

## Darkness or Blackness? A Semantic Study of חַשְׁכָּה (Joel 3:4)

LOURDES GARCÍA UREÑA

lgarciau@ceu.es

Universidad San Pablo-CEU, CEU Universities, Madrid, Spain

Joel's oracle proclaiming the day of the Lord concludes with the announcement of a series of wonders. The event that the prophet announces is not devoid of chromatism, since the language of color emerges in the prophecy through elements of nature that connote color (blood, fire, smoke [Joel 3:3–4; Eng. 2:30–31]). It is logical, then, to ask if חַשְׁכָּה means “darkness” or, on the contrary, “color.” In order to determine if חַשְׁכָּה has a chromatic meaning, I will apply a specific methodology based on cognitive linguistics. First, I will discuss the “encyclopedic knowledge” of the native speaker, describing the meaning of the color terms proposed in the main dictionaries and undertaking a comparative study of how the terms have been translated in the early versions of the Bible. I will then study the occurrences of the color terms in context and analyze the entity that describes the color term—the sun. In the light of this semantic analysis, I conclude that חַשְׁכָּה expresses color in Joel 3:4, and this fact has great relevance for the interpretation of the prophecy.

---

The book of the prophet Joel, despite its brevity, has been considered the “work of a great poet who constructs with rigour, one able to develop with coherence an imaginative transposition that in brief images renews a literary tradition and its common poetic motifs.”<sup>1</sup> As I will show in this article, Joel 3:4 (Eng. 2:31) provides

This article is part of a larger study that I have undertaken as principal investigator of the research group LECOBİ (El lenguaje del color en la Biblia) (PC06/0720) and the project El Apocalipsis: un universo de color. Del texto a la imagen (I). El negro: color representado, color significado (MPFI1LG), both under the auspices of the Universidad San Pablo CEU. I wish to thank my colleagues Giovanni Collamati and Antonio Jiménez for their help in researching Mesopotamian and medieval source material. A first version of this paper was presented at the 2021 AAR/SBL Annual Meeting in San Antonio, Texas, in the Biblical Lexicography Section directed by Reinier de Blois and William Ross.

All translations are my own.

<sup>1</sup>Luis Alonso Schökel, ed., *Biblia del Peregrino: Edición de Estudio*, 3 vols. (Estella: Verbo Divino, 2003), 2:1128.

an excellent example of that renewal, as this motif of the sun's darkening, which was common in the prophets, becomes here a brief image infused with color that describes two eclipses.

The pericope under study here is from the second part of the book, where, following the invasion of the locusts, a message of hope is revealed at the effusion of the Spirit and the arrival of the day of the Lord. Specifically, Joel 3:3–4 (Eng. 2:30–31) announces the events that will take place before that day arrives:

3 ונתתי מופתים בשמים ובארץ דם ואש ותימרות עשן:  
4 השמש יהפך לחשך והירח לדם לפני בוא יום יהוה הגדול והנורא:

I will work wonders in the heavens and on the earth: blood, fire, and columns of smoke.

The sun will be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood before the day of the Lord, great and terrible.

These events are described as מופתים (“wonders,” “miracles,” “portents”). The community that hears the prophecy knows that מופת was used earlier to designate the miracles that God performed through Moses to liberate the people from the pharaoh. Indeed, this is mentioned not only in the book of Exodus (4:21; 7:3, 9; 11:9–10) but also in other writings that record the same acts (Deut 6:22, 7:19, Neh 9:10, Ps 135:9, Isa 20:3, Jer 32:20).<sup>2</sup> Joel 3:3–4 reveals that the Lord will again perform such wonders; through them the people will behold the effusion of the spirit, and they will know that the day of the Lord is near, as these events will be witnessed by all.

The earth wonders are presented in the prophecy in a synthetic manner. The poet uses a rapid enumeration of three metonyms that refer to three elements of nature: “blood, fire, and columns of smoke” (v. 3). This enumeration transmits a dramatic message: death and destruction are faits accomplis. The drama is further intensified by the chromatic connotations of these metonyms (the reddish hues of the blood and the fire, and the black of the smoke).<sup>3</sup> It is, then, a “visual” prophecy, and the community listening to it is able to contemplate it as such: a world ravaged by fire and running with the blood of its inhabitants, the victims of war. The effect this produces in the community of listeners is one of fear and dread at what is to come.

Immediately after this, the celestial wonders are described. Here Joel changes his literary strategy: he leaves off enumerating and employs a perfect parallelism in which it is announced that the sun and the moon will change their aspect, maintaining the chromatic connotation of blood: “The sun will be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood” (v. 4). What is it that the prophet wants to announce? And what does the community of listeners understand by it? Is Joel

<sup>2</sup>Robert L. Alden, “מופת,” *TWOT* 1:67.

<sup>3</sup>See 121 below.

really saying that the sun will turn to “darkness,” losing its own essence, while the moon will become red, as if echoing here the plagues of Exodus?<sup>4</sup>

The motif of darkness and its unexpected covering of the earth was an ominous occurrence that was well known to Joel’s listeners. The first time we encounter this phenomenon in the biblical corpus is in the book of Exodus, after the plague of locusts (10:22–23). It will later be repeated as a portent of divine punishment in the prophetic books. At times it is a darkening of the earth that is referred to (Amos 8:9b), while at other times it is a darkening of the sky (Jer 4:28) or heavenly bodies (Ezek 32:7b, Joel 2:10b, 4:15b), and finally of the sun and the moon. To describe the darkening of the sun, the prophets make frequent use of the verb חשך (“to darken,” Isa 13:10), or other such verb forms (שמש בענן אכסנו), “I will cover the sun with a cloud,” Ezek 32:7a; והבאתי השמש בצהרים, “I will make the sun go down at midday,” Amos 8:9).<sup>5</sup> On two occasions, Joel himself mentions the darkening of the sun by repeating the expression with no variation of the verb קדר (“to become dark”). The first time is when he describes the devastating effects of the locusts (שמש וירח קדרו, “the sun and the moon are darkened,” Joel 2:10); the second describes the reaction of the firmament to the military judgment of God—the light of the sun and the moon is dimmed, perhaps due to the density of cloud-covered sky (שמש וירח קדרו, “the sun and the moon are darkened,” Joel 4:15). Joel 3:4, then, would seem to be merely a third repetition of this literary motif of the sun’s darkening, with two new innovations in the presentation of this image: the use of the nominal lexeme חשך (“darkness”) rather than the verbal lexeme קדר (“to become dark”), and the addition of the moon’s reddening. If that were the case, however, the evocative force of this carefully constructed prophecy and the dramatic intensity it transmits would be lessened, as it is the third time the poet alludes to such a familiar image.

