\(^{43}\) The elusiveness of “Israel” in the rhetoric of Jeremiah, directly links up with the question of text application later in Jeremiah’s own life and the Jeremiah tradition after his time. The origin of at least this chapter is built on the assumption that Assyria refers to the former empire which conquered the Northern Kingdom, Israel. See Mary E.
(synchronously based) research on metaphors in the Jeremiah text, however, convincingly demarcates this passage as the second section of a unit that spans the whole of chapter two\(^{44}\). Israel, portrayed in the double images of family relationships (ywhh’s faithful bride) and horticulture (ywhh’s choicest fruit)\(^{45}\), is rebuked for her religious disloyalty, trusting foreign deities. This triggers ywhh’s lawsuit (\(\text{rib}\)) against his covenant breaching people who are turning from a symbol of blessing into a symbol of curse, by metaphorically returning to the Egypt they were taken from (2:6, 36)\(^{46}\). Within this symbolically charged passage the divine name (The) Ba’al\(\) occurs for the first time in Jeremiah (2:8) in the phrase תָּהֳניִמַנְיֵים הָּבַעַל. Ba’al is the divine inspiration of the prophetic visions or words of the (false) prophets. The latter are mentioned in the same grouping as “the priests” and “shepherds” (kings, leaders) who broke their allegiance to ywhh by “going after” a new overlord that is of no avail, אַחֲרֵי לֹּא־יֹּועִׁלוּ. Actually “the fathers” (ancestors, v 5-6) are early examples of those that “went after the vanity” (יִבְלַע) “resulting in becoming a copy of the same” (יִבְלַע). The semantic affinity between יִבְלַע and לֹּא־יֹּועִל is of significance: both denote a state or action that result in failure\(^{47}\). Both subjects are pursuing (הלך) this object that is bound to fail them. הַהֶׁבֶל (in the definite form) is literally “The worthless One” and refers to an idol (singular of הֶבָּל “false gods”, in Deuteronomy 32:21 // לאירא),\(^{48}\) and לֹּא־יֹּועִל are referring to the same object of futile invocation is not unrealistic. Lundbom renders the phrase לֹּא־יֹּועִל rather literally with “After No Profits they went”\(^{49}\), with the following remark relevant to this study\(^{50}\):


As illustrated by the cyclical structure of the chapter, see Job Y. Jindo, Biblical Metaphor Reconsidered, 181-2.


Translation of Jack R. Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 256.

Jack R. Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 262.

Note that לואֵי לֹא־יועִל (plural) is followed up in v 11 in the singular. It is clear that these are allusions to the Ba‘al/Ba‘alim, assumedly another form of derogatory name for the deity. It is explicitly mentioned in the plural in Jeremiah 2:23 and 9:13, most probably defining “the other gods” in 3:9 ᐆ�� / אֶלְ הוֹרִים, remains the same, with a nominal but not substantive change of object of allegiance.

The apparently concealed references to the deity in Jeremiah 2 (hahebel in 2:5 // הָהֵבֶל in 2:8) seem to be revealed in the temple sermon of Jeremiah 7 (אלהים אחרים in 7:9). The Jeremiah text progressively makes it clearer that Israel has renounced her allegiance to her Overlord, Yahweh, and started serving a new master who has decidedly shown himself to be “The Worthless”, hahebel, the “No-Profit”, לואֵי לֹא־יועִל.

It should therefore come as no surprise that the last colon of Jeremiah 2:5 (MT) is rendered in Targum Jonathan as וַיֵלְכוּ אַחֲרֵי הַהֶׁבֶל וַיֶהְבָּל “and (they) went astray after the idols and became worthless”. Bright followed by Thompson suggests that hahebel is a pun on habba‘al. Once again Lundbom describes it as a disparaging name for Ba‘al, as it occurs with the article. Since the formula of new allegiance appears here, as in other places referring to the ba‘al (or b‘alîm) as the object of reverence, it is

51 In form similar to names like לא וָיְרָפְד in 2 Sam 17:27, Amos 6:13), לא וָיְרָפְד (Hosea 1:9, 2:25), לא וָיְרָפְד (Hosea 1:6, 8). See Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and C.A. Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon, 520.


