Scarlet and Harlots: Seeing Red in the Hebrew Bible

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In this contribution, I offer a semiotic study of seven terms for the color red in the Hebrew Bible. I contend that such an approach allows us to recognize that the terms convey far more than mere hues in that they appear in texts that cluster references to stigmatized sexual behavior and blood and/or that involve implicitly bloody contexts. I first examine eleven texts in which the cluster appears, and then sixteen more that employ the cluster in more subtle ways. Afterwards, I offer an explanation for the cluster by examining the sympathetic and performative aspects of color in the wider Near East – specifically, how red, as the color of blood, encodes notions of protection, fertility, and defilement. Finally, I demonstrate how recognizing this code sheds light on a number of other biblical texts.

Scholars of the ancient Near East have long held an interest in the subject of color. Long ago, Hermann Kees, Roland L. Gradwohl, Wolfdietrich Fischer, and Benno Landsberger set the course for future research by defining color terms with precision and by demonstrating that color is more than an aesthetic category.¹ Since these seminal works, there has emerged an entire field of study concerned with the semiotics of colors. Shaped by research primarily in sociology, psychology, and design, this field of inquiry has helped us to appreciate both the innate and socially determined ways that colors encode meaning in different cultures.² It is the work of the semiotician to ascertain what sorts of associations colors conjure.


Typically, semioticians divide signs into three categories: symbolic, iconic, and indexical. Symbolic signs generate meaning through conventions, like language; iconic signs employ visual representations, and indexical signs refer to origins by way of a direct material connection. To use blood as an example, the categories might include the word “blood” (symbolic), a photograph of blood (iconic), or a stain made by blood (indexical). Moreover, regardless of the category, signifiers may convey an entire host of associations. Thus, the signifier “red” can communicate caution, injury, evil, violence, murder, wine, money, or even good luck, depending on the culture in which one finds it. By necessity, the semiotic study of color terms in the Hebrew Bible is limited to “symbolic” signs. The approach employed herein differs from previous studies on color in that it is interested not in the exact hue represented by each term, but in the meanings and associations the symbolic sign “red” might conjure in Israelite culture. For example, while the אָדֹם, “stew,” (lit. “red stuff”) that Esau ate (Gen 25:30) likely would have been on the browner side of red, this does not negate the term’s semiotic ability to evoke “red” and all that “redness” conjures semiotically in a literary context. Indeed, though אָדֹם is a general term that Israelites used to refer to a continuum of hues from brown to red to pink, its exact hue matters little for this study since the term for the stew conveys the same semiotic information as the signifier “red.”

The study of color in the ancient Near East has by no means stagnated


since the works of the aforementioned scholars, though advances have come primarily from archaeologists, anthropologists, and art historians working in Egyptology and Assyriology, who have had the advantage of working with colorful artistic remains. The study of colors in the Hebrew Bible also has benefitted from several important studies, but they too have not considered color terms from a semiotic perspective.


With this in mind, I should like to examine biblical references to the color “red” (דָּוִד “red,” מָסָים “carmine,” חוּם “burgundy,” כָּרְמִיל “dark-red,” פּוּצֶ “puce,” אָדוֹם “scarlet,” חָמַץ “carmine,” חָמַר “burgundy,” שָׂרַק “dark-red,” שָׁשַׁר “puce,” שָׁנִי “scarlet,” תּוֹלֵעָה “crimson,” and כַּרְמִיל “vermilion”). Semantically speaking, together these terms constitute the Macro Category for the Basic Color Term “red.” Individually, each is a hyponym of “red.” As I aim to demonstrate, these symbolic signs convey far more than hues in that they index literary contexts involving stigmatized sexual behavior. Moreover, these same texts often include references to blood and/or involve implicitly bloody contexts.

Of course, one can find examples in modern Western cultures of red evoking forbidden sex, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s classic 1850 novel, The Scarlet Letter, and numerous “red-light” districts. Yet, one cannot use these examples to assert the existence of a “universal” association, because the semiotics of color in the medieval to modern Jewish tradition are variably different from those found in the Western world. Therefore, red is not a ‘universal’ association. Of course, the ancient Near Eastern concept of the color red — understood as a biological phenomenon — is not a different conversation than that of the modern Western world.

