

**FROM “DEATH” TO “LIFE” – דָּם IN THE PSALMS:
A LEXICAL-SEMANTIC-CULTURAL SURVEY,
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE TRANSLATION OF
“BLOOD” IN A WESTERN AND AN AFRICAN SETTING**

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ABSTRACT

After a brief lexical-semantic summary of the principal senses of דָּם in the Hebrew Bible (HB), our focus shifts to this word’s 21 occurrences in the Psalms. How widely and diversely was the notion of “blood” employed in the psalmists’ manifold prayers to the Lord? We then consider the practice of translation in two greatly contrasting sociocultural settings – Western versus African. What are some of the main challenges that translators confront when they attempt to convey the distinct “meanings” of דָּם meaningfully – with functionally equivalent content, intent, impact and appeal – in these two disparate contexts? In a Western setting, as expressed in English, the biblical, symbolically sacred understanding of “blood” is virtually non-existent, thus necessitating significant paratextual supplementation, whereas in an African linguistic environment, Chichewa for example, the ancient symbolical sense of “blood” and its contemporary connotations remain so powerful that it requires great care in translation in order to avoid possible misunderstanding or offense in the vernacular text. In the latter case and in certain Psalmic passages, it turns out that instead of some expression relating to “death”, one that rather conveys the notion of “life” may well be more accurate and acceptable, especially when uttered in prayer or praise to the Lord.

דָּם IN BIBLICAL HEBREW

There is only one word that designates “blood” in the Hebrew Bible – דָּם – and, as one might expect, it occurs frequently, some 360 times. There are two principal uses, or families of usage, negative and positive in connotation: (a) the loss of animate blood due to violence, usually resulting in death; and (b) the loss of blood as a sacrifice to God, always resulting in death. Thus, “blood is an indispensable element in many sacrifices, and in this connection is regularly associated with cleansing, consecration,

and atonement for sin” (VanGemeran 1997:964). But, on the other hand, when blood is manifested where it does not belong, outside of the living body without due purpose (as in [a] above), it is harmful and always defiles or pollutes – people, animals, things, even an entire nation and its land (Gen 4:10; Num 35:33–34).

There is an interesting debate among some theologians concerning the semantic denotation of blood, especially in the context of ritual sacrifice. One proposal is that “blood symbolizes life—the blood of the victim is the *life* that has passed through *death*”; the second interpretation is that “blood in the OT denotes not *life*, but *death*, or more accurately, *life* that is offered up in *death*” (Harris et. al. 1980:190– 191, italics added). So how can the same word signify two opposite notions – death and/or life?¹ I would like to suggest in the present study that this is exactly the case with דָּם. It is not a matter of either one interpretation or the other being the correct one, but rather that either one or the other sense may more readily apply in one biblical context as distinct from another. In many passages, perhaps it could simply be a matter of perspective. Both “death” and “life” might apply depending on how one looks at it, that is, considers the word in its sociocultural and religious setting. This ambiguity is reflected in the assertion cited above: “blood in the OT denotes not life, but death, or more accurately, life that is offered up in death”. Thus, the claim that blood “denotes not life, but death” is contradicted by the “more accurate” reflection “life that is offered up in death” – hence both at once; alternatively, either-or, depending on the context or the interpreter’s chosen frame of reference.

But before we can come to any definite conclusion about this hypothesis, it is necessary to survey some foundational data: first, the results reported by several experts in the field of biblical lexicography, and second, an examination of all of the passages containing דָּם in the book of Psalms.

The following is a summary of the principal senses of דָּם in the Hebrew Bible as identified in several lexicons. The entire lexical range covered by this term is not the primary focus of my study – only the 21 occurrences found in the Psalter. However, a

¹ This question is relevant also for NT hermeneutics, e.g., “For by the **blood*** of Christ we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven” (Eph 1:7a, GNB; * footnote: “Or ‘by the **sacrificial death**’”; cf. Rom 3:25, 5:9; Col 1:14; Heb 9:14).

general overview of the broader lexical-semantic field may be instructive as a background for our more detailed analysis to follow. To begin with, I summarise the distinct senses of דָּם which are listed in a recent draft of the *Semantic domain dictionary of Biblical Hebrew*, perhaps the most valuable of modern lexicons, especially for Bible translators, which is currently being compiled and edited in an online edition by Dr Reinier de Blois (the initial boldfaced terms refer to the putative “semantic domains” for a given sense).²

- 1) **Parts: Creatures** = red liquid that circulates in the arteries and veins of humans and animals; ► used in rituals such as sacrifices, purification and covenant ceremonies, and never to be eaten; ≈ regarded as the seat of life; human blood, when flowing from the body, pollutes the body and the land – blood (GEN 4:10,11; 9:4; 37:31; EXO 4:9,25,26; 7:17,19,19,20; EZK 19:10a ...).
- 2) **Parts: Creatures > Liquids** = red liquid, ◀ compared to blood because of its colour – blood > wine (GEN 49:11; DEU 32:14).
- 3) **Parts: Creatures > People** literally: blood; hence: = living human being, ◀ defined by the blood flowing through their veins – blood > person (DEU 27:25; 1SA 19:5; PSA 94:21).
- 4) **Parts: Creatures > Dead** (Causative) = causative action whereby humans kill other humans in a violent way, usually involving the shedding of blood, which brings guilt upon the people committing these acts – blood > bloodshed (GEN 9:5,6,6; 37:22,26; 42:22; EXO 22:1,2; LEV 17:4,4; 19:16c; 2SA 1:16b ...).

