WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

THE VALUE OF LINGUISTICS FOR EXEGESIS

A DEMONSTRATION OF LEXICAL SEMANTICS AND THE HEBREW נחם

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ABSTRACT

Linguistics, the study of how language works, is a field of study closely related to biblical scholarship and exegesis. Advances in linguistics have benefited WELS pastors and their exegesis, but in a largely indirect way. For the most part, engaging directly with modern linguistic study is reserved for those who are perceived as language specialists. This essay seeks to demonstrate that linguistics is a beneficial field of intentional study for exegetes of any level. After a brief introduction of linguistics in general, the essay demonstrates the value of linguistics by way of a complete semantic treatment of the Hebrew word נחם, resulting in a dictionary definition that was submitted to the work-in-progress *Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew*.

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The Dual Purpose of this Paper

A young man training to be a WELS pastor will learn several languages along the way. Greek and Hebrew, the languages of the Bible, are indispensable. Many students will add another theological language such as Latin or German. Others will study a language with the intent of cross-cultural outreach, such as Spanish or Mandarin. Along the way, the students master their command of the language of instruction in WELS ministerial schools, English. As pastor hopefuls are trained for ministry, they study languages. They do not, however, study language itself.

Linguistics is the study of language as a system, "the study of language as language."[1] It is not the study of a specific language like Greek or German, but rather that of language in general. While a WELS pastor has received substantial training to enter the ministry with a firm working knowledge of several languages including his own, he may not have ever stepped back to think about how language actually works.

The broad purpose of this paper is to further the idea that linguistics would be a beneficial, even critical, area of knowledge and study for a pastor. Biblical linguist David Allen Black says, "If the student of the Bible is to become something more than a well-trained technician, he must sooner or later develop a solid perspective on linguistic study and the nature of language itself."[2] Most pastors develop this kind of "solid perspective of language itself" implicitly, passively noting similarities between Latin and Spanish or gaining a personal vocabulary of language terms simply from being surrounded by them so often. What potential is there for our exegetical ability, then, if this perspective of language itself would be explicitly and

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1 Wendy Widder, "Introduction to Linguistics and the Bible," in *Linguistics & Biblical Exegesis,* eds. Douglas Mangum and Josh Westbury (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 1.
2 David Alan Black, *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek: A Survey of Basic Concepts and Applications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 21.

intentionally taught? It would not be necessary for a pastor to become a linguistic expert; the normal demands of parish ministry do not require an advanced level of expertise in linguistics. But this paper will seek to demonstrate that there is value in a pastor familiarizing himself with linguistic principles and contemporary linguistic discussions—and that this familiarization could be introduced into the training process. This broad purpose is not the main focus, however, but rather an application or benefit flowing from the narrow purpose.

The narrow purpose of this paper, then, is a thorough word study and lexical treatment of the Hebrew word נחם. By the end of the essay, I will provide a dictionary definition for נחם based on the principles of lexical semantics, a linguistic sub-discipline. This definition will be useful for any reader of this paper with even passing interest in biblical words and their meaning; more than that, though, the definition concluded in this paper has been submitted to a work-in-progress Hebrew lexicon, *The Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew* (*SDBH*).[3] More details about *SDBH* and this submission process will follow below.

This narrow-focus study of נחם will not only offer a newly-organized definition for the word, but will also serve as an introduction to important linguistic questions, such as, "What do we mean by 'meaning'?" Using lexical semantics to study and define נחם will offer a different, more useful approach to viewing a word's meaning, as opposed to the comparative philology[4] of lexicons like BDB and *HALOT*.

This study is just one exercise to demonstrate the usefulness of linguistics for exegetes, only focusing on one linguistic sub-discipline. The potential is vast for further linguistic

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3 http://www.sdbh.org.
4 The differences between traditional lexical methods and *SDBH* are detailed further below.

exercises in other areas such as phonology and syntax. In a small way, though, I hope this particular study will serve to further the conversation about linguistic study among pastors and pastoral students. This is not meant as a criticism of our current educational system or an indictment of pastors who do not have familiarity with the field of linguistics; rather, this is intended as a positive exploration of what more we could be doing to faithfully proclaim the gospel and exposit Scripture. Martin Franzmann wrote in 1961, before linguistics truly took off in the world of biblical studies,

> The Bible is not a lazy man's book, nor is it a dreamer's book…it calls for sober, thinking, wide-awake work, not for speculation and daydreams. It comes to us in the languages and the forms of certain times and places…. We must, then, as our traditional hermeneutics has always stressed, study the Bible linguistically and historically. Those of us who have only English or German as our linguistic equipment shall behold great things in God's Word if we use our English or German Bibles diligently and faithfully. Those whom God has blessed with a knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, however slight that knowledge may be, have been given five talents by our Lord and had better work with them, lest our returning Lord find cause to rebuke us for our infidelity. It is our business to hear our Lord as he has spoken, in the languages he has chosen. We are to hear him only, and we are to hear him out: the interpretation of Scripture involves both the scrutiny of the individual part and the survey of the parts in relation to one another and to the whole. *Sola Scriptura* means *Tota Scriptura.*[5]

In the spirit of faithful treatment of Scripture, the study of linguistics could be yet another talent for pastoral exegetes to put to work for the Lord and his people.

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5 Martin Franzmann, "Scripture and Interpretation," 1961. WLS Essay File, http://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/1488/FranzmannScripture.pdf, 11.

Groundwork: What is Linguistics?

Linguistics and Its Sub-disciplines

Although the intricacies of language are profound, human beings all acquire some form of language skills without normally considering just how amazing their natural linguistic ability is. We use language to communicate every day without giving thought to how communication really works. But when one breaks apart and examines all the different aspects of a single speech event, the complexity of language unfolds. "Human language is an enormously complex phenomenon. The task of a linguist is to tease apart the patterns of various aspects of human language in order to discover how language works."[6] *Language Files,* the linguistics textbook of the Ohio State University, lists no fewer than nine steps to speech communication: the speaker thinks of something to communicate, picks out the words to express it, arranges those words in a logical order, recognizes how to pronounce those words, sends those pronunciations through vocal anatomy, sends those sounds through the air, and then connects with the listener—who then decodes those sounds and perceives their meaning.[7] Each step of a communication event has its own unique concerns, intricacies, and profound questions to dig into. For that reason, the study of linguistics is further divided into several different sub-disciplines.

In his introduction to *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek,* David Allen Black describes linguistics as "the proverbial hydra—a monster with an endless number of heads."[8] Not all of these heads will be of equal importance to a pastoral exegete, but to know they exist and to have a basic idea of what they are would certainly be valuable. The following

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6 Vedrana Mihalicek and Christin Wilson, eds., *Language Files: Materials for an Introduction to Language and Linguistics* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 5.
7 *Language Files*, 7.
8 Black, *Linguistics,* xiv.

list is a sample of linguistic sub-disciplines based on the aforementioned *Language Files*, each one accompanied by a brief appraisal of its importance for a pastor.

Phonetics

"Phonetics is the study of the minimal units that make up language. For spoken language, these are the sounds of speech—the consonants, vowels, melodies, and rhythms."[9] The study of phonetics includes how these minimal units[10] are articulated (speech production), their acoustics (speech transmission), and their auditory qualities (speech reception). One of the most important aspects of phonetics is the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), a series of symbols that represent uniform phonetic sounds regardless of language. To represent the *a* sound in *cat,* for example, the IPA employs the symbol [æ],[11] whereas the *a* sound in *father* is expressed with [ɑ].

An English-speaking student beginning his study of Greek or Hebrew has an immediate hurdle to overcome: an unfamiliar alphabet with unfamiliar pronunciation conventions. A student coming into these languages would benefit from a working knowledge (or even passing familiarity) with the IPA and the phonetic principles behind it. Of course, learning the IPA would be adding another unfamiliar alphabet to study to the growing list of new alphabets, but it would serve as a useful tool for language learning. For example, most Hebrew students simply pronounce the letter ע as a normal glottal stop [ʔ] with practically no difference from the letter

א, but the ע actually has a pronunciation unfamiliar to English speakers called a pharyngeal fricative [ʕ]. This distinction is a fine one and would probably not even change the way that most

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9 *Language Files*, 36.

