

# Hostility towards removal: A frame-semantic analysis of שָׁמַד in the Hebrew Bible

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**Dates:**

Received: 13 Apr. 2024

Accepted: 05 June 2024

Published: 04 July 2024

**How to cite this article:**

Connoway, I.J.L., 2024, 'Hostility towards removal: A frame-semantic analysis of שָׁמַד in the Hebrew Bible', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45(1), a3167. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.3167>

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The verb שָׁמַד is a prominent verb of destruction that appears throughout the Hebrew Bible (HB). It is well represented in both Dtn-Dtr and the Prophetic Books. Many verses related to the conquest of Canaan and the exile feature this verb. Relevant scholarly literature also indicates that some elements of its meaning and usage remain obscure. All this makes it worthy of investigation. The last few decades have seen a rise in the utilisation of cognitive linguistics (CL) for the exegesis of the HB. A review of scholarly literature did not identify any robust attempt at utilising CL to gain insight into the meaning of שָׁמַד. In this study, frame semantics (FS) along with several other CL methodologies are used to gain greater insight into the semantic force of שָׁמַד in the HB. Three major discoveries were made. (1) While there usually are severe fatalities, all-encompassing fatality (i.e. annihilation) is not at the semantic core of שָׁמַד. Rather, decimation is the idea. (2) The destruction envisaged by שָׁמַד is conceptualised as removal from a location, whether dispossession or extermination. (3) Some insight was gained into the obscurity of when שָׁמַד takes בְּמוֹת as an object.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This study traverses the fields of CL, Semitics, Biblical Studies, and Biblical Theology. It utilises CL to gain greater insight into a Hebrew verb. This insight enabled more accurate exegesis of the HB. These exegetical findings have implications for Biblical Theology, especially divine judgement and the conquest of Canaan.

**Keywords:** frame semantics; cognitive linguistics; שָׁמַד; conquest; exile; destruction; Hebrew Bible; exegesis.

## Introduction

'Most of the Orcs of the Misty Mountains were scattered or destroyed in the Battle of the Five Armies' (Tolkien 1994:389). Gandalf uttered these words when trying to convince his companions to travel through Khazad-dûm. This quote is instructive since it captures the semantic core of שָׁמַד quite well. Surely with a verb of destruction, perhaps used in war, the patient of the verb is either destroyed (i.e. annihilated) or not (e.g. scattered). But what if there was a verb which has both the infliction of severe casualties (without annihilation) and displacement at its semantic core? Decimation with the implication of displacement. After utilising frame semantics (FS) and some other cognitive linguistics (CL) methodologies, it was found that שָׁמַד is such a verb. This article presents argumentations for this.

The article starts with a literature review. The methodology section follows, which outlines the means used for gathering and interpreting data. Three senses of שָׁמַד are presented next, and the prototype and its relation to the other senses are indicated. The next two sections flesh out the senses. Firstly, each of the senses is demonstrated and secondly, the spatial nature of שָׁמַד is explored. The penultimate section presents some points of insight that were gained by inspecting the verbs that appear in collocation with שָׁמַד. The final major section contains expositions of three verses that exhibit the semantic core of שָׁמַד. To conclude, the major findings and some suggestions for future research are presented.

## Literature review<sup>1</sup>

The verb שָׁמַד appears a total of 90 times in the Hebrew Bible (HB), of which 69 are in the hiphil stem (Hall 1998:151). This is not unusual, since verbs of force most often appear in the hiphil stem (Jenni 1968:205). Two-thirds of all the occurrences are in Dtn-Dtr (Hall 1998:151); and after Dtr, the collection with the most occurrences is the Prophetic Books (Vetter 1997:1367). Almost four-fifths

1. Lexicons only supply glosses that do not provide much insight into the *meaning* of verbs. To focus my literature review, I did not include the major lexicons.

of the occurrences are theologically significant, considering Yahweh is the immediate or implied agent (Hall 1998:151). It is not always possible to tell whether the action is done by humans or Yahweh (Lohfink 2004:185). The idea of Yahweh as the agent of execution of the ban is often found in Dtn-Dtr when an evildoer is annihilated (Vetter 1997:1367). Humans are always affected by שָׂמַד, even if the action is done to physical objects (Lohfink 2004:181). It is most often used for the destruction of whole groups, but individuals are destroyed a few times (Hall 1998:151). A few times it takes בְּמִוֹת as an object, but this 'unusual usage remains obscure' (Lohfink 2004:196).

