"ADAM AS 'SKIN' AND 'EARTH':
AN EXAMINATION OF SOME PROPOSED
MEANINGS IN BIBLICAL HEBREW"¹

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The noun 'dm appears in the lexicon of L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner with five separate listings for אָדָם.² In addition to (1) the common meaning of 'humanity'; there is (2) the meaning of 'skin, hide, leather' given for an appearance of אָדָם in Hosea 11:4; (3) the personal name Adam; (4) the meaning of 'ground, earth', a variant of אֲדָמָה; and (5) the geographic name for a site identified with Tell ed-Dāmiye. While the first and third meanings are identifiable in the opening chapters of Genesis;³ the second, fourth, and fifth are to be considered here in terms of their usefulness in understanding the texts in which they have been found and in terms of their value as additions to the Hebrew lexicon.

1. Meaning 2: 'skin, hide, leather'

This meaning is based on the use of אָדָם in Hosea 11:4. The text of the first part of the verse reads:

בְּחַלְּלֵי אָדָם אֶמְשְׁכֵם
בַּעֲבֹתוֹת אַהֲבָה

G. R. Driver proposed the rendering: 'I attached them (as) with bands of leather, drawing them (close as) with bonds of hide'.⁴ He bases his translation on Arabic cognates for both אָדָם and אהבה. The JPS translation reads: 'I drew them with human ties, With cords of love'. This is acceptable for the context.

Although the lexicon of Koehler and Baumgartner cites H. W.

¹ The research for this paper was done at Tyndale House, Cambridge, England, as part of the Genesis 1-11 Project. It forms part of a paper read to the Tyndale Old Testament Study Group on 10 July 1988, at Tyndale House.
³ Cf. Gen. 1-5 and my forthcoming article, 'Splitting the Adam: The Usage of 'ADAM in Genesis i-v', Vetus Testamentum.
Wolff, the latest edition of his commentary rejects 'leather' as a translation for אדם or אהבה.\(^5\) Such an understanding is supported by the other commentaries, as well. The most common translation is to understand אדם as 'humanity' or as an individual human.\(^6\) This is the simplest and most suitable reading of the text. However, even options to read חסד as an emendation in place of אדם\(^7\) demonstrate an alternative view to אדם understood as 'skin, hide, leather'.

2. Meaning 4: 'ground, earth, steppe'

This meaning for אדם is suggested by its similarity to the Hebrew word for 'ground, earth', אדמה. The meaning is based upon M. Dahood's argument concerning the עין אדמ of Zechariah 9:1.\(^8\) Among the emendations proposed for this phrase was one that


\(^8\) ‘Zacharia 9,1, ‘EN ĀDĀM, *CBQ* 25 (1963) 123-4. In addition to the passages discussed here, Dahood argues for this translation in Job 11:12 and Isaiah 38:11:
relating אדם to the word. The translation would then be, 'surface of the earth'. Dahood accepted this translation but argued that no emendation was necessary since 'Hebrew possessed a masculine substantive אדם, "earth, steppe"'. Thus Dahood would translate Zechariah 9:1 as follows:

The word of the Lord is in Hadrach,  
And Damascus is his domicile;  
For the Lord's is the surface of the earth,  
As well as all the tribes of Israel.

However, this is not the only translation possible. Indeed, commentators have tended to understand אדם as an unemended geographic name (definition 5 of Koehler and Baumgartner's lexicon), or as a slightly emended geographic name, אדם! in either case, the proposed translation of אדם as 'earth, steppe' is unnecessary. However, A. Lacocque argues for accepting the text as it is and translating אדם as 'humanity'. His translation follows Dahood's except for the third line, which he renders:

'Car sur YHWH est l'œil de (tout) homme'.

Lacocque's case is supported by the versions and by the reference to eyes in v. 8. Five other examples are also cited by Dahood. All appear in the lexicon of Koehler and Baumgartner. The first one is Proverbs 30:14b:

\[לֶאֱכֹל עֲנִיִּים מֵאֶרֶץ וְאֶבְיוֹנִים מֵאָדָם\]

Dahood translates: 'To devour the poor from the land and the needy from the earth'. However, it is possible to understand אדם in this verse as 'humanity'. In this case, its which is parallel to בָּשָׂר, should be understood as a poetic metaphor for humanity in general. This is preferable as the context is not concerned with the place of residence for the poor and needy (i.e. the earth), but with that portion of humanity which is least able to defend itself against the type of people described in vv. 11-14a.

