

3. Linguistic evidences from the books of Moses support a numerical interpretation of the Hebrew word *elef* and *elefim* as evidenced by first seeking the non-theological interpretation of the word and then applying that same practice to the problem passages.
 - a. Certain limitations must be advanced in a linguistic study of *elef*, namely a separation of the second and third homonyms and limiting the scope of the study to the books of Moses, as these are primarily the books in question.

The strength of a linguistic study can be evidenced first by the many scholars who question the meaning of *elef* and second by those who have surmised alternative interpretations for the word. That being said, a proper interpretation of any one word within the biblical languages must be carefully dissected within the strict philological framework of that given language all the while maintaining strict lexicological principles. There are certain guidelines that we must follow, or else we may find ourselves saying anything without boundary – we do not want to say *too much* or stretch the word beyond its own inherent limits.

Two such guidelines will be discussed below and are found in the form of limitations. The first of these limitations that we must set stems from an understanding of the homonymous nature of the word in question, and therefore, after discussion, we will limit our research to *elef* II and *elef* III, and look none at all at *elef* I. The second limitation that we will set is to limit the scope of our research concerning *elef* II and *elef* III to the Pentateuch, as some have argued for a different meaning within these earlier books that has been lost in later writings.

Beginning with the second limitation, we really do not need to debate the point too deeply, for it is a common practice already within biblical scholarship to speak of certain

“dialect” words or phrases. As a matter of fact, one such argument concerning *elef* (mentioned above) is that the author meant something other than what the word later became to mean, and that we must attempt to decipher that earlier meaning in the problem passages containing large numbers of Hebrews. It only seems to make good sense, therefore, to limit our study of the word’s uses to the Pentateuch where the “original” problem passages occur.

This must, then, lead us into an understanding of the difference between a diachronic and a synchronic etymological study, or what Silva refers to as the two sciences of language.

Diachronic is that of the evolving nature of all languages, and is concerned with the meaning or value of a word through time; it is here that many linguists mistakenly make their arguments for the meaning a word in question – assuming that the “original” meaning of a word must always carry through later meanings of its derivatives.¹ It must be understood, though, that a speaker is not aware of the later definition of a word or even the previous definition. Instead, the speaker is only aware of the synchronic or static value of the word in which he uses. In our case, the author understood the value of the signifier *elef* in a certain, and perhaps exact, way. Our job as linguists/interpreters is to diachronically move back in time to the synchronic/static moment of the author’s time period in order to understand what the author signified by *his* use of the word *elef*. This meaning may or may not have changed afterward and in later texts, and it may or may not have been the same as what was signified before the author’s time, but none of this is of importance to us. We need only learn how *the author* used the word, and to do that we need to examine his usage completely and in context.

¹ This is not to negate the value of an etymological study, just to tell us that: “Etymology tells us nothing about the things, nor even about the present meaning of a word, but only about the way in which a word has come into existence. At best, it tells us not what *is true* but what *has been true*” (Jespersen, 1922, p. 316).

Concerning the homonymous nature of *elef*, we must look a little deeper, and in fact, the lexicons give us a great beginning. For example, Gesenius' lexicon gives us a verb with four senses, a noun with four senses, and a mutilated four-radical word with four senses. Following the long standard approach of accepting the 3rd person singular Perfect *Qal* as the stem, and then allowing that the meaning of all other forms of the verb and in fact nouns to be derived from this stem,² we find that there are in fact two seemingly unrelated stems with the word *elef*. One denoting a tameness and the other a joining together – remember, though, before we proceed, that this diachronic look does nothing for our understanding of the author's static value, it merely limits us and helps us not to say too much.

HALOT gives us even more detail and helps to decipher Gesenius' entries. Beginning with the verb, אלה, there appears to be two basic understandings, the first being a kind of familiarity (being accustomed to something). From this basic idea, we have as Gesenius distinguishes the verb I אלה (to accustom oneself), but also II אלה (to tame, particularly of beasts) and III אלה (to learn – i.e., to become accustomed to something). HALOT, on the other hand, brings these three into one homonym – I אלה. The second of HALOT's homonyms is agreed upon by both HALOT and Gesenius as a denominative of our noun, II אלה ("thousand"). Since we are looking from verb to noun and not noun to verb, this stem helps little. Gesenius gives us a hint as to the origin of our word when he lists II אלה as being derived from an unused verb in Hebrew, but with cognates in Arabic, meaning "to join together, to associate," and thus Gesenius' IV אלה. BDB confirms this, and TWOT goes even farther listing as its cognates words

