

Word Play in the Hebrew Bible

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A pun is a form of word play, a rhetorical device in which two words, similar in sound but different in meaning, are juxtaposed or exchanged to create a specific effect, perhaps ironic. Some puns involve just one word, which has more than one possible meaning, allowing for comic confusion. Most of us think of punning as a form of humor. Consider this sentence, "He tried to conduct *Judas Maccabaeus*, but he just couldn't handle it." Imagine it spoken aloud, rather than viewed on the page. The word "handle" has two meanings in that sentence. The surface meaning has something to do with managing or successfully performing. But the other sense of the word, wittily lurking in the background, although spelled differently, is the name of the composer, Handel.

The fancy Greek term for pun is **paronomasia**. It is based on another Greek concept, **polysemy** —the capacity for a word (or other sign) to have multiple meanings. Punning assumes that the juxtaposition of the two senses is not accidental. (Accidental is when the speaker says, "No pun intended," although in many cases she doth protest too much.) There are numerous examples of non-accidental word play in the Hebrew Bible, in most cases impossible to convey in translation. In this essay, we will examine biblical word play in several categories.

1. The juxtaposition of two (or more) words that sound alike (but not *exactly* alike) and have different meanings

1.a. The word ויראו appears in Exod. 14.30-31.

וַיִּשַׁע יְהוָה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וַיֵּרְא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־מִצְרַיִם מֵת עַל־שַׁפַּת הַיָּם׃ וַיֵּרְא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַיָּד הַגְּדֹלָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְהוָה בְּמִצְרַיִם וַיִּירָאוּ הָעָם אֶת־יְהוָה וַיֵּאֱמִינוּ בַּיהוָה וּבְמֹשֶׁה עַבְדּוֹ׃

Thus, the LORD delivered Israel that day from the Egyptians. Israel **saw** the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea. And when Israel **saw** the wondrous power which the LORD had wielded against the Egyptians, the people **feared** the LORD; they had faith in the LORD and His servant Moses.

If we saw ויראו unpunctuated, we might infer that it means "they saw," (from the root ראה) especially in the context, in which the phrase וַיֵּרְא יִשְׂרָאֵל (the Israelites **saw**) appears twice. However, the word וַיִּירָאוּ (from the root ירא) means "they **feared**," or "they were in awe of (God)." Whoever chants this verse should emphasize the נע שוא under the ר, to clarify the word's meaning.

1.b. These verses (Deut. 11:16-17), found in the second paragraph of the שמע are well known.

הִשְׁמְרוּ לָכֶם פֶּן יִפְתָּה לְבַבְכֶם וְסִרְתֶּם וְעַבְדִּתֶם אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתֶם לָהֶם. וְחָרָה אַף־יְהוָה בְּכֶם וְעָצַר אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹא־יִהְיֶה מָטָר וְהִיאֲדָמָה לֹא תִתֵּן אֶת־יְבוּלָהּ וְאַבְדִּתֶם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה נָתַן לָכֶם.

Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and you turn aside, and serve other gods, and **worship** them. For the LORD'S anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon **perish** from the good land that the LORD is assigning to you.

Notice the use of the near homophones וְעַבְדִּתֶם (you shall **serve/worship**) and וְאַבְדִּתֶם (you shall **perish**). I don't think that juxtaposition is accidental. By sonically linking these two words, the core

message is underlined, "if you serve other gods, you will perish."

1.c. Consider the word play in Gen. 21.17.

וַיִּקְרָא מַלְאָךְ אֱלֹהִים | אֶל־הַגֵּר מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַה־לָּךְ הַגֵּר

And a **messenger** of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar?"

God's messenger **מַלְאָךְ** uses a pun on its name when it asks Hagar, **מה־לָּךְ**.

1.d. In Exod. 12.23, God passes over the homes of the Israelites with this paranomasial expression:

וַפָּסַח יְהוָה עַל־הַפֶּתַח

And the LORD **passed over** the **door**.

1.e. Notice the juxtaposition of מקץ ("at the end" from the root קצץ) and ויקץ ("awoke" from the root יקץ) in these verses.

Gen. 41:1— וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ שְׁנַתַּיִם יָמִים וּפְרַעַה חֹלֵם וְהָגָה עֹמֵד עַל־הַיָּאֵר:

At the end of two years' time, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile,

Gen. 41:4— וַיִּקָּץ פְּרַעַה —and Pharaoh **awoke**.

1.f. The word דבר can mean "word" or "pestilence." In this verse we have both forms.

2Sam. 24:13 וְאִם־הָיִיתָ שְׁלֵשֶׁת יָמִים **דָּבַר** בְּאַרְצֶךָ עֲתָה דַע וְרָאָה מִה־אָשִׁיב שְׁלֹחֵי דְבָר

Shall there be three days of **pestilence** in your land? Now consider carefully what **word/reply** I shall take back to Him who sent me.

