

The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures

ISSN 1203-1542

<http://www.jhsonline.org> and

<http://purl.org/jhs>



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VOLUME 6, ARTICLE 7

**DR. SILVIO SERGIO SCATOLINI APÓSTOLO,
ON THE ELUSIVENESS AND MALLEABILITY OF
“ISRAEL”**

ON THE ELUSIVENESS AND MALLEABILITY OF “ISRAEL”

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1. INTRODUCTION

If we today were to ask a Jew from Jerusalem or a Palestinian exile in Egypt about the meaning of “Israel,” they would probably refer more or less to the same portion of land, but would most surely define it in different terms. They would evoke and actualize different *virtual meanings* of the word, depending on their own context. This observation may also be made about “Israel” in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic canonical writings.

One of the most common errors to which we, as readers, are all prone is that of unconsciously presupposing that words embody one and the same meaning throughout a text or, more naïvely still, across time, space and social groups. However, meaning exists within communication acts, which are contextual, cultural realities. Written or recited texts make use of *words* to convey meaning and bring about interpersonal communication. They are *language events* about which a number of general observations could be made; we shall limit ourselves to two such observations.

First of all, dictionaries offer a word’s *virtual* meanings: what it potentially *can* express, but do not tell us what a word *does actually* mean in this or that case. To be able to arrive at the meaning(s) applicable to a situation, the *context* within which words are uttered will have to be taken into account.

Secondly and going beyond the immediate context of a passage, it can be pointed out that both the virtual and actual meanings of words as language realities must be deduced and established in and through their *use*. For, as Wittgenstein suggested in his *Philosophical Investigations* (PI § 43), “For a large class of instances —though not for all— in which the word ‘meaning’ (‘Bedeutung’) is used, one can explain this word thus: *The meaning* (‘Bedeutung’) *of a word is its use in the language*’.¹ The use being spoken of here is not merely that evidenced in a particular text where a word is employed but in the “form of life” within which the text itself originated and the word functions. For “to imagine a

¹ The italics are ours. This is our own translation of: “Mann kann für eine große Klasse von Fällen der Benützung des Wortes ‘Bedeutung’ – wenn auch nicht für alle Fällen seiner Benützung – dieses Wort so erklären: Die Bedeutung eines Wortes ist sein Gebrauch in der Sprache”. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, § 43. This insight surfaces, for instance, in the *Real Academia Española’s Gramática de la lengua española*: “La lengua se hace patente en cada acto de comunicación de los hablantes. Partiendo del análisis de todos los posibles actos de habla en una lengua dada, se llega a establecer su sistema y las reglas con que se maneje,” Emilio Alarcos Llorach, *Gramática de la Lengua Española* (Madrid: Espasa, ¹²2004) 27.

language is to imagine a form of life” (*PI* § 19), i.e. the language and “the actions into which it is interwoven” (*PI* § 7). A form of life, seen in light of Wittgenstein’s legacy, is broader than a text’s particular *Sitz im Leben*; it is its overall framework conceived as a dynamic reality, which also includes ideological, aesthetical, ethical and other components.

Thirdly, “meaning” as “Bedeutung” refers to the semiotic dimension of words; words are *signs* and as such they *exist* and *indicate* something only within and in light of a code in use. In other words, the *meaning* (“Bedeutung”) of words is not an *a priori* reality that can be guessed or fixed once and for all. Words *become* signs, and signs come to life when they are used (*PI* § 432). If there was a so-called “word” that did not signify anything, it would not be a word but a mere sound or mark.

An absolute and necessary *literal* sense (words = the things they re-present) is untenable; Ricoeur’s suggestion that not only *some* words but *language itself* is *metaphorical* underscores the fact that language can never be equated with reality and that thinking is found imbedded within mental categories of its own and a system of associations and premises (e.g. language). For us, humans, *to see is to see as* humans do. This does not need to lead into radical relativism; the fact that we can put a man on the moon or conduct biogenetic experiments by applying our mental calculations does indicate that our *seeing as* can offer us an *adequate enough translation* of what is “out-there”.

Meaning (“Bedeutung”) must therefore be arrived at by observing how words are *normally* being employed (*PI* § 340) within their own code. It is the code that lets the users distinguish between “normal” and “abnormal” usages; and this happens even in instances when individuals are not wholly aware of their actions. For instance, the fact that a husband kisses his beloved wife goodnight before falling asleep *without realizing what he is doing* instead of shouting at her shows that *even* habitual, less than conscious actions still presuppose the appropriation of a code according to which shouting at someone is not a sign of love. In other words, this normality at the level of language in use (or *parole*) depends on a normative code at the level of language as system (or *langue*). Nonetheless, language as system subsists in its use and usage can change the code, whereby the exception becomes part of the norm. This is so because language as system and code is not a mere abstract entity; it is rather an activity *comparable* to a game,² a language game (“Sprachspiel”).

Fourthly, Wittgenstein suggested that this kind of meaning (“Bedeutung”)³ is dependent upon use in “a large class of instances” or

² Cf. Michael W. Nicholson, “Abusing Wittgenstein: The Misuse of the Concept of Language Games in Contemporary Theology,” in *JETS* 39/4 (December 1996) p. 618; whole article: pp. 617–629.

³ It would seem that Wittgenstein accepted that there are cases in which the meaning of words such as “cry,” “laugh” and “hope” etc. (cf. *PI* § 543-545 and 558-568) escapes the “meaning = use” equation since their meaning would not depend on the *general* use of these terms but on the *concrete* feelings being expressed. Cf. Newton Garver, “The Other Sort of Meaning,” in Elisabeth Leinfellner, Werner Leinfellner and Hal Berghel (eds), *Wittgenstein and His Impact on Contemporary Thought. Proceedings of the second international Wittgenstein*

cases. But, in what cases does use not reveal a word's meaning ("Bedeutung") or semiotic virtuality? We can mention two cases.

- a) When words are used erroneously or accidentally, i.e. against the rules of the language game: "If one uses a word falsely, this does not constitute a further new meaning of the word. Something similar is true of accidental uses, as for example when a parrot calls out its name".⁴
- b) When one wants to *apply the rules of one language game to another*, or as D'Hert put it: "when the deviation from the normal use is too big to be called a mistake in the language-game (in which case one may call it a category mistake), like saying in a game of tennis: 'That player is off-side'."⁵

However, as indicated above, there are also cases in which what at first was considered an "error" is at a later stage taken up within the normative core of the game. This happens not only in the linguistic realm, but also in the world of the socially acceptable; for example in instances pertaining to sexual mores, such as premarital sex and homosexuality. These phenomena have evolved in the West from being considered "erroneous usages" to becoming "normal". The opposite can also happen, think of the current unacceptability in the West of marrying children off to adults.

Fifthly, words in and by themselves (as listed in dictionaries) are *only virtually* capable of functioning as semiotic indicators of something (of "Bedeutung"); yet, when used in conjunction with other words they can become the building-stones whereby *semantic* "sense" ("Sinn") is *actually* made and mediated and pragmatic communicative goals are pursued. The latter case scenario happens when words are grouped together in a sentence or complemented by other non-verbal indicators with which they form sentence-like units (the single word "Yes," for instance, when used in combination with a loving gaze and a kiss will be equivalent to saying: "I do love you, don't you see?"). It is therefore sentences or sentence-like units that help people actualize one or several

symposium (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1978) pp. 253-256. Having said this, we can also add that, *if* the people hearing or reading these words ("cry," "laugh" etc.) can make their own mental picture of what possibly and plausibly is being meant, this is because these words are *words*, i.e. they have *semiotic* functions. If one person *can imagine* what another person *means* as he or she speaks about his or her feelings despite the fact that nobody can read somebody else's mind, this is because even the most concrete and personal use of words still has a *general, symbolic (= unifying)* dimension, which —precisely because of this generality— can bridge the distance between two minds and bring about *communication*. This can be seen in cases where individuals suddenly find themselves in the midst of another life form and language game, both equally unknown to them (say, a couple of Argentineans in China). If they fail to tap into this new matrix, "to crack the code," Chinese words will never become *words* (signs bearing meaning) to them; they will remain incomprehensible sounds and marks on a piece of paper.

