Article

Making Sense of Destruction: A Frame-Semantic Analysis of *šḥt* in the Hebrew Bible

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Abstract

The verb *šḥt* is worthy of investigation. It is a prominent verb of destruction that occurs throughout the Hebrew Bible. It is also polysemous. Furthermore, its basic meaning has not yet been determined in the various reference works and it defies the traditional wisdom that specific stems have specific meanings. Great advances have been made in utilising cognitive linguistic (CL) methodologies to interpret the Hebrew Bible (HB). We are not aware of any robust attempt at using insights from CL to investigate the meaning of *šḥt*. For this study, we utilised frame semantics (FS) and several other CL methodologies to gain insight into the semantic force of *šḥt* in the HB.

Keywords: cognitive linguistics; destruction; frame semantics; Hebrew Bible; *šḥt*

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Introduction

The verb שׁחת is a prominent verb of destruction, and it is polysemous, which makes it intriguing. Beyond that, its basic meaning has not yet been determined. The various reference works provide much information on it; however, they do not always help with understanding the verb's conceptualisation (i.e., its meaning). Advances in the field of general linguistics have highlighted the power of cognitive linguistics (CL) for determining meaning. In this article, we utilise frame semantics (FS) and several other CL methodologies to gain insight into the semantic force of שׁחת in the Hebrew Bible.

The article begins with a literature review, which identifies several gaps in the literature. In the methodology section, we outline the methodologies used for gathering and interpreting data. We then look at the various senses of שׁחת, noting the prototypical sense, showing the relationship between senses, and also demonstrating the various senses. We then identify and discuss the three major frames that are evoked by שׁחת in various contexts. Thereafter, we show what can be learned about שׁחת by inspecting the verbs it occurs in collocation with. In the penultimate section, we interpret selected passages for each of the three senses of שׁחת. The study concludes with a summary of our findings and recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

Although we included both lexicons and other reference works in the literature review, we discuss them separately because of their divergent natures. Lexicons[1] usually provide a translation equivalent with an explanation. However, these offer limited help with understanding a word's meaning.

Gesenius (2003, 816) identifies the two uses of the *piel* as "to destroy, to ruin" and "to act wickedly." The two uses for *hiphil* are "to destroy" and "to act wickedly." Both these uses take animate and inanimate objects for their transitive uses (first sense). The two uses for the *niphal* are "to be corrupted" and "to be laid waste."

BDB (1977, 1007–8) is more cryptic. For the *piel*, it only supplies "spoil, ruin" with animate and inanimate objects, and "pervert, corrupt" with inanimate objects. For the *hiphil* it has "spoil, ruin" with various inanimate and abstract objects, and "pervert, corrupt, morally" is another use. For the *niphal* it has "be marred, spoiled" with various objects, potentially with a moral sense.

1 The omission of the *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* might puzzle some readers, but O'Connor, cited in Shead (2011, 184), criticises the *DCH* severely for including the likes of the Dead Sea Scrolls and inscriptions in its discussions since these "are of a markedly different character to the HB." In light of Shead's (2011, 184) conviction that "at this stage of scholarship" sticking to Standard Biblical Hebrew might be wise and since *DCH* discusses the various texts together, we decided to leave it out of the discussion.

HALOT (2000, 1470–71) covers every occurrence and provides much more detail. For the *piel*, it provides "to ruin, destroy, annihilate" as an equivalent. Secondly, שִׁחֵת לְ expressions are discussed separately. A third use of *piel* is "to behave corruptly, cause trouble." The first *hiphil* equivalent is "to ruin, destroy" and the second is "to annihilate, exterminate," but it is noted that separating these uses is tricky. A third *hiphil* section discusses a number of particular uses, among which are "to take a corrupt course of action" and "to behave corruptly." Under the first *hiphil* use, it is also noted that with an abstract object, it could mean "to behave corruptly." For the *niphal* they simply have "to be (become) ruined, spoiled."

Theological dictionaries, articles, and similar resources[2] provide considerable insights, but these are gathered and presented in a structuralist fashion. So, while being voluminous, they offer little help with understanding the conceptualisation (i.e., meaning) of a verb. Nevertheless, the most salient points are summarised here. What follows confirms and challenges several of the points.

Conrad (2004, 583) says, "The basic meaning of the root [שׁחת] cannot be precisely determined," but in an attempt to describe שׁחת he says (584) it signifies "an act of ruthlessness destruction subjecting the object to complete annihilation or decimating and corrupting it so thoroughly that its demise is certain." Jenni (1968, 259) aims for precision of meaning and argues that since *hiphil* monopolises with durative verbal forms (43 imperfects and 17 participles) this "must be related to the verb's meaning,"[3] and comes up with the basic idea of "suddenly destroy."[4]

The verb takes a variety of objects, including morals, and various physical and other abstract objects (Van Dam 1997, 92), often referring to the immediate and direct annihilation of persons or objects (Conrad 2004, 587). When this is not the idea, it refers to an action or behaviour that does such damage that the ultimate demise of the object is certain (588).

The verb has in view ruin effected on a community or individual, whether in battle or public life (Vetter 1997, 1318). It is firmly anchored in the realm of power politics (Conrad 2004, 585), with one adversary aiming to annihilate the other. Its focus seems to be not so much on the action of killing, but rather on severe losses. The aggressor is often more powerful (585), and the object is culpable because of some action so the destruction is justified or at least understandable (586).