It seems, rather, that Joel’s intention is to announce an event that is totally anomalous, that has never before taken place, one that is portentous and exceeds the limits of nature—in effect, an alteration of the cosmic order. Only in this way can the prophecy be taken as a clear, unequivocal message to the community that the day of the Lord is at hand. The import of the prophecy must not be confused with mere destruction. The effect of the prophecy on the community is twofold: on the one hand, there is a feeling of horror at the devastation being described, while, on the other, there is a feeling of consolation in the eventual cessation of the destruction. That is, hope appears: death will come to an end and the day of the Lord will arrive. In this sense, the announcement of a double total eclipse of both the sun and

<sup>4</sup>Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 101: “Joel’s terminology for the latter portent significantly echoes that used of an Exodus plague in Ex. 10:17, 20. It alludes to a reddish obscuring of the moon through sandstorms and the like, whose color ominously suggested bloodshed.”

<sup>5</sup>In the New Testament, the darkening of the sun and the moon will announce the coming of Christ in the gospels (Matt 24:29, Mark 13:24). Meanwhile, in the book of Revelation, this will take place at the fourth trumpet blast (Rev 8:12), preceding the plague of locusts.

the moon fits well in the context of the prophecy. Such phenomena are, after all, sporadic celestial occurrences, limited in their duration and wondrous in that how and why they are produced is unknown to the ancient audience of the prophecy. Thus, they cause astonishment, fear, and uncertainty in those who contemplate them, but also a hope that, once they have concluded, the light of the sun and the moon will be reestablished.

In any case, it is true that during the total eclipse of the sun, the sun is not transformed into darkness (i.e., it does not cease to be what it is); nor is it even covered by darkness or enveloped in clouds. It simply changes color, as will be shown later.<sup>6</sup> Is it possible, then, that Joel is maintaining the language of color throughout the entire prophecy and intensifying it in this parallelism to express the strangeness of this occurrence? Is Joel modifying the biblical image of the sun's darkening by using the color of these eclipses? Is color in fact the language that allows him to fuse together poetry, realism, and theology? To answer such questions one needs to show that  $\aleph\aleph$  does not express darkness, as the principal dictionaries of Hebrew (BDB; *HALOT*; *DCH*; *SDBH*<sup>7</sup>) propose, but color. Can it thus be affirmed that from the lexicographical point of view  $\aleph\aleph$  denotes "the color black," "blackness"?

The answer to this implies a shift that is not merely formal but substantive, involving meaning. It is thus necessary to determine first what was understood in the biblical world both by darkness and by color and whether these concepts coincide with our own views so as to avoid anachronisms (section I). Once these concepts have been clarified, I will go on to present the methodology followed for determining the meaning of  $\aleph\aleph$  (section II), which, as I will explain, is based on two broad areas denominated as encyclopedic knowledge (section III) and semantic analysis (section IV). After this, I will present the conclusions (section V) that correspond to the questions listed above.

## I. THE CONCEPTS OF DARKNESS AND COLOR

According to the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*,  $\aleph\aleph$  ("darkness") as a physical reality consists of "the absence of light."<sup>8</sup> A similar definition is given by *SDBH*.<sup>9</sup> This coincides, in effect, with the use of  $\aleph\aleph$  in the biblical text. The word appears for the first time in the Priestly narrative, before light has been created ("darkness

<sup>6</sup>See 124 and 125 below.

<sup>7</sup>Reinier de Blois, ed., *Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew*, <https://semanticdictionary.org/semDic.php?databaseType=SDBH&language=en&lemma=%D7%97%D6%B9%D7%A9%D7%81%D6%B6%D7%9A%D6%B0&startPage=1>.

<sup>8</sup>Leland Ryken et al., eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), s.v. "Darkness."

<sup>9</sup>See 117 below.

covered the face of the earth,” Gen 1:2b); light arises afterward from the action of God over the shadows (Gen 1:4). Light/darkness thus receive different names (day/night, Gen 1:5), and from this moment on the opposition between these two realities becomes a recurring antithesis in the biblical corpus.<sup>10</sup>

This same concept of darkness appears also in Greek thought. Aristotle describes darkness as the absence of light (*De an.* 418b.17), as does the author of *De coloribus* (791b), who, in declaring that darkness is not a color, says:

ὅτι δὲ τὸ σκότος οὐ χρώμα ἀλλὰ στέρησις ἐστὶ φωτός

as darkness is not color, but rather the lack of light

This concept of darkness as a physical reality has continued to the present day,<sup>11</sup> which cannot be said, however, of the concept of color. As I have shown in earlier studies, the concept of color that existed in antiquity differs from our own, which we have inherited from Isaac Newton.<sup>12</sup> Today color is understood as an effect of light on the visual organs and comprises three elements: hue, luminosity, and saturation.<sup>13</sup> In the Bible, however, color is

what covers a person or object, in many cases reflecting a state, and is describable in terms of hue, luminosity (or brightness) and saturation, making it possible for human beings to differentiate between otherwise perceptually identical entities and substances, and more especially between entities and substances that are perceptually identical with respect to size, shape and texture.<sup>14</sup>

From this definition, one can deduce that color in the biblical corpus is not presented as an abstract concept (in fact, nouns corresponding to “black” or “white” are not found in the texts) but, rather, is concrete and inseparably linked to the entity it describes (an object, a person, an event, etc.). Color is what is visible in a given entity, for example, שער שחר (“black hair,” Lev 13:31) or לבן שינים (“white teeth,” Gen 49:12). Color terms, therefore, appear to be *embodied* in an entity; they are, in effect, embodied color terms, and so to arrive at the meaning of a given color term, it is necessary to study the entity to which it refers.

Color, when embodied in entities from the natural world, generally changes according to the degree of an object’s development, maturity, or moistness (think, for example, of fruit, grasses, etc.) or, in the case of a person, an individual’s emotional state or health. Color, then, reflects a state; more precisely, it is the external

<sup>10</sup> See 124 below.