The verb שָׂמַד often appears with other verbs of destruction, but it is not necessarily synonymous with these. It might rather form a sequence with them (Lohfink 2004:180). It often appears as the outcome of other verbs (Lohfink 2004:180) or at the end of a list, in which case it might be a summary statement (Lohfink 2004:193). It most often appears with אָבַד (Lohfink 2004:180), which Hall (1998:152) thinks might be its closest synonym, though Lohfink (2004:180) thinks it is most likely interchangeable with כָּרַת. Vetter (1997:1367) and Hall (1998:152) say it corresponds with הָרַם because they often appear together, thus שָׂמַד also refers to physical extermination from the cultic community.

It almost always refers to the act of destruction, and once it is done, nothing is left (Lohfink 2004:179). The destruction 'may be permanent', though it could be impermanent (e.g. 2 Ki 10:28; cf. 2 Ki 21:3) (Austel 1999:930). The hiphil refers to the 'visible expurgation' of the object, as shown by its use with expressions like, for example, 'from the face of the earth' (Vetter 1997:1367). It is always used for vengeance or judgement (Austel 1999:930) and also belongs to the domain of cursing (Lohfink 2004:181).

As a requirement for receiving the Promised Land, the Canaanites were to be annihilated so Israel would not follow their ways (Hall 1998:152). This annihilation is seen throughout Dtr as the occupation progresses (Lohfink 2004:179). Israel also appears as the object. They faced extinction if they disobeyed the covenant. This explains their later destruction (Is 48:19; Hall 1998:152).

Lohfink (2004:182) says its concrete use always refers to physical destruction, but that שָׂמַד does have an abstract sense. In such cases, annihilation is not implied. The idea is rather something like 'remove' (Lohfink 2004:179). Its original meaning may have been removal from the family-ancestors-inheritance nexus (Lohfink 2004:183). In the context of a few verses, some people are left after שָׂמַד is done, of which many refer to the exile (182). If we do not take these verses (e.g. Dt 4:26; 28:20, 24, 45, 51, 61) as hyperbole like Tigay (1996:52, 262) does, we might say it has an abstract sense. These refer to dispossession and banishment (Lohfink 2004:182) since some verses even already foresee the return from the exile (Lohfink 2004:190–191). It is also used in formulaic expressions (Dt 2:12, 21, 22, 23) for one group doing שָׂמַד to another group with

the implication of dispossessing them and taking over their territory (Lohfink 2004:184). One unique case is Deuteronomy 9:14, where Israel was to have their name blotted out from under heaven (Lohfink 2004:192).

While some acknowledgement is given to the fact that annihilation is not always the idea, the majority of what is said portrays the idea that שָׂמַד has all-encompassing fatality in mind. We see this with expressions like 'whole group', 'nothing is left', 'visible expurgation' and 'extinction'. The abstract sense of שָׂמַד and the times where the context indicates it does not refer to annihilation deserve more attention than they have received. A greater understanding is necessary because of how central שָׂמַד is to the conquest of Canaan and the exile. The obscurity of when בְּמִוֹת is the object is also worthy of exploration.

## Methodology

### Overview

Cognitive linguistics emerged in the 1970s (Croft & Cruse 2004:1). It consists of a series of methodologies that recognise the link between language and cognition. These are used to gain greater insight into the meaning of words, which lies outside the reach of structuralist approaches (Ziegert 2021a:28). One of these methodologies is FS, which holds that language is made up of 'frames'. These frames form a system of concepts that relate in such a way that to understand one part, you must understand the whole structure (Fillmore 2006:373). An example of a cognitive frame is a commercial event, which involves a buyer, seller, product, and value. If one hears the word 'buyer' the rest of the parts are also activated (Fillmore 1976:25). As with any knowledge system, a frame has several 'slots', and the frame has a slightly different meaning depending on what 'fillers' they are filled with (Minsky 1975:212). Frame semantics, like CL generally, has an encyclopaedic approach to semantics (Langacker 2008:39); therefore, the context in which something is experienced has to be inspected to determine its meaning (Fillmore 1976:24). This encyclopaedic knowledge can be gathered from a text (Fillmore 2006:386) by, for example, inspecting the function of a verb, the verbs used in collocation with it, and the situations in which it is used. Inspecting the semantic roles of a verb's arguments has much greater explanatory power than merely looking at the grammatical case of its arguments (Fillmore 2006:375–377). All the information gathered needs to be categorised (Fillmore 2006:373).