The verb שׁחת has a strong moral implication and is often used for corrupt deeds (Harland 1996, 29). It is used for actions that leave humans culpable for activity that is

2 We decided to favour sources that discuss שׁחת at a semantic level, thus opted for theological dictionaries, monographs, and other reference works rather than, for example, commentaries, which often only discuss words at a localised level.

3 "Muß mit der Verbalbedeutung zusammen-hängen."

4 "Plötzlich vernichtet machen."

contrary to God's will (Conrad 2004, 587). In various expressions, it indicates Israel's behaviour that destroyed their relationship with Yahweh (589). When Yahweh brings ruin to humanity with שׁחת, they deserve it since their behaviour caused it (Harland 1996, 30). The thorough devastation it describes makes it an apt word for divine judgment (Van Dam 1997, 92). When it is used in this way, Yahweh either does the destruction directly or others do it, with him being implicated. He also uses "exceptional instruments" like floods or famines (Conrad 2004, 591). When it is negated, it shows that although Yahweh "could or ought to destroy" them he does not because he is committed to Israel and wants to preserve them—but not without qualification. Often disaster looms, and specific conditions must be met if it is to be averted (591).

Determining the basic meaning of שׁחת, which has not yet been done, is desirable. While these sources gather much data, little insight into the various senses of שׁחת is given, with its various uses being discussed with little precision. Since the word defies the traditional wisdom that each stem has its own meaning, with *piel* and *hiphil* being used in similar ways with both their transitive and intransitive functions, some other way of separating various uses needs to be found. The literature shows that שׁחת has an abstract moral sense, but it does not supply much insight into what that means and struggles to separate it from other uses. These sources do not separate the concrete uses of שׁחת from the abstract ones, whether with regards to the subject (e.g., God) or object (e.g., morals). While much of the discussion revolves around the context of war, more could be said about other contexts, especially the frames that are evoked. While the sense of total annihilation is noted by various sources, they do not fully explain how they arrived at that idea. In the following sections we use FS and several other CL methodologies to fill some of the gaps in what is understood about שׁחת and also confirm a number of the previously mentioned findings.

Methodology

Overview

Since the early 1970s, general linguistics has had many breakthroughs, with the biggest being the recognition of the link between language and cognition, which gave rise to CL. CL consists of several methodologies that are used to inspect how cognition determines meaning. One approach is FS, which is used to gather and categorise cognitive information to understand the conceptualisation of a word (i.e., its meaning). In a cognitive frame, the parts relate in such a way that to understand the one you must understand the whole structure since one part evokes the other parts (Fillmore 2006, 373). An example of this is a COMMERCIAL EVENT.[5] If one hears the word "buyer" they would know that there is a seller, a product, and a certain value involved (Fillmore 1976, 25).

5 All conceptual entities appear in SMALL CAPITALS.

CL has an encyclopaedic view of semantics (Langacker 2008, 39), which it gathers from, for example, culture, language, text, and context (van Wolde 2009, 51). However, this encyclopaedic information needs to be gathered and categorised (Fillmore 2006, 373) and FS has ways of doing this (Joubert 2021, 61). One way is inspecting the semantic roles of a verb's arguments to understand its meaning (Fillmore 2006, 376). By inspecting various occurrences of a verb one can construct a network of relationships called "slots" and draw conclusions about which "fillers" they have under which circumstances (Minsky 1975, 212). Other ways of gathering such encyclopaedic information include inspecting the various functions of the verb, the verbs that are used in collocation, the situational contexts in which it is used, and the relevant culture surrounding the verb, which is categorised (Fillmore 2006, 373).

FS was a major methodology for this article, but beyond FS several other methodologies were used to interpret the data. Principled polysemy was used to identify various senses of שׂחת and construct a semantic network (Tyler and Evans 2003, 38, 42–45). Since principled polysemy assumes that the various senses in a semantic network are derived from a single primary sense, prototype theory[6] was used (Tyler and Evans 2003, 45–46) and the notion of preponderance in the semantic network was also used to arrive at the prototype (48). Humans use concrete domains as source domains to conceptualise abstract target domains, therefore the methodology image-schemata was used (Brugman and Lakoff 2023, 319) to understand the relationship between concrete and abstract senses of שׂחת. Radial network was used to present which sense is primary and how the various senses relate to it and each other (Brugman and Lakoff 2023, 1–2). The sense of a word in context can be understood better by inspecting the words with which it occurs in collocation, so semantic priming (Grasso 2021, 124) was used to see what light could be shed on the meaning of שׂחת by inspecting the verbs that appear in collocation with it.

Cognitive Linguistics and the Hebrew Bible

Already in 1961, James Barr (1961, 21) took issue with the "unsystematic and haphazard nature" of attempts to connect theological thought to biblical languages. He also argued that biblical studies should utilise general linguistics (Barr 1961, 21). Barr launched the Structuralist revolution, but its methods could not extract all the intricacies of meaning from the biblical text (Ziegert 2020, 718). Barr (1992, 145) argued that Hebrew dictionaries ought to provide definitions rather than only glosses, but suitable linguistic methodologies were not available in his day. Since then, however, serious

6 Prototype theory has some problems, e.g., (1) the complication with using it with lexemes other than objects (Tyler and Evans 2003, 46), (2) that properties of lexemes might be mistaken or missed out, (3) that some categories do not have prototypes, and (4) that it cannot handle complex categories (Evans and Green 2006, 268). While we acknowledge this, it is still widely used and provides useful insights, so we decided to utilise it.

attempts have been made (e.g., Burton 2017a; Shead 2011; van Wolde 2009, 2003) to utilise linguistic insights for Bible interpretation.