Brenner, Colour Terms in the Old Testament, 33, rejects Gradwohl’s grouping of all similar colors together and instead opts to treat the primary terms for color first and the secondary and tertiary terms separately. I have followed Gradwohl’s approach, because I am interested in the semiotic of redness, i.e., what the term “red” might convey beyond color, and not in the precise hue of a given color term. My translations for the various terms denoting “red” merely aim to differentiate them. Unlike Brenner (pp. 130–31), I have not included the term חַכְלִילִי and its derivatives, as it denotes darkness, not redness. See similarly, John Hartley, The Semantics of Ancient Hebrew Colour Lexemes, 177–81. It occurs in Gen 49:12 and Prov 23:29 to describe the eyes of someone drunk on wine, but it is never used of wine. In the former passage it parallels לבן “white,” suggesting it is the opposite of white. The Akkadian cognate ekēlu, “be dark” and Arabic cognate كلحـ, “confused, impeded” are insightful. See CAD E 64, s.v. ekēlu; Edward William Lane, Arabic–English Lexicon, vol. 2 (Beirut: Librarie du Liban, 1968), 616, s.v. كلحـ. Also unlike Brenner (pp. 145–48), I do not include the terms חַלַּשׁ, “blue,” or אַרְגָּמָ, “purple,” as they are distinguished from terms for “red” (e.g., Exod 25:4). See also 1Q Temple Scroll 10:12, which records the odd amalgam אַרְגָּמָ אֵדָם ”purple-red” or “purple (and) red” (?).


On sexual relationships in ancient Israel that deviate from normative social boundaries (e.g., adultery, bestiality, gender-bending, incest, sexual coercion, and prostitution), I have found especially useful Athalya Brenner, The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Love, Desire and ‘Sexuality’ in the Hebrew Bible (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 90–152.
are culture specific, even if borrowed. My two examples bear this out. The use of red in *The Scarlet Letter* derives from Puritan anti-Catholic interpretations of the whore of Babylon who sits clothed in scarlet in Revelation 17:3–4, and red-light districts have their origins in China, where brothels hung red silk lamps outside their doors (also as signs of good luck).

So too is it with red and blood. Though again one might think of this identification as a cultural “universal,” the symbolic sign “red” requires a precise collection of other signs that allow us to interpret it as blood. Moreover, the word “blood” also is a symbolic sign, and thus, it too can signify different things in different cultures, and even within the same culture. In a medical context, blood might signify one’s type, whereas elsewhere it might signify kin relations. Thus, to understand why biblical writers felt compelled to “cluster” terms for red with stigmatized sexual behavior and blood in a single literary context, we must look within ancient Israel’s own semiotic system.

I divide my presentation of the biblical evidence into four sections. In the first, I examine eleven texts in which the cluster appears. In the second, I turn to sixteen texts that employ the cluster in more subtle ways. In the third, I offer an explanation for the cluster by examining the sympathetic and performative aspects of color in the ancient Near East; specifically, how red, as the color of blood, encodes notions of protection, fertility, and defilement. In the fourth and final section, I demonstrate how recognizing this code sheds light on a number of biblical texts.

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13 The way in which the texts combine the three is reminiscent of the clustering device first noted by Jonas C. Greenfield, “The Cluster in Biblical Poetry,” *MAARAV* 55–56 (1990): 159–68: “In the ‘cluster’ the Biblical writer draws from the poetical resources available to him a number of word pairs and standard epithets and uses them to construct a complex poetic structure, or to set the background framework of the material that he is presenting” (160–61). My adoption of his term represents a slight extension of his usage.

