

The Contrastive Polysemous Meaning of Hērem in Biblical Hebrew: A Cognitive-Linguistic Approach

As many scholars have noticed, the noun hērem is related to entirely different semantic fields. On the one hand, it is strongly connected with the root qādaš in Priestly texts where it denotes a 'holy thing', while the cognate verb hrm means 'to consecrate' (Lev 27,21.29-29; Num 18,14; Ezek 44,29). On the other hand, hērem is situated in the semantic field of destruction in Deuteronomy (Deut 7,2.4.25-26; 13,14-15; 20,16-18) and is combined with roots like nāḥah.

Brekelmans (1959) and Lohfink (1982) developed a diachronic semantic model to explain this double nature of the term: originally related to the domain of war in which hērem has religious overtones, the term underwent a diachronic change to a 'profane annihilation' due to important historical and social changes in society. Not satisfied by this account, Stern (1991), Schäfer-Lichtenberger (1995) and Nelson (1997) devoted attention to the conceptions of the world underlying the concept, but did not come to an adequate description of its semantic structure which accounts for the double nature of the term.

In this paper I will offer a new perspective on the meaning of the concept hērem informed by the semantic models of 'Prototype theory' (Rosch:1975) and the 'Radial Network Model' (Lakoff:1987). Prototypically, the term hērem could best be labeled as 'taboo'. The term is used to describe what is separated from the ordinary sphere of life, either because it belongs to the sphere of the sacred (qōdeš) or because it is defiled (hālāl). The two meanings of holiness and defilement – which seem mutually exclusive to our conceptual understanding, thus form the polysemous core of the term's semantic structure. Once this is established, I will develop a 'radial network' of the concept, showing that in particular the meaning of 'defilement' gave rise to new meanings by means of metonymy and generalization.