<sup>11</sup> Juan Carlos Sanz and Rosa Gallego, *Diccionario Akal del color* (Madrid: Akal, 2001), s.v. “oscuridad,” 650.

<sup>12</sup> Lourdes García Ureña et al., *The Language of Colour in the Bible: Embodied Colour Terms Related to Green*, FSBP 11 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022), 5–8 and 11–19, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110767704>.

<sup>13</sup> Sanz and Gallego, *Diccionario Akal del color*, s.v. “color,” 258–59.

<sup>14</sup> García Ureña et al., *Language of Colour in the Bible*, 20.

sign of that state. Thus, for example, in the book of Leviticus color is used to diagnose leprosy:<sup>15</sup>

וכי יהיה בקרחת או בגבחת נגע לבן אדמדם צרעת פרחת הוא בקרחתו  
או בגבחתו: Lev 13:42

But if in the bald place, on the forehead or crown, there appears a white or reddish wound, it indicates leprosy of the scalp.

Finally, color requires light in order to be perceived. Indeed, the first color term to be mentioned in Genesis, ירק ( “green,” Gen 1:30), appears once night has been separated from day, and God has created paradise.

## II. METHODOLOGY

To study the concept of color found in the Bible, a methodology must be designed that takes into account the particular notion described above. For this purpose, lexicographical contributions from the field of cognitive linguistics have proved useful in determining the meaning of color terms.<sup>16</sup>

In cognitive linguistics, meaning is considered to be the essence of language. This meaning is a concept, which a definition expresses.<sup>17</sup> To arrive at this definition, however, cognitive linguistic practice insists on the need to acquire the knowledge possessed by the native speaker, which is referred to as *encyclopedic knowledge*, that is, “the overall knowledge that typical members of the speech community have.”<sup>18</sup> When ancient biblical texts are studied, two obstacles become evident: native speakers of the time no longer exist; and we do not know whether the language used in the Bible was a spoken language. In any case, the Bible was a text built upon the oral tradition and was read, meditated upon, listened to, and interpreted over the course of centuries by a particular community. This reality allows us to specify that what can be understood as encyclopedic knowledge in the biblical world was *the overall knowledge possessed by the typical members of the community that listened to or read the Bible*. To access this knowledge and to illuminate the

<sup>15</sup>Today it is known that צרעת denotes a dermatological illness such as vitiligo, psoriasis, and so on; see Julius Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*, trans. and ed. Fred Rosner (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004; German original, 1911), 326; John Wilkinson, “Leprosy and Leviticus: A Problem of Semantics and Translations,” *SJT* 31 (1977): 153–66, here 159.

<sup>16</sup>García Ureña et al., *Language of Colour in the Bible*, 24–34.

<sup>17</sup>Iraide Ibarretxe-Antuñano, “Lexicografía y lingüística cognitiva,” *Revista Española de Lingüística Aplicada* 23 (2010): 195–213.

<sup>18</sup>Ronald W. Langacker, “Context, Cognition and Semantics: A Unified Dynamic Approach,” in *Job 28: Cognition in Context*, ed. Ellen van Wolde, *BibInt* 64 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 179–230, here 187.

meanings of terms in the Hebrew version of the Bible—given that these early communities no longer exist—we have a series of tools at our disposal:

- The information provided by the main dictionaries and specialized studies of Biblical Hebrew
- The interpretations given in the ancient versions of the Bible, as their translators were closer in time to the original sources, when Biblical Hebrew was still a living language
- A wider study of the context of each pericope—its literary form, context, literary devices, syntactic peculiarities, and especially the entities being described (in accordance with the cognitive linguistics approach, the entity belongs to a cognitive domain that determines the meanings of color terms)<sup>19</sup>
- Extralinguistic disciplines such as archaeology, ancient astronomy, ancient metallurgy, ancient medicine, and so on

In the light of this theoretical framework, I have designed a method that consists of two broad sections following the sources identified above. First, *encyclopedic knowledge*, which includes (a) a *status quaestionis* that synthesizes the contributions of the leading dictionaries and monographic studies of color in the Bible; (b) the study of the interpretations given by the early versions of the Bible; and (c) a conclusive synthesis of the first two points. The second is a *semantic analysis* that includes a detailed study of the context of the terms, as we have just explained, along with relevant information from other disciplines regarding the entities described. All of these elements allow us to develop an accurate definition and to propose various translations.

### III. ENCYCLOPEDIA KNOWLEDGE

#### A. *Status Quaestionis*

The main dictionaries of Hebrew agree that the nominal lexeme  $\aleph\psi\aleph$  refers to “darkness” as opposed to light.<sup>20</sup> In fact, *SDBH* defines it as a “state in which there is no light, caused by the fact that the light of sun, moon, and stars cannot reach the location that is in focus.”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the extensive use of the word in the Hebrew text would indicate that it is a polysemic term with a wide range of meanings, especially in the figurative sense, as it results “in a state in which no one can

<sup>19</sup> Maria Josep Cuenca and Joseph Hilferty, *Introducción a la lingüística cognitiva* (1999; repr., Barcelona: Planeta, 2018), 72–73.

<sup>20</sup> BDB; *HALOT*; *DCH*; Luis Alonso Schökel, *Diccionario bíblico hebreo-español* (Madrid: Trotta, 1994), s.v. “ $\aleph\psi\aleph$ .”

<sup>21</sup> *SDBH*, s.v. “ $\aleph\psi\aleph$ ,” <https://semanticdictionary.org/semDic.php?databaseType=SDBH&language=en&lemma=\aleph\psi\aleph&startPage=1>.

readily see, and colors and shapes can no longer be distinguished; loved by the wicked only.”<sup>22</sup> From this definition come meanings such as (a) distress (Isa 5:30; 9:1; 29:18; Job 15:22, 23, 30; 20:26; etc.); (b) dread, terror, symbol of judgment (Amos 5:18, Job 3:4); (c) mourning (Isa 47:5); (d) perplexity or confusion (Job 5:14, 12:25, 19:8); (e) ignorance (Job 37:19); (f) evil, sin (Isa 5:20, Prov 2:13);<sup>23</sup> (g) oblivion (Job 3:4, 5; Eccl 6:4);<sup>24</sup> and (h) kingdom of death (Isa 47:5, Ps 88:13).<sup>25</sup> Finally, Luis Alonso Schökel points out that  $\text{ךשח}$ , although a nominal lexeme, can also function as an adverb or adjective. In any case, the translations he proposes are all related to the absence of light: “oscuro, tenebroso, lóbrego, sombrío, fosco; nublado, anubarrado.”<sup>26</sup>