53 According to John A. Thompson, Jeremiah, 167, “in the secular treaties of the day a rebel vassal who 'went after' some other ruler was understood to have renounced allegiance to his overlord. Indeed, the expression 'go after' meant 'serve as a vassal.'” See footnote 28.

54 Note the close resemblance to לואֵי לֹא־יועִל in Deuteronomy 32:21.


56 Robert Hayward, The Aramaic Bible, 49.


58 John A. Thompson, Jeremiah, 167.

59 Jack R. Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 259.

60 } / אֶלְ הוֹרִים, remains the same, with a nominal but not substantive change of object of allegiance. See footnote 36.
reasonable to assume נֹכֶל to be a substitute for נֹכֶל. In fact, Jeremiah 23:27 states that the fathers, אֲבֹתֵךְ, forgot the Name of Yahweh “through (the) Ba‘al”, הבַעַל – which logically identifies הבַעַל in 2:5 explicitly with הבַעַל (in 23:27).

It is clear that in this passage (2:4-13) the object of Ba‘al worship is masked in names that ironically and unmistakably reveal the real identity and character of the deity as “The Nothing” הבַעַל (v 5), “The No-Profit” לוּא יועל (v 11), as well as in plural terms as the בֵּאלִים, “the other gods” ואתֵם אלִים (v 8) and “No-gods” לא אלהים (v 11). Eventually (in verse 13) they are depicted by the prophet as broken, leaking cisterns, hewn out by those who have left Yahweh, their original Source, good for nothing but to be ridiculed by disparaging names, all pointing to habba‘al.

4 Jeremiah 3:21-25

In Jeremiah 3:24 הבֹּשֶׁת occurs as the next definite noun that may form part of the name and shame arsenal against Ba‘al. According to Jeremiah 3:24 “The Shame”61 (הבֹּשֶׁת), readily recognised as a name for Ba‘al62, is devouring “the product of the labour of your fathers from our youth, their flocks and their cattle, together with (אֶת) their sons and their daughters”63. In verse 25a the same noun, הבֹּשֶׁת, resumes with a pronominal suffix (first person plural), which likewise marks it as definite64. Therefore it could be argued that if not naming the deity due to its definiteness, הבֹּשֶׁת at least indicates the reality of הבֹּשֶׂת, and thus indirectly refers to the deity. The cohortative נִשְכְבָה “Let us lie down” probably carries a sexual connotation in parallel with its (only other) occurrence in Genesis 19:3265. While the prepositionbeth before הבֹּשֶׁת is usually assumed to be a beth locale, “Let us lie down in our shame” (as an admission of guilt), the preposition could (also?) be a beth comitanteae66: “Let us lie down in the company of our shame”. In this case הבֹּשֶׁת recalls or reiterates הבֹּשֶׁת, in other words Ba‘al. It could

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62 Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 322; Jewish Study Bible, 929; Niv, Afr83.
63 Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 322 mentions two interpretation possibilities: if the verse is taken from 5:17 it could mean that Ba‘al worship is punished by YHWH by an enemy that has now consumed the labour of many generations. Otherwise it could refer to both animal and child sacrifices, the latter practised by Ahaz and Manasseh, and after them flourishing in the Ben Hinnom Valley (7:31, 9:5). The second possibility is preferred, since no agents of YHWH’s wrath are involved, as in Jeremiah 5:17.
65 William L. Holladay, Jeremiah 1, 126.
then further be argued that כְּלִמָׁה in the next colon (וּבָשְתֵנ כְלִמָׁתֵנ “and let our scandal cover us”) in its textual format is grammatically determined in the very same way as בָשְתֵנ and thus qualifies as another derogatory name for Ba‘al, functioning as a metaphor of overt adultery.

