

This paper was written for an International Conference with the title “Neighborliness in Global Perspective” held at Erfurt, Germany, February 12-14, 2019. It was updated in March 2020 for publication in a conference volume. However, the publication process was severely delayed and is still not complete (as of August 2022).

“Love Your Neighbor” – “I am a Horror to My Neighbors”

Differing Concepts of Neighborliness in the Hebrew Bible – A Terminological and Theological Overview

Abstract: The English term “neighbor” relates to at least two different concepts for which the Biblical Hebrew (and other languages like German and French) use different terms. This paper illustrates these concepts of “neighborliness” with two terms from the Hebrew Bible: *rēa* (German: “Nächster, Freund”) and *šākēn* (German: “Nachbar, Bewohner”). Regarding the term *rēa*, the paper focuses on the command to love one’s neighbor in Leviticus 19:17–18, since the synonyms in the immediate context contribute significantly to the semantic spectrum. There are also some brief remarks on the Greek term *πλησίον* in the Septuagint and the New Testament. The term *šākēn* offers important insights into the concept of neighborliness and the socio-historically relevant structure of society behind the biblical texts. The *šākēn* stands for a mere partnership of convenience, comments one’s fate in praise or, more often, reproach, and functions as metaphor or within merisms. Brief remarks on the Greek term *γείτων* in the Septuagint and the New Testament are included. Finally, the paper presents the Hebrew Bible’s proposal for neighborly cohabitation that successfully masters everyday life and ensures the cohesion of society: The *šākēn* must become a *rēa*.

1 Introduction: Semantic Concepts

The English term “neighbor” covers a large semantic range, as the juxtaposition of two verses from the Bible shows: “you shall love your *neighbor* as yourself” (NRSV),¹ the famous commandment from Leviticus 19:18, on the one hand, and the individual lament in Psalm 31:12 (Eng. 11) on the other: “I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my *neighbors*”. The Biblical Hebrew (as the German, by the way) uses different terms for both *neighbors*. Thus, one can correlate the idea of “neighborliness” to two differing, however overlapping, semantic concepts in the Hebrew Bible. The overlapping aspect can be termed as “closeness” (to varying degrees): One notes a spatial nearness between the one party (e.g., the speaker, the subject) and the other (the neighbor as the object). This closeness, however, does not automatically generate a close relationship. Various circumstances trigger at least two divergent concepts: The neighbor can be an object in need that requires some kind of attention, help, or even love by the subject on the one hand – and on the other hand, “neighbor” can refer to one or several persons nearby who take friendly or hostile actions or even no actions at all towards the subject.

In this paper, I want to illustrate these different concepts of “neighborliness” with the help of two terms from the Hebrew Bible: *rēa* ‘ (German: “Nächster, Freund”) and *šākēn* (German: “Nachbar, Bewohner”). Regarding the term *rēa* ‘, I focus on the command to love one’s neighbor in Leviticus 19:17–18, since the synonyms in the immediate context contribute significantly to the semantic spectrum. The term *šākēn* offers important insights into the concept of neighborliness and the socio-historically relevant structure of society behind the biblical texts. Why does that matter at all? In his 1980 dissertation, Ronald Lee Cook writes in the preface: “The quality of a person’s life receives its most thorough test in relationships with neighbors. In that interpersonal arena of life values and convictions are examined daily”².

¹ Quotations from the Bible follow the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

² R.L. Cook, *Neighbor Concept* (1980), x.

2 The Neighbor as an Object/in Need – Love Your Neighbor

2.1 The Command to Love One’s Neighbor – Synonyms in Lev 19:17–18

The famous command to “love one’s neighbor” uses the Hebrew term *rēa* ‘, “friend, companion, lover, darling, neighbor, fellow” (DCH).³ The immediate context offers three synonyms that help to encompass the semantic field in question. Leviticus 19:17–18 reads:⁴

| | |
|--|---|
| 17 a You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin (<i>’āḥ</i> , lit. “brother”) | 18 a You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people (<i>bānê</i> <i>’ammekā</i> , lit. “sons of your people”), |
| b you shall reprove your neighbor (<i>’āmîṭ</i> , lit. “fellow citizen”), | b but you shall love your neighbor as yourself (<i>rēa</i> ‘, see above): |
| c or you will incur guilt yourself. | c I am the LORD. (NRSV) |

The four aspects (17ab, 18ab) all point in the same direction: They command positive and prohibit negative actions towards persons that are spatially closely related. It would make no sense to assume that the four terms denote four different groups; hence, the most natural