The chromatic connotation of  $\text{ךשח}$  is absent from the meanings listed above, from the principal lexicons of Biblical Hebrew, as well as from specialized studies of color.<sup>27</sup> Only the *Jewish Encyclopedia* recognizes a connotation of “color,” examining the degrees of darkness as parts of color and affirming that the term  $\text{ךשח}$ , together with  $\text{כחלילי}$  and  $\text{כחללות}$ , refers “to the darkly lustrous or inflamed appearance of the eyes.”<sup>28</sup> However, when  $\text{ךשח}$  refers to eyes in the biblical text, the verb is used, and it refers to the impossibility of seeing, whether in a physical or figurative sense (Ps 69:24, Lam 5:17), and not to color.

Nevertheless, the verb  $\text{ךשח}$  can denote color. This occurs when individuals are described and the verb is accompanied by a color term. Thus, for example, in

<sup>22</sup> SDBH, s.v. “ $\text{ךשח}$ .”

<sup>23</sup> BDB, s.v. “ $\text{ךשח}$ .”

<sup>24</sup> SDBH, s.v. “ $\text{ךשח}$ .”

<sup>25</sup> Alonso Schökel, *Diccionario bíblico hebreo-español*, s.v. “ $\text{ךשח}$ .”

<sup>26</sup> Alonso Schökel, *Diccionario bíblico hebreo-español*, s.v. “ $\text{ךשח}$ .”

<sup>27</sup> Antoine Guillaumont, “La désignation des couleurs en hébreu et en araméen,” in *Problèmes de la couleur: Exposés et discussions du Colloque du Centre de recherches de psychologie comparative tenu à Paris les 18, 19, 20 mai 1954*, ed. Ignace Meyerson, Bibliothèque général de l'École pratique des hautes études (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1957), 339–48; Roland Gradwohl, *Die Farben im Alten Testament: Eine Terminologische Studie*, BZAW 83 (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1963); Pelio Fronzaroli, “Sulla struttura dei colori in ebraico biblico,” in *Studi linguistici in onore di Vittore Pisani*, ed. Vittore Pisani (Brescia: Paideia, 1969), 377–89; Athalya Brenner, *Colour Terms in the Old Testament*, JSOTSup 21 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982); Maria Bulakh, “Basic Color Terms of Biblical Hebrew in Diachronic Aspect,” in *Babel und Bibel 3: Annual of Ancient Near Eastern, Old Testament and Semitic Studies*, ed. Leonid E. Kogan (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 181–216; Maria Bulakh, “Basic Color Terms from Proto-Semitic to Old Ethiopic,” in *Anthropology of Color: Interdisciplinary Multilevel Modeling*, ed. Robert E. MacLaury, Galina V. Paramei, and Don Dedrick (Philadelphia: Benjamins, 2007), 247–61; François Jacquesson, “Les mots de la couleur dans les textes bibliques” (2008), for the research project Histoire et géographie de la couleur (CNRS-ISCC 2008–2009), available at [www.academia.edu/33347300/Les\\_mots\\_de\\_couleurs\\_dans\\_les\\_textes\\_bibliques\\_2008\\_](http://www.academia.edu/33347300/Les_mots_de_couleurs_dans_les_textes_bibliques_2008_); John E. Hartley, *The Semantics of Ancient Hebrew Colour Lexemes*, ANESSup 33 (Louvain: Peeters, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> Emil G. Hirsch and Caspar Levias, “Color,” *JE* 4:174–78, available online at <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4557-color#anchor4>.



Lam 4:7–8 the prophet describes the aspect of the princes with verbal lexemes that denote color: אָדָם (“to be red”) or with natural elements that connote color: חָלָב, “milk,” for white; פְּנִינִים, “coral,” for red; סַפִּיר, “sapphire,” for blue (Lam 4:7) or שָׁחֹר, “soot,” for black (Lam 4:8). Thus, some dictionaries, such as BDB, SDBH, and *Diccionario bíblico hebreo-español* propose that חָשַׁח denotes “to be black”;<sup>29</sup> it is also understood as such in the Vulgate (*denigrata est super carbones facies eorum*) and in the modern English and Spanish versions of the Bible (“Now their visage is blacker than soot,” NRSV).<sup>30</sup>

### B. The Early Versions of the Bible

With respect to the early versions of the Bible, the Septuagint is faithful to the Hebrew version in terms of both syntax and the choice of a nominal lexeme: εἰς σκότος (“into darkness,” Joel 3:4). In a literal as well as figurative sense, the Greek lexeme possesses similar meanings to that of the Hebrew חָשַׁח.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, in the Septuagint σκότος is generally used to translate חָשַׁח.<sup>32</sup> The same occurs with the verb; the Septuagint uses μεταστρέφω (“to turn”), the usual term for translating חָשַׁח.<sup>33</sup>

Centuries later, the New Testament would reference the prophecy of Joel on two occasions: in Acts 2:20 and in Rev 6:12. In Acts, the Septuagint is cited literally. Luke puts the prophecy into the mouth of Peter to explain the tongues of fire—namely, that the final phase of the church has been inaugurated with Pentecost.<sup>34</sup> In the book of Revelation, this is not the case. The prophecy instead appears during the opening of the sixth seal, but here the author reinterprets it by explicitly clothing it with color. For this, he replaces the verb μεταστρέφω (absent in the book of Revelation and in general little used)<sup>35</sup> with γίνομαι, which, followed by a nominal

<sup>29</sup> BDB, SDBH also include Exod 10:15. This passage is more doubtful, however (Alonso Schökel, *Diccionario bíblico hebreo-español*, s.v. “חָשַׁח”).

<sup>30</sup> NIV; Facultad de Teología de la Universidad de Navarra, *Libros proféticos*, vol. 4 of *Sagrada Biblia: Antiguo Testamento* (Pamplona: EUNSA, 2002); *Biblia del Peregrino*; Conferencia Episcopal Española, *Sagrada Biblia* (Madrid: BAC, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> LSJ, s.v. “σκότος”; MGS, s.v. “σκότος.”