Frame semantics is the major methodology for the article, but beyond that, some other methodologies will also be used to interpret and present the data. Principled polysemy will be used to arrive at a semantic network for different senses of שָׂמַד (Tyler & Evans 2003:38, 42–45). The various senses will be used to set up a semantic network, which will require that I identify the prototype<sup>2</sup> and indicate how it relates to the other

2. I acknowledge that prototype theory has some problems, the most relevant to this study being: (1) using it with lexemes other than objects is complicated (Tyler & Evans 2003:46), and (2) it does not always handle complex categories well (Evans & Green 2006:268). Despite these complications, it is widely used and provides useful data, so it was utilised.

sense (Tyler & Evans 2003:45). This will be presented as a radial network (Brugman & Lakoff n.d.:1–2). Because humans use concrete domains to conceptualise abstract domains, image-schemata will be used to understand metaphors (Brugman & Lakoff n.d.:318). The notions of preponderance in the semantic network (Tyler & Evans 2003:48) and basic domains (Evans & Green 2006:234) will also be used. Greater insight can be gained into the meaning of a word by inspecting the verbs with which it appears in collocation, thus semantic priming (Grasso 2021:124) was also used.

## Cognitive linguistics and biblical Hebrew

The need for greater precision when handling the biblical text was already identified by James Barr in 1961. Barr (1961:21) took issue with the ‘unsystematic and haphazard’ way in which theological thought and biblical languages were connected. He criticised biblical philologists for not using sound linguistic methodology (Ziegert 2021b:311) and neglecting to draw on general linguistics (Barr 1961:21). Barr (1992:145) called for Hebrew dictionaries to supply definitions and not just glosses.

He launched the structuralist revolution that provided great improvements, but its methodologies could not extract all the intricate meanings of the text (Ziegert 2020:718). Structuralism still dominates biblical studies, but CL is on the rise (Ziegert 2021a:19), as recently published books indicate (e.g. Burton 2017a; Shead 2011; ed. Van Wolde 2003, 2009).

I acknowledge that modern CL studies rely heavily on the intuition of native speakers to determine normativity. This complicates the study of a dead language (Burton 2017b:214). However, this does not leave us without data (Burton 2017b:214) since the study of literary activity can provide much insight (Burton 2017b:215). It is generally acknowledged that where suitable data exists, cognitive methods are preferable over structuralist or generative methods (Burton 2017b:213).

## Delimitation

To ensure the study is practicable, I delimited the data. I did not engage in comparative philology for a few reasons: (1) שָׁמַד had enough data (90 occurrences; Hall 1998:151) for conclusions to be drawn (Barr 1968:154), (2) ‘in contrast to forms, meanings are rather slippery’ (Barr 1968:88), and (3) different cultures have different conceptualisations (Minsky 1975:257).

The article follows a synchronic approach<sup>3</sup> to the text, but the linguistic dating of the Hebrew texts is regarded. Early in the study, all occurrences of שָׁמַד from all periods were inspected. Data from the analysis of the extent of the destruction and the spatial nature of שָׁמַד were used to come up with the senses for שָׁמַד; therefore, for these, all occurrences of שָׁמַד from all

3. To approach the HB synchronically was a structuralist initiative when it comes to biblical studies, but FS independently holds that cognitive insights can be deduced from the text itself (Fillmore 2006:386).

periods were inspected.<sup>4</sup> This was done because the Biblical Hebrew corpus is small already. However, Standard Biblical Hebrew (SBH) and Transitional Biblical Hebrew (TrBH) were favoured over Ancient Biblical Hebrew (ABH), Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH), and Psalms and Proverbs.<sup>5</sup> However, when studying the verbs in collocation and choosing verses to exegete, only occurrences from SBH and TrBH were used. It was assumed that these would be most instructive. Where relevant, when TrBH and LBH differ from SBH, it is pointed out.

## Senses

Since שָׁמַד is a verb of destruction, the extent or nature of the destruction needs to be a major consideration. Some questions need to be answered. Is there a potential for recovery? Is the destruction all-encompassing, including all of a patient or experiencer, if it is a group? What is the nature of the destruction? How is the destruction conceptualised?

## Principled polysemy

I drew on Tyler and Evans’s (2003:42–43) methods for minimising subjectivity in coming up with various senses when setting up a semantic network. I used the requirement that each sense must be unique when compared to other senses. The uniqueness of my senses revolves around the object שָׁמַד takes, and the extent of the destruction implied. All three have the *removal from* sense.

The first sense is ‘decimate’,<sup>6</sup> which can be defined as ‘to inflict severe casualties on humans to remove them from a location’. The agent can be divine or human, and the patient or experiencer is human.<sup>7</sup> With this sense, there might be severe casualties if the object is a group and it is dispelled from a location, but it does not cease to exist.

The second sense is ‘annihilate’, which can be defined as ‘to attack humans to exterminate them from a location’. The agent can be human or divine, and the patient or experiencer is human.<sup>8</sup> This sense is all-encompassing, so the totality of the patient or experiencer, whether it is an individual or a group, ceases to exist. Some all-encompassing references appear in the context where this sense applies.