10 The word choice of "minimal units" instead of "sounds" is intentional, as the study of phonetics also extends to signed languages.

11 IPA symbols are typically written in brackets for clarity.

Hebrew students pronounce the letter, but it would at least be a concept one could demonstrate easily using the IPA.

Phonology

Though phonetics and phonology are closely related, they are distinct disciplines. "Phonetics…is specifically the study of how speech sounds are produced, what their physical properties are, and how they are interpreted. Phonology, on the other hand, is the study of the distribution of sounds in a language and the interactions between those different sounds."[12] Phonology is concerned with the grouping of sounds in a language. An English speaker will understand the word "little" whether it is pronounced with distinct *t* sounds or softer *d* sounds— or, to use the IPA, [t] and [ɾ]. The same meaning is conveyed with either consonant pronunciation because [t] and [ɾ] are part of the same class of speech sound, called a phoneme.

Though biblical exegetical work is almost always dealing with written language, phonology certainly has its applications for an exegete. Understanding a language's phonological pronunciation is a fundamental language skill, even when the language is encountered primarily in written form. Familiarity with phonology will help an exegete understand why certain decisions were made by biblical authors, or as an aid in recognizing certain poetic devices like wordplay or alliteration. Phonology is also helpful in the comparison of biblical languages, such as understanding why the letter שׁ in Hebrew will show up as ת in Aramaic, or realizing why

Mark transliterates Aramaic words into Greek the way that he does (such as Ταλιθα κουμ in Mark 5:41).

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12 *Language Files*, 102.

Morphology

A sub-discipline of linguistics that has a perhaps more apparent connection to the exegetical study of the written word is morphology. "Morphology as a subfield of linguistics studies the internal structure of words. It tries to describe which meaningful pieces of language can be combined to form words and what the consequences of such combinations are."[13] The study of morphology is concerned with the function and relationships of morphemes, which are "the smallest linguistic unit with a meaning (e.g. the morpheme *cat*) or a grammatical function (e.g. the morpheme *–ed* that indicates past tense)."[14]

All speakers of any language have more knowledge of morphology than they might realize. A two-year-old learning how to talk may want to express how she went somewhere, saying "I goed over there." She has a grasp on the morpheme *–ed* and its typical function of making something past tense, though she could not articulate what the past tense even is. Mature English speakers do this often enough as well, inventing words from known morphemes. "Antigospelism"[15] is not found in any dictionary, but anyone who hears or reads that word will understand that it is a philosophy (*-ism*) that is opposed to (*anti-*) the gospel.

Students of Greek and Hebrew do much memorizing of noun charts and verb conjugations, which are just organized collections of morphemes, as foundational points of understanding the language. After working with Greek for a time, exegetes no doubt realize that the letter θ is a marker of the passive voice, similar to the ז vowel sound in Hebrew in certain situations; these morphological markers are not always explicitly mentioned in form memorization, however. Morphological concepts are already beneficial in an implicit way, so

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13 *Language Files*, 148.
14 *Language Files*, 152.
15 This word is invented by F. Bente in the historical introductions to the Book of Concord, *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 161.

deliberate study of morphology would serve to bring out such connections or ideas and thus aid in translation or memorization. For example, morphologists studying NT Greek have identified the suffix –μα as a morpheme denoting result,[16] a helpful concept to be aware of.

Syntax

Whereas morphology is concerned with the inner structure of words and their morphemes, "syntax has to do with how sentences and other phrases can be constructed out of smaller phrases and words."[17] Grammar, the structured organization of words into sentences, is naturally a huge part of the study of syntax. Language curriculums necessarily spend a lot of time and effort on principles of grammar and syntax in their own specific languages, but there is value in a linguistic study of how syntax in languages functions in general. Biblical exegetes are already working in a minimum of three languages, so an awareness of syntactic commonalities and differences from language to language would be useful. A good example is the issue of word order in Greek, a concept which beginning Greek students are convinced does not exist. But a student that has been introduced to general principles of syntax across languages would more readily understand that Greek most definitely does have word order, just a different kind of word order than what an English-speaker is used to.

Semantics

"Semantics is a subfield of linguistics that studies linguistic meaning and how expressions convey meanings."[18] This field is further divided into lexical semantics, concerned with the meaning of individual words, and compositional semantics, concerned with the meaning of sentences and sections. An exegete will see plainly why studying a field concerned with word

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16 Black, *Linguistics*, 65.
17 *Language Files*, 196.
18 *Language Files*, 240.

and sentence meaning would be useful to his work. This field, especially lexical semantics, will be the major focus of this essay, and will be treated more thoroughly below.

Pragmatics

One could describe pragmatics as applied semantics. While semantics focuses on the meaning of words and phrases, "pragmatics is the study of the ways people use language in actual conversations."[19] It seeks to answer the question of how speech affects a listener or reader, putting meaning into context and focusing on its intent. The line between semantics and pragmatics is a blurry one—so much so that some scholars question whether they should be considered distinct fields, or whether semantics is just an aspect of pragmatics (or vice-versa).[20]

A pastor will realize that the words he is working with were not spoken in a vacuum. They had an audience and were written to accomplish a purpose. Why does Paul address the Galatians as ἀδελφοί nine times in a letter of only six chapters? What effect would this brotherly greeting have had on a group of Christians reading a letter that's primarily intended as rebuke?

A WELS Pastor's Current Relationship with Linguistics

Biblical scholarship became interested in developments in linguistics only toward the end of the twentieth century. Walter Bodine notes that prior to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "comments on languages emanated from philologians [sic] as well as from philosophers."[21] Not until the 1960's did James Barr begin his work on integrating biblical scholarship with formal linguistics, and even after that it took until the mid-80s for most to take notice.[22]

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19 *Language Files*, 270.

20 Stephen L. Shead, *Radical Frame Semantics and Biblical Hebrew: Exploring Lexical Semantics* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2011), 40.

21 Walter R. Bodine, "The Study of Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew," *Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew,* ed. Walter R. Bodine (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 1.

22 Silva, foreword to Black, *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek,* ix-x.

By this time, WELS curricula were well established and their language-teaching principles were time-tested. Of course, theologians in WELS circles valued exegesis and language study to a high degree, thanks to the principles of the Wauwatosa Theologians in the early parts of the twentieth century who argued that the exegetical study of Scripture was of prime importance, superseding the rigorous dogmatic and systematic study that was popular at the time. This high view of language study still persists. Greek, Hebrew, and a third language are still required of almost all pastoral candidates. Latin instruction still begins at the prep school level. Yet even a synod so strongly concerned with the languages has mostly operated apart from any training in the field of linguistics, which has since moved past nascence and is a well-respected area of study. It is not an issue of controversy; those who wish to pursue linguistic study are welcome to do so. But the field remains niche, and its students in WELS are considered language specialists.

None of this is to say that WELS exegetes, whether parish pastors or seminary professors, are substandard. By no means is WELS alone in the world of biblical scholarship with regard to its relationship to linguistics. What is worth noting, though, is that what WELS exegetes typically do with languages is largely considered not work in linguistics, but in philology.

Philology is related to linguistics, but it is distinct. A philologist studies language through its history and by examining related languages, or by carefully and rigorously categorizing words and grammatical structures.[23] Philology places heavy importance on word etymology[24] and looking deeply into how a word has been interpreted over centuries. Bodine says, "Since the emergence of linguistics as a field in its own right, biblical scholars have occupied an

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23 Widder, "Introduction to Linguistics," 5-6.
24 For instance, a philologist reading this paper has already figured out that "philology" comes from the Greek for "love of words."

intermediate ground. They have functioned primarily as philologians in a broad sense." Wendy

Widder has this to say on the difference between these two disciplines:

> Philology largely focuses on the reconstruction of the form and meaning of words and grammatical structures, and the categorization of those elements. Linguistics, on the other hand, focuses on the linguistic systems, taking into account the accumulated evidence and hypotheses of contemporary theories of language. Both contribute to our understanding of the Bible, and since the scope of linguistics is broader than that of philology, it can even include philology.[25]

So it is not that the scope of WELS language study is wrong; perhaps, though, the scope is too

narrow.