<sup>32</sup> This occurs 65 times: Gen 1:5, 18; Exod 10:21, 22; Deut 4:11; Josh 2:5; 2 Sam 22:12, 29; Isa 5:20 (2x), 30a; 9:1; 42:7; 45:7; 47:5; 49:9; 58:10; 59:9; 60:2; Ezek 32:8; Joel 2:2; 3:4; Amos 5:18, 20; Mic 7:8; Nah 1:8; Zeph 1:15; Ps 18:12, 29 [17:12, 29 LXX]; 35:6 [34:6 LXX]; 88:13 [87:13 LXX]; 104:20 [103:20 LXX]; 107:10, 14 [106:10, 14 LXX]; 112:4 [111:4 LXX]; 139:11, 12 [138:11, 12 LXX]; Job 3:4, 5; 5:14; 12:22, 25; 15:22, 30; 17:12; 18:6, 18; 19:8; 20:26; 22:11; 23:17; 24:16; 26:10; 28:3; 29:3; 38:19; Prov 2:13; 20:20; Eccl 2:13, 14; 5:16; 6:4 (2x); 11:8; Lam 3:2.

<sup>33</sup> Georg Bertram, “μεταστρέφω,” *TDNT* 7:729.

<sup>34</sup> *Biblia del Peregrino*, nn. 3–4.

<sup>35</sup> Bertram, “μεταστρέφω,” 729. In the New Testament, this verb occurs only in Acts 2:20 and Gal 1:7.

predicate, underscores the meaning of “become,” “turn into.”<sup>36</sup> Rather than retaining *σκότος*, the author employs a color adjective, *μέλας* (“black”), whose hue is made more precise by the simile *ὡς σάκκος τρίχινος* (“like sackcloth of hair,” Rev 6:12), which was usually made from the hair of black or brownish goats.<sup>37</sup> In this way, the seer makes it clear that the sun does not lose its essence but simply changes color.

As for the Vulgate, the Hebrew syntax is maintained by the use of the preposition *in* and the choice of the nominal plural *tenebrae*: *in tenebras* (Joel 2:31 [MT 3:4]). *Tenebrae* is used repeatedly to translate the Hebrew lexeme *טשן*, as it has a similar meaning.<sup>38</sup> Unlike the Hebrew term, however, *tenebrae* does possess a chromatic meaning: “dark coloring.”<sup>39</sup>

### C. Synthesis

In the light of this study, I conclude that neither the leading dictionaries of the Hebrew Bible nor the specialized studies recognize a chromatic meaning for *טשן*, unlike the case of the verbal lexeme. The verbal form denotes color in chromatic contexts that describe a person’s physical appearance.

With respect to the early versions of the Bible, the Septuagint does not seem to perceive a chromatic meaning in Joel 3:4, nor does Luke (Acts 2:20), in contrast to the author of the book of Revelation, who replaces *σκότος* with the adjectival lexeme *μέλας* and emphasizes the presence of color with a chromatic simile, *ὡς σάκκος τρίχινος* (Rev 6:12). Finally, the Vulgate selects *tenebrae*, which possesses a meaning very similar to that of the Hebrew lexeme, but which is in fact chromatic: “dark coloring.”

<sup>36</sup>Francisco Rodríguez Adrados, *Diccionario Griego-Español en línea*, s.v. “γίγνομαι,” <http://dgc.cchs.csic.es/xdge/γίγνομαι>.

<sup>37</sup>Gustav Stählin, “*σάκκος*,” *TDNT* 7:57. Alessandro Belano has observed that flocks of black sheep were common in the ancient Near East (*Apocalisse: Traduzione e analisi filologica*, Alef Omega 1 [Rome: ARACNE, 2013], 310); Lourdes García Ureña, “The Book of Revelation: A Chromatic Story,” in *New Perspectives on the Book of Revelation*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins, BETL 291 (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 393–419, here 408.

<sup>38</sup>More specifically, it is used 71 times: Gen 1:2, 4, 5, 18; Exod 10:21, 22; Deut 4:11; 5:23; Josh 2:5; 1 Sam 2:9; 2 Sam 22:12, 29; Job 3:4, 5; 5:14; 12:22, 25; 15:22, 23, 30; 17:12, 13; 18:18; 19:8; 20:26; 22:11; 23:17; 24:16; 26:10; 28:3; 29:3; 34:22; 37:19; 38:19; Ps 17:12, 29 (18:12, 29 MT) 34:6 (35:6 MT); 87:13 (88:13 MT); 103:20 (104:20 MT); 104:28 (105:28 MT); 106:10, 14 (107:10, 14 MT); 111:4 (112:4 MT); 138:11, 12 (139:11, 12 MT); Prov 20:20; Eccl 2:13, 14; 5:16; 6:4a; Isa 5:20, 30; 9:2; 29:18; 42:7; 45:7; 47:5; 49:9; 58:10; 59:9; 60:2; Lam 3:2; Ezek 8:12; 32:8; Joel 2:2, 31 (3:4 MT); Amos 5:18, 20; Mic 7:8; Nah 1:8; Zeph 1:15.

<sup>39</sup>*OLD*, s.v. “*tenebrae*.” See, e.g., Marcus Manilius, *Astr.* 4.723: *Aethiopes maculant orbem tenebrisque figurant perfusas hominum gentes* (“Ethiopians stain the world and depict a race of men steeped in darkness”).

#### IV. SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

Now that we have acquired a certain degree of encyclopedic knowledge of the meanings of  $\Upsilon\Upsilon\Upsilon$  and how it has been interpreted, we will proceed to the semantic analysis.

Joel 3:4 belongs to the eschatological-salvational genre. As mentioned earlier, the prophet announces a series of miraculous events that will occur before the day of the Lord, an important concept in biblical eschatology that expresses God's judgment and salvation of the chosen people. The expression "day of the Lord," with some variants, appears sixteen times, primarily in the prophetic texts, although it is also found in the historical books and the psalms. It is characterized by a variety of cosmic-meteorological disturbances, such as the darkening of the earth and the sun, as well as armed conflicts.

In the case of Joel, we find both. The poet employs a chiasmus.<sup>40</sup> Although he announces first the events in heaven and then those on earth (Joel 3:3a), he describes the phenomena that will affect the earthly surface in language of great expressive power, both for its dramatic content and for its visual, chromatic character: nature will be overrun by blood, fire, and smoke (Joel 3:3b).