³ See also M. Fagenblat, *Concept* (2011), 541: “The full range of the Tanakh’s *rea*, ‘neighbor,’ is remarkably wide, like the English ‘fellow.’ It can designate any human being (Gen 11.3) or denote a person with whom one has an intimate relationship such as a friend (e.g., Ex 33.11; 1 Chr 27.33) or a lover (e.g., Hos 3.1; Song 5.16). Often *rea* refers to a person encountered in everyday life: Proverbs 3.29 explains that ‘your *rea*’ is someone who ‘lives trustingly beside you’; in Jeremiah 9.1–5 the prophet berates his people for the widespread deception among neighbors. In Deuteronomy 19.14 and 27.17 *rea* refers to a landowner with whom one shares a boundary. It is therefore not surprising that the term ‘neighbor’ figures prominently in the legal literature of the Tanakh, for neighbors rely on laws to regulate their relationships. In the context of biblical law the term refers to a person with whom one has a legal relationship (e.g., Ex 22.25; Deut 4.42). Here it is perhaps analogous to ‘citizen’ or ‘compatriot.’ This is the case for Leviticus 19.18.”—There are 187 occurrences of the masculine term *rēa* ‘ in the Hebrew Bible. The feminine *rē’ā* designates the female friend and occurs three times (Judges 11:37–38; Ps 45:15). All statistics are taken from the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia SESB 2.0 database in Logos Bible Software.—Both terms (*rēa* ‘ and *rē’ā*) might derive from the root רעה II (*R’Y* II) “associate with” (DCH); however, R.L. Cook, *Neighbor Concept* (1980), 13, advises some caution (see his word study on pp. 14–35). Cook also mentions very rare orthographic variants of *rēa* ‘ (see *ibid.*, 35–38).

⁴ On the following see T. Hieke, *Leviticus 16–27, 728–736*; H.-P. Mathys, *Liebe, passim*.

understanding assumes a variety of four synonyms all expressing the same semantic concept.⁵ The NRSV even translates two of them with the same term “neighbor.” However, the literal meanings of the terms differ slightly, and thus each object contributes a different nuance to this overall concept.

In 17a, the term *’āḥ* literally means “brother” and thus imports the notion of intra-familial solidarity (in an ideal sense). The word *’āmit* in 17b denotes the “fellow citizen” and thus stresses the idea of living together in the same city, town, village, or neighborhood. The *bānē ’ammekā* (“sons of your people”) in 18a import the aspect of the same origin in a genealogical sense: coming from the same people. Finally, the *rēa’* in 18b contributes the notion of “friend, companion.” In sum, the commandments insinuate a positive and prohibit a negative behavior towards persons with whom the addressee shares several aspects: a common origin, a family-like relationship, a common space of living, and thus at least some degree of friendship or comradeship. All in all, this is the putty that holds society together,⁶ and hence it is vital for a functioning civilization that these relationships are not undermined by hidden hatred, vengeance, grudge, false friendliness.⁷ Even if your *rēa’* does not behave accordingly, you shall love him as yourself—as the *ultima ratio*: “Love” in the sense of cooperative loyalty and active solidarity in times of distress⁸ is urgently commended (not necessarily emotional empathy, however).

⁵ See also R.L. Cook, *Neighbor Concept* (1980), 38–49.

⁶ As R.L. Cook, *Neighbor Concept* (1980), 9, puts it: “A few good neighbors can redeem an entire community.”

⁷ As these commandments address an inner habit that precedes the actual deed, they go deeper than the second half of the Decalogue which also addresses the neighbor (*rēa’*) as object. In Exodus 20:16–17 par. Deuteronomy 5:20–21, the neighbor is protected against false witnessing and covetousness against his belongings (and, in a broader sense, also against murder, adultery, and theft, see Exodus 20:13–15 par. Deuteronomy 5:17–19; on the *rēa’* in the Decalogue see, e.g., R.L. Cook, *Neighbor Concept* [1980], 122–128). These important commandments cover a minimum standard of ethical behavior for coexistence within a society; a higher quality of life, however, requires higher ethical standards, and the Holiness Code heads with Leviticus 19 towards this direction.

⁸ For “love” in this practical sense, see Deuteronomy 10:17–19 (emphasis added): “(17) For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, (18) who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and *who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.* (19) You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

2.2 The Alien Becomes One's Neighbor – Lev 19:33–34

Thus far, it sounds quite natural and plausible to demand to love one's fellow, brother, kinsman, any member of one's own people or peer-group. However, in spite of many misunderstandings, the command to "love one's neighbor" is not limited to Israel's in-group only, it is not a *Binnenethik*.⁹ Only a few verses later, the wording of Lev 19:18b reappears with a different term: "(33) When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. (34) The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; *you shall love the alien as yourself*, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God" (Lev 19:33–34). This command prohibits the exploitation of the resident alien (Hebrew: *gēr*) who stems from another nation and does not possess land of his own.¹⁰ As a labor immigrant, the resident alien is reliant on the support of the Israelite land owners who let him work on their fields and provide wages (payment in kind) for him and his family. According to Lev 19:34, this alien obtains the same status as the *rēa'* of 19:18 and thus as the groups denoted by the other terms in 19:17–18. He becomes a "neighbor" in the full sense and gains the same rights as the fellow citizen (Hebrew: *'ezrāh*). "By using the same love language as Leviticus 19.18b, verse 34 equates the love prescribed to one's fellow Israelite with love for the stranger."¹¹ With this somewhat utopian commandment, Leviticus avoids a segregation of the society in different social strata and secures the quasi-familial amalgamation of the members which the commandment to love one's neighbor aimed at.