Biblical linguistics is still catching on, and some scholars make strong appeals for its

value. Moisés Silva, whose work is foundational for this essay, proposes that "acquaintance with

up-to-date systematic work on the nature of language seems an indispensable foundation for

proper exegesis."[26] Perhaps less strongly, Wendy Widder says, "A basic understanding of

linguistics and how it applies to the Bible will help people better evaluate biblical interpretations

based on language usage and reinforce even rudimentary language skills in Hebrew and

Greek."[27]

As a final appeal to the value of linguistics before the study of נחם, consider an analogy.

A student of baroque music with no knowledge of music theory will certainly still appreciate a

Bach cantata merely upon listening to it. If they are well-versed in musical terms, they could

even intelligently discuss its movements, fugues, text painting, and so on. But without a working

knowledge or even passing familiarity with music theory, their contribution to the discussion will

only go so far. Once that student gets acquainted with music theory, however, the brilliance of

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25 Widder, "Introduction to Linguistics," 7.
26 Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academic Books, 1983), 10.
27 Widder, "Introduction to Linguistics," 1.

Bach is brought even more clearly to light, and the appreciation of his work deepens as the student sees how he arranges chords, structures his progressions, and effectively harmonizes the piece. The student's love of Bach did not necessarily grow or shrink after learning music theory, but they were simply able to see and appreciate more of what Bach had to offer.

In the same way, WELS pastoral exegetes have a deep love and appreciation for the biblical languages, and that is a wonderful blessing of our education. But what could we appreciate, learn, or see anew if we studied the theory of language itself?

The following semantic exercise with נחם is just one example of how that question could be answered.

Lexical Semantics and נחם

The Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew

The fruits of this word study of נחם will be a comprehensive dictionary definition based

on sound semantic principles. That dictionary entry has been submitted to the Semantic

Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew (*SDBH*) for its editors' consideration. Currently an online

resource, *SDBH* is a work-in-progress by the United Bible Societies that encourages user

submissions and comments. This is helpful for the clarity of the finished product; constructing a

dictionary definition of נחם with no predetermined guidelines would require a lot of decisions

of formatting and style that in a vacuum would be largely arbitrary. Following *SDBH*'s pre-

established conventions has provided a solid framework on which to build the entry.[28]

The aim of *SDBH* is "to build a new dictionary of biblical Hebrew that is based on

semantic domains."[29] Instead of organizing the dictionary strictly by alphabetical order, the goal

is to arrange the entries by grouping words that deal with the same semantic range (i.e., related

meanings, whether by synonymy, antonymy, or other semantic relations). The structure is based

on, or at least inspired by, Louw and Nida's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, which

was first published in 1989. Silva says of Louw-Nida's lexicon, "By using this tool, students can

develop valuable sensitivity to the makeup of the Greek vocabulary generally, as opposed to the

tunnel-vision characteristic of much word study."[30] Louw and Nida set out to highlight "the

necessity of bringing together those meanings which are most closely related in semantic

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28 I'd like to include a personal thank-you to the SDBH project and its editors, particularly Dr. Reinier de Blois, with whom I kept correspondence during my research and who assisted in the polishing of the final definition.
29 http://sdbh.org/home-en.html.
30 Moisés Silva, *God, Language, and Scripture: Reading the Bible in the Light of General Linguistics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 92.

space."[31] In a similar way, *SDBH* says of its organization and philosophy on its "Theoretical

Framework" page,

> The meaning of a particular concept can only…be fully understood if we study it in combination with other concepts that belong to the same semantic field or domain. Only in this way we can discover the different semantic features of a lexical unit that need to be distinguished in order to be able to describe its meaning adequately.[32]

SDBH's website provides a more detailed description of its origins and philosophy.

Though unfinished, *SDBH* is already well-regarded in biblical linguistic circles. Stephen

L. Shead appreciates that *SDBH* helps to distinguish between a word's default or "minimal-

context" meanings and its "contextual modulation, or contextual constraints."[33] With its use of

these lexical and contextual domains, *SDBH* seeks to show not just what a word could mean, but

also to show in what contexts a word is used and, therefore, to better express the relationships of

words with overlapping meanings. The portions of *SDBH* available online are already worth

using regularly for those entries that are available.

<div align="center">Lexical Semantics</div>

Before examining נחם according to the principles of lexical semantics, I will first need

to explain what those basic lexical semantic principles are, as well as point out some common

fallacies surrounding word study that this study sought to avoid.[34]

"What do we mean by 'meaning'?" is a fundamental question that linguists who study

semantics must wrestle with. The average person will find out the meaning of an unfamiliar word

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31 Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, second edition (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), x.
32 http://sdbh.org/framework/index.html, accessed December 2018.
33 Shead, *Radical Frame Sematnics*, 329.
34 These fallacies and others are discussed in further detail in Professor Kenneth A. Cherney's essay "General Linguistics and Some Exegetical Fallacies," 2009, WLS Essay File.

simply by checking the dictionary or by making a quick Google search. This is certainly an adequate method of ascertaining meaning most of the time. It does, however, lead to the idea that words and meanings are inherently linked.

Semantic research demonstrates that to view meaning as a linear relationship between word and meaning is too simplistic, especially for exegesis. After all, that concept breaks down quickly when polysemy (when a single word has multiple meanings) is at play. With no context, the word "run" will most often refer to the activity one does for exercise, but it could be referring to a group of playing cards whose numbers go in sequence. So does "run" have two meanings? If so, the linear connection between word and meaning is already complicated.

Harold P. Scanlin explains, "Meaning is not a possession; it is a set of relations for which a verbal symbol is a sign."[35] These sets of relations become attached to their signs (i.e., words), and a generally accepted meaning results. For polysemous words that signify more than one "set of relations," context determines what is being referred to at a given time. A word could have a range of meanings, but only the meaning in a specific context is truly what that word means.[36] Of course, if the speaker is at all interested in being understood, the use of a word in context needs to be understandable to both the speaker and listener or else all communication would break down. For an example of this breakdown, take this passage from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There,* a classic example of semantics:[37]

> "There's glory for you!"
> "I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said.
> Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't — till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"
> "But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.

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35 Harold P. Scanlin, "The Study of Semantics in General Linguistics," *Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew,* ed. Walter Bodine (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 127.
36 Silva, *God, Language, and Scripture,* 89-93.
37 This passage from *Through the Looking Glass* is used in both Shead, 1, and Scanlin, 126.

> "When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."
> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master — that's all."

While the initial attachment of meanings to specific words is arbitrary, once that attachment is established and accepted, communication of concepts becomes possible. This view of meaning aligns well with a conservative biblical hermeneutic that places high value on what the author is saying. After all, the intent of the biblical authors is to be understood—and the exegete's task is to understand what the authors intended.[38]

In ascertaining meaning, context is vital. Silva posits that conservative Bible scholars' view on "the verbal view of inspiration" has driven a desire to define words divorced from context,[39] which is to say that a conservative exegete places such a high value on the individual words that he will often lose sight of the forest for the trees.[40] This context-divorced view of word meaning then results in high importance placed on a word's etymology.

Etymology is rarely as useful for exegesis as the exegete might want it to be. Sometimes using an etymological connection might appear useful for illustrative purposes in a sermon (bringing up "dynamite" in reference to the word δυναμις in Rom 1:15, for example), but too often the etymology is equated with what the author intended to say with the word. Etymology might be helpful for word pictures and certain conceptual connections, but rarely will it help to ascertain meaning when an author actually uses the word.[41] A pastor may have some very pious-sounding things to say about a word he came across in his sermon text, but those ideas actually

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38 Silva, *God, Language, and Scripture*, 96.
39 Silva, *Biblical Words*, 23.
40 Clichés and metaphors are another point of evidence against a too-simplistic view of word meanings! If words can only mean one basic thing, then bringing up trees and forests make no sense in this context.
41 Silva, *God, Language, and Scripture*, 87-89. The exception to this blanket statement about etymology is in the case of *hapax legomena,* in which cases sometimes the best option we have to determine meaning is etymology. This is more common with OT study than NT study due to the higher number of *hapaxes.*

have to have been present in the mind of the author for the pastor to be able to claim that the ideas are "textual."