Blood is a frequent metonym in the prophetic books for referring to the "violent death of an individual at the hands of others" (Isa 34:6, 7; Jer 46:10; Ezek 32:6; Zeph 1:17), while fire and smoke, which on occasion are signs of a theophany (Exod 19:18, Ps. 18:9), here refer to the destruction of the world, as in other prophetic texts (Isa 10:16, Amos 1:14, Zeph 3:8). Death and destruction are made visible to the listener/reader through the chromatic images chosen by the prophet, since, as we have said, color in antiquity was the visible sign of a state, which is here none other than death and destruction. Thus, in this eschatological context, the color of death is the dark red of spilled blood, that of destruction is the color of fire in all of its varied hues (dark red, oranges, yellows, and so on) and of smoke in the blackish or greyish shades characteristic of a devastating fire (in the words of Carl F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, "from burning towns in time of war").<sup>41</sup> The dark red tones of spilled blood, together with the reds of fire and the black of smoke, invade the earth making the death of humanity, the destruction of cities, and the annihilation of nature all vividly apparent to the listener/reader.

Once the catastrophe that will ravage the earth has been described, Joel concludes the chiasmus by revealing what will take place in the heavens. For this he creates a parallelism, in which elements from the cognitive domain of celestial bodies (the sun and the moon) open each part of the parallelism and two different

<sup>40</sup> Allen, *Books of Joel*, 100; Willem S. Prinsloo, *The Theology of the Book of Joel*, BZAW 163 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1985), 82.

<sup>41</sup> K&D, 10:213.

natural elements (darkness and blood) close them, as can be observed in the following table.

Cognitive Domain	Verb	Elements of Nature
שמש <i>sun</i>	הפך <i>to turn</i>	חשך darkness?
ירח <i>moon</i>		דם blood

The word דם (“blood”) is the term with which Joel both opens the chiasmus (3:3) and closes it (3:4). This repeated use of “blood” augments the dramatic effect of the day of the Lord and maintains the chromatic context throughout this announcement, since, as we have said, it is a natural element that connotes color. Here, however, blood assumes a different meaning than is typical elsewhere in the prophets. It no longer denotes the “violent death of an individual at the hands of others,” nor simply “red liquid, compared to blood because of its color,”<sup>42</sup> since the moon, as well as the sun and the stars, belongs to the cognitive domain of celestial bodies, which are conceived as solid entities. The transformation of the moon (a solid element) into liquid would thus appear to work against the parallelism of this image. It seems, rather, that the prophet is aware of the expressive power of a red the color of blood and uses the word “blood” in verse 4 to refer exclusively to color. This is what in cognitive linguistics is denominated a conceptual metonym of the ENTITY and SALIENT PROPERTY type.<sup>43</sup> That is to say, attention is given to the color of blood, which is its salient property, and the entity itself is used to refer to this. Blood, then, denotes a “blood-like color as a figure of judgment and destruction”<sup>44</sup> and “blood red” is proposed as a translation.

This affirmation is corroborated by the Hebrew verb chosen, הפך (“to turn”), which, in both *qal* and *niphal*, is employed precisely to express the change of color in a given entity.<sup>45</sup> The most relevant examples of this appear in Leviticus, where הפך, accompanied by the color adjective לבן (Lev 13:3, 4, 10, 13, 16, 17, 20, 25), becomes almost a technical expression for diagnosing illness or health through color (once again, here color denotes a state).

<sup>42</sup>SDBH, s.v. “דם,” <https://semanticdictionary.org/semDic.php?databaseType=SDBH&language=en&lemma=%20D7%93%D6%BC%D6%B8%D7%9D%20&startPage=1>.

<sup>43</sup>Cognitive metonymy is a cognitive mechanism that an individual uses more or less consciously in everyday language to allow the mental access of one element to another within the same conceptual domain. Cognitive metonymies are classified according to various criteria; see Antonio Barcelona, “La metonimia conceptual,” in *Lingüística cognitiva*, ed. Iraide Ibarretxe-Antuñano et al., 2nd ed., Autores, textos y temas: Lingüística 8 (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2016), 123–46.

<sup>44</sup>The meaning of blood as a color is found in the leading dictionaries of Hebrew: BDB, HALOT, Alonso Schökel, *Diccionario bíblico hebreo-español*, s.v. “דם,” some of which have even cited Joel 3:4 as an example. Along the same line, see Allen, *Books of Joel*, 101.

<sup>45</sup>HALOT, s.v. “הפך.”



earth, they refer either to the opposition of light and darkness or to the aspect of the darkness itself (clouds and thick darkness), as we have just seen. For the biblical author, darkness is related not to color but to the absence of light. Indeed, there are many occasions on which  $\text{חשך}$  is linked to light, not only in the prophetic books (Isa 5:30, 9:1, 45:7, 49:9, 58:10, 59:9, 60:2, Ezek 32:8) but in the biblical text in general (Gen 1:2, 4, 5, 18; Ps 112:4; Job 12:25; 17:12; 18:18; 26:10; 29:3; 38:19; Eccl 2:13).

This is not the case with Joel 3:4, however. The prophet is not interested in showing the opposition of light and darkness, nor in describing the darkness that envelops the earth, as there is an absence of those lexemes that usually describe  $\text{חשך}$  in the biblical corpus: אפלה (“gloom”), ענן (“clouds”), and ערפל (“thick darkness”) in Joel 2:2; חשרת מים עבי שחקים (“dark rainstorm and thick clouds”) in 2 Sam 22:12; צלמות (“shadow”) in Job 10:21 and Ps 107:14; לילה (“night”) in Ps 104:20; and ערפל (“thick darkness”) in Isa 60:2. Joel’s intention, as in the previous verse, is to reveal the wonders that will take place before the day of the Lord and to show that the sun and the moon will be affected simultaneously.