² I do not wish to argue for this method, nor do I wish to argue against this method. I merely follow suit with so many who already use this method as a reference point. As will be seen shortly, this method fails when a stem is found in a cognate language rather than the language of its derivatives.

with the basic meaning of “thousand” in Aramaic, Arabic, and Ugaritic.³ We find, then, through use of cognate languages the basic idea of “thousand” brings us to our II אָלָף (thousand), and then to the denominative verb found only once in the Old Testament in the *hiphil*, HALOT’s II אָלַף, “to produce by the thousand.”⁴

Please allow me to begin now to use only HALOT’s entries (with one exception) so as to limit the confusion. I אָלַף and II אָלַף should be seen as two completely separate homonym verbs, and therefore we can easily set aside I אָלַף and all nouns that have been derived from that stem: namely I אָלָף (ox or steer; a certain animal that has been tamed or has become accustomed to people) and even I אֱלֹוֹף (“pet” or “close friend”). What remains for us now is to determine the value of II אָלָף and III אָלָף,⁵ both of which can be understood to have been derived from Gesenius’ IV אָלַף (from this point forward marked G IV אָלַף to avoid confusion; I must refer back to Gesenius’ list and mention of the cognate, here, since HALOT only lists the denominative verb).⁶

³ Note Gordon’s Ugaritic Handbook (1948) also confirms *alp* II as “thousand” and *alp* I as “ox,” just as in Hebrew.

⁴ Of course, we need to pause at this point to reflect on the fact that the formation of the *hiphil* in a Hebrew verb, according to Barr, is in itself a new formation semantically and, therefore, its value has to be determined for itself. This formation of a “new” word is a reflection of how languages evolve and shift in meaning.

⁵ II אֱלֹוֹף is also a derivative of II אָלָף and means, basically, “chief of a thousand”; the value of this word can somewhat be joined with an understanding of III אָלָף, particularly its *lexicological separation* from II אָלָף in our study.

⁶ It should be noted that a deeper study into the etymology of this word might, in fact, reveal a relationship between these two stems. It has been suggested that the progression could have followed as ox > herd > thousand, thus allowing for some connection between stems. Whether that is the case or not does not conflict with our study, as our study is centered at a later point in time and is limited synchronically with the language within early biblical history. To establish this further, Barr tells us that a “moment’s thought [...] should indicate that the ‘meaning’ of a ‘root’ is not necessarily part of the meaning of a derived form. Still less can it be assumed that the two words having the same root suggest or evoke one another” (2004, p. 102).

Of special interest to our study is the fact that III אֶלֶף and II אֶלֶף, according to HALOT, are both derived from the noun II אֶלֶף, and both still contain some aspect of the numeral “thousand”: II אֶלֶף meaning “to produce by the thousand” and III אֶלֶף meaning a “group of a thousand.” The value of III אֶלֶף is key to our study, as some assume to diachronically transfer the meaning of III אֶלֶף back to II אֶלֶף in certain critical passages, namely Numbers 1:46 and 26:51. Even if this were possible, the very nature of III אֶלֶף, according to HALOT, BDB, and TWOT, is that of a relation to “thousand.” It is true that in certain later passages the context around III אֶלֶף gives the idea of a “clan” or “tribe” almost exclusively, particularly the later Isaiah 60:22, but this still is not at the total loss of the idea of the division of a “thousand.” Even the earlier Numbers 10:4 (within our framework of study), which appears to be understood as the “divisions of Israel,” is reminiscent of the II אֶלֶף’s divisions of 1,000s which are juxtaposed with 100s, 50s, and 10s – quite ordinary numbers.

While these words are obviously diachronically related, and sometimes closely related, they are still, synchronically, two separate homonyms – even at this early point. Even though the author used both words, we are hard pressed if we attempt to transfer the value of one word⁷ to the other. In fact, by doing so we violate the very nature of the language in static form, and we place upon the author an understanding that *might* not have been his own⁸. The only way to truly determine the value of each is to study each separately (beginning with the non-critical or

⁷ I use the thought idea “word” here on purpose, for a homonym can truly be said to be a completely different word synchronically.

⁸ My point here is simply to show that the meaning of a word must be understood from its usage and not from its derivation. Thus, through usage, we are able to differentiate shifts in etymological “meaning.” Therefore, a word has the possibility of becoming a completely new word over time if used that way. In fact, both “words” can even be used in their respective ways at the same time. We find examples of these in English frequently including words such as “mad” or even to a point “gay.” The difference in meaning of these sometimes identical words can only be seen by properly dissecting the context in which they occur – thus the purpose of this study.

common usages) and in the idialect context provided to us. Only then can we truly begin to understand the key critical passages and be able to solve the riddle.