The following is a summary of the entry for דָּם in Brown, Driver, Briggs (1978:196–197):

1. *Blood* of man or animal, = the life (*nephesh*), Gn 9:4.
2. Usually blood become visible,³ (a) as from a wound, 1Kgs 22:35; (b) often object of *shaphakh*, *spill*, *shed*, Gn 9:6; (c) *blood of slain*, 2 Sm 1:22; (d) often of

² I wish to thank Dr de Blois for providing me with this pre-publication draft of דָּם (23/02/2016). Note that the following is merely an outline for orientation; most of the examples of different constructions for illustration have been omitted.

³ It is not clear why this description begins the definition, for it does not apply to many of the sub-senses listed, e.g., e, g, i, and j.

innocent blood, i.e., blood shed with injustice and cruelty, Dt 21:8–9; (e) *avenger of blood*, Nu 35:19; (f) plural of abundance, blood in quantity, hence blood shed by violence, Gn 4:10–11; (g) *guilt of bloodshed, blood-guiltiness*, Ex 22:1; (h) plural also in phrases, *bloody man*, 2 Sm 16:8; (i) *his blood is in (upon) him*, he is responsible for his own death, Lv 20:9; (j) of judicial process in case of bloodshed, Dt 17:8; (k) in phrase *require blood at the hand of*, exact vengeance (for it) from, Ez 33:6; (l) of blood as defiling, e.g., a land, Nu 35:33; (m) atonement for blood-guilt, Dt 21:8; (n) blood(-shedding) as connected with divine wrath, Ez 14:19; (o) of water turned into blood, Ex 4:9, or appearance of blood in the sky, Jo 3:3.

3. Blood used with religious significance: (a) blood of Passover lamb, Ex 12:7; (b) blood used in ritual, Lv 17:11.
4. Figurative of wine, Gn 49:11.

Finally, I give the subheadings under “blood” in the *Dictionary of biblical imagery* (Ryken et. al. 1998: 99–101):

- Blood as human life⁴
- Blood as death
- Blood as guilt
- Blood as impurity
- Blood as omen
- Blood as sacrifice and propitiation
- Blood as wine

In summary, “Blood is never a good sign. While blood is neutral, the sight of it is not. To the ancients its red color, along with its mystical connection with life and death, made it a powerful and ominous symbol of violence and wrong, guilt and coming punishment. Only in the framework of sacrifice could blood portend good news” (Ryken et.al 1998:98–100). However, with regard to the referential ambiguity noted

⁴ Perhaps “life force” is more precise: “In ancient times blood was considered a life force (Deut 12:23). . . . The draining of blood before eating meat was a way of returning the life force of the animal to God who gave it life. This offers recognition that they have taken life with permission and are partaking of God’s bounty as his guests” (Walton et. al. 2000:39).

above, we find no definite answer; in the words of the preceding dictionary of imagery we have: “Blood as human life” [and also] “Blood as death.” Apparently both meanings are applicable, depending on the context.⁵ We turn next to the Psalter to see if its 21 occurrences of דם can lead us in one direction or the other in terms of interpretation.

דם IN THE PSALTER

Below I have presented a table that summarises the various appearances of דם in the Psalms. As can be seen, the distribution is quite dispersed, with occurrences being recorded in all five so-called “Books.”

English Standard Version	Hebrew MT
You destroy those who speak lies; the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man. (5:6/7)	תִּאבֵד דְּבַרֵי כָזָב אִישׁ דָּמִים וּמְרֹמָה יִתְעַב יְהוָה:
For he who avenges blood is mindful of them; he does not forget the cry of the afflicted. (9:12/13)	כִּי־דָרַשׁ דָּמִים אֹתָם זָכַר לֹא־שָׁכַח צַעֲקַת עֲנִיִּים:
The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips. (16:4)	יִרְבוּ עֲצָבוֹתָם אַחַר מְהָרוּ בְּלֹא־סֵדֶךָ נִסְפִיָּהֶם מַדָּם וְבִלְאִשָּׁא אֶת־שְׁמוֹתָם עַל־שִׁפְתַי:

⁵ After completing a draft of this study, I noted the following pertinent comments by Jill Carattini (2016:n.p.) in an online Bible study: “Thought and practice in Old Testament times revolved around a similar understanding—namely, the *life is in the blood*. It is this notion that informs the expression that ‘blood is on one’s hands’ when life has wrongfully been taken. When Cain killed his brother Abel, God confronted him in the field, ‘Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.’ For the ancient Hebrew, there was a general understanding that blood is the very substance of our *createdness*, that in our blood is the essence of what it means to be alive. There is life in the blood; there is energy and power. ... This notion of blood and its power can also be seen in the language of sacrifice and offering found throughout Near Eastern culture. ‘And you shall provide a lamb a year old without blemish for a burnt offering to the LORD daily; morning by morning you shall provide it’ (Ezekiel 46:13). Just as it was understood that the force of life exists in the blood, there was a general understanding of the human need for the *power* of perfect blood, a need in our lives for atoning and cleansing” (italics in original).