2.3 *πλησίον* in the Septuagint and the New Testament

The Greek word *ὁ πλησίον* (*plēsion*) is the standard equivalent for the Hebrew term *rēa'* in the Septuagint (LXX). It denotes the one nearby, the neighbor, the fellow human being and thus covers more or less the semantic range of the Hebrew word, especially when it does not indicate a particularly close relationship. In some cases, the LXX uses the more intimate

⁹ See, e.g., M. Fagenblat, *Concept* (2011), 540–542.

¹⁰ See, e.g., R. Kessler, *Weg* (2017), 234–235. On the term *gēr*, see also R.L. Cook, *Neighbor Concept* (1980), 59–63.

¹¹ M. Fagenblat, *Concept* (2011), 541.

equivalent φίλος, “friend”¹². In the New Testament, *plēsion* occurs mostly in the quotations of Leviticus 19:18 (e.g., Matthew 5:43; 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31, 33; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8; see also Ephesians 4:25). When asked, “who is my neighbor?” Jesus replies by telling the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37). Jesus’ parable is essentially a definition of who one’s neighbor is (LTW s.v. πλησίον).¹³ The New Testament underscores at least from three perspectives that the commandment to love one’s neighbor is the greatest one in the law: (1) When asked for the greatest commandment in the law, Jesus answers in the *Synoptic Gospels* with a quotation of Deuteronomy 6:5 (love the Lord your God) and of Leviticus 19:18 (love your neighbor), see Matthew 22:34–30//Mark 12:28–34//Luke 10:25–28. (2) *Paul* sums up all commandments of the law in a single one, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Romans 13:9–10; see also 15:2; Galatians 5:14). (3) Among the so-called “Catholic epistles,” *James* 2:8 promises that everyone who loves one’s neighbor fulfills the “royal law.”

3 The Neighbor as a Partner or Problem (*šākēn, šākēnâ*)

Thus far, the “neighbor” (Hebrew *rēa*) is the object, i.e., someone towards whom the subject or addressee should act in a favorable and helpful way. This sort of active loyalty, in the language of the Bible called “love,” is by no means a matter of course, since the Torah must command it explicitly and sanction it by the exhortative phrase “I am the LORD.” A more “natural” behavior between neighbors maintains a greater distance and is by far less engaged in “love,” loyalty or help. In this concept, the neighbor becomes a partner of convenience or,

¹² E.g., in Exodus 33:11 (Yahweh and Moses), Deuteronomy 13:7; 1 Chronicles 27:33; and especially in Proverbs (3:29; 6:1; 12:26; 14:20; 16:29; 17:17–18; 19:4; 25:8, 17, 18; 26:19; 27:10, 14; 29:5) and Job (2:11; 6:27; 19:21; 32:3; 35:4; 42:7, 10).

¹³ See also the commentary by M. Fagenblat, *Concept* (2011), 542–543, on Luke’s parable of the Good Samaritan from a Jewish perspective: “The Samaritans were Israelites with entrenched opposition to the Jewish ways of understanding their shared tradition. A subtle but decisive shift at the end of the story confirms that Jesus’ point was not to redefine the category of ‘neighbor’ to include Gentiles but to emphasize that neighbors are those who show love. [Luke 10:36–37] In the end, the parable does not answer the lawyer’s question ‘Who is my neighbor?’ but illustrates *how to love*. It shows the Jewish questioner what a neighbor *does* but does not redefine who a neighbor *is*” (emphasis in the original).

in the worst case, a problem. Here, the Hebrew uses the words *šākēn* (masculine, 18 occurrences) and *šākēnā* (feminine, 2 occurrences).¹⁴

3.1 The Term *šākēn* Meaning “Inhabitant”

The term *šākēn* derives from the root *ŠKN* with its basic meaning, “to dwell, reside.” Hence, in a few cases, *šākēn* simply means “inhabitant.” This is clearly the case in Isaiah 33:24 (the inhabitants of the eschatological Zion) and Hosea 10:5 (the inhabitants of Samaria).¹⁵

3.2 The Partnership of Convenience

3.2.1 *A Special Partnership of Convenience at Passover*

Inhabitants that dwell together are “neighbors,” and the closeness can create synergy effects, e.g., saving of resources. A certain commandment in the context of the Passover prescriptions is an example for this partnership of convenience. At Passover, the Israelites shall roast and eat a lamb. As this Passover lamb is a symbolic meal highly imbued with theological meaning and designed for this very special moment of remembrance once a year, it would be not adequate to stretch the consumption of the roasted meat over a longer period of several days, even if it were technically possible. In the morning after the celebration, the remains of the roasted lamb shall be burned in fire (Exodus 12:10). As a lamb provides a significant amount of meat, more than a household might be able to consume, this prescription might result in an undesirable waste of valuable food. Hence, even if Passover is described as a celebration of the family or household, Exodus 12:4 creates an *ad hoc* partnership of convenience between neighbors: “If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join *its closest neighbor* in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it.” The term “neighbor” (*šākēn*) is even qualified by the word “close(st)” (*haqqārōb*). There is no option to pick and choose one’s party of Passover, and there is no further ado about a long-term relationship: The commandment to share the lamb’s meat between close neighbors has practical reasons—only. The side effect that sharing a lamb for Passover might lead to a closer emotional relationship resulting in more neighborly solidarity in times of distress is not mentioned in the text, but by no means excluded.