So if a word's etymology is only of limited usefulness, and if context is essential to understanding what a word means when it is used, how does an exegete ascertain a word's basic or literal meaning? As noble as this concept seems for exegesis, the question is built on a fallacy that a word has a "basic meaning" that travels with a word wherever it goes. An exegete is better served by thinking of the "marked" and "unmarked" meaning of a word. A word's unmarked meaning would be what that word would mean in minimal context (e.g., "run" as the activity), and the marked meaning would be what that word would mean in a specific context (e.g., "run" in a card game).[42] A word's meaning is determined by its usage; to say a word has an inherent or basic meaning is imprecise and gives a faulty impression of how words work. If a parishioner hears their pastor talk about what the Greek "literally says," or the "basic meaning" of a Greek word and how vital it is to a certain passage, that parishioner could begin to wonder if only the pastor with his Greek knowledge can truly unlock the Bible's meaning.

A useful tool for visualizing the concept of word meaning is the Ogden-Richards Triangle.[43]

sense (mental response)

symbol (word)   referent

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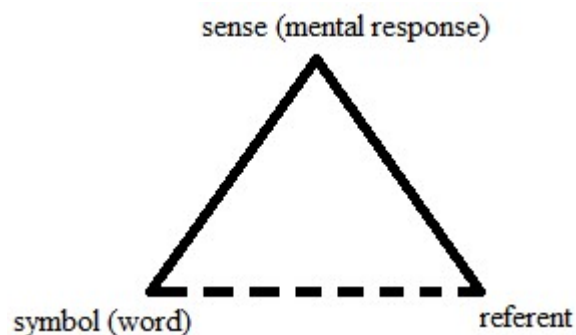
42 Scanlin,"Study of Semantics," 132.

43 C.K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1945), 11; cited in Silva, *Biblical Words,* ….102-3.

The solid lines represent direct relationship, while the dotted line represents a perceived relationship. A word does not directly refer to a thing (called the referent), but rather brings a mental response to mind. That mental response is then linked to the referent itself. This helps one avoid confusing the word for the reality, instead demonstrating that the connection between word and referent is more complex.

The final fallacy to briefly mention in this section is a concept for which James Barr coined the term "illegitimate totality transfer."[44] Cherney summarizes this phenomenon as "the notion that everything a word *can* mean is at least potentially relevant every time it occurs."[45] It may be tempting to take a word used in a theological sense in the Bible and impose that theological meaning in every place it is used. For example, the word נחם has wonderful gospel implications in Isaiah 40:1 as God wants his people comforted in light of his deliverance. But when David expresses sympathy to Hanun in 2 Sam 10:2 at the death of his father, the verb נחם is used. Does this mean that David "comforts" in the same way that Isaiah wants God's people "comforted" in his famous gospel prophecy? No; David did not proclaim to Hanun that his hard service was over and that he had received from the LORD double for all his sins. That would be stretching the sense of the word.

In a recent article in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly,* Aaron Jensen examines the word τετέλεσται in John 19:30 and demonstrates very well how to navigate these semantic waters, carefully and explicitly avoiding all the above fallacies. A popular way of viewing τετέλεσται is to say that it means "paid in full" in addition to the idea of "it is finished." It is certainly appealing. Is it valid? Jensen concludes,

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44 James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Glasgow: Oxford University Press, 1961), 218-219.
45 Cherney, "General Linguistics," 175.

So why has this "paid in full" interpretation persisted for at least seventy years despite its complete lack of evidence? It is because, speaking from a purely theological standpoint, there is something really attractive about it. We know that Christ's death was a full payment for sin, and so we like what it would mean to say that Christ's shout on the cross was him explicitly stamping "paid in full" on the receipt for our debt of sin. We see it there because we like how it looks. But even though the "paid in full" interpretation really glimmers, it is a case of exegetical fool's gold…. While τετέλεσται does not mean "every sin is paid for," we can be confident that τετέλεσται does mean that every sin is paid for.[46]

While fully retaining the theological significance of the word, Jensen cautions against sloppy exegesis and walks the reader through a sound semantic process.

In general, the way that people most often think of meaning—and how meaning is considered more deeply, but in flawed ways—would not be sufficient for a semantically sound treatment of נחם. Instead of trying to find a supposed "basic sense" of the word or finding a direct link between word and reality, this word study will outline the usage of נחם and how it is chosen to reflect concepts in different contexts. To put it simply, this study is built on a memorable and helpful maxim: "Words don't have meanings; meanings have words."[47]

נחם

In his book *Biblical Words and their Meaning,* biblical linguist Moisés Silva proposes six steps to soundly defining a word.[48] There are many methods of going about word definition, but Silva's steps provide an easily understood framework on which to build. I have added one step

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46 Aaron Michael Jensen, "Does τετέλεσται Mean 'Paid in Full' in John 19:30? An Exercise in Lexical Semantics," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 116 (1): 14-16.
47 I first came across this semantic "cliché" in Scanlin, "Study of Semantics," 134.
48 Silva, *Biblical Words,* 176-177.

between steps one and two and have foregone step five,[49] resulting in the following six-step

process:[50]

1. Determine the referentiality of the word.

2. Examine the word's uses in biblical Hebrew (BH) and draw preliminary conclusions.[51]

3. Explore existing lexicons.

4. Consider paradigmatic relations of the word.

5. Consider syntagmatic combinations of the word.

6. Think about why an author would choose this word over others.

In this way I will examine the word נחם, traditionally translated *comfort* or *repent.*

Determine Referentiality

The connection between a meaning and a word is more indirect than commonly thought,

as demonstrated above. The directness of that word-meaning relationship will vary, however,

depending on the type of word. A proper name is fully referential; when the Bible speaks of

Abraham, we connect that word directly to the patriarch of the Old Testament. The word

Abraham is *fully referential*. Other words have less specific and less direct referents. *Beauty* is a

concept that is easily understood, but does not have a direct referent at all. It is a *non-referential*

word. Other words fall in between, some being *mostly referential* or *partly referential*, or

anywhere in between.[52] This distinction of referentiality is important to keep in mind when

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49 The newly-inserted step is an effort to examine the word based on biblical Hebrew alone without consulting another source, in an attempt to draw preliminary conclusions without outside influence. Step five, now omitted, was to examine a word's diachronic interpretation, a process which did not prove profitable for this particular study.
50 This list is paraphrased; for Silva's exact wording and process, see *Biblical Words,* 176-177.
51 This was not one of Silva's original suggestions.
52 Silva, *Biblical Words,* 107.

combating the idea that words have "inherent" or "basic" meanings. It is true that some words do have specific denotations[53]; still, this type of fully referential word is comparatively rare.

With either of its typical renderings, *comfort* or *repent,* נחם falls on the lower end of the referentiality spectrum. A verb like *kick* brings to mind a very specific action of a strike with the foot; a verb like *comfort* presents a concept that can present itself in many different ways. Comfort and repentance will look very different depending on the individual. Some may be comforted most by spending time alone, while others are comforted by going out with friends. Some may repent openly in sackcloth and ashes, while others repent quietly and privately. נחם will be treated throughout this study as a *partly-referential* to *non-referential* word.

Related to referentiality, though, is whether or not the word is used in a *technical* sense.[54] When the New Testament writers use the Greek word νόμος, they often use it in a technical way that specifically refers to God's Old Testament law. That is not the only way νομος is used (as it can also be used to refer to the law as a concept opposed to the gospel, to refer to all of God's Word, even to refer to the gospel itself, and more), but it is a very specific and technical use. As this study will explore in more detail below, it is possible that the same technical distinction may be in view when נחם is used in the Nifal with God as the subject. Is it valid to say that נחם could sometimes technically refer to a specific action by which God *relents* from a course of action he proposes? Or, perhaps, is "relent" simply what the word means?

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53 Scanlin, "Study of Semantics," 132.
54 Silva, *Biblical Words,* 107.

