



BOOK REVIEW

A Review of The Shorter Dictionary of Classical Hebrew Revised (SDCHR)

Volodymyr Lavrushko

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Introduction

A good lexicon or a dictionary is indispensable for any reliable translation or exegetical work. As I was researching the book of Leviticus, I stumbled on the following sarcastic statement regarding Leviticus 11:13-19 on the internet – “Dear God. Bats are not birds. Yours, Science.” A quick look at the popular English and other languages translations reveals that most of them seem to classify bats under the category of birds. For example, the English Standard Version reads: “And these you shall detest among *the birds*... the stork, the heron of any kind, the hoopoe, and the bat.” (Lev 11:13, 19, ESV). King James Version has “the fowls” in verse 13, The Modern Czech translation has “ptáků,” the most widely used Russian translation, “птиц,” and the Traditional Chinese Bible uses the characters for birds (雀鳥). To clarify this or any other translation issue, one would naturally turn to a good lexicon.

In this review, we will briefly consider *The Shorter Dictionary of Classical Hebrew Revised* (SDCHR), arguably the most up-to-date lexicon on the market. The review will be threefold: the SDCHR project will be situated within a broader, relevant background; methodological questions will be addressed; and finally, a new feature of this lexicon – synonyms – will be discussed.

Background

The intention behind the SDCHR is to replace Brown, Driver, and Briggs *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (BDB) (p. 7). Earlier attempts at producing a revision or replacement of BDB have come to nothing for one reason or another. Sadly, lexicographer David Winton Thomas’s work on a BDB revision ended with his sudden death (John Day, *Recovery of the Ancient Hebrew Language* [Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013], 5). His manuscript was made available to David Clines as he was working on the *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (DCH) (Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993–2011, 1:13). Jo Ann Hackett and John Huehnergard envisioned a thorough revision of the BDB, especially of its etymological and cognate

information (“On revising and updating BDB” in *Foundations for Syriac Lexicography III* [Gorgias, 2009], 227–234). There seems, however, to be no current update available on the state of their project. Another major project, the Princeton Classical Hebrew Dictionary Project, appears to be halted (Roberts, “Princeton Classical Hebrew Dictionary Project,” *ZAH* 3 (1990): 84–89; “A Conceptual Framework for a New Comprehensive Syriac-English Lexicon” in *Foundations for Syriac Lexicography I* [Gorgias, 2005], 23). The publication of the SDCHR, therefore, marks a significant development in the field of Classical Hebrew studies. The SDCHR is essentially an abridgment of *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew Revised* (DCHR), which is a revision of eight volumes of *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (DCH).

Four Methodological Questions

Noonan in *Advances in the Study of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic* (Zondervan Academic, 2020, 78–79) well summarizes four preliminary questions for anyone who aspires to undertake the mammoth task of creating a lexicon or a dictionary. These are questions of corpus, form, meaning, and additional information. First, in terms of the corpus, SDCHR covers the Hebrew portions of the Old Testament, Ben Sira, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Hebrew Inscriptions. On one hand, some scholars critique this approach because the corpus is too wide and does not sufficiently account for language variation over time (Noonan 2020, 82). On the other hand, some are pleased with this decision as the Hebrew in those documents is much closer to Biblical Hebrew than in later Hebrew writings (e.g. the Mishna), so SDCHR provides a wider background for understanding a Hebrew word (Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. [Eerdmans, 1995], 128). Second, in relation to the form, SDCHR organizes the lemmas in alphabetical order, in contrast to the BDB arrangement according to root. In addition to the main lemma/headword, SDCHR lists relevant byforms (alternative spellings). Third, regarding the meaning of the lemma, SDCHR appears to consider both the basic and metaphorical senses of a lemma, as well as syntactical constructions. For example, for lemma “אב,” SDCHR lists the basic meaning “father,” then explores various senses of the word starting from the concrete meaning of a biological father, moving on to more metaphorical senses like “divine father.” In lexical entry, syntactical relationships are usually noted (p. 17). It is worth noting that although SDCHR uses glosses rather than full sentence definitions for lemmas, it does provide explanatory notes regarding various aspects of meaning throughout the lexical entry. The full-sentence definitions approach is now considered to align most closely with best practices in lexicography (Noonan 2020, 80). Finally, concerning the additional information, the notable difference between SDCHR and BDB is that SDCHR includes no etymological or cognate information. It also includes other important information, such as statistics, part of speech, grammatical gender (if applicable), and synonyms.

Hebrew Synonyms

The research on Biblical Hebrew synonyms is scarce. Previously, one would most likely consult two primary sources, an edition of Even-Shoshan's *A New Concordance of the Old Testament* (2nd ed., Baker, 1985) or Girdlestone's *Synonyms of the Old Testament* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1897). The SDCHR contains a detailed list of synonyms at the end of the dictionary (pp. 931–982); moreover, at the end of each entry, where applicable, there is a reference to the list of synonyms. The editors of SDCHR acknowledge that “[t]he compiling of sets of synonyms is not an exact science...” and that some readers may disagree with the decisions made (p. 11). Nevertheless, the SDCHR provides a handy tool for exploring the meaning of Hebrew synonyms.

Conclusion

To conclude this brief review of the SDCHR, let us revisit the Leviticus text mentioned at the outset. The word in question, “עוף” actually refers to “flying creatures,” and in the same context also describes not only birds but insects (Lev 11:21) (p. 599). In summary, the SDCHR provides accurate and helpful information in relation to each lemma and can serve as a handy tool for translation and interpretation work.

Volodymyr Lavrushko
Independent Researcher

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