This same word play is even more pronounced in this passage (Exod. 9:3-6).

הִנֵּה יַד־יְהוָה הוּיָהּ בְּמִקְנֶךָ אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׂדֶה בְּסוֹסִים בְּחֻמְרִים בְּגַמְלִים בְּבָקָר וּבְצֹאן **דְּבָר** כְּבֵד מְאֹד: וְהַפְלָה יְהוָה בֵּין מִקְנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל וּבֵין מִקְנֵה מִצְרַיִם וְלֹא יָמוּת מִכָּל־לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל **דְּבָר**: וַיִּשֶׂם יְהוָה מוֹעֵד לְאַמֵּר מִחֹר יַעֲשֶׂה יְהוָה הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה בְּאַרְץ: וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה אֶת־הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה מִמְּחֹרַת

Behold, the hand of the LORD is upon thy cattle which is in the field, upon the horses, upon the asses, upon the camels, upon the oxen, and upon the sheep: there shall be a very severe **pestilence**. And the LORD will make a distinction between the cattle of Israel and the cattle of Egypt: and no **thing** shall die of all that belongs to the Israelites. And the LORD appointed a set time, saying, "Tomorrow the LORD shall do this **thing** in the land." And the LORD did that **thing** on the next day.

1.g. Isaiah uses word play to reveal an ironic truth. שר is a "ruler," a "prince." סרר is to be "rebellious,"

or stubborn. The NJPS translation "Your **rulers** are **rogues**" uses alliteration to reflect the word play.

שְׂרִיף סוֹרְרִים Isa 1:23

1.h. Micah (6:3-4) contrasts הֶלְאֲתִיף (from לאה "to be weary") with הֶעֱלֵתִיף (from עלה "to go up")

עָמִי מִה־עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ וּמִה־הֶלְאֲתִיף עָנָה בִּי: כִּי הֶעֱלֵתִיף מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וּמִבַּיִת עֲבָדִים פְּדִיתִיךָ

O my people, what have I done unto thee? and wherein have I **wearied** thee? testify against me. For I **brought thee up** out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed thee out of the house of servants.

1.i The word תֵּאָבֹוּ is from the root אבה "to be willing/to agree." In Isa. 1:19 it is linked to טוב, meaning "goodness."

אִם־תֵּאָבֹוּ וְשָׁמַעְתֶּם טוֹב הָאֶרֶץ תֹּאכְלוּ:

If, then, you **agree** and give heed, you will eat the **good** things of the earth.

1.j. Isaiah (24:17) intensifies his message with the repetition of the פח sound in three consecutive words.

פֶּחַד וּפְחַת וּפָחַ עָלֶיךָ יוֹשֵׁב הָאֶרֶץ:

Fear, and the pit, and the snare, are upon thee, O inhabitant of the earth.

1.k. Jeremiah (1:11-12) makes an intentional pun. שֶׁקֶד is an "almond tree," but can also mean "to watch."

וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֵלַי לֵאמֹר מִה־אֲתָה רֹאֶה יְרֵמְיָהוּ וְאָמַר מִקֵּל שֶׁקֶד אֲנִי רֹאֶה:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלַי הִיטַבְתָּ לְרֹאֹת כִּי־שֶׁקֶד אֲנִי עַל־דְּבָרִי לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ:

The word of the LORD came to me: What do you see, Jeremiah? I replied: I see a branch of an **almond tree**. The LORD said to me: You have seen right, For I am **watchful** to bring My word to pass.

1.l. In this verse from the Song of Songs (4:2), not only is the initial ש used for alliteration, but the combination שכל recurs in nearly adjacent words.

שִׁנְיֶךָ כְּעֶדֶר הַקְּצוּבוֹת שְׁעָלוּ מִן־הַרְחֻצָּה שְׁכָלָם מִתְאִימוֹת וְשִׁכְלָה אֵין בָּהֶם:

Your teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn, which came up from the washing; **whereof every one** bears twins, and no one is **barren** among them.

1.m. Notice the juxtaposition in Gen. 29:10-11 of two near homophones **וַיִּשָּׂק** (from שקה "cause to drink") and **וַיִּשָּׂק** (from נשק "to kiss").

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר רָאָה יַעֲקֹב אֶת־רַחֵל בַּת־לָבָן אַחֵי אִמּוֹ וְאֶת־צֹאן לָבָן אַחֵי אִמּוֹ וַיִּגֶשׁ יַעֲקֹב וַיִּגַּל אֶת־הָאֶבֶן מֵעַל פִּי הַבְּאֵר וַיִּשָּׂק אֶת־צֹאן לָבָן אַחֵי אִמּוֹ: וַיִּשָּׂק יַעֲקֹב לְרַחֵל וַיִּשָּׂא אֶת־קִלּוֹ וַיִּבְדֹּד:

And when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his uncle Laban, and the flock of his uncle Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone off the mouth of the well, and **watered** the flock of his uncle Laban. Then Jacob **kissed** Rachel, and broke into tears.