Literary Clusters: Red, Stigmatized Sexual Behavior, and Blood

1. GENESIS 38

We first find the cluster in the story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38). After disguising herself as a זונה, “prostitute,” (38:15) and duping Judah into performing his levirate duty (38:15–22), Tamar successfully becomes pregnant and gives birth to twins.15 The auspicious moment of their births is observed when one of the infants extends his hand from the womb and the midwife binds something שאני, “scarlet,” (presumably a thread) around his hand to mark him as the firstborn.16 However, the child, Zerah, withdraws his hand, and eventually

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15 A number of scholars have argued that there is little evidence for “sacred prostitution” in the Near East and that non-cultic prostitution was an accepted, albeit marginalized and stigmatized profession. My not including the term קדשה here (38:21–22) is an attempt to avoid that pitfall, though I recognize that the root of the word implies “sacredness.” In addition, Phyllis Bird (see this note, below), has shown that זונה, usually translated “prostitute,” also can refer to stigmatized sex generally, including adultery. Thus, I have avoided the word “prostitute” for this term unless it refers to the profession. See, e.g., Joan Goodnick Westenholz, “Tamar, Qĕdēšā, Qadištu, and Sacred Prostitution in Mesopotamia,” Harvard Theological Review 82 (1989): 245–65; Martha T. Roth, “Marriage, Divorce, and the Prostitute in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World, ed. Christopher A. Faraone and Laura K. McClure (Madison: University of Wisconsin University Press, 2006), 21–39; Phyllis A. Bird, “Prostitution in the Social World and Religious Rhetoric of Ancient Israel,” in Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World, 40–58; Stephanie Budin, The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Karin Adams, “Metaphor and Dissonance: A Reinterpretation of Hosea 4:13–14,” JBL 127 (2008): 291–305, especially 293–94, nn. 4–7, for a useful bibliography. For an alternative way of explaining the terms, see Karel van der Toorn, “Female Prostitution in Payment of Vows in Ancient Israel,” JBL 108 (1989): 193–205. With Genesis 38 in mind, I also note that some relationship appears to have existed between the qadištu and midwives in Mesopotamia, as the Atra-ḫasi Epic makes clear. After creating the first human, the mother goddess Nintu declares: “I have created, my hands have made it. Let the midwife rejoice in the qadištu’s house” (I 289–90). See also M. Stol, Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting. Cuneiform Monographs 14 (Groningen: Styx Publications, 2000), 172–73.

16 Cf. b. Gittin 69b, which offers several remedies for passing gallstones, one of which requires taking a scarlet thread (חתות דזהוריתא) that has been spun by a woman of ill repute (דומית) or her daughter and hanging it on the man’s penis or a woman’s breasts. The Tosefta, Shabbat 7:1, forbids tying a red thread to one’s finger, because it belongs to “the ways of the Amorites,” i.e., the gentiles of the Graeco-Roman world. On the custom, see Heinrich Lewy, “Morgenländischer Aberglaube in Der römischen Kaiserzeit,” Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde 3 (1893): 23–40, 130–44, 238; A. Marmorstein, “Comparisons between Greek and Jewish Religious Customs and Popular Usages,” in Occident and Orient: Being Studies in Semitic Philology and Literature, Jewish History and Philosophy and Folklore in the Widest Sense, in Honor of Haham Dr. M. Gaster’s 80th Birthday. Gaster Anniversary Volume, ed. Bruno Schindler (London: Taylor’s Foreign Press, 1936), 409–23. This custom persisted into more recent times usually as a talisman against the evil eye or bad luck. See Michele Klein, A Time to Be Born: Customs and Folklore of Jewish Birth
appears second (38:27–30). The thread’s color was significant to the author, since presumably a thread of any color could have served the same purpose. Yet, what is its significance? It does not appear to be common to midwifery as it does not mark the birth of the twin Esau or firstborns elsewhere in the ancient Near East. Further, as many biblical passages testify, scarlet cloth was an expensive luxury item, and thus an unlikely material for use during parturition. Thus, while the cord itself marked the firstborn, its color must have held other significance to the author. Indeed, the context of birthing implicitly suggests blood, which would render the thread’s color somewhat illegible as a semiotic sign. Finally, I note that the name Zerah derives from an Aramaic root meaning “scarlet.” Thus, the author has integrated into a single literary context the cluster: red, stigmatized sexual behavior (here prostitution), and blood.