Do not sweep my soul away with sinners, nor my life with bloodthirsty men... (26:9)	אַל־תִּאָסֵף עַם־חַטָּאִים נַפְשִׁי וְעַם־אַנְשֵׁי דָמִים חַיִּי:
“What profit is there in my death (lit. blood), ⁶ if I go down to the pit?...” (30:9/10)	מִה־בְּצַע בְּדַמִּי בְרַדְתִּי אֶל־שַׁחַת הַיּוֹדֵד עֶפְרַיִם
Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? (50:13)	הֲאוֹכַל בָּשָׂר אֲבִירִים וְדָם עֲתוּדִים אֶשְׁתֶּה:
Deliver me from bloodguiltiness , O God, O God of my salvation, ... (51:14/16)	הַצִּילֵנִי מִדָּמִים אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵי תְּשׁוּעָתִי
... men of blood and treachery shall not live out half their days. (55:23/24)	אַנְשֵׁי דָמִים וּמְרֵמָה לֹא־יִחְצוּ יְמֵיהֶם
...he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked. (58:10/11)	פָּעַמְיוֹ יְרַחֵץ בְּדָם הַרְשָׁע
Deliver me from those who work evil, and save me from bloodthirsty men. (59:2/3)	הַצִּילֵנִי מִפְּעֻלֵי אֹנָן וּמֵאַנְשֵׁי דָמִים הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי:
...that you may strike your feet in their blood ... (68:23/24)	לְמַעַן תִּמְחֵץ רַגְלֶךָ בְּדָם
From oppression and violence he redeems their life , and precious is their blood in his sight. (72:14)	מִתּוֹד וּמִחַמְס יִגְאֵל נַפְשָׁם וַיִּקַּר דָּמָם בְּעֵינָיו:
He turned their rivers to blood , so that they could not drink of their streams. (78:44)	וַיַּהַפֵּךְ לְדָם יְאֲרֵיהֶם וְנִזְלֵיהֶם בַּל־יִשְׁתִּיּוּן:
They [<i>enemies</i>] have poured out their [<i>Israelites</i>] blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them. (79:3)	שָׁפְכוּ דָמָם כַּמַּיִם סָבִיבוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם וְאֵין קוֹבֵר:
Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants be known among the nations before our eyes! (79:10)	יִדְעַת בְּגוֹיִם לְעֵינֵינוּ נִקְמַת דָּם־עַבְדֶּיךָ הַשְּׁפוּד:
They band together against the life of the righteous and condemn the innocent to death. (lit., ‘and the blood of the innocent they declare guilty’; 94:21)	יִגְדוּ עַל־נַפְשׁ צְדִיק וְדָם נָקִי יִרְשָׁעוּ:
He turned their waters into blood and caused their fish to die. (105:29)	הִפָּךְ אֶת־מִימֵיהֶם לְדָם וַיָּמַת אֶת־דָּגָתָם:
They poured out innocent blood , the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they	וַיִּשְׁפְּכוּ דָם נָקִי דָם־בְּנֵיהֶם וּבְנוֹתֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר

⁶ NET (<https://net.bible.org/>) notes are given in brackets: “What profit is there in taking my life [*Heb.* “What profit [is there] in my blood?” “Blood” here represents his life.], in my descending into the Pit? [The Hebrew term...*shakhat*... “pit” is often used as a title for Sheol]; Can the dust of the grave [*Heb.* “dust.” The words “of the grave” are supplied in the translation for clarification] praise you? Can it declare your loyalty?” [According to the OT, those who descend into the realm of death/Sheol are cut off from God’s mighty deeds and from the worshiping covenant community that experiences divine intervention (Ps 6:5; Ps 88:10–12; Is 38:18). In his effort to elicit a positive divine response, the psalmist reminds God that he will receive no praise or glory if he allows the psalmist to die. Dead men do not praise God!]

sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was polluted with blood. (106:38)	זָבַחוּ לְעֵצָבִי כִנְעַן וּתְהַגֵּף הָאָרֶץ בַּדָּמִים:
Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God! O men of blood, depart from me! (139:19)	אִם-תִּקְטֹל אֱלֹהִי! רְשָׁע וְאֲנָשֵׁי דָמִים סֹרוּ מִנִּי:

There is at least one clear example in the preceding listing for each of the two polar meanings that have been posited for דם. For “death” we have: “What profit is there in my death (lit. blood), if I go down to the pit?...” (30:9/10), where “death” (blood) is in semantic parallel with “going down into the pit.” For “life” there is: “From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight” (72:14), where “blood” is in parallel with “life”. Analogous to the latter sense is 94:21: “They band together against the life of the righteous and condemn the innocent to death (lit., ‘and the blood of the innocent [דַּם דָּם] they declare guilty’)”, where again we observe the significant connection between “life-force” (נַפְשׁ) and “blood” (דָּם). Another passage similar to the preceding is found in 106:38a: “They poured out innocent blood (דָּם דָּם), the blood of their sons and daughters...” where an innocent “life” (or “lives” in context) is being referred to. In 26:9 we have the example of “blood” and “life” being juxtaposed, again in close parallel with “life-force”: אֶל-תִּאָסֵף עַם-חַטָּאִים נַפְשִׁי וְעַם-אֲנָשֵׁי דָמִים חַיִּי.⁷