Examine the Word's Uses in Biblical Hebrew

The verb נחם is used 108 times in biblical Hebrew. Using the tool SHEBANQ,[55] an

online Hebrew study tool that is particularly useful for searching specific words and stems, I

categorized all 108 uses of נחם according to conjugation and location in the Bible.[56] The

conjugation greatly affects how the stem נחם is understood and rendered. The stem is used

almost equally between Piel and Nifal, with some scattered uses in other conjugations:

> Piel: 51 uses
> Nifal: 48 uses
> Hitpael: 7 uses
> Pual: 2 uses

The relatively equal distribution of the verb among these conjugations is consistent throughout

the entire Old Testament. The Pentateuch, for example, uses the Piel six times and the Nifal eight

times. Distribution is similarly uniform elsewhere.

The books of Isaiah and Jeremiah demonstrate the difference between the Piel and Nifal

of נחם in a useful way. Isaiah contains the root seventeen times, more than any other book of

the Bible. Fifteen of those uses are in the Piel, and thirteen of those Piel uses are in chapters 40-

66, the gospel-predominant second section of the prophecy. Isaiah also employs the Pual form of

נחם in its only two uses (54:11 and 66:13), functioning as the passive equivalent to the Piel.

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55 https://shebanq.ancient-data.org/. SHEBANQ is a free, open-source web tool for searching the OT for specific
words, stems, and syntaxes. User-friendly and robust, it makes a great tool for OT Hebrew study of any level.
56 My exact search can be cross-referenced at https://shebanq.ancient-
data.org/hebrew/word?version=4&id=1NXMv

Perhaps the most memorable use of נחם in the entire Bible is what begins Isaiah 40: "'*Comfort,*

comfort my people,' says your God." This becomes characteristic of how Isaiah uses the word

throughout these chapters, as in 51:3a, "The LORD *will* surely *comfort* Zion and *will look with*

compassion on all her ruins,"[57] or 66:13, "As a mother *comforts* her child, so *will* I *comfort* you;

and you *will be comforted* over Jerusalem." In Isaiah and elsewhere, the Piel of נחם is most

often a positive, even gospel-focused term of comfort and consolation.

Jeremiah, on the other hand, is the dominant location of the Nifal form. Fourteen

occurrences of נחם are in Jeremiah, the second-highest concentration to Isaiah, and twelve of

those fourteen uses are Nifal. He uses both God and man as the subject of the verb. 26:3 has God

as the subject: "Perhaps they will listen and each will turn from their evil ways. Then *I will relent*

and not inflict on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done." 31:19 has

a human subject, namely, Ephraim speaking in the first person: "After I strayed, *I repented*; after

I came to understand, I beat my breast. I was ashamed and humiliated because I bore the disgrace

of my youth."

Worth noting is the fact that the divine subject dominates Jeremiah's usage—eight of

these twelve Nifals in Jeremiah are used in reference to God's relenting from some sending some

calamity. This is a pattern that follows with the Nifal נחם through the rest of the Old Testament.

In general, it is fair to say that the Piel most often means *comfort* and the Nifal most often

means *relent* or *repent.* For the rest of the paper I will make reference to the *comfort* range as

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57 The Hebrew for "will comfort" and "will look with compassion" is the identical Piel perfect form נִחַם , rendered
differently in English by NIV.

"Piel" and the *relent/repent* range as "Nifal." Even though certain Nifal forms will fall under the

comfort range of meaning, they are the exception rather than the rule.

The Hitpael of נחם, occurring seven times, has a variety of meanings in the established

ranges. Each occurrence is easily grouped with one of the established meanings of the more

prevalent conjugations: four with the Piel (Gen 27:42, Gen 37:35, Ezek 5:13, Ps 119:52), three

with the Nifal (Num 23:19, Deut 32:36, Ps 135:14). Worth noting is the fact that the Nifal

conjugation and Hitpael conjugation can be semantically related, which seems to be true in the

case of נחם. When these two conjugations are semantically related as they are here, "the Nifal

focuses on the resulting state of the action, whereas the Hitpael focuses on the process."[58]

The Piel Range – "Comfort"

The *comfort* range of meaning is well-attested and relatively easy to work with. 68 of the

108 uses of נחם would fall into this category, predominantly in Piel, but also in Pual, Hitpael,

and Nifal.

Occasionally the Nifal form is used simply as a passive, *be comforted*, like the Pual. In

certain instances like Gen 24:67, however, it denotes not just the act of comforting or being

comforted, but the completion of a lengthy grieving process: "Isaac brought her into the tent of

his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac

was comforted after his mother's death." We see this also in 2 Sam 13:39, "And King David

longed to go to Absalom, for *he was consoled* concerning Amnon's death," as well as in Gen

38:12, Ezek 14:22, Ezek 31:16, and Ezek 32:31. The form looks identical in Hebrew and in

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58 C.H. J. Van Der Merwe, J. A. Naudé, and Jan Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (London: Bloomsbury, T&T Clark, 2018), 85.

English, though it describes a comfort that is more drawn-out, or a completion of a longer process of being comforted. Ultimately, this is still under the umbrella of the *comfort* range of meaning, but it is a useful nuance to consider.

In this connection, the Nifal form in this range of meaning can also be used for the grieving process itself, as in Judg 21:6, "Now the Israelites *grieved* for the tribe of Benjamin," and Judg 21:15, "The people *grieved* for Benjamin, because the LORD had made a gap in the tribes of Israel." These are the only two occurrences of this sense, but the idea is clear. One could view this as comfort in-progress.

The final nuance to the Piel range is the idea of *avenging oneself.* This is a specific type of comfort which one acquires by getting revenge or satisfaction for some past wrongdoing. This nuance occurs twice in Hitpael (Gen 27:42, Ezek 5:13), which aligns well with that conjugation's typical reflexive sense. The third and final use is Nifal (Isa 1:24). This vengeance-comfort is not inherently sinful, as God is the subject twice in this sense.

The Nifal Range – "Relent"

The other forty uses of נחם fall into this second range of meaning. While the "comfort" range contained some Nifal forms, the reverse is not the case; this "relent" range has no Piel or Pual forms whatsoever. Three Hitpael forms do make their way into this category.

נחם in Nifal has often been glossed as "repent," but when one examines all the uses of the word, the theological idea of repentance (contrition over sin and asking for forgiveness) is almost never in view in the passages that employ נחם—the major exception being Jer 8:6. When the Bible's authors want to speak of repentance, they far more often use forms of the verb

שׁוּב.[59] This assumed equivalence of נחם with "repentance" is pervasive, however, and has

given conservative theologians some pause when God is used as the subject. "How can God

repent?" is the question that presents itself. The classic solution is that the word is a metaphor or

anthropomorphism. However, there is a simpler solution: נחם almost never means "repent," and

is better viewed primarily as "relent."

Twenty-seven of the forty Nifal-sense occurrences have God as the subject. This is worth

noting—the Nifal נחם is used in reference to God well over half the times that it occurs. The

question is no longer "How can God repent?" but a different question yet presents itself: why

would a perfect God ever need to relent or regret anything? Is he even capable of doing so?

Lessing says of Isa 57:6, "Though not the same in every case, the OT recognizes that

God's 'relenting' is different from that of people."[60] While God is essentially unchanging, it is not

out of line for him to propose a calamity that he will later rescind if human beings change their

ways, as in the case of Exod 32:12 when Moses pleads with God not to destroy Israel after the

Golden Calf incident, or 2 Sam 24:16 when God ends the plague he sent on the people after

David's census. In this sense, it is not God changing, but relenting from a proposed course of

action based on the changing of human beings. Even then, it only appears to be a "change" from

our human, time-bound perspective.

Admittedly, this line of reasoning is not purely semantic and is at least partially

theological, as it impinges on the doctrine of God's immutability. However, because this word is

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59 Kenneth A. Cherney, Jr. "Exegetical Brief: Did Job 'Repent'? (42:6)," 2014, WLS Essay File.
60 R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 56-66* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 112.

used to describe God and his actions, the argument must be at least somewhat theological.[61] But the goal of this study is to determine what a word means, and to that end, even from a purely semantic standpoint, the usage of the verb appears contradictory and must be reconciled. The Bible clearly states that human beings נחם and God does not; yet, God is said to נחם twenty-seven times. These senses must be different, whether the doctrine of immutability is in view or not.