Genesis 16:12 contains the expression, פֶּרֶא אָדָם, which Dahood translates as, 'a wild ass of the steppe'. This translation has not been followed by the commentators who

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12 P.148. Cf. JPS: 'For all men's eyes will turn to the LORD'; NIV: 'for the eyes of men and all the tribes of Israel are on the LORD'; and M. Delcor, 'Les allusions a Alexandre le grande dans Zach IX 1-8', VT 1 (1951) 110-24 [112].


find here in אדם, a description of a particular אדם, the man אדם. This is the simplest explanation and adequately suits the context. Most commentators understand אדם נפש to form a bound construct relationship (i.e. 'a wild ass of a man')\textsuperscript{16}, while others render the text in a periphrastic manner.\textsuperscript{17}

In Job 36:28b, Dahood translates the Hebrew:

יִרְעֲפוּ עֲלֵי אָדָם רָב

as 'They rain down showers upon the earth'. Although supported by M. Pope,\textsuperscript{18} this interpretation has not been accepted by other Semiticists who have studied Job. N. H. Tur-Sinai's repointing of the last two words to form אדם רַב ('their rich stream') has not been followed.\textsuperscript{19} Nor is it necessary to find a hypothetical 'by-form' of רְבִיבִים ('showers') in רָב.\textsuperscript{20} Rather, the remark of R. Gordis is cogent: 'The traditional rendering "they shower upon all men" is entirely satisfactory; it lacks only the virtue of novelty'.\textsuperscript{21}


\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Job. Introduction, Translation, and Notes} (AB 15; Garden City, New York 31973) 267, 274.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{The Book of Job. A New Commentary} (Jerusalem, Kiryath Sepher 1967) 504.


The Hebrew text of Jeremiah 32:20 includes the phrase, וּבְיִשְׂרָאֵלְ בָּאָדָם. This is the sixth of Dahood's examples. He translates, 'both in Israel and in the steppe'. The verse describes 'signs and wonders' which God has done in Egypt, in Israel, and בָּאָדָם. The result of these signs has been the establishing of a name (שֵׁם) for God. The verse is part of a section involving praise to God for the deliverance of the people of God. The context therefore is appropriate for an expression which describes. God's universal fame. Thus the generic use of אדם ('humanity') would be entirely fitting for such praise, whereas a description of God's renown as extending to the steppe would seem out of place, indeed rather strange in a context of concern for peoples rather than places.

The last example cited by Dahood is Zecharaiah 13:5, where the Hebrew of the second half of the verse reads:

The rain falls on ādām, "humankind," rather than on the "dāmā, "dry ground," as we might expect from other contexts. . . . The reference to ādām in v. 25 indicates that Elihu's focus is on human beings who experience these mysteries in person; nevertheless the ādām/dāmā, wordplay lies in the background as in Gen. 2:4-7.

Dahood translates: 'A tiller of the earth am I for the earth possessed me from my youth'. However, most commentators have been satisfied to follow J. Wellhausen's emendation of this difficult text. Wellhausen proposed to redivide the אדם and to add a yodh between the two nuns. This yields אדמה קנני, i.e. 'the land has been my possession'. This seems plausible, although the suggestion of H. L. Ginsberg should also be considered. He takes אדם as the root meaning, 'to be red', and repoints the verb as a passive form. His translation is: 'I was plied with the red stuff from my youth on'; the 'red stuff' here being wine.
3. Meaning 5: a geographic name

The existence of a geographic site with the name אָדָם is established by both Egyptian and Hebrew sources. It has been identified with Tell ed-Dāmiye, a site in the Jordan Valley. Its appearance in Joshua 3:16 is certain. Suggested appearances elsewhere are conjectural.

4. Conclusion

The results of this survey of the various definitions listed for אָדָם, have led to conclusions that cast doubt on two of the five meanings suggested by L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner's lexicon. Although it may be possible to find the root 'dm with the meanings of 'skin, hide, leather' or 'earth, steppe' in cognate Semitic languages, their appearance in Biblical Hebrew is hypothetical at best. This is not to say that the texts cited do not possess grammatical and syntactical problems. However, obscurity should not be the rationale for the introduction of a new semantic category. Indeed, replacing one noun with another does not lessen the grammatical problems which exist in some of the passages discussed. Nor is the claim made that passages such as Proverbs 30:14b are not well suited for the translation of אָדָם proposed by Dahood and followed by Koehler and Baumgartner. Rather, it is more important to understand that adequate renderings exist within the recognized Hebrew semantic range of אָדָם with the meaning,

‘humanity’ in all of the examples above. Because this is the case it is unwise to introduce new meanings into the Biblical Hebrew lexicon. Other orthographically distinct forms of the ‘dm root provide an adequate semantic range for the meaning, 'earth, land', as used throughout the Hebrew Bible. Therefore it is probable that, whatever the original meaning of the Hebrew word אָדָם, its understood meaning among Hebrew speakers and writers during the Biblical period need not be found through the introduction of previously unrecognized meanings from cognate languages.

27 This is not to discount the obvious word play between אדם and אדמה in Genesis chapter 2, a word play which reflects a concern to portray humanity's origin and association with the earth. Cf. Delitzsch, Genesis 117-18; Driver, Genesis 37; Speiser, Genesis 16; Westermann, Genesis 199-207.