

TWO FUNDAMENTAL WORD-PAIRS: SOW/REAP AND PLOW/REAP

RONALD T. HYMAN

The study of word-pairs arose within the sizable literature on biblical poetry because word-pairs were often viewed as a subpoint of the better-known concept of parallelism in poetic lines. Although the original emphasis was on word-pairs in poetry, it is true that word-pairs appear throughout the Tanakh, in prose as well as in poetry. Indeed, the readily apparent antonymic word-pairs of heaven/earth, light/darkness, and evening/morning appear in the opening prose verses of Genesis. This article will focus on two word-pairs: sow/reap and plow/reap. The analysis of the examples will present the characteristics and functions of sow/reap and plow/reap. While our focus will be on sow/reap and plow/reap as word-pairs, it remains true that the three constituent words "plow," "sow," and "reap," in their several verb and noun variations, also appear individually in the Tanakh.

SEMANTIC EQUIVALENCE

I consider the two word-pairs sow/reap [זרע/קצור – *zra/ktzr*] and plow/reap [שור/קצר – *hrsh/ktzr*] to be semantically equivalent for purposes of this article. The two word-pairs reflect three basic agricultural tasks that yield food: plowing, sowing, and reaping. Each word-pair describes two of these activities, with the first being either sowing or plowing as precursor of reaping, the goal of the seasonal agricultural cycle of growing food. In this way, each word-pair describes an antecedent and a consequence.

Examination of specific examples of each word-pair indicates that sow/reap could easily be substituted for plow/reap and vice versa, especially when these word-pairs appear in figurative or metaphorical language. For example, Hosea 10:13 reads: *You have plowed wickedness; iniquity you have reaped.* Psalm 126:5 reads: *They who sow in tears, in joyous song shall they reap.* In these two verses, "sow" and "plow" are interchangeable in terms of

Ronald T. Hyman is Professor of Education at Rutgers University in New Jersey. His most recent book is Mandatory Community Service in High School: The Legal Dimension (1999).

the basic meaning of the two quoted passages.

CRITERIA FOR WORD-PAIRS

Because the study of biblical word-pairs has grown out of the study of parallelism in Hebrew poetry, the available criteria for recognizing and listing word-pairs appear in studies dealing specifically with poetry.¹ Those criteria are not applicable here, as we look at both prose and poetry in the Tanakh. The criteria that are applicable here are: (1) the two component Hebrew roots of a proposed word-pair should appear in the same verse or in a contiguous verse, and (2) the roots should be related to each other in the meaning of the examined passage.

That is to say, the component words of a pair must be located within a limited space and connected by the meaning of the identified biblical passage. Based on these criteria for this review I believe that the combinations found in the following cited verses² qualify as word-pairs of sow/reap and plow/reap.

Sow/Reap: Genesis 8:22; Exodus 23:16; Leviticus 25:11; II Kings 19:29 and Isaiah 37:39 (duplicate); Jeremiah 12:13, 50:16; Hosea 8:7, 10:12; Micah 6:15, Psalm 126:5; Proverbs 22:8; Job 4:8; Ecclesiastes 11:4.

Plow/Reap: Genesis 45:6; Exodus 34:21; I Samuel 8:12; Hosea 10:13; Amos 9:13; Job 4:8; Proverbs 20:4;

CHARACTERISTICS AND FUNCTIONS OF SOW/REAP AND PLOW/REAP

Agricultural activities: Our two word-pairs, sow/reap and plow/reap, via their constituent three-root words, stem from the agricultural basis of biblical society. In Exodus 20-23 and Leviticus 19-26, Moses sets forth laws by which the Hebrews, now called the Israelites, should live as farmers in the Land of Israel. It is not surprising that in these sections of the Tanakh, there appear word-pairs of sow/reap, specifically: . . . *and the Feast of the Reaping, of the first fruits of your labors, of what you sow in the field . . .* (Ex. 23:15) and *That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, neither shall you reap the aftergrowth . . .* (Lev. 25:11). From these sections it is evident that sow and reap are integral terms in the lives of the children of Israel.

