

# Componential Analysis of the Lexeme דָּבָר (‘plague’) in Ancient Hebrew

*By*

Massimiliano Marrazza

*Florence*

In ancient Hebrew the epidemic is indicated by the lexeme: דָּבָר. In biblical Hebrew the lexeme is indicative of some form of epidemic disease, but it is not easy to apprehend. In fact, it appears in lexical solidarity with other lexemes that indicate catastrophes and are the sign of divine wrath. The reference to akk. *dibirru* (‘bad’) is excluded from the CAD,<sup>1</sup> while Driver talks about ug. *dbr* (‘death’).<sup>2</sup> Wiseman noted that the sequence of calamities that is observed in the standard poetic language also appears in the vassalage treaties of Esarhaddon, in the list of curses that pertain to the offender.<sup>3</sup> However, in these lists the *dibirru* lexeme is not found; in its place we find the lexeme *mūtānu* which corresponds to ‘pestilence’.<sup>4</sup> This same lexeme has been present in Aramaic with the same meaning since its ancient phase<sup>5</sup> and is often used by Pešitta and some targumim to translate דָּבָר.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* 1956, v 3, p. 145a.

<sup>2</sup> DRIVER 1956, p. 154b.

<sup>3</sup> WISEMAN 1958, pp. 455-56.

<sup>4</sup> *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* 1977, v 10/2 p. 296.

<sup>5</sup> See comment on Num 14: 12.

<sup>6</sup> See analysis below.

### 1. *Methodological introduction*

The following is a component analysis to provide the lexeme with additional sense components and to re-detect if it was denotative of contagious diseases in ancient Israel. A componential analysis (CA) is only effective in the so-called ‘functional languages’ (FL), understood as linguistic units characterized by a chronological, dialectal, sociological, and stylistic homogeneity. This statement is intended to respond to the multiple objections made about the validity of the CA with respect to the dictionaries in use and their progress.<sup>7</sup> A CA made through the functional languages of a *corpus* of a language can highlight the evolutions of the distinctive features of the lexeme on a diachronic and non-diachronic basis. This type of analysis shows its validity compared to others. It is able to observe, through the study of the modifications of a lexematic structure as a whole, in fact the diachronic changes consist not only in the appearance of a lexeme, but also in the displacement or disappearance of meaning components of a lexeme from a functional language to another.<sup>89</sup> However, the scholar thinks of some modifications, namely that it resorted to measures of degrees of value for lexical items, rather than absolute values. These reports are accepted in De Stadler, but in the case of this study, which refers to the research on the lexical field of the hyponyms and hyperonyms indicating diseases of the corpus described below, the CA does not show the limits found by van Steenbergen for universal names. The analyzed lexemes afferent to the lexical field of sicknesses in ancient Hebrew share elements of meaning, but the semic value has also been given on a variable basis. And so, for example, the lexeme צָרְעָה shares with many other lexemes the distinctive feature ‘which confers impurities’ but is denoting ‘a spectrum of epidermal diseases’ if the class is ‘man’.<sup>10</sup>

The other investigations do not take into account functional languages but, As I will say later, only their introduction into the method can differentiate the semic values of a given lexeme.

### 2. *Analyzed corpus and functional language in ancient Hebrew*

The analyzed *corpus* of AH from an historical perspective is constituted by the Masoretic Text (MT) which contains the attestations of AH and standard Hebrew, by the Hebrew version of Ben Sira’ and the documents discovered in Qumran.

In light of the considerations made above on what is meant by ‘meaning’, which is much more complex than is normally admitted, it is not clear why analyses that do not go beyond chronological categorizations on which, moreover, there are few margins of certainty, are the only ones that are considered ‘useful’; while it seems that the legitimacy of other categories of research that have non-chronological focuses, but are fundamental in the evolution of a linguistic layer, is heuristically weak. This research, in fact, admits and enhances diachronic development, but also makes use of variational and diasystematic focuses.

As mentioned above, a FL is not, therefore, just a historical language or a language definable exclusively based on its own characteristics and autonomy (lexical, syntactic and grammatical), which can be placed at a precise moment in the general evolution of a language. On the other

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<sup>7</sup> This refers to CLINES 1993-2011, KOEHLER, BAUMGARTNER 1998, BROWN, DRIVER, BRIGGS 1906-1952, and ZORRELL 1940-1989.

<sup>8</sup> See SCIUMBATA 2005, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> VAN STEENBERGEN 2002, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> MARRAZZA 2019, p 99-115.

hand, a CA that considers only historical languages would be heuristically interested in the possible evolution of the language *tout court*. This is already done with customary approaches. As linguistic monoliths, we would have a biblical Hebrew (BH) and a Mishnaic Hebrew, for example, and we would not give attention to the coexistence in the first language or in the second of several languages, each of which is evidently synchronic with characteristics of dialectal and sociolinguistic autonomy that demand adequate attention.<sup>11</sup>

The functional language is only one segment of a historical language and has a heuristic relevance in the attention it places as a homogeneous linguistic unit, analyzed synchronically and independent of the other linguistic layers. This study will refer to both historical languages (e.g. Biblical Hebrew, Qumranic Hebrew) and functional languages (early poetical language, juridical-cultic language). The former concerns the temporal delimitation of the *corpus* analyzed, the latter form the heuristic foundations of the CA.

