AOSIS

To destroy or not? A Cognitive Linguistics exploration of Yahweh's (un)willingness to destroy Israel in Deuteronomy

CrossMark
click for updates

Author:
Izaak J.L. Connoway[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Biblical Studies, South African Theological Seminary, Sandton, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Izaak Connoway,
izaak@sats.ac.za

Deuteronomy portrays Yahweh as both willing (e.g. Dt 28:63) and unwilling (Dt 4:31; 10:10) to destroy Israel, which creates one tension worthy of exploration. Of the three most prominent verbs of destruction, two [שׁמד and אבד] are constantly used in affirmative statements, and one [שׁחת] is continuously negated. However, these elude being divided into two levels of severity. Beyond that, in some verses (e.g. Dt 4:26) it appears that Israel is threatened with annihilation for idolatry after they cross the Jordan while their continued existence is also noted in the context, which creates another tension worthy of exploration. Secondary literature does not always seem aware of these tensions or the need to address them. This article sought to explore the tensions of Yahweh's willingness and unwillingness to destroy Israel and whether the annihilation of Israel is in view in these verses (e.g. Dt 4:6), as well as the role these verbs play in these matters. This study used a literary approach for secondary sources. A theory-driven data-informed method of analysis and Discourse Analysis, both emanating from Cognitive Linguistics (CL), were used to analyse the Hebrew text. The study found that when שׁמד and אבד are used for future judgement for idolatry once Israel crosses the Jordan (e.g. Dt 4:26), they never refer to the annihilation of Israel. Although the judgement described there does involve severe casualties, the focus is on being removed from Canaan rather than the nation being annihilated. In Deuteronomy 9, however, שׁמד does refer to annihilation since it is coordinated with verbs of annihilation, indicating Yahweh's intent to wipe Israel out at Horeb.

Contribution: This article grounds previously obtained semantic insight to address two mostly unidentified tensions in Deuteronomy and also explores the role that specific verbs play in addressing them. It also provides insight into divine judgement by destruction in the book of Deuteronomy.

Keywords: cognitive linguistics; Deuteronomy; שׁחת; אבד; שׁמד; discourse analysis; destruction; exegesis; judgement; Deuteronomy 4:26.

Introduction

Deuteronomy[1] has 24 verses with verbs of destruction, with Yahweh as the immediate or ultimate agent and Israel as the patient or experiencer. Of these, 21 verses contain affirmative statements, while three verses (Dt 4:31; 9:26;[2] 10:10) are negated, which forms one tension. The verbs שׁמד and אבד are used in 20 of these affirmative statements,[3] while שׁחת is used for the three negated statements. While a sensible preliminary assumption might have been that שׁחת is an extreme form of destruction, and the other two are milder, this does not quite work because of Deuteronomy 9, where שׁמד seems to have the same force as שׁחת. There is also the pragmatic question of whether any of these verses envision the annihilation of Israel. What further complicates matters is that in six verses (Dt 4:26; 28:45, 48, 51, 61, 63), all containing שׁמד, Yahweh clearly[4] seems to threaten the annihilation of Israel; but their continued existence appears in the context, which causes another tension. Secondary literature does not offer clear resolutions to these tensions or the role that these verbs play in them. This study is aimed at gaining insight into these matters.

1.This study is based on the final canonical form of Deuteronomy (BHS). Beyond that, the findings are largely based on chapter 9:1–10:11 and chapter 28, and while many consider these composite texts that contain later additions, others (for chapter 9 see Arnold 2022: 515–551; McConville 2002:183; Wright 2012:136; and for chapter 28 see Barrett 2010:162; Block 2012:651; Hillers 1964:32, Weinfeld 1972:126, 128) see them as units.

2.Deuteronomy 9:26 is a petition; it is thus in is in the *irrealis* mood, while the other two are in the *realis* mood (Noonan 2020:121).

3.1:27; 4:26; 6:15; 7:4; 8:19, 20; 9:8, 14, 19, 25; 11:17; 28:20, 22, 24, 45, 48, 51, 61, 63, 30:18.

4.One could argue for a few more, but these are the clear cases.

This study used a literary approach to evaluate secondary sources to synthesise insight provided by previous research. A theory-driven data-informed method[5] is used to analyse the text of the Hebrew Bible. The theory driving the study is Cognitive Linguistics (CL) and the data informing the study emanate from previous Frame Semantic[6] analyses of pertinent Hebrew verbs.[7] Using this form of analysis, the study seeks to ground semantic insight by applying it to the exegesis of the text and arrive at a fuller understanding of divine judgement by destruction in Deuteronomy. Discourse Analysis,[8] another CL methodology, was also used to analyse the Hebrew text.

This study starts with a literature review, using a sample text to survey the light secondary literature sheds on the tensions it perceives. Next is the delimitation, which narrows the focus to make the study practicable. A section on the lexical data comes next, which collates pertinent insight on the prominent verbs, שמד, אבד and שחת. A section on the textual data follows, which is the main section of the article. Two subsections discuss verses on future judgement and the Horeb narrative. The study concludes by reviewing what has been found and suggesting future research.

Literature review

Several of the 24 verses from Deuteronomy, which relate to Yahweh destroying Israel, indicate Israel's continued existence in the context. This is done by two means: some verses (Dt 9:8, 14, 19, 25, 26; 10:10; 32:26) are historical from the book's perspective; Israel's survival is thus understood. The other verses have a future focus (Dt 4:26; 28:45, 48, 51, 61, 63), indicating destruction for future idolatry. This literature review is limited to future-focused verses that indicate Israel's continued existence in the context.[9]

With these verses, few scholars (Barrett 2010; Tigay 1996) address the fact that שמד is used and that Israel's continued existence is indicated in the context. Major commentaries generally take one of three approaches: some (e.g. Weinfeld 1991) write as if there is no tension. This means they assume that שמד and/or אבד means Israel will be completely destroyed, and then go on to comment on their continued existence later on without addressing the tension. Others (e.g. Brueggemann 2001) overlook the issue. This means they address either that שמד or אבד refers to total destruction

without commenting on the continued existence, or Israel's continued existence without commenting on the presence of the verb. Still, other authors (e.g. Christensen 2001; 2002) go straight to some interpretation without addressing the data. Only Barrett (2010) and Tigay (1996)[10] address the tension directly.

