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

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ABSTRACT

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

KEYWORDS: Jeremiah; Baal; exegesis.

INTRODUCTION: RATIONALE AND BACKGROUND

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

The grammatical possibility that nouns in the definite form can be classified as proper nouns1 (names), the insight that לַשָּׁוְא in at least Jeremiah 18:5 refers to an idol2, and the multiple occurrences of the name of the deity Baʻal in the definite form habbaʻal (הַבַעַל)4 in MT Jeremiah, beg the question whether all these references or allusions are not pointing to the same subject, namely Baʻal. In the light of the shared semantic fields of these nouns, the rhetorical function of these allusions seems to be ‘naming and shaming,’ disparaging the named candidate (and by implication his associates), typically in the vernacular of our day a ‘disgraced fake’5.

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


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

As for the other occurrences of לַשָׁוא in Jeremiah (2:30, 4:30, 6:29, 46:11), only a few commentators, but no translations, have considered the possibility that they might be of the same order as Jeremiah 18:15. The obvious rationale is that some form of “in vain” makes translational sense in all the texts apart from 18:15. The latent semantic difference between the definite and indefinite forms of the word is apparently not considered, or the assumption is that the definiteness of the word bears no real semantic value. All or at least most of the lexicons and semantic and theological dictionaries reflect this stance by not distinguishing the indefinite from the definite forms of these nouns. The dictionary entry in Koehler and Baumgartner (KAHAL) of לַשָׁוא contains examples of the lexeme with the definite article haphazardly inserted in between the indefinite form. The possibility that there may be a (collective) variation of meaning of the same noun in the definite form, is not perceived. The same applies


8 Luther 1545 (1534) “Sie räuchern den Göttern”.
9 For example, John A. Thompson, Jeremiah, 438; William L. Holladay, Jeremiah 1, 524.
10 Curiously, Jack Lundbom, with a keen eye for what he calls “a disparaging name for Ba‘al”, translates Jeremiah 18:15 with “they burn incense in vain”, with the note that the reference here would be to the idols. See Jack Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 822.
11 For example, The Jewish Publication Society Tanakh 1985 “They sacrifice to a delusion”.
12 John A. Thompson, Jeremiah, and Jack R. Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20.
14 At inception, b. לַשָׁוא vergeblich, ohne Erfolg; later as group b: Trug/trügerisch, קְסֶם לַשָׁוא and קְסֶם לַשָׁוְא together with indefinites ִּתָּוְא וּלְשָׁו and שָׁוְא וּלְשָׁו.
to the entries of the aforementioned related nouns. At the time of this research, the online *Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew* only has the name, which is not helpful. The theological dictionary series at my disposal is likewise of little avail regarding שָׁוְא šaw', שֶׁקֶר šeqer, הֶׁבֶל hebél and בֹּשֶׁׁת bōšet.

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15 See the entries in Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *KAHAL*, of בֹּשֶׁׁת (page 85), הֶׁבֶל (page 123), and שֶׁקֶר (page 640). שְוָׁא is mentioned in combination with מְבֻשִים as "Götzen" (idols), as well as מַעֲבֵדָל הָאָרֶץ (Jeremiah 14:22), a definite plural genitive construct.


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


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


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

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

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

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\(^\text{26}\) Also, as בֶׁל in 8:19 and בֶׁל in 14:22 where they are recognised as idols.

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

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

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

\(^\text{30}\) In 2:26, 3:25, 7:19 and 20:18.
Diagram of determined nouns versus undetermined counterparts in Jeremiah, alongside (The) Ba‘al/Ba‘alim

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Hypothesis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1 Introduction

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

וְדִבַּרְתִי מִשְפָּטַי אֹּתָם עַל כָּל־רָעָּתָם אֲשֶׁר עֲזָּבוּנִי וַיְקַטְרוּ לֵאלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וַיִשְתַחֲווּ לְמַעֲשֵי יְדֵיהֶׁם׃

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

“Other gods”, אלהים אחרים, is a key term in Jeremiah occurring throughout the book as object of קטר (burning incense to) in Jeremiah 1:16, 19:4, 44:3, 5, 8, 15; as object of שֵׁבֶט (outpouring of libation offerings to) in 7:18, 19:13, 32:29; as object of שָׁבַע (service to) in 16:13, 44:3; as object of worship לעָלָהִים (עָלָהִים) in 22:9.