1.n. In these examples, the prophet makes his point by playing on the name of a city or nation.

Jer. 6:1— **וּבַתְּקוֹעַ תִּקְעוּ שׁוֹפָר** Blow the horn in Tekoa

Ezek. 25:16 — **וְהִכַּרְתִּי אֶת־כְּרֹתִים** and cut off the Cherethites

Hos. 2:24-25 — **וְהֵם יַעֲנֵוּ אֶת־יִזְרְעֵאל: וְזִרְעֵתִיהָ לִי בְּאֶרֶץ**

And they shall respond to Jezreel, I will sow her in the land as My own

Amos 5.5 — **כִּי הַגִּלְגָּל גְּלָה יִגְלָה** for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity

Zech. 9:3 — **צָר מְצֹר לָהּ וַתִּבְנֶן צָר מְצֹר לָהּ** Tyre (Tsor) has built herself a fortress;

1.o. Word play on a name.

1Sam. 14:37— **וַיִּשְׁאַל שְׂאוּל בַּאלֹהִים** So Saul inquired of God

1Sam. 8:19— **לְשִׁמְעַע בְּקוֹל שְׂמוּאֵל** to listen to the voice of Samuel

1.p Palindromic word play.

These four words form a quasi-mirror image.

Ecl. 7 **טוֹב שֵׁם מִשְׁמָן טוֹב**. A good name is better than fragrant oil

2. A single word with double meaning—double entendre

2.a. The word הזמיר in Song 2:12 functions as a "Janus." That is, it is two-faced. The root **זמר** can mean "**pruning**" or "**music**." When facing backward, towards the words "blossoms have appeared in the land," it suggests the pruning of the buds on the trees. When facing forward towards the turtledove, it suggests the singing of birds.

הַנְּצַנִּים נִרְאוּ בְּאֶרֶץ עַת הַזְּמִיר הַגִּיעַ וְקוֹל הַתּוֹר נִשְׁמַע בְּאֶרְצֵנוּ:

The blossoms have appeared in the land, the time of **pruning/nightingale singing** has come; and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

2.b. The word **זהר** can mean "to warn" but it can also mean "to shine brilliantly." This is another Janus. When facing backward, towards the words "fine gold," it suggests shining. When facing forward, it suggests being warned.

Ps. 19:11,12, 13

הַנְּחֻמָּדִים מִזֶּהָב וּמִפָּז רֶב וּמִתּוֹקִים מִדְּבַשׁ וְנֹפֶת צוּפִים: גַּם־עֲבָדָךְ נִזְהָר בָּהֶם בְּשִׁמְרָם עֵקֶב רַב.
שְׂגִיאוֹת מִי־יָבִין מִנְסֻתָרוֹת נִקְנִי:

More to be desired are they than **gold**, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is thy servant **warned**: and in keeping of them there is great reward. Who can understand his errors? cleanse thou me from secret faults. Who can **be aware of errors**? Clear me of unperceived guilt,

2.c. The word **שבע** can mean "swear" but it can also mean "seven." This is another Janus. When facing backward, towards the words "seven ewe lambs," it suggests seven. When facing forward, it suggests swearing. And to top it off, the final verse includes the similar sounding word **וישבו**.

Gen. 21:28-32

וַיֵּצֵב אַבְרָהָם אֶת־שִׁבְעַת כְּבָשֹׂת הַצֹּאן לְבִדְהָן: וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ אֶל־אַבְרָהָם מַה הֵנָּה שִׁבְעַת כְּבָשֹׂת הָאֵלֶּה
אֲשֶׁר הִצַּבְתָּ לְבִדְהָנָה: וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי אֶת־שִׁבְעַת כְּבָשֹׂת תִּקַּח מִיָּדִי בְּעִבּוֹר תְּהִיֶּה־לִּי לְעֵדָה כִּי חָפַרְתִּי
אֶת־הַבְּאֵר הַזֹּאת: עַל־כֵּן קָרָא לְמָקוֹם הַהוּא בְּאֵר שִׁבְעַת כִּי שָׁם נִשְׁבַּעוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם: וַיִּכְרְתוּ בְרִית בֵּבְאֵר
שִׁבְעַת וַיִּקַּם אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ וַפִּיכֹל שָׂר־צָבָאוֹ וַיָּשׁוּבוּ אֶל־אֶרֶץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים:

And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. And Abimelech said unto Abraham, what mean these seven ewe lambs which thou hast set by themselves? And he said, For these **seven** ewe lambs shalt thou take of my hand, that they may be a witness unto me, that I dug this well. Wherefore he called that place **Beersheba**; because there they **swore** both of them. Thus they made a covenant at Beersheba: then Abimelech rose up, and Pichol the chief captain of his host, and they returned into the land of the Philistines.