Therefore, in order to be diastematic, that is, to explore chronological and non-chronological focuses, each lexeme must be analyzed within each functional language. Only in this way will the CA give information on semantic shifts from one functional language to another, in an evolutionary sense, but not always strictly diachronic.

The relationships of meaning that oppose the lexemes in a FL take place within semantic frames: dimensions. The more general definition, that of Geckeler, is also the one that we adopt: "Gliederungsgesichtspunkt der in einem Worterfeld funktioniert und der sozusagen die Skala für die Oppositionen zwischen bestimmten Lexemen des betreffenden Wortfeldes bildet".<sup>12</sup>

Of course, for a dimension to be detectable, it is a necessary condition that it contains a significant number of opposing lexemes. The application of the size criterion guarantees greater heuristic solidity to the CA method, since it represents the place of oppositions from which the distinctive constitutive features of meaning emerge.

### 3. *Distributional analysis of the lexeme דָּבָר*

A distributional analysis of the occurrences of lexeme דָּבָר in the various functional languages will be carried out in order to detect their predominance.

The distributional analysis detects the presence of the דָּבָר lexeme in almost all FL, with a maximum frequency in standard poetical Hebrew as in the following diagram from which only the most characteristic examples will be cited in order to determine the nature of the lexemes under analysis:

Chronological subdivision	Occurrences in FL	Corpus
Classical-standard Hebrew	BH1: Num 14: 12; 2Sam 24: 13; 15 1Kings 8: 37; Ex 5: 3; 9: 3, 15; Lev 26: 25; Deut 28: 21. BH2: Ps 78: 50; Ps 91: 3; 6; Jer 14: 12; Jer 21: 6; 7; 9 Jer 24: 10; Jer 27: 8; 13; Jer 28: 8; Jer 29: 17; Jer 29: 18; Jer 32: 24; 36; Jer 34: 17; Jer 38: 2; Jer 42: 17; Jer 42: 22; Jer 44: 13; Ezek 5: 12; 17; Ezek 6: 11; 12; Ezek 7: 15 (2x); Ezek 12: 16; Ezek 14: 19; 21; Ezek 28: 23; Ezek 33: 27; Ezek 38: 22; Ho 13: 14; Am 4: 10; Hab 3: 5	MT

<sup>11</sup> ZANELLA 2010, p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> GECKELER 1973, p. 97.

Post-classical Hebrew	LBH1: 1Chr 21: 12; 14; 2Chr 6: 28; 2Chr 7: 13; 2Chr 20: 9 BSH: Sir 39: 29 (B IX v Mas I) Sir 40: 9 (B X r). QH2: 11Q11 6:5; 11Q 11 6: 7 QH4: 4Q171 fl_2ii: 1; 4Q171 fl+3_4iii: 4; 11Q 14 fl ii: 13-14	Ben Sira'  Languages of Qumran
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#### 4. *Historical-narrative language*

Num 14: 12

אֶכְנֹנּוּ בַדָּבָר וְאֹרְשָׁנּוּ וְאֶעֱשֶׂה לְאֻמָּה לְגוֹיִם גְּדוֹל וְעֲצוּם מִמֶּנּוּ

«I will strike him with the דָּבָר and destroy him and make you a nation larger and more numerous than that»

The lexeme דָּבָר represents one of the punishments reserved for the people of Israel who have just abandoned Egypt and show their hesitancy in continuing to the promised land or returning to Egypt. Yhwh responds to Moses with the aforementioned verse showing his anger towards the doubting people.<sup>13</sup> As can be seen from now on, the lexeme דָּבָר indicates a disease inflicted on the whole people, a meaning that will remain in almost all occurrences. The Targumim bear no trace of the lexeme in analysis which is replaced by the syntagma: אֶמְחִינּוּ בְמוֹתָא (“I will strike him with death”), while Pešitta translates דָּבָר with the lexeme *mwtn* (‘plague’)<sup>14</sup> already attested in ancient Aramaic: *mwtn* | *šbt* | *zy* | *nyrgl* (“the plague, the rod of Nergal”).<sup>15</sup> The LXXs resort to the accusative θάνατον (‘death’), while the Vulgate has *pestilentiam* (‘pestilence’).