We acknowledge that modern researchers rely heavily on the intuition of native speakers to determine normativity and that this complicates the study of an ancient language like Biblical Hebrew (Shead 2011, 181). However, we are not without data (Burton 2017b, 214) since language-internal relations provide much insight (Taylor 2003, 177). It is widely acknowledged that where suitable data exist cognitive approaches are preferred over structuralist or generative methodologies (Burton 2017b, 213). By studying the text itself much can be learned about the frames that are evoked by lexemes (Fillmore 2006, 386).

Delimitation of the Data

To give the study focus we delimited the data for investigation. We only focused on occurrences of the verbal root and not on derived nouns. We did not consider comparative philology, because (1) שׁחת occurs about 140 times in the HB (Van Dam 1997, 92) so the HB has sufficient data (Barr 1968, 154); (2) "in contrast with forms, meanings are rather slippery" (Barr 1968, 87–88); and (3) conceptualisations differ between cultures (Minsky 1975, 257).

Early on we analysed all occurrences, but for our detailed analysis, we only engaged prose texts. This was done for several reasons. While doing FS studies, Ziegert (2020, 720; 2021, 138) prioritised narrative texts because he thought they would describe the prototypical situation well. Fillmore (2006, 386) notes that FS insights can be deduced from the ongoing text itself. We also reasoned that if we have as many of the constituents of a sentence as possible, we might be able to determine what the *normal* behaviour of a verb is.

Occurrences where God is the subject were analysed early in the study, but they were let out of our detailed analysis[7] because concrete domains are often used as a source domain for target domains with metaphoric senses (Brugman and Lakoff 2023, 319), and to understand the target domain (the metaphoric use of something) one needs to understand the source domain (its literal meaning) first (Croft and Cruse 2004, 195). In light of this, we decided to do our detailed analysis of all verbs with human subjects, being convinced that these more concrete occurrences would shed light on the

7 Occurrences with God using "exceptional instruments" like floods (Conrad 2004, 591) or with other divine subjects are also not included. Because war is so central to שׁחת and because it is such a natural and concrete phenomenon, where dual causality is at play, with God being noted as the ultimate subject, these occurrences were included in our detailed analysis.

occurrences with God as a subject,[8] and we found this to be correct.[9] We do not deny, though, that שׁחת has a significant level of abstraction, especially with regard to the objects it takes.

For this article, we follow a synchronic approach[10] as far as the text is concerned, but we did consider the linguistic dating of Biblical Hebrew. We paid the most attention to SBH but because the corpus is so limited passages from Transitional Biblical Hebrew (TrBH) and Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH) were also regarded, though we paid less attention to them.[11] At times the occurrences from TrBH and LBH differed from SBH, and this is noted where relevant.[12]

Senses

In this section, we look at the three senses for שׁחת that we came up with while analysing our data. We also identify and defend the prototypical sense and display the relationship between the senses with a radial network.

Principled Polysemy

In line with several methods outlined by Tyler and Evans (2003, 42–43) to minimise subjectivity when separating different senses of a lexeme, we identified three different senses for שׁחת. The two criteria we used were that each sense must have a distinct conception compared with other senses and the nature of the relationship between the verb and its arguments (subject and object) must be unique as well.

The first sense is "damage,"[13] which can be defined as "damage done by a human to an object to the effect that it cannot fulfil its proper function." The objects for this definition are inanimate, and after שׁחת is done to them, they can no longer fulfil their proper function.

8 This was a methodological decision we made to access the semantic core of שׁחת, but in no way denies the importance of these verses or the concrete nature of certain destruction events where God is the subject. Future research could utilise our findings to gain greater insight into occurrences where God is the subject.

9 Some of the insight we gleaned can be found in note 14.

10 We acknowledge that approaching the HB synchronically is a structuralist initiative for biblical studies, but FS also holds that cognitive insights can be deduced from an ongoing text itself (Fillmore 2006, 386).

11 We followed the categorisation found in Garr and Fassberg (2016).

12 We engaged the text-critical apparatus of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* while doing the research, but there were no issues worthy of note for the investigated verses.

13 The shorthand identifiers of all definitions for the various senses are enclosed in double quotes. These are meant to be a shorthand means of referencing the sense, rather than a comprehensive equivalent.

The second sense is "kill,"[14] which can be defined as "damage done by humans to humans leading to death." When שׁחת is done to a human they lose their proper state—being alive—whether an individual (2 Sam 1:14), a group (Judg 20:21), or a whole nation (2 Kgs 19:12).

The third sense is "corrupt," which can be defined as "damage done to self through moral degradation leading to moral corruption." The subject damages themselves by doing an action that damages their moral integrity, which is a state that the covenant community had to maintain.

Prototype

From our analysis the basic sense of שׁחת appears to be that damage is done to something/someone to the effect that the proper state is lost. If we followed the monosemic approach we may have come up with a highly abstract prototype definition to this effect, but monosemy has less explanatory power than principled polysemy (Tyler and Evans 2003, 37). Since principled polysemy holds that all of the senses in a semantic network ought to be derived from a single primary sense (Tyler and Evans 2003, 45), we had to identify the central meaning. To find this we had to see which sense is a more prototypical representation of שׁחת than the other senses (Evans and Green 2006, 232).

We used two concepts in trying to determine which sense is likely more central. The first is preponderance in the semantic network, meaning an element that is found in the majority of the senses (Tyler and Evans 2003, 48). The other is image-schemata, meaning that concrete domains are used as a source domain for target domains with metaphoric senses (Brugman and Lakoff 2023, 319).