2.d. In this verse (Song 2:7) the shepherdess asks her friends to take an oath. Normally an oath is taken in the name of God. But here the oath is taken in the name of the animals of the field. But note the word play. **צבאות** (single **צביה**) are "gazelles," but that same word can also refer to "the Lord of **Hosts**." and **אילות** are "does" (plural of doe), but embedded in that word is **אל** - God/god.

הַשְּׂבַעְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם בְּצִבְאוֹת אֹ אוּ בְּאֵילוֹת הַשָּׂדֶה אִם־תִּעְרְוּ | וְאִם־תִּעְוְרוּ אֶת־הָאֲהָבָה עַד
שְׂתַחַפֵּץ:

I make you swear, O maidens of Jerusalem, by **gazelles** or by the **does** of the field: Do not wake or rouse love until it please!

2.e. The word **רוח** can mean "spirit" or "breath" or "wind." This simile in Psalm 103:15-16 plays on

that ambiguity. Humans are alive until the spirit/breath leaves them. Flowers bloom and then a wind blows and they are gone.

אָנוֹשׁ כְּחֶצְרִיר יָמָיו כְּצִיץ הַשָּׂדֶה בֵּן יָצִיץ: כִּי רוּחַ עֲבָרָה־בּוֹ וְאֵינָנוּ וְלֹא־יִכְרְנוּ עוֹד מִקּוֹמוֹ:

Man, his days are like those of grass; he blooms like a flower of the field; a **wind/breath/spirit** passes through and it/he is no more, its/his own place no longer knows it.

2.f. (X-rated word play).

In Song 5:2 the male lover is knocking (**דופק**), but the word can also mean “to drive hard.” (In modern Hebrew the word is slang for the sexual act. Did it have that meaning in ancient Israel?) And his voice is heard calling for his lover to open for him. Is she opening more than just the door?

קוֹל | דוֹדִי דוֹפֵק פֶּתַח־לִי אֲחַתִּי רַעִיתִי יוֹנְתִי תַמְתִּי

Hark, my beloved **knocks**! “Open to me, my own, my darling, my faultless dove!”

Then two verses later (Song 5:4), she reports, **ידו מן החור** וּמַעֵי הָמוּ עָלָיו: "my lover put his hand **in the hole**, and my guts were moved for him." The word **יד** was well known to ancient readers as a euphemism for the male sexual organ. But the King James Version (KJV) translates, "My beloved put in his hand by the hole of the door, and my bowels were moved for him." Whatever.

3. Intertextual references

Some play involves connecting words or phrases that are not in the same verse, or even the same chapter, or even the same book. Several verses from the Song of Songs have intertextual echoes.

3.a. The last three words of Song 1:13 closely resemble the last three words of Psalm 9:1. Is that a coincidence, or has the love song morphed the words of the Psalmist? Note the transformation of **שדי** from a name of God to female anatomy. What a difference a **דגש** makes!

Ps. 91:1— יֵשֵׁב בְּסִתְרֵי עֲלִיּוֹן בְּצֵל שְׁדֵי יִתְלוֹנֵן

He that dwelleth in the shelter of the **Most High** shall **abide/lie** under the shadow of the Almighty.

Song 1:13— צֶרֶר הַמֶּר | דוֹדִי לִי בֵּין שְׁדֵי יָלִין

A bundle of myrrh is my lover unto me; he **lies all night** in the cleavage of **my breasts**.

3.b. In Song 8:6 we read, "Love is fierce as death, Its jealousy (passion) bitter as the grave. Even its sparks are a raging **fire**, a mighty flame (or literally – a flame of God)."

כִּי־עֵזָה כַּמּוֹת אֶהְבֶּה קֶשֶׁה כְּשֹׂאֵל קִנְאָה רִשְׁפֵיהָ רִשְׁפֵיהָ אֵשׁ שְׁלֵה־בַתְּיָה:

Where find similar fire imagery in Deut. 4:24, "For the LORD your God is a consuming **fire**, an impassioned (or jealous) God."

כִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵשׁ אֹכְלָה הוּא אֵל קִנְאָה:

And, of course, in the third chapter of Exodus (Exod. 3:2), God appears to Moses in a blazing **fire** out

of a bush.

וַיֵּרָא מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה אֵלָיו בְּלִבְתַּאֲשׁ

3.c. In the Song of Songs the lovers are constantly yearning for each other, seeking each other with difficulty.

יוֹנָתִי בְּחַגְוֵי הַסֵּלַע בְּסִתְרֵי הַמְּדַרְגָּה הֲרֵאִינִי אֶת־מַרְאֵיךְ הַשְּׁמִיעֵנִי אֶת־קוֹלְךְ

“O my dove, in the cranny of the rocks, hidden by the cliff, **let me see** your face, Let me hear your voice.” (Song 2:14)

We find nearly identical language in Exodus 33:18. Moses asks the seemingly impossible: **to see** God.