¹⁴ See also R.L. Cook, *Neighbor Concept* (1980), 51–52.

¹⁵ See R.H. O’Connell, Art. *שָׂכֵן* (*šākēn*), 111.

3.2.2 *The Commonplace Partnership of Convenience (“Borrowing”)*

To have neighbors close by has economic advantages. Even if the relationship is not close on an emotional level, the everyday closeness makes it possible to share things like tools and garments, to borrow devices on a mutual consent. The spatial proximity makes it very likely that the borrower will return the borrowed equipment as soon as possible. If the borrower does not comply with this unwritten rule, even the mere visible presence of the neighbor who owns the borrowed thing will remind the borrower to give it back every day. This social constellation is reflected in at least three biblical passages. The easiest one is 2 Kings 4:3. Elisha the prophet wants to secure the living of a poor widow by a miracle and commands the widow to borrow as many empty vessels as possible from her neighbors. The widow encounters no problems in collecting a significant number of empty vessels in the public space of her neighborhood. Then she retreats to her private sphere and excludes her neighbors. Here she can fill all the vessels from her last and only jar of olive oil. The proceeds of the sale of the oil can pay the widow’s debts and provide a basis for further living. What the story does not need to tell is a matter of course: The neighbors got their empty vessels back in due time.

The story of the female (!) neighbors of the Israelite women in Egypt is a little trickier. In the instructions for Moses about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, Yahweh commands that the Israelite women shall “ask her neighbor (*miššəkentāh*, feminine!)¹⁶ and any woman living in the neighbor’s house for jewelry of silver and of gold, and clothing, and you shall put them on your sons and on your daughters; and so you shall plunder the Egyptians” (Exodus 3:22). This tactic presupposes that there is a fundamentally trusting atmosphere among the Israelite families and their Egyptian neighbors, so that the Egyptians will voluntarily lend their valuable goods without suspicion. The Israelites abuse this neighborly confidingness of the Egyptians when they go away with the borrowed things. Besides, the Egyptians were the slaveholders, the Israelites the slaves, and the slaveholders would not set their slaves free voluntarily, not to mention giving them some seed capital. One could discuss much about this

¹⁶ The Samaritan Pentateuch (SP) reads a different text and uses *rēa*’ and the feminine *rē*’*ā* (in the plural) instead of *šākēn* or *šākēnā*: רעוהו וְאִשָּׁה מֵאֶת רְעוּתָהּ, “and a man will ask from his neighbors (*rē*’*ē-hū*), and a woman from her neighbors (*rē*’*ūt-āh*).”

passage,¹⁷ but for our purpose we learn that it is a matter of course among neighbors to borrow things from each other on a basis of trust, not reckoning that the borrower will disappear never to be seen again.

The fundamentally trusting atmosphere made manifest in mutual borrowing among neighbors also forms the background of a good piece of advice in the book of Proverbs: “Do not forsake your friend (*rēa* ‘) or the friend of your parent; do not go to the house of your kindred (‘*āḥ*, literally “brother”) in the day of your calamity. Better is a neighbor (*šākēn*) who is nearby than kindred (‘*āḥ*) who are far away” (Proverbs 27:10). This saying juxtaposes two concepts: intra-familial solidarity based on bonds defined by kinship versus solidarity and friendship among neighbors (in the latter sense). On the day of calamity, one needs help from the ones that are nearby; hence, it is commended to cultivate one’s relationship with these people. The NRSV translates the Hebrew term *rēa* ‘ in this verse with “*friend*,” it is, however, the same term as in the command to “love your *neighbor*”. The terms *rēa* ‘ and *šākēn* here share the notion of “being close” (and thus able to help), while the one who should help due to the family bonds, the “kindred”, literally “brother” (‘*āḥ*), lives far away (and thus cannot help, at least not immediately). The teachers of the book of Proverbs are well aware that the concept of intra-familial solidarity comes to its limits if the family members live far away from each other. Thus, a concept of solidarity based on proximity (“neighborliness”) becomes (even more) important for the cohesion of society or, with less pathos, the success of everyday life. The Greek translators of the Septuagint version of Proverbs underscore this notion by rendering both Hebrew terms, *rēa* ‘ and *šākēn*, by φίλος (*philos*), “friend” (see below).

3.3 The Neighbors as Commentators of One’s Fate

3.3.1 Praise

Neighbors comment on one’s own fate, for better or for worse. In the book of Ruth, the female protagonist Ruth bears a son for her mother-in-law Naomi. The women of the neighborhood praise Yahweh and congratulate Naomi by commenting on her fate and Ruth’s love in detail. Then Ruth 4:17 reads: “The women of the neighborhood gave him [the child] a

¹⁷ According to the biblical slave law, a slave who is set free shall not be sent out empty-handed (see Deuteronomy 15:13). Hence, one could argue that the Israelites here only take what is rightfully theirs according to their own right, but what the Egyptians probably would not give them voluntarily. See, e.g., H. Utzschneider/W. Oswald, Exodus 1–15, 131–132.

name, saying, ‘A son has been born to Naomi.’ They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.” Thus, the story of Ruth ends with a large harmonious scene of a cheerfully celebrating and friendly neighborhood.