Literal use: Within the agricultural perspective mentioned above, our word-pairs can be used with explicit meaning. In Genesis 45:3-5, Joseph

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reveals himself to his brothers. He asserts that God sent him ahead to Egypt to save their lives. To add to the strength of his remarks, so that his brothers should not be distressed or self-reproaching because they sold Joseph into slavery, Joseph then says: *'It is now two years that there has been a famine in the land and there will be five more years of no plowing and reaping'* (45:6).

Samuel uses the words literally when he speaks to the Israelites who want him to appoint a king to govern them. Among other points in his attempt to dissuade the people, he warns them that a king will require them to *'plow his plowing and to reap his reaping'* (I Sam. 8:12). That is to say, a king will require people to perform essential, difficult services for him in addition to what they perform for themselves as farmers, thereby affecting the common people's lives considerably. In short, our word pairs provide a literal and succinct way to refer to fundamental tasks in the daily lives of the Israelites.

Figurative use: Within the agricultural perspective our word-pairs can have a figurative meaning. In fact, examples of figurative use of our two word-pairs exceed the number of literal ones.³ The two verses of Hosea 10:13 and Psalm 126:5, quoted earlier to show that the words sow and plow can be interchangeable in semantic meaning, contain figurative uses of our word-pairs. Jeremiah uses the figurative meaning of sow/reap to admonish his people: *They have sown wheat and reaped thorns* (Jer. 12:13). Similarly, the author of Ecclesiastes figuratively says: *He who watches the wind, will not sow; and he who observes the clouds will not reap* (Eccl. 11:4).

Our word-pairs are mostly used negatively when they appear with figurative meaning. For example, Hosea says: *They sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind* (Hos. 8:7). On the other hand, our word-pairs can also refer figuratively to the positive, good times to come. To depict the bright possible future after the Israelites change their behavior, Amos prophesies a bountiful time *when the plowman shall meet the reaper* (Amos 9:13). Mention of these word-pairs is able to bring a host of associations to mind immediately in order to set the context for the material at hand.

Cycles of activities: Sow/reap and plow/reap constitute a convenient and direct way to highlight the concept of cycles in human life. Cycles are significant because they indicate continuity and evoke feelings of regularity and security about the future. After the destructive great Flood, the Lord decides to assure people that there would be stability in the future. In Genesis

8:22, the Lord speaks to Himself [literally: "to His heart"] and makes a promise about the future. There He refers to four cycles and says that they shall endure forever:

*For all the days of the earth,
Sowing-time and reaping-time,
Cold and heat,
Summer and winter,
Day and night
Shall not cease.*

The very mention of these cycles here indicates their significance. Sow/reap and plow/reap encapsulate the fact that human life feels stabilized and secure because cycles exist in our lives; cycles in nature and cycles that we humans carry out ourselves. It is significant to note that in Genesis 8:22 three of the four cycles refer to natural cycles of the earth: cold/heat; summer/winter; and day/night. Only one cycle refers to human activity, and it is the first cycle mentioned by the Lord: sowing and reaping. This fact raises the significance of our word-pair sow/reap. The Lord promises that the sow/reap cycle will not cease, that the basic cycle of activity performed by people to sustain themselves with food will continue all the days of the earth.

Sow/reap and plow/reap, because they refer to central, cyclical activities in an agricultural society, provide a way to bring cohesion to the material at hand. The use of sow/reap and plow/reap as fundamental word-pairs "helps bind together the parallel lines of couplets." These word-pairs provide cohesion that binds the context of the message being presented.⁴

The plow/reap cycle serves to highlight another cycle appearing in the Tanakh. When the Lord speaks with Moses in Exodus 34 to give commandments to the Israelites, He instructs the people to observe the cycle of the seven-day week: *Six days you shall work and on the seventh day you shall rest* (Ex. 34:21). Then the Lord emphasizes the importance of this religious/spiritual cycle by appending a brief statement to complete that verse. Using the plow/reap word-pair to strengthen the point, the Lord adds: *You shall rest even at plowing-time and reaping-time.* The religious/spiritual cycle of the Sabbath is so important that it overcomes even the need to plow the land and to reap the crops, two of the basic human sustaining activities. Such is the importance of observing the Sabbath that even plowing and

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reaping must yield to it.

