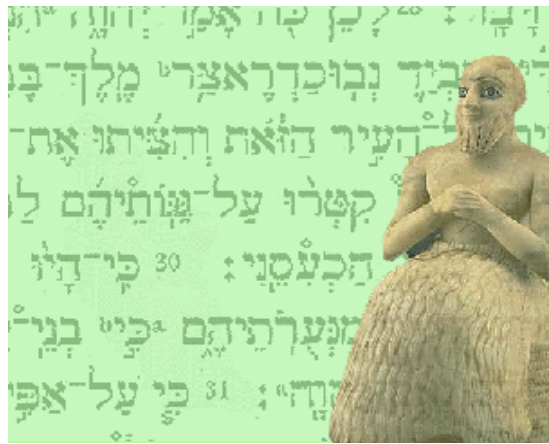


# The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures

ISSN 1203–1542

<http://www.jhsonline.org> and

<http://purl.org/jhs>



Articles in JHS are being indexed in the ATLA Religion Database, [RAMBI](#), and [BiBIL](#). Their abstracts appear in Religious and Theological Abstracts. The journal is archived by *Library and Archives Canada* and is accessible for consultation and research at the Electronic Collection site maintained by [Library and Archives Canada](#) (for a direct link, click [here](#)).

## VOLUME 9, ARTICLE 22

**KAROLIEN VERMEULEN,  
TO SEE OR NOT TO SEE. THE POLYSEMY OF THE  
WORD עָיַן IN THE ISAAC NARRATIVES (GEN 17–35)**

**TO SEE OR NOT TO SEE  
THE POLYSEMY OF THE WORD עֵץ IN  
THE ISAAC NARRATIVES (GEN 17–35)**

KAROLIEN VERMEULEN

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON/INSTITUTE OF JEWISH  
STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF ANTWERP

It is usual to encounter ambiguous sentences, but it is not  
usual to notice their ambiguity.<sup>1</sup>

Ambiguity, and more in particular the type generated by polysemy, has given rise to many studies over time, reaching from research on the psycholinguistic mechanisms underlying the process to the discussion of examples pulled from the large corpus of world literature.<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew Bible has taken its stand in these studies as well.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Garrett, “Does Ambiguity Complicate the Perception of Sentences?,” G. Flores d’Arcais and W. Levelt (eds), *Advances in Psycholinguistics* (Amsterdam/London: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1970), 50.

<sup>2</sup> A selection: Garrett, “Does Ambiguity Complicate?,” 48–60; D. Foss, “Some Effects of Ambiguity upon Sentence Comprehension,” *Journal of Learning and Verbal Behavior* 9 (1970): 699–706; J. Puskjovsky and B. Boguraev, *Lexical Semantics: the Problem of Polysemy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); H. Cuyckers and B. Zawada, *Polysemy in Cognitive Linguistics: selected papers from the International Cognitive Linguistics Conference, Amsterdam, 1997* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001); M. Rakova, *The Extent of the Literal: Metaphor, Polysemy and the Theories of Concepts* (Houndsmills/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); M. Garcia, et al., “Polysemy: A Neglected Concept in Wordplay,” *English Journal* 96,3 (2007), 51–57.

<sup>3</sup> Ground breaking work has been written by I. Casanowicz, G. Rendsburg, J. Sasson and E. Greenstein. For a current *status quaestionis* see S. Noegel, “Polysemy,” G. Kahn, et al., *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming). Noteworthy are the following recent contributions: D. Tsumura, “Polysemy and Parallelism in Hab 1,8–9,” *ZAW* 120 (2008), 194–203; J. Grossman, *Ambiguity in the Biblical Narrative and its Contribution to the Literary Formation* (PhD Dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 2006) (in Hebrew); J. Grossman, “The Use of Ambiguity in Biblical Narratives of Misleading and Deceit,” *Tarbiz* 73 (2006), 483–515

In this article I will discuss the purposeful use of the polysemous word עין in the light of the Isaac narratives (Gen 17–35). First, I will discuss the lexical ambiguity of the word and its limits as *conditio sine qua non*. Secondly, I will show that its polysemy concurs with the main themes of Isaac’s story. Through specific examples I will illustrate that the semantic paradigm introduced by עין is also exploited on the sentence level. To conclude, I will formulate some thoughts on the exhaustive use of the word’s polysemy in the current narrative.