In light of these concepts, we tentatively suggest that the "damage" sense is the prototype. We offer the following reasons. (1) The loss of the proper function is at the semantic core (preponderance), as the monosemic account would have emphasised as well. (2) The "damage" sense is also the most concrete one, with an inanimate object losing its functionality. Because of image-schemata we find it reasonable that the other more abstract senses could be derived from the "damage" sense. In support of this, we note that when a human is the object of שׁחת ("kill" sense) it is not like נכה (strike), referring to the action of killing, but rather focuses on severe losses suffered by the

14 We reckon that when God is the subject the sense is a further metaphorical extension of the "kill" sense since almost all the objects are humans who lose their lives. This means the sense is destruction by divine judgment ("judge"). These humans include the Israelites and others. Some occurrences specifically have humans as objects, although many involve metonymy, whether cities (Gen 13:10), kingdoms (2 Kgs 13:23), families (2 Chr 21:7), or individuals (2 Chr 25:21). One exception is a verse from TrBH (Jer 13:14) where pride is destroyed. We acknowledge that occurrences with God as a subject deserve further attention in later research.

object (Conrad 2004, 585). This makes it more metaphorical than the "damage" sense. It is clear that the "corrupt" sense is metaphorical.

The shift to a metaphorical conception also often has some motivation behind it (Brugman and Lakoff 2023, 322). In light of this, it might be significant that the moral nature of שׁחת is much stronger in the "kill" and "corrupt" senses than in the "damage" sense, and when God is the subject (see below) the moral flavour of שׁחת naturally is also quite strong.

Radial Network

Semantic networks have a prototype, which is the most prototypical sense of a lexeme, with other senses deriving from the primary sense (Tyler and Evans 2003, 45). A radial network can be set up to show how senses relate to the prototype and other senses. We propose that the "kill" and "corrupt" senses both derive from the "damage" sense. Also, while it does not form a large part of the study when used for destruction by divine judgement ("judge"), we consider שׁחת to be a further metaphorical extension of "kill."[15] It can thus be portrayed as follows:

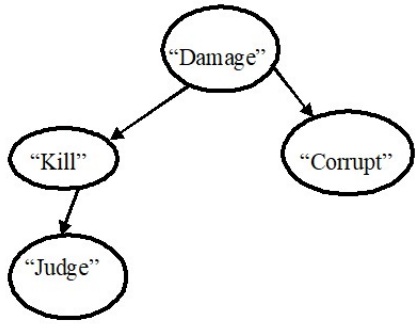

Figure 1. Radial network for שׁחת

Demonstration of Senses

In this section, we demonstrate the various senses by looking at specific occurrences.

"Damage"

We classify 17 of the occurrences according to this sense. Eight of the occurrences indicate the purpose for which the destruction is done, like not providing an heir (Gen 38:9), destroying a dynasty (Dan 11:17), or bringing a wall down (2 Sam 20:15). The damage done is severe, bringing on the end, with only one verse from LBH (2 Chr 34:11) noting restoration in the context. The majority of the occurrences (14) have physical objects, although there are a number of exceptions (3). In SBH the nearest

15 See note 14 for more details on this.

redeemer might damage his inheritance (Ruth 4:6),[16] in TrBH the priests damaged the covenant (Mal 2:8), and in LBH a king gives his daughter to destroy another dynasty (Dan 11:17). There are several occurrences from TrBH (Jer 13:7, 18:4$_{bis}$) that we classify as "damage," but they are unique since they are the only *niphal* occurrences for this sense. Two other verses from TrBH (Jer 13:7) and LBH (2 Chr 34:11) are odd since the subject is responsible for the damage rather than directly doing it.[17] The frames of SHAME[18] and WAR are found with this sense.

"Kill"

We classify 25 occurrences of שׁחת according to this sense.[19] Eight of the occurrences indicate the aim of the aggression, while with six, שׁחת is the outcome of successful aggression. With two occurrences שׁחת leads to further military success (2 Sam 11:1; 2 Chr 20:1).

Morality[20] is highlighted in five occurrences. These indicate the consequences of idolatry (Josh 22:33), guilt incurred if שׁחת is committed presumptuously (1 Sam 26:9; 2 Sam 1:14), it could be done in consequence of murder (2 Sam 14:11), and it should not be done without a good reason (2 Sam 20:20). Three occurrences focus on humans' responsibility to prevent שׁחת (1 Sam 26:9, 25; 14:11).

There are a few places where אֶרֶץ (Josh 22:33; Judg 6:5; 2 Kgs 18:25; Isa 36:10; Jer 36:29; 1 Chr 20:1) or עִיר (1 Sam 23:10; 2 Sam 20:20) is the object of the verb, but it is used metonymically. 1 Chr 20:1 is debatable since there is no indication of the loss of life, but it is a summary of 2 Sam 11–12 where many lives were lost. Also, there is no indication that the countryside itself was damaged as in Judg 6:4–5.

Numbers 32:15 is a unique case: "You will have destroyed all these people."[21] Here שׁחת appears in the *piel*, so it could be taken as a simple factitive, but it is unique since only here does שׁחת have such an indirect "you will be responsible for" force. The frames of DELIVERANCE,[22] SHAME, and WAR are all found with this sense.

16 One might argue that נַחֲלָה refers to physical wealth, in which case all SBH occurrences would take concrete objects.

17 However, there is one verse from SBH (Num 32:15) where the subjects are responsible for the destruction of the object, though they do not do the destroying themselves. So, this *indirect* sense might not be due to semantic drift.