This, however, might not be the case, for on the surface level בָשְתֵנ and כְלִמָׁתֵנ do not look like determined nouns, and the meaning would then be that of shame and scandal in the general sense of the word. In other words this line would be Israel’s sincere, unadulterated confession of their religious adultery. Surely, does the subsequent admission of guilt not strongly support a penitential reading of verse 24a’ as part and parcel of at least Jeremiah 3:21-25?

For against Yahweh our God we have sinned,
we and our fathers, from our youth unto this day.
We have not obeyed the voice of Yahweh our God.

On the other hand, not even deliberated by traditional interpreters, the rhetoric of allusion to Ba‘al worship is constantly at work in Jeremiah. The name-term בָשְתֵנ is not to be separated from כְלִמָׁתֵנ. In either case, whether the latter two are understood as determined or undetermined nouns, colon 1 and 2 of verse 25a are read as synonymous or complementary parallelisms. This means that in the reading of all these terms as determined nouns (alluding to Ba‘al), the first colon

Let us lie down in the company of Our Shame (i.e. Ba‘al)

is complemented by the second colon

Let Our Scandal (i.e. Ba‘al) cover us.

A tentative conclusion seems in order at this point: What is on surface level assumed as a genuine confession of guilt verbalised through undetermined nouns denoting inherent and public shame, is actually a cover for a refusal to confess persistent idolatry, strategically marked as such by references to the scandalous Ba‘al and an ongoing relationship with him, and that from the mouth of the adulteress-idolatress.

A brief exposition of the surrounding text, however, is necessary for a more nuanced understanding: This verse (25) is situated within the passage Jeremiah 3:21-25, where, according to our reading, another derogatory term for

67 This confession, apparently of sin, is verbalised in Psalm 109:29, where the Psalmist prays that his accusers “be clothed in public shame / dishonour / scandal (כְלִמָׁה), wrapped in their shame (בָשְתָּם) like a robe.”

68 Cf. Jack R. Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 320: “Gunkel (1967:14) identified the ‘we’ portion as a community lament, which he said Jeremiah was imitating in anticipation of the day when Israel would see her waywardness and repent (similarly Rashi; Gordis 1949:176; Blank 1970:2-3; and others).”
Ba‘al occurs, namely חֲשֶׁר in the first colon of the previous verse (23a): אָכֵן חֲשֶׁר מִגְּבָׁעֹּות הָׁמֹּון הָׁרִים. The interpretation of these words has been problematic, for three reasons: (1) אָכֵן is “surely” when occurring once in a clause. But here the term already occurred in verse 20⁶⁹, and is repeated in verse 23, with the function of overruling and correcting the previous statement⁷⁰. When functioning in a repetitive sequence it could be translated as “however”⁷¹, or even better “no”⁷², rather than “surely”⁷³ or “truly”⁷⁴. (2) ל in חֲשֶׁר is ignored. (3) and/or not correctly interpreted as defining šeqer, and as such referring to Ba‘al.

The first two problem areas are correctly handled by Holladay⁷⁵ who translates the initial words of each phrase as “no”, and realises that the preposition (ל) before חֲשֶׁר is the very same preposition in the previous line: “Look, we are coming to you (ךְָׁל), for you are yhwh our God”. The response is therefore a retort from (the mouth of) yhwh: “No, to the Lie (you are coming)...”.