2Sam 24: 13

וַיָּבֹא גָד אֶל-דָּוִד וַיִּגְדֹּל-לוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הֲתִבּוֹא לָךְ שִׁבְעַ שָׁנִים | רָעָב | בְּאֶרֶץ אֱמ-שְׁלֹשָׁה חֳדָשִׁים נִסָּף לְפָנַי-צָרִיךָ וְהוּא רִדְפָךָ וְאִם-תִּיָּוֵת שְׁלִשֶׁת יָמִים דָּבָר בְּאֶרֶץ עַמְתָּה נָע וְרָאָה מִה-אֲשִׁיב שְׁלֹחֵי דָבָר

«Gad went to David, told him this and said: “Do you want seven years of famine in your country, or three months escaping from your enemies who are pursuing you, or three days of דָּבָר in your country? Now reflect and decide what I have to answer to the one who sent me”»

This verse is included in the narrative of the ‘census of David’ and corresponds to 2Chr 21 with some variants. David is compelled to censor the people of Israel (by the will of Yhwh *supra*), by Šatan in 2Chr 21.<sup>16</sup> However, according to Jewish perception, the census, as a form of counting individuals, implies a form of ‘possession’ and is therefore a serious transgression for Yhwh. He therefore speaks through His prophet Gad and leaves three options to David, who is evidently guilty before his God of pride and vainglory and must choose a punishment. The lexeme דָּבָר is indicative of a disease that could exterminate an entire people, the most fatal consequence of David's erroneous choice (that of not falling into enemy hands). As Sheppard has noted, the compositional core of 2Sam 21-24 constitutes a sort of autonomous narrative of traditions around the figure of David, with a collection of stories gathered in what has been

<sup>13</sup> ASHLEY 1993, p. 251.

<sup>14</sup> SOKOLOFF 1990, p. 297a; SOKOLOFF 2003, p. 651b; JASTROW 1950, p. 752, TAL 2000, p. 459.

<sup>15</sup> Bilingual of Fakhariyeh in GREENFIELD 1981, p. 110-115.

<sup>16</sup> The editor of the 1Chr made explicit the subject of the order received by David in 1Chr 21: 1: וַיַּעֲמֵד שָׁטָן עַל-: וַיִּשְׁרָאֵל נִסָּף אֶת-דָּוִד לְמַנּוֹת אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל: («Šatan revolted against Israel. He pushed Israel against Israel»): Here the proper name Šatan is used, even based on similar considerations in 1Kings 11: 14; 23; 25 and Ps 109: 6 the lexeme corresponds to a common name for ‘opponent’, see KNOPPERS 2004, p. 742 and fl.

called the appendix of narrative 2Sam.<sup>17</sup> The TgY<sup>18</sup> translates with the lexeme מוֹתָא ('death'), Pešitta has *mwtm* ('plague'), the LXX carry the accusative θάνατον ('death'), while the Vulgate has *pestilentiam* ('pestilence').

2Sam 24: 15

וַיִּמְנוּ יְהוָה דָּבָר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל מִהַבֹּקֶר וְעַד-עֶת מוֹעֵד וְעַד-בֹּקֶר שְׁבַע שָׁבָעִים אֶלֶף אִישׁ

«So the Yhwh sent the דָּבָר to Israel from that morning until the appointed time; seventy thousand men died from Dan to Beer-Seba (?)»

The דָּבָר quoted in this verse is the effect of David's choice not to fall into the hands of the enemies: "that he does not give in to the hands of the enemy" (2Sam 21: 14 וּבִיַד-אֲדָמִים אֶל-אֶפְלָה). As a consequence of this choice, Yhwh sends the דָּבָר to Israel. The lexeme in analysis indicates a highly endemic disease, but there are no elements so far to characterize it as a form of 'pestilence'.<sup>19</sup> He will exterminate the verse informs us, a large number of men. The autonomy of the compositional core 2Sam 21-24 has already been mentioned above, but the editor of the appendix has tried to create a link with the corresponding verse of 1Chr 21: 12: "אִם-שָׁלוֹשׁ שָׁנִים רָעָב " וְאִם-שְׁלֹשׁ יָמִים חֶרֶב וְיְהוָה וְדָבָר בְּאֶרֶץ וּמִלְאָךְ יְהוָה וְאִם-שְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים חֶרֶב וְיְהוָה וְחֶרֶב אוֹיְבֶיךָ וְחֶרֶב אוֹיְבֶיךָ לְמִשְׁגַּת וְאִם-שְׁלֹשׁ יָמִים חֶרֶב וְיְהוָה וְדָבָר בְּאֶרֶץ וּמִלְאָךְ יְהוָה " ("either three years of famine, or three months to be swept away before your foes, while the sword of your enemies overtakes you, or else three days of the sword of the Yhwh, even pestilence in the land, and the angel of the Yhwh destroying throughout all the territory of Israel." Now, therefore, consider what answer I shall return to Him who sent me"). A verse which presents a variant between נִסְפָּה ('to be taken away') of 1Chr 21: 12 and אֶפְלָה (pa. 'fall') of 2Sam 24: 15. The ancient versions of 2Sam have the same translations as 2Sam 24: 13.