Scholars also do not always treat the data consistently. Keil and Delitzsch (1865) have the most variety. They offer an interpretation in Deuteronomy 4:26 (Keil & Delitzsch 1865:313), speak past the issue in Deuteronomy 28:45 (Keil & Delitzsch 1865:442) and 28:51 (Keil & Delitzsch 1865:442), and see no tension in Deuteronomy 28:61 (Keil & Delitzsch 1865:444) and Deuteronomy 28:63 (Keil & Delitzsch 1865:444–445). Christensen (2001:96) offers an interpretation in 4:26, speaks past the issue in Deuteronomy 28:51 (Christensen 2002:659), and sees no tension in Deuteronomy 28:63 (Christensen 2002:701). Merrill (1994) also has some variety. He sees no tension in Deuteronomy 4:26 (Merrill 1994:126–127) and Deuteronomy 28:45 (Merrill 1994:359) and speaks right past the issue in Deuteronomy 28:48 (Merrill 1994:365) and Deuteronomy 28:64 (Merrill 1994:371). McConville (2002:109) also sees no tension in Deuteronomy 4:26 and speaks right past the issue in Deuteronomy 28:48 and 51 (McConville 2002:407). Block (2012:132–133) sees no tension in Deuteronomy 4:26 and goes straight for an interpretation in Deuteronomy 28:63 (Block 2012:660).

It is appropriate to take a closer look at the way these three approaches are taken. Deuteronomy 4:26 is used to give a sample of this. Four factors make it an appropriate sample verse: (1) all three approaches are represented in how scholars approach it; (2) it contains שמד and אבד, which are the two most pertinent verbs for the judgement Israel would face for unfaithfulness; (3) its context refers to the continued existence of Israel; and (4) there are contextual and verbal connections between parts of Deuteronomy 4 and 28 (Braulik 1978:59); and Deuteronomy 28 is an exposition of 4:26–28 (Block 2012:134), which is appropriate, considering the other verses that indicate Israel's continued existence appear there. In Deuteronomy 4:26, Moses calls heaven and earth as witnesses against Israel that 'you will soon utterly perish [אבד תאבדון] from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to occupy; you will not live long on it but will be utterly destroyed [השמד תשמדון]' (NRSV). Their continued existence is discussed in Deuteronomy 4:27–31.

Weinfeld (1991:207) notes that what is being threatened is their eradication and perishing 'from the land'. He says this refers to the exile and the context already foresees redemption. However, he also states that not only the election but the 'very existence' of Israel is threatened (Weinfeld 1991:215). Commenting on perishing 'from upon' the land, Robson (2016:156) avers that death means losing the land. However, Robson (2016:155) also says that the 'two paronomastic infinitive constructions … emphasised the certain and total destruction' of Israel.

---

5. Adapted from Haardörfer (2019:537).

6. Frame Semantics (FS) holds that different concepts in a language are connected in such a way that to understand one you must understand all of them (Fillmore 2006:373). If you hear the word 'buyer' you know there is a seller and a product (Fillmore 1976:25). Cognitive Linguistics (CL) generally has an encyclopaedic approach to meaning (Langacker 2008:39), and so does FS. Since the meaning of a word is determined by the context in which it is experienced (Fillmore 1976:24) encyclopaedic knowledge can be gathered to understand words' meaning by inspecting the context in which they occur (Fillmore 2006:386).

7. Connoway and Malherbe (2023); Connoway (2024).

8. Although the operation of Discourse Analysis is not explicitly displayed in the article, it contains the fruit of it.

9. While verses with a historical perspective merit attention and are treated below, the destruction or non-destruction senses are a bit clearer with them; they are thus left out of the literature review.

10. Tigay (1996:52) only does this at 4:26.

Merrill (1994:127) seems aware of the dissonance here, noting that תאבדון מעל הארץ could refer to perishing away from the land as in perishing by deportation, which would agree with 4:27. However, he also notes that 'they would quickly and with utmost certainty perish', and 'the verb שָׁמַד, however, speaks of such violent and irreversible annihilation that it seems difficult to view it as an uprooting into exile'. Three of the consequences that Block (2012:132–133) lists for idolatry are, firstly, certain and quick removal from the land; secondly, that 'they will be utterly destroyed'; and lastly, they will be scattered among the nations, but he shows no need to address this tension. Lundbom (2013:256, 257) similarly notes that they will 'perish quickly on the land' and will 'be completely destroyed', but continues with 'yes, there will be some survivors, but their number will be small'.

Arnold (2022:268) says the two infinitive absolute and finite verbs stress 'the thoroughness of the devastation', and that they would 'certainly perish' [אבד תאבדון] and 'definitely be destroyed' [השמד תשמדון]. However, he continues that if this was not 'clear enough' Israel is also told they 'will not live long in the promised land', which would perhaps not be relevant if Israel is destroyed. McConville (2002:109) opts for the translations, 'certainly perish' and 'be totally destroyed', but proceeds to state that this extreme form of the curse is removal from the land.