### 1. LEXICAL AMBIGUITY

The word עין is a prototypical example of a polyseme. It can mean both eye and well.<sup>4</sup> Despite its natural twoness, the word denotes one or the other most of the time. The polysemous nature is from a purely morphological point of view only at play in the singular form of the word. עין has two different plurals— עינות (wells) and עינים (eyes)— establishing a one to one relation between meaning and form.<sup>5</sup> Another regulating factor is the textual context, which disambiguates the meaning most of the time.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless the semantic multivalence of the word evokes the other meaning in the audience’s mind. In a single moment, in which the reader or listener decides which option to choose, both of them are there, creating two parallel stories.

Moreover the ambiguity extends beyond the biblical text, being a widespread ancient conception that tied eyes and wells. In the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* a connection between eyes and water can be seen in the creation of the earth out of the body of the goddess

---

(in Hebrew).

<sup>4</sup> See HALOT 6980. For the use of עין as ‘eye’ see, for instance, Gen 29:17, Deut 11:12, and Jer 24:6; for the use of עין as ‘well’ see Gen 16:7, Num 33:9, and Deut 8:7. The examples given here imply that although the word has different meanings, this polysemy does not create any interpretation problems or opportunity for playing on ambiguity (depending on the point of view one takes). This is due to the purpose of dictionaries in general – disambiguate meaning for the reader – and to the goal of Biblical Hebrew dictionaries in particular – provide the reader with the most plausible meaning of the divine word in a certain context. In search for polysemous wordplay therefore dictionaries are only useful as backup, after one has discovered a possible ambiguity. As an initial source they are misleading and limiting. The examples mentioned later on in this paper will illustrate this.

<sup>5</sup> GKC § 87.3, p. 243.

<sup>6</sup> For the role of context, both textual and extra-textual, in approaching ambiguous words see D. Payne, “Old Testament Exegesis and the Problem of Ambiguity,” *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 5 (1967), 48–68.

Tiamat. One eye became the Tigris and the other the Euphrates. “He placed her head, heaped up [ ] Opened up springs: water gushed out. He opened the Euphrates and the Tigris from her eyes, ...”<sup>7</sup>

## 2. THEMATIC AMBIGUITY

The frequent use of the word רָאָה in the Isaac narratives—Genesis 17 through 35—attracts attention.<sup>8</sup> Its repeated appearance suggests a certain narratological importance. The semantic field of the word turns out to show similarity with the major elements that drive the Isaac narratives.

There is the eye, instrument of seeing,<sup>9</sup> seeing the empirical world and seeing the inside world, seeing the past and hoping for the future,<sup>10</sup> seeing and understanding—a polysemy caught in the Hebrew root רָאָה.<sup>11</sup> Abraham and Sarah will *see* their son Isaac and

<sup>7</sup> S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 257.

<sup>8</sup> The word appears 42 times. In comparison to the whole of the book of Genesis, in which it occurs 75 times, this constitutes more than half of the appearances. רָאָה can be found in Gen 3:5, 6; 6:8; 13:10,14; 16:4, 5, 6, 7\*2; 18:2, 3; 19:8, 14, 19; 20:15, 16; 21:11, 12, 19; 22:4, 13; 23:11, 18; 24:13, 16, 29, 30, 42\*2, 45, 63, 64; 27:1, 12; 28:8; 29:17, 20; 30:27, 41; 31:10, 12, 35, 40; 32:6; 33:1, 5, 8, 10, 15; 34:18\*2; 37:25; 38:10; 39:7, 21; 41:37\*2; 42:24; 43:29; 44:21; 45:5, 12\*2, 16\*2, 20; 46:4, 47:19, 29; 48:10, 17; 49:12, 22; 50:4.

<sup>9</sup> “The Bible reflects a high appreciation of vision, whereas blindness is interpreted as the most terrible misfortune: ‘Guard me like the pupil of your eye.’ (Ps 17:8) and ‘A curse be on whoever misleads a blind man’ (Deut 27:18).” A. Mansour – D. Gold – H. Salti, and Z. Sbeity, “The Eye in the Old Testament and Talmud,” *Survey of Ophthalmology* 49.4 (2004), 448.