A consequence of behavior: Sow/reap and plow/reap can refer to the concept of behavioral consequences. If farmers do not sow, then they cannot reap the crops that will provide food. The consequence of not sowing is not reaping. The use of sow/reap and plow/reap to stand for the concept that consequences arise from a person's behavior appears several times in prophecy and wisdom literature. In Hosea 10:12, the prophet urges the people of Israel to reform their ways. He encourages Israel by saying: ***Sow righteousness for yourselves; reap according to lovingkindness.***

Hosea in the very next verse, 10:13, uses the plow/reap word-pair as he reprimands the people for their errant behavior and points to the consequence of that behavior: *You have **plowed** wickedness; iniquity you have **reaped**.* The four Hebrew words of that verse convey a strong point about behavioral consequence by having the words *plow* and *reap* enclose the other two words, *wickedness* and *iniquity*. Earlier, in verse 8:7, Hosea had utilized the sow/reap word-pair to reprimand Israel for its misbehavior. There the consequence of the people's sowing appears to be even worse than what they sowed: *They have **sown** the wind, and they shall **reap** the whirlwind.*

In Job 4:8, Eliphaz the Temanite replies to Job's complaints and combines all three root words of our two word-pairs into what might well be called a double word-pair, in that all three of our root words appear together in a progressive series. Eliphaz indicates that behavior has its consequences by saying: *'According to what I have seen, those who plow evil and those who sow wickedness, reap them.'*

The concept of behavioral consequences appears twice in Proverbs with our word-pairs. Proverbs 20:4 says: *In winter the lazy man will not plow and at reaping-time he will seek but there will be nothing.* Proverbs 22:8 teaches that: *he who sows injustice shall reap misfortune.*

In these examples from Hosea, Proverbs, and Job the moral message is that people reap what they plow and sow, and sometimes they reap consequences even more dire than what they plow and sow. Therefore, to understand the consequences that appear in their lives, people must reflect on how they have acted.

Our word-pairs remind us that people need to plan ahead. It is for this

reason that Proverbs 20:4 calls our attention to the lazy person who has nothing to reap because he failed to plow in winter. As a way of speaking about responsible behavior and its consequences, our sow/reap and plow/reap word-pairs serve as a powerful rhetorical tool. These word-pairs can refer also to consequences in the moral-religious lives of the Israelites. The prophets, for example, knew with confidence that when they used these word-pairs in reference to the moral-religious sphere the people would understand the intended message.

Lines with flexible word order: As noted earlier, parallelism is of interest in poetic expression. The standard parallel line of poetry appears as ABAB, as shown in the example that follows and contains the sow/reap word-pair. (The "A" and "B" words are in boldface and the word order for each verset is indicated on the left side.)

AB ***Sow** for yourselves **righteousness**,*

BA ***Reap** according to **lovingkindness** (Hos. 10:12).*

Sometimes, however, the word order of the line is reversed so that the order of the key words is ABBA. Three notable poetic lines, each containing one of our word-pairs, appear in ABBA form.

AB *They who **sow** in **tears***

BA *In **joyous song** shall they **reap** (Ps. 126:5).*

AB *You have **plowed wickedness**;*

BA ***Iniquity** you have **reaped** (Hos. 10:13).*

AB *The **plowman** shall meet the **reaper**;*

BA *The **treader of grapes**, **the carrier of seeds** (Amos 9:13).*

From the above four examples of parallelism, we can see that our two word-pairs are flexible in that they are able to be used in ABAB or ABBA word order.