2. JOSHUA 2

We next find the cluster in the account of the prostitute, Rahab, who binds a “cord of scarlet” ( חוּט הַשָּׁנִי ) to her window as a sign of her oath (Josh 2:18, 2:21). Here again the color would appear significant, though the cord’s conspicuous placement in the window suggests that a cloth of any color would have served equally well as a signal. In addition, the spies’ deictic reference to the cord, i.e., “bind this chord of scarlet thread in the window” (2:18), indicates that it already was in Rahab’s possession, and was not an item they had brought with them. Therefore, it appears to be connected with Rahab’s occupation. If we


17 See the comment of Stol, Birth in Babylonia and the Bible, 135: “There is no obvious connection between ‘scarlet’ (thread)’ (šānī) and the name Zerah and we do not know what the author of Genesis 38 meant.”

18 Cf. Ezek 16:6, in which the prophet describes the infant Jerusalem as kicking about in its blood.

19 For discussions of this color and its reflection as both קדrosis and תֵּחֶר, see Gradwohl, Die Farben im Alten Testament, 73–78; Fischer, Farb- und Formbezeichnung in der Sprache der altarabischen Dichtung, 249–52; Landsberger, “Über Farben im Sumerisch-Akkadischen,” 161. F. Zimmern, “The Birth of Perez and Zerah,” JBL 64 (1945): 377–78, suggests the influence of eastern Aramaic on this text, in which צְהוֹר means “scarlet.” Note also the Akkadian cognate, inzaḫurētu, “red dye, red wool,” likely a loan from Aramaic. CAD I 163, s.v. inzaḫurētu.


may see the scarlet cord as belonging to the accoutrements of Rahab’s trade, then its appearance in the account of Tamar’s accouchement, a text in which she disguises herself as a prostitute, must have shared significance. Indeed, the connection between the two texts was not lost on later Jewish exegetes, who opined that Rahab received the scarlet cord from Zerah. Moreover, the two narratives share a context of inversion. In Genesis 38, the order of the infants is inverted. In the story of Rahab, the author transforms the scarlet cord from

“dyed cloth,” and thus, cognate with the Akkadian šiniṭu (CAD §/3 47, s.v. šiniṭu A). He then compares it to cloth banners posted by ancient Arab women in polyandric relationships to mark them as “occupied” with their other husband (as discussed in Thomas Achelis, Die Entwicklung der Ehe. Beiträge zur Volks- und Völlerkunde 2 [Felber: Berlin, 1903], 30; S. Krauss, “Klassenabzeichen im alten Israel,” ZDMG 80 [1926]: 1–23). He also provides evidence for the use of cloth banners by prostitutes, citing Ibn Rosteh, Kitāb al ḍālak an naﬁsa. Vol. 7, p. 107, 10–11 (= M. J. de Goeje, ed., Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum, vol. 7 [Lugduni Batavorum: E. J. Brill, 1892]). Indeed, Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum, vol. 8 (1894), p. xxii, defines راية (i.e., “meretrix”) and adds the Arabic phrase ذات راية, i.e., “one possessing a cloth.” The Latin portion of the entry states that the cloth also marked taverns and veterinarians. According to Lane, Arabic–English Lexicon, vol. 3, 998–1002, the root راية relates to “seeing” and can refer euphemistically both to women who “see” blood on their menstrual cloths and to the stained cloth itself (i.e., “that which is seen”). The Ibn Rosteh text glosses the name Zarnab Dāt Rāya, who was a wet nurse/concubine to Khalīd b. Abd Allah b. Asad b. Kurz, by alluding to the meaning of her name: “one possessing a cloth.” While this comparative data is compelling, the reading “scarlet” for השניא is preferred by all the ancient witnesses: LXX κόκκινον, Targum Jonathan נזוזיתא, Vulgate coccineus. Josephus, Antiquities v 5, too, translates with φοινικίδας, “red cloth.” It also is possible that the Akkadian term šiniṭu refers to red-dyed cloth, as the term can refer to daubing a home with wet clay. Ḥḫ XIX 210 also lists TŪG.A.GI4.A = širpu after TŪG.A.GI4.A = šibutum, šiniṭum. Since širpu means “red dyed wool,” it is possible that šibutum and šiniṭum do as well. CAD § 208, s.v. širpu. Unfortunately, the traditions adduced by Achelis and Krauss, as well as the work of Ibn Rosteh, say nothing about the cloth’s color. Others have likened Rahab’s scarlet thread to the account in Herodotus, Histories, 1.199.2, in which women wear garlands of string (Θώμιγγος) on their heads to attract strangers for sex; a text adopted with variations by Strabo, Geography, xvi.1.20. However, neither Herodotus nor Strabo relates the string’s color. In fact, the word Θώμιγγος can be used of a bow-string (Aeschylus, Persians, 461; Eumenides, 182) or fishing line (Oppian, Halieutica, 3.76). The Letter of Jeremiah 6:43, also refers to women wearing cords: “The women also with cords (σχοινίον) about them, sitting in the ways, burn bran for perfume: but if any of them, drawn by some that passeth by, lie with him, she reproacheth her fellow, that she was not thought as worthy as herself, nor her cord broken.” Again there is no color reference, and it is unclear if the cord was wrapped around the head or elsewhere. Therefore, there is no comparative justification for seeing Rahab’s scarlet cord either as a banner marking her trade or as an item of apparel.