<sup>10</sup> See J. Kaminsky, “Humor and the Theology of Hope: Isaac as a Humorous Figure,” *Int* 54 (2000), 364. “There is a connection between the use of humor in the Isaac narratives and the ability and, furthermore, that the author(s) of Genesis employed humor as a means to communicate a sense of hope to future readers and hearers of the text.” According to the author of the article the mentioning of Isaac’s blindness can be read as humorous and thus as a sign of hope. Although I do not follow Kaminsky in his main argument that “Isaac plays a passive role as others manipulate him and shape his future destiny”(367) and that “this incident (Isaac and Ishmael ‘playing’) contains the first hint of Isaac’s schlemiel quality: he is the active disseminator of bad luck” (367) and finally “Jacob’s fooling of Isaac does not reveal Jacob’s great acting ability, but Isaac’s utter stupidity” (371), I do believe that the seeing in the stories can be related to hope and a fulfillment of the initial promise.

<sup>11</sup> The Hebrew verb רָאָה ‘see’ very often used in the Bible includes both the visual seeing and the more metaphorical or mental seeing, i.e., understanding. As the verb carries this double meaning, it is very likely that the instrument related to this verb evokes the same connotations.

they will *understand* that God was not joking (Gen 17:17, 18:12, 13, 15; 21:6).<sup>12</sup> Isaac will wait for the camels to return and he will *see* his wife Rebecca and will *understand* (Gen 24:63–67). Isaac will not *see* and therefore, he will not *understand* that he should not bless only one son or the son who transgressed the rule of not marrying Canaanite women and therefore he will not *see* that he blesses his youngest son (Gen 26:34–35).<sup>13</sup> But even in this not *seeing* he will *understand* that he did the right thing.<sup>14</sup> Jacob will *see* Rachel and he will *understand* (Gen 29:9–11). He will *see* the many conflicts he has created and left behind and he will *see* that *understanding* is the solution.<sup>15</sup> If one reads the Isaac stories as a lesson in true sight, in understanding, the eye is definitely the guide in this.

Moreover dictionaries show the different interpretations of ראה and the text gives even better evidence. In Gen 12:7 the verb ראה is used twice in the same verse referring once to the literal meaning, the empirical act of seeing, and once to the figurative meaning, the understanding.

<sup>12</sup> The initial disbelief of Abraham and Sara when hearing the annunciation of a son in their old age results in a poetic exclamation of Sara, which recalls the same root צהק. Its recurrence illustrates the process of understanding, the same eyes but a different view.

<sup>13</sup> Esau takes Hittite women as wives which is bitterness for his parents. The commandment that was already introduced under Abraham is transgressed by the oldest son. In the ancient Near Eastern context this would have equaled a punishment as severe as loss of the firstborn blessing and rights. However Isaac still intends to bless Esau. On the other hand it was rather unusual to bless one of the sons. The custom was to bless all the male descendants. Twice the story seems to go against the traditional rules. However, Isaac is old and blind. This seems to be the explanation for the reversals in the story. It gives him some respite to make these misjudgments. As an almost logical consequence of these events and taking into account the divine message brought to Rebecca Isaac does bless the right son, although not on purpose. This youngest son might be a born deceiver; however he did nothing more than dressing up as his brother. He didn't break the unwritten laws. (G. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* [WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1994], 205)

<sup>14</sup> J. Kaminsky, *Yet I loved Jacob. Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 51.

<sup>15</sup> The conflicts arise in the chapters 26–7 and 28–29. In the former Jacob tricks his brother and takes the firstborn rights (whether this was justified, does not matter, as Esau feels impaired and wants to kill his brother as soon as the old man 'joins his people'). Jacob flees. After many years, when he attained wealth and descendants, the brothers meet again and they solve their conflict. As such the conflict issue forms an outer circle (G. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1986], 59–62). The latter case forms an inner circle, talking about the rise of the conflict between Jacob and Laban and the final solution. In both cases the conflict arises because of the blindness of the characters – they focus on their own profit and do not see the larger picture. As soon as they understand that a future—the promise of God—only can be reached by understanding and working together, the conflict dissolves.