When commenting on 4:26, two scholars speak right past the issue. Brueggemann (2001:56) says this refers to the loss of the land and deportation, and Wright (2012:53) notes that they will be scattered among the nations, but they do not address the meaning of שמד in this verse. A few scholars offer interpretations without addressing the tension, especially the meaning of שמד. Nelson (2001:68) says idolatry would lead to national destruction. Keil and Delitzsch (1865:313) say the warning is that 'they should be quickly destroyed out of the land'. Weinfeld (1991:133) notes that the idea here is banishment from the land. Christensen (2001:96) notes both parts as if there is no tension, but then offers the interpretation that for this 'nascent national entity', the 'greatest danger was the loss of unity among the tribes'. This could be taken to indirectly address the tension, but it could also be taken as going straight to an interpretation. As noted earlier, Block (2012:132–133) does not address the tension but supports the idea that the ultimate meaning is that the tripartite relationship (Yahweh, Israel, land) will disintegrate.

Two scholars address the tension in Deuteronomy 4:26. Tigay (1996:52) realises that there is tension in the text and suggests that the שמד and אבד are used in a hyperbolic manner. Barrett (2010:96 [*author's own emphasis*]) notes that 'they will quickly and utterly perish *through removal* from the land (v. 26) and be exiled'. However, Barrett (2010:97) addresses the tension directly when stating that the use of שמד and אבד 'even in the emphatic form, does not mean utter annihilation' but rather corporate destruction (Barrett 2010:100), or 'the destruction of the nation' (on 28:63; Barrett

2010:176). For the verses from Deuteronomy 28, scholars mostly speak past the issue,[11] but some also see no tension[12], and a few go straight for an interpretation.[13]

It should be acknowledged that these sources are commentaries and thus have a general focus and are not limited to data on the destruction of Israel in Deuteronomy specifically. Only Barrett (2010:96–97, 172, 176) is a sustained study on destruction for disobedience in Deuteronomy. However, this literature review has hopefully illustrated that there is tension in the text and that it may not have been sufficiently addressed in scholarly literature thus far.

Delimitation

The 24 verses in Deuteronomy that contain the idea of Yahweh destroying Israel (or not) as an immediate or ultimate agent, use the verbs שמד, שחת, אבד, מחה [blot out] (9:14), פאה [wipe out] (32:26), and שבת [blot out] (32:6). The two verbs from 32:26 are rare and the verse is poetic, so it was left out of the study. While מחה only occurs once, it falls within 9:1–10:11, which is an important section; it was thus included. Deuteronomy 1:27 שמד was removed because it contains a false accusation against Yahweh.[14] The remaining 22 verses are treated in the textual data section. This study is informed by Frame Semantic analyses previously done on שחת (Connoway & Malherbe 2023) and שמד (Connoway 2024), but similar research has not yet been conducted on אבד. As such, the study relies on secondary literature for אבד, and it plays a less central role in the argumentation.

Lexical data

The three most pertinent verbs used for Yahweh meting out judgement on Israel (or not) for unfaithfulness, are שמד, אבד, and שחת. Below a few short pieces of relevant information are provided on each verb.

שמד

Hall (1998:151) notes that שמד is a theologically significant word since four-fifths have Yahweh as the immediate or ultimate agent. With the execution of the ban, when an evildoer is annihilated, Yahweh is often the agent of שמד (Vetter 1997:1367). Many times, שמד indicates the outcome of other verbs (Lohfink 2004:180). It also has an abstract sense, in which case 'remove' is the idea (Lohfink 2004:179), and seems to refer to dispossession or banishment (Lohfink 2004:184, 190–191). In a Frame Semantic analysis of שמד previously done (Connoway 2024:3–4), it was found that שמד has three senses and that the primary sense is 'decimation', which is defined as 'to inflict severe casualties on humans to

11. For 28:48, Biddle (2003:419), Keil and Delitzsch (1865:442), McCarthy (1963:407), and Merrill (1994:365). For 28:51, Christensen (2002:659), Keil and Delitzsch (1865:442), McCarthy (1963:407). For 28:61, Driver (1896:317). For 28:63, Biddle (2003:425), Brueggemann (2001:258), and Merrill (1994:371).

12. For 28:61, Keil and Delitzsch (1865:444). For 28:63, Christensen (2002:701), Craigie (1976 – 28:63), and Keil and Delitzsch (1865:444–445).

13. For 28:63, Block (2012:660) and Von Rad (1966:176).

14. For a discussion of 1:27, which finds that it was losing a battle rather than being annihilated that the Israelites feared, see Connoway (2024:6–7).

remove them from a location' (Connoway 2024:3).[15] The sense of 'annihilation'[16] is secondary and requires additional verbs or prepositions to clarify that the fatality is all-encompassing (Connoway 2024:4). Connoway (2024:2) suggests that in contexts where שׁמד is done to a group and some are left (e.g. Dt 4:26; 28:20, 24, 45, 51, 61), the abstract sense that Lohfink (2004:179) refers to, applies.

שׁחת

According to Conrad (2004:584), שׁחת signifies 'an act of ruthlessness destruction subjecting the object to complete annihilation'. It describes such fatal damage that there is no hope of recovery for the object, whether animate or inanimate (Connoway & Malherbe 2023:18). Because of the overall devastation it describes, it is an apt word for divine judgement (Van Dam 1997a:92). When God is the agent of שׁחת and it is used for judgement, it refers to killing humans, and if the patient is a group, the whole group is killed (Connoway & Malherbe 2023:8). It has a strong moral implication, as it is used for corrupt deeds (Harland 1996:29); thus, if God brings such ruin on humanity, they deserve it since they caused it (Harland 1996:30). When it is negated with Israel as the patient, Yahweh does not make an end to Israel because he is committed to their preservation, even though he 'could or ought to destroy' them (Conrad 2004:591).

אבד

In the Qal, אבד is taken to mean 'destroyed' in the sense of 'to be lost', or 'be snatched away' (Jenni 1997:13) because its basic meaning is 'to wander off' and if an animal wanders off, it is lost to its owner (Otzen 2004:19). With אבד, when the patient comes under divine willed destruction (Otzen 2004:22), the destruction is devastating. Still, Yahweh does not put an end to his people (Van Dam 1997b:223). To perish from a place, can mean to be driven from it (Otzen 2004:22; Weinfeld 1991:448). If we take it as a stative verb (Van der Merwe, Naudé & Kroeze 1997:§16.2.2), since it describes a condition, it might be said to refer to becoming absent from somewhere. This study provisionally suggests that אבד focuses on where something is not, or is no longer, rather than whether it still exists.