22 See Midrash HaGadol Bereshit, Haye Sara, 231. Rashi also relates the passage to the Book of Joshua (Josh 7:2), but observes that the word “hands” appears four times in this pericope to signify four items that Achan (the descendant of Zerah) took as spoil, including a Babylonian garment, two pieces of silver weighing two hundred shekels, and a wedge of gold. This is based on Bereshit Rabbah 85:14.
Scarlet and Harlots: Seeing Red in the Hebrew Bible

As such, it serves much like the window, which itself is an object charged with sexual import when associated with a woman, but here serves as a portal of salvation.

Moreover, the two tales not only share a context of prostitution and scarlet, they involve blood. In the Tamar episode, blood is implicit in the act of birthing. In the Rahab story, the spies underscore the terms of the oath by qualifying that if any one of Rahab’s kin were to go out into the street, that דָּמוֹ בְרֹאשׁוֹ “his blood would be on his (own) head” (Josh 2:19).

3. 1 Kings 22

The deep associations of the sanguine color also inform the account of Ahab’s death. According to 1 Kings 22:35, Ahab was mortally wounded by an archer while disguised in his chariot, and the blood from his wound spilled into the vehicle’s casing. The people then brought the bloodied chariot to a pool in Samaria to clean it, and it was there that דָּמוֹ בְרֹאשׁוֹ “the dogs licked up his blood and the prostitutes bathed” (22:38). Since the term “dog” is an epithet elsewhere given to the קָדֵשׁ, “male prostitute” (Deut 23:18–19), the passage has added allusive power. Indeed, the narrator soon informs us that Jehoshaphat rid Judah of the קָדֵשׁ and adds that there was no king in אוֹדָם, “Edom” (22:47–48), thus concluding the bloody scene by evoking the color אָדֹם, “red.”

4. Isaiah 1

The association of scarlet and prostitution also occurs in Isaiah 1:18–23, in which the prophet describes Zion as a זֹנָה, “prostitute,” (1:21) whose sins he likens to those of the rulers of Sodom and the people of Gomorrah (1:10). He even explains her apostasy in terms that evoke her profession. Thus, he states that righteousness once lodged in her (rather than clients) (1:21), and

23 Indeed, the hope is signaled by the expression תִּקְוַת חוּט הַשָּׁנִי, “cord of scarlet thread,” since תִּקְוָה also means “hope.” The dual meaning was espied by the author of 1 Clement 12. See A. T. Hanson, “Rahab the Harlot in Early Christian Tradition,” Journal for the Study of the New Testament 1 (1978): 53–60.