These examples would appear to clearly establish “life” as the meaningful translation preference in certain instances at least – rather than the almost default concept of “death”⁸ which a literal rendering of “blood” would suggest in many languages (in English as well as Chewa, see below).⁹

⁷ Literally: “Do not gather up with sinners my life-force – with men of bloodshed my lives”.
⁸ See, for example, the *Good News Translation*: “...who plot against good people, and sentence the innocent to death” (94:21); “They killed those innocent children, and the land was defiled by those murderers” (106:38).
⁹ After completing a draft of the present study, I discovered the following pertinent comments from three topical-thematic study Bibles: “Though blood occasionally refers to the literal fluid in human beings, the Bible uses it primarily as a symbol of *life* and *death*, so that the phrase ‘shedding of blood’ means taking a *life*” (Verbrugge 1989:1374, italics added). “BLOOD: *The symbol of life*, which thus plays an especially important role in the sacrificial system of the OT. The shedding of the blood of a sacrificial animal represents the *giving up of its life*. The ‘blood of Christ’ refers to Jesus Christ’s obedient *giving of his life*, in order to achieve redemption and forgiveness” (McGrath 1999:1883, italics added; cf.

In addition to several non-controversial translation choices, such as the literal “sacrificial blood of goats” (50:13) or the polluting substance in the Nile River having a “blood-red” colour (105:29), there are a number of what I would regard as being debatable, ambiguous cases. Of course, the default rendering of “death” (or something related) for דָּם is the path of least resistance, and a choice perhaps influenced by a modern Western mental model (where one’s “life” is not “in the blood”, Gen 9:4, Lev 17:14) and literalistic English translations (like ESV). Consider Psalm 79:3, for example: “They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them.” So what did the enemies “pour out” with the “blood” – life or death? Life, of course, and the result was death for many people. In any case, both life and death are integrally linked in the ancient mind set,¹⁰ such that translations like the following would seem to involve a significant conceptual reduction: “They have killed the people all around Jerusalem”.¹¹ A similar idea is found later in this same psalm, 79:10: “Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants be known among the nations before our eyes!” Again, it is not just a matter of “the killing of your servants” (Bratcher & Reyburn 1991:709), but much more, the loss of sacred God-given life (דָּם, with נְשָׁמָה) was concerned.¹²

also 2 Samuel 23:17; Ezekiel 33:4–6; Hebrews chs. 9–10). “In terms of the ransom picture of atonement, the animal’s lifeblood served as the ransom payment. It was a gracious application of the ‘life for life’ principle of justice (Exod 21:23). When people forfeited their own lifeblood because of sin, they were able to be ransomed by the lifeblood of a blameless substitute—an animal—who took their place (see also important Jewish commentators such as Rashi or Ibn Ezra on Lev 17:11)” (Carson 2015:2657).

¹⁰ “This association is very natural since a body that loses its blood quickly becomes lifeless. It is indeed why we can speak of ‘lifeblood’. Significantly, sacrifices can atone because the animal’s lifeblood is offered” (Carson 2015:2657).

¹¹ This is one translational recommendation in Bratcher & Reyburn (1991:707).

¹² “The OT clearly asserts that the life of an organism exists within its blood. Blood is used synonymously with life in Leviticus 19:16, where a prohibition against doing anything that might endanger the life of one’s neighbor is to be read literally: ‘the blood of your neighbor.’ It is the blood [i.e., life] of the slain Abel that cried out to Yahweh from the ground in the Hebrew Bible’s first use of this noun (Gen 4:10), and blood and life are equated clearly in the post-flood prescription... (Gen 9:4; cf. Lev 3:17; 7:26–27; 19:26)” (Alexander & Backer 2003:88).

The most common expression in the Psalter involving דָּם is “bloodthirsty man/men”, lit. “man/men of bloods [pl.]” (דְּמוּיִם יָשׁוּׁרִים), as in 26:9.¹³ The GNT rendering “murderers” gets the “death” component across, but the loss of revered “life” (in the blood) is left implicit (so, would a compound like “life-taker/s” be a possible option?). Perhaps this is not a major issue from a Western perspective, but undoubtedly it is a matter to be seriously considered in translation when working in any culture having a world-view similar in certain key respects to that of the ancient Hebrews.

BLOOD IN ENGLISH

We turn now to a cursory survey of the concept of “blood” from a Western perspective in English. A much greater in-depth linguistic and sociocultural study is really required, but for our purposes, a sense listing from two major dictionaries and a reliable website will have to suffice.