Textual data

The 22 verses of this study fall into two categories: The first group of verses contains predictions of future judgement for unfaithfulness to Yahweh, which has 16 verses.[17] The second group appears with the golden calf incident at Horeb, which

has six verses. This study found that at Horeb, God was intent on wiping out the whole nation, except for Moses. It also found that none of the future judgement passages have the annihilation of Israel in view. Below some arguments are presented in favour of these propositions.

Future judgement

The future judgement verses contain the verbs שׁמד and אבד. The lexical data section showed that both verbs have an element of the patient or experiencer being absent or removed from a location, but that annihilation is not necessarily the idea. These verses contain two elements that indicate that Israel's annihilation is not in view. The one element is that references to Israel being removed from the promised land are contained in the same verse (Dt 4:26; 6:15; 8:20; 11:17; 28:63; 30:18) or a nearby verse (Dt 7:4; 8:19; 28:20, 22, 24, 51, 61). The other element is that Israel's continued existence is referred to in the context (Dt 4:26; 28:45, 48, 51, 61, 63). To illustrate that the annihilation of Israel is not in view, some verses with these two elements are discussed below.

Israel's continued existence

Regarding the verses where Israel's continued existence is seen, all except for 4:26[18] fall in chapter 28. Chapter 28:45 says, 'All these curses'[19] would come upon, pursue, and overtake them 'until you are destroyed' [עד השמדך], but 28:46 adds that the curses would be a sign and a wonder forever [עד־עולם]. These calamities would be 'indelibly engraved in their memories', forever bearing witness against them (Merrill 1994:364). Their continued existence is implied by this. The idea is 'a devastated existence rather than utter annihilation' (Barrett 2010:172). On a related note, 28:61 says that Yahweh will also bring upon [עלה] them all kinds of illness and plagues not recorded in the book 'until you are destroyed' [עד השמדך]. However, while 'Israel would be almost annihilated' (Keil & Delitzsch 1865:444), 28:62 continues, noting that only a few of them would be left. This is an inversion of the Deuteronomic promise of multiplication (McConville 2002:408).

Turning to verses with siege warfare as a focus, Deuteronomy 28:48 notes that they would serve [עבד] the enemies Yahweh sent and do so under terrible circumstances. Yahweh would put a yoke of iron on their necks until he destroyed [עד השמידו] them. However, 28:46 describes their enduring existence.[20] The main thing a suzerain wanted was עבד, but since they would not give it to Yahweh, they would have to give it to their enemies 'until they were utterly decimated' (Merrill 1994:365). This refers to siege warfare (Barrett 2010:172) which would involve conquest in utter lack, as their fortunes are reversed (Tigay 1996:268). Deuteronomy 28:51 says their enemies would eat their flocks and produce 'until you are destroyed' [עד השמדך] and 'until he causes you to perish'

[עד האבידו]. However, the following verses indicate life during siege warfare, which was well-known in the ancient Near East (Nelson 2002:332). Such an invasion would follow a scorched-earth policy in which all of Israel's produce would be consumed (Merrill 1994:367), devastating Israel's economy (Tigay 1996:269) and making life in the land unviable. The loss of access to the fruit of the ground and the livestock is a reversal of two covenant blessings (Barrett 2010:173). The deity-nation-land covenantal triangle would collapse (Block 2012:661). The descriptions of the siege in this passage are reminiscent of the conditions during the deportation of the Judeans and the destruction of Jerusalem (Biddle 2003:419).

All these verses contain some form of עד–שמד [until and destroy] but also have references to Israel's continued existence in the context, which is odd. However, Connoway (2024:4–5) found that the primary sense of שמד is 'to inflict severe casualties on humans to remove them from a location' and that שמד could indicate the outcome of another verb (Connoway 2024:6). In light of this finding, and that removal from Canaan appears as punishment for idolatry throughout Deuteronomy, it seems that the afflictions and siege warfare were to be unleashed until Israel was removed from the land. This was the aim of the verbs that precede עד–שמד in these verses.

Israel's removal from the land

The study now turns to verses that show Israel being removed from the land.[21] Most of these verses use אבד [perish]. Otzen (2004:22) says that perishing from the land means that God drives Israel from the land. Deuteronomy 11:17 says if Israel goes after other gods, Yahweh will get angry and shut up the heaven so that the ground does not yield its produce and then they will perish quickly from upon the good land [הארץ הטבה] he gave them. Rather than annihilation, the idea here is banishment from the land (Weinfeld 1972:133) when the 'harmonious symbiotic relationship' between Yahweh, Israel, and the land ends (Block 2012:289). Weinfeld (1991:448) links this use of אבד with the wandering sense in 26:5.[22] This verse has futility in mind, as under the curse of God Israel will no longer be economically viable (Brueggemann 2001:138). It would thus not be possible to remain in the land (Merrill 1994:210).

Deuteronomy 8:20 does not have a reference to land. However, it warns that unfaithfulness to Yahweh will result in them perishing [תאבדון] from the land just like the nations that Yahweh made to perish [מאביד] 'from before you' [מפניכם]. This is taken as a reference to removal from the land. They will receive the same treatment as the Canaanites (Driver 1986:110), but the question is what this means. Some (Biddle 2003:153; Brueggeman 2001:110; Merrill 1994:188) say this refers to the annihilation of Israel, but this study holds the understanding that it refers to Israel's eviction from the land. If Israel was unfaithful to God, there would be 'disastrous consequences' (McConville 2002:204). Like the nations, 'they

would die or be ejected from the promised land' (Craigie 1976: Dt 8:19–20) when they are dispossessed (Wright 2012:129) and finally lose the land (McConville 2002:204). In a similarly indirect reference to removal from the land (Dt 30:18), Moses declares to Israel that if they go after other gods 'you will certainly perish; you will not lengthen your days upon the land'. They will have a shortened life in the land (Block 2012:710) when they are evicted (Merrill 1994:392) and are so precluded from partaking of the ancient promise of God (Craigie 1976; Dt 30:18).