The examples cited clearly show that in the narrative language, the analyzed lexeme is connotative of a 'calamitous event' emanating from divine wrath and is not accompanied by the pathognomonic that denote it as a contagious disease.

### 5. Early Poetical Language

Jer 14: 12

כִּי בַחֲרֹב וּבְרָעָב וּבְדָבָר אֲנֹכִי מְכַלֶּה אוֹתָם: [...]

«[...] because I will exterminate them with the sword, with hunger and with the דָּבָר»

The analyzed lexeme is part of the punishments that Yhwh reserves for Israel for its iniquity. These are, in turn, inserted in the prayer of Jeremiah. Once again lexical solidarity can be found with words that indicate by extension war, famine and an infectious disease without any identifiable treatment. Although the text presents a clear metaphor, it may be conceded that the lexeme דָּבָר refers to various contagious diseases that come about as a result of sharing the space of a besieged city, even in light of its frequency in the book of Jeremiah.<sup>20</sup> In the TgY, the translation can be super-imposed on the cited verse, but the lexeme דָּבָר is replaced with

<sup>17</sup> SHEPPARD 1980, pp. 144-158.

<sup>18</sup> Legenda: BH1 – Historical-narrative Language; BH2 – Early poetical language; BSH – Poetical language of Ben Sira'; LBH1 – Late historical-narrative language; QH2 – Poetical language of Qumran; QH4 – Sectarian language of Qumran.

<sup>19</sup> Plague in the sense of an infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*.

<sup>20</sup> WILLIS 2002, p. 143.

במותא (“by death”), while Pešitta uses the already analyzed *mwt* (‘plague’, ‘pestilence’). With instrumental value it should be considered ἐν θανάτῳ (“by the death”) of the LXX and the ablative for plague (*pestilentia*) of Jerome.

Ezek 5: 12

שְׁלֹשִׁים יָדָרְךָ יָמוֹתָי וּבָרְעָב יִכְלוּ בְּתוֹכָךָ וְהִשְׁלִישִׁית בַּחֶרֶב יִפְלוּ סְבִיבוֹתָיִךְ וְהִשְׁלִישִׁית לְכָל־רֵיחַ אֲזוּרָה וְחָרֵב אֶרֶץ אֲחֵרִים:

«A third part of you will die of דָּרְךָ, and will be consumed by the hunger among you; a third part will fall to the swords around you, and the other third part I will scatter to all the winds, and I will draw the sword against it »

The lexeme דָּרְךָ is discussed in the same hyperbolic sequence in connection with the Book of Jeremiah, as the fate of a part of the rebellious people, while the second part of the verse refers to the prophecy of the scattering. Ezekiel also prophesies the punishments for Judah's transgressions. The apocalyptic-style compositional core is usually considered a later addition to the more subdued tones of the second part of the book; however, the use of the apocalyptic-style contributes to the cataloging of Ezekiel in BH2.<sup>21</sup>

Hab 3: 5

לִפְנֵי יְהוָה יֵלֵךְ דָּרְךָ וַיִּצָא רֶשֶׁף לְרַגְלָיו:

«In front of him the דָּרְךָ walks and (?) the fire goes out before his feet»

The verse quoted refers to the power of Yhwh, the bearer, in punishment, of דָּרְךָ and רֶשֶׁף (‘fire’, therefore, ‘burning fever’). The text is drafted in the form of a dialogue and presents numerous archaisms such as the *scriptio defectiva* in the body of the word or the scarce presence in the text of the article, as highlighted by Albright.<sup>23</sup> The lament tells of a punishing and powerful God who leaves no hope in his anger: catastrophic and exterminating diseases are His emanation. The TgY does not refer to the דָּרְךָ, but alludes to the “angel of death” (מְלַאֲךְ מוֹתָא), Pešitta renders the lexeme in analysis with *mwt* (‘death’), the LXX read: “before his person proceeds the Word” (πρὸ προσώπου αὐτοῦ πορεύσεται λόγος), completely renouncing any reference to the ‘plague’, death (*mors*) returns in the version of Jerome. The Seventies probably read by vocalizing *davar* and this justifies the surrender in λόγος.

In BH2 there is a generic use of the lexeme in analysis and only in Jeremiah can it also be thought of as a distinctive feature linked to some form of ‘contagion’. In the only place in Jeremiah where the lexeme דָּרְךָ is not included in the formula “of sword, of hunger and of דָּרְךָ” (Jer 21: 6), we learn that the bacterium is also transmitted to animals and that of the reception of the plague louse on pets or whoever lives in close contact with humans, the rat is in fact only the preferred vehicle. In Ezekiel the pathognomonic elements are more numerous, since the lexeme associated with the deaths of people, with the contagion of animals and men and with crowded and closed places. These would be enough to define our lexeme as indicative of some death, but certainly not of bubonic plague. The lexeme in BH2 seems to denote a generic annihilation due to any disease of contagion, as evidenced by the formula, mentioned above, proper to this language and present in Jer 14: 12; Jer 21: 7; 9; Jer 24: 10; Jer 27: 8; 13; Jer 28: 8; Jer 29: 17; 18; Jer 32: 24; 36; Jer 34: 17; Jer 38: 2; Jer 42: 17; 22; Jer 44: 13 and Ezek 6: 11 and 14: 12.