First, according to the *Concise Oxford English dictionary* “blood” has four principal senses (Soanes & Stevenson 2006:147):

1. The red liquid that circulates in the arteries and veins, carrying oxygen to and carbon dioxide from the tissues of the body.
2. Violence involving bloodshed.
3. Fiery or passionate temperament.
4. Family background; descent or lineage: *she must have Irish blood.*

Webster’s new world college dictionary lists ten non-idiomatic or colloquial senses (Agnes 2006:157):

1. The usually red fluid, consisting of plasma, red and white blood cells, etc., that circulates through the heart, arteries, and veins of vertebrates...
2. A comparable fluid, usually colorless or bluish, in many invertebrate animals.

¹³ Similar to this notion is that of the “avenger of blood”, lit. “seeker of bloods” (דְּרוֹשׁ דָּמַיִם) in 9:12/13; to be sure, God, the referent, will punish “murderers” (NET; GNT’s “those who wrong them” seems much too weak). But the point is that such evil-doers or enemies will be punished with “death” because they have consciously taken the “life” (“shed of blood”) of others, the innocent in particular (cf. vv. 5–6, 17).

3. The spilling of blood; murder.
4. Lifeblood.
5. The sap or juice of a plant.
6. Passion, temperament, or disposition.
7. Parental heritage; family line, lineage.
8. Relationship by descent in the same family line; kinship.
9. Descent from nobility or royalty.
10. Descent from purebred stock.

Finally, from the widely recognised website www.Dictionary.com the following senses plus sample usages and several common idioms involving “blood”:¹⁴

1. The fluid that circulates in the principal vascular system of human beings and other vertebrates, in humans consisting of plasma in which the red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets are suspended.
2. The vital principle; life: *The excitement had got into the very blood of the nation.*
3. A person or group regarded as a source of energy, vitality, or vigor:
It's time we got some new blood in this company.
4. One of the four elemental bodily humors of medieval physiology, regarded as causing cheerfulness.
5. Bloodshed; gore; slaughter; murder: *to avenge the blood of his father.*
6. The juice or sap of plants: *the blood of the grape.*
7. Temperament; state of mind: *a person of hot blood.*

Idioms:

Get/have one's blood up, to become or be enraged or impassioned:

Injustice of any sort always gets my blood up.

Have someone's blood on one's head/hands, to be to blame for someone's affliction or death:

Though a criminal, he had no blood on his hands.

In cold blood, deliberately; ruthlessly:

The dictator, in cold blood, ordered the execution of all his political enemies.

¹⁴ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/blood?s=t>. [Accessed 2016/02/25.]

Make one's blood boil, to inspire resentment, anger, or indignation:

Such carelessness makes my blood boil.

Make one's blood run cold, to fill with terror; frighten:

The dark, deserted street in that unfamiliar neighborhood made her blood run cold.

Sweat blood, to be under a strain, to wait anxiously, to worry:

He was sweating blood while his friend was being questioned by the police.

Taste blood, to experience a new sensation, usually a violent or destructive one, and acquire an appetite for it:

Once the team had tasted blood, there was no preventing them from winning by a wide margin.

As is evident in the preceding survey, the Hebrew notion of “blood as life” is not very prominent in general cultural thought, hence popular usage, but the association of blood with “death” or psychologically deadly feelings is quite common. This significant conceptual-lexical difference needs to be kept in mind both when one is translating into English, and more importantly perhaps, when referencing English versions during the preparation of a translation in another language. The more formally-correspondent versions, in particular, which regularly render דָּם as “blood,” do not take into consideration the fact that a majority of their readers (hearers) will automatically reference something to do with “death” and miss the vital connection that the original text and context also had with “life”.¹⁵ Finally, it is important to keep in mind another major difference in understanding that originates from disparate

¹⁵ Such a connection is sometimes made in the expository notes of a “study Bible”, but all too often it is ignored. The NET (<https://net.bible.org/>) is probably the most helpful in this procedure of paratextual supplementation, for example, at 30:9/10: “*Heb* “What profit [is there] in my blood?” “Blood” here represents his life.” While strangely missing in the various Psalms’ references cited above, the *NIV Study Bible* does provide a helpful comment on “blood” at Genesis 9:4: “Lev 17:14 stresses the intimate relationship between blood and life by twice declaring that ‘the life of every creature is in its blood.’ Life is the precious and mysterious gift of God, and man is not to seek to preserve it or increase the life-force within him by eating ‘life’ that is ‘in the blood’ (Lev 17:11)—as many pagan peoples throughout history have thought they could do” (Barker 1985:18).

world-views: “Blood is not to be identified with the family bond. While in English we speak of blood kinship or blood relations, the OT speaks of someone as being of the same bone and flesh (...Gen 2:23; Judg 9:2). Since *dâm* was regularly connected with violence or spilt blood, it was not a suitable word to designate family relationships...” (VanGemeren 1997:964).

BLOOD IN BANTU (CHEWA)

In a Bantu setting of communication, the cultural factor greatly influences, hence complicates, the accurate re-conceptualisation and verbalisation of “meaning” in Bible translation. This is due to the expanded and enriched “cognitive environment” evoked by the notion of “blood” in all of its local speech situations and social contexts of use. The practice of translation, and indeed biblical text interpretation in general, is thus complicated by a fertile, albeit often implicit, symbolical usage in all of the Bantu language-cultures of central and southern Africa. This is based on a world-view, or mental model, involving a perception of “blood” (as a conceptual complex) that ranges in a broad continuum from the purely physical to the darkly mystical, the latter frame of reference including diverse injurious forces, such as malevolent witchcraft and sorcery, on the one hand, and a mechanistic system of taboo surrounding the female menstrual cycle, on the other.