The third sense is ‘purge’, which can be defined as ‘to root out a religion from an area’. The agent can be human or divine, and the patient or experiencer is a cultic object or a

4. For the dating, I followed Garr and Fassberg (eds. 2016:2, 20–21, 32–33, 44–46).

5. I gave less weight to ABH because it is archaic and poetic and therefore quite terse. I gave less weight to LBH, because it is dated later, so semantic drift is likely. Because Books 4 and 5 of Psalms exhibit some LBH elements (Morgenstern 2016:46) and because Psalms and Proverbs do not have a uniform corpus (Grasso 2021:23), they were given less weight.

6. The shorthand identifiers of all senses are indicated with single quotation marks. These are not meant as exhaustive glosses.

One of the senses for the English word ‘decimate’ is ‘to reduce drastically, esp. in number’ (ed. Mish 2020:322), which I find an appropriate definition for שָׁמַד when the ‘decimate’ sense is in use.

7. Some patients are physical objects, but the objects are used with a metonymic sense.

8. Ibid.

deity, but the clear sense is that the religion is no longer practised in the location indicated.

## Prototype

If I used a monosemic approach, I could come up with an abstract prototype that accommodates all the senses, but this approach has less explanatory power than principled polysemy (Tyler & Evans 2003:37). Principled polysemy holds that all the senses in a semantic network derive from one of the represented senses, which is also the prototype (Tyler & Evans 2003:45–46). This requires that you figure out which sense is more prototypical, and which is less prototypical (Evans & Green 2006:332).

Even though most occurrences have the ‘annihilate’ definition (preponderance; Tyler & Evans 2003:48), I do not believe this is the primary sense. Langacker’s theory of domains is similar to and complements Fillmore’s FS, but domains organize concepts explicitly while FS does it implicitly (Evans & Green 2006:228). According to Langacker’s domains theory, cited in Evans and Green (2006:234), the basic domain is the one with the least amount of complexity or level of detail.

In light of this, I would argue that the ‘decimate’ sense is primary. I say this because that sense is often clear from the context, but the ‘annihilate’ sense requires, for example, additional verbs or prepositions to make the all-encompassing sense clear. Rather than the sense of ‘removal’ being an abstract, fringe sense (Lohfink 2004:179, 182) that includes dispossession, the idea of engaging in hostility and decimating with the aim of removal from a location appears to be the primary sense of *שמד*.

## Radial network

A semantic network has a prototype to which the other senses are related and from which they derive (Tyler & Evans 2003:45). These relations can be represented with a radial network (Brugman & Lakoff n.d.:1–2). The following radial network indicates (see Figure 1) the prototype and how the other senses relate to it. As discussed earlier, I propose that the ‘decimate’ sense is the core with the ‘annihilate’ sense proceeding from it.

Beyond that, I propose that the ‘purge’ sense is a metaphorical extension of the ‘annihilate’ sense, for the following reasons. According to image-schemata, concrete domains are used as source domains to make sense of metaphoric target domains (Brugman & Lakoff n.d.:319). The shift from a concrete to a metaphoric conception often has some motivation (Brugman & Lakoff n.d.:322). The verb *שמד* is often used for annihilating people engaged in activities that do not please Yahweh from a location. Therefore, I posit that ‘purge’ is a metaphoric extension used for completely rooting out cultic practices that do not please Yahweh from a location.

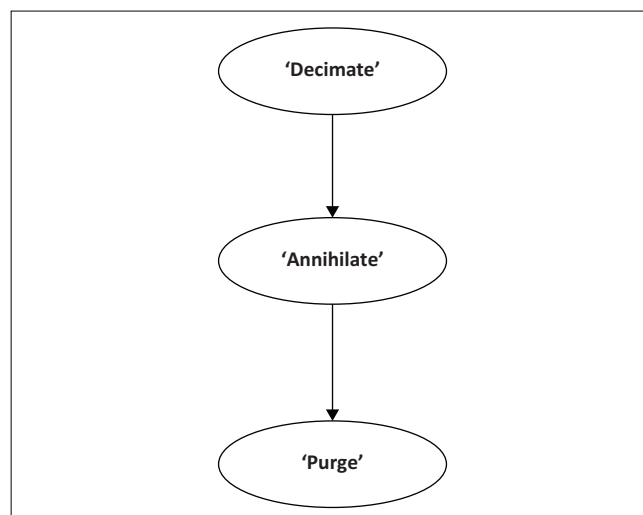


FIGURE 1: Radial network of *שמד*.

## Demonstration of senses

This section demonstrates the three senses (Figure 1) for *שמד* that the study proposes. The amount of occurrences of *שמד* that are classed according to each sense is indicated. The arguments of *שמד* as well as the extent of the destruction are indicated for each sense. For illustrative purposes, some verses are referenced for each sense and the reasons for classing them according to a specific sense are also provided. Some anomalies from TrBH are discussed at the end.