25 Brenner, Colour Terms in the Old Testament, 158, relates the toponyms Edom and אֲדֻמִּים (Josh 15:7, 18:17) to אדֹם, “red.” However, she connects the toponyms הַקָּדֵשׁ (Gen 14:2), קָדֵשׁ (Josh 19:36), and בֹּקֶק (Josh 19:33), to the word קָדֵשׁ, “soil.” Regardless of the etymologies, all the names semiotically connote “red” and/or “red-soil.” I discuss this further below.
Scott B. Noegel

he spices his harangue with images of silver (1:22), mixed-wine (1:22), princes (1:23), companions (1:23), and the loaded words אָהַב, “love,” רֹדֵף, “pursuer,” and שַׁלְמֹנִים, “payments” (1:23).26 The mention of סֹבֶא, “mixed-wine,” is of special note. As the דָּם עֲנָבִים, “blood of grapes,” wine conjures burgundy notions of both red and blood.27

Despite the prostitute’s transgressions, Yahweh declares: “though your sins are like scarlet (תִּלְבֹּשְׂתָה), they will become white as snow, though they are red as crimson (עֲרַיִם תֹּלְדָת), they shall be like wool” (1:18).28 The Targum’s rendering of שָׁנִים with כְּתִים, “blood-stained,” demonstrates that the color evokes blood in this context. Completing the cluster is Isaiah’s pronouncement that Zion’s hands are דָּמִים מָלֵאו, “full of blood” (1:15).

5. JEREMIAH 4

The prophet Jeremiah similarly castigates Jerusalem by asking:

“Why do you clothe yourself in scarlet (תִּלְבֹּשְׂתָה) and adorn (yourself with) adornments of gold? Why do you render your eyes with kohl? You beautify yourself for nothing. Your lovers (עֹגְבִים) despise you. They seek your life” (Jer 4:30).

Though he does not use the word “prostitute,” his plural use of the sexually charged term עֹגְבִים, “lovers,” and his listing of fine adornments establishes a context of promiscuity.29 In addition, he concludes the prophecy immediately afterwards by describing Jerusalem as a woman giving birth, which again creates a literary context involving blood: “I hear a cry like a woman in labor, vexed as if delivering her first child – the cry of the Daughter Zion groaning,

26 Harlots are said to pursue (רָדַף) their lovers in Hos 2:9.

27 In Gen 49:11 Jer, “wine,” parallels דָּם עֲנָבִים, “the blood of grapes.” See also Deut 32:14, Sir 39:26, and CAT 1.4 iv 38, in which the Ugaritic phrase dmʿsm, “the blood of vines,” parallels yn, “wine”; for “tree resin” as “blood” in Akkadian, see CAD D 79, s.v. damu. For the color of wine, see Prov 23:31: “Do not look at wine (יָיִן), indeed it is red (דָּם)”.

28 The early rabbis understood the Isaiah passage to refer to קָשֶׁר לְשׁוֹן של חָדָעִית בְּרֵאשׁ בָּעְרֵי תָּפֵלְתִים, “a strip of scarlet cloth (that) was tied to the head of the scapegoat and sent (into the wilderness)” as a sin offering on Yom Kippur (Mishnah Yoma 4:2). In Mishnah Yoma 6:8, R. Ishmael relates that “a strip of scarlet cloth that had been tied to the sanctuary door turned white when the goat reached the wilderness.” When the cloth turned white, it signified that the peoples’ sins had been forgiven. y. Shabbat 9:3 states that, prior to this, a scarlet cloth was placed on the window of everyone’s home and God meted his judgments individually. However, when many failed the test and were embarrassed, the people used just one cloth and attached it to the temple door. Shir HaShirim Rabbah 48:9 links the scarlet thread to which the lovers lips are likened in Song 4:3 to the scarlet cloth tied to the scapegoat. There is no reference to this cloth in the Bible.

29 On the jewelry of harlots, see also Hos 2:15. On this term, see Brenner, The Intercourse of Knowledge, 27–28.