<sup>21</sup> BROWN, FITZMYER, MURPHY 2002, p. 399.

<sup>23</sup> ALBRIGHT 1950, p. 10.

As the origin of this lexeme Blair used the unusual expression in Ps 91: 3: כִּי הוּא יִצְיִילֶךָ מִפֶּהּ יְקוּשׁ מִדְּבַר הַהוֹת: ("He certainly frees you from the hunter's trap and from the דָּבַר of destruction") by establishing that the lexeme was by no means indicative of a disease, but referred to a demon.<sup>24</sup> In this proposition, the lexeme analyzed would be a proper name and in support of this he, together with others, points out that in the LXX, דָּבַר corresponds to *λόγος*. Blair therefore means the aforementioned Ps 91: 3: דָּבַר הַהוֹת "דָּבַר of destruction" or "to spell calamity") with "Deber's destruction",<sup>25</sup> although Deber is not a recognized demon in Witton Davies' list.<sup>26</sup> Even the Assyrian Gaspar believed that Deber was a proper name and traced the lexeme to *ak. dab / paru* (= reject) and linked the name to the idea of refolement and catastrophe.<sup>27</sup> Although this thesis, which philologically attests to a divinity *Dābir* in Ebla and a *dbr*, probably to be understood as a proper name in Ugarit,<sup>28</sup> is well supported, the scholar is forced to admit that the tradition that lies behind 'plague' (already mentioned in Pešitta and definitive in Jerome) is the result of a process of identifying a vindictive god of an original polytheism in which exterminating divinities would manifest themselves with epidemics.

## 6. Late historical-narrative language

In this language, there is the second edition of the story of the census of David, which corresponds to the divine punishments. Among them, we still find the דָּבַר.

1Chr 21: 12

[...] וְדָבַר בְּאֶרֶץ וּמִלְאָף יְהוָה מִשְׁחִית בְּכָל-גְּבוּל יִשְׂרָאֵל [...]

«[...] or of דָּבַר and the messenger of Yhwh will bring destruction across the border of Israel [...]»

The quote shown here is part of the three choices that Yhwh grants to David to punish him for having ordered the census of the people. The other two consist of three years of famine, three months escaping from the enemy's sword and, finally, the דָּבַר. It is not said what causes Yhwh's anger, but in 1Ch 21, 1 reference is made to *Śatan* who inspires David's behaviour.<sup>29</sup> The duration of the punishments indicates their gravity and the דָּבַר seems the most dangerous, even if it is not directly inflicted by Yhwh, but by one of his messengers as in Ex 33, 2; 2Ki 19, 35; Ps 35, 5-6 and 78, 49. The news in the Chronicles makes use of the lexeme *mwtin* ('pestilence') like Pešitta. The LXXs have the usual lexeme for 'death' and the Vulgate reverses the lexemes, translating רָעָב ('famine') with *pestilentia* and דָּבַר with *mors*.

2Chr 7: 13

הֲנֹ אֶעֱצֹר הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹא-יִהְיֶה מָטָר וְהוֹ-אֶצְנֶנָּה עַל-חֲגָב לֶאֱכֹל הָאָרֶץ וְאִם-אֲשַׁלַּח דָּבַר בְּעַמִּי:

«If I close the sky so that there is no more rain or I order the locusts to devour the country, if I send the דָּבַר among my people»

2Chr 7 concludes the consecration of the Solomonic temple and the quotation reported is part of the reassurances of Yhwh, who appeared to Solomon in a dream. He will cease to punish

<sup>24</sup> BLAIR 2008, pp. 105-9.

<sup>25</sup> ID.: 106

<sup>26</sup> WITTON DAVIES 2010, p. 177.

<sup>27</sup> GASTER, FRAZER 1969, p. 771.

<sup>28</sup> BLAIR 2008, pp. 32-37.

<sup>29</sup> *Śatan*, also on the basis of similar considerations in 1Ki 11, 14; 23; 25 and Ps 109: 6 is not philologically a proper name, but corresponds to the common name for 'opponent'. See KNOPPERS 2004, p. 742 and fl.

the people for their transgressions if he delivers sincere prayers. The following verses show that the transgression reference is made to is to idolize or venerate other deities.<sup>30</sup> The TgCr translates with a periphrasis where Yhwh says that “he will send the angel of death” (אגרי מלאך מותא), Pešitta resorts to the usual *mwtm* (‘pestilence’), the LXX a θάνατος (‘death’) and the Vulgate *pestilentia* (‘pestilence’).