This difference between God's נחם and our נחם is presented nowhere clearer than 1 Samuel 15. In verse 29, after God rejects Saul as king and Saul desperately tears the hem of Samuel's robe, the prophet states very plainly to Saul, "He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or *change his mind*; for he is not a human being, that he should *change his mind*." In this passage, the Nifal נחם is used emphatically twice to say that God does not change his mind as a human would. He is unchanging. Yet, earlier in verse 11, God states of himself, "'I *regret* that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions,'" then later in verse 35 the author repeats, "And the LORD *regretted* that he had made Saul king over Israel." The word rendered *regret* in English in both of these passages is נחם. And so we readers of the Bible are presented with a challenge to wrestle with: how can God both נחם and *not* נחם? How can a perfect God regret something? The word choice by the author is obviously intentional. He wants his readers to figure this out.

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61 This is especially true in the sense of "theology proper," the study of God's essence and attributes.

1 Sam 15:29 says that to נחם is a human action. God does not do this thing that humans do—change his mind. God does seem to perform this action, though, from our limited perspective. The Bible authors are not afraid to use נחם in connection with God—they do so twenty-seven times, even in light of the testimony of 1 Sam 15:29 and its parallel passage, Num 23:19, which is often used as the *sedes doctrinae* for God's immutability: "God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" So if God categorically does not do this human action, but then is repeatedly said to do it, what is the solution?

Robert B. Chisholm, Jr. suggests the translation "retract," making a distinction between God's decrees and his announcements—the difference being that God cannot retract what he has decreed, but he has every right to retract what he has announced or proposed.[62] This distinction lines up well with what we see in 1 Sam 15. When God rejected Saul as king, he decreed it through his prophet Samuel. This is not an announcement, such as the message of Jonah to Nineveh, which God did indeed retract. This is a decision that is as good as done, and he would never retract (נחם) such a decree. Then, later in the chapter, God describes himself as regretting (נחם) making Saul king, which is neither a decree nor an announcement, but an anthropomorphic description of a "feeling" of God concerning the situation. The author wants us to consider this difference in meaning: when the word is used in connection with God, sometimes God is said to do it, and sometimes it is said God cannot do it. Chisholm's suggestion

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63 Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., "Does God 'Change His Mind'?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (October-December 1995), 387-399.

is useful for determining when each case applies. Each time God is said to נחם (or not), one

could ask whether it is a decision that God cannot retract, a proposal that he is indeed liable to

retract, or a description of God's emotions to help humans understand who he is. To put it

simply, the object of נחם will often determine whether the author will or will not ascribe the

action to God.

Ultimately, what's clear is that the OT writers understand that נחם primarily means

something other than "repent." "Relent" dominates the usage of the word, and "retract" is a

useful concept to hold in view as well, especially in the passages traditionally translated as

"change one's mind" and in Job 42:6.[63] Then there remains the sense of *regret,* used in Genesis 6

and 1 Samuel 15 (four times between those two chapters, all in reference to God). This category

would include Jer 8:6, the one occurrence in which נחם clearly means "repent," as well as Jer

18:8 and Jer 31:10.

Do any lexicons make this same distinction between relenting, regretting, and perhaps

repenting? At this point, it is time to return to Silva's suggested steps of defining a word.

Explore Existing Lexicons

James Barr said of the lexicographers of the past, "We in the modern world may set out

to surpass them, but we shall be fortunate in the end if we succeed in equaling them."[64] Even

though Barr himself is the one whose work ushered linguistics and semantics into biblical study,

he recognized the value of the work that had been done by men such as Gesenius, Brown, Driver,

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63 Cherney, "Did Job Repent?"

64 James Barr, "Hebrew Lexicography: Informal Thoughts," *Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew*, ed. Walter Bodine (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 137.

and Briggs. Silva, with a similar respect for the work done by past lexicographers, says,

"Students of the biblical languages must use their valuable tools critically—and they must also

supplement them."[65] At this point, then, I will compare my observations of נחם usage with what

well-respected Hebrew lexicons, older and modern, have already said.

Gesenius[66]

The most recent edition of Gesenius lists Nifal as the first stem, with the definitions "1.

To be sorry for something, 2. Reflexive of Piel, to comfort oneself; 3. To provide oneself relief…

revenge." The three Hitpael definitions are very similar. Piel and Pual are simply "to comfort"

and "to be comforted."

Brown-Driver-Briggs[67]

BDB also lists the primary conjugation as Nifal, with a general meaning of "be sorry,

console oneself, etc. (only in derived species)." Like Gesenius, the entry is organized by

conjugation, and also like Gesenius, the Nifal and Hitpael listings are nearly identical: "1. be

sorry, moved to pity, have compassion; 2. be sorry, rue, suffer grief, repent; 3. comfort oneself,

be comforted; 4. be relieved, ease oneself by taking vengeance." Piel and Pual are again just

listed as "comfort" and "be comforted."

Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament[68]

HALOT exhaustively categorizes each use of the stem, listing the Nifal uses first,

followed by Piel, Pual, and Hitpael. The Nifal section contains the definitions "1. to regret; 2. to

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65 Silva, *Biblical Words,*176.

66 William Gesenius, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), 804-805. Translation mine.

67 Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 636.

68 Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament,* Vol. 2 (Leiden, the Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1995) 688.

be sorry, a) God, b) people; 3. to console oneself, a) to find consolation, b) to gain one's satisfaction, c) to observe a time of mourning, d) termination of mourning rituals." *HALOT* then makes the interesting comment, "note that the subject is always God except Gen 24:67, [etc.]."

Dictionary of Classical Hebrew[69]

DCH lists the primary gloss as *regret* before dividing the entry into primarily Nifal and Piel. *DCH* makes more distinctions in the Piel such as "perhaps vindicate" and dedicating a specific section to "participle as noun, comforter." Its Nifal definitions are listed as "1. regret, be sorry, repent (of), relent; 2. be moved to pity, have compassion; 3. comfort oneself, be comforted, be consoled; 4. gain satisfaction (for oneself), avenge oneself." Noteworthy is the fact that *DCH* does not make the distinction of God as the subject, as *HALOT* did.

Conclusions

The major lexicons of Biblical Hebrew typically structure their entries by conjugation, then meaning. In keeping with the pattern of *SDBH*, the entry for נחם developed by this study will instead organize the definition first by meaning, then by conjugation. This will be the most apparent difference in terms of approach and product.

The earlier lexicons like Gesenius and BDB still seem to have philological idea that words have an inherent meaning, based on the structure of their entries. That idea mostly disappeared in the more modern lexicons, save for the major gloss of "regret" placed at the head of the *DCH* entry.

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69 David J. A. Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew,* Vol. 5 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 663.

HALOT thought it worth mentioning that God is most often the subject of the Nifal נחם,

so that idea is not unprecedented. *HALOT* also made a distinction about mourning and

completing mourning rituals. Overall, *HALOT*'s entry especially captures many of the same

things revealed in the above word study.

Paradigmatic Relations

The idea of a paradigmatic relationship is fundamental to lexical semantics.

"Paradigmatic sense relations are essentially about the similarities and differences in meaning

between two or more words."[70] Some linguists will say this is the most important part of defining

a word—Sawyer says, for instance, "The best method of defining the words is not by giving

English equivalents, but by formulating [paradigmatic relations] as clearly as possible."[71] The

superlative "best" in Sawyer's quotation is debatable, but it does highlight the importance of this

step.

Examining paradigmatic relations also helps us determine the word's semantic range.

Scanlin defines a semantic range (or domain) as consisting "essentially of a group of meanings

(by no means restricted to those reflected in single words) which share certain semantic

components."[72] Nailing down a semantic range will especially help in the final step of

determining why an author would choose נחם over the words related to it.

A few passages were particularly helpful to determine the semantic range of נחם in both

its Nifal and Piel senses. The words in the "synonyms" column may not be true synonyms, but

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70 Shead, *Radical Frame Semantics,* 14.
71 John F. A. Sawyer, *Semantics in Biblical Research*: *New Methods of Defining Hebrew Words for Salvation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), cited in Silva, *Biblical Words,* 162.
72 Scanlin, "Study of Semantics," 135.

their presence in synonymous contexts at least reveals that the words are connected and in the

same semantic range.