⁴ E. K. Specht, *The Foundations of Wittgenstein's Late Philosophy* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1969) 130.

⁵ Ignace D'Hert, *Wittgenstein's Relevance for Theology* [European University Papers, Series XXIII:44] (Bern – Frankfurt am Main – Las Vegas: Peter Lang, 21978) 51. Underlining, added.

virtual meanings of a word because it or they appear(s) to be “warranted” by their context. Yet, more often than not, communicators will need frames of reference that are larger than the single sentence to fully envisage which of the virtual meanings of a word may plausibly be actualized in a given instance. This is particularly applicable to the word **יִשְׂרָאֵל** (“Israel”) in the Hebrew Scriptures.

In what follows, we shall take the word “Israel” in the Hebrew Scriptures,⁶ read synchronically, as a study case. We shall attempt to show that when we try to draw up a list of the “normal” virtual meanings (as “Bedeutung”) of this word *based on its use* within the Canon (taken as the language game in which the code is being applied) not one but many virtual meanings will appear. This exercise will thus also manifest the unavoidable “hermeneutical knot” that exists between the semiotic and the semantic dimensions of language. Words do *actually* point to or signify something when they enter into semantic interplay with other words. Language is indeed comparable to a game. We deduce the meanings of words from their use, but can also use words because we already have an idea of what they *can* mean. Therefore, while virtual polysemy (1) warns us as readers against making exaggerated claims to understanding the historical (or “original”) meaning of texts, it also (2) invests texts with the potentials to remain relevant and continue to evoke meaningful readings, thus expanding the rules of the language game by establishing new usages. Ideological criticism is in this way both called for to safeguard warranted readings (point 1) and brought about as accepted readings are critiqued and expanded (point 2).

2. THE POLYSEMIC VIRTUALITY OF “ISRAEL” IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

The concept of “Israel” is a given that the Hebrew Scriptures take for granted. The word is used throughout the canonical books, and the readers are presupposed to know what it virtually and actually means and to whom it refers. The meaning of “Israel” intended here is not in terms of its etymology⁷ but of its referential relationships within the text as it stands (its “Bedeutung” and “Sinn”), i.e. the text read synchronically and not from a historical- or source-critical perspective. We shall now list a number of “Israel’s” virtual meanings (“Bedeutungen”), taking the word synchronically, as one would during *lectio divina* or in the liturgy.

⁶ This study intends to be a first step of a journey that could and maybe should be continued in different directions. It would certainly be worthwhile to conduct research into the meaning(s) of “Israel” in the other (not Hebrew) Judeo-Christian canonical and non-canonical writings, the material from Qumran and the Islamic texts. Such an exercise would be interesting from a lexicographical, religious, historical and ideological perspective.

⁷ This issue has been dealt with by authors such as Paul-Richard Berger, “Israel in der Sicht der alten Ägypter, Assyrer und Babylonier nach den erhaltenen historischen Inschriften,” in Folker Siegert, *Israel als Gegenüber. Vom Alten Orient bis in die Gegenwart* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000) 44-52.

2.1 “ISRAEL” = JACOB

The first occurrences of the word “Israel” in the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures are of an etiological nature, used as a personal name. In these texts Jacob, described by some traditions as one of the ancestral figures of “Israel,” is identified with “Israel” (e.g. Gen 32:28-29; compare with 1 Kgs 18:36; 2 Kgs 17:34; 1 Chr 1:34; 2:1; 5:1.3; 16:17; 29:18; 2 Chr 30:6). Gen 35:10 words this identification between Jacob and Israel as follows:

35:10	Then God said to him: “Even though your name is Jacob Your name shall no longer be called Jacob. For, indeed, Israel shall be your name, and your name will be called Israel.”	וַיֹּאמֶר־לוֹ אֱלֹהִים שִׁמְךָ יַעֲקֹב לֹא־יִקְרָא שִׁמְךָ עוֹד יַעֲקֹב כִּי אִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל יִהְיֶה שִׁמְךָ וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל
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Even though Israel’s (i.e. the patriarch) life, as synonymous with Jacob, ended with the patriarch’s death (cf. Gen 49:33), the equation “Jacob = Israel” lived on as interpretive key. This may indicate that the hermeneutical function of the word is the real aim of its use.⁸

2.2 “ISRAEL” = THE PRIMORDIAL FOREFATHERS AND FOREMOTHERS OF THE “NATION”

Once the “Jacob = Israel” parallel has been suggested to the readers, they can go on to view Jacob’s descendants (i.e. Jacob’s children) metonymically as the “children of Israel” (cf. Gen 32:33; 49:2.7; Num 23:7.10.23; Deut 33:10). “Israel” becomes the appellation for the whole family or clan.

Thenceforward it is not always easy to determine whether the word “Israel” refers to the individual or to his or her clan. An example of this is found in Gen 34:7 where the readers are told that Shechem has defiled Dinah and “committed a disgraceful folly against Israel”. Who is meant here: her father or his whole family or clan? The implied answer may be: both!

This group dimension of the word “Israel” is further reinforced in Gen 33:20 where Jacob is said to have built an altar dedicated to אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (“Ēl, the God of Israel”). The use of the expression “the God of Israel” instead of “the God of Jacob” or “his own God,” which may have been more proper, suggests that the text prefers to stress the ambivalence of the word so that the community rather than the individual alone (Jacob) may be the addressee. The identification of the Canaanite Deity ’Ēl as the God of “Israel” may perhaps be an indirect indication that the “Israelites” were natives of Canaan after all.⁹

⁸ It would be interesting to ask whether this identification was meant to expand the meaning of Jacob or that of Israel. In other words, which pole of the identification was enriched or enlarged?

⁹ The reference to ’Ēl as the original name for the group’s Deity is an interesting detail, especially in contexts that are essentially Yahwistic, e.g. Ezekiel. Cf. Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism. Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: University Press, 2001) 142-145. Deut

The phrase **אלהי ישראל** (“the God of Israel”) is, in fact, an important one since it is used throughout the Hebrew Scriptures in all sorts of contexts, which makes it even harder to determine whether it refers to “Israel” = Jacob or to “Israel” = community. The implied answer may be once again: both.

2.3 “ISRAEL” = A TRIBAL LEAGUE OR ALLIANCE

Some texts describe the community dimension of the word “Israel” as a political alliance that transcends the boundaries of a family clan¹⁰ and is grouped around one unifying name: “Israel,” **שבטי ישראל** (“the tribes of Israel”). It has been suggested that this tribal alliance can be compared to patronage relationships (*mutatis mutandis*), where God functions as a Godfather of sorts to whom allegiance is sworn and whose affairs are entrusted to a head figure in the community who protects unity, promotes common interests and avenges offences.¹¹ This would seem to be borne out by Josh 24:1,

<p>24:1 Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem</p> <p>and he called for the elders of Israel, and their heads, and their judges, and their officers.</p> <p>And they presented themselves before God.</p>	<p>ויאסף יהושע את-כל-שבטי ישראל שכמה ויקרא לזקני ישראל ולראשיו ולשפטיו ולשטריו ויתיצבו לפני האלהים</p>
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“Israel” is used in this sense in Judges and in the first and second books of Samuel (cf. 1 Sam 2:28; 15:17; 2 Sam 15:2; 20:14; 24:2, compare with 1 Chr 17:5.6.7.9.10). Judg 20:1 and 1 Sam 3:20 place this tribal alliance within clear geographical co-ordinates: “from Dan [north] to Beersheba [south]”. The fact that these are the dimensions that the biblical material attributes to the much later Davidic kingdom (cf. also 2 Sam 2:10; 24:2; 1 Chr 21:2; compare with 1 Chr 13:6; 2 Chr 7:8) is not relevant for the semantic functioning of the term within the story.