2Chr 20: 9

אם-תבוא עלינו רעה חרב שפוט ודבר ורעב געמ'ה לפני הבית הזה ולפני כי שמך בבית הזה ונזעק אליך מארתנו ותשמע ותושיע:

«Should evil come upon us, the sword, or judgment, or דבר, or famine, we will stand before this house and before You (for Your name is in this house) and cry to You in our distress, and You will hear and deliver us»

The quoted verse is part of the prayer that Ihošafaṭ addresses to Yhwh for the imminent attack by Edom. In many respects it seems a quotation from Solomon's prayer cited above, but with differences. The most relevant is the evident panic of Ihošafaṭ who expressly says: "We don't know what to do" in v 12 (לא נדע מה-נעשה), connoting the text with an “emotionally forceful rhetoric”,<sup>31</sup> while for Dillard the text is inserted in the “national complaint”.<sup>32</sup> It is important to note that the lexemes for “sword, judgment דבר or famine” appear in an absolute state and all belong to the collective רעה (‘calamity’), without additional specifications. The TgCr and Pešitta use the lexeme *mwtm* (‘pestilence’), the LXX in θάνατος (‘death’) and the Vulgate to *pestilentia* (‘pestilence’).

## 7. Poetical language of Ben Sira'

Sir 39: 29

נב[ראו] גם אלה למשפט [[ ]] אש וברד רע ודבר

«Fire and hail, evil and דבר [[ ]] These too were [created] for the judgment»

Ben Sira' 39 is a collection of quotes from eight punishments from various TM books inflicted by Yhwh on the man who leaves the Torah. In particular, the cited verse takes up 1Kings 8, 37 and Jer 21: 9. Unfortunately, the immediately preceding v is illegible, and no further references can be found. We have seen elsewhere the attention that Ben Sira' pays to medical prescriptions, but in this place for the lexeme in analysis there is no pathognomic and one can only hypothesize that the lexemes are arranged in an ascending climax of gravity in which דבר would represent the most catastrophic event of divine judgment. Both the Greek version of Ben Sira' and the Vulgate translate with ‘death’: respectively θάνατος and *mors*.

2 Sir 40: 9-10

ד[ב]ר ודם חרחר וחרב [[ ]] שד ושבר רעה ומות:

על רשע נבראה רעה [[ ]] [...]

«ד[ב]ר and blood, burning fire and sword [[ ]] plundering and destruction, evil and death.

Evil was created for the sinner [...] »

<sup>30</sup> DILLARD 1987, p. 59; THOMPSON 1994, p. 236.

<sup>31</sup> JAPHET 1993, p. 788.

<sup>32</sup> DILLARD 1987, p. 156.



The cited verse is part of the description of the misfortunes that are due to the sinner. Each social stratum is destined for suffering and death, Sirach warns, but the sinner carries his own self-destruction and will suffer seven times more than the wise. This verse is affected by the description of the divine punishments reserved for those who do not respect the covenant as they are represented in Dt 28: 15-68. From the places reported here, Beentjes notes, "it gradually becomes clear it is not Ben Sira's main intention to describe the basic qualities of human life, but to sketch a series of sanctions by which the wicked could be called to order".<sup>33</sup> The ancient versions are the same as those mentioned in connection with Sir 39: 29.

Both Sir 39: 29 and Sir 40: 9 report the lexeme דָּבַר in a climax of disasters that await the non-pious man and mention places in the MT. The same vb is dependent on the sg רעה ('evil') quoted in Sir 40: 10 which refers to and includes all the lexemes mentioned in the verse itself.

### 8. Poetical language of Qumran

11Q 11 6: 5

[כי ה]ואה יצילך מְ [פח יקו]ש מדבר הו[ות. ב] אברתו יסכ [לדך] [...]

«Certainly he] frees you from the [hunter's trap] and from the דָּבַר [of di[s]s[truct]ions [with] his feathers [you] will cover [...]]»

The lexeme דָּבַר is inserted in a metaphor that unites evil to the net used to imprison birds. Yhwh is the liberator first and then the protector. According to the scholar Pajunen, the function of this apocryphal Psalm was to be exorcistic and ritualistic,<sup>34</sup> as it was for Sanders for whom the Psalm was recited by anyone who needed protection from demons and spirits.<sup>35</sup> Yhwh has a saving connotation to which the possessed person appeals to be freed and the Psalm is written to be recited aloud.<sup>36</sup> For this same component, the lexeme דָּבַר is accompanied by the adjective הו[ות] ('mort[al]') and indicates a pathology without escape. Despite being a quotation, the occurrence is reported for the ritualistic and apotropaic character of the work that characterizes דָּבַר with a purely rhetorical appeal.

11Q 11 6: 6-7

לוא תירא [...]