Deuteronomy 28:63 contains both the elements of continued existence and removal from the land. As a climax of one pericope[23] of various afflictions they would suffer for disobedience, Moses declares that as God took delight [שׂושׂ] in doing good to them and multiplying them, He is also determined [שׂושׂ][24] 'to make you perish [אבד] and to destroy [שמד] you'. However, he continues, noting that they will be plucked [נסח] from the land and scattered [פוץ] (Dt 28:64) among the people so that those who have not succumbed, will be scattered (Keil & Delitzsch 1865:445). Instead of increasing they are reduced (Merrill 1994:371). Instead of enjoying the land they are deported (Barrett 2010:174–175). They had their start in Deuteronomy 26:5 as a wandering [אבד] Aramean, and there will then be a reversal (Christensen 2002:701) so that the number of people will shrink again (Craigie 1976; Dt 28:63) and have to wander into exile (deported) (Weinfeld 1991:448). With the loss of the land, they lose their reason for being Israel (Brueggemann 2001:258). This is 'a divine liquidation of the whole history of Salvation' (Von Rad 1966:176). The focus is on 'being separated from the security and prosperity of the land', so 'the destruction of the nation' is being threatened (Barrett 2010:176). Therefore, the annihilation of the ethnic group is not in view.

Only one verse (Dt 6:15) that expresses the element of removal from the land, contains שמד and it merits discussion. Israel is warned against idolatry and is told: 'For Yahweh your God is a jealous God in your midst' and if they make him angry, 'then[25] He will destroy [והשמידך] you from off the face of the earth or land [אדמה]'. Most bible translations (NLT, ASV, KJV, CSB, ASV, NASB, LSB, Douay-Rheims, NRSV, LEB) opt for 'earth', while a minority (NIV, NET, ISV) go for 'land'. While 'earth' might seem like a reasonable translation of אדמה, it is not helpful for modern readers since its use would necessitate that annihilation is the idea. This is argued because it is preceded by 'destroy from'. Modern English readers would probably assume 'land' refers to 'a portion of the earth's solid surface distinguishable by boundaries or ownership' (Mish 2020c:699). However, 'earth' would likely be taken to mean 'the planet on which we live that is third in order from the sun' (Mish 2020b:391).

---

21. For reasons stated in footnote 18, 4:26 is left out here.

22. 'My father was a wandering Aramean'.

23. McConville (2002:407–408) groups 28:58–63 together.

24. The second use of שׂושׂ should not be taken literally, but rhetorically (Wright 2012:283). It relates to volition (Christensen 2002:171), indicating Yahweh's determination (Nelson 2002:333).

25. The ו is interpreted as indicating the result (Van der Merwe et al. 2017:§40.23.4.2).

Some scholars (Block 2012:193; Lundbom 2013:322; Nelson 2002:93; Weinfeld 1972:133; 1991:346) also support the idea of removal from the face of the earth. Weinfeld's (1991:346) examples (1 Ki 13:34; Am 9:8) might not be valid as support for Deuteronomy 6:15. In 1 Kings 13:34 idolatry resulted in the house of Jeroboam being made to disappear [כחד] and being destroyed [שמד] 'from upon the face of the land' [מעל פני האדמה]. Under the right circumstances, שמד can indicate annihilation (see Connoway 2024:5), and in 1 Kings 13:34, the addition of כחד [disappear] with בית ירבעם [house of Jeroboam] as patient, indicates the whole group was eliminated. However, it is a limited group, unlike Deuteronomy 6:15. Weinfeld also references Amos 9:8[26] (supposedly the first of three uses). However, 'I will destroy [שמד] the sinful kingdom from upon the face of the ground', should be taken as exile rather than a threat to annihilate Israel. This understanding is based on the negated second (Inf. Abs.) and third (Impf.) uses of שמד, which make up an extreme mode (Van der Merwe, Naudé & Kroeze 2017:§20.2.2.2), denying that Yahweh will make a final end to Israel.

Block (2012:193) supplies several verses as evidence of his interpretation: 'off the face of the earth'. However, except for Deuteronomy 7:4 and 11:17, all the examples given, take the land (Dt 29:22, 23, 26, 27; Dt 32:22) or a part of a group (Nm 11:1–3; Dt 29:19, 20; 31:17[27]) as patient or experiencer. Deuteronomy 11:17 is discussed above. On Deuteronomy 7:2-4, Block (2012:205) himself notes elsewhere that the destruction described here (both חרם and שמד) cannot be understood as the extermination of the population. He says this since Deuteronomy 'foresees an Israelite remnant surviving the judgement of exile' (Block 2012:205). This accords well with this study's finding that the threat of Deuteronomy 7:4 is decimation aimed at the removal from Canaan.

A few scholars (Arnold 2022:415; Biddle 2003:129; Merrill 1994:171; Weinfeld 1991:448)[28] also take אדמה as 'land'. According to Schmid (1997:44) אדמה 'generally represents the land on which one stands'. Deuteronomy 6:10–15 form a pericope (McConville 2002:142–143), and in 6:10 Moses refers to a time Yahweh brings them [והיה כי יביאך] to the promised land [ארץ]. It might make sense then to take והשמידך מעל פני האדמה (Dt 6:15) as referring to being removed from the land they will be in at that time. Schmid (1997:44) also notes that when used theologically, no clear distinction can be made between אדמה and ארץ.