On the other hand there is the well, the spring, the water. Water stands as a symbol for fertility even up until today.<sup>16</sup> The water is a life giver and so is the woman, who draws it. Hagar and Ishmael are banished, facing death without *water*. However God reveals a *well* and they *live* (Gen 21:19).<sup>17</sup> At the *well* Rebecca comes to Isaac and he *lives*, putting aside the grief and generating offspring (Gen 24:67).<sup>18</sup> He digs *wells* and there is *prosperity* (Gen 26:17–22).<sup>19</sup> When *wells* are closed, conflict arises (Gen 26:12–16). Rachel comes to Jacob at the *well* and he *lives* (Gen 29: 9–11). Linked up with the story the wells are the fulfillment of God’s promise, they are fertile and they increase and they have land and flock and servants. Although all the women are described as עקרה ‘infertile,’<sup>20</sup> they all give birth.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> For the symbolism of water see J. Richards, “Water, Justice and Community Building. An Old Testament Perspective,” S. Mathew and P. Martin (eds), *Waters of Life and Death. Ethical and Theological Responses to Contemporary Water Crises* (Delhi: Cambridge Press, 2005), 214–240; J. Samuel, “Towards a Biblical Understanding of Water,” Mathew and Martin, *Waters of Life and Death*, 207–213; L. Hobgood-Oster, “For Out of that Well the Flocks were Watered: Stories of Wells in Genesis,” N. Habel and S. Wurst (eds), *The Earth Story in Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 187–199; M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: New American Library, 1958), 188–215; D. Fontana, *The Secret Language of Symbols. A Visual Key to Symbols and Their Meaning* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993), 112–113.

<sup>17</sup> Hobgood-Oster, “For Out of that Well the Flocks were Watered,” 191; C. Kroeger and M. Evans, *The IVP Women’s Bible Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 597.

<sup>18</sup> Hobgood-Oster, “For Out of that Well,” 199.

<sup>19</sup> Hobgood-Oster, “For Out of that Well,” 199; Kroeger and Evans, *IVP Women’s Bible Commentary*, 597.

<sup>20</sup> The word ‘infertile’ in Hebrew has a very close affinity with עָקַר ‘descendent’ (see Lev 15:47; cf. 1 Chr 2:27; see HALOT). This can imply two things: it is a small step from one to the other, i.e., infertility is not a permanent situation, it can easily be reversed (at least in the world of Hebrew language). Another possibility is that there is no such thing as infertility in the Bible. The mentioning of infertility is a precondition for the birth of a child. Indeed all the women that are defined as infertile will have descendents in the end. Even when the women of Abimelech’s people are made infertile this seems to be easily resolved. Whether the language invites the writer to use the link between infertility and descendents or whether the motif exists and it happens to be expressed nicely in language, cannot be distinguished. What can be noticed is that it at least gives rise to some thoughts about the story and its use of language.

<sup>21</sup> E.g., Gen 24:11, 29:10.

Thus I argue that the word עין incorporates the two major themes of Isaac's life: understanding and fertility, both of land and of women.<sup>22</sup>

### 3. SOME EXAMPLES

The function of עין as a *Leitwort* in the broader narrative through frequent repetition and exploration of its polysemy is furthermore highlighted by the use of other literary devices involving or surrounding the word. The following three examples illustrate that עין has an important role to play on the sentence level as well, evoking two semantic paradigms at the same time, thus telling a double tale.

#### EXAMPLE 1: GEN 21:19

ויפקח אלהים את־עיניה וטרא באר מים  
ותלך ותמלא את־החמת מים ותשק את־הנער

And God opened her *ayins*, and she saw a well of water and she went and she filled the skin of water and she gave the boy to drink.<sup>23</sup>

Although “the eyes” form here the referential meaning of עין connected with the word ראה ‘see,’ the other meaning is prominent as well. There is the source, the filling of the water skin and the giving the child to drink. It almost looks as if we had wrongly disambiguated the word עין in the beginning of the sentence. Other literary devices surround the eye, such as parallelism, epanalepsis, *inclusio* with verse 14, and a chiasm involving the חמת מים. These

---

<sup>22</sup> This interpretation finds also support in the second part of the cycle, focusing on Jacob. As Mansour observes “The eye is called *ayin* from a root which means ‘to flow’, and the same word denotes a spring of water...Simple observation can distinguish the white or *laban* and the black or *schachor* of the eyeball. In humans the white is predominant whereas in animals the black is predominant. The black part makes vision possible ... (Niddah 31a). The Talmud states that the *shuryane* (vessel) of the eye is connected to the chamber of the heart.” (Mansour, *Eye in the Old Testament and Talmud*, 448) It is striking that these anatomic references immediately recall the game going on between Laban and Jacob. This conflict peaks when Jacob takes Laban's heart, part of his name and part of his life (Gen 31: 27–29). The name Laban is played upon throughout that story. (S. Noegel, “Drinking Feasts and Deceptive Feats: Jacob and Laban's Double Talk,” S. Noegel (ed), *Puns and Pundits: Wordplay in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature* [Bethesda: CDL Press, 2000], 163–179) This medical article introduces an additional element of literary sophistication.