מפחד לילה מחץ יעוף יומם. מקטב ישוד [צ]הרים מדבר [בא]פל

«[...] you won't be afraid

the terror of the night or the arrow that flies in the day [or the destruction that rages at noon or the דָּבַר of the da[rk] »

In this passage quoted by the same Apocryphal Psalm, the lexeme in analysis is inserted in conjunction with other lexemes indicative of harmful events: terror (פחד), arrow (חץ) and destruction (קטב), but none is pathognomic. The consoling character of the passage cited is proper to the apotropaic purpose of the Psalm, as has been said for the previous passage.

<sup>33</sup> BEENTJES 2006, p. 520.

<sup>34</sup> PAJUNEN 2009, p. 61-62.

<sup>35</sup> SANDERS 1997, p. 231.

<sup>36</sup> ALEXANDER 1997, p. 326

## 9. *Sectarian language of Qumran*

4Q171 fl\_2ii, 1-4

יובדו בחרב וברעב ובדבר. הרף מאף ועזוב חמה ואל  
תחר אך להרע כיא מרעים יכרתו. פשרו על כול השבים  
לתורה אשר לוא ימאנו לשוב מרעתם כיא כול הממריים  
לשוב מעונם יכרתו. וקואי יהוה המה ירשו ארץ

«So they will perish by the sword, by the famine and by the דבר. Leave anger and abandon ardour, do not become inflamed with evil, for the wicked will be destroyed. פשר for all those who return / to the law, who do not refuse to be separated from their impiety, since all those who refuse / to be separated from their impiety will be exterminated and those who hope in Yhwh will inherit the earth»

The lexeme in analysis is inserted in the usual sequence (for the sword, for the famine and for the דבר) in the pešer of Ps. 37 which highlights the contrast between the life of the righteous and that of the wicked using different biblical *topoi*.<sup>37</sup> The quote, however, is not from the Psalm and is reported in a work of sectarian content.

These are mostly “biblical allusions”,<sup>38</sup> that is biblical references, adapted however to the ethos of the sectarian narrative.<sup>39</sup> In particular, the lexeme is representative of the consequences for those who follow the man of lies (איש הכזב). Indeed, in the same text we read (4Q171, fl\_2i, 18-19) that:

ממר [שקר] פשרו על איש הכזב אשר התעה רבים באמר  
“his interpretation refers to the man of lies who misled many with misleading words”.

Also, the return (evidently to the Law) mentioned in v 2 is seen precisely in the redemption and is present several times in Am 4 (שוב) although in negative propositions. The final part of the quotation בחרב וברעב ובדבר (“of sword, famine or דבר) preserves the vb כרה ('exterminate'), a semantic juxtaposition that gives mortal gravity to the same lexical elements analyzed in EB2.<sup>40</sup>

The juxtaposition in the order of the lexical elements cited בחרב וברעב ובדבר is attested as has been seen sixteen times in EB, where it refers to false prophets, and the leitmotiv is represented by the lexeme נְשָׁקָר ('lie'):<sup>41</sup> those who preach resistance to the advancing of the army of Nebuchadnezzar.). In fact Jer 27: 13-14 declares:

«Why would you and your people want to die by the sword, by hunger and דָּבָר, as Yhwh foretold for the nation that will not submit to the king of Babylon?

Do not listen to the words of the prophets who say to you: "You will not be subject to the king of Babylon!" Because they preach lies to you (נְשָׁקָר) ». For the purpose of Pešer, on the other hand, בחרב וברעב ובדבר do not have any particular justification but they seem to be what

<sup>37</sup> HARTOG 2016, p. 267.

<sup>38</sup> KATZIN 2004, p. 122.

<sup>39</sup> TSO 2010, p. 197-203

<sup>40</sup> In the early poetical language: Jer 14: 12, 21: 9; 24: 10; 27: 8, 13; 29: 17, 18; 32: 24, 36; 38: 2; 42: 17, 22; 44: 13; Ezek 6: 11; 12: 16; 14: 22.

<sup>41</sup> KATZIN 2004, p. 128.

Katzin called “a stream of consciousness on free word associations on Biblical allusions”.<sup>42</sup> In the sixteen occurrences mentioned in EB, דָּבָר indicates a disease resulting from the sharing of confined spaces in a besieged city, here it loses all reference to any physiological-mental malaise.

4Q171 fl + 3\_4iii, 3- 4

פּשְׁרוֹ אֵל [שֶׁר] יַחִים בְּרַעַב בְּמוֹעֵד הָ[תַע]וֹת וּרְבִים  
[יִוְבְדוּ בְרַעַב וּבְדָבָר כּוֹל אֲשֶׁר לֹא יֵצֵא] וּ... [לְהִיּוֹת לְעָם]  
וְאוֹהֲבֵי יְהוָה כִּי־קָר כּוֹרִים

«His interpretation: he will keep alive those who live in famine and in the time of affliction, / but many will perish from hunger and דָּבָר: all those who do not go out with / the congregation of his chosen ones / those who love Yhwh will be like precious lambs»

The lexeme in analysis is mentioned in the pešer at Ps 37: 20, with numerous additions to the structure of the interpreted Psalm.<sup>43</sup> The autonomy of the work, in the light of which the lexeme דָּבָר is to be interpreted has been seen above, but here we note the lack of the lexeme חֶרֶב ('sword'), a metonymy for external attacks in the sequence analyzed above. It is in lexical solidarity with the רַעַב lexeme ('hunger', 'famine') and seems indicative of a generic calamity rather than a specific disease.