The sun belongs to the cognitive domain of celestial bodies like the moon, and it is likewise a solid element that human beings perceive chromatically.<sup>50</sup> Along with the presence of the verb  $\text{הפך}$  in the *niphal*, the chromatic context of the chiasmus, and the parallelism of sun and moon, these factors suggest that  $\text{חשך}$  denotes color just as  $\text{דם}$  does (Joel 3:4). This is again a case of a conceptual metonymy of the ENTITY and SALIENT PROPERTY type, which in turn enables  $\text{חשך}$  to function as an adjective, rather than a noun. Thus, the meaning of  $\text{חשך}$  would be “the color acquired by the sun, causing the absence of light, a symbol of destruction,” and might be translated as “tenebrous black.” It is not surprising, then, that the book of Revelation uses μέλας ὡς σάκκος τρίχινος, where μέλας captures the chromatic meaning of  $\text{חשך}$  and makes this even clearer with the expression ὡς σάκκος τρίχινος, which nuances the hue and endows it with an ominous symbolism.

The chromatic meaning of  $\text{חשך}$  makes it possible for Joel’s poetic words to put into visual form what today we know as a solar eclipse,<sup>51</sup> a phenomenon in which the moon passes between the sun and the Earth and the sun is darkened by the moon’s shadow. When this darkening is total, it is referred to as a total eclipse,

<sup>50</sup> In fact, the record of Mesopotamian solar omens describes some of the hues acquired by sun: “red like a torch,” “yellow,” in Tablet 23 (24); “red,” “white,” in Tablet 26 (27). See Wilfred H. van Soldt, *Solar Omens of Enuma Anu Enlil: Tablets 23(24)–29(30)*, UNHAI 73 (Leiden: Netherlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 1995), 5 and 69.

<sup>51</sup> F. Stephenson, “The Date of the Book of Joel,” *VT* (1969): 224–29; Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos: A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 68; John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 762.

otherwise as a partial eclipse.<sup>52</sup> The resulting optical effect is that the sun changes color, blackening either totally or partially, as shown in the photograph.

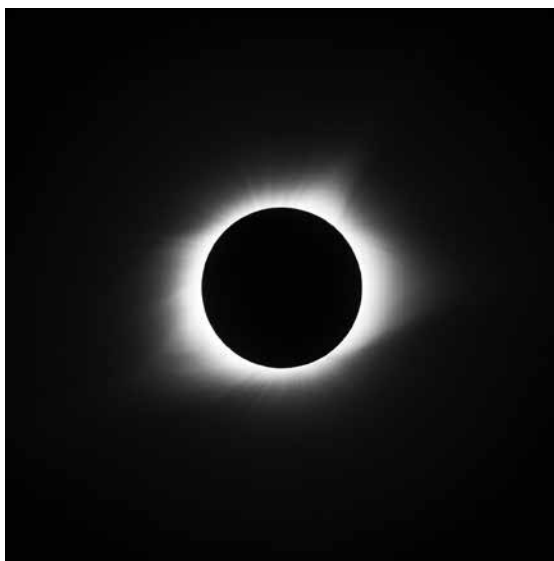


FIGURE 1. A total solar eclipse. The sun becomes black. This image was captured in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, on 21 August 2017. Photo Credit: NASA/MSFC/Joseph Matus. <https://www.nasa.gov/image-feature/total-solar-eclipse-over-hopkinsville-kentucky>.

This phenomenon was also perceived and studied in antiquity; in fact, testimonies of solar eclipses are numerous. In Mesopotamia, the Venus Tablet from the Old Babylonian period contains a register of solar eclipses; in the Mul.Apin tablets (containing astronomical tables from the Neo-Assyrian period) the periodicity of both solar and lunar eclipses is established; the Babylonian poem King of Battle, dedicated to King Sargon of Akkad, describes an eclipse and mentions the darkening of the sun (“the sun became obscured, the stars came forth the enemy”);<sup>53</sup> and the Enuma Anu Enlil (a collection of astronomical predictions in relation to the king and society in general that was compiled in its canonical form in the Kassite period [1595–1157 BCE])<sup>54</sup> provides many examples of the use of eclipses to divine the future of the king and the nation, such as EAE Tablet 20, which predicts the fall

<sup>52</sup>Clemency Montelle, *Chasing Shadows: Mathematics, Astronomy, and the Early History of Eclipse Reckoning*, Johns Hopkins Studies in the History of Mathematics (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 35–39.

<sup>53</sup>Reiner, *Astral Magic in Babylonia*, 10–11.

<sup>54</sup>David R. Brown, *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy-Astrology*, CM 18 (Groningen: Styx, 2000), 254–55.

of Babylon after eclipses of both the sun and the moon. For this reason, a succession of eclipses was believed to augur a great catastrophe.<sup>55</sup> What is more, in one of these prophecies the black color of the sun is described specifically: “[If the sun rises] and is black, there will be a famine.”<sup>56</sup>

Eclipses were also studied in Greece (ἡ δὲ ἔκλειψις τοῦ ἡλίου σκιὰ σελήνης, ὅταν ἡ ὄψις ἐν αὐτῇ γένηται, “the eclipse of the sun is the shadow of the moon, when darkness is produced upon it” [Plutarch, *Fac.* 12.19 [931F]; Strabo, *Geogr.* 1.12), and their consequences predicted and analyzed (Thucydides, *Hist.* 1.23; 2.28; 4.52).

Centuries later, in the Middle Ages, the already cited *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* would give this description, in the annal for the year 733, using the language of color:

In this year ... there was an eclipse of the sun, and all the circle of sun was become like a black shield.<sup>57</sup>

This short survey of scientific, historical, and literary texts both earlier and later than the book of Joel reflects the impact that the phenomenon of eclipses had on the population that observed them. Aside from the scientific knowledge that might have existed about eclipses, they were perceived and contemplated as a cosmic event that altered the color of the sun and the moon.

Returning to Joel 3:3–4, the semantic analysis done here shows that דם and שחן acquire a chromatic meaning within a prophecy that is infused with color by the three initial metonyms (blood, fire, and columns of smoke, Joel 3:3). After this, color becomes visible in the sky in grandiose form, as we see the aspect of the sun and moon change (Joel 3:4). The nominal lexemes שחן, “the color of the sun caused by the absence of light,” and דם, “the color of blood,” make the direct expression of color possible as they maintain the poem’s parallelism. In this way, שחן and דם paint with words the reality of these eclipses. It is color that allows poetry and reality to be fused together with a theological message.

