Semiotics as a Theory of Culture
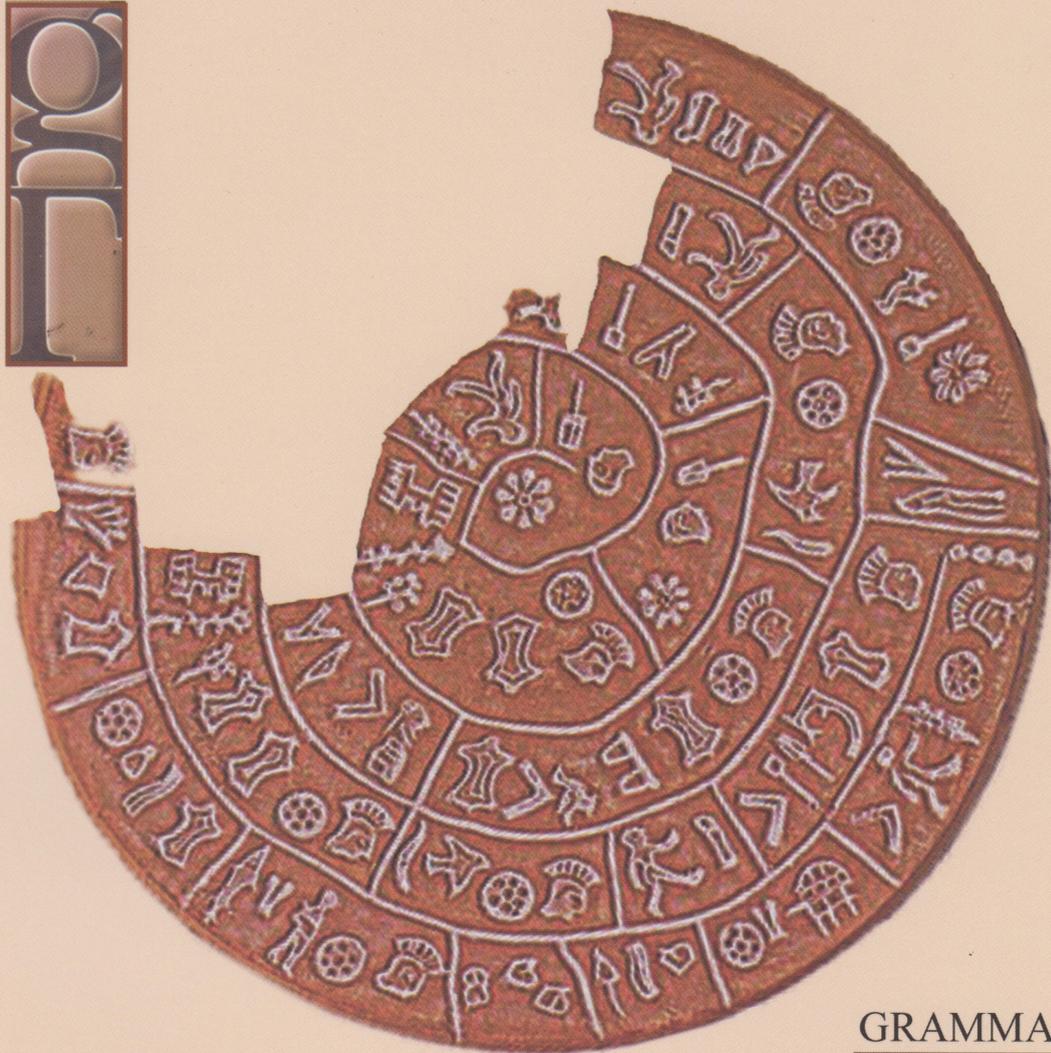
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Biblical Windows

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This paper examines different translations of the Bible from Hebrew, a Semitic language, into Indo-European languages, using the methodology of root semantics and focusing on the Hebrew terms translated into English as "window". Analysing the semantics of the roots of the Hebrew terms, we discover that in addition to the concept of "window" as an opening in a wall, they also have varying significations of whiteness, light, prophecy, purity, judgment, cleansing, and blessing. All the Hebrew terms are traversed by the idea of light and purity, and also display different transformations of the idea of light, meanings which are lost in translation into Indo-European languages. The theoretical implication is that there are in Biblical Hebrew meanings that never pass to the Indo-European translations, because the Hebrew language is the vehicle of a worldview totally different from that of the Indo-European languages.

Tasks

The tasks I have set myself in this paper is to decode the various Hebrew words that are translated as *windows* in English translations of the Bible, and to emphasise the hermeneutic aspect of the meanings of Hebrew words which are untranslatable into Indo-european languages.

Problems – the artifact and the term window

The artifact

We are used to having windows in our buildings. It is not only a matter of style or wealth; the window is also a sign of architecture, culture and civilization. The window has cognitive aspects as well – we use it to see through, to look out the window. The economic aspect is that we save money for fuel and energy. All this is because light makes things visible in our houses. The window is also a linguistic phenomenon. The window (with or without a balcony) is often used in art (literature, cinema) as a setting for love scenes or crime scenes.

The term: etymology

According to the *Concise Dictionary of English Etymology* the etymology of the English word *window* is:

> **window** (scand.) Orig. sense 'wind-eye,' an eye or hole for admission of air and light. M.E. *windowe, windohe, windoge*. – Icel. vindauga, a window; lit. 'wind-eye.' – Icel. vindr, wind; auga, eye; see Eye. ¶ Bulter has windore, a corrupted form, as if for wind-door. (Skeat 564)

The Hebrew word for window has a completely different semantic structure, expressing a different worldview. According to *BibleWorks*, the root and the etymology are unknown. The only hypothesis is the meaning "hollow" (in the wall) connected to the root *Het-Lamed-Lamed*. The extended semantics of the root *Het-Lamed-Lamed* is:

> **[halon]** I. [halàl] wound (fatally), bore through, pierce; slain, fatally wounded; [halàh] cake (if pierced); [mehilà] hole; [halòn] window; II. [halàl] play the pipe; flute, pipe; III. [halàl] profane, defile, pollute, desecrate; begin (Hiphil only); profaned, dishonoured, unhallowed; [hol] profaneness, commonness; [halilà] far be it (from me etc.), God forbid that, emphatic substantive used as a negative particle or interjection; [thilà] beginning, first. *(BibleWorks)*

In Bulgarian, the etymology and word derivation show a third kind of worldview for window:

> **[prozoretz]** lit. *place to see, to see far away*

In addition, we note that for the word which in English Biblical translations is rendered as *window*, in the Hebrew text there are three different words having three different roots: [halòn], [mehezàh], [tzòhar].

Approaches to the tasks

Worldview

W. von Humboldt in his philosophy of language introduces the concept of *Weltansicht,* the ability of language to form concepts with which we understand the world. According to Underhil (55-56), the concept of *Weltansicht* is not identical to the idea of linguistic relativity proposed by Whorf, the theory that a language is the vehicle of a specific worldview.

> […] the concept of worldview is invariably confused in English-speaking countries with the term *Weltanschauung* (Lee 1996: 84). In the US of Whorf's time and throughout the second half of the twentieth century, *Weltansicht* – language as the capacity to coin concepts – was scarcely a welcome extra in the scenario of linguistics. And linguists interested in Whorf's intuitions – weak echoes of Humboldt's voice – were forced to critically reappraise linguistic relativism in order to reinstate it as an academically respectable position (Lakoff 1987: 304).

Underhil draws attention to Trabant's distinction between *Weltansicht* and *Weltanschauung*.

> Trabant asserted that worldviews *(Weltanschauungen)* were visions of the world in the sense of conceptions or ideologies. They were *affirmations* about the nature of the world and our place within it. In contrast to this, for

Humboldt: languages are not assemblages of affirmations about the world which we hold to be true. Languages affirm nothing about the world; they give us the world in a certain way, thereby allowing assertive discourses (among others) upon the nature of the world. (Trabant 1992: 56, mT)

An example will help to clarify this point. A communist worldview might clash with, or exclude, a capitalist worldview. Both might be condemned as distorted or perverted perspectives by a Christian, just as a Catholic might condemn New Age Protestant cults and the worldviews they promote. And yet, all of these radically different visions of the world might take root and fight for territory within the same linguistic community. Furthermore, any one of the above belief-systems has grown and thrived in a multiplicity of languages of very different types, so even though they would appear to be conceptually constrictive, they are, unquestionably, linguistically flexible. Weltansichten, on the other hand, are language-bound. A *Weltansicht* constitutes the individual form or nature of the language (but also, in a deeper sense, its meaning too). A worldview-as-*Weltansicht* is the capacity which language bestows upon us to form the concepts with which we think and which we need in order to communicate. Whorf may have used the term *Weltanschauung* when he evoked his concept of thought worlds, but what he had in mind was closer to *Weltansicht.*

Underhil then attempts to disentangle the different meanings of *Weltansicht,* recognizing that the term may not have a precise analogue in English-speaking countries and terminology:

Since the aim of this whole work is to redefine world-view, it is somewhat perverse to attempt to encapsulate all of the complexities and contradictions which this sole term has come to include. However, since the term has gained wide currency in the disciplines of philosophy, sociology and cultural studies as well as in linguistics, and since it is not likely to be discarded, some attempt should be made to define it. Though any attempt at definition will be inadequate, it seems, nevertheless, reasonable to affirm that this catch-all term covers five different concepts which I have attempted to disentangle using the terms world-perceiving, world-conceiving, cultural mindset, personal world and perspective as defined above. (152-153)

Worldview and interlinguistic asymmetry and dissymmetry

The Indo-European and Semitic languages are vehicles of different worldviews. This is reflected in interlinguistic asymmetry and dissymmetry.

Biblical Hebrew is a sacred language. In the twenty-first century, if somebody is interested in a better understanding of the Biblical Hebrew text he/she needs information on the Hebrew language, not only on its grammar, but also on the psychology of its reading as this has developed in Jewish culture (Shimron 2006). A good example of this approach is Ugo Volli's work on biblical semiotics.

Jewish culture has an overwhelming respect for the written word, a respect bordering on mysticism. For centuries the Kabbalah has been conceived as 'Jewish mystical theology' (*Encyclopedia Judaica*, 11: 587-588). The great thinker

Gershom Scholem was the first to realise that Hebrew has an algebraic structure, probably because he was a student of the German mathematician and philosopher of language Gottlob Frege. At the same time he wrote a "strange" (as Derrida calls it) letter to the German thinker Franz Rosenzweig in 1926 from Jerusalem:

> This country is a volcano in which language will boil *[Das Land ist ein Vulkan, Es beherbergt die Sprache]* […] There exists another danger even more disturbing [umheimlicher] than the Arab nation, a danger which is a necessary consequence of the Zionist enterprise: What about the 'actualization' of the Hebrew language; does this sacred language by which our children are nourished not constitute an abyss *[Abgrund]* which will, without fail, open up someday? […] May we not be running the risk of seeing, someday, the religious power of this language turned violently against those who speak it? […] As far as we are concerned, we live inside our language, which for most of us is like blind men walking over an abyss. But when vision is granted us, to ourselves and our descendants, shall we not fall to the bottom of this abyss? And no one can tell whether the sacrifice of those who will be destroyed in this fall will be enough to seal it up again. (Derrida 80-81)[1]

To summarise Scholem's views on the Hebrew language: the Hebrew language has religious power; even in secular Hebrew the power of the sacred often seems to speak to us; names have their own life. Scholem worries that the process of adopting Hebrew as a spoken language will violently turn against those who speak it. That is because of the "religious power" of the sacred and symbolical status of Hebrew; "Hebrew words, all that are not neologisms but have been taken from the treasure-house of our 'good old language', are full to bursting with meaning" (Scholem 98-99).

Methodology

The analysis I propose in this paper draws on several methodological approaches.

Root semantics

The extended semantics of the root, i.e. the complete paradigm of a root, is a common method of analysis, commentary and interpretation in Judaism. One reason is the high ambiguity of the root in Hebrew.

The cognitive approach

The cognitive approach involves the knowledge that the human being has language consciousness and linguistic subconsciousness. The extended semantics of the Hebrew root is important in cognitive terms because it shows associative and logical relationships that exist in Hebrew linguistic consciousness and sub-

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1. The full text of the English translation of the letter is in Scholem.

consciousness. Every Hebrew root is a Hebrew conceptualization of the world. Language conceptualization and the cognitive construal of the world are the object of the Vantage theory developed by MacLaury. He shows the role of the whole, including "the subconsciousness and presuppositions" of a conceptualiser in a categorization procedure. This corresponds to the possibility of communication through subconscious knowledge. This approach is all the more valid in the case of a sacral language.

The semiotic approach to the Bible

In its one-hundred-year history, semiotics has achieved significant success. Achievements, however, require specialised training and long-term educational effort. Semiotics as a field of study has received some bad press over the years. Trask comments that "in spite of its deliberate emphasis upon the social nature of the sign systems examined, semiotics tends to be highly abstract and at times seemingly impenetrable" (180). Leone holds a softer but similar position: "At times the effort to create an artificial meta-language […] has led semioticians to develop an abstruse jargon" (18).

My understanding of a modern structuralist and semiotic approach is in the sense articulated by Ricoeur:[2]

> No structural analysis, we said, without a hermeneutic comprehension of the transfer of sense (without 'metaphor', without translatio), without that indirect giving of meaning which founds the semantic field, which in turn provides the ground upon which structural homologies can be discerned. (56)

Code, encoding, decoding

In his *Semiotics for Beginners* Chandler points out that "The concept of the 'code' is central in structuralist semiotics. […] Semioticians seek to identify codes and the tacit rules and constraints which underlie the production and interpretation of meaning within each code" (147-149). Chandler also points out that the processes of encoding and especially decoding are more complex than the terms appear to indicate:

> Contemporary semioticians refer to the creation and interpretation of texts as 'encoding' and 'decoding' respectively. […] In the context of semiotics, 'decoding' involves not simply basic recognition and comprehension of what a text 'says' but also the interpretation and evaluation of its meaning with reference to relevant codes. Where a distinction is made between comprehension and interpretation this tends to be primarily with reference to purely verbal text, but even in this context such a distinction is untenable; what is 'meant' is invariably more than what is 'said'. *(Semiotics: The Basics)*

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2. For a more detailed elaboration of my point of view, see Almalech, "The Eight Kinds of Linen in the Old Testament".

In his *Handbook of Semiotics* Winfried Nöth accords the rightful place to the concept of code. The textbook, as is evident from the title, is for the advanced learner and the information is rich and reliable.

> The term code was adopted as a key concept of semiotics under the influence of information theory. A large field of diverse phenomena, from phoneme systems […] to aesthetic conventions, was soon studied under the designation of code, but this terminological expansion did not remain without criticism. The semiotic concept of code has inherited a fundamental ambiguity from its presemiotic usage. Accordingly, a code is defined either as an autonomous system of signs or as a mere instruction for the translation of signs from one to another system of signs. […] Two Meanings of Code − Institutional Codes and Cryptographic Codes. (206)

In our case, due to the the different worldviews of the different languages, the Biblical Hebrew terms for window needs to be treated as Cryptographic Code because of the interlinguistic dissymmetry. Put simply, Hebrew terms cannot be translated into an Indo-European language. Thus they need to be decoded.

For me, the best semiotic and structuralist texts reveal or decode the hidden just as an X-ray gives new knowledge. This new knowledge is Culture. If I reveal for the Indo-Europeans new knowledge about the Bible by practicing semantics in a contrastive linguistic manner, it gives better understanding. This classical method is not only pure semiotics, but also hermeneutics.

Semantics and contrastive lingustics

Semantics is an important and essential part of semiotics. The translation of the Bible requires comparative linguistics. The fact that three different Hebrew words for window are translated with the same English word should be seen in terms of linguistic relativity and not of the poverty of the English language. The facts of the differences between the Hebrew and English (and other Indo-European) texts of the Bible are a matter of better understanding, i.e. of hermeneutics.

Exploring the whole text of the Bible

I explore the various terms for *window* not in a particular book but in the entire text of the Old Testament. The structure of different terms for *window* in the whole of the Bible can be compared to an independent system that runs through the entire text, reflecting in language the prophetic attitude over the period of a thousand years during which the Old Testament was written.

Prototype Theory and the cognitive approach

Since a window lets light into our homes and the light makes things visible inside, we should have in mind the Prototype Theory of Eleanor Rosch, its basics and development.

In Prototype Theory light is proven to be a universal prototype for the colour white. Wierzbicka united the linguistic factor with the cultural one by uniting Berlin and Kay's schema to Rosch's prototypes, including the ideas of Witkowski

and Brown for macro-light and macro-dark colours. Through this step the cognitive processes gain a logical advantage for the interpretation of both the linguistic and cultural data. Wierzbicka's point of view relies on George Lakoff's research as well as on Lakoff-Johnson's study where Prototype Theory and the metaphor models were developed as cognitive phenomena.

Words for window in Biblical Hebrew

What do English speakers fail to understand when three different words from the Hebrew original − [halon], [mehezàh] and [tzòhar] − are translated with the single word *window*? Here is the story of the original content of the Bible.

[halon]

According to *BibleWorks* the semantics of the root Het-Lamed-Lamed חלל is:
   1. wound (fatally), bore through, pierce [halàl]
      slain, fatally wounded [halàl]
      cake (if pierced) [halàh]
      hole [mehilà]
      window [halòn]
   2. play the pipe [halàl]
      flute, pipe [halìl]
   3. profane, defile, pollute, desecrate; begin (Hiphil only) [halàl]
      profaned, dishonoured, unhallowed [halàl]
      profaneness, commonness [hol]
       far be it (from me etc., used as a negative particle or interjection) [halilà]
      beginning, first [thilà]

This is the most frequently used term for *window* – it is used in 25 instances in the Old Testament. *BibleWorks* indicates that the root and the etymology are unknown. The only hypothesis is the meaning "hollow in the wall" connected to the root *Het-Lamed-Lamed* חלל. Usually [halòn] is translated as θυρίδα, *window, прозорец* [prozoretz].

> Genesis 8:6
>
> WTT וַיְהִ֕י מִקֵּ֖ץ אַרְבָּעִ֣ים י֑וֹם וַיִּפְתַּ֣ח נֹ֔חַ אֶת־חַלּ֥וֹן הַתֵּבָ֖ה אֲשֶׁ֥ר עָשָֽׂה
>
> KJV And it came to pass at the end of forty days, that Noah opened the **window** of the ark which he had made:
> NAU   Then it came about at the end of forty days, that Noah opened the **window** of the ark which he had made;
> NRS At the end of forty days Noah opened the **window** of the ark that he had made
> Библия 1940 После, след четиридесет дни, Ной отвори **прозореца** на ковчега, що беше направил; [lit. **window**]
> LXT   καὶ ἐγένετο μετὰ τεσσαράκοντα ἡμέρας ἠνέῳξεν ὁ Νῶε τὴν **θυρίδα** τῆς κιβωτοῦ, ἥν ἐποίησεν

If we know that [halòn] is the usual term for window in Hebrew, we can say that in the case of [halòn] we have symmetry in Indo-European translations. What is missing is the associative and logical structure inscribed in the semantics of the Hebrew root. For the skilled Hebrew reader the term itself contains semantic nuances of "kill", "profane", "defile", "pollute", "desecrate".

[mehezàh]

This word [mehezàh] is used only three times, all in the same passage (1 Kings 7:4-5). It is not the usual term for *window* in Hebrew. All three uses are for description of the palace of Solomon. The root is *Het-Zain-He* הזח and according to *BibleWorks*, the root semantics of *Het-Zain-He* הזח are:

> light, place of seeing, window [mehezàh]
> look, see, behold, prophesy, provide [hazàh]
> vision [hazòn]
> seer [hozèh]
> visions (only in 2Chr 9:29) [hazòt]
> vision [hazùt]
> vision [hizaiòn]
> vision [mehazèh]

1 Kings 7:4

WTT וּשָׁקְפִים שָׁלֹשׁ טוּרִים מֶחֱזָה **הַמֶּחֱזֶה**-לֹא שָׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים

KJV   And *there were* **windows** *in* three rows, and **light** *was* against **light** *in* three ranks.

NAU *There were artistic* **window** frames in three rows, and **window** was opposite **window** in three ranks.

RSV There were **window** frames in three rows, and **window** opposite window in three tiers.

NRS There were **window** frames in the three rows, facing each other in the three rows.

Библия 1940 И имаше решетки в трите етажа, така че **светене** беше поставено срещу **светене** в трите етажа. [lit. ***candescence***]

Библия 1992 Прозоречни стълбове имаше три реда; имаше и три реда **прозорци**, **прозорец** срещу **прозорец**. [lit. ***window***]

LXT καὶ μέλαθρα τρία καὶ χώρα ἐπί χώραν τρισσῶς

Some of the translations give for [mehezàh] the usual term for **window** in the target language**:** *window* (NAU; NRS; NKJ), *прозорец* (Библия 1992), *окно* (RST). Others translate [mehezàh] with a target-language term for **light:** *light* (KJV)*, светлина* (Библия 1940), *светене* (Библия, 1992). In KJV *window* is used once and two uses of *light* are inserted. A third group **skips** the translation of the two instances of [mehezàh] – LXT, the Septuagint, avoids the use of a term for *window* and prefers a word for space: χώρα, the space in which a thing is.