POETRY AND PROSE

This article deals with two word-pairs found in both poetry and prose. At this point it is appropriate, then, to inquire whether any discernible difference is evident between the poetic instances⁵ and the prose instances of sow/reap

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and plow/reap. The only – and significant – noticeable difference involves the use of the figurative characteristic of the word-pairs. The poetic word-pairs, with the exception of sow/reap in Genesis 8:22, use the figurative meaning rather than the literal meaning. Similarly, the prose word-pairs, with the exception of Ecclesiastes 11:4, use the literal meaning. One could well argue, however, that no exception occurs in regard to prose verses in that Ecclesiastes 11:4 actually qualifies as poetry even though the New Jewish Publication Society (NJPS) translation does not lay it out typographically as poetry. This verse appears in intent and form to be poetic because it clearly manifests an ABAB parallel construction: *He who watches the wind will not sow; and he who observes the clouds will not reap.*

In any case, whether Ecclesiastes 11:4 is classified as poetry or prose, our examination of the instances of sow/reap and plow/reap reveals that in general the poetic instances use the figurative meaning and the prose instances use the literal meaning of these word-pairs. This finding, which connects poetry with the figurative meaning and prose with the literal meaning of our two word-pairs, is not surprising. Poetic expression provides a different approach from that of prose. It causes the listener/reader to rethink, reflect on the text in a new and vivid way. It provides a sharp, often dramatically different slant on the words. Indeed, this seems to have been the intention of the prophets and others who chose poetry rather than prose as their medium of expression. Hosea's use of a figurative plow/reap, set within a four-word ABBA parallelistic form, serves as the basis of his moral message to his people. It stands as a powerful prophetic statement: *You have plowed wickedness; iniquity you have reaped* (Hos. 10:13).⁶

The use of a figurative word-pair in poetic expression to urge moral reform is natural. A literal use of one of the word-pairs would seem odd within a passage concerning moral behavior. Biblical authors understood the characteristics and functions of sow/reap and plow/reap, and they used them well.

NOTES

1. One available set of three criteria follows below: a) each must belong to the same grammatical class (verb, noun, etc.); b) the components must occur in parallel lines; c) such word-pairs must be relatively frequent. See: W.G.E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (Sheffield: England, JSOT Press, 1986) p.128. Watson based his criteria on P.B. Yoder, "A-B Pairs and Oral Composition Vol. 31. No. 4, 2003

in Hebrew Poetry, *Vetus Testamentum* 21 (1971) p. 472.

2. Job 4:8 appears in both lists for sow/reap and plow/reap because it contains the words "plow," "sow," and "reap" in a progressive series. In this series we can see both a plow/reap and a sow/reap word-pair. Job 4:8 is the only instance of this three-word series that I have found.

3. The following examples have figurative meaning: Jeremiah 12:13, 50:16; Hosea 8:7, 10:12, 13; Amos 9:13; Micah 6:15; Psalms 126:5; Proverbs 22:8, 30:4; Ecclesiastes 11:4. The following are literal: Genesis 8:22, 45:6; Exodus 23:16, 34:21; Leviticus 25:11; I Samuel 8:22; II Kings. 19:29/Isaiah 37:30.

4. Watson, *op.cit.*, 140.

5. According to the NJPS translation of 1985, which arranges poetic expression differently from prose expression, the following verses are poetic: Genesis 8:22; Jeremiah 12:13, 50:16; Hosea 8:7, 10:12,13; Amos 9:13; Micah 6:15; Psalms 126:5; Proverbs 20:4, 22:8; Job 4:8. The following are prose: Genesis 45:6; Exodus 23:16, 34:21; Leviticus 25:11; I Samuel 8:12; II Kings 19:29/Isaiah 37:30; Ecclesiastes 11:4.

6. For another memorable example of poetic prophecy that exhibits ABBA parallelism and contains a word-pair (justice/righteousness) see my article, "Amos 5:24 – Prophetic, Chastising, Surprising, Poetic," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 30 (2002) pp. 227-234.

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