Contrary to the vocalisation of הָׁמֹּון הָׁרִים in the MT, multiple manuscripts take הָׁמֹּון הָׁרִים to be a genitive construct, so that the logical literal translation would be “from the hills is the noise of the mountains”⁷⁶. Therefore, on the surface this

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⁶⁹ According to Garr, W Randall, “אָכֵן,” Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages 33/2 (2007), 68, the term connects antithetical halves within an adversative context, and “signals that the following, contrasting member overrides what came prior.” Mary Shields points out that this is the turning point in the narrative report where the negative female metaphor (up to verse 20a) turns into (the ultimately positive) male imagery (20b-25). See Mary E Shields, Circumscribing the Prostitute: The Rhetorics of Intertextuality, Metaphor and Gender in Jeremiah 3.1-4.4 (JSOT Suppl 387, London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 123-124. Interestingly, this metaphorical “turning” from the idolatrous woman to the faithful son, corresponds to the theme of “turning” in verse 21-25, where the other two instances of אָכֵן follow one another (verse 23a, b). It therefore seems that אָכֵן is time and again the word around which the narrative report is turning.

⁷⁰ Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jackie A. Naudé and Jan Kroeze, Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar, 390, note this as “the most typical use of אָכֵן (אכָן) to affirm the truth of the content of a statement that overrules implications to the contrary that were invoked by a previous statement.” See W. Randall Garr, “אכָן,” Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages 33/2 (2007), 65-78 for numerous illustrations.


⁷² William L. Holladay, Jeremiah 1, 124.

⁷³ Cf. Mary E. Shields, Circumscribing the Prostitute, 125; Jack R. Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 11, 316.

⁷⁴ John A. Thompson, Jeremiah, 204.

⁷⁵ William L. Holladay, Jeremiah 1, 124-5.

⁷⁶ Jack R. Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 322 writes the last two words in capital letters: Noise of the Mountains, noting that this is “(p)erhaps another disparaging name for Ba‘al. The name given to Pharaoh in 46:17 is sā‘ôn he‘ēbir hammō‘ēd, ‘Loud Noise Who Lets the Deadline Pass’.”
whole passage looks like Israel’s confession of guilt, but there are enough indications that yhwh is still in dispute with his people who are actually refusing heartfelt penitence, using subversive language to convey their addiction to Baʻal.

Jeremiah 3:21-25 has been identified by Claus Westermann as a liturgy of penitence, on the form critical ground that verse 21, 22b-25 represents the people’s voice, as “a confession of sins and an expression of trust,” prompted by the call to repentance in verse 22a (God’s response is in 4:1-2/4)77. The liturgical setting is an acceptable theory, but to label the entire passage as a liturgy of penitence does not do justice to the intention of the passage. Verse 22-25 rather seems to be an alternating dispute between yhwh and his people, a rib within a liturgical setting. The call to repentance in 22a is not the last word from yhwh: verse 23a is his retort, taken up by a counter-retort from his people (v 23b), who are now reflecting on their dismal state, with an apparent willingness to finally repent (in terms of the theme: to turn to Yahweh, not Baʻal) and confess their sins (v 24-25) [as reflected on the surface level of the text]. On a sublime level, however, the confession is that of religious apostasy, a love for Baʻal – over against the facts that he has taken his high toll, “the fruit (product) of our fathers, from our youth, their sheep and their cattle, their sons and their daughters” (v 24).

My translation proposal of verses 22-25 takes the dialogue and poetic terseness into account, by its layout and slight paraphrasing of the text:

V 22 (Yahweh): Return, o sons that are turning around; let me heal your turning-around.
   (Israel): Here we are, we have come to you, for you are YHWH our God!
V 23 (Yahweh): No, to The Lie [you have come]!
   [listen!]: From the hills [sounds] “The Loud Noise of the Mountains”78.
   (Israel): No, in YHWH our God is the salvation of Israel.
V 24 However (we have to confess):
   The Shame has devoured the fruit (product) of our fathers, from our youth, their sheep and their cattle, their sons and their daughters.
V 25 (Therefore):
   [surface level:] Let us lie down in our shame: let our scandal cover us.