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

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

35 As object of בַּר (burning incense to) in Jeremiah 1:16, 19:4, 44:3, 5, 8, 15; as object of כַּמַּה (outpouring of libation offerings to) in 7:18, 19:13, 32:29; as object of שֶׁבַע (service to) in 16:13, 44:3; as object of worship לעָלָהִים (עָלָהִים) in 22:9.
and then feel safe in the house of yhwh! The reason and source for the self-deception is already repudiated in Jeremiah 7:4 (אֲחֵרִים לִפְנֵי אֱלֹהֵי אֲחֵרִים), now stated in verse 8 as follows:

The standard translation of this phrase is:

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

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

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

36 The phrase הָלַֹּךְ אַחְַרֵי אֱלֹהֵי אֲחֵרִים, occurs in Jeremiah 7:9, 11:10, 13:10, 16:11, 25:6, 35:15. The combination [הלך אחר| אחר| אֱלֹהֵי אֲחֵרִים] also occurs in Jeremiah 2:5 (וַיַּלְכּוּ לְחִוְֹל| אחר| אֱלֹהֵי אֲחֵרִים). It appears to be an identification marker for the subject under discussion. John A. Thompson, Jeremiah, 167 makes the remark “that in the secular treaties of the day a rebel vassal who 'went after' some other ruler was understood to have renounced allegiance to his overlord. Indeed, the expression 'go after' meant 'serve as a vassal'.” (with reference to W. L. Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” CBQ 25 (1963), 77-87, for examples.).

37 William L. Holladay, Jeremiah 1, 238, allocates it to the end of section two, verse 5-8 (his divisions 3-4, 5-8, 9-11 and 12). According to John A. Thompson, Jeremiah, 274, the opening of the description of the nation's apostasy, verse 8-12. Peter C. Craigie et al, Word Biblical Commentary, 119, divides the text after the introduction (v 1) according to the elements of the so-called torah of entrance, namely proclamation of YHWH’s word v 2-7, declaration of apostasy v 8-12, judgement v 13-15. Jack R. Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 455-7, marks three oracles by inclusio, v 3-7, 8-11, 12-14.


39 John A. Thompson, Jeremiah, 277, 280.

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

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

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

3 Jeremiah 2:4-13

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

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

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

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


\(^{46}\) As illustrated by the cyclical structure of the chapter, see Job Y. Jindo, Biblical Metaphor Reconsidered, 181-2.


\(^{49}\) Translation of Jack R. Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 256.

\(^{50}\) Jack R. Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 262.
Note that lōʻyô’îlû (plural) is followed up in v 11 in the singular. It is clear that these are allusions to the Baʻal/Baʻalim, assumedly another form of derogatory name for the deity. It is explicitly mentioned in the plural in Jeremiah 2:23 and 9:13, most probably defining “the other gods”52. The formulaאלהים אחרים / אחריהם הלוקלים + object (of new allegiance)53, remains the same, with a nominal but not substantive change of object of allegiance.

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

It should therefore come as no surprise that the last colon of Jeremiah 2:5 (MT) is rendered in Targum Jonathan55 as והלכו אחרי הַהֶּבֶל וַיָּהְבָּל “and (they) went astray after the idols and became worthless”56. Bright57 followed by Thompson58 suggests that hahebel is a pun on habbaʻal. Once again Lundbom describes it as a disparaging name for Baʻal, as it occurs with the article59. Since the formula of new allegiance60 appears here, as in other places referring to the baʻal (or bʻalîm) as the object of reverence, it is