The Horeb narrative

Next, the study turns to the Horeb narrative. In the context of the Horeb narrative שמד does refer to annihilation the four times it occurs (Dt 9:8, 14, 19, 25). In light of the extent to which

this article has argued that שמד does not refer to annihilation, the reader might find this curious. However, while its primary sense is not annihilation it can refer to annihilation when the context indicates that all-encompassing fatality is in view (Connoway 2024:5). Two elements in the context indicate that annihilation is the sense. The first one appears in Deuteronomy 9:14, where Yahweh tells Moses, 'Leave me alone [הרף] that I may[29] destroy them [ואשמידם] and blot out [ואמחה] their name from under the heavens.' It is annihilation because שמד is coordinated to מחה [blot out], which is qualified by 'from under the heavens', which could sensibly be taken as an all-encompassing reference. The second element is the use of שחת, both in Moses's prayer (Dt 9:26) and when he says Yahweh decided to show mercy (Dt 10:10) since when this verb is used with a group as a patient, all are killed (Connoway & Malherbe 2023:8). Lohfink (2004:192) also finds this occurrence of שמד unique in that it is used for the eradication of the whole nation. The golden calf incident was the most outrageous sin Israel ever committed because Yahweh had just appeared to them (Tigay 1996:98); thus, Yahweh was ready to perform 'the utter erasure of Israel from memory' (Barrett 2010:72). Israel was not to be arrogant about the Canaanites being displaced (Dt 9:4–6) because Israel had committed this horrible sin and deserved to be wiped out (Wright 2012:135).

Some scholars (Nelson 2002:124; Robson 2016:294; Tigay 1996:100) note that at Horeb Israel almost suffered the same fate they were about to inflict on the Canaanites. However, this comparison might not do justice to the details; therefore, a quick excurses on this might be in order. As noted, the golden calf incident was the most outrageous sin Israel ever committed (Tigay 1996:98). This study proposes that based on the meaning of these verbs and a careful reading of Deuteronomy 7, what Israel was about to do to the Canaanites cannot be compared with what Yahweh was intent on doing to them at Horeb.[30] The scholars mentioned above probably base their argument on Deuteronomy 7:24, as this is the only verse in Deuteronomy that fits this description. It says: '… and you will destroy [והאבדת] their name from under heaven'. However, some details need to be noted here. This verse plus the occurrence of החרם תחרים [you will surely put to the ban] in Deuteronomy 7:2[31] seem to be the strongest points in favour of wiping out the Canaanites being the sense. However, Block (2012:205) says that some have argued that the חֵרֶם ordinance here does not refer to wiping out all the Canaanites[32] since it is followed by a command not to make a covenant or intermarry

---

26.'Behold, the eyes of Yahweh the Lord are on the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy (והשמדתי) it from the face of the land (האדמה), but I will not totally destroy (השמיד אשמיד) the house of Jacob, declares Yahweh.'

27.It is sensible to translate והיה לאכל in Deuteronomy 31:17 as 'they shall become as prey' (LEB) rather than 'they will be devoured' (ESV).

28.While Weinfeld (1991:448) goes for 'earth' on p. 346 and opts for annihilation, he interprets Deuteronomy 6:15 as going into exile; his interpretation is therefore not interpretation is not consistent.

29.The ו is interpreted as indicating purpose (Van der Merwe et al. 2017:§40.23.4.2).

30.As noted earlier (§5.1.2), the Israelites might suffer the same fate as the Canaanites as future judgement for idolatry in the form of being driven out of Canaan, but that cannot be compared with Deuteronomy 9:14.

31.'When [based on כי in 7:1] Yahweh your God hands them over to you and you defeat (נכה) them, you will certainly put them to the bad (החרם תחרים); do not make a covenant with them.'

32.Some even doubt that the חֵרֶם ordinance should be understood literally in general, considering it was only applied strictly in about four places in Joshua–Judges (Block 2012:205). This agrees with De Prenter's (n.d.:6) detailed Cognitive Linguistic analysis of חרם, where she found it is a polysemous taboo concept and that both its denotations (defilement and holiness [p. 7]) 'share the general sense of "separation" and "irredeemability"' (p. 15). The instruction to destroy their cultic objects (7:5, 25) and abstain from and abhor anything to do with their cult (7:25–26) might also support this idea.

with them, which would not be possible if they were all dead. Beyond that, Deuteronomy 7:24 says, 'and he will give their kings into your hand, and you will make their name perish [האבד] from under the heavens'. The patient of אבד in Deuteronomy 7:24 is only the name of the kings. Moses also said Yahweh would clear out [נשל] their adversaries (Taylor 1998:189) little by little (Dt 7:22), and these would not be able to resist them in battle (יצב; Martens 1998:500) until they have destroyed [שמד] them (Dt 7:24). From this data, hostility is evident, and much death seems likely, but annihilation is not that clear; therefore, comparing it to Deuteronomy 9:14 might not be justified.

To end with, the focus should be given to God's threat (Dt 9:14), Moses's intercession (Dt 9:26), and God abandoning his plan to annihilate Israel (Dt 10:10). It should first be noted that Israel clearly deserved to be destroyed (Tigay 1996:100), 'since Moses offers no counterargument on this point' (Barrett 2010:70). However, while announcing judgement, Yahweh invites Moses to intercede (Moberly 1983:50) by making Moses aware of his prophetic duty (Nelson 2002:124). While God's wrath is legitimate (Brueggemann 2001:117) and it does not diminish Israel's offence (Moberly 1983:50), Yahweh shows that he is vulnerable to human appeal (Nelson 2002:124). This almost creates the impression that he needs Moses's permission to destroy Israel (Balentine 1993:136), but Moses understood this as an invitation to intercede (Craigie 1976 see Dt 9:14).

