Botterweck, G. Johannes, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds.


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The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (the English translation of the Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament) has long been recognized as an indispensable English-language philological research tool for professional readers of the Bible. This is the final volume covering biblical Hebrew; volume 16, covering biblical Aramaic, is in preparation, but as of this writing there is no projected date of completion. A concluding volume will contain a general index and supplementary bibliography. Volume 15 contains eighty-six articles dealing with 162 words—from šākar “become intoxicated” (1–5, by M. Oeming) to taršîš “Tarshish, chrysolite” (790–93, by E. Lipiński)—by a total of sixty-one international contributors. The German original (TWAT 8/1–7) was published in 1994–1995 and is represented here virtually unchanged.

As is to be expected, the format of the previous volumes is maintained here. Entries are listed alphabetically by key word followed by related lexemes. A typical entry begins with an etymological study (including relevant cognate words in other Near Eastern, primarily Semitic, languages) and a survey of the number and distribution of occurrences in the Old Testament (sometimes including parallelisms and noun + verb idioms); this is followed by a detailed, often verse-by-verse, analysis of the word’s meaning, semantic range in usage, theological significance, and, finally, a consideration of translational equivalents (especially LXX) and postbiblical (Sirach, Dead Sea Scrolls) occurrences, if any. The organizational structure is flexible, and the larger articles and those treating the
more theologically charged terms display considerable variations on this theme. Each entry typically is accompanied by an excellent bibliography.

The volume under review, like its predecessors, is a smorgasbord of philological delights of all sizes. The shortest entries at two pages or less are šāmîr “thorn” (237–38, by H. Ringgren), šāraq “hiss, whistle” (480–81, by H. Schmoldt), šātal, “plant” (544–45, by K.-M. Beyse), and tĕē'nâ “fig tree” (546–47, by H. Ringgren). At the other extreme, at over forty pages, are šēm “name” (128–76, by F. V. Reiterer, H.-J. Fabry, and H. Ringgren) and ša’ar “gate” (359–405, by E. Otto). The last item illustrates the many strengths of this publication project but also a serious shortcoming.

Otto’s comprehensive forty-six-page analysis of ša’ar “gate” draws upon both literary and material (archaeological) data in admirable fashion. The term is defined as “the architecturally conspicuous entrance to a public building or the structural complex marking the entrance to urban wards, towns, and cities,” but not a domestic building, for which petah “entrance” is used (368); a “gate” distinguishes a “city” (‘îr) from a village (373). Otto proceeds to explore the term’s architectural, functional, and metaphorical dimensions, further illuminated by relevant Mesopotamian terminology and artifacts. He stresses that “in the ancient Near East and in Israel, a gate is a place of transition from a salubrious, sheltered place to a chaotic and perilous outside world; the city gate is thus a transition from the sheltered space of the walled city to the outside world, a transition that must be made safe by architectural and magical means” (377). A gate functioned, therefore, on several different existential levels, which Otto discusses under the headings of “defense” and “civil” (392–403); of the latter, judicial functions are highlighted, while religious/cultic (demeaned as “magical”) functions are classified as the former (facilitated by accepting the common emendation of bāmôt haššē‘ārim, “baanoth of the gates,” in 2 Kgs 23:8b to bāmôt haššē‘īrim, which he renders “the pedestals with ‘satyrs,’” analogous to Mesopotamian and Syrian gate-guardian figures [394]). The various nuances of the term in Deuteronomy, archaeological examples of Iron Age gates, and the gates of pre-Hellenistic Jerusalem receive separate treatments. His survey of IA gates (383–86) is very good but incomplete. The German original entry appeared just before the discovery of the IA gate complex and cultic installation at Bethsaida, and this creates a serious gap in this English version; see now M. Bernett, O. Keel, and S. Münger, Mond, Stier und Kult am Stadttor: Die Stele von Betsaida (et-Tell) (Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), and T. H. Blomquist, Gates and Gods: Cults in the City Gates of Iron Age Palestine—An Investigation of the Archaeological and Biblical Sources (CBOT 46; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1999). The original also just missed the appearance of two very relevant discussions of the cultic installation at the gate complex at Dan—locus 5122, not mentioned by Otto, not the well-known podium with canopy bases (?) to the right of the entrance of the gate, which Otto does touch on (398)—by A.
Biran (Biblical Dan [Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1994], 243–45, 248 fig. 206, 249 fig. 206a; and “Tel Dan: Biblical Texts and Archaeological Data,” in Scripture and Other Artifacts: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Honor of Philip J. King [ed. M. D. Coogan et al.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994], 8–11; see also idem, “Sacred Spaces: Of Standing Stones, High Places and Cult Objects at Tel Dan,” BAR 24/5 [1998]: 41–45, 70) and by J. A. Emerton (“The High Places of the Gates in 2 Kings xxiii 8,” VT 44 [1994]: 455–67). B. Halpern’s important discussion of “Eli’s Death and the Israelite Gate: A Philological-Architectural Correlation” (Erlsr 26 [1999]: 52*–63*) should also be mentioned here. It is regrettable that in the English edition these items could not at least have been added to the five-plus-page bibliography (the largest in the volume), which, as it is, gives the impression of being thorough and up-to-date (which it was when first written ca. 1993 [the most recent publication date cited: 376 n. 149, 377 n. 162, 385 n. 238]). This is not a minor quibble, since it involves new information pertaining directly to one of Otto’s major insights on the subject. Bad luck perhaps, although I note that a few other entries in the English version have been updated in this way (e.g., 2 n. 12, 3 n. 15, 103 n. 41, 171 n. 26, 260 n. 79, 267 n. 147, 268 n. 157, 277 n. 227, 455 n. 20, 471 n. 12, 531 n. 99, 568 n. 43, 621 n. 33), for the most part giving English translations or new editions but nonetheless reinforcing the impression that the scholarship in volume as a whole is current as of the mid-2000s. It is not. Another shortcoming in this and some other entries is the lack of visual illustrations to supplement the text: here the floor plans of some of the IA gates discussed would have been helpful, and, for example, sketches of the Old Testament’s two competing cosmological representations that form the heuristic core of G. Bartelmus’s treatment of šāmayim “heaven” (204–36) even more so. The concluding volume in the set is promised to remedy the first problem, and we may hope that the second can be addressed as well.

Entries for words of particular theological significance include šālôm “peace” (13–49, by F. J. Stendebach), šēm “name” (noted above), šāmayim “heaven” (noted above), šāma’ “hear” (253–305, by U. Rüterswörden), šemeš “sun” (305–13, by E. Lipiński), šāpat “judge” (411–31, by H. Niehr), and tōrā “instruction, teaching” (609–46, by F. Garcia López and H.-J. Fabry).

In quality of content, presentation, and usefulness, this volume meets the high standard of its predecessors.