18 More details follow below, but the SHAME frame means that dishonorable activities are done.

19 We do not distinguish between large-scale conflicts and smaller skirmishes.

20 For this study, we define "morality" broadly as faithfulness to Yahweh, primarily manifested (in our verses) in worshipping him only and regarding life as sacred.

21 Unless otherwise indicated, we make use of our own curated translations aimed at emphasising the points we wanted to highlight.

22 The DELIVERANCE frame means that someone is saved by a higher power from suffering שׁחת.

“Corrupt”

We classify 15 occurrences according to this sense. Eleven of these occurrences indicate the manner of corruption, including making idols (Deut 9:12), doing evil in the eyes of Yahweh (Deut 4:25), and turning from the way commanded (Deut 31:29). Eight occurrences connect שׁחת with the noun דֶּרֶךְ, including corrupting ways (Gen 6:12), not turning from stubborn ways (Judg 2:19), or following the ways of the wicked (Ezek 16:47). In 13 of the occurrences Yahweh is clearly aware of the corruption. This awareness is shown with prepositions (לִפְנֵי Gen 6:11; בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה Deut 4:25; 31:29$_{bis}$; 2 Chr 27:2), verbs (ראה Gen 2:12$_{bis}$; חרה Judg 2:19[23]), or in the context (Exod 32:7; Deut 9:12; Ezek 16:47; 20:44; 23:11). One verse from TrBH (Ezek 20:44) has a *niphal* stem with an adjectival use. One verse from LBH (2 Chr 26:16) has שׁחת as a result of growing proud (גבה), whereas other actions usually result from שׁחת. These verbs all occur in the SHAME frame.

Frames

A lexeme might have a different sense depending on the context in which it appears (Fillmore 1976, 24), which means a different frame is evoked by the lexeme in that context. In this section, we demonstrate the three major frames we identified that are evoked by the occurrences of שׁחת.

Deliverance

With the DELIVERANCE frame, the object is a human who is culpable and might therefore reasonably be subjected to שׁחת, but the possibility exists for a higher power to save them from this destruction.

We classify seven occurrences of שׁחת under the DELIVERANCE frame. Six of the occurrences relate to the narrative where Sennacherib, king of Assyria, threatens to destroy Jerusalem.[24] 2 Sam 14:11 is the remaining occurrence, where the false widow asks David to prevent the blood avenger from wreaking further destruction (מֵהַרְבָּת גֹּאֵל לְשַׁחֵת דָּם). *HALOT* (2000, 1470) puts this verse under “to behave corruptly, cause trouble,” but we think this is incorrect. The remaining son was culpable. The blood avenger would be meting out justice rather than causing trouble. The DELIVERANCE frame only contains verses with the “kill” sense.

23 Appearing at the start of 2:20.

24 This is taken to be a metonym for killing everyone in Jerusalem since 2 Kgs 19:12 and Isa 37:12 refer to the nations (הַגּוֹיִם) rather than kingdoms that have been destroyed.

War

With the WAR frame, שׁחת is used in the context of war, whether larger-scale conflicts or smaller skirmishes. However, in the WAR frame, שׁחת sometimes takes an object other than the opponent.

We classify a total of 22 occurrences of שׁחת according to the WAR frame, of which six indicate the motivation for the war: for three occurrences the motivation is moral offence (Josh 22:33; Judg 20:35, 42), for two it is tribalism (Judg 2:21, 25), and for one it is revenge (1 Sam 23:10).

Nine occurrences have inanimate objects, of which two relate to the necessities of war (Deut 20:19, 20), two indicate damage done to the food supply (Judg 6:4–5), four indicate damage to property (2 Sam 20:15; 2 Chr 36:19; Ezek 26:4; Dan 9:26), and one indicates the ending of a dynasty (Dan 11:17). The other 13 all have groups of humans as objects.

While primarily evoking the WAR frame, three of these occurrences also contain an element of SHAME. Judg 20:21, 25 can be classified as tribalism since the Benjaminites refused to deliver the men from Gibeah to justice. In 1 Sam 23:10 Saul was willing to destroy a whole city because he was jealous of David. The WAR frame contains verses with the "damage" and "kill" senses.

Shame

With the SHAME frame, people commit שׁחת, whether to themselves or another object, but it is shameful to do it. The ancient Near East had an honour-shame culture.[25] The concept of SHAME can be found in many aspects of social relations and was a matter of the public sphere. Honour and shame are also related to covenant relations and were used as motivation for conformity to covenant stipulations. Conformity was rewarded with status (honour) in the community and nonconformity with shame ((Olyan 1996, 203–5). Although these verses do not contain the vocabulary of shame (e.g., בוֹשׁ, be ashamed; קלל, curse), the frame evoked by the contexts is SHAME.

We identified 28 occurrences of שׁחת that evoke the SHAME frame. Twenty-one directly relate to moral issues, including turning from the way (Deut 9:12), idolatry (Deut 4:25), or committing שׁחת unjustly (2 Sam 1:14; 20:20). Three relate to injustice (Gen 38:9; Exod 21:26; Ruth 4:6), and two involve neglected duties (1 Sam 26:15; 2 Chr 34:11).[26]

25 While we acknowledge that the socio-scientific hermeneutical lens of honour and shame is a vast field of research, we define the SHAME frame simply as behaviour that would not have been approved by society.

26 Gen 38:9 and Ruth 4:6 are categorised under injustice, but they could also be counted as a neglect of duty.

There are two occurrences from TrBH (Jer 13:7; 18:4) that we classify as SHAME,[27] but they are odd examples because only they have inanimate objects. However, the context indicates that they are metaphors for (the shame of) Israel. The SHAME frame contains verbs with the "corrupt," "damage," and "kill" senses.