<div align="center">Helpful Passages with נחם Synonyms</div>

Reference	Conjugation	English (*NIV*)	Hebrew	Synonyms of נחם
Ezek 24:14b	Nifal	I will not hold back; I will not have pity, nor will I relent.	לֹא־אֶפְרַ֣ע וְלֹֽא־ אָח֛וּס וְלֹ֥א אֶנָּחֵ֖ם	פרע חוס
Joel 2:14a[73]	Nifal	Who knows? He may turn and relent.	מִ֥י יוֹדֵ֖עַ יָשׁ֣וּב וְנִחָ֑ם	שוב
Isa 49:13b	Piel	For the LORD comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.	כִּֽי־נִחַ֤ם יְהוָה֙ עַמּ֔וֹ וַעֲנִיָּ֖ו יְרַחֵֽם׃	רחם
Job 7:13	Piel	When I think my bed will comfort me and my couch will ease my complaint,	כִּֽי־אָ֭מַרְתִּי תְּנַחֲמֵ֣נִי עַרְשִׂ֑י יִשָּׂ֥א בְ֝שִׂיחִ֗י מִשְׁכָּבִֽי׃	נשא
Job 42:11b	Piel	They comforted and consoled him…	וַיָּנֻ֤דוּ ל֙וֹ וַיְנַחֲמ֣וּ אֹת֔וֹ	נוד

The Nifal נחם appears to be in the same field as "regret" words such as פרע (avoid, refrain),

חוס (have pity), and שוב (turn, repent). The Piel is grouped with "compassion" words like

רחם (have compassion), נשא (ease, forgive), and נוד (lament, express grief).

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73 This exact Hebrew phrase occurs also in Jonah 3:9.

SDBH will eventually organize its entries entirely based on semantic domains, as Louw-Nida did with biblical Greek. The complete list of those domains is currently still in development, however. With the domains available in *SDBH* specifically, the Piel sense of נחם

fit decently into the lexical domain *Grief* and the contextual domain *Joy and Grief*. The Nifal senses of *regret* and *repent* would fit in these same domains as well. Though God himself is unchanging, the *relent* definition fits best in the lexical domain *Change* and the contextual domain *Mind*. Obviously, the *change one's mind* fits best in these same domains.

Syntagmatic Combinations

Whereas paradigmatic relations focus on what words could be reasonably substituted for

נחם, syntagmatic combinations focus on what words are used in combination with נחם. This is where the ever-important context comes into play.

Context has various layers, arranged like concentric circles. A word has an immediate context, then its context used in its verse or chapter, then its context in the nearby section or entire book, then a context in its Testament, and then its context in the religious environment at the time of writing. When examining these contextual circles, though, it is important to start small and then zoom out. Starting from a greater biblical context when approaching a singular word in a specific verse will often result in distorting its meaning, or importing meaning that is not really there (like the aforementioned "illegitimate totality transfer").[74] This caution rings true with נחם. While Isa 40:1 is iconic, and the second half of Isaiah uses נחם predominantly in the sense of *comfort,* it would be out of place to force that larger contextual circle onto Isaiah 57:6,

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74 Silva, *Biblical Words,* 156-159.

where God says through the prophet, "The idols among the smooth stones of the ravines are your portion; indeed, they are your lot. Yes, to them you have poured out drink offerings and offered grain offerings. In view of all this, should I *relent*?" That specific verse ought to be considered before the section or whole book.

Much of this syntagmatic combination examination was done above in the preliminary word study, namely, examining who is usually the subject of the verb נחם in the Nifal. Even though the action is primarily a human one (1 Sam 15:29), it is often used with God as the subject when he relents a proposed calamity or retracts a proposal.

The verb נחם also takes certain prepositions that help with categorization of meaning. The sense of *regret* in all four cases uses the preposition כִּי (e.g. Gen 6:6 – "The LORD *regretted* that he had made human beings on the earth"). The preposition עַל is often used when God *relents* concerning something (e.g. 1 Chr 21:15, "the LORD saw it and *relented* concerning the disaster"). This seems entirely interchangeable with the preposition אֶל (e.g. Jer 42:10, "for I have *relented* concerning the disaster I have inflicted on you"). The *comfort* senses of the word usually takes an unmarked direct object (e.g. Isa 40:1, "*Comfort*, *comfort* my people").

Why an Author Would Choose נחם

When dealing with synonymous terms or paradigmatic relations, answering the question "Why did the author choose this word over that other, potential word?" is critical. Was the choice one of semantic significance, or was it simply a stylistic difference?[75]

In the case of the Piel sense, the related words[76] such as רחם and particularly נשׂא often carry a tone of forgiveness that נחם does not necessarily have. While נחם is often used in gospel contexts and with a gospel sense, it deals more with the comfort that comes from forgiveness and not the forgiveness itself. A word like נוד is related to נחם in terms of grieving, but again, נחם will typically deal with the completion of grieving and the resulting comfort of grieving instead of just the lament or grief on its own.

The Nifal sense has a much more significant point of importance in the area of word choice, particularly in the choice between נחם and שׁוב. Both words are used to convey the idea of *repentance,* and both words potentially take human beings as the subject. As mentioned above, though, when the idea of *repentance* is applied metaphorically or anthropomorphically to God, the authors almost always use נחם—and when שׁוב is used with God as the subject, it is usually in conjunction with נחם ("turn and relent," as in Joel 2:14 and Jonah 3:9). Additionally,

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75 Silva, *Biblical Words,* 159-161.
76 See chart on pp32-33.

שׁוּב is one of the most common and well-attested words in the entire OT, occurring over 1,000

times.[77] It appears, then, that the OT authors' relatively uniform choice to use נחם for God is

deliberate and significant. This is ultimately why the special sense of God's *relenting* will receive

its own section in the resulting definition below. Lessing reaches a similar conclusion in his

Isaiah commentary. To complete his point mentioned above,

> Though not the same in every case, the OT recognizes that God's 'relenting' is different
> from that of people. Generally it does so by reserving the Niphal of נחם for Yahweh and
> using a different verb, commonly שׁוּב, 'turn, return, repent,' for Israel and the nations.
> For example, when God saw that the Ninevites 'repented' (שׁוּב), God then 'relented'
> (Niphal of נחם, Jonah 3:10)."[78]

But perhaps the solution is even simpler: נחם never—or almost never—means "repent."

So while this conclusion is not entirely new, it is not necessarily reflected in any existing

lexicon.

Resulting Definition

The following *SDBH*-formatted definition is the product of the above work:[79]

נחם

> (1) verb
>> a) to comfort (63)
>>> Lexical domain: GRIEF
>>> verb piel; verb pual (passive); verb nifal
>> = action by which one seeks to make someone else feel joy again after
>> grief – *to comfort, console, reassure, express sympathy, overcome grief*

(Gen 5:29; Gen 24:67; Gen 37:35 (x2); Gen 38:12; Gen 50:21; 2 Sam 10:2; 2 Sam 10:3; 2 Sam 12:24; 2 Sam 13:39; Isa 12:1; Isa 22:4; Isa 40:1 (x2); Isa 49:13; Isa 51:3 (x2); Isa 51:12; Isa 51:19; Isa 52:9; Isa 54:11; Isa 61:2; Isa 66:13 (x3); Jer 16:7; Jer 31:13; Jer 31:15; Ezek 14:22; Ezek 14:23; Ezek 16:54; Ezek 31:16; Ezek 32:31;Nah 3:7; Zech 1:17; Zech 10:2; Ps 23:4; Ps 69:21; Ps 71:21; Ps 77:3; Ps 86:17; Ps 119:52; Ps 119:76; Ps 119:82; Job 2:11; Job 7:13; Job 16:2; Job 21:34; Job 29:25; Job 42:11; Ru 2:13; Ecc 4:1 (x2); Lam 1:2; Lam 1:9; Lam 1:16; Lam 1:17; Lam 1:21; Lam 2:13; 1 Chr 7:22; 1 Chr 19:2 (x2); 1 Chr 19:3)
       Lexical subdomain: JOY AND GRIEF

b) to avenge oneself (3)
       Lexical domain: GRIEF
       verb nifal; verb hitpael
= action by which one seeks to comfort himself by way of revenge – *to avenge oneself, to be avenged*
(Gen 27:42; Ezek 5:13, Isa 1:24)
       Lexical subdomain: JOY AND GRIEF

c) to grieve (2)
       Lexical domain: GRIEF
       verb nifal
= action by which one seeks to comfort himself by mourning a loss – *to grieve*
(Judg 21:6; Judg 21:15)
       Lexical subdomain: JOY AND GRIEF