78 See footnote 76.
The theme of the dispute-cum-penitence is the return/turning of Israel either to yhwh or הַשֶּׁקֶר / הַבֹּשֶׁת. Israel is turning this way and that, circling around, without reaching a decision. From verse 23b-25 reality starts dawning: in yhwh is salvation, while habbošet (=Ba‘al) has claimed their livestock and children (by means of animal and child sacrifice). The gruesome reality is that generations have sinned against yhwh. At this point in the text confession of sin seems to be apparent on the surface. Language specifics prompt a deeper level reading, however, revealing Israel’s ambiguity, her ongoing, subversive turning to Ba‘al when pretending in liturgically correct language of penitence to turn to yhwh. The confession of sin against yhwh and realisation of harm done by Ba‘al, is subverted by a confession of addicted adherence to Ba‘al. What is obvious, is that the allusions to and derogatory naming of the ba‘al / bē‘alîm is most ironically placed in the mouth of the confessor, who confirms as truthful witness that Ba‘al is “Our Shame” and “Our (Public) Scandal”. Although this constitutes experiential truth, it does not constitute true repentance to Yahweh. Therefore, the subsequent response of Yahweh (Jeremiah 4:1ff) is not a word of forgiveness or promise, but a conditional sentence: “If you return, O Israel … return to Me”.

5 Jeremiah 5:30-31

Verse 30 reads as follows (MT):

שַׁמָּה וְשַעֲרוּרָה נִהְיָתָ֑ה בָּאָֽרֶץ׃
הַנְבִיאִים נִבְּאוּ־בַשֶּׁקֶר  וְהַכֹּהֲנִים יִרְדוּ עַל־יְדֵיהֶֽם
וּמַה־תַעֲשֶׂו לְאַחֲרִיתָ֑ה

A horror, an outrage§ happened in the land

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§ Depending on whether these forms of definite nouns (without explicit article) should be identified as names for Ba‘al. This argument must still be settled. The ambiguity might be intentional.


The prophets prophesy by the Lie, and the priests reject their consecration,
and my people love it that way.
But what will you do when she comes to her end?

Our study has to focus on the event of הַנְבִיאִים נִבְאוּ־בַשֶׁקֶׁר (line 2a above). This event with its sequel is identified as, and takes place within the setting of נִבְאוּ־בַשֶׁקֶׁר. The ultimate (added?) question at the end of the prophetic utterance, “What will you do לְאַחֲרִית ?” (v 31), is linked to the introduction, in that it refers to a single feminine entity or person. Both נשמה and שערורה as well as the pronominal suffix of אַחֲרִית are in the feminine forms. All of them seem to refer to the same entity. In the HB/OT the habitat, the land and cities, are feminine forms and metaphorically expressed in feminine persona. It seems evident that two metaphors are here at play, and that נשמה and שערורה, and probably also אחריםית, are describing a state of curse of both the people and land of Israel. The effects of the curse have their origin in the wrongful actions of the prophets and priests.

Most translators render הַנְבִיאִים נִבְאוּ־בַשֶׁקֶׁר in Jeremiah 5:31a as “the prophets prophesy falsely” or “falsehood” or “lies” or “by a lie.” Some commentators believe to detect an allusion to Ba‘al in בַשֶׁקֶׁר “by The Lie.” The same sentiment is reflected in a cautious way by some translations, for example “Prophets give their messages in the name of a false god” (Cev). The notion that haššeqer refers to an idol, another deity contrary to yhwh, is confirmed by a similar phrase earlier on: הַנְבִיאִים נִבְאוּ בַבַעַל (Jeremiah 2:8c). In