The following, for example, is a selection of assorted non-literal senses of “blood” (in Chewa)¹⁶ derived from everyday local life to illustrate the range, and to suggest points of possible conceptual “interference,” when ordinary readers/hearers encounter unfamiliar uses of this word in passages of Scripture—like those found in the Psalter:¹⁷

¹⁶ Chi-Chewa is a SE Bantu language of wider communication spoken as a first, second, or trade language by some 12 to 15 million people in Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. “In the OT, as in African traditional religion, blood sacrifice was known in family worship. ... The blood (life) of the sacrificial victim was exchanged for that of the worshipper whose sin needed to be atoned for” (Cole 2006:139).

¹⁷ The different senses and contextual usages listed below, some translated from the original Chewa, were volunteered (in writing) by the members of my Lutheran Seminary Psalms

- “We call a murderer *wamwazi/wamagazi* (‘someone-of-blood’).”
- “*Mwazi* is in his hands” (i.e., he murdered someone).
- “His great wealth is *chamagazi*” (‘a thing of blood’; i.e., derived from sorcery, magic, or witchcraft).¹⁸
- “A feast where a lot of meat will be roasted and eaten is sometimes called *chamagazi*” (‘something-of-blood’; note that this colloquial observation is possibly an allusive play on the preceding example, where necrophagous, nocturnal witchcraft is involved).
- “They are *amagazi amodzi*” (‘of one blood’, i.e., consanguineal relatives have common ancestors).¹⁹
- “This child is *magazi anga* (‘my blood’).”
- “These are the *magazi* (‘blood’) from my body” (i.e., my children).
- “Your blood is fat/thick (*mwazi wanu ng’wopantha*), Mr. Zimba” (i.e., Zimba has fathered children who look like him by several women).²⁰
- “His *blood* (i.e., reproductive capability) is powerful; he has many children!”
- “There will be much *magazi* there” (i.e., great bloodshed as in war or a mine disaster).
- “The ancestral spirits came to him in a dream and said that they want *blood*” (i.e., they want the person to carry out a ritual sacrifice of “remembrance” in honour of the departed spirit/s).

exegesis class. These meanings greatly expanded on the senses supplied in the oldest (Scott 1892:411), as well as the newest (Paas 2013:371) Chewa scholarly dictionaries. For example: “**Mwazi**, BLOOD; also temper, health, natural life...the life and spirit of an animal or of man” (Scott 1892:411).

¹⁸ Keep this sense in mind below when we come to the Chewa translation of Ps 9:12 in the old version.

¹⁹ The connection between “blood” and the “ancestors” (*mizimu*) is very strong among the Shona people of Zimbabwe: “It is blood that connects a child with the tribe. ... The spirits of the dead parents, or grandparents, the *vadzimu*, help their descendants to beget children. ... The heart is also the centre of the blood, and blood is another Karanga symbol for life. ... Blood is the bond that ensures a state of continuity between the ancestral spirits and the living” (Aschwanden 1982:3–4, 9, 22).

²⁰ Some respondents suggested that in such contexts, *magazi/mwazi* may be used figuratively (i.e., life-giving) to refer to male sperm.

- “My wife is ill – she has thrown out blood” (*wataya magari*, i.e., her menstrual flow is unusually heavy or has lasted too long).
- “I want my *blood* (i.e., life or good fortune) to be the engine that drives this nation forward.”
- “He has cold *blood*” (*magazi ozizira*, i.e., he is a very weak or a slow person).
- “He has bad *blood*” (*magazi oipa*, i.e., he has a bad character, especially a hot temper).
- “He brings new *blood* to the company” (*magazi atsopano*, i.e., he has fresh ideas or a new plan; perhaps an English calque).
- “This fellow grows much maize with his *blood*” (i.e., he has a good crop because he is a skilful farmer and/or he has supernatural help from his ancestors).

Though not found among the Chewa people, an initiation custom involving blood is commonly found elsewhere in Africa: “Blood brotherhood or blood friendship is established by African tribes by the mutual shedding of blood and either drinking it or rubbing it on one another's bodies. Thus and by the inter-transfusion of blood by other means it was thought that a community of life and interest could be established” (Clippinger n.d.). And here we may see an interesting connection with the OT rite of circumcision: “The rite of circumcision is an Old Testament form of blood ceremony. Apart from the probable sanitary importance of the act is the deeper meaning in the establishment of a bond of friendship between the one upon whom the act is performed and Yahweh Himself. In order that Abraham might become ‘the friend of God’ he was commanded that he should be circumcised as a token of the covenant between him and God (Genesis 17:10 – 11)” (Clippinger n.d.).