Barrett (2010:66) finds Yahweh's use of שמד instead of שחת in Deuteronomy 9:14 interesting and thinks that שמד might better capture the idea, as שחת would be too strong since 4:31 says Yahweh would not do שחת to Israel. However, this article argues that it makes sense to take Moses's use of שחת in Deuteronomy 9:26 as strategic, also because of Deuteronomy 4:31. In that verse Yahweh said he would not abandon or destroy [שחת] the people or forget his covenant with the fathers; and now Moses tosses the ball back to him (Block 2012:260). Moses suggests that the proposed punishment might be 'more than God really intended' (Arnold 2022:535). He also reminds God of the covenant with the fathers (Mayes 1979:195). However, justified annihilating Israel might be (Arnold 2022:536), Moses reminds God that proceeding with the plan would mean: (1) repudiating his covenant relationship with Israel; (2) going back on his word to the patriarchs; and (3) risking his name being dishonoured among the nations (Wright 2012:138). This section[33] ends, noting that 'Yahweh was not willing [לא-אבה] to annihilate (שחת) you (Dt 10:10)'. Meier (1998:121) says that when אבה [34] is negated, it means an individual refuses to cooperate within certain constraints. Because of Yahweh's commitment to Israel, the patriarchs, and his honour, he was not willing to annihilate them. But their survival depended on God's character (Moberly 1983:93).

....
33. Deuteronomy 9:1–10:11.

34. The verb אָבָה is discussed with נָעַם in the NIDOTTE. Therefore, it appears under this title in the References.

Conclusion

Two tensions were identified in this study. Firstly, Deuteronomy portrays Yahweh as both willing (e.g. Dt 28:63) and unwilling (e.g. Dt 4:31) to destroy Israel. Secondly, sometimes annihilation seems to be threatened while Israel's continued existence is referenced in the context (e.g. Dt 4:26). The role that the three major verbs of destruction [שמד, אבד, and שחת] play in these tensions was not apparent. Secondary literature also did not seem to have clear answers on this and sometimes seemed unaware of these tensions. This study offers provisional solutions to these tensions and insight into the role these verbs play.

The study found that the verses where Yahweh is willing to destroy Israel contain שמד and/or אבד, that these all relate to future judgement for idolatry once they enter Canaan, and none of them have the annihilation of Israel in view. This is argued since all these verses contain either a reference to Israel's continued existence in the context or a reference to them being removed from the Promised Land. While severe casualties would be inflicted, the removal of Israel from Canaan, rather than their annihilation, seems to be what is meant by destruction in these verses. The study also found that all the verses where Yahweh is shown to be unwilling to destroy Israel (Dt 4:31; 10:10) contain שחת, that these have the annihilation of Israel in view, and that the occurrences of שמד in Deuteronomy 9 refer to the annihilation of Israel. This is based on these uses of שמד being coordinated with מחה (Dt 9:14) as well as the two times שחת is used (Dt 9:26; 10:10) during the Horeb narrative. Yahweh was intent on annihilating Israel at Horeb but did not carry this plan out after Moses interceded. However, Deuteronomy shows that Yahweh was willing to decimate Israel in the process of removing them from the Promised Land. The verb שחת necessarily involves annihilation while שמד usually does not involve annihilation, although it can have that sense under the right circumstances.

It is appropriate to make some suggestions for future research. The Cognitive Linguistic insights gained from the Frame Semantic analyses of שמד and שחת provided insight for the exegesis of these verses. A similar study on אבד could also be done to provide more insight into the conceptualisation of destruction in the Hebrew Bible. On a related note, much work has been done comparing the structure and content of Ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties with Deuteronomy. However, a comparison of the vocabulary used for destruction for covenant unfaithfulness in these two might also provide greater insight into the conceptualisation of destruction in the ancient Near East.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contribution

I.J.L.C. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by the author.

Funding information

Data availability

Queries related to the data on which the findings are based may be directed to the author, I.J.L.C., who might respond within reason.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

References

Arnold, B.T., 2022, *The book of Deuteronomy, chapters 1–11*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Balentine, S., 1993, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The drama of divine-human dialogue*, Overtures to Biblical Theology, Fortress Press, Augsburg, MN.

Barrett, R., 2010, *Disloyalty and destruction: Religion and politics in Deuteronomy and the modern world*, The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 511, Clark, New York, NY.

Biddle, M.E., 2003, *Deuteronomy*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Macon, GA.

Block, D.I., 2012, *The NIV application commentary: Deuteronomy*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.

Braulik, G., 1978, *Die Mittel Deuteronomischer Rhetorik: Erhoben Aus Deuteronomium 4, 1–40*, Analecta Biblica 68, Biblical Institute Press, Rome.

Brueggemann, W., 2001, *Deuteronomy*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN.

Christensen, D.L., 2001, *Deuteronomy 1:1–21:9*, vol. 6a, Word Biblical Commentary, Nelson, Nashville, TN.

Christensen, D.L., 2002, *Deuteronomy 21:10–34:12*, vol. 6b, Word Biblical Commentary, Nelson, Nashville, TN.

Connoway, I.J.L., 2024, 'Hostility towards removal: A frame-semantic analysis of שׁמד in the Hebrew Bible', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.3167

Connoway, I.J.L. & Malherbe, J., 2023, 'Making sense of destruction: A frame-semantic analysis of šḥt in the Hebrew Bible', *Journal for Semitics* 32(2), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.25159/2663-6573/15345

Conrad, J., 2004, 'שָׁחַת', in G. Johannes Botterweck, H. Ringgren & H.-J. Fabry (eds.), *Theological dictionary of the Old Testament*, transl. D.E. Green & D.W. Stott, vol. 14, pp. 583–595, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Craigie, P.C., 1976, *The book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

De Prenter, J., n.d., *The contrastive polysemous meaning of Ḥērem in the book of Joshua: A cognitive linguistic approach*, viewed 21 August 2024, from https://www.academia.edu/27439053/THE_CONTRASTIVE_POLYSEMOUS_MEANING_OF_%E1%B8%A4%C4%92REM_IN_THE_BOOK_OF_JOSHUA_A_COGNITIVE_LINGUISTIC_APPROACH.