3.3.2 *Reproach (ḥerpâ, mādôn)*

More often, however, the neighbors become a problem for the subject, since they turn out to be hostile and full of ridicule and malice. All occurrences of *šākēn* in the Psalms fall under this category. But let us start with the ideal. Psalm 15 is famous for its list of ethical requirements for those who may abide in Yahweh’s tent and dwell on God’s holy hill.

Psalm 15:3 mentions the one “who does not slander with his tongue, and does no evil to his friend (*rē ‘ē-hû*), nor takes up a reproach (*ḥerpâ*) against his neighbor (*qarob-ō*).”¹⁸ Here, the adjective *qarob* (“near”, from the root *QRB*, “to draw near”) functions as a rare synonym for *šākēn* or *rēa* ‘respectively.’¹⁹ Hence, Psalm 15 formulates an ethical standard that is important for the participation in Yahweh’s cult: avoiding slander and resisting taking up a reproach against one’s neighbor. As indicated above for the commandment to love one’s neighbor, this ideal ethical standard keeps society together. However, in reality the contrary happens, as one can learn from the psalms of lament: “My friends (*‘ōhābay*) and companions (*rē ‘ay*) stand aloof from my affliction, and my neighbors (*qarōbay*) stand far off” (Psalm 38:12 [Eng. 38:11]; see also Job 19:14). The individual in Psalm 31 laments her/his distress which the neighbors multiply by their behavior: “I am the scorn (*ḥerpâ*, ‘reproach’) of all my adversaries, a horror²⁰ to my neighbors (*li-šākēn-ay*), an object of dread to my acquaintances²¹; those who see me in the street flee from me” (Psalm 31:12 [Eng. 31:11]).

¹⁸ NRSV modified. The NRSV originally translates the sentence in the plural in order to achieve inclusive language: “who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors.”

¹⁹ For details see R.L. Cook, *Neighbor Concept* (1980), 49–50. Cook lists five passages where *qarob* designates the neighbor or kinsman: Exodus 32:27; Joshua 9:16; Psalm 15:3; 38:12; Job 19:14.

²⁰ The MT reads *mə ‘ōd*, “exceedingly.” However, due to the parallelism it seems plausible to regard this reading as a scribal error for a different word, e.g., *mādôn*, “scorn”. See the similar passage in Psalm 80:7 (Eng. 80:6).

²¹ Hebrew *məyuddā ‘āy* from the root *YD* ‘, “to know” (Pual); a rather rare term, mostly used for acquaintances, close friends, companions who abandon the person in distress (see 2 Kings 10:11; Psalm 31:12 [Eng. 31:11]; Psalm 55:14 [Eng. 55:13]; Psalm 88:9.19 [Eng. 88:8.18]; Job 19:14).—There are several other

The neighbors act in a way that their closeness does not create a situation of well-being for all sides by mutual help. On the contrary, their nearness intensifies their reproach at the praying person in need and their scorn and taunt. The experience that neighbors can be evil adds something threatening to the idea of neighborliness: My neighbor is the first to notice when I am ill or otherwise weakened, and he can take advantage of this and not only mock, but directly threaten my own realm if I cannot rely on him.

In the genre of the communal lament, the individual's experience of being ridiculed and despised by neighbors is transformed to the collective level in a metaphorical way. There, it becomes an important leitmotif: God has rejected the nation and punishes his people by letting the neighboring peoples mock at Israel.²² The lamenting people of Israel directly addresses their lament to God: "You have made us the taunt (*herpā*) of our neighbors, the derision and scorn (*qeles*) of those around us" (Psalm 44:14 [Eng. 44:13]). Psalm 79:4 and Psalm 80:7 (Eng. 80:6) argue in the same direction, while Psalm 79:12 asks for revenge and utters the following desperate plea towards God: "Return sevenfold into the bosom of our neighbors the taunts with which they taunted you, O Lord!" Psalm 89:42 (Eng. 89:41) adopts the same motif for the Chosen One, God's "servant David", as a symbol for the lost Judahite kingdom: "All who pass by plunder him; he has become the scorn (*herpā*) of his neighbors." In sum, the neighboring nations not only despise the people of Israel, they also taunt Yahweh, and instead of helping the people, they profit from Israel's (Judah's) desolate downfall.

3.4 Metaphorical Usage and Merism

Referring to the hostile nations geographically located around Israel as "neighbors" in the communal lament psalms already is a metaphorical usage. There are a few other instances in which "neighbor" (*šākēn*) adds the notion "nearby" as a qualification of the actual bearer of meaning.

(rather rare) terms that share some nuances with the concept(s) of "neighbor," such as *'allūp*, *'ōhēb*, *hābēr*, *sābīb*, *makār*, *kānāt*, *dōd*. For details, see R.L. Cook, *Neighbor Concept* (1980), 52–56.

²² See R.H. O'Connell, Art. *שָׂכֵן* (*šākēn*), 112: "It is perhaps significant that so many of the latter passages, in which *שָׂכֵן* refers to neighboring nations, depict Israel's neighbors pejoratively and in the rhetorical context of Israel's complaint or the threat of divine judgment."