We turn now to several representative passages from the Psalms in Chewa simply to illustrate some of the potential problems in comprehension that a formally correspondent rendering poses (based on the 1922 “missionary version”),²¹ along with

²¹ “The term ‘blood’... is an important verbal symbol in the Scriptures, and due to its theological significance, in certain passages at least, translators would normally be expected to make some attempt to preserve the form in translation. But in the case of this word, certain problems develop due to cultural associations in the Bantu languages of Central [sic] Africa. Here we find that ‘blood’ is such a strong symbol of ‘life’ that to use it with reference to ‘death’ often causes a considerable degree of unnaturalness in usage”

suggestions for improvement (adapted from the 1998 “popular language” version).²² The difficulty arises because, literally-speaking, “blood” suggests death rather than life. I accompany each version’s rendition with a close back-translation into English.

Buku Lopatulika	Buku Loyera
Munthu wokhetsa mwazi ndi wa cinyengo, Yehova anyansidwa naye. (5:6b)	Inu Chauta ²³ mumaipidwa nawo anthu onyenga ndi opha anzao .
A person who causes bleeding ²⁴ and is deceitful, Jehovah is disgusted with him (her).	You, O Chauta, you despise deceitful people and those who kill others .
Pakuti Iye wofuna camwazi awakumbukila... (9:12a)	Paja Chauta amatetetza moyo wa ozunzika...
For He who desires sacrifice ²⁵ (lit. ‘a thing of blood’) remembers them...	As you know, Chauta protects the life of those who are afflicted...
M’mwazi wanga muli phindu lanji? (30:9a)	Kodi mudzapindulanji pakutayika kwa moyo wanga?
In my blood is what sort of profit? ²⁶	Say, what will you profit from the loss of my life ?
Anthu okhetsa mwazi ndi cinyengo masiku ao sadzafika nusu. (55:23b)	Anthu ochotsa moyo ndi onyenga sadzakhala ndi moyo wautali konse.
People who cause bleeding and deceit their lives will not reach a little bit.	People who take away life and (are) deceitful will not have a long life at all. ²⁷

(Wendland 1987:92–93).

²² Both versions, the older *Buku Lopatulika* (BL, “Set-apart Book”) and the more recent *Buku Loyera* (BY, “Pure Book”) are currently published by the Bible Society of Malawi (Blantyre); see also Wendland (1998, Chapter 1).

²³ For background information regarding the selection of *Chauta*, the high Creator-God of the Chewa people, to render the Tetragrammaton (YHWH), see Wendland (1998:114–121).

²⁴ The nature or severity of the action of literally “causing blood to flow” is not specified; it does not necessarily refer to death, and might (by the biblical illiterate) be understood as a derogatory reference to a woman having her monthly period. A *munthu* “person” can refer to a male or female, and third person singular pronominal references (here *naye*) may be masculine or feminine in reference (this will no longer be displayed in the English translation).

²⁵ It is not clear how this mistranslation got into the text, or why it was not corrected in later editions. In any case, we also note that the literal expression “thing of blood” might possibly evoke the notion of sorcery.

²⁶ This expression could be misunderstood as a reference to a blood donor.

²⁷ This modified Chewa rendition highlights the notion of “life” by playing on two related

Adzaombola moyo wao ku cinyengo ndi ciwawa; ndipo mwazi wao udzakhala wa mtengo pamaso pace. (72:14)	Mfumuyo idzawaombolera kwa owapsinja ndi ankhanza, pakuti amayesa miyoyo yao kuti n'jamtengo wapatali.
He will redeem their life from deceit and rioting; and their blood will be valuable before him. ²⁸	The king will redeem them from oppressors and violent persons, because he considers their lives to be most valuable.
...Namtsutsa wa mwazi wosacimwa . (94:21b)	...nagamula kuti moyo wa osalakwa unyongedwe.
...They rebuke the one of sinless blood . ²⁹	...and judge that the life of innocent ones be executed.
Nakhetsa mwazi wosacimwa , ndiwo mwazi wa ana ao amuna ndi akazi...M'mwemo analidetsa dziko ndi mwaziwo . (106:38)	Adathetsa miyoyo ya opanda milandu, magazi a ana ao...choncho dzikolo adaliipitsa ndi imfa zimenezo.
And they shed sinless blood , that is, blood of their male and female children...In which way they dirtied (polluted) the land with that blood .	They ended the lives of those without guilt, the blood of their children...and thus they desecrated the land with those deaths .

When comparing these two translations, we note that there is a lot more “life” in the “blood” as rendered in the *Buku Loyera* version – overall, in six of the seven passages considered. These do of course exemplify non-literal usages of the term. In certain contexts, another translation was deemed more natural, e.g., “those who kill others” in Psalm 26:9 for “bloodthirsty men” (ጸገገ ህጻናዎች), while *mwazi* is retained where “blood” is being literally referred to, e.g., 50:13. The reiterated use of *mwazi* in the *Buku Lopatulika* makes most passages difficult, if not impossible, to understand readily or correctly, as their back-translations into English would suggest.

It should also be noted that there are several other terms for “blood” in Chewa. Blood, from a chicken or goat for example, that is cooked and eaten as a food is termed *uwende*. *Chiropo*, on the other hand, is used in reference to the blood of a living being, animal or human, which is killed (murdered); this blood is mystically

senses. The old Chewa version, on the other hand, is nearly unintelligible, as is the case with the next example (106:38).

²⁸ The result–reason connection expressed in this verse is lost due to a literal rendering of the *waw*-connective.