32:8-9 constitutes a telling example of the problem insofar as the readings found in the MT, the LXX and the Dead Sea Texts deal with the relationship between ʾĒl and YHWH in different ways. “This passage [Deut 32:8-9], with the Septuagint and Dead Sea Scroll reading, presents a cosmic order in which each deity received its own nation. Israel was the nation which Yahweh received, yet El was the head of this pantheon and Yahweh only one of its members. This phrase points to an old phase of Israel’s religion when El held a pre-eminent position apart from the status of Yahweh. Apparently, originally El was Israel’s chief god, as suggested by the personal name, Israel. Then when the cult of Yahweh became more important in the land of early Israel, the view reflected in Deut 32:8-9 served as a mode to accommodate this religious development,” *idem*, 143.

¹⁰ Noth has suggested that some sort of tribal society is the original designation and point of reference of the word “Israel,” cf. Martin Noth, *History of Israel* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1960) 4. See also Gillis Gerleman, “*yisra’el* Israel,” 581ff.

¹¹ Cf. Thomas L. Thompson, “House of David?: An Eponymic Referent to Yahweh as Godfather,” in *SJOT* 9/1 (1995) 59-74.

There are passages, however, where the implied all-encompassing unity of the term is deconstructed. Judges 20 speaks of “*all* the children of Israel” (Judg 20:26) while excluding the “children of Benjamin” (e.g. Judg 20:30). The same thing is seen in the books of Samuel, where “Israel” is placed over against Judah (cf. 1 Sam 11:8; 17:52; 18:16; 2 Sam 2:10; 5:3; 18:6.16.17; 19:8.11) or Benjamin (cf. 2 Sam 3:19), and where David is at times included within “Israel” (cf. 2 Sam 19:23) and other times is not (cf. 2 Sam 18:6.16.17), depending on his relationship with the alliance. This would seem to point out that “Israel” is a fluid or flexible term that applies first and foremost to the larger political whole as such and then to the parts insofar as they remain within the whole.¹² Having said this, the basic northern core of the term “Israel” is never missing, in the way that Judah and Benjamin sometimes are. In other words, the relationship between “Israel” and “Judah” (and “Jerusalem”) is a fluctuating one: while the northern territories were considered as constituting “Israel” in a more stable and proper fashion, the south was part of it only as long as it was joined to the Northern Alliance.¹³

The same can be said of the generic expression “*all* Israel” in 1 Kings and 1 Chronicles. At times it implies all the tribes together operating as one (e.g. 1 Kgs 4:7; 5:27(13); 8:62.65; 11:42; 1 Chr 29:23.25.26), while in other instances it refers to the majority of the tribes with the exception of Judah and occasionally of Benjamin, too (cf. 1 Kgs 12:19-20.21-24; 14:13.18 [in light of 14:8.10.14.15.16.19(compare with v. 29)]; 16:16.17; 22:17; 1 Chr 21:5). This reinforces the suggestion that in the biblical material the relationship between “Israel” and Judah and the Davidic dynasty is not always one of absolute identity or coincidence. This is highlighted beyond doubt in the pair: “the house of Israel” and “the house of Judah” (cf. 1 Kgs 12:21).

The relationship between Judah and Jerusalem (which falls under the “house of Judah”) does not seem to have been that of a kingdom and its capital as it is understood nowadays, but one within which a certain differentiation could be made between Judah and the old city(-state) of Jerusalem. Hebron may have had its own political significance within Judah, at least initially (cf. 2 Sam 5:3; 15:10; 1 Kgs 2:10; 2 Chr 32:9; 33:9; 34:18; 36:4), next to which Jerusalem may have had some sort of *status aparte*.¹⁴

¹² One could perhaps compare this to the way in which one can speak nowadays, on the one hand, of the “United Arab Emirates” referring to Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ra’s al-Khayma, Fujayra, ‘Um al-Qaywayn, and ‘Ajman in their political togetherness, and, on the other hand, of *each* emirate in its individuality.

¹³ This would be reinforced if it was proven that “Israel” is primarily the name of a place or region.

¹⁴ Cf. J. Alberto Soggin, *An Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah*, 62 sub 4.6.7.2. For some of the scholarly opinions regarding Jerusalem and its status, cf. A. Alt, “Das Königtum in Israel und Juda,” in *VT* 1 (1951) 1ff. See also N. Na’aman, “The Contribution of the Amarna Letters to the Debate on Jerusalem’s Political Position in the 10th Century BCE,” in *BASOR* 304 (1996) 17-27; N. Na’aman, “Cow Town or Royal Capital? Evidence for Iron Age Jerusalem,” in *BAR* 23/4 (1997) 43-47, 67; Margreet Steiner, “David’s Jerusalem: Fiction or Reality? It’s Not There: Archaeology Proves a Negative,”

It is also worth noting that Exod 24:5 presupposes a clear tribal organization *already in Egypt*, which –while accepting it as a rhetorical strategy within the text– may still be described as a historical anachronism.

The metonymical relationship between Jacob = “Israel” ↔ “Israel” = Children of Israel is stretched further so that the names of Jacob’s sons become the designation for the tribes, the so-called Twelve Tribes: Jacob = “Israel,” “Israel” = Children of “Israel” and then Twelve children of “Israel” = Twelve Tribes (cf. Gen 46:8ff; 49:28).¹⁵

2.4 “ISRAEL” = ONLY THE NORTHERN KINGDOM BEFORE THE UNITED MONARCHY

The northern core of “Israel” surfaces also in parts of the Davidic stories as an accepted presupposition.

The compositional agents responsible for 1 Kgs 1:35 depict David as knowing the distinction between “Israel” and “Judah” since he declares that his son Solomon would be king “over Israel *and* over Judah”.

1:35	Then you shall come after him and he shall come and sit upon my throne. For it is him who shall be king in my stead. and it is him that I have appointed to be prince over Israel and over Judah.	ועליתם אחריו ובא וישב על-כסאי והוא ימלך תחתי ואתו צויתי להיות נגיד על-ישראל ועל-יהודה
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This northern dimension of the word “Israel” is present again in 1 Kgs 2:32, where the expressions “the army of Israel” and “the army of Judah” are used referring to pre-Davidic times.

2.5 “ISRAEL” = THE UNITED MONARCHY OF NORTH AND SOUTH

The word “Israel” is also used at times within texts that refer to the *whole* of the territory within narrative contexts staged *during* the period of the Davidic United Monarchy, connoting thus both the northern *and* the southern territories or tribes.

1 Kgs 1:34 is an example of this usage since it speaks of the united territories as “Israel,” whose government David entrusts to his son Solomon as “king over Israel” (cf. also 1 Chr 28:1.4.8).

in *BAR* 24/4 (1998) 26-33, 62-63; Jane Cahill, “David’s Jerusalem: Fiction or Reality? It Is There: The Archaeological Evidence Proves It,” *BAR* 24/4 (1998) 34-41, 63; Ernst Axel Knauf, “Jerusalem in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages: A Proposal,” in *Tel Aviv* 27/1 (2000) 75-90; Israel Finkelstein, “The Rise of Jerusalem and Judah: the Missing Link,” in *Levant* 33 (2001) 105-115; Jane Cahill, “Jerusalem at the Time of the United Monarchy: The Archaeological Evidence,” in Ann E. Killebrew and Andrew G. Vaughn (eds), *Jerusalem in Bible and Archaeology: The First Temple Period* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2003) 13-80.

¹⁵ However, the literary sequence between the terms of the equation would have to be inversed if an extra-biblical rationale was found.

1:34 Let Zadok, the priest, anoint him ומשח אתו שם זדוק הכהן
 there—and Nathan, the prophet—as ונתן הנביא למלך על
 king over Israel. ישראל
 Then blow the trumpet, ותקעתם בשופר
 and say: ואמרתם
 “Long live king Solomon!” יחי המלך שלמה

There are other examples of this use of the word “Israel” in books as late as Ezra (cf. Ezra 3:10; 5:11).

2.6 “ISRAEL” = THE NORTH DURING THE UNITED MONARCHY

There are texts concerning the United Monarchy in which “Israel” clearly refers to all the tribes with the exception of Judah, and sometimes also of Benjamin, during the United Monarchy.