Verbs In Collocation

Some corpus and psycholinguistic studies have found that the senses of a lexeme are primed by their collocations (e.g., verbs in collocation). This is called semantic priming. These words activate associated semantic concepts and trigger certain meanings. These collocations are important when determining the meaning of a word in context (Grasso 2021, 124). In this section, we inspect three classes of verbs that appear in collocation with שׁחת. They are verbs of movement, aggression, and intention.[28] Only verbs that shed light on the function of שׁחת were considered.

Movement

In total, 44 verbs of movement occur in collocation with שׁחת.[29] Only three portray positive outcomes (Exod 32:7; Deut 9:17; 2 Sam 14:11), while 41 portray negative outcomes.

Nine of the verbs are moral in nature, with the verbs שׁוב (Judg 2:19)[30] and סור (Mal 2:8) being the most prominent. Thirty-two of the verbs relate to hostility, of which three take an individual—Saul in all three cases—as object. The verbs of hostility that appear the most are עלה (10X; 2 Kgs 18:25), בוא (10X; 1 Sam 23:10), and יצא (4X; Judg 20:21). Two of these three verbs appear together at times in various combinations.

The verb שׁוב occurs in one verse from TrBH (Jer 18:4). It usually has a moral sense (turn away), but here it is used for attended circumstances, meaning "turn (back into a lump) and make another vessel" (וְשָׁב וַיַּעֲשֵׂהוּ כְּלִי אַחֵר). The "corrupt," "damage," and "kill" senses and the DELIVERANCE, WAR and SHAME frames are all represented with the verbs of movement.

Aggression

It is no surprise that other verbs of aggression appear in colocation with שׁחת, and they cast some light on its meaning. In total, 59 verbs of aggression appear in collocation with שׁחת. We consider 50 of these to be the vocabulary of war. The verbs that appear

27 We classify them as SHAME because the loincloth was no longer useful for anything (לֹא יִצְלַח לַכֹּל), and the clay vessel was marred, returned to a lump, and then changed (וְשָׁב וַיַּעֲשֵׂהוּ) into another vessel.

28 There were other classes of verbs (ability, approval, and perception) that provided some insight as well, but these were not well represented, so they were left out to give the study focus.

29 We counted all verbs that refer to movement in concrete terms, even if they were used in an abstract sense, like בוא for sleeping with or שׁוב for changing one's way of life.

30 Throughout the section on the verbs in collocation we provide individual verses as examples.

most with aggression are also the verbs of movement used for war, עלה (11X; 2 Kgs 18:25), בוא (6;X 1 Sam 23:10), and יצא (4X; Judg 20:21). Some other verbs that are worth mentioning are שלח (4X; 2 Sam 1:14), צור (beseech; 4X; 2 Sam 20:15), נפל (2X; 2 Sam 20:15), and הרס (raze; 2X; 2 Chr 20:1). The verb כרת appears three times in verses that relate to war, but two have inanimate objects (Deut 20:19, 20) and one from LBH has a human object (Dan 9:26). The verb נכה is also used once for physical abuse (Exod 21:27). The "damage" and "kill" senses as well as the DELIVERANCE, WAR, and SHAME frames are represented with the verbs of aggression.

Intention

The literature review already highlighted culpability. Many other verbs of intention are also found in collocation with שׁחת. A total of 45 verbs of intention were identified. Three of these verbs occur with a positive outcome. They are a negated אמר for no longer speaking of war (Josh 22:33), and two occurrences of עשׂה for doing right in Yahweh's eyes (2 Chr 27:2$_{bis}$).

Twenty-five of these verbs relate to morality. The most used verbs are עשׂה (7X) for doing evil and making idols (Deut 9:25), הלך (2X) for an evil lifestyle (Judg 2:19), and סור (4X; Deut 31:29) and שׁוב (2X; Num 32:15) for turning from Yahweh or the way.

Five of the verbs involve SHAME as they refer to a neglect of responsibility. Abner is asked, "Why did you not protect (לֹא שָׁמַרְתָּ) your master the king?" (1 Sam 26:15). The priests have made many stumble (הִכְשַׁלְתֶּם) by their teaching (Mal 2:8). Onan did not want to give (לְבִלְתִּי נְתָן) his brother a descendant (Gen 38:9). Twice the nearest redeemer claims to be unable (לֹא־אוּכַל) to perform his responsibility (Ruth 4:6).

Three verbs highlight intentionality with regard to the need for שׁחת to be kept in check. Abner was asked why he did not protect (לֹא שָׁמַרְתָּ) Saul from being killed (1 Sam 26:15), David asked the Midianite how it is he did not fear (לֹא יָרֵאתָ) killing Saul (2 Sam 1:14), and the false widow asked David to prevent the blood redeemer from wreaking further destruction (מֵהַרְבַּת לְשַׁחֵת) by killing her remaining son.

One verse from TrBH (Jer 18:4) contains four verbs of intention. While these relate to שׁחת, they are neutral and do not add to its meaning. Three verses from LBH (Dan 8:24, 25; 9:26; 11:17) contain five verbs that relate to שׁחת, but they too do not contribute to the meaning of שׁחת as SBH occurrences do. The "corrupt," "damage," and "kill" senses as well as the DELIVERANCE, WAR, and SHAME frames are all represented with verbs of intention.

Exegesis of Selected Passages

In this section, we take a closer look at some pertinent verses that exhibit characteristics of the various senses, frames, and verbs in collocation. We grouped them according to the three senses.

