# From Biblical Semantics to Theology:Divine and Human כעס and קנאה

Considered a central phenomenon in the Hebrew Bible, “divine anger” has been the subject of numerous studies. Most of these assume that Biblical Hebrew offers a range of expressions that denote the concept of anger, including **חרה, אף, קצף,** and others.[[1]](#footnote-3) Indeed, considerable scholarship has been devoted to trying to classify these terms,[[2]](#footnote-4) but the basic lexical assumption—that these are basically synonymous expressions for anger—has not been challenged. Even the literature the offers some insights into nuances differentiating the “terms of anger” tend to treat them essentially as synonyms, regarding any differences identified among them as inconsequential in the interpretive and conceptual analysis of anger.[[3]](#footnote-6)

While virtually overlooking any meaningful distinction between these various Hebrew words and idioms, many studies either presuppose or seek to prove another distinction—of that between human and divine anger, in terms of meaning, terminology, phenomenology, and even justification.[[4]](#footnote-7) Both the failure to differentiate between the “terms of anger” on the one hand, and the strong differentiation between “human anger” and “divine anger” on the other, do not emerge from readings of the biblical texts. Rather, they stem from scholarly preconceptions about anger and the divine, which impede our ability to properly analyze the phenomenon of divine anger.

This article demonstrates that semantic analysis, based on philological linguistical considerations, such as morphology and syntax—rather than theological considerations, such as the perfection or righteousness of the deity—reveals that biblical authors clearly ascribed particular meanings to different phenomena by using specific words and idioms to describe crises in man–deity relations, intentionally using words and idioms from human relationships, thereby depicting the two realms as analogous.

I will focus on the root **כעס**, which is the common and conventional way of denoting “anger” in modern Hebrew, as it probably already was in Mishnaic Hebrew, and perhaps even in Late Biblical Hebrew, and therefore it usually considered to have had the same meaning in Classical Biblical Hebrew as well.[[5]](#footnote-8) The widespread appearance of  **כעס**in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic redaction of the Former Prophets and Jeremiah has led scholars to point out the centrality of “divine anger” in these writings. While distinguishing it from human **כעס**, they have assumed there is a difference between **כעס** and other so-called terms of anger, thereby overlooking its semantic, literary, and theological meaning.

The new semantic analysis of **כעס** in Biblical Hebrew which I present here leads to three main propositions. First, neither divine nor human **כעס** denotes anger at all; instead, it is lexically proximate to sorrow, vexation, or insult. Second, **כעס** expresses not a general, undifferentiated offense, but a special kind of offense specifically associated with jealousy, in view of the special semantic proximity of **כעס** and **קנא**. As I note below, neither of these claims is totally unprecedented in research. However, this study’s comprehensive analysis of them, an endeavor which has not yet been undertaken, will lead to this paper’s third contribution of revealing, a new, deeper, and more precise understanding of divine **כעס** in the Hebrew Bible in general, and in Deuteronomistic literature and theology in particular.

1. Does כעס Mean Anger?

Scholars, commentators, and translators regularly include **כעס** among the terms that express the notion of anger, while acknowledging that the meaning of “anger” is not always congruent with it. This has led to inconsistency in defining the word.[[6]](#footnote-12) In the *HALOT* dictionary, for example, the noun **כַּעַס** is defined as either “vexation” or “grief” when its references pertain to people, but only as “vexation” when the reference is to the deity. In almost all occurrences of the verb **כעס** *hiphil*, however—where the object is the deity—it is interpreted in *HALOT* as “to offend, to provoke to anger,” and only where the object of the verb is human, is it construed as “to grieve.”[[7]](#footnote-13) However, this interpretation is inconsistent, both in terms of matching between the causative verb and its outcome and in terms of making semantic distinctions within the same morphemes on the basis of theological rather than linguistic assumptions.

Scholars have attempted to solve the problem of what seems like semantic duality of **כעס** in a number of ways. Samantha Joo, who devoted a detailed study to the usage of **כעס** in the Deuteronomistic strata, added another distinction—internal/external— to the human/divine distinction in HALOT:

**כעס** can indicate both internal irritation (usually with humans as subject) and external/active anger (usually with God as subject). The word in of itself does not differentiate between human or divine use; rather the context determines which meaning is more relevant.[[8]](#footnote-14)

To these two distinctions—human/divine, internal/external, irritation (or vexation, grief, etc./anger—Matthew Schlimm added another, hierarchical, distinction. According to Schlimm, the primary meaning of **כעס** is “being ‘troubled,’” and the exact meaning depends on the hierarchical status of the subject:

It conveys anger when someone in a hierarchical position is described with this word, but interestingly it refers to anguish or sadness when describing a subordinate.[[9]](#footnote-15)

Focusing on divine anger, Deena Grant reestablished the theological distinction between human **כעס** that means “grief,” and divine **כעס** that means “anger,” because the latter often appears next to other words that are considered “terms of anger.”[[10]](#footnote-16)

What are the reasons for this equivocality? Is there a real ambiguity or duality in the semantics of **כעס**? I will suggest that there is no need for such complicated distinctions and that the meaning of **כעס** is quite consistent in most occurrences in Classical Biblical Hebrew. To confirm this, however, we must base the semantic inquiry on morphologic, syntactic, and contextual considerations rather than on theological ones. Only in the next stage shall we apply the results to understanding the theology of **כעס**.