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51 In form similar to names like לא דרכו in 2 Sam 17:27, Amos 6:13), לא צבור (Hosea 1:9, 2:25), לא רחמה (Hosea 1:6, 8). See Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and C.A. Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon, 520.
53 According to John A. Thompson, Jeremiah, 167, “in the secular treaties of the day a rebel vassal who ’went after’ some other ruler was understood to have renounced allegiance to his overlord. Indeed, the expression ’go after’ meant ’serve as a vassal’.” See footnote 28.
54 Note the close resemblance to הבילים לא אחר in Deuteronomy 32:21.
56 Robert Hayward, The Aramaic Bible, 49.
58 John A. Thompson, Jeremiah, 167.
59 Jack R. Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 259.
60 In form similar to names like לא אחר in Deuteronomy 32:21.
reasonably to assume הַהֶׁבֶל to be a substitute for הַבַעַל. In fact, Jeremiah 23:27 states that the fathers, אבות, forgot the Name of Yahweh “through (the) Ba‘al”, הבאλ – which logically identifies הַהֶ׆בֶל in 2:5 explicitly with הבאλ (in 23:27).

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

4 Jeremiah 3:21-25

In Jeremiah 3:24 הבשֶׁת occurs as the next definite noun that may form part of the name and shame arsenal against Ba‘al. According to Jeremiah 3:24 “The Shame” לחַבֶּשֶׁת, readily recognised as a name for Ba‘al, is devouring “the product of the labour of your fathers from our youth, their flocks and their cattle, together with (את) their sons and their daughters”. In verse 25a the same noun, הבשֶׁת, resumes with a pronominal suffix (first person plural), which likewise marks it as definite. Therefore it could be argued that if not naming the deity due to its definiteness, הבשֶׁת at least indicates the reality of הבשֶׁת, in other words Ba‘al. It could


62 Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 322; Jewish Study Bible, 929; Niv, Afr83.

63 Lundbom, Jeremiah 1-20, 322 mentions two interpretation possibilities: if the verse is taken from 5:17 it could mean that Ba‘al worship is punished by YHWH by an enemy that has now consumed the labour of many generations. Otherwise it could refer to both animal and child sacrifices, the latter practised by Ahaz and Manasseh, and after them flourishing in the Ben Hinnom Valley (7:31, 9:5). The second possibility is preferred, since no agents of YHWH’s wrath are involved, as in Jeremiah 5:17.


65 William L. Holladay, Jeremiah 1, 126.

then further be argued that כְָלָה in the next colon (‘and let our scandal cover us’) in its textual format is grammatically determined in the very same way as בָּשְתָּן and thus qualifies as another derogatory name for Ba‘al, functioning as a metaphor of overt adultery.

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

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

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

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

is complemented by the second colon

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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


72 William L. Holladay, Jeremiah 1, 124.

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

74 John A. Thompson, Jeremiah, 204.

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

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

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

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

V 22 (Yahweh): Return, o sons that are turning around; let me heal your turning-around.
(Israel): Here we are, we have come to you, for you are YHWH our God!

V 23 (Yahweh): No, to The Lie [you have come]!
[listen!]: From the hills [sounds] “The Loud Noise of the Mountains”\(^{78}\).
(Israel): No, in YHWH our God is the salvation of Israel.

V 24 However (we have to confess): The Shame has devoured the fruit (product) of our fathers, from our youth, their sheep and their cattle, their sons and their daughters.

V 25 (Therefore):

[surface level:] Let us lie down in our shame; let our scandal cover us.


\(^{78}\) See footnote 76.
Let us lie down in the company of Our Shame; let Our Scandal cover us.

Indeed against Yahweh our God we have sinned, we and our fathers, from our youth, until today; and we did not listen to the voice of Yahweh our God.

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

5 Jeremiah 5:30-31

Verse 30 reads as follows (MT):

A horror, an outrage happened in the land

79 Depending on whether these forms of definite nouns (without explicit article) should be identified as names for Ba’al. This argument must still be settled. The ambiguity might be intentional.
The prophets prophesy by The Lie, and the priests reject their consecration\(^{81}\) and my people love it that way. But what will you do when she\(^{82}\) comes to her end?\(^{83}\)

Our study has to focus on the event of הנביאים ניבאו ב병וג (line 2a above). This event with its sequel is identified as, and takes place within the setting of השם ושערורה נהייתה בארץ. The ultimate (added?) question at the end of the prophetic utterance, “What will you do לאחריתה?” (v 31), is linked to the introduction, in that it refers to a single feminine entity or person. Both השם and شهرора as well as the pronominal suffix of אחריתה are in the feminine forms. All of them seem to refer to the same entity. In the HB/OT the habitat, the land and cities, are feminine forms and metaphorically expressed in feminine persona. It seems evident that two metaphors are here at play, and that השם and شهرора, הארייתא, are describing a state of curse of both the people and land of ישראל.\(^{84}\) The effects of the curse have their origin in the wrongful actions of the prophets and priests.