### ‘Decimate’

A total of 33 of the 90 occurrences are classed as ‘decimate’. When these occurrences have a people group as the patient or experiencer, the destruction of the whole group is not what is meant. Rather, the focus often seems to be on removing the people from a location, though severe casualties are inflicted. Examples include Israel, among others, dispossessing a nation and dwelling in their place or Israel being evicted from Canaan for being unfaithful to Yahweh. All ‘decimate’ occurrences are found in contexts where the patient or experiencer is displaced while inflicting casualties, like the conquest of Canaan or the exile.

Some of the reasons for occurrences to be classed as ‘decimate’ are: (1) The context focusses on removal from a location, which applies to all ‘decimate’ occurrences, (2) the object still appears later in the book (Dt 2:21) or elsewhere in the HB (Dt 2:23), and (3) verbs of subjugation and dispossession appear in the context. These include *ירש* (Dt 2:12, 21, 22; 9:3; 31:3, 4; Jos 24:8; 2 Chr 20:10; Am 2:9), *ישב + תחתם* (Dt 2:12, 21, 22, 23; 12:30<sup>9</sup>), *כנע* (subdue Dt 9:3), *גרש* (drive out; Dt 33:27; 2 Chr 20:10), *יצא בגולה, לכד + יצא בגולה* (taken + go into exile Jr 48:8).

Deuteronomy particularly has a focus on being removed from the land, whether through the conquest of Canaan (1:27; 7:23, 24; 9:3; 12:30; 31:3, 4; 33:27) or the exile (4:26<sup>bis</sup>; 6:15; 7:4; 28:20, 24, 45, 48, 51, 61, 63). After Deuteronomy, the ‘decimate’

9. Deuteronomy 12:30 does not have *תחתם*, but *בארצם* [in their land].





community for sin (Dt 4:3; Jos 7:12), or by killing (Jdg 21:16; 1 Sm 24:22; 2 Sm 14:16; Jr 48:42). Another use is removal from a land, whether exile (Dt 6:15; Jos 23:15; Is 49:19; Am 9:8a, b), the death of a family (1 Ki 13:34), removal of a cult (2 Ki 10:28), or judgement (Is 13:9). One TrBH occurrence (Lm 3:66) refers to being removed from under heaven.

### Inseparable כ

With three occurrences of שָׁמַד, it is followed by a כ with a locative use (Van der Merwe, Naudé & Kroeze 2017:§39.6). They all appear in prose texts; two in SBH (2 Sm 21:5; 2 Ki 10:17) and one in LBH (Est 3:6). The locative כ is attached to a location and all the members of the group that make up the patient are destroyed, whether the mood is *realis* or *irrealis*. Here too, then, it is conceptualised as being removed from a location.

### No preposition

Just over half (46/90) of the occurrences of שָׁמַד are not followed by a locative preposition. However, if the *removal from* sense was at the semantic core of שָׁמַד, it is sensible that the meaning would have been understood even if no locative preposition follows שָׁמַד. Beyond that, for most verses, there is still some element in the context that creates a spatial reference. In this section, these 46 occurrences are discussed. They are discussed in three groupings, ordered according to a descending level of certainty. Lastly, a few occurrences with no spatial reference are discussed and reasons are given for why they pose no threat to the proposed semantic core.

The most certain ones make up 19 of the 90 occurrences. The claims for spatiality include another verb of dispossession or subjugation in the context (Dt 2:23; 4:26<sub>bis</sub>; 7:23, 24; 9:3; 33:27), a parallel verb in the context with a locative preposition (Dt 4:26<sub>bis</sub>; 9:14; 28:63; 31:4; Ezk 25:7; Mi 5:13) or another clear reference to removal from a space in the context (Dt 7:4; 28:48, 51).

Less certain ones that are still worthy of note make up 23 of the 90 occurrences. For these, the claim for spatiality include, שָׁמַד is linked to a location (28:20, 24, 45, 61), a verb of removal or desolation appears in context (Lv 26:30; Nm 33:52; Dt 9:8, 19, 20, 25; 2 Chr 20:10; Jr 48:8; Hs 10:8; Hg 2:22), or there is a spatial reference in the context (Gn 34:30; Dt 1:27; 28:20, 24, 45, 48, 51, 61, 63; Jos 11:14, 20; 2 Sm 14:7, 11; 1 Ki 15:29; 1 Ki 16:12; Est 3:13, 4:8, 7:4; Am 9:8 b, c). The 4 of the 90 that are least certain still have the removal (Is 14:23, 26:14; Ezk 32:12) or non-removal (Ps 106:34) from a location implied in context.