וַיֹּאמֶר הֲרֵאִינִי נָא אֶת־כְּבוֹדְךְ

When it happens, Moses must be hidden in a cleft of the rock, just as the dove of the Song is hidden by the cliff in the cranny of the rocks.

וְהָיָה בְּעֵבֶר כְּבֹדִי וְשִׁמְתִּיךְ בְּנִקְרֹת הַצֹּר וְשִׁכַּתִּי כַּפִּי עָלֶיךָ עַד־עֲבָרִי

(Exod. 33:22) and, as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a **cleft of the rock** and shield you with My hand until I have passed by.

4. Names—Etiology

Etiology is the attribution of the cause or reason for something, often expressed in terms of historical or mythical explanation. In these verses the Bible explicitly explains why this person or place is called such-and-such. There are many, many of these; we will provide just a few examples.

4.a. Abraham's first son is called **ישמעאל**—God has heard.

וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה הֲנֵנּוּ הָרָה וְיִלְדֶת בֵּן וְקָרָאת שְׁמוֹ יִשְׁמָעֵאל כִּי־שָׁמַע יְהוָה אֶל־עֲנִיךְ

(Gen. 16:11) The angel of the LORD said to her, “Behold, you are with child and you will bear a son. You shall call him **Ishmael**, for the LORD **has heard** your suffering.

4.b. The name **יצחק** is derived from his mother's laughter.

וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָה צָחֵק עָשָׂה לִי אֱלֹהִים כָּל־הַשְּׁמַע יִצְחָק־לִי

(Gen. 21:6) And Sarah said, God made me **laugh**, everyone who hears will **laugh** with me.

וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־שֵׁם־בְּנֵו הַנּוֹלָד־לֹו אֲשֶׁר־יִלְדָה־לֹו שָׂרָה יִצְחָק

(Gen. 21:3) Abraham gave his newborn son, whom Sarah had borne him, the name of **Isaac**.

4.c. The name **יעקב** is given when the infant emerges from the womb clutching his twin brother's **heel**.

וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן יֵצֵא אָחִיו וַיִּדּוּ אַחֲזֹת בְּעֵקֶב עֵשָׂו וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב

(Gen. 25.26) Then his brother emerged, holding on to the **heel** of Esau; so they named him **Jacob**.

4.d. The brother of יעקב was initially called עשו. But after the incident with the red stew, he is known as **אדום**.

וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו אֶל־יַעֲקֹב הֲלֵעִיטְנִי נָא מִן־הָאֲדָם הָאֲדָם הִזֶּה כִּי עִיַף אָנֹכִי עַל־כֵּן קָרָא־שְׁמוֹ אֲדָוִם:

(Gen. 25:30) And Esau said to Jacob, “Give me some of that **red stuff** to gulp down, for I am famished”—which is why he was named **Edom**.

4.e. Years later, יעקב's name is changed to **ישראל**, the man who struggled with God.

וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאמָר עוֹד שְׁמִי כִּי אִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי־שָׂרִיתָ עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעַם־אֲנָשִׁים וַתֻּבָּל:

(Gen. 32.:29) Said he, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but **Israel**, for you have **striven with beings divine** and human, and have prevailed.”

4.g. There are two explanations for the name **בנימין**. His dying mother calls him "the son of my **mourning**," But his father calls him "my **right-hand** son."

וַיְהִי בְּצֵאת נַפְשָׁהּ כִּי מָתָה וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ בֶּן־אוֹנִי וְאָבִיו קָרָא־לוֹ בְּנִימִין:

(Gen. 35.18) But as she breathed her last—for she was dying—she named him **Ben-oni**; but his father called him **Benjamin**.

4.h. Pharaoh's daughter calls her adopted son **משה** because she **drew him** out of the waters of the Nile.

וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי מִן־הַמַּיִם מָשִׂיתָהוּ

(Exod. 2.10) She named him **Moses**, explaining, “I **drew him** out of the water.”

4.i. In 1Sam. 25:25 we have what would become a well-known phrase, explaining etiology. The person in question resembles his name, כְּשֵׁמוֹ כָּן־הוּא.

אֶל־נָא יְשִׁים אֲדֹנָי | אֶת־לְבָבוֹ אֶל־אִישׁ הַבְּלִיעַל הַזֶּה עַל־נָבָל כִּי כְשֵׁמוֹ כָּן־הוּא נָבָל שְׁמוֹ וַנְּבִלָה עָמוּ

Please, my lord, pay no attention to that wretched fellow **Nabal**. For he is just what his name says: His name means ‘**boor**’ and he is a **boor**.

4.j. The name of the city **בבל** reflects the fact that God caused the builders of the Babel Tower to speak in languages that were suddenly mutually unintelligible. This etiology explains not only the name of the city, but the origin of multiple languages. Plus, the word **בבל** itself, and its associated verb **בלל**, is onomatopoeic, describing derisively the **stuttering** sound of a "foreign" language.