1 Chr 21:5, for example, makes the distinction between “all Israel” and “Judah” in a context that is purported to reflect the time of David’s reign, thus restating the idea that “all Israel” includes first and foremost the northern tribes and not necessarily Judah (cf. 1 Chr 9:1.2). This is remarkable, however, because when 1 Chronicles speaks of “Israel” in conjunction with David it tends to overlook or ignore the north-south division (cf. 1 Chr 11:1.2.3.4.10; 12:38; 13:2.5.6; 14:2.8; 15:3.25.28; 16:3; 18:14.16.17.18.19; 21:3.4.12.14).

2.7 “ISRAEL” = ONLY THE NORTHERN KINGDOM AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE UNITED MONARCHY

With the division of the idyllic or idealized short-lived United Monarchy, the distinction between “house of Judah and house of Israel” (e.g. Jer 5:11) becomes once again politically relevant, in which case “Israel” refers to the Northern Kingdom (e.g. 2 Sam 2:8-11,¹⁶ 1 Kgs 11:37-38; 12:21.33; 14:8.10.13.14. 15.16.18.19 [compare with v. 29]; 15:9.16.20; 16:1-2; 2 Kgs 3:9; 5:2.4.5.6.7; 17:18.23 [the end of “Israel”]; 23:27; 2 Chr 10:1.3.16.18.19 (v. 19 is of particular importance); 18:3 etc.).¹⁷

2 Chr 10:17 presents the readers with an interesting case since it says that “Rehoboam reigned over the people of Israel, who *dwelt in the cities of Judah*” (cf. also 2 Chr 11:3). This raises the question whether it refers to Judah as “Israel” or to northerners living in Judah. If this reflects situations such as the ones described in 2 Chr 15:9 in conjunction with 2 Chr 17:2 and 19:4 (compare also with 2 Chr 31:1.6), one may have to conclude that northerners residing in territories under Judahite control were seen as recognizably different from native Judahites (and Benjaminites), that is, as “Israelites”.¹⁸

¹⁶ It is worth noting that Ishbosheth is made king of “Israel, all of it”.

¹⁷ This is also the meaning of “Israel” on the Moabite *Mesha Stone*, which goes back to the same post-Davidic and post-Solomonic times.

¹⁸ The name “Ephraim” is also occasionally used to refer to the Northern Kingdom (e.g. 2 Chr 25:10; 28:7; Hos 10:5.11; 11:3.9.12).

2.8 “ISRAEL” = NORTH AND SOUTH AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE UNITED MONARCHY

There are texts dealing with the time after the collapse of the so-called United Monarchy that still speak of “Israel” as conveying the whole of the territories, as it would have been the case during David’s and Solomon’s reigns.

“Israel” is sometimes assigned a dual point of reference in adjacent passages. 2 Chronicles 34 is a good example of this duality. When 2 Chr 34:7 (“in all the land of Israel”), 34:21 (“what is left in Israel and in Judah”) and 34:33 (“who were found in Israel”) are read in light of 34:6 (“in the cities of Manasseh and Ephraim and Simeon and clear to Naphtali in their devastated places all around” and the end of 34:7 (“after which he returned to Jerusalem”), it transpires that “Israel” refers to the northern territories.

In 2 Chr 34:33, however, it is said that Josiah removed all the detestable things “in Israel,” which is circumscribed by its context as encompassing “Judah and Jerusalem” (2 Chr 34:29.30), “Benjamin” (2 Chr 34:32) and “all the lands that belonged to the children of Israel” (2 Chr 34:33). This means that “Israel” was perceived as including the Southern Kingdom of Judah, especially if one considers that these passages are about King Josiah of Judah, and are meant to describe a time when the Northern Kingdom did not exist as such anymore. This is all the more remarkable considering that 2 Chronicles knows the clear distinction between “Israel” and “Judah” (cf. 2 Chr 32:32; 34:21; 35:18.27).

2.9 “ISRAEL” = THE JUDAHITES IN BABYLONIA AND PERSIA

In some texts, “Israel” refers to the Judahite exiles during the exile. Jeremiah’s letter, for instance, identifies the prophets Zedekiah and Ahab, who were among the exiles in Babylonia, as having carried on senselessly in “Israel” (cf. also Jer 29:23). Jer 29:15.20-22 may indeed be an indication that, even though “Israel” may have general connotations, in this case it refers in particular to the exiled community.

“Israel” can also refer to the Judahites that would later live in the Persian Kingdom (cf. Ezra 7:7).

2.10 “ISRAEL” = THE RETURNEES DURING THE PERSIAN REIGN

In other texts the word “Israel” can refer also to those Judahites and Benjaminites (cf. Ezra 1:5) that returned to Judah from the exile in Babylonia and / or the dispersion in general. This is the case, for instance, in Ezra 2:2 (in light of 2:1) and 6:16.21.

Ezra divides the social landscape of Palestine in three groups: firstly, the adversaries of Judah, namely the Samaritans (cf. Ezra 4:1-2), also called “the people of the land” (cf. Ezra 4:4); secondly, the Judahites that had returned from the exile (e.g. Ezra 6:19-21); and, thirdly, some of the people that had separated themselves from “the people of the land” (cf. Ezra 6:21). “Israel” would appear to refer in the first place to the returnees, who see themselves as the new conquerors and settlers of the land, comparable to the times of old.¹⁹

¹⁹ Provided “the times of old” are not “the new times” projected back into

It is worth noting, however, that the usage of “Israel” in both Ezra and Nehemiah is not as uniform and consistent as it is in 1 Samuel—2 Chronicles. It is also noteworthy that besides “Israel” also the term “Jews” is employed in Ezra (e.g. Ezra 4:12; 5:1.5; 6:7.8.14).

2.11 “ISRAEL” = APOLITICAL, RATHER SOCIAL-RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

“Israel” can also refer to an apolitical, rather social-religious community. Gerleman repeats the old conviction that “Israel is not, in the first instance, a political term but a religious one (...). ‘Israel’ is the ‘people’ as a religious entity, as bearers of the traditions of the fundamental deeds of God in history, and could also, as such, survive after the end of national independence in the form of a cultic community”.²⁰ An example of this use of the term is found in Exod 1:7. This verse speaks of the “children of Israel” referring back to the Patriarch’s family and functions as a bridge between the mythical beginnings and the actual community being addressed by the Hebrew Bible, which in Exod 19:2 is simply called “Israel”. Something similar is seen in Hos 11:1 and 1 Chr 16:8-36.

The expression “the elders of Israel” (e.g. Exod 24:1) indicates that “Israel” was seen as a community with a social structure, even in those cases in which it cannot be identified with a political entity. The distinction between foreigners and “Israelites” is not merely a *political* given since they are excluded from the *community* of “Israel” even when they are in its territory (e.g. 1 Kgs 9:20).

One could argue that the “Israel” meant in this sort of texts is not primarily some historical grouping of old, but the audience of the texts, who would have projected (or read) themselves into the texts. This is manifest throughout Leviticus where the expressions “the children of Israel” and “the house of Israel” are used with no explicit political reference. The texts pretend to be speaking of the past, whereas their rhetorical and ideological interest lies with their readers.²¹

As mentioned above, the expression “the God of Israel” is a good example of the apolitical group meaning of “Israel,” for such texts would appear to refer to Jacob as well as to his descendants (i.e. those who accept Jacob = Israel’s God as their deity).

Such a denominational or confessional understanding of the word “Israel” may be behind Jeremiah’s use of the expression “the God of Israel”. Jer 7:3 identifies YHWH, i.e. the God that is (or should be) worshipped in the Jerusalem temple, as “the God of Israel” (see also Jer 7:21). An explicit theological opposition between “the God of Israel” and the Ba’als is drawn in Jer 9:14, which is further depicted as going back to the fathers, as though YHWH was the God of the mythic father

the past!

²⁰ Gillis Gerleman, art. “*yisra’el* Israel,” in Jenni, Ernst & Westermann, Claus (eds), *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament, volume 2* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub., 1997) 583; whole entry: 581-584. Cf. A. R. Hulst, “Der Name ‘Israel’ im Deuteronomium,” in *OTS* 9 [1951], 65-106, esp. 103f.