With 14 of the 90 occurrences, no spatial reference is found in the context, but these do not pose a problem for the proposed semantic core, for the following reasons. Only two of these (Is 10:7, 23:11) fall under SBH, and they occur in poetry, which is often terse and does not include all the constituents in a sentence. There is one from ABH (2 Sm 22:38), five from Psalms (37:38, 83:11, 92:8, 106:23, 145:20), and one from Proverbs (14:11), and all these are also poetry. The remaining ones are two prose texts from TrBH (Ezk 34:16; Zch 12:9) and three from LBH (2 Chr 20:23; Es 8:11; Dn 11:44); therefore,

less weight should be given to them because of the possibility of semantic drift.

## Verbs in collocation

Semantic priming (Grasso 2021:124) states that much insight can be gained into the meaning of a verb by inspecting the verbs that appear in collocation with it. For this article, only verbs of destruction or verbs that provide insight into the conceptualisation of the destruction that שָׁמַד portrays are regarded. Occurrences that were inspected are limited to SBH and TrBH.

The verb שָׁמַד relates to other verbs of destruction in various ways. It could be the result of another verb and the result could be reached momentarily (נָכַח Gn 34:30), though it often portrays a process (נָכַח Jos 11:14; נָכַח 2 Sm 21:4; נָכַח 1 Ki 15:29; נָכַח 2 Ki 10:17). In several places, שָׁמַד seems to be correlated to another verb, though as CL dictates, they will each have their own conceptualisation (אָבַד Dt 4:26<sub>bis</sub>; אָבַד Dt 28:20; אָבַד 128:5; אָבַד Dt 28:63; חָרַם Jos 11:20; כָּרַח 1 Sm 24:22; כָּחַד 1 Ki 13:34; כָּרַח Is 10:7; אָבַד Is 26:14; כָּרַח Is 48:19; אָבַד Jr 48:8).

Beyond the result relation mentioned previously, it could also indicate an outcome, meaning if שָׁמַד is done, it would equate to another verb (נָסַח pluck off Dt 28:63; מוֹת 2 Sm 14:7; שָׁחַח 2 Sm 14:11; אָבַד Ezk 25:7; כָּרַח Ezk 25:7). Related to this, other verbs can also portray the mode (הִפְךָ and יָרַד Hg 2:22) or extent (מָחָה Dt 9:14) to which שָׁמַד is done.

It could also be the outcome of another verb in the sense that when the verb has run its course, שָׁמַד is the outcome. These are preceded by עָד. There are the three process uses of שָׁמַד mentioned previously (Jos 11:14; 1 Ki 15:29; 2 Ki 10:17), but it could also portray the outcome of verbs that are not verbs of destruction, though all except one appear in contexts of future judgement (Dt 7:23, 24; 28:20, 24, 45, 48, 51, 61; Jos 23:15).

## Exegetical demonstrations

Scholars agree on the ‘annihilate’ sense of שָׁמַד; but while some grope in that direction, the ‘decimate’ sense has not enjoyed much attention or acknowledgement. In light of this, for the exegetical demonstration section, three passages regarded to have the ‘decimate’ sense are exegeted. These were chosen from Deuteronomy as it is the book with the most occurrences of שָׁמַד (29/90).

### Deuteronomy 1:27

וַתִּגְנוּ בְּאֹהֲלֵיכֶם וַתֹּאמְרוּ בְּשִׁנְאֵת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ הוֹצִיאָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם לְתֵת אֶתְנוּ בְּיַד הָאֱמֹרִי לְהַשְׁמִידָנוּ:<sup>17</sup>

You rather grumbled in your tents saying, ‘Because Yahweh hates us, he brought us out from the land of Egypt to hand us over to the Amorites for them to decimate us’.<sup>18</sup>

17. Verses from the HB are taken from the Lexham Hebrew Bible (2012).

18. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of the Hebrew text are my own.

For the exegesis of this verse, 1:19–33 was inspected. While some obvious points are made, they lead to a less obvious conclusion. Scholars note that in this verse, Yahweh's greatest blessing (giving Israel the land) is interpreted as an act of hatred, which is emphasised by the word order (Tigay 1996:16). Block (2012:72) says they were 'accusing Yahweh of deliberately trying to destroy them'. McConville (2002:69) also notes that Yahweh wanted 'to destroy them', and Lundbom (2013:177–178) says the hiphil is intensifying here.

However, it could be argued that their complaint was not that Yahweh wanted to annihilate them, but that he was leading them into a lost battle. There are some hints of protection during war in the context. They are told not to dread (עָרַץ; 1:29), indicating Yahweh's presence in the war camp (Van Pelt & Kaiser 1998:544). Yahweh would fight (לָחַם; 1:30) for them, indicating that he would be present in the camp as they fight the war sanctioned by him<sup>19</sup> (Longman 1998:786). They are reminded that Yahweh spied out (תָּוֵר; also used in Numbers 12; 1:33) appropriate places for them before; therefore, they should trust him now also (Matties & Thompson 1998:283).