על־כֵּן קרא שְׁמָהּ **בְּבֶל** בִּי־שָׁם **בְּלַל** יְהוָה שְׁפַת כָּל־הָאָרֶץ וּמִשָּׁם הִפְיָצָם יְהוָה עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ:

(Gen. 11:9) That is why it was called **Babel**, because there the LORD **confounded the speech** of the whole earth; and from there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

5. Names -- implied word play

In these cases, no explicit explanation is given for the name. But the name nonetheless reflects some aspects of the person's character.

5.a. Many of the actors in the Ruth story have names that reflect their roles in the drama. Naomi's sons-in-law, who both die, are called **מַחֲלֹן**, related to מחלה "sickness," and **כְּלִיזֹן**, related to כלה "ended."

—Ruth 1:5 **מַחֲלֹן וְכְלִיזֹן** גַּם־שָׁנִיָּהֶם

Then those two—**Mahlon** and **Khilion**—also died.

Even the name of the actors' home is significant. **בית לחם** means the "home of bread," an abundance of food. Naomi and her family, like many of their biblical predecessors, have to leave their home in search of sustenance. Years later the famine in Judea is over and once again there is **לחם** in **בית לחם**.

Ruth 1:1

וַיְהִי בִימֵי שָׁפֶט הַשָּׁפֹּטִים וַיְהִי רָעַב בְּאֶרֶץ וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לָחֶם יְהוּדָה לְגוֹר בְּשֹׁדֵי מוֹאָב הוּא וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וּשְׁנֵי בָנָיו:

In the days when the chieftains ruled, there was a famine in the land; and a man of **Bethlehem** in Judah, with his wife and two sons, went to reside in the country of Moab.

Ruth 1:6

וַתָּקָם הִיא וְכַלְתֶּיהָ וַתָּשָׁב מִשׁוֹדֵי מוֹאָב כִּי שָׁמְעָה בְּשׂוּדָה מוֹאָב כִּי־פָקַד יְהוָה אֶת־עַמּוֹ לְתֵת לָהֶם לֶחֶם:

She started out with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab; for in the country of Moab she had heard that the LORD had taken note of His people and given them **food**.

5.b. Rachel is first introduced to us as a shepherdess. Her name **רחל** means "ewe lamb." And I wonder if we are supposed to smile when she is described (in both 29:6 and 29:9) as **באה עם הצאן**. Is that **ba-ah** ("arrived") like the sound of her **sheep**?

וַרְחֵל | בָּאָה עִם־הַצֹּאן אֲשֶׁר לְאִבֶּיהָ כִּי רָעָה הוּא:

(Gen. 29:9) **Rachel** had **arrived** with her father's flock; for she was a shepherdess.

But let's not forget Rachel's less attractive older sister, whose name **לאה** means "tired" or "exhausted."

וּלְלֶבֶן שְׁתֵּי בָנוֹת שֵׁם הַגְּדֹלָה לֵאָה וְשֵׁם הַקְּטָנָה רָחֵל:

(Gen. 29:16) Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older one was **Leah**, and the name of the younger was Rachel.

5.c The name of the first human on earth **אדם** reveals his origins **מִן־הָאֲדָמָה**.

וַיִּצְרֶה יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עֹפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה

(Gen. 2:7) And the LORD God formed man (**earthling**) from the dust of the **earth**,

5.d The name of the fruit **דודאים** (mandrakes) reveals its function, **דודים**, lovemaking.

וַיֵּלֶךְ רְאוּבֵן בְּיָמָיו קְצִיר־חֲטִים וַיִּמְצָא **דֹּדַאִים** בְּשָׂדֵה וַיָּבֵא אֹתָם אֶל־לֵאָה אֵל־לֵאָה תִּגְיָנָה לִי **מִדֹּדַאִי** בְּנֵי: וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ הַמַּעֲט קָחְתְּךָ אֶת־אִישִׁי וְלָקַחְתְּ גַּם אֶת־**דֹּדַאִי** בְּנֵי וַתֹּאמֶר רָחֵל לָכֵן יִשְׁכַּב עִמָּךְ הַלַּיְלָה תַּחַת **דֹּדַאִי** בְּנֵי: וַיָּבֵא יַעֲקֹב מִן־הַשָּׂדֵה בְּעֶרְבַּ וַתֵּצֵא לֵאָה לִקְרֹאתוֹ וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלַי תָּבוֹא בִּי שָׁכַר שְׂכָרְתִּיךָ **בְּדֹדַאִי** בְּנֵי וַיִּשְׁכַּב עִמָּה בַּלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה:

(Gen. 30:14-16) Once, at the time of the wheat harvest, Reuben came upon some **mandrakes** in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, “Please give me some of your son’s **mandrakes**.” But she said to her, “Was it not enough for you to take away my husband, that you would also take my son’s **mandrakes**?” Rachel replied, “I promise, he shall lie with you tonight, in return for your son’s **mandrakes**.” When Jacob came home from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, “You are to sleep with me, for I have hired you with my son’s **mandrakes**.” And he lay with her that night.