81 Taking the second meaning of רדה = scrape, and following the argument of Holladay, Jeremiah I, 201.
82 Note the feminine singular formations אחריםית, נשמה, שערורה, and שערורה as imagery of the land as well as Israel in feminine terms. See Job Y. Jindo, Biblical Metaphor Reconsidered, 138. This imagery can hardly be represented in a translation. Translations like “But what will you do at the end?” (Niv), “But what will you do when the end comes?” (Rsv) are not reflecting the thrust of the hidden metaphors, of land and people.
83 Alternative translation: “What will you do to her posterity?” אחרית has both meanings, of which the positive outcome is attested in Jeremiah 29:11 (תקוה hope). See HALOT (p 31).
85 So Robert P. Carroll, Jeremiah, 189; Peter C. Craigie et al, Jeremiah 1-25, 94; Esv, Kjv.
86 John A. Thompson, Jeremiah, 247.
87 Niv.
88 William L. Holladay, Jeremiah 1, 200.
89 Jack R. Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 410 with reference to Ehrlich 1912: 255, Rudolph, and Bright. According to Bright, Jeremiah, 41, followed by Holladay, Jeremiah 1, 201 the phrase may either be rendered “prophesy falsely” or refer to Ba‘al.
Jeremiah 5:30 

בַּבַּעַל (babhaʿal) is simply replaced by בַּשֶׁקֶׁר (baššeqer). Both nouns are in the definite form. The text gives no indications that two different deities are intended; to the contrary. It can therefore be concluded that in the lectio continua of the MT, בַּשֶׁקֶׁר is indeed בַּבַּעַל – here most probably a derogatory name for the deity.

6  Jeremiah 11:9-13

In 11:13 occurs in the phrase שַמְתֶּם מִזְבְּחוֹת לַבֹּשֶׁת מִזְבְּחוֹת לְקַטֵּר לַבַּעַל. The LXX omits מִזְבְּחוֹת لְקַטֵּר לַבַּעַל and translates with ἐτάξατε θομᾶν τῷ Βααλ, a variant of מִזְבְּחוֹת לְקַטֵּר לַבַּעַל. A comparison of the MT and LXX versions of this text with that of Jeremiah 2:28 highlights the complication of the problem, which can be approached with the immediate context (verse 9-13) seems to support the occurrence of מִזְבְּחוֹת לַבֹּשֶׁת in the MT (with the specific Masoretic vocalisation of בשת) as a reference to idol worship. Verse 10a speaks of subservience to other gods (וּלְכַאַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים) and verse 12 “the gods to whom they burn incense offerings,” מִזְבְּחוֹת לְקַטֵּר לַבַּעַל. Apart from these indicators in the text, מִזְבְּחוֹת לַבֹּשֶׁת can best be interpreted as an explanatory phrase of מִזְבְּחוֹת לְקַטֵּר לַבַּעַל. “The Shameful Thing” is nothing but Baʿal. This fact, explicitly expressed in many translations, seems to be irrefutable.

7  Jeremiah 18:13-17

The obvious reason for choosing this passage is that it contains the term לַשָּׁוָא as its centrepiece (v 15) which is interpreted by a vast majority not as the futile act of sacrificing (šawʾ = in vain), but haššawʾ as the futile recipient of sacrifices, a worthless idol. Even some commentators who maintain a translation like “they burn incense in vain” have to admit that מִזְבְּחוֹת לַבֹּשֶׁת refers to idols. There are also those who connect the idol(s) to Baʿal, “the Fraud”. The exegetical tradition

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90 For a summary of the arguments, see Jack R. Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 625.
91 John A. Thompson, Jeremiah, 340.
92 Afrikaans (1933, 1983), Cev, Jsb, Niv, Nbv.
93 Translations in this range: Luther 1545 (1534) “Sie räuchern den Göttern”; Afrikaans 1933 “hulle laat rook opgaan vir die nietige afgode”; Afrikaans 1983 “hulle bring reukoffers vir gode wat nie bestaan nie”; Herziene Statenvertaling 2010 “Zij brengen reukoffers aan nutteloze afgoden”; Asv 1901 “... they have burned incense to false [gods]”. Esv 2001 “they make offerings to false gods”. See also John A. Thompson, Jeremiah, 438; Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelly & Joel F. Drinkard (jr.), Word Biblical Commentary, 249; William L. Holladay, Jeremiah I, 524.
94 So Robert P. Carroll, Jeremiah, 376; Jack Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 822.
95 For example, John A. Thompson, Jeremiah, 438; William L. Holladay, Jeremiah I, 524.
96 Bright, Jeremiah, 124. According to Thompson (438), Bright connects laššāwʾ to Baʿal.
has already paved the way for the conviction that השוהא in 18:15 refers to anti-Yahweh deities (as collective) or the anti-Yahweh deity par excellence. Our hypothesis provides a grammatical basis for this understanding. The reason for the people of Yahweh forgetting Him, is first and foremost (as syntactically foregrounded) נג科创板, “The Worthless One” (Fraud), i.e. Baʿal, to whom they sacrificed incense. Additional textual support is given by the key word ישכחה that links this utterance to yhwh’s judgement in the same vein in 14:25, ישכחת אまい, “You forgot Me and trusted hašseqer” - another perceived reference to Baʿal.