<sup>23</sup> I have chosen to transliterate the key word, rather than translate it, so as to maintain the ambiguity in the translation, both here and in the other examples.

devices are connected with the less obvious meaning of עֵין here, the watery one.

Many commentaries discuss this verse on the issue of the pre-existence of the well.<sup>24</sup> B. Jacob and N. Sarna argue that the water might have been there but that Hagar did not see it in her desperation.<sup>25</sup> However, as J. Skinner<sup>26</sup> points out, language leaves it in between, it can be both a miracle – there was no water, God did open the well – or just a matter of opening up your mind for possible solutions – God opened her eyes, he directed her gaze to the well.<sup>27</sup>

These explanations show that even without focusing on the polysemous play both themes represented by sight and wells are central to the episode.

**EXAMPLE 2: GEN 24:16**

והנער טבת מראה מאד בתולה ואיש לא ידעה  
ותרד העינה ותמלא כדה ותעל:

And the girl was very beautiful to see, a young lady, and no man had known her, and she went down to the *ayin* and she filled her jar and she went up.

On the one hand the עֵין appears after a description related to the eye meaning – she is a beautiful girl. On the other, the word precedes a fragment that draws on the well meaning – filling the water jar, going up and going down pointing to Rachel's industry as well as to the often lower geographical location of wells.<sup>28</sup>

Once more the context evokes both meanings, this time in a Janus parallelism. The Janus parallel mentioned here centers around the eye/well word in the sentence.<sup>29</sup> The second meaning is the

<sup>24</sup> See Wenham, *Genesis*, 86; Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary. Genesis. בראשית* (Philadelphia/New York/Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 148; M. Kessler and K. Deurloo, *A Commentary on Genesis: the Book of Beginnings* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 127; B. Jacob, E. Jacob and W. Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis* (New York: Ktab Publishing House, 1974), 139.

<sup>25</sup> This is the case in Jacob, Jacob and Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible*, 139; Sarna, *Genesis*, 148.

<sup>26</sup> J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1969), 323–4.

<sup>27</sup> *Torat Haminba* supports an interpretation in favor of an existing well and God as a guide to it and compares the situation to Abraham looking for the place to sacrifice his son (דרשה לד, פרשת פקודי, תורת המנחה).

<sup>28</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 165; Wenham, *Genesis*, 144; Skinner, *Genesis*, 344; B. Waltke and C. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 329.

<sup>29</sup> Janus parallelism, initially discovered by C. Gordon (1978), typically appears in poetic texts. This example shows that the feature can also



most obvious one and the traditional translation of the verse. However, following the idea developed earlier on in the verse on good looking girls of nubiable age, one can read ותרד העינה “and she went down to the well” as “her eye went down,” as a sign of politeness and shyness. A similar coming down, not of the eye but of Rebecca as a person, can be found in Gen 24:64,

ותשא רבקה את-עיניה ותרא את-יצחק ותפל מעל הגמל

She dismounts from the camel (תפל) as a form of respect.<sup>30</sup> Whereas Rebecca’s action supports the translation content wise, Jer 14:17 offers a verbal parallel, combining עין with the verb ירד.

ואמרת אליהם את-הדבר הזה תרדנה עיני דמעה  
לילה ויומם ואל-תדמינה כי שבר גדול נשברה בתולת  
בת-עמי מכה נהלה מאד

You shall say to them this word: *Let my eyes run down with tears* night and day, and let them not cease, for the virgin daughter of my people is shattered with a great wound, with a very grievous blow.

Additional emphasis on the verse occurs through many other literary techniques: alliteration of the *mem* in מראה מאד and the *tav* in the verbs ואיש לא ידעה ותעל ותמלא ותעל. In the case of וואיש לא ידעה anastrophe creates a parallelism with the opening of the verse with הנער. The verbs ירד and עלה are antonyms and form an *inclusio*, encapsulating עין, the verb מלא and the water jar.

### EXAMPLE 3: GEN 26:35–27:1<sup>31</sup>

ותהיין מרת רוח ליצחק ולרבקה:  
ויהי כ-יזקן יצחק ותכהין עיניו מראת  
ויקרא את-עשו| בנו הגדל ויאמר אליו בני ויאמר אליו הנני:

And they were a bitterness of spirit for Isaac and Rebecca. And it happened as Isaac was old that his *ayins* were dim so that he could not see and he called Esau his oldest son and he said to him: “My son” and he said to him: “Here I am”.