(2) verb

a) to relent (27)
       Lexical domain: CHANGE
       verb nifal; verb hitpael
= action by which one decides to forego a proposed course of action due to a change in circumstances; used in reference to God only – *to relent, hold back, have pity*
(Exod 32:12; Exod 32:14; Deut 32:36; Judg 2:18; 2 Sam 24:16; Isa 57:6; Jer 4:28; Jer 15:6; Jer 18:10; Jer 20:16; Jer 26:3; Jer 26:13; Jer 26:19; Jer 42:10; Ezek 24:14; Joel 2:13; Joel 2:14; Amos 7:3; Amos 7:6; Jonah 3:9; Jonah 3:10; Jonah 4:2; Zech 8:14; Ps 90:13; Ps 106:45; Ps 135:14; 1 Chr 21:15)
       Lexical subdomain: MIND

b) to change one's mind (6)
       Lexical domain: CHANGE
       verb nifal; verb hitpael
= action by which one plans a course of action and then does not do it; when used of God, referring to how he does *not* do this – *to change one's mind, retract*
(Num 23:19, Exod 13:17; 1 Sam 15:29 (x2); Ps 110:4, Job 42:6)
       Lexical subdomain: MIND

c) to regret (7)

        Lexical domain: GRIEF
        verb nifal
= state in which one is disappointed by the failure of another to meet a certain condition and feels remorse – *to regret, repent* (Gen 6:6; Gen 6:7; 1 Sam 15:11; 1 Sam 15:35; Jer 8:6; Jer 18:8; Jer 31:19;)
        Lexical subdomain: JOY AND GRIEF

Application of this Study

In a narrow sense, this study means to re-frame the general understanding of נחם,

particularly in the Nifal. In the exegesis of נחם in passages like Gen 6:6-7, Jonah 3:10, or Isa

57:6, the apparent dilemma is often presented as "How can God repent or regret?" But if we view

the Nifal נחם primarily meaning "relent" or perhaps "retract," the dilemma is quite easily

solved. This conclusion was drawn from examining how the word is used by biblical authors.

We ought to remember that for these authors there was no dilemma or problem, because they

used נחם carefully. We, in turn, ought to understand it carefully.

More broadly speaking, this study demonstrates the value of lexical semantics for

exegesis. Not every word study should or must be this extensive. The goal of word study is

rarely to result in a full *SDBH*-formatted definition; that said, every word study should be as

semantically sound as possible and avoid classic pitfalls and fallacies. The aforementioned

maxim "Words don't have meanings; meanings have words" is a broad principle that has

potential value in exegesis at any level of study, from the pastor's office to the seminarian's dorm

room. Silva's assessment of conservative theology holds true—the doctrine of verbal inspiration

does cause us to place high value on the individual words of the Bible.[80] This leads a theologian

to want to treat those words as soundly as possible.

This demonstration of lexical semantics, in turn, demonstrates the value of linguistics for

the exegete. The many other sub-fields of linguistics present many other opportunities and

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80 Silva, *Biblical Words,* 23.

potential areas of study for pastors who are concerned with the Bible and what it has to say. A pastor may not want to become an expert linguistic analyst—in fact, that would almost certainly not be the best use of time for most. Silva draws a useful comparison from linguistics to textual criticism. One does not need to be an expert in textual criticism—in fact, that would probably be a poor use of a pastor's time. But an exegete should certainly be able to understand his UBS apparatus, or be able to understand the logic when a commentary makes text-critical points.[81] In the same way, while expertise may be asking too much, a simple working knowledge, or even a passing familiarity, with the field of linguistics and its terminology will help one to understand and evaluate modern commentaries and discussions.[82] Most biblical scholars will readily admit that linguistics is beneficial and adjacent to biblical study, along with things like archaeology, without ever truly engaging in it. We benefit from linguistics in a passive way as we make use of materials and studies; what could we learn if that linguistic study became more intentional?[83] And if we do not make that study more intentional, will our methods and studies be outdated or unsound?[84]

For a pastor or student reading this paper who is intrigued by these concepts and would like to become more familiar with linguistics, several Bible-focused linguistics introductions are available. A brief but useful treatment by Prof. Cherney, "General Linguistics and Some Exegetical Fallacies," is on the WLS Essay File. [85] Moisés Silva's *God, Language, and Scripture* and David Alan Black's *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek* are two resources from the 1990s that serve as good introductions. The best and most recent volume is *Linguistics and*

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81 Silva, *Biblical Words,* 31.
82 Widder, "Introduction to Linguistics," 8.
83 Bodine, "Study of Linguistics," 6.
84 Kurtis Peters, *Hebrew Lexical Semantics and Daily Life in Ancient Israel: What's Cooking in Biblical Hebrew?* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2016), 4.
85 http://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/1034/CherneyExegeticalFallacies.pdf .

Biblical Exegesis, a collection of biblical linguistics essays edited by Douglas Mangum and Josh Westbury and published in 2017.

The final application is for those studying to be pastors and for those who are teaching those students. While WELS has never had a general linguistics course in its worker training curriculum, the function of foundational language study was filled by Latin. The two prep schools still require Latin for at least one year before students are permitted to switch to studying another language. Latin instruction synod-wide has waned in recent decades, however, and there are far fewer students entering pre-seminary studies at Martin Luther College with a working Latin knowledge than there were in the past. That "foundational language" is no longer a basis for teaching Greek and Hebrew—and even then, the idea that Latin is a somehow more foundational language than any other is perhaps outdated thinking. In spite of this overall disappearance of Latin, though, the study of Greek and Hebrew grammar is still rife with meta-language derived from Latin study. "Accusatives" and "datives" are discussed in biblical Hebrew, a language that has no inflected case system.

Could general linguistics be an introduction to language study that would benefit pre-seminary students? Most students entering the program begin Classical Greek study immediately in their first semester. It is a well-known gauntlet. Perhaps an introductory course in general linguistics could serve as a smoother transition to Greek and Hebrew study? Unfortunately, a full exploration of this concept is beyond the scope of this paper. Regardless of timing in the curriculum, a general linguistics course somewhere along the way might be of great benefit to students who will spend so much of their academic effort on languages. This idea is worth exploring in a future study or thesis.

Points of Departure and Conclusion

In addition to the final point above, there are plenty of other potential research directions at hand. Being such a broad field of study with many sub-disciplines, linguistics presents a wide variety of things to research in our midst. Issues of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics are all on the table. Discourse analysis and rhetorical analysis are areas of pragmatics that are very relevant to pastoral exegetes. Comparative linguistics is another field worth exploring, whether comparing ancient languages to each other or ancient languages to modern languages. Second language acquisition could be worth studying for not just learning biblical languages but for cross-cultural outreach purposes.

As for lexical semantics specifically, plenty of words deserve extensive research and sound semantic treatment. Without introductory material and the groundwork that this paper laid out, a more well-attested and contested word could be explored, such as αγαπάω or חֶסֶד. One might also consider developing a streamlined exegetical model for lexical semantics; while the Silva framework used in this paper was serviceable for a thesis-length research project, it might be cumbersome and lengthy for a pastor interested in exploring a word for text study.

Linguistics is a rich area of study that is relatively untapped in WELS circles. Hopefully, this paper has demonstrated how even just one specific area of the field could be useful for the average exegete. One does not need to be a language expert to understand linguistics, and understanding linguistics will be a great step in maximizing anyone's potential language ability.

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