Driver, S.R., 1896, *A critical and exegetical commentary on Deuteronomy*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, 2nd edn., Clark, Edinburgh.

Fillmore, C.J., 1976, 'Frame semantics and the nature of language', *Annals of the New York Academy of Science* 281(1), 20–32. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.1976.tb25467.x

Fillmore, C.J., 2006, 'Frame semantics', in D. Geeraerts (ed.), *Cognitive linguistics: Basic readings*, pp. 373–400, Mouton, Berlin.

Haardörfer, R., 2019, 'Taking quantitative data analysis out of the positivist era: Calling for theory-driven data-informed analysis', *Health Education & Behavior* 46(4), 537–540. https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198119853536

Hall, G.H., 1998, 'שָׁמַד', in W.A. Van Gemeren (ed.), *New international dictionary of Old Testament theology and exegesis*, vol. 4, pp. 151–152, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.

Harland, P.J., 1996, *The value of human life: A study of the story of the flood (Gen 6–9)*, Brill, Leiden.

Hillers, D.R., 1964, *Treaty-curses and the Old Testament Prophets*, Biblica et Orientalia 16, Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome.

Jenni, E., 1997, 'אבד', in E. Jenni & C. Westermann (eds.), *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, pp. 13–15, Hendrickson, Peabody, MA.

Keil, C.F. & Delitzsch, F., 1865, *The Pentateuch*, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 3, Clark, Edinburgh.

Langacker, R.W., 2008, *Cognitive grammar: A basic introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Lohfink, N., 2004, 'שׁמד', in G.J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren & H.J. Fabry (eds.), *Theological dictionary of the Old Testament*, transl. D.E. Green & D.W. Stott, vol. 15, pp. 177–198, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Lundbom, J.R., 2013, *Deuteronomy: A commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Martens, E.A., 1998, 'יָצַב', in W.A. Van Gemeren (ed.), *New international dictionary of Old Testament theology and exegesis*, vol. 2, p. 500, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.

Mayes, A.D.H., 1979, *Deuteronomy*, New Century Bible, Oliphants, London.

McCarthy, D.J., 1963, *Treaty and covenant: A study in form in the ancient oriental documents and the Old Testament*, Analecta Biblica 21, 1st edn., Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome.

McConville, J.G., 2002, *Deuteronomy*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary, Apollos, Leicester.

Meier, S.A., 1998, 'נָעַם', in W.A. VanGemeren (ed.), *New international dictionary of Old Testament theology and exegesis*, vol. 3, pp. 121–123, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.

Merrill, E.H., 1994, *Deuteronomy: An exegetical and theological exposition of the holy scriptures*, New American Commentary, B&H Publishing, Nashville, TN.

Mish, F.C. (ed.), 2020a, 'Decimate', in *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*, 11th edn., p. 322, Merriam-Webster, Springfield, MO.

Mish, F.C. (ed.), 2020b, 'Earth', in *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*, 11th edn., p. 391, Merriam-Webster, Springfield, MO.

Mish, F.C. (ed.), 2020c, 'Land', in *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*, 11th edn., p. 699, Merriam-Webster, Springfield, MO.

Moberly, R.W.L., 1983, *At the mountain of God: Story and theology in Exodus 32–34*, JSOT Supplement 22, JSOT Press, Sheffield.

Nelson, R.D., 2002, *Deuteronomy: A commentary*, Old Testament Library Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY.

Noonan, B.J., 2020, *Advances in the study of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic: New insights for reading the Old Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.

Otzen, B., 2004, 'אבד', in G.J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren & H.J. Fabry (eds.), *Theological dictionary of the Old Testament*, transl. D.E. Green & D.W. Stott, vol. 1, pp. 19–23, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Robson, J.E., 2016, *Deuteronomy 1–11: A handbook on the Hebrew text*, Baylor Handbook on the Hebrew Bible, Baylor University Press, Waco, TX.

Schmid H.H., 1997, 'אדמה', in E. Jenni & C. Westermann (eds.), *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, pp. 42–44, Hendrickson, Peabody, MA.

Taylor, R.A., 1998, 'נָשַׁל', in W.A. VanGemeren (ed.), *New international dictionary of Old Testament theology and exegesis*, vol. 3, p. 189, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.

Tigay, J.H., 1996, *Deuteronomy*, The JPS Commentary, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, NJ.

Van Dam, C., 1997a, 'אָבַד', in W.A. VanGemeren (ed.), *New international dictionary of Old Testament theology and exegesis*, vol. 1, p. 223, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.

Van Dam, C., 1997b, 'שָׁחַת', in W.A. VanGemeren (ed.), *New international dictionary of Old Testament theology and exegesis*, vol. 4, pp. 92–93, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.

Van Der Merwe, C.H.J., Naudé J.A. & Kroeze, J.H., 2017, *A biblical Hebrew reference grammar*, 2nd edn., Bloomsbury, London.

Vetter, D., 1997, 'שׁמד', in E. Jenni & C. Westerman (eds.), *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, transl. M.E. Biddle, pp. 1367–1368, Hendrikson, Peabody, MA.

Von Rad, G., 1966, *Deuteronomy: A commentary*, Old Testament Library, transl. D. Barton, SCM, London.

Weinfeld, M., 1972, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic school*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Weinfeld, M., 1991, *Deuteronomy 1–11: A new translation with introduction and commentary*, Anchor Bible Commentary, vol. 5, Doubleday, New York, NY.

Wright, C.J.H., 2012, *Deuteronomy*, Understanding the Bible Commentary, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI.