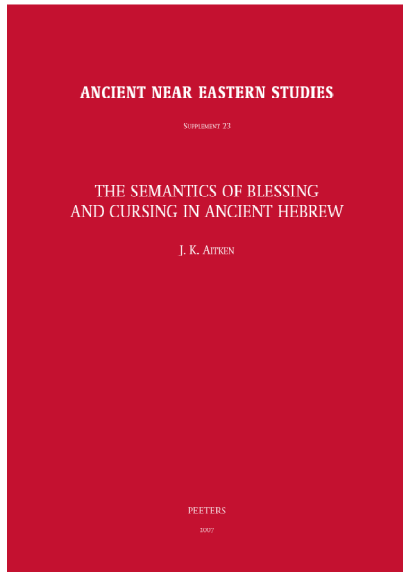


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**Aitken, J. K.**

***The Semantics of Blessing and Cursing in Ancient Hebrew***

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Yael Avrahami  
The University of Sydney  
Sydney, Australia

*The Semantics of Blessing and Cursing in Ancient Hebrew* is part of the Semantics of Ancient Hebrew Database (SAHD). Since its establishment in 1991, multiple entries were published online, fewer related articles were published in various journals,<sup>1</sup> and some entries appeared in a special volume, which also included an introduction and methodological description by the project committee chair, Prof. Muraoka, of Leiden University.<sup>2</sup> This is, however, the first printed publication to include a complete semantic field and to go beyond the form of lexical entries to include a survey of scholarly approaches to the particular semantic field, whether semantic, lexical, theological, or cultural.

The general introduction includes two parts: a review of previous scholarship of blessing and curses in the Hebrew Bible; and a detailed outline of the structure of entries within the present work, its *raison d'être*, and some examples of possible generated scholarship. Aitken describes the development of scholarly work on blessing and cursing and stresses that it was/is often based on theological considerations and anthropological theories

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1. See the following websites for both: <http://www.sahd.uklinux.net/>; <http://www.orinst.ox.ac.uk/html/hjs/sahd.html>; <http://www2.div.ed.ac.uk/research/sahd/about.html>.

2. T. Muraoka, ed., *Semantics of Ancient Hebrew* (Abr-Nahrain Supplement 6; Leuven: Peeters, 1998).

rather than on the semantic evidence to be found in the text. Early evolutionary interpretations recognized three steps of the use of cursing and blessing in Israelite religion: from magic, through cult, to direct divine intervention. Recent approaches talk about a shift from performative blessing and cursing to declarative one, a shift that is claimed to find expression also in semantic development. Aitken challenges both ends of the spectrum of interpretation as being evolutionary by nature, relentless in using this semantic field to distinguish between magic and religion, and as being far from the text when reaching their respective conclusions.

Aitken stresses the centrality of pragmatics and speech-act theory to semantic investigation, especially in the attempt to recognize the meaning of a given lexeme through its context (micropragmatics) and setting (macropragmatics). He describes the direct link between social conventions and semantic conventions, which can explain specific issues in the understanding of blessing and cursing: “we can say that to some extent words are power-laden, but it is not inherent in the words themselves, but rather in the conventions of their use” (21). The power of words, therefore, is not seen as a “primitive” concept but as a universal semantic reality.

The introduction as a whole serves as a methodological signpost regarding the link (or lack thereof) between the study of notions and the study of terms in biblical studies. In the opening page, we read that “Semantic is a branch of linguistics that must interact with other disciplines. This is all the more the case with ancient language where we have no informants and are required to reconstruct for ourselves as much as we can from the information available. In engaging with history, archaeology, anthropology, theology, textual criticism, and other branches of linguistics, semantic analysis provides an important contribution to our understanding of the ancient sources and of the writers behind them” (3). Throughout the introduction it becomes clear that Aitken does not feel that such an overarching approach was ever carried out in the research of biblical blessing and cursing. This is expressed in his assertion toward the end of the research review: “The conclusions of this study are derived from the principle that we must describe the functions and effects of the utterances. Explanations and rationalisations of the linguistic phenomena can obscure a proper semantic description” (22). In the remainder of the introduction, Aitken provides a brief explanation of his method, which follows the principles of the SAHD and includes some more detailed examples or possible conclusions taken from the entries to follow.

Each entry opens with a survey of the occurrences of the lexeme in the Hebrew Bible, inscriptions, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and any other Hebrew text earlier than the Mishnah. This is also where a choice is made in debatable cases. After the database is established, each entry includes seven parts: (1) root and comparative material: comparative material

is provided under the assumptions that there is a “likelihood that etymology will be informed more of the semantics than vice versa” (24); it is included for matters of research and reference and might teach us something about the development of a word across languages or about literary attributions of ethnicity or geographical location to different characters; (2) syntegmatics: the subjects and objects collocated to verbs and the verbs collocated to nouns are provided to demonstrate synonymous and antonymous relationships within the semantic field and to distinguish between synonymous lexemes; one of the main differences revealed within the syntegmatics of blessing and curses is the distribution of divine and human subjects and objects across different verbs; (3) formal characteristics: summary of grammatical information regarding the lexeme is given; (4) versions: although versions are not considered to be central in the determination of Hebrew meaning, they can often confirm the polysemic nature of a given lexeme; they are also presented for the sake of future research; (5) lexical/semantic field: this part presents the paradigmatic links of the given lexeme, which determine if this lexeme is actually part of the semantic field or not; the main bases of such decisions are allocations and parallelism (both synonymous and antithetical); it is stressed that words might belong to few semantic fields, depending on the sense relationship considered; (6) exegesis: analysis of specific verses that demonstrates the context and setting of each lexeme and provides a range of possible meanings for it; this part provides the suggested meaning(s) of the lexeme; (7) a conclusion includes consideration of “all the evidence, including an evaluation of the position of the lexeme within the semantic field, and a fresh consideration of the individual passages in which the lexeme occurs” (40–41).

The second (and longer) part of the book presents twenty lexical entries, in alphabetical order: אלה I (verb); אלה (noun); ארר (verb); אָרַרָה (noun)<sup>Q</sup>; ברך (verb); בָּרַכָה (noun); זעם (verb); זעם (noun); זְעַמָּה (noun)<sup>Q</sup>; חרף II (verb); חָרַפָה (noun); מְאַרָה (noun)\*; נאץ I (verb); נָאַץָה (noun); נָאַצָה (noun); נקב II (verb)\*; קבב (verb)\*; קלל (verb, only piel/pual); קָלְלָה (noun); תְּאַלָה (noun) (lexemes marked with a <sup>Q</sup> are attested only in Qumran; lexemes marked with an asterisk appeared previously (see n. 2) and are presented here in a modified version). The exhaustive presentation naturally does not lend itself to abstracting, and any general assessment of it would require painstaking research that cannot be brief either. The entries present rich and precise information that should serve as fertile ground for reassessing our understanding of blessing and cursing in the culture reflected in the Hebrew Bible and relevant Hebrew literature. That will only be the case if scholars taking the social-scientific approach will be wise enough to embrace this comprehensive source of information.

Although such reassessment would require an extensive work, it seems that Aitken has some overall observations that are, sadly, not shared with the reader. I would be particularly interested to know why certain words that proved not to be strongly linked to

the semantic field of blessing and cursing but to other fields (e.g., “covenant/oath” [אַלֶּה I, verb], “shame/honor” [תְּרַפָּה] and “anger” [זַעַם, noun]) were included, while other words were left out. It is true that “only a semantic description of all of the Hebrew language would ensure full coverage, but that naturally is not currently realizable” (37), yet I was hoping to read about the author’s view of these overlaps.

Furthermore, despite the fact that Aitken aims to “describe the specific function of the curse in terms of its operation, thereby paving the way for a semantic understanding of the biblical lexemes rather than for a social anthropological reading of the Bible” (22), and therefore exempts himself from any discussion beyond the lexical entries, his presentation of scholarly views in the introduction does call for some reevaluation of these views in light of his own semantic analysis. It is only natural that preliminary insights will come from the scholar who investigated the matter thoroughly. The introductory part included much criticism of previous scholarship (albeit temperate), and as a reader I would like to find a similar conclusion. Although Aitken rejects much of the previous understandings of blessing and curses in the Bible, he chooses not to express his own conclusions explicitly or systematically.

Unlike Brichto, who studied the same semantic field in an “attempt to arrive to a more precise original denotation of each term, that is, of its narrowest meaning before its connotative value broadens its usage into synonymous ambiguity with other terms conceptually related but etymologically and semantically distant,”<sup>3</sup> Aitken rightly takes the contemporary semantic approach, where there is no meaning without the connotative (contextual) value. The result is a fine example of the prospects of SAHD, and we can only wish that similar volumes will be available to the scholarly community in following years.

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3. C. H. Brichto, *The Problem of “Curse” in the Hebrew Bible* (SBLMS 13; Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1963), 14.