This example parallels the previous one, exploiting the immediate textual context on both sides of the word עין. The verb ‘see’ follows the eye; the bitterness associated with tears and with water is mentioned in the previous verse, also the previous chapter.<sup>32</sup>

occur in prose.

<sup>30</sup> Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis*, 332.

<sup>31</sup> Seen as a betrothal type scene by Robert Alter, *Genesis*, (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 115. Genesis 24 is the most elaborated of those scenes in the Hebrew Bible. The girl has an archetypal look. (See also Wenham, *Genesis*, 144)

<sup>32</sup> The article of Mansour, which brings together eyes and water with-

Striking is the resemblance between these two words, *מרת* and *מראת* both on the visual and aural level. The minimal difference brings together bitterness and hardship with blindness. Rashi noticed this link as well, as he writes that Isaac's eyes were too dim to see “בעשנן של אלו (שהיו מעשנות ומקטירות לע"א)”<sup>33</sup> Ahmad Mansour concludes that “the pungent vapors irritated the old man's eyes, with eventual loss of vision.”<sup>34</sup>

Rashi gives also a second explanation on the same verse referring to Genesis Rabbah 65:10<sup>35</sup>

כשנעקד על גבי במזבח, והיה אביו רוצה לשהטו, באותה שעה  
נפתחו השמים, וראו מלאכי השרת והיו בוכים, וירדו  
דמעותיהם ונפלו על עיניו, לפיכך כהו עיניו

Each of these remarks combines the form similar words *מרת* and *מראת* in an interpretation that makes them semantically related as well.

The use of both the eye, as a metaphor of awareness, and the lack of sight create further ambiguity, alluding to insight and thus a fulfillment of God's plan versus deception<sup>36</sup> and wrong

out emphasizing it as the main point of the contribution, although approached from a medical point of view, draws on biblical and exegetical sources and starts from the language and the text. It is in this article that the link between the eye on the one hand and water as one of the remedies to ocular problems on the other hand is made. (Mansour, “Eye in the Old Testament and Talmud,” 451)

<sup>33</sup> Rashi on Gen 27:1 “because of the smoke of these [the wives of Esau], who would be burning incense in service for their idols. Cf. *Tanhuma, Toldot*, 8; R. Elijah Mizrahi on Gen 27:1.

<sup>34</sup> Mansour, “Eye in the Old Testament and Talmud,” 451.

<sup>35</sup> Rashi on Gen 27:1: When he (Isaac) was bound on the altar, and his father was about to slaughter him, on that very moment the heavens opened, and the ministering angels saw and wept, and their tears fell down, they fell upon his (Isaac's) eyes. As a result, his eyes are like this. See also Genesis Rabbah 65:10.

<sup>36</sup> Support for this reading can be found in Sarna, *Genesis*, 190; Wenham, *Genesis*, 205; Jacob, *First Book of the Bible*, 178; J. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Assen/Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1975), 101.

judgment equaling deviation from that same plan.<sup>37</sup> Several other literary techniques add to this double polysemy.<sup>38</sup>

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The appearance and use of the word עין in the chapters 17 to 35 of the book of Genesis reveal an example of polysemy carried to extremes. The word is played upon on every level of the story from its specific sentences to its broader narrative level. The ambiguity is highlighted by other literary devices and a repetition of the word, as to make sure that the audience will not overlook its importance.

As such every עין in the Isaac stories is a wink to the reader, inviting him to see or not to see the multiple readings, the narratological texture, and the red flagged themes and motives.

---

<sup>37</sup> In the Enoch article of J. Vanderkam the emphasis on sight is actually promoted as it says ‘hearing is deceptive’. Sight is the most reliable sense of all. Without sight therefore there is nothing to be trusted. (J. Vanderkam, “Open and Closed Eyes in the Animal Apocalypse (1 Enoch 85–90),” H. Najman, and J. Newman (eds), *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation. Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* [Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2004], 289) This gives a valuable alternative for the earlier mentioned definition of Isaac as a schlemiel by Kaminsky; see his “Humor and the Theology of Hope,” 367)

<sup>38</sup> *Notarikon*. מרת and מראת; parallelism between verse 35 and verse 1 from ותכהין on; *polyptoton* of בין.