²⁹ This is another difficult-to-understand rendering.

transformed into a spirit of vengeance, one of the same name (*chirope*), that must be magically protected against by means of traditional “medicine” involving blood lest it cause madness or a fatal illness.³⁰ There are two words currently in common use for “blood” – the similar sounding *mwazi* and *magazi*. Some respondents claim that the former refers to human blood, the latter to the blood of an animal. Others say that the difference is simply dialectal. In any case, the fact is that *mwazi* occurs much more frequently in the old Chewa Bible (BL) and *magazi* in the new Bible (BY). This gives many people a definite ecclesiastically-based preference, many older Protestants, for example, claiming that *mwazi* is the only correct word to use with reference to the blood of Christ.³¹

STRATEGIES FOR BRIDGING THE LINGUISTIC-CULTURAL GAP IN TRANSLATION

The following is a listing of some of the common translation strategies that may be employed when confronting challenging terms, like 𐌆𐌗, and similar, semantically-complex words in the Scriptures. Any one of these methods might be helpful, especially where non-literal senses are concerned, depending on the competency of the translation team and the translation brief (with its *Skopos*) according to which they are working.³² Thus, one might utilise:

³⁰ “*Chiropa* [sic] has also the meaning of life, the first ritual bite of a slain animal, and the propitiatory gift of an animal to the spirits, in order to ward off diseases and death” (Schoffeleers 1997:139).

³¹ The *Buku Lopatulika* was a Protestant (Presbyterian)-only translation that is still very popular among mainline Protestants today. The *Buku Loyera* was an ecumenical translation, but several Catholic priests were prominent members of the translation team, and the Catholic Church has adopted this version for exclusive use in preference to an older one prepared by a missionary (*Malembo Oyera* “Pure Writings”).

³² The notion of a translation “brief”, or job description, and its *Skopos*, or primary “communicative aim” in relation to a specified target audience, is most thoroughly developed and exemplified in a so-called “functionalist” approach to Bible translation, as practiced for example by Christiane Nord (for an overview of this effective local audience-oriented methodology, see Wendland 2004:50–54).

- a) a literal rendering of the lexical item (“blood”) along with an explanatory footnote that gives its context-determined meaning;
- b) translate the non-literal sense alone (i.e., some expression involving either “death” or “life”);
- c) translate the non-literal sense, as in (b), but include a footnote that indicates the original form, “blood”;
- d) render both the form and the meaning through the use of a phrasal expression (“crossing the translation river twice,” e.g., “life-blood”);
- e) convey the content by means of some local idiomatic expression or figurative cultural substitute (e.g., for “bloodthirsty men” [men of bloods] – “people with a bad heart”).

The *Good News Translation* (GNT) often gives examples of (b), while the *New English Translation* (NET) does the same for strategies (a) and (c). The *UBS Handbook on Psalms* (Bratcher & Reyburn 1991) frequently suggests renderings that are related to categories (d) and (e).

Finally, it may be helpful to summarise the sequence of analytical steps that may be derived from this study’s journey from “death” to “life” when exploring the range of semantic “motion” of דָּם in the Psalms, moving from Hebrew to English to Chewa:

- a) Conduct a personal in-depth, lexical-semantic study of the key term, e.g., דָּם, in Hebrew (SL), examining as many diverse contexts as possible (ideally all occurrences within a given book).
- b) Explore the various senses documented in scholarly literature on the term, e.g., in lexicons, Bible dictionaries, study Bibles, commentaries, etc., comparing these results with your own as determined in (a); on this basis propose a comprehensive set of distinctive senses.
- c) Do a similar lexical-semantic study of the closest corresponding key term (or terms) within the cultural framework of the language of wider communication that translators may be using for scriptural and scholarly reference, e.g. English, French, Spanish, Swahili.

- d) Carry out another comparative lexical-semantic analysis in the language of translation (TL), using all available published resources plus as much corresponding oral research as possible in different literary and oratorical genres.
- e) Put together a “translational profile,” identifying specific ST usages of the key term’s different senses in relation to suggested TL functional equivalents in order to use this lexical-semantic grid as a flexible, context-sensitive guide when translating (revising it as necessary through ongoing usage and related lexical study).

By applying the preceding methodology (which is just one possible way of doing it), it was discovered that, instead of “death,” the primary (prototypical) cultural-religious focus of דָּם in the Scriptures, the Psalter at least, would seem to be “life”. This represents the divinely-given “life-force” (*nephesh*) of a person or animal that was deliberately expelled (as symbolised by “blood-shed”), whether for evil (murderous) or beneficial (sacrificial) purposes, resulting in the state of “death”. Thus, the default figurative way of talking about such phenomena in the Hebrew Bible appears to be through using the powerful imagery of “blood”, which communicates a multifaceted, contextually defined semantic complex plus all the conceptual associations that are related to it, including that of ritual sacrifice and “atonement”. To be sure, no translation can verbally convey such a rich cognitive environment that is evoked by a key source language term in a contemporary target language-culture. But by recognising this unavoidable problem of conceptual re-imaging and by consistently applying established translation principles, one can at least limit the metaphoric “loss of blood”, translationally as well as theologically speaking, and keep it to a manageable minimum.

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