However, they do not believe in and obey (ב; 1:32) him (Moberly 1998:431). They already forgot that Yahweh had deposed Egypt, a mightier enemy (Block 2012:72), and so in despair, they accused him of something absurd (Wright 2012:30). The distrust is seen early on. Moses instructs them to possess (יָרַשׁ; 1:21) the land that was promised (Schmid 1997:579), but contrary to expectation (contrastive ך; Van der Merwe, Naudé & Kroeze 2017:§40.23.4.2; 1:22) they request that spies be sent to spy out (רָגַל; 1:24) weaknesses of the land (Merrill 1998:1047). However, rather than being comforted, they are demoralised by paralysing fear (מָסַס; 1:28) when they hear the report (Wolf, Holmstedt & Wakely 1998:1004). They refuse (לֹא + אָבָה; 1:26) to invade the land since victory seemed unlikely (Meier 1998:121).

Considering its context, it appears that in Deuteronomy 1:27, the Israelites feared that Yahweh was leading them into a lost battle rather than that he wanted to see them annihilated. In response to Lundbom's (2013:177–178) comment on the hiphil, it should be noted that 69 of the 90 occurrences of שָׂמַד are in the hiphil (Hall 1998:151). Also, the stem dominates with verbs of force with the Piel stem seldom featuring (Jenni 1968:205). Thus, the hiphil stem in no way requires that annihilation be the meaning here.

## Deuteronomy 4:26

הַיּוֹם אֲתִּישָׂמְךָ וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ כִּי־אֲבִדְךָ מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר  
אָמַרְתָּ עֲבָרִים אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן שָׂמָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ לֹא־תֵאָרֵבוּ יָמִים עָלֶיךָ כִּי הַשָּׂמַד תִּשְׂמְדוּן:

Today I call heaven and earth as witness against you that you will certainly perish from off the land which you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You will not lengthen your days on it but will certainly be rooted out of it.

<sup>19</sup>Yahweh chose when to present himself in a war camp (Longman 1998:786). Cf. 1:42 where they are told not to go up because Yahweh is not in their midst (Connaway & Malherbe 2020:63).

For the exegesis of this verse, 4:25–31 was inspected. They are told that if they damage (שָׁחַת; 4:25) their moral integrity with idolatry (Connaway & Malherbe 2023:8), Yahweh would not allow the lengthening (אָרַךְ; 4:26) of their days (Thompson & Martens 1998:517) on the land. However, what this means and how to interpret שָׂמַד are complicated matters. Scholars are open to an extreme interpretation of שָׂמַד, with offerings like 'will surely perish' (Christensen 2002:96), 'be totally destroyed' (McConville 2002:109), 'shall be utterly wiped out', and will be utterly destroyed (Block 2012:133). Lundbom (2013:249) notes that the niphil is particularly strong here and has the sense of completely destroy. Merrill (1994:127) adds that שָׂמַד 'speaks of such violent and irreversible annihilation that it seems difficult to view it as an uprooting into exile'.

These same authors acknowledge the non-destruction in the context, but either ignore it or explain it away. Block (2012:132–133) notes that three of the consequences for infidelity in the context are: (1) they will be utterly destroyed, (2) Yahweh will scatter them, and (3) they will be few in number, but does not reconcile these points. McConville (2002:109) says it refers to the loss of the chief covenant blessing – the land. Merrill (1994:127) notes that here just like in chapter 28 (vv., 20, 24, 45, 51, and 61), the sense is to be decimated. Tigay (1996:52, 262) also connects Deuteronomy 4 (v. 26) and 28 to the exile. Only he (1996:52) tries to reconcile this with the (supposed) heavy meaning of שָׂמַד by stating that it is hyperbole. Rather than taking it as hyperbole, Lohfink (2004:190–191) says the abstract meaning of שָׂמַד (roughly 'remove') should be understood here.

Some elements in the context clarify that they would survive as a nation. While their unity might be threatened if they are scattered (Christensen 2002:96), they would nevertheless survive. Israel would be scattered (פִּזְּוּ; 4:27), which was a serious punishment for covenant infidelity (Carroll 1998:586), and they would be driven (נָהַג; 4:27) as prisoners of war (Baker 1998:42) and experience great distress (צָרָר) when suffering military defeat (Swart & Wakely 1998:854). However, the end of the exile is already indicated in this passage (Lohfink 2004:191). 'Yahweh's unfailing protective presence' would not forsake (רָפָה; 4:31) them (Wakely 1998:1182), ensuring that the annihilation of the whole nation (Connaway & Malherbe 2023:8) does not occur.