3.4.1 *Neighbor Cities*

Jeremiah 49:18 announces the destruction of Edom: “As when Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighbors were overthrown, says the LORD, no one shall live there, nor shall anyone settle in it.” With the same wording, Jeremiah 50:40 heralds the downfall of Babylon. “Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighbors” alludes to the story in Genesis 19:1–29 and the mentioning of the neighbor cities Admah and Zeboiim in Genesis 10:19; 14:8; Deuteronomy 29:22; and Hosea 11:8. The phrase in Jeremiah and the enumeration of these cities thus became a motif for utter destruction on a large scale. It implicitly insinuates that the neighbor cities share not only the fate but also the ungodly and wicked behavior of Sodom and Gomorrah. Hence, “neighbor city” not only implies a spatial closeness but also an affinity of mind.

3.4.2 *Neighboring Nations*

The neighboring nations are not only mentioned in the psalms of communal lament as a source of scorn and taunt. Three other passages mention them as problematic neighbors. In Deuteronomy 1:7, Moses reflects Yahweh’s command at Mount Horeb (the Sinai) to resume the wandering of the Exodus by going “into the hill country of the Amorites as well as into the neighboring regions—the Arabah, the hill country, the Shephela, the Negeb, and the seacoast—the land of the Canaanites and the Lebanon, as far as the great river, the river Euphrates.” This catalogue lists the ideal and maximum expansion of the “land of the people of Israel,” which Israel never actually covered. The “Amorites” here function as a cipher for all the conflicts and battles Israel faces when entering the Promised Land. The entire list is thus a “theological geography” indicating that Yahweh is willing to give this entire region to Israel. The wording connects Deuteronomy to Joshua 11:16 and 12:8, fostering the idea of a “Greater Israel” that covers the entire satrapy “Transeuphrates” and thus emerges in the Persian Period after the Babylonian Exile (approximately 5th/4th century B.C.E.).²³

The idea that Yahweh promised the land to his people, the people of Israel, is taken up in a passage in the book of Jeremiah that proclaims the restoration of Israel/Judah after the Exile from a post-exilic perspective. The prophetic narrative shifts towards a quotation of a divine speech in which Yahweh identifies himself with the people and the land and declares the hostile nations as his “evil neighbors:” “Thus says the LORD concerning all my evil neighbors

²³ For details see E. Otto, *Deuteronomium* 1,1–4,43, 335–338.

who touch the heritage that I have given my people Israel to inherit: I am about to pluck them up from their land, and I will pluck up the house of Judah from among them” (Jeremiah 12:14). Strange enough, God has “evil neighbors”! This phrasing is due to a particularistic viewpoint of the authors of this passage who focus on their own religious, cultural, and territorial identity at the cost of the exclusion of other peoples. At this moment, these other peoples are God’s “evil neighbors” who illegitimately touched “the heritage” God has given to his people Israel. However, this is not the end of the game: Later on, the passage (Jeremiah 12:15–17) opens the possibility that these other nations have the opportunity to “learn the ways of my people.” Hence, if they convert to the belief in Yahweh (i.e., to Judaism in this early manifestation), “they shall be built up in the midst of my people.” Thus, even the “evil neighbors” can become part of Yahweh’s salvation. The presupposition is a positive attitude towards Yahweh, listening to God’s life-promoting instructions, and this is the only chance to survive: “But if any nation will not listen, then I will completely uproot it and destroy it, says the LORD” (Jeremiah 12:17). All in all, Jeremiah 12:14–17 thus announces a new relationship between Israel and the nations by opening the possibility for the other peoples to get included into the salvation Yahweh promises to those who trustingly turn to him.

While the passage in Jeremiah probably shows the perception of a later period, the following passage in Ezekiel matches the earlier perspective of the Prophets’ critique of Israel’s apostasy to other gods. In a drastic metaphor, Ezekiel compares the tendency to live according to the style of the Egyptians by taking over their religious practices to harlotry. The language in Ezekiel 16 is rather explicit, using socially unacceptable sexual practices as metaphors for illegitimate religious rituals. Thus, Ezekiel 16:26 reads: “You served as a prostitute with the Egyptians, your big-membered neighbors, and multiplied your prostitutions to provoke me” (NAB). The prophet criticizes the tendency in Israel to take over deities and religious practices from other nations. He does so by comparing this behavior with a sexually promiscuous woman²⁴ who loves men with a big member, a stereotype as old as Ezekiel and as modern as contemporary pornography. Hence, without any qualms Ezekiel terms Egypt and its culture and religion “the neighbors with a big flesh,” a euphemistic paraphrase for a big penis. Thus, the prophet plays with sexually charged language, unofficially attractive, officially outlawed. His goal is to generate attention and to summon his people to discard the

²⁴ This is what “prostitute” here technically means.

veneration of foreign deities (at least officially). From a present-day perspective, these passages in Ezekiel are at least problematic, since they subtly foster misogynist sexual stereotypes, not to speak of the prejudices against foreign cultures.