The word-play is even more pronounced in this verse from the Song of Songs.

הַדֹּדַאִים נְתַנּוּ־רִיחַ וְעַל־פִּתְחֵינוּ כָּל־מִגְדִּים חֲדָשִׁים גַּם־יִשְׁגָּם **דֹּדַי** צָפַנְתִּי לָךְ:

(Song 7:14) The **mandrakes** yield their fragrance. At our doors are all choice fruits—both freshly picked and long-stored, which I have kept, my **beloved**, for you.

6. Paregmenon

A similar type of word play is paregmenon, a rhetorical technique by which a word is used in close proximity to another word from which it is derived.

6.a. Isaiah hammers his point home by presenting five consecutive words derived from the same root.

בְּגָדִים בְּגָדוּ וּבְגָד בּוֹגְדִים בְּגָדוּ:

(Isa. 24.16) Treacherous dealers have dealt treacherously; yea, treacherous dealers have dealt very treacherously.

6.b. The Jeremiah indulges in similar rhetoric in this passage (51:20-23) with repetition of the verb **נפץ** (**shatter**).

מפץ־אתה לי כלי מלחמה ונפצתי בך גוים והשחתי בך ממלכות: ונפצתי בך סוס ורכבו ונפצתי בך רכב ורכבו: ונפצתי בך איש ואשה ונפצתי בך זקן ונער ונפצתי בך בחור ובתולה: ונפצתי בך רעה ועדרו ונפצתי בך אבן וצמדו ונפצתי בך פחות וסגנים:

You are My war club (**shatterer**), My weapons of battle. With you I **shatter** nations, with you I destroyed kingdoms. With you I **shatter** horse and rider, with you I **shatter** chariot and driver. With you I **shatter** man and woman, with you I **shatter** graybeard and boy, with you I **shatter** youth and maiden. With you I **shatter** shepherd and flock, with you I **shatter** plowman and team, with you I **shatter** governors and prefects.

7. **Gemination**—doubling of a word (in any inflection) for emphasis or intensification—an important stylistic feature of biblical Hebrew. Note how Everett Fox's translation retains the linguistic gemination.

Gen. 2:17—**כי ביום אכלך ממנו מות תמות**

NJPS: for as soon as you eat of it, you shall **surely die**.

Fox: for on the day that you eat from it, you must die, **yes, die**.

Gen. 37:33—**טָרַף טָרַף יוֹסֵף**

KJV: Joseph is **without doubt rent in pieces**

Fox: Yosef is torn, **torn-to-pieces!**

Gen. 9:25—**עֶבֶד עֲבָדִים יִהְיֶה לְאָחָיו**

NJPS: The **lowest of slaves** shall he be to his brothers

Fox: **servant of servants** may he be to his brothers!

Song 1—**שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים**

The **Song of Songs** (i.e. the greatest song)

8. **Other poetic devices**, such as **alliteration** and **assonance** involve repetition of phonemes, letter play, sonic delight. These devices can affect the listener, without reference to the discursive meaning of the words.

8.a. The opening verses of the Song of Songs feature an abundance of the sound "sh." We hear the repetition of the shin words (**שיר, נשק, שמן**) as well as the similarity of the words **שמך** and **שמניך**. And the the first three letters of **מְנַשְׁקוֹת** echo the word **שָׁמֶן**, with the letters reversed (metathesis).

שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים אֲשֶׁר לְשִׁלְמָה: יִשְׁקֵנִי מְנַשְׁקוֹת פִּיהוּ כִּי־טוֹבִים דְּדִידָךְ מִיָּוֶן: לְרִיחַ שְׁמָנֶיךָ טוֹבִים שָׁמֶן

Similar is the repetition of the "sh" in 1:6.

אֶל-תִּרְאוּנִי שְׂאֵנִי שְׁחַרְחֹרֶת שְׁשֻׁפְתָּנִי הַשָּׁמֶשׁ

8.b. In Song 4:2 there is a play on two words, with different meanings, but with the common letters שכל. (See also 1.1. above.)

שְׁנִיף בְּעֵדֶר הַקְּצוּבוֹת שְׁעָלוּ מִן-הַרְחֹצָה שְׁכָלִם מִתְאַיְמוֹת וְשִׁכְלָה אֵין בָּהֶם:

8.c. Running as a thread throughout the Song are the related names ירושלים, שולמית, שלמה, all with שלם in common. Here are but a few examples.