8 Conclusions

1. The inter-textual exegesis as a test of the semantic connectivity of the relevant terms from a network of texts where these terms occur, confirms that the working hypothesis is plausible. Numerous cross-references to Baʿal by means of the defined nouns šaw’ (laššaw’), šeqer (hašseqer, lašseqer, bašseqer), bošet (habbošet) and hebel (hahebel) could be detected throughout the text in the chosen text blocks. The reading of the text from this perspective revealed text-immanent support in some cases, previously overlooked.

2. An observation on the sideline is that the texts under discussion also contain other references to Baʿal which could likewise be understood as derogatory names for the deity in the plural form לעליות. These are שלא־יוועל in 2:8 (also 12:13), לא אלהים in 2:11 (also 5:7, 16:20), and probably אלהים אחרים in 1:16, 7:6, 9.

3. The case of nouns of which the definiteness is grammatically formed by pronominal suffixes or construct states bound to a definite noun, was practically illustrated in the discussion of Jeremiah 3:21-25. It seems that כלמה and כלמיה in verse 25, as grammatically typified definites, but formally not recognised as such (without definite articles), can be read on two levels: either as a non-coded reference to shame in general (in the passage a sign of Israel’s repentance), or as coded language, alluding to (Israel’s ongoing worship of) Baʿal. In this particular instance the rhetorical function of this double reading supports Israel’s ethical ambiguity regarding repentance, the main theme in Jeremiah 2-3.

9 Suggested further studies in MT Jeremiah

1. The sampled texts, good indicators as they are, need to be supplemented by further exegetical study. The remaining texts where laššaw’ and

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laššeqer/baššeqer appear as well as excerpts from Jeremiah 23:9-40 should either strengthen the hypothesis, or show up its problematic side.

2. Of interest would be the discovery of additional examples of allusions or references to the deities/deity in the plural, as well as examples of nouns defined through pronominal suffixes or construct states bound to definite nouns, enabling references to idols apart from their general meaning.

3. The assumption that the terms under discussion that appear in Jeremiah in their indefinite forms (namely bošet, hebel and particularly šeqer) always denote shame/nothingness/deceit in general, should be revisited. If they (also) have a connotation of idolatry, i.e. alluding to the anti-YHWH deities, the perceived rhetorical function of their definite counterparts as disparagement in particular may have to be adjusted.

4. This study (and its sequel) could probably be one element of the phenomenon of coded language in Jeremiah⁹⁸.

**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

*Bible Translations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asv</td>
<td>American Standard Version 1901</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jps17</td>
<td>Jewish Publication Society, Tanakh Translation 1917</td>
</tr>
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<td>Jps85</td>
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<td>De Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling 2004 (Dutch)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Niv</td>
<td>New International Version 2011</td>
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*Reference Works*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HELOT</td>
<td>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</td>
</tr>
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<td>KAHAL</td>
<td>Konzise und actualisierte Ausgabe des Hebräischen und Aramäischen Lexicons des Alten Testament</td>
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<td>NIDOTTE</td>
<td>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</td>
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<td>THAT</td>
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<td>TLOT</td>
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<tr>
<td>TWOT</td>
<td>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</td>
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