3.4.3 *Merism*

In two cases, the “neighbor” just functions as a part of a larger merism that denotes a totality. Jeremiah 6:21 includes the neighbor in a list that wants to express the entirety of the people: “Therefore thus says the LORD: See, I am laying before this people stumbling blocks against which they shall stumble; parents and children together (*’ābôt û-bānîm*), neighbor and friend (*šākēn wā-rē’-ô*) shall perish.” Again, one can see the different grades of social nearness within a society: the intra-familial relations (parents and children) versus the non-familial relationships that are due to living close to each other (neighbor/*šākēn* and friend/*rēa’*). Within this latter group, the two parts express two subgrades: neighborliness (the *šākēn* concept) and friendship (the *rēa’* concept), i.e., there are ones with whom one simply lives together next door (the neighbor) and with whom one has a rather loose or practical connection, and there are the ones with whom one engages more actively on the level of loyalty or even love (the friend). One could put the terms on three concentric circles: parents and children on the inner circle, friends and neighbors on the next two outer circles. Put together, this marks the entirety of the people.

Jeremiah 49:10 expresses the entirety of the people of Edom (represented by its ancestor “Esau”) in a slightly different phrasing: “But as for me, I have stripped Esau bare, I have uncovered his hiding places, and he is not able to conceal himself. His offspring (*zar’-ô*) are destroyed, his kinsfolk (*wā-’eh-āyiw*) and his neighbors (*û-šākēn-āyiw*); and he is no more.” The three concentric circles appear again: The “offspring” marks the family as the inner circle, the next circle is the larger clan (“kinsfolk”, literally: “brothers”), and the outer circle form the “neighbors”. The neighbors are thus part of “Esau,” and together with the other terms the merism expresses the totality of Edom.²⁵

²⁵ There are only three occurrences of the term *šākēn* in the Qumran literature, and to some extent the usage there can also be regarded as merisms. (1) Two occurrences stem from the same text that is preserved in two different contexts: 4Q175 1:24 (4QTestimony) and 4Q379 f22ii:10 (4QPsalms of Joshua^b/apocrJosh^b). This text seems to be a warning against a cursed man of Belial “[who arises] to b[e] a fowler’s snare to his people and a cause of ruin to all hi[s] neighbours” (trans. C. Newsom, in: E. Tov [ed.], Dead Sea Scrolls Electronic Library). “His people” and “his neighbors” probably want to express the entirety of the violent man’s environment that

3.5 γείτων in the Septuagint and the New Testament

The Septuagint usually renders the Hebrew *šākēn* by γείτων (*geitōn*), “neighbor.” Other equivalents are τὸς περιόικους (Deuteronomy 1:7), φίλος (Proverbs 27:10), οἱ κατοικοῦντες (Hosea 10:5), τὰς ὁμορούσας (Jeremiah 27:40; Ezekiel 16:26); αἱ πάροιχοι (Jeremiah 30:12). It is interesting that in the case of Proverbs 27:10, the LXX chooses the rendering of the rather distant Hebrew term *šākēn* by the more intimate word φίλος (*philos*), “friend.” In doing so, the LXX aligns the second part of the proverb with the first one, in which *philos* translates the Hebrew *rēa*’: “Do not forsake your friend (*philos/rēa*’) nor the friend of your father, and do not go to the house of your brother when you have bad luck. A friend (*philos/šākēn*) nearby is better than a brother who lives far away” (New English Translation of the Septuagint, NETS). As the second part of the proverb insinuates that the “friend” is a *helpful* friend in the time of bad luck, the concept of Hebrew *rēa*’ would be more adequate than *šākēn*. By rendering both terms by *philos*, the LXX arrives at a more consistent saying.

In the New Testament, the term γείτων (*geitōn*) occurs only four times and mirrors quite exactly the semantic spectrum of its usage in the LXX (and of *šākēn* in the Hebrew Bible). In Luke 14:12, Jesus suggests not to invite the rich neighbors, since “they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid.” This is the partnership of convenience among equals, nothing special, without any sign of love or solidarity. Luke 15:6 and 15:9 mention the neighbors that rejoice together with the one who found his lost sheep and with the woman who found the lost coin (see Ruth 4:17). In John 9:8 the neighbors comment on the healing of the man who was blind from birth; they start arguing quite skeptically about the identity of the healed person without showing any sign of empathy or help.

suffers under his brutality. Unfortunately, the text is too fragmentary to find out more about this person. (2) The third occurrence is also very fragmentary: 4Q521 f5i+6 (4QMessianic Apocalypse). However, like Jeremiah 6:21, the text puts the *rēa*’ (“friend”) and the *šākēn* (“neighbor”) in one line: “[He shall do well with]his [fri]end and with [his] neighbour” (trans. M. Wise, M. Abegg, and E. Cook with N. Gordon, E. Tov [ed.], Dead Sea Scrolls Electronic Library). Because there is virtually no understandable context, it remains unclear who shall do well and who the friend and the neighbor are, but maybe both terms express slightly different grades of proximity. The neighbor might be on a more distant level, but the combination could well function as a merism addressing close relationships beyond the familial bonds.