שְׁחֹרָה אֲנִי וְנֶאֱוָה בְּנֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם בְּאֶהְלִי קִדָּר בִּירֵעוֹת שְׁלָמָה — (1:5)

הִנֵּה מָטְתוּ שְׁלִשְׁלָמָה שְׁשִׁים גְּבָרִים סָבִיב לָהּ (3:7)

שׁוּבִי שׁוּבִי הַשְׁוֹלְמִית שׁוּבִי וְנִחֲזֶה-בָּךְ מִה־תְּחִיזוּ בַשְׁוֹלְמִית בְּמַחֲלַת הַמַּחְנֵים — (7:1)

Notice how in 1:7 the word למה is changed to שלמה to echo the שלם leitmotif.

שְׁלָמָה אֶהְיָה בְּעֵטְיָה עַל עֲדָרֵי חֲבָרִיךְ:

8.d.

Look at (listen to) the repetition of phonemes in these verses from Isaiah:

וְהִיְתָה צִיצֵת נִבֵּל צְבִי תִפְאַרְתּוֹ . . . בֵּיזִם הַהוּא יְהִיָּה יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת לְעֵטְרַת צְבִי וְלְצִפְרִית תִּפְאַרָה לְשָׂאֵר עַמּוֹ: (Isa. 28.4-5)

כִּי צוֹ לְצוֹ צוֹ לְצוֹ קוֹ לְקוֹ קוֹ לְקוֹ זְעִיר שָׁם זְעִיר שָׁם: (Isa. 28:10)

9. Onomatopoeia is the use of words to imitate natural sounds.

9.a. The Hebrew word for "fly," זבוב, plays on the buzzing sound of the insect.

Isa. 7.18— וְהָיָה | בֵּיזִם הַהוּא יִשְׁקַח יְהוָה לְזַבּוּב אֲשֶׁר בְּקִצָּה יִאֲרִי מִצְרַיִם וְלִדְבוּרָה אֲשֶׁר בְּאַרְץ אַשּׁוּר

And it shall come to pass in that day, that the LORD shall hiss for the fly that is in the uttermost part of the rivers of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria.

9.b. The Hebrew word for “cricket,” צלצל, plays on the chirping sound of the insect.

כָּל-עֵצָה וּפְרֵי אֲדָמָתָךְ יִירָשׁ הַצִּלְצָל — Deut. 28:42

The cricket shall take over all the trees and produce of your land.

9.c. The Hebrew word for “cymbals,” צלצלים, plays on the metallic percussive sound of the instrument.

Ps. 150—הַלְלוּהוּ בַצִּלְצְלִים—שִׁמְעוּ הַלְלוּהוּ בַצִּלְצְלִים תְּרוּעָה

Praise Him with resounding **cymbals**; praise Him with loud-clashing **cymbals**.

וְדָוִד | וְכָל־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל מְשַׁחֲקִים לְפָנָיו יְהוָה בְּכֹל עֲצֵי בְרוֹשִׁים וּבְכַנְרֹת וּבְנִבְלִים וּבַתְּפִים וּבַמְנוּעָנָעִים
וּבַצִּלְצְלִים—Sam 6:5

David and all the House of Israel danced before the LORD to the sound of all kinds of cypress wood instruments, with lyres, harps, timbrels, sistrums, and **cymbals**.

9.d. The Hebrew word for “shatter,”

, plays on the sound of something being smashed and broken into pieces. (See also above **6b**.)

וְאַחַז בְּעֶרְפִי וַיִּפְצַּץ־נִי וַיְקִימֵנִי לֹא לְמַטְרָה—Job 16.12

He took me by the scruff and **shattered** me; He set me up as His target.

הֲלוֹא כֹה דְבַרְךָ כְּאֵשׁ נֹאֵם־יְהוָה וּכְפִטְיֵשׁ יִפְצֹץ סֶלַע—Jer. 23.29

Behold, My word is like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that **shatters** rock!

10. Conclusion

How does the reader who is chanting these texts evoke the word play? What does this mean for those who chant the Bible? First of all, if we are aware of the word play, we take great delight in the text. We can call the listener's attention to the word play by emphasis (loudness or elongating). In some cases, we need to call attention to the differences (וּיִרְאוּ, וַיִּירָאוּ), and on other occasions to the similarities (שְׁכַלְם מִתְאִימוֹת וְשִׁכְלָה אֵין בָּהֶם).

Coda: A Visual Pun

In Moses and Miriam's Song of the Sea, the text is traditionally arranged on the parchment so that the people of Israel appear with the sea (standing up) on either side of them. Is that intentional or did it just come out that way?

Exod. 15:19

For the horses of Pharaoh, with his chariots and horsemen, went into **the sea**; and the LORD turned back on them the waters of

the sea; but the Israelites marched on dry ground in the midst of **the sea**.

בֹּא סוֹס פָּרְעֹה בָּרִכְבוֹ וּבַפָּרְשָׁיו בִּים וַיֵּשֶׁב יְהוָה עֲלֵהֶם אֶת מֵי הַיָּם
וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הָלְכוּ בִיבֹשָׁה בַתּוֹךְ הַיָּם

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