The differences in the translations indicate that [mehezàh] is not the usual term for *window* in Hebrew. The appearance of translations using the word *light* reflects an attempt to keep the meanings of the extended semantics of the Hebrew root of [mehezàh].

Solomon is known as a king and the wisest judge. The use of the word [mehezàh] shows that in Hebrew the information is included that Solomon was also a prophet. Even in a translation with *light*, this information remains hidden in the Indo-European languages. This is due to the difference in world views.

According to the Prototype Theory (and its further development by multiple authors) the word [mehezàh] ascribes to Solomon and his home the semantic feature of "ritual purity". To native Hebrew speakers the semantic feature of "ritual purity" is communicated through the linguistic subconsciousness.

Only for skilled native speakers of Hebrew is there a logical connection in linguistic consciousness between [mehezàh] and the semantic feature of "ritual purity".

[tzòhar]

In Genesis 6:16 Noah is given instructions how to build the Ark. The word used for the window of the Ark is not the standard word for *window* [halòn] but [tzòhar]. The term [tzòhar] is used only once as a term for *window* in the Old Testament. The root is *Tzadi*-He-Reish צהר and according to *BibleWorks* the root semantics are:

1. whiteness, brilliance
2. noon, midday [tzòhar]
   roof (Gen 6:16) [tzòhar]
   press oil (only in Job 24:11) [tzahàr]
   fresh oil [itzhàr]

Genesis 6:16

KJV   A **window** shalt thou make to the ark, and in a cubit shalt thou finish it above; and the door of the ark shalt thou set in the side thereof; *with* lower, second, and third *stories* shalt thou make it.

NAU   You shall make a **window** for the ark, and finish it to a cubit from the top; and set the door of the ark in the side of it; you shall make it with lower, second, and third decks.

NRS   Make a **roof** for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks.

NKJ   You shall make a **window** for the ark, and you shall finish it to a cubit from above; and set the door of the ark in its side. You shall make it *with* lower, second, and third *decks*.

Библия, 1992 И направи на ковчега **прозорец** (…) [lit. *window*]

Библия, 1940 **Отверстие** направи на ковчега (…) [lit. *an aperture*]

LXT ἐπισυνάγων ποιήσεις τὴν κιβωτὸν καὶ εἰς **πῆχυν** συντελέσεις
      αὐτὴν ἄνωθεν τὴν δὲ θύραν τῆς κιβωτοῦ ποιήσεις ἐκ πλαγίων κα-
      τάγαια, διώροφα καὶ τριώροφα ποιήσεις αὐτήν.

The variations in the translations (*window, roof, aperture*) are a sign of nonstan-
dard Hebrew use. This nonstandard use, however, is intentional. The intention
of the author is to honor Noah with a "window" suitable for him through which
in Hebrew is indicated his "moral purity" and righteousness. Whether a *window*
or a *roof*, the Indo-European translations remain silent on the idea of light and
"moral purity".

General conclusions

There has been a healthy interest in the peculiarities of the Hebrew text of the
Old Testament in the humanities for the last 50 years. This paper is my contri-
bution to this trend.

I have also wished to demonstrate that semantics is an integral part of se-
miotics. In the year 2013 semantics is an interdisciplinary field. It includes cog-
nitive approaches, the philosophy of language, evidence derived from modern
ethno-linguistics, comparative linguistics and philology and many other methods.

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LXT   *Septuaginta. Old Greek Jewish Scriptures.* Ed. Alfred Rahlfs. Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt / Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1935. Print.

NAU   *The New American Standard Bible.* 1977 and 1995 editions. Lockman Founda-

tion, 1986. This translation is an updated edition of the ASV, with the entire Bible completed in 1971. Print.

NRS   *The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*. National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1989. Print.

NKJ   *The New King James Version.* Thomas Nelson, Inc, 1982. Print.

WTT   *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia.* 4th corrected edition. Ed. K. Elliger and W. Rudoph. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1966, 1977, 1983, 1990. Print.

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