4 Conclusion

The English standard translation “neighbor” somewhat blurs the considerably differentiated perspective of the Hebrew Bible on the phenomenon “neighborliness.” The quotations “Love Your Neighbor” (Leviticus 19:18) and “I Am a Horror to My Neighbors” (Psalm 31:11) mark different levels. Correspondingly, the Hebrew uses different terms: *rēa*´ and *šākēn*. Both concepts have at least two things in common: They deal with spatial closeness and with relationships that transcend the confines of the family (or even clan). The *rēa*´ refers to the neighbor insofar as s/he as an object is in need or requires concrete assistance. In this case, the command to love one’s neighbor demands a loyal solidarity that manifests in active help and actions of material support (Leviticus 19:17–18). This concept of intra-societal and asymmetric solidarity aims at a functioning community that masters the demands of everyday life and can also defend itself against attacks from outside by means of reliable inner-communal bonds. Hence, the labor immigrant (Hebrew: *gēr*), the resident alien, is included and transferred to the level of the fellow citizen (Leviticus 19:33–34). One shall love the *rēa*´ as well as the *gēr* as oneself.²⁶

This is different from the concept of the *šākēn*, which is ambivalent in itself. This kind of neighbor is not in need or distress (i.e., not an object), but rather actuates (as a subject) the spatial closeness in a good or bad way. In the best case, the neighbors are happy with you when you are doing well (Ruth 4:17), or they mutually borrow devices and garments on a basis of trust (2 Kings 4:3). A partnership of convenience emerges between parties that act on a par (Exodus 12:4; Proverbs 27:10). In a bad case, however, the neighbors exploit the plight of the affected person and do not act according to the spirit of charity (“Love Your Neighbor”), i.e. they do not see in the affected person the *rēa*´ that one ought to help. On the contrary, the neighbors mock and despise the one in distress (Psalm 31:12 [Eng. 31:11]). In the psalms of communal lament, the Hebrew Bible transfers this experience from everyday life quite often to the situation of the people of Israel when it deteriorates militarily and as a

²⁶ The Hebrew phrasing “Love your neighbor/the alien *as yourself*” (Hebrew *kāmōkā*) can also be rendered as “... s/he is like you.” This translation rather stresses the basic equality of all human beings as God’s creation: the neighbor (or: the alien) is like you, i.e., a human being with the needs and qualities that you have yourself. For details, see T. Hieke, *Leviticus 16–27*, 734–736.

state and in return experiences taunt and scorn from its neighbors (e.g., Psalm 44:14 [Eng. 44:13]; 79:4.12; 80:7 [Eng. 80:6]; 89:42 [Eng. 89:41]).

One can consider the Hebrew Bible as a mirror for human behavior in general. Regarding human cohabitation, the Hebrew Bible knows the reality of everyday life as well as the needs for peaceful and efficient living together in different communities: On the one hand, there is the “normal,” natural behavior: first of all, the solidarity within the family, then an ambivalent behavior of neighbors from the partnership of convenience (mutual lending) to taunt and scorn. On the other hand, the Hebrew Bible knows very well that a society needs a sort of solidarity beyond the family (or clan) in order to achieve a good and efficient coexistence. To this end, the Hebrew Bible calls for the utopia of “Love Your Neighbor:” A mere spatial closeness may lead to mutual mockery and disdain or a mere partnership of convenience among equals (concept: *šākēn*); in order to be more successful and gain a better quality of life, society must develop towards a community organized by mutual appreciation, unconditional support, and actively helping loyalty, in a sense and in biblical language: “love” your *rēa*’. To put it briefly: The *šākēn* must become a *rēa*’, the neighbor as the one living next door must become a friend and companion whom I will help if necessary and without reservation, even if this *rēa*’ may be my personal enemy or a resident alien, a labor immigrant (*gēr*). This is the Hebrew Bible’s proposal for neighborly cohabitation that successfully masters everyday life and ensures the cohesion of society.

Literature

Cook, Ronald Lee, *The Neighbor Concept in the Old Testament*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Ann Arbor: UMI, 1980.

DCH: *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, ed. by David J.A. Clines, 8 Vols., Sheffield: Sheffield Academic/phoenix Press, 1993–2011.

Fagenblat, Michael, *The Concept of Neighbor in Jewish and Christian Ethics*, in: Levine, Amy-Jill; Brettler, Mark Zvi (eds.), *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 540–543.

Görg, Manfred, Art. *שָׂכֵן* *šākan*, *שָׂכֵן* *šāken*, in: *ThWAT* 8 (1993) 1337–1348.

Hieke, Thomas, *Levitikus 1–15. Levitikus 16–27 (HThKAT)*, Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 2014.

Kessler, Rainer, *Der Weg zum Leben. Ethik des Alten Testaments*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2017.

LTW: *The Lexham Theological Wordbook*, ed. by Douglas Mangum, Lexham Press, 2014.

- Mathys, Hans-Peter, *Liebe deinen Nächsten wie dich selbst. Untersuchungen zum alttestamentlichen Gebot der Nächstenliebe (Lev 19,18) (OBO 71)*, 2. Aufl., Freiburg (CH): University Press/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990.
- O'Connell, Robert H., Art. *שָׂקֵן (šākēn)*, in: *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* 4 (1997), 111–113.
- Otto, Eckart, *Deuteronomium 1,1–4,43 (HThKAT)*, Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 2012, 335–338.
- Tov, Emanuel (ed.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls Electronic Library, English Translations*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2006.
- Utzschneider, Helmut; Oswald, Wolfgang, *Exodus 1–15 (IEKAT)*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2013.