With respect to this message, the wider context of Joel’s prophetic announcement should be kept in mind: the day of the Lord is near, and this is a cause for hope. The two total eclipses are, then, a sign of this and שחן and דם express not only destruction (connoted by their specific hues of black and red) but also the definitive cessation of that destruction. Joel manages to do this through his description of the two eclipses; their duration is not excessively long, and afterwards the sun and moon resume their splendor as a definite sign that the Lord, the creator of light (Gen 1:3) has returned. Indeed, the sun and the moon reflect their inverse (for the sun, the blackness of smoke; for the moon the red of blood and fire), colors that infuse the earth with terror in the space defined by these two celestial bodies but

<sup>55</sup> Emil Khalisi, “The Double Eclipse at the Downfall of Old Babylon,” Habilitation at the University of Heildeberg, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2007.07141>.

<sup>56</sup> Van Soldt, *Solar Omens*, Tablet 26 (27), 72.

<sup>57</sup> Härke, “Astronomical and Atmospheric Observations,” 35.



which also indicate the limits of this destruction. For this reason, the negative symbolism of the color of the sun and moon, in the context of the prophecy, becomes a sign that the destruction will come to an end and that the Lord will appear in all his light and glory.

## V. CONCLUSION

In a culminating point of his work, in which he refers to the effusion of the spirit, the prophet Joel employs the language of color to announce the events that are to take place on the earth and in the heavens in anticipation of the day of the Lord. When he describes what is to pass on the earth, this is a simple enumeration of natural elements that connote color: the reddish hues of blood and fire, the blackish ones of smoke. However, when he describes what will occur in the heavens, perhaps because he wants to present it as being a great wonder and wishes to convey it with all the evocative power befitting such an extraordinary calamity, he employs language that is much more poetic, sensitive, and visual. Perhaps the fear and awe that Joel experienced during these visions compelled him merely to list the sequence of events that took place during the chromatic contemplation of the two simultaneous eclipses. In any case, he clothes the sun and the moon with color through the use of two lexemes that in other contexts may ( $\text{דם}$ ) or may not ( $\text{דשח}$ ) have chromatic connotations, but here, in the chromatic context he has created, actually denote color, rather than simply connoting it. This is made possible thanks to the conceptual ENTITY and SALIENT PROPERTY metonymy he uses, a cognitive tool that explains the acquisition of new meanings by a particular word. Thus,  $\text{דשח}$  denotes “the color of the sun that causes the absence of light” and  $\text{דם}$ , “the color of blood.” Simultaneously, these lexemes incorporate the symbolism possessed by both darkness and blood, that is, the absence of God, negativity, death, and destruction.

Nevertheless, that the sun and the moon reflect, as in an inverse mirror image, the events that take place on earth, circumscribing the color of destruction to a limited space, and that the eclipses in turn have a limited duration, allow the prophet to show that the destruction and bloodshed have reached their end. What comes after this is the light of God, bringing peace to humanity. The prophecy has, then, a twofold effect: terror coupled with hope. Once again, it is color that allows this fusion of poetry, reality, and theology.

Finally, this pericope from the book of Joel shows the chromatic meaning of  $\text{דשח}$  that is present not only in the verbal lexeme but also in the nominal form when this functions as an adjective. In this sense, the Vulgate chose well to translate  $\text{דשח}$  as *tenebrae*, as that term carries with it a chromatic meaning. In the future, it remains to determine whether  $\sigma\acute{o}\tau\omicron\varsigma$  in the Septuagint has a chromatic significance as well.



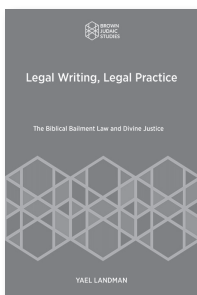
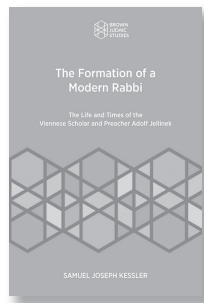
## New and Recent Titles from Brown Judaic Studies

### THE FORMATION OF A MODERN RABBI: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE VIENNESE SCHOLAR AND PREACHER ADOLF JELLINEK

Samuel Joseph Kessler

Adolf Jellinek (1821–1893), the liberal chief rabbi of Vienna, was the most famous Jewish preacher in Central Europe in his day. Jellinek helped mold and define the modern synagogue sermon into an instrument for expressing Jewish religious and ethical values for a new era. Kessler discusses the ways in which Jellinek was emblematic of a new synagogue-based model of rabbi-as-scholar-preacher and returns Jellinek to the center of the Jewish nineteenth century.

Paperback \$50.00 • Hardcover \$82.00 • E-book \$50.00



### LEGAL WRITING, LEGAL PRACTICE: THE BIBLICAL BAILMENT LAW AND DIVINE JUSTICE

Yael Landman

Prescriptive law writings rarely mirror how a society practices law. Through close analysis of the laws of bailment (i.e., temporary safekeeping) in Exodus 22, Yael Landman probes the relation of law in the biblical law collections and law-in-practice in ancient Israel and exposes a vision of divine justice at the heart of pentateuchal law. By connecting pentateuchal and ancient Near Eastern law collections, biblical narrative and prophecy, and Mesopotamian legal documents, Landman accesses how ancient Israel thought about and practiced law.

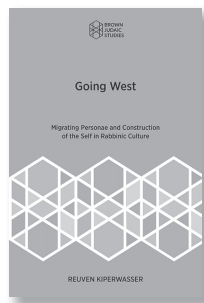
Paperback \$50.00 • Hardcover \$82.00 • E-book \$50.00

### GOING WEST: MIGRATING PERSONAE AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF IN RABBINIC CULTURE

Reuven Kiperwasser

Reuven Kiperwasser examines the social, cultural, and religious aspects of third- to sixth-century narratives involving rabbinic figures migrating between Babylonia and Palestine. He draws on migration and mobility studies, comparative literature, humor and satire studies, as well as social history to reveal how border-crossing rabbis were seen as exporting features of their previous eastern context into their new western homes and vice versa.

Paperback \$29.00 • Hardcover \$82.00 • E-book \$29.00



Order online at <https://cart.sbl-site.org> or email us at [sblpressorders@aidcv.com](mailto:sblpressorders@aidcv.com).  
SBL Press and Brown Judaic Studies e-books available from SBL Press, Amazon, and Google Play

Copyright of Journal of Biblical Literature is the property of Society of Biblical Literature and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.