"Corrupt"

Judges 2:19

וְהָיָה׀ בְּמ֣וֹת הַשּׁוֹפֵ֗ט יָשֻׁ֙בוּ֙ וְהִשְׁחִ֣יתוּ מֵאֲבוֹתָ֔ם לָלֶ֖כֶת אַחֲרֵ֣י אֱלֹהִ֑ים אֲחֵרִ֤ים לְעָבְדָם֙
וּלְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת לָהֶ֔ם לֹ֥א הִפִּ֖ילוּ מִמַּעַלְלֵיהֶ֑ם וּמִדַּרְכָּ֖ם הַקָּשָֽׁה׃[31]

> And it happened that whenever the judge died, they would turn and behave more corruptly than their ancestors, by walking after other gods; serving and worshiping them. They would not let go of any of their deeds or stubborn ways.

The moral focus of this verse evokes the SHAME frame. The Israelites were not true to their covenant with Yahweh. The imperfect יָשֻׁבוּ (they would turn) is frequentative here (Lindars 1995, 107), referring to their well-documented deviation from following Yahweh.

The verbs in collocation are intention and movement verbs, most of which show the manner of their corrupt behaviour. The verb הלך qualifies as movement and intention and its use as a metaphor for a way of life is well established. Another verb that qualifies for both is נפל, which is used here with a sense it seldom has (Lindars 1995, 107), for their unwillingness to drop any (partitive מן; Lindars 1995, 107) of their deeds or their stubborn ways. The rest are verbs of intention. When עבד has a god as object,[32] service in the cult is in mind (*HALOT* 2000, 774), and חוה is the standard verb for bowing in worship. As with other contexts of morality, Judg 2:20 shows Yahweh's awareness.

"Damage"

Below we discuss two verses that have different objects but are quite similar. They both have the "damage" sense, evoke the SHAME frame, and relate to a man shunning his levirate duty.

Genesis 38:9

וַיֵּ֣דַע אוֹנָ֗ן כִּ֤י לֹא֙ לוֹ֙ יִהְיֶ֣ה הַזֶּ֔רַע וְהָיָ֗ה אִם־בָּא֙ אֶל־אֵ֣שֶׁת אָחִ֔יו וְשִׁחֵ֥ת אַ֖רְצָה לְבִלְתִּ֣י נְתָן־זֶ֑רַע
לְאָחִֽיו׃

> Onan knew that the descendant would not be his, so whenever he would sleep with his brother's wife he would spill his sperm on the ground, so that he would not bear a descendant for his brother.

Verbs of perception were, statically speaking, less significant, so they do not feature prominently in this study. However, where they appear the action often motivates שׁחת. Here ידע provides the reason that Onan destroyed his seed upon the ground; the descendant would not be his. His intentionality and persistence are further shown by the

31 Hebrew passages in the exegesis section are taken from the *Lexham Hebrew Bible*.

32 Yahweh and false gods.

אִם + *qal* perfect, "so, whenever he would go (וְהָיָה אִם־בָּא) into his brother's wife" (Hamilton 1995, 436). The intention is also shown with the negated נתן; he refused to provide his brother with a descendant.[33] He had a duty to perform, but with the death of the firstborn, Onan would have inherited half the estate. So, if his brother had an heir Onan's portion would be diminished (Sarna 1989, 266). This was a shameful action and 39:10 shows that, as with moral matters, so also with this matter of injustice, Yahweh was aware of it and imposed the due penalty.

Ruth 4:6

> וַיֹּאמֶר הַגֹּאֵל לֹא אוּכַל לִגְאָל־לִי פֶּן־אַשְׁחִית אֶת־נַחֲלָתִי גְּאַל־לְךָ אַתָּה אֶת־גְּאֻלָּתִי כִּי לֹא־ אוּכַל לִגְאֹל׃

> Then the redeemer said, "I cannot redeem it myself, lest I damage my inheritance. You should perform my kinsman-redemption because I cannot do it."

To start with, it should be noted that before Boaz's second speech, the nearest kinsman was willing to redeem the property when he thought he would just have to take care of Naomi, but would get Elimelech's land (Block 2015, 218–19). Now, however, he shows his intentionality, twice claiming to be unable (לֹא אוּכַל) to do it, and he situates his reasoning in economic terms. Rather than the nearest redeemer gaining Elimelech's property, if Ruth bore a child, the child would inherit that land and maybe even some of his land. He was not willing to damage his inheritance like this. He emphatically shifts his responsibility onto Boaz as shown by the ethical dative (גְּאַל־לְךָ אַתָּה), which has the sense "I can't, *you* do it" (Campbell 1975, 147; original emphasis). Unlike Boaz (Block 2015, 218), he shamefully only thinks of himself. He has no regard for duty or justice. In a culture where having your name recorded is a badge of honour, he receives no name but is called פְּלֹנִי אַלְמֹנִי (such-and-such someone, 4:1).

"Kill"

In this section, we discuss two verses with the "kill" sense. However, they are dissimilar in other regards.

2 Samuel 14:11

> וַתֹּאמֶר יִזְכָּר־נָא הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מֵהַרְבַּת גֹּאֵל הַדָּם לְשַׁחֵת וְלֹא יַשְׁמִידוּ אֶת־בְּנִי וַיֹּאמֶר חַי־יְהוָה אִם־יִפֹּל מִשַּׂעֲרַת בִּנֵּךְ אָרְצָה׃

33 Conrad (2004, 588), wrestling with the meaning of שׁחת, says that in spilling the seed on the ground Onan was "extinguishing another person." However, due to the SHAME involved and the impact of שׁחת on communal life, we think the focus is rather on Onan's selfish neglect of his duty to his clan.