²¹ We could say that the “Israel” meant in these texts is not behind the text, in the past, but in the future: it is the texts’ *implied* and/or *model reader* or audience.

Jacob = Israel and as if the Ba’als were the Gods of the unfaithful fathers. Moreover, “Israel” in the expression “the God of Israel” clearly encompasses more than Judah. A similar use of the expression is seen in Jer 11:3; 13:12 (where meaning larger than that in 13:11 is actualized); 19:3.15; 28:2 etc. Furthermore, Jer 21:4 warns against any identification of “Israel” in the expression “the God of Israel” with Judah since the very “God of Israel” will fight against Jerusalem, the Judahite royal city (cf. also Jer 23:2; 35:13.17.18.19, compare with Jeremiah 24 etc.).²²

2.12 “ISRAEL” = A FUTURE REALITY YET TO COME

It has often been stressed that promise is one of the key characteristics not only of religion, in general, but also of the Hebrew Scriptures, in particular. Religious realities often are “realities that the eye cannot see,” not only because they are spiritual but also because they still have to happen. The ideal must still take on socio-geographical shape. Some Hebrew biblical texts advocate this idea and declare that God’s true “Israel” is one of those promises awaiting fulfillment.

The exodus functions in this context not only as the name for an event of mythical dimensions, but also as a constitutive characteristic of biblical hermeneutics. “Israel” is in a continuous state of dislocation and transition: it must continually leave behind its negativity and move on to a promised land where in the end all will be well. This is most clear in the so-called “gathering-and-return” passages.²³ Jer 16:15, for instance, shows YHWH as the God who in the future will bring the children of Israel out of the land of the north (=Babylonia) and out of *all the lands* to which He has dispersed them. This is a deconstructive mechanism that goes against any claim on the part of any particular “Israel” to its being the realization of the “Israel” that God has envisaged.

2.13 SOME ADDITIONAL REMARKS

The virtual meanings of “Israel” resulting from a *prima facie* synchronic reading of the texts and listed above could be further complemented by looking at the *value judgment* that accompanies them. When “Israel” is looked at in this way, it will transpire from the context that next to its referential capacity, it can also embody connotations that may be either positive or negative; these connotations we have left aside and concentrated exclusively on the word’s referential capacities.

3. THE SCHOLARLY AWARENESS OF “ISRAEL’S” POLYSEMIC VIRTUALITY

Ahlström, who has dealt with the issue of “Israel” and “Israelites”,²⁴ painted a detailed and structured picture of the *development* of the

²² Interestingly enough, the expression “the God of Israel” is used in Ezekiel only in the visionary sections (cf. Ezek 10:19.20; 11:22; 43:2 and 44:2).

²³ Cf. Johan Lust, “«Gathering and Return» in Jeremiah and Ezekiel,” in P.-M. Bogaert (ed.), *Le livre de Jérémie* (Leuven: University Press / Peeters, 1997), 119-142, see also his “Notes additionnelles,” 428-430.

²⁴ Cf. Gösta W. Ahlström, *Who Were the Israelites?* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1986).

semantic virtualities of “Israel”. He recognized some basic phases within this process:²⁵

- At first, “Israel” designated the central hill country of Palestine and by extension the people who lived there, namely the “Israelites”.
- When Saul became the leader of this part of the land, his nation took on its name. “Israel” became thus both a geographical and a political reality.
- When the so-called United Monarchy arose, the whole community bore the name of “Israel”.
- At the end of the short-lived United Monarchy, “Israel” remained the appellation of the Northern Kingdom only. The political significance of the name was truncated by the fall of the “House of Israel” in 722 BCE, when it became an Assyrian province called Samerina.
- “Israel” lived on as a socio-political designation which also Judahites appropriated, sometimes as though they were the remainder of “Israel”.
- When Judah itself collapsed, the name was somehow hijacked by the Judahite exilic or *gōlāh* community in Babylonia, who disqualified those in Judah and in the old North (the Samaritans) as polluted and iniquitous apostates.
- At the time when the *gōlāh* proper came to an end (i.e. when the Babylonians themselves fell under the dominion of the Persians), those who migrated from Babylonia and the broader Persia further claimed the name “Israel” for themselves.
- It was during the Persian time that “Israel” became increasingly void of political content, so much so that in the end, in a certain sense, a distinction could be made between the mere inhabitants of Yehud and the Jews, in such a case scenario it was only the latter that had the self-given right to call themselves “Israel”.

Williamson’s treatment of the issue of “Israel,”²⁶ which has got a broad reception in the field of “Israel” studies, went about the biblical data not in a historical sequential way, but according to the books, based mainly on the prophetic writings. Williamson started by stating that “we may perhaps agree that (...) there was an accepted pre-history of ‘Israel’ as a nation which, with the establishment of the monarchy, had become ‘like all the nations’ (1 Sam. 8.5)”.²⁷ Although the exile must have shaken the rooted self-understanding of “Israel,” it was with the post-exilic return and restoration that “continuity could be

²⁵ *Idem*, 85-118.

²⁶ Cf. Hugh G. M. Williamson, “The Concept of Israel in Transition,” in Ronald E. Clements (ed.), *The World of Ancient Israel. Sociological, Anthropological and Political Perspectives. Essays by Members of the Society for Old Testament Study* (Cambridge – New York – New Rochelle – Melbourne – Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 141-160.

²⁷ *Idem*, 141.

maintained only at the cost of extensive change”.²⁸ Redefining “Israel” became thus an important ideological task.

He argued, for instance, that while Ezekiel allegedly preferred to go back to the idyllic utopia of *one* “Israel” (cf. Ezek 37:15ff.),²⁹ Deutero-Isaiah represented the true transitional point (cf. Is 49:1-6) in the process whereby the concept of “Israel” became increasingly narrow. “Unlike Ezekiel, the author of Isaiah 40—55 was initially concerned to address only the Babylonian exiles (...) Their lack of response, however, led to a shift in his aspirations and he seems to have experienced the need to narrow the meaning of Israel quite sharply (and here it becomes difficult to avoid otherwise unsatisfactory terms like ‘true Israel’), restricting it now to a faithful individual or group within the community”.³⁰ By the time of Trito-Isaiah, “Israel” can refer to individuals or groups both in the diaspora and in Palestine.³¹

Therefore, the radical paradigm shift took place during the Persian time. Even though Ezra is seen initially as standing close to Ezekiel insofar as he was sent to all his people Beyond the River, including the Samaritans, some data would indicate that the role of the Persian administration (i.e. the edict of Artaxerxes, cf. Ezra 7:12-26) may have contributed to the change of ideology regarding “Israel” more than other factors. The identity of the new community was perceived in ethnic terms and the old division between “Canaanites” and “Israel” was reapplied. Nehemiah, too, is presented by the texts as agreeing with this approach. The influence of colonialism would once again leave its mark on the self-understanding of “Israel”. For “the reality of life as a small colony in the vast Achaemenid empire which ironically sought to encourage the aspirations of local but loyal cults meant that political accommodation had to take precedence over an idealism which could not be understood at the centre of power as other than nationalist and hence potentially dangerous. (...) Israel had been transformed from a national and political to a cultural and religious concept. Henceforth, the future of its cohesion had inevitably to focus on the temple and the law”.³²

Zobel, too, has examined the concept of “Israel,” both in general and book by book; he came to similar conclusions: besides the personal use of the name to designate the Patriarch (Israel = Jacob), “Israel” can be used in a narrower and a broader sense, as a political term or a name with religious connotations,³³ for the Northern Kingdom and for Judah, both together and, sometimes, separately (less so for Judah), for the exiles, the diaspora and the future community of God’s people.³⁴

Another recent study of the meanings of “Israel” in the Bible conducted by Harvey³⁵ has looked into biblical etymologies and word

²⁸ *Idem*, 142.

²⁹ *Idem*, 143f.

³⁰ *Idem*, 147.

³¹ *Idem*, 150.

³² *Idem*, 159.