Most translators render הנביאים ניבאו ב병וג in Jeremiah 5:31a as “the prophets prophesy falsely”\(^{85}\) or “… falsehood”\(^{86}\) or “... lies”\(^{87}\) or “... by a lie.”\(^{88}\) Some commentators believe to detect an allusion to Ba’al in ב병וג “by The Lie”\(^{89}\). The same sentiment is reflected in a cautious way by some translations, for example “Prophets give their messages in the name of a false god” (Cev). The notion that haššeqer refers to an idol, another deity contrary to יוהוה, is confirmed by a similar phrase earlier on: הנביאים ניבאו בסעול (Jeremiah 2:8c). In

\(^{81}\) Taking the second meaning of רדה = scrape, and following the argument of Holladay, Jeremiah I, 201.

\(^{82}\) Note the feminine singular formations ארייתא, שערורה, and השם, as imagery of the land as well as Israel in feminine terms. See Job Y. Jindo, Biblical Metaphor Reconsidered, 138. This imagery can hardly be represented in a translation. Translations like “But what will you do at the end?” (Niv), “But what will you do when the end comes?” (Rsv) are not reflecting the thrust of the hidden metaphors, of land and people.

\(^{83}\) Alternative translation: “What will you do to her posterity?” акחרית has both meanings, of which the positive outcome is attested in Jeremiah 29:11 (התקווה hope). See HALOT (p 31).

\(^{84}\) See Job Y. Jindo, Biblical Metaphor Reconsidered, 138.

\(^{85}\) So Robert P. Carroll, Jeremiah, 189; Peter C. Craigie et al, Jeremiah I-25, 94; Esv, Kjv.

\(^{86}\) John A. Thompson, Jeremiah, 247.

\(^{87}\) Niv.

\(^{88}\) William L. Holladay, Jeremiah I, 200.

\(^{89}\) Jack R. Lundbom, Jeremiah I-20, 410 with reference to Ehrlich 1912: 255, Rudolph, and Bright. According to Bright, Jeremiah, 41, followed by Holladay, Jeremiah I, 201 the phrase may either be rendered “prophesy falsely” or refer to Ba’al.
Jeremiah 5:30 (babba‘al) is simply replaced by baššeqer (baššeqer). Both nouns are in the definite form. The text gives no indications that two different deities are intended; to the contrary. It can therefore be concluded that in the lectio continua of the MT, הבשל is indeed הבשל – here most probably a derogatory name for the deity.

6 Jeremiah 11:9-13

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

7 Jeremiah 18:13-17

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

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

8 Conclusions

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

2. An observation on the sideline is that the texts under discussion also contain other references to Baʻal which could likewise be understood as derogatory names for the deity in the plural form הבשולים. These are ולא אלים in 2:8 (also 12:13), לא אלהים in 2:11 (also 5:7, 16:20), and probably אלהים אחרים in 1:16, 7:6, 97.

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

9 Suggested further studies in MT Jeremiah

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


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

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

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

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

**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

*Bible Translations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asv</td>
<td>American Standard Version 1901</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jps17</td>
<td>Jewish Publication Society, Tanakh Translation 1917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jps85</td>
<td>Jewish Publication Society, Tanakh Translation 1985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasb</td>
<td>New American Standard Bible 1971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nbv</td>
<td>De Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling 2004 (Dutch)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niv</td>
<td>New International Version 2011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Reference Works*

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

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


Seebass, Horst. “בּוֹשֶׁׁת bōsheth, בושָׁׁה būshāh, בושֶׁׁה m′bhûshim.” Pages 50-60 in volume 2 of *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Edited by G.


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