11Q 14 fl ii, 13-14

וְחַיָּה רַעָה שְׁבֹתָה מִן[...]  
[הָאָרֶץ וְאִין דָּבָר] בְּאַרְצְכֶם[...]

"[...] and the evil animals will vanish from

[earth and there will be no דָּבָר on your earth»

The lexeme analyzed is contained within a text known as Sefer ha-Milhamah ('Scroll of War'), a variant of 4Q285. The quoted verse contains a blessing after the victory against the Kittim, that is, the Romans. Compared to 4Q285, 11Q 14 has an eschatological warfare character in which the Kittim are seen as the bitter enemies of the 'children of light' and often mentions a “Prince of the congregation”.<sup>44</sup> The lexeme has a generic connotation of disease, is an absolute state and is sg of a negative proposition.

## 10. Results

In the light of this analysis, it is possible to disambiguate the lexeme דָּבָר as in the following diagram:

Variants	Translation	FL	Sema and distinctive features	Dimensions	Conclusions
דָּבָר <sup>1</sup>	'fatal event'	BH1	It is indicative of a 'fatal event' and would appear outside the field of sickness; however it remains connotative of an 'exterminating and devastating		The lexeme is not indicative of an epidemic plague, but of a destructive fatal event.

<sup>42</sup> IBID.

<sup>43</sup> TOV 2004, p. 325.

<sup>44</sup> ELLEDGE 2007, p. 178-207.

			disease', consequent to divine anger and a direct phenomenology of its power		
דָּבָר <sup>2</sup>	'contagious disease'	BH2	In BH2, and in prophetic literature in particular, it lends itself to the identification of some form of 'contagious disease' characterized by the forced sharing of small spaces. Of course, it is also an emanation of divine anger due to men who do not bow to the truth spread by true prophetism.	physiological-mental, cultural-behavioral, social	Contagious disease due to poor hygiene conditions practiced in closed and crowded places.
דָּבָר <sup>3</sup>	'disaster'	LBH1 BSH QH2 QH4	In these languages, it does not indicate a pathology, but a serious adversity that falls, on the wicked, or on a community of wicked 'with a destructive purpose' as a 'consequence of divine anger'.		Adversity of a generic nature

The CA shows that the analyzed lexeme does not have homogeneous distinctive features for each functional language, but at least three can be distinguished as in the diagram shown.

The semic variant <sup>1</sup>דָּבָר is external to the field of disease but is connotative of a fatal event emanating divine wrath.

It does not indicate plague in all languages, but a polysemic variant <sup>2</sup>דָּבָר in the standard poetical language denoting a contagious disease is detected. In the other functional languages, the lexeme דָּבָר is used generically and is indicative of a fatal event or a calamitous episode.

Although the lexeme <sup>2</sup>דָּבָר with 'plague' in the modern sense, in BH2, and in prophetic literature in particular, is not identifiable on a linguistic basis, it lends itself to the identification of some form of 'contagious disease' characterized by the forced sharing of small spaces. Of course, it is also an emanation of divine anger due to men who do not bow to the truth spread by true prophetism. The 'cultural-behavioural' dimension also covers the use of <sup>2</sup>דָּבָר

The lexeme <sup>3</sup>דָּבָר denotes 'disaster' in LBH1-BSH-QH2-QH4: in these languages it does not indicate a pathology, but a serious adversity that strikes, the wicked, or a community of impious 'with a destructive purpose' as a 'consequence of divine anger'.

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## ABSTRACT

The research is part of the compositional analysis started some time ago in the Florentine University. It is based on the application of Coseriu's theories on functional languages within Hebrew lexicographic research. In the corpus of ancient Hebrew (consisting of the inscriptions, the MT and the Qumranic epigraphic material) various functional languages characterized by chronological, dialect, sociological, and stylistic homogeneity have been identified. The research, in the first phase, comments on the occurrences of the דָּבַר lexeme within the various functional languages in order to offer grammatical and semantic information on the lexeme itself. Subsequently, in the results, he proposes the inclusion in the overall search of the 'dimension' identified for the דָּבַר lexeme. The reconstruction of the meanings of דָּבַר will be given by the identification of the distinctive features, meaning by meaning the result of the complementary interaction of semantic features.

## KEYWORDS

1. דָּבַר
2. plague
3. componential analysis