³³ Moritz Zobel, “יִשְׂרָאֵל—*yisra’el*,” in G. Johannes Botterweck & Helmer Ringgren (eds), *TDOT. Volume VI* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 397.

³⁴ Cf. *idem*, 404, 409, 417-418; whole article: 397-420.

³⁵ Cf. Graham Harvey, *The True Israel. Uses of the Names Jew, Hebrew and Israel*

combinations in which “Israel” occurs. This author, too, concluded that “‘Israel’ in the Bible refers to a mixed community,”³⁶ comprising all of the aforementioned components. He stressed, however, that to whomever “Israel” may refer, it always comprises “real Israel” rather than “ideal Israel,” and that it remains, throughout, God’s *audience*.³⁷

Coming from another angle, Ben Zvi has reminded us of a particularly relevant point concerning the occurrences of “Israel” in the Hebrew Bible. Insofar as “Israel” is a concept used in “written” works, it must have belonged among the circle of the literati, and therefore among the leading classes. Many a time, “it is reasonable to assume that within the discourse of the early post-monarchic period, ‘Israel’ stood—at least on some occasions—for the king and the Judahite monarchic elite”.³⁸

Gerleman has recently restated what had been suggested earlier: “‘Israel’ does not always refer to the same entity in the O.T. Historical processes that were significant for the identity of Israel were mirrored in shifts of usage”.³⁹

Similar awakening calls have arisen from the midst of historiographical circles not to become oblivious of the ideological dimension of “Israel”. Liverani, for instance, has recently spoken of the existence of “an immutable and therefore anti-historical conceptualization of the entity ‘Israel’ – an entity which has on the contrary grown throughout the centuries and which, once it reached the end of its trajectory, re-read and re-wrote its past in its own image and likeness”.⁴⁰ He goes on to sketch the complexity of the issue: “The various constitutive elements of the concept of ‘Israel’ came into existence one by one, not all at once: there is a linguistic and an ethnic background, a territorial arrangement, a socio-economic system, a political unification (or maybe more than one), a religious orthodoxy, a historiographical validation, and a legislative validation. All these aspects, all these distances, have not been used univocally, in a straight line; they have known regressions as well as returns, oscillations and separations—some even came into the picture while others were already gone for good”.⁴¹ Finally, he speaks of “the duty to see things

in *Ancient Jewish and Early Christian Literature* (Leiden – New York – Köln: Brill, 1996) 148-188.

³⁶ *Idem*, 186.

³⁷ Cf. *idem*, 187-188.

³⁸ Ehud Ben Zvi, “Inclusion in and Exclusion from Israel as Conveyed by the Use of the Term ‘Israel’ in Post-Monarchic Biblical Texts,” in Steven W. Holloway & Lowell K. Handy (eds), *The Pitcher is Broken. Memorial Essays for Gösta W. Ahlström* [JSOTSup, 190] (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 121.

³⁹ Gillis Gerleman, “*yisra’el* Israel,” 583.

⁴⁰ Our own translation of: “una concettualizzazione immutabile e perciò anti-storica dell’entità ‘Israele’- entità che è invece cresciuta su sé stessa nel corso dei secoli, e che una volta compiuta per intero la sua parabola ha poi riletto e riscritto a sua immagine e somiglianza il suo passato”. Mario Liverani, “Nuovi sviluppi nello studio della storia dell’ Israele biblico,” in *Bib* 80 (1999) 496.

⁴¹ Our own translation of: “I vari elementi costitutivi del concetto di ‘Israele’ si sono costituiti uno per volta, non tutti insieme: c’è uno sfondo

historically or historicize” (“il ‘dovere’ di fare storia”). It is quite undeniable that the “‘all-Israel’ political entity is part of an invented history” —as Davies has recently put it.⁴²

4. THE MEANINGS OF “ISRAEL” IN EZEKIEL

The foregoing sections have shown that “Israel” does indeed convey an array of virtual meanings within the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures as a whole and that the scholars have been aware of this. We shall now briefly look at Ezekiel to indicate that the same polysemic mechanisms can be seen at work within a *single* writing.

In his 1946 general study of the name “Israel” in the Hebrew Scriptures,⁴³ Danell initiated the section dedicated to Ezekiel by stating that the “problem of the meaning of the name Israel in Ezekiel is closely connected with the literary problems of the book. After having been regarded during the nineteenth century by most of the leading commentators as a literary unity, a book without problems, during the twentieth century and more particularly since the 1920’s, it has been one of the most debated books in the Old Testament”.⁴⁴ In other words, the content assigned to the concept of “Israel” is closely linked to the underlying presuppositions of the readers/interpreters vis-à-vis the book as a whole. Its meaning thus understood would not be intrinsic, but extrinsic to the text—which is an important ideological-critical insight.

After having examined chapters 1—24, which are mostly anti-Jerusalem and anti-Judah, Danell concluded that “the name Israel has no uniform sense there. It often means the *exile community*, but the population left in Judah and Jerusalem goes by this name too. Besides, Israel appears occasionally in the sense of northern Israel. Finally, it must sometimes mean the whole people”.⁴⁵ “Israel” and some of its combinations are also employed elsewhere in the book and appear to make a threefold reference to the *exiles*, the *people in Judah* and the *Northern Kingdom*.⁴⁶ Moreover, Danell concluded: “We found that the exiles of 597 BCE were looked upon as the people of the future, while those who stayed on after this year were abandoned to destruction. The group that would possibly escape with their lives (פְּלִטָה, שְׂאֲרִית), would do so to meet destruction in a foreign country. It seems then that this view is consistently maintained in the final section of the book, and we

linguistico ed etnico, c’è un assestamento territoriale, c’è un sistema socio-economico, c’è un’unificazione politica (o magari più d’una), c’è un’ortodossia religiosa (il dio unico e il tempio unico), c’è una validazione storiografica, c’è una validazione legislativa. E tutti questi aspetti, tutti questi percorsi, non sono usati univoci, rettilinei; hanno conosciuto regressi e riprese, oscillazioni e separazioni, anzi alcuni sono intervenuti quando altri erano già spenti per sempre”. *Idem*, 497.

⁴² Philip R. Davies, “The Origin of Biblical Israel,” in *JHS* 5 art. 17 (www.jhsonline.org) 8; whole article 1-15.

⁴³ Gustav Adolf Danell, *Studies in the Name Israel in the Old Testament* (Upsala: Appelbergs Boktryckeriaktiebolag, 1946).

⁴⁴ *Idem*, 239.

⁴⁵ *Idem*, 254.

⁴⁶ Cf. *idem*, 258ff.

may therefore assume that ‘the house of Israel’ for whom the prophet will proclaim his view on a very high mountain in the land of Israel (40:2 ff.), is built around the exiled community of 597 B.C. A definite impression is given that it is this body of exiles who preserved the traditions from Ezekiel and gave them their present shape. They have been distinct from those who lived on in the land after 597, and also from those who were deported in 586, and they have claimed to be alone the Israel of the future, with the addition however of the descendants of the Ephraimites. ‘Theirs is the land of Israel’.⁴⁷

In short, there is not one uniform meaning of “Israel” in Ezekiel. Furthermore, when the content of the book is examined, “true Israel” is found in the future which may be a critique of the understanding of “Israel” upheld by the book’s contemporaries.

In what follows, we shall list the meanings that “Israel” can have in the disputation speeches against God’s people in Ezekiel and thus show how polysemic it can be.

5. “ISRAEL” IN THE DISPUTATION SPEECHES IN WHICH YHWH CONFRONTS HIS PEOPLE

5.1 “ISRAEL” AS A GEOGRAPHICAL ENTITY

The data that are more straightforward are those phrases where the word is used accompanied by clearly geographical qualifiers.