## Deuteronomy 9:3

וַיִּדְעַת הַיּוֹם כִּי־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ הוּא־הַעֲבֹר לְפָנֶיךָ אֵשׁ אֹכְלָהּ הוּא יִשְׂמִיךָ וְהוּא יִכְנִיעֶם  
לְפָנֶיךָ וְהוּא יִשְׂמֶם וְהוּא יִשְׂמֶם מִיָּד כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה לְךָ:

So, know today that Yahweh your God who is going before you is a consuming fire. He will decimate them, and he will subdue them before you and you will dispossess and root them out quickly, just as Yahweh told you.

For the exegesis of this verse, 9:1–5 was inspected. To begin with, no claim is made that שָׂמַד never refers to the annihilation of the Canaanites (see 'annihilate' section), but that all-encompassing fatality does not have to be the sense,



even with Canaanites as patient. Again, scholars generally hold that *שמד* means 'destroy' here (e.g. Block 2012:244; Christensen 2002:180; Merrill 1994:190; Wright 2012:130) and Lundbom (2013:357) again notes that the hiphil indicates complete destruction.

Yet with this occurrence of *שמד*, the sense also appears to be 'decimate', rather than 'annihilate'. Some elements in the context lead to this conclusion. Moses notes that people doubt whether anyone can attack and withstand (יצב; 9:2) the Anakites as Yahweh promised them (Martens 1998:500). However, he notes that Yahweh will decimate (*שמד*; 9:3) them and subdue (כנע; 9:3) them before Israel by granting them military victory (Dumbrell 1998:667). The verb *ירש* is also pertinent in this passage. The qal in 9:1 clearly refers to taking possession of the land (Schmid 1997:579), but its use in verses 3, 4, and 5 is contested and definitive. Lohfink (2004:196) holds that the hiphil of *ירש* means 'destroy' here, but Schmid (1997:579) claims that the qal and the hiphil are almost identical. Those two take it to mean 'annihilation' or 'extermination' go too far, he says. In the hiphil stem, when *ירש* takes humans as an object it means to forcefully expel them (p. 579). Lundbom's (2013:357) argument for complete destruction in the hiphil has been answered with Deuteronomy 1:27.

Decimation (*שמד*) and dispossession (*ירש*) seem to be the senses. Christensen (2002:180) says that 'who will stand before the Anakim' might refer back to the report of the spies, and Lundbom (2013:362) also notes 'Canaan's inhabitants ... were later reported as having been subdued'. Yahweh was to thrust out (הדף; 9:4) the Canaanites before the Israelites as they advanced with military force, extending their territory (Klingbeil 1998:1012). Lohfink (2004:184) approves dispossession being the sense of *שמד* in Deuteronomy 2, but it seems sensible that that interpretation can be applied here also.

Rather than having the same technical sense as *הרם* (Hall 1998:152), which only occurs three times in the same verse as *שמד*, it may only have that sense when used with *הרם*. Other times, the sense is not all-encompassing, like when it is used with *ירש* (e.g. Dt 12:30; Jos 24:8) or has dispossession as a focus (e.g. Dt 2:12, 21, 22, 23, 24; 7:23).

## Conclusion

Because *שמד* is such a prominent verb of destruction in the HB, it was found worthy of investigation. Its prominence in Dtn-Dtr and the Prophetic Books and its frequent use in contexts of the conquest of Canaan and the exile highlighted it as a likely object of fruitful research. This assumption proved true. Many of the findings complemented scholarly literature, but the investigation drew attention to some elements of its meaning and usage that remained obscure. Previous findings have provisionally been completed and corrected by utilising CL methodologies.

Three senses with which *שמד* were used are offered, differentiating between when it refers to annihilation and

decimation. An argument was presented that spatiality, specifically removal from a location, is at the core of *שמד*. One hitherto obscure use of *שמד* was also illuminated, by showing that it can be used for purging a pagan religion from an area.

Some suggestions for future research might be in order. The hiphil stem is most often used for *שמד*, which is not strange since it is a verb of violence, but the significance of its use in the niphil stem deserves more attention. The relationship of *שמד* to other verbs of destruction it appears in collocation with it, especially *אבד*, *שחח*, and *כרת* could be inspected. A radial network of their relationship could also be set up. In this study, the 'purge' sense of *שמד* was touched upon only once, but it is also worthy of further exploration.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mr Mathieu Pelletier (SATS) and Dr Johannes Malherbe (SATS) for their critical feedback on a draft version of this article. Any remaining errors are my own.

## Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## Author's contribution

I.J.L.C. is the sole author of this research article.

## Ethical consideration

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by the author.

## Funding information

The article processing charges (APC) for this article was paid by the South African Theological Seminary.

## Data availability

Queries related to the data on which the findings are based may be directed to the author, I.J.L.C., who might respond within reason.

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