> Then she said, “Let the king swear to Yahweh his God that he will prevent the blood avenger from causing more destruction, so that he will not kill my son.” The king answered, “As Yahweh lives, no harm will come to your son.”

In this passage, שׁחת is used as a means of meting out justice for murder, but its ability to bring ruin is also in focus, evoking the DELIVERANCE frame. The false widow implores David (a higher power) to invoke Yahweh (and so swear; Anderson 2000; 2 Sam 14:11) that he will stop the blood avenger who was intent on wreaking further destruction by killing (שׁמד) her last son. The community would have appointed such a person, although this one is portrayed as overeager (cf. v. 7; Anderson 2000; 2 Sam 14:11). One of only three verbs of movement with a positive outcome, נפל is used for David promising that no harm will come to the son, thereby nullifying the blood guilt.

However, this draws attention to the devastation of שׁחת—it should not be done lightly—when the focus is turned on David. If he could absolve her son of blood guilt, why not Absalom? She challenges David (2 Sam 14:13; Morris 2013, 188), “Then why (וְלָמָּה) are you plotting (חָשַׁבְתָּה) such a thing against (עַל) the people of God?” While the DELIVERANCE frame is evoked in the verse, there is an element of SHAME in the wider context because of this.

Numbers 32:15

כִּֽי תְשׁוּבֻ֣ן מֵאַחֲרָ֗יו וְיָסַ֤ף עֹוד֙ לְהַנִּיחֹ֔ו בַּמִּדְבָּ֖ר וְשִׁחַתֶּ֣ם לְכָל־הָעָ֥ם הַזֶּ֖ה׃

> If you turn from following him, then he will again abandon us in the desert, and you will have destroyed all these people.

In Numbers 32 the clans of Gad and Reuben come to Moses, asking to remain in Cisjordan where there is plenty of pasture for their great flocks. Moses gets angry and asks them “Why would you discourage[34] (וְלָמָּה תְנִיאוּן) the hearts of the sons of Israel?” (32:7) and likens them to the spies from Numbers 14. The verb שׁוב is a movement verb that also shows intention. The modal adverb כִּי before it introduces the protasis here (If you turn from following; Van der Merwe et al. 2017, §40.29.1) and the modal future consecutive (Van der Merwe et al. 2017, §21.3) shows that they will be responsible for the death of that whole generation (וְשִׁחַתֶּם לְכָל־הָעָם). This evokes the SHAME frame. Commenting on לְכָל־הָעָם הַזֶּה (all these people), Ashley (1993, 610) argues that the focus is on the unity of the people just like in Joshua 22:18. However we think the focus there is also on unfaithfulness to Yahweh.[35] This is supported by Joshua 22:33. After Israel accepted Reuben and Gad’s explanation about the memorial altar, they gave up the idea of killing them all for their idolatry.[36] This occurrence in Numbers 32:15 is

34 The imperfect תְנִיאוּן has a modal sense here, indicating the possibility of the event (Van der Merwe et al. 2017, §19.3.5.3)

35 “Today (הַיּוֹם) you are turning (תָּשֻׁבוּ) from following (מֵאַחֲרֵי) Yahweh” (Josh 22:18).

36 The object is the land where they dwell, but we take this as a metonym for the people.

unique since it is the only occurrence in SBH[37] where the subject is responsible for the destruction, rather than performing it themselves.

Conclusion

Structuralism was a significant improvement on previous methods, and it provided great insight. However, cognitive methods have proven superior. The fatality of שׁחת was previously known but we learned that its basic sense is the loss of a proper state. We used FS and several other CL methodologies to gain insight into the semantic force of שׁחת. We identified three senses and how they relate, noted three frames that are evoked by שׁחת in various contexts, and inspected three types of verbs that appear in collocation with שׁחת that also supply insight into its meaning.

With all three senses, the damage affected is fatal with no real chance of recovery. With "damage," there is no hope of recovery.[38] With "kill," the fatality is final and the losses are severe, encompassing all mentioned in the content.[39] With "corrupt," the moral degradation is so great that capital punishment is most appropriate.

Morality was often in view. Humans can be corrupted when they turn from the way, but some transitive uses also emphasise intentionality, and therefore culpability. The devastation of war often appears with various forms of aggression. The sacredness of life, that שׁחת should not be done casually, is highlighted by contexts of DELIVERANCE. How שׁחת affects a community is often in view, which also touches on duty, injustice, and shame.

Devotion to God is an element involved in nearly every occurrence of שׁחת, including when it is done without the due weight, in neglect of duty, or deliberate idolatry. God's awareness is also often noted in the context.

Regarding future research, the relationship between the *hiphil* and *piel* occurrences of שׁחת deserves more attention. Our delimitation provided a good idea of the semantic core of שׁחת, but future research should give more attention to occurrences with God as a subject to gain greater insight into how שׁחת functions as a verb of divine judgement. Lastly, if CL is right that each lexeme has a unique conception, then similar studies of other verbs of destruction (e.g., שׁדד, גוע) could provide great insight.

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37 There is an equivalent in LBH (2 Chr 34:11) and one that comes close to it in TrBH (Jer 13:7).

38 Only one verse from LBH notes recovery from it.

39 Whether an individual (2 Sam 1:14), a group (Judg 20:21), or a whole nation (2 Kgs 19:12).

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