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ על-גבול ישראל (“at the border of Israel”): Ezek 11:10.11 ▪ עדמת ישראל (“the soil of Israel”): Ezek 11:17 ▪ אל/על-אדמת ישראל (upon the soil of Israel”): Ezek 12:22, 18:2, 20:38.42, 33:24 and 37:12 ▪ בישראל (“in Israel”): Ezek 12:23, 18:3 ▪ הרי ישראל (“the mountains of Israel”): Ezek 33:28 ▪ בהר מרום ישראל (“the mountain height of Israel”): Ezek 20:40 |
|--|

In light of the fact that the Northern Kingdom of “Israel” did not exist anymore at the time framing the autobiographical narration of the prophet’s experiences, we can deduce that “Judah” presents itself as the most warranted virtual meaning to be actualized in these phrases *as used in the disputation speeches* of Ezekiel. **Whenever “Israel” is used in a geographical sense, it means “Judah”.** When the above word combinations are read in light of Ezek 14:7, which speaks of הגר [...] בישראל (“the sojourner [...] in Israel,” compare with Lev 22:18, 1 Chr 22:2, 2 Chr 2:16 and 30:25),⁴⁸ as well as Ezek 11:10.11 with its mention of אל/על-גבול ישראל (“at the border of Israel”), provided we translate גבול as “border” in light of Ezek 11:9.11 and not as “territory”.⁴⁹ In this case, “Israel” could function as synonymous with Judah.

⁴⁷ *Idem*, 260.

⁴⁸ Cf. Graham Harvey, *The True Israel: Uses of the names Jew, Hebrew and Israel in Ancient Jewish and Early Christian Literature* (Leiden – New York – Köln: Brill, 1996) 177-182.

⁴⁹ Cf. *idem*, 182-184.

How can we explain this? Ezekiel seems to view the future as entailing the gathering of the dispersed into some sort of United Kingdom (cf. Ezek 37:15ff.) with a centralized cult in the mountain height of “Israel” (cf. Ezek 20:40). This may indicate that the book works on the basis of the idyllic picture of the Davidic United Monarchy of old, with the only difference that due to the lack of independence in the North (political “Israel”) and of recognition of its inhabitants (now called “Samaritans”), Ezekiel identifies “Israel” with Judah, reducing it to its southern part.

5.2 “ISRAEL” AS A SOCIAL ENTITY

“Israel” is also used in phrases referring to a group of people whose identity must be determined each time on its own merits.

▪ **בית ישראל** (“house of Israel”): Ezek 11:5, 12:24, 12:27, 18:6.15.25.29.30.31, 20:39.44, 33:10.11, 33:20

This phrase can refer to the “remainder of Israel” in Judah.⁵⁰ This is the case in Ezek 11:5, where the context indicates that it is the leaders that remained in Jerusalem after the first *gōlāh* that think that “they are the meat and the city is the pot” (Ezek 11:3). This is confirmed by the whole of Ezekiel 8—11, especially 11:1.13.22-25, which belong to the autobiographical framework of the narration. Ezek 12:24 would also seem to point to those in Judah (cf. Ezek 12:22.23). The use of the phrase **בית ישראל** (“(oh) house of Israel”) in Ezek 18:6.15.29.30.31 within a context that speaks of eating *upon the mountains* (cf. Ezek 18:5.11.15) reinforces the suggestion that it is “the remainder of Judah” during Zedekiah’s period that are meant. It responds to the profile of the people in Judah sketched by the book and is mentioned within the autobiographical framework before the fall of Jerusalem with no signs indicating that it provides anticipated information about the far-off future. We read **בית ישראל** (“oh, house of Israel”) in Ezek 20:39.44 as referring primarily to the “men from amongst the elders of Israel,” the thematized addressees of the unit, whom we can best see as representing Judah within the narration. We also read Ezek 33:10.11 as referring to the people left in Judah between the first group of exiles or first *gōlāh* and the destruction of Jerusalem.

This phrase can refer also to the first *gōlāh* in Babylonia.

The emphasis placed on the person of the prophet in Ezek 12:27 (**הוא** is used twice) would seem to indicate that this disputation speech belongs to the stratum of the book trying to vindicate the prophet’s ministry⁵¹ (compare with Ezek 33:30-33). This would suggest that the expression **בית ישראל** (“the house of Israel”) in Ezek 12:27 may be read

⁵⁰ Cf. Ezek 11:13.

⁵¹ As Lust has suggested, this disputation speech which is a plus in relation to papyrus 967 may indeed be an attempt at vindicating not only Ezekiel (the narrative *actant*), but also Ezekiel (the book), and its eschatological components; cf. Johan Lust, “Major Divergences between LXX and MT in Ezekiel,” in Schenker, Adrian (ed.), *The Earliest Text of the Hebrew Bible. The Relationship between the Masoretic Text and the Hebrew Base of the Septuagint Reconsidered* [IOSCS, Congress Series, 52] (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2003) 85-86.89; whole article: 83-92.

as referring first and foremost to Ezekiel's (the prophet's) own community, differing noticeably from the meaning it carries in Ezek 12:24. We also understand Ezek 33:20 as referring to the first *gōlāh*, even though this case is far from clear.

▪ כל-בית ישראל ("the whole house of Israel"): 37:11

This phrase is employed in Ezek 37:11 to describe "future Israel," the one that is to be brought to life by means of the prophetic word and YHWH's life-giving breath. The qualifications אל-אדמת ישראל ("to the soil of Israel") in Ezek 37:12, and על-אדמתכם ("upon your own soil") in Ezek 37:14 undoubtedly suggest that this future "Israel" will be made up of all those that are *not in Judah*, their own soil, but in the dispersion.

▪ כל-בית ישראל כלה ("the whole house of Israel, all of it"): Ezek 11:15, 20:40

This phrase can refer to the dispersion (within which the Babylonian first *gōlāh* is subsumed).

Ezek 11:14-21 places כל-בית ישראל כלה ("the whole house of Israel, all of it," Ezek 11:15) amongst the nations and the countries. "Israel" would (primarily) not include those that stayed on in Jerusalem (and Judah) after the first *gōlāh* of 597 BCE,⁵² but those in the dispersion, particularly those scattered at the time of the capture of Jerusalem.

This phrase can refer also to "future Israel," the "Israel" that must yet be created.

In Ezek 20:40, this expression is used to speak of future "Israel," the one that has never existed yet, the one that will stem from the dispersion. Thus, the "Israel" of the future would encompass a recognizable social group, excluding the residents of Judah. It was the function of Ezek 33:23-29 to make sure that the implied readers understand that there will be no one left in Judah (at least, no one deserving mention). The desolate land would be waiting, as it were, for the arrival of true "Israel".

The above means that, while the concept of "Israel" is *apparently* being made more inclusive by adding כלה ("all of it"), its content becomes increasingly pregnant with exclusivism. The "inhabitants of Jerusalem" were exclusivistic insofar as they excluded all those that had not been left in the land, and Ezek 11:15-18 is exclusivistic insofar as it appears to exclude anybody who is not abroad, away from Judah. In Ezek 37:15ff., the book will reinterpret "Israel" not only in relationship to Judah but also to northern (true political) "Israel": not only is true "Israel" to be found in the dispersion as far as the homeland Judahites are concerned, but also in relation to the "Samaritans" (the proper heirs to the term "Israel"). It would thus appear that Ezekiel expropriates, at least theoretically, the use of the concept of "Israel" from both homeland Judahites and Samaritans. The initial reference to "nations"

⁵² In Renz's words: "The book will be inclusive with regard to members of the former northern kingdom (37:15ff) and even with regard to other nationals (47:22f), but it is severe in its insistence that the Jerusalemites have no part in the Israel of the future," Thomas Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel* (Leiden: Brill, 1999) 69.

(in the first chapters) and even the concept of “scattering” may thus have to be understood in this way. Even if this is merely an exaggeration that does not reflect historical events (which is also plausible), it still is a surprising ideological-theological paradigm shift.

In short, “Israel,” in Ezekiel’s disputation speeches in which YHWH confronts His people, means several things. In geographical terms, it points primarily to Judah. In social terms, it is used to refer (a) to the people left in Judah and Jerusalem (above all the leading segments of the population), both before (e.g. Ezek 11:2-12) and immediately after (e.g. Ezek 33:23-29) the collapse of Jerusalem, (b) to the first exilic community or *gōlah*, (c) to the dispersion or *diaspora*, for which the Babylonian exile functions as an interpretative paradigm, and, finally, (d) to the future “Israel” that YHWH will create after the dispersed have been gathered and the rebels purged from amongst them in order to re-establish the honour of His Name. The nations that saw the idolatry which led them into exile and/or the dispersion (encompassing also the earlier dispersion of the Northern Kingdom) will see them admit their error in the future when YHWH gathers them and brings them to their own land around the future central temple in Jerusalem.

6. CONSEQUENCES FOR THEOLOGY AND EXEGESIS

6.1 The word “Israel” offers us a good study case showing how the meaning(s) of a word can be expanded through its use; so much so that it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to isolate one of the meanings and classify it as “erroneous”. It is at this point that, if we take the parameters of the Canon as reflecting the grammar or rule of the Jewish Scriptures’ language game, we will have to say that the expansion of meaning is often fuelled by strongly ideological concerns. We must be aware of these dynamics as we read-interpret.

A study of the value connotations of the word as it is used, going beyond its cognitive possibilities, will probably indicate that it is often employed to call upon the “targeted audiences” of the texts to identify themselves with “Israel,” be it in order to invite them to consider themselves blessed by God (even to the wilful exclusion of others), or to bring them to shame and exhort them to repent for their wrongdoings.

6.2 Our question about the virtual meanings of “Israel” and the polysemic answer we have given based on a synchronic reading of the texts do not undermine the efforts of diachronic history-oriented scholars; on the contrary, they highlight the need for a historiographical explanation of why and how the diverse ideologies at work in the texts brought about so many expansions of the virtualities of this word. It is becoming quite clear in this respect that the influence of the Persian period on the composition of the Jewish Canonical Scriptures was far greater than readers could ever have imagined in the past by looking at the old “Histories of Israel”. In Davies’ words: “the historical roots of ‘biblical Israel’ in the religious discourse and practice of the sixth and

fifth centuries may hold the key to the burst of Judean literary activity that laid the basis of the canon we know call the ‘Hebrew Bible’”.⁵³

6.3 Those who try to search for the ideological affiliation of the literary agents responsible for the Canonical Books ought to take up Ben Zvi’s caveat. Insofar as these Holy Texts are written works they belong within the circle of the literati,⁵⁴ i.e. of those who were not only able to read and write, but also to compose these “books” and pass them on (often after having edited them).

The fact that the educated circles were ultimately those responsible for the *books* is not an irrelevant piece of information; it bears strongly on the ideological use of the word “Israel” as employed in these texts. Ben Zvi has suggested that many of the occurrences of “Israel” in the Hebrew Bible must be viewed as referring primarily to the *leading classes*: “it is reasonable to assume that within the discourse of the early post-monarchic period, ‘Israel’ stood—at least on some occasions—for the king and the Judahite monarchic elite”.⁵⁵

The mentions of “the elders of Judah,” “the elders of Israel,” “the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (as opposed to “the people”), “the prince(s),” “the priests,” “the Levites” and “the prophets” found throughout Ezekiel and elsewhere in the Canon are all socially-laden concepts indicating that the discourse within which these written texts found their place was conducted especially by the leading figures of the people and at the upper levels of society.

6.4 The example of Ezekiel’s manifold use of “Israel” contains a caveat for all readers of all Holy Scriptures: the fact that the same lexeme is used repeatedly within one and the same literary work does not imply that we must always actualize the same virtual meaning. The warning against any assumption that lexical equivalence between languages, times and places entails semantic parity, is particularly important in the case of writings that are received as Holy and taken as points of reference for personal and social behaviour, and for delimiting orthodoxy and orthopraxis. We, as readers, ought to be aware of this and avoid interpretations of the text in its own terms that are anachronistic and therefore (synchronically) unjustifiable. This warning applies also to concepts such as “Messiah,” “God’s Word,” “Son of God,” “God the Son,” “Church,” “Jew,” “Islam,” “Muslim” and so on.

⁵³ Philip R. Davies, “The Origin of Biblical Israel,” 13.

⁵⁴ Cf. Ehud Ben Zvi, “Writings, Speeches, and the Prophetic Books,” 5-16. See also A. Demsky & M. Bar-Ilan, “Writing in Ancient Israel and Early Judaism,” in M. J. Mulder (ed.), *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum, Section II, volume I, MIKRA* (Assen – Maastricht: Van Gorcum / Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988) 1-38. See also Roger T. Beckwith, “Formation of the Hebrew Bible” in M. J. Mulder (ed.), *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum, Section II, volume I, MIKRA* (Assen – Maastricht: Van Gorcum / Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988) 39-86.

⁵⁵ Ehud Ben Zvi, “Inclusion in and Exclusion from Israel as Conveyed by the Use of the Term ‘Israel’ in Post-Monarchic Biblical Texts,” in Holloway, Steven W. and Handy, Lowell K. (eds), *The Pitcher is Broken: Memorial Essays for Gösta Ahlström* [JSOTSup, 190] (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press) 121; whole article: 95-149.

6.5 The fact that words are polysemic and that their polysemy can expand has real implications for the qualification of interpretations as “explanation,” “evolution” or “distortion” of ideas present in the Holy Scriptures. If the virtual meanings of a word can increase in number, how are we then to judge between “normal or correct” (“orthodox”) and “abnormal or erroneous” (heterodox) usages? Do we not run the risk of whitewashing heretic readings of texts in the name of expanding polysemy? Correct actualizations are those that are “backed up” or “warranted;” however, justification depends on the initial criterion and the contours of the language game we have opted to play as we set out on reading journey. For instance, we could read Ezekiel in light of itself or in light of the way the Qumran texts used it. In the first case, Ezekiel will be its own criterion of actualization; an interpretive reading that is not backed up by Ezekiel’s own elements and in its own terms cannot be said to be warranted. In the second case, the interpretative game will include Qumran texts, which means that its rules of interpretation will justify other types of actualizations. Our initial list of virtual meanings of “Israel” is another example of how this dynamic works. Our list of virtual meanings took the whole range of Canonical Writings synchronically read as its framework, while it left out other approaches (e.g. diachronic) and other writings (e.g. the LXX in its own right, the Qumran Texts, the Christian Canonical Scriptures, other Jewish authoritative writings and the Qur’ān). This means that the correctness of our present suggestions can be judged as justified or as wholly unwarranted only by playing the same game and applying the same rules; otherwise we would be crisscrossing data that methodologically-speaking are not comparable because they have not been established and read in the same way, nor looked at from the same perspective.

6.6 Theological systems that borrow their language for speaking of the Unspeakable and their imagery for describing the Invisible from Holy Scriptures cannot lose sight of the implications of the view that meaning (“Bedeutung”) in and through use and that sense (“Sinn”) is made possible when words and/or other signs interact in particular combinations.

While our different religious traditions may still uphold the conviction that in and through their canonized texts new windows can and do open up whereby human consciousness is enlightened by “insights” that come from Beyond, they must acknowledge the role and dynamics of language (as *parole*) as means of God-human communication. Sacred Texts *do not contain* God’s Word; rather, they embody the capability to *mediate* it whenever the passage from *langue* to *parole* takes place when the language game is played. Divine Revelation is a language *act*: it *happens* when the Holy Texts stop being mere dead marks or memories stashed away in the human brain, and become activated and actualized by means of interpretative reading or recitation when words are allowed to describe their own reality from one or other perspective and to invite their audience *to see things as they do* (because “to see” = “to see as”).

Our theologies must therefore not succumb to the temptation to worship the dead written word *as though it was God in person*. Words, too, belong to the realm of semiotics; they are signs comparable to other

signs, such as pictures and statues, to which the distinction between *signifier* and *signified* still applies. The idolatry of the written word ought to be avoided just as the adoration of statues and icons. We could thus say that the *locus* where divine revelation proper happens is not the book, but the encounter or interaction between the Holy Texts and the interpretative quest of their readers and (re)readers as they actualize concrete virtual meanings. Divine Revelation through canonical Holy Texts comes about in and through interpretation, for every reading or recitation entails an interpretation, i.e. a series of committed options to play the language game, applying certain strategies here and there and leaving out other courses of action.