Let us first consider various occurrences of **כעס** in human contexts only and then turn the discussion to divine **כעס.**

The root **כעס** appears several times in the story of Hannah (1 Sam 1:6–18):[[11]](#footnote-17)

Moreover, her rival used to provoke her severely to **כעס**, to irritate her, because Yhwh had closed her womb. So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of Yhwh, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. […] She was deeply distressed and prayed to Yhwh, and wept bitterly. […] But Hannah answered, “No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before Yhwh. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and **כעס** all this time.” […] So the woman left, and she ate, and was no longer downcast.

Evidently, the **כעס** in the account of Hannah is not an expression of anger, but of distress manifested in weeping, refusing to eat, and being “a woman deeply troubled.”[[12]](#footnote-25) Anger must have an object or an addressee; it is always directedatsomeone.[[13]](#footnote-26) Hannah, however, does not express **כעס** at Peninnah or anyone else. Rather, the **כעס** she experiences is her emotional response to others’ actions and is not levelled at anyone. In fact, the combination of the verb  **כעס***qal* with the preposition **על** “at”—already common in Mishnaic Hebrew and used in Modern Hebrew to express an active response—is completely absent in the Hebrew Bible.[[14]](#footnote-27)

The phrase **שיחי וכעסי**, “my great anxiety and **כעס**” (1 Sam 1:16), also expresses the association of **כעס** with distress, which is one of the contexts of**שיח** —“I pour out my complaint [**שִׂיחִי**] before him; I tell my trouble before him” (Ps 142:2 [Heb. 3]); “I loathe my life; I will give free utterance to my complaint **[שִׂיחִי]**; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul” (Job 10:1).[[15]](#footnote-28)

Hannah’s **כעס** is accompanied by weeping and tears, as found elsewhere:

I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eyes waste away because of **כעס**; they grow weak because of all my foes. Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for Yhwh has heard the sound of my weeping. (Ps 6:6–8 [Heb 7–9])

Be gracious to me, O Yhwh, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from **כעס**, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away. (Ps 31:9–10 [Heb 10–11])

In both passages, the eyes are wasted by **כעס,**[[16]](#footnote-29)which clearly belongs to the semantic field of tears, weeping, sorrow, and groaning.

The nexus of **כעס** and sorrow recurs also in the following:

**כעס** is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. (Eccl 7:3–4).

**כעס** is contrasted with “laughter” and resembles “sadness of countenance” (**רֹעַ פָּנִים**, literally “bad face”). This also explains the statement about Hannah after being blessed by Eli: **ופניה לא היו לה עוד**, literally, “she did not have her face any more” (1 Sam 1:18)—her face was no longer sad.[[17]](#footnote-31) The proximity of the contrast of **כעס**/“laughter” to the contrast of “mourning/mirth” reinforces the possibility that **כעס** is associated with sorrow and not with what we call anger. In certain occurrences, **כעס** parallels **מכאוב** “pain” (Eccl 1:18; 2:23) and once it appears next to the verb **חרה** with the preposition **ל**, which also verges on sadness (Neh 3:33).[[18]](#footnote-32)

Thus, **כעס** is associated with sorrow, insult, or vexation inflicted by one person on another. While scholars and translators have remarked on this meaning, they still see it as a secondary meaning, the primary one for them—perhaps the only one in relation to Yhwh’s כעס—being “anger.” Before addressing divine **כעס**, let us point out a particular kind of sorrow that arises in certain situations with respect to both divine and human **כעס**. To substantiate this, we need to demonstrate how **כעס** relates to **קנאה** (“jealousy”)**.**

2. כעס and קנא

Biblical Hebrew does not distinguish between envy and jealousy; both fall within the semantic field of **קנא,** although “jealousy” seems to be more common, especially in contexts relating to the deity.[[19]](#footnote-33)**קנאה** can be defined as an attempt by an individual—human or divine—to cope with a situation in which something that this individual desires is in someone else’s possession: economic success, family fertility, or, as is sometimes the case, loyalty.

Absolute and exclusive loyalty can be neither multiplied nor divided; for this reason, a perceived challenge to such loyalty triggers**קנאה** in the party demanding it. This kind of **קנאה** is typical of a husband who suspects his wife of betraying him, as we find in the law of the suspected adulteress (Num 5:11–31), and, similarly, in Yhwh’s insistence that Israel worship him exclusively. It is typical of Yhwh to demand Israel’s unadulterated loyalty and to threaten to respond to any disloyalty on Israel’s part with massive and destructive force. For this reason, Yhwh is repeatedly called **אל קנא,** “a jealous god” (e.g., Exod 20:4; 34:14; Deut 4:24; 5:9; 7:14).[[20]](#footnote-34)

Many biblical passages, in contexts between man and man and between man and deity, indicate a special relationship between the roots **כעס** and **קנא**.[[21]](#footnote-35) The most significant examples are found in the Song of Moses.[[22]](#footnote-36) Four times in this poem—or three, according to MT[[23]](#footnote-37)—a verb from the root **קנא** appears in parallel to a verb or a noun from the root **כעס**, probably signaling a semantic proximity between them:

They made him jealous [**יַקְנִאֻהוּ**] with strange gods, with abhorrent things they provoked him [**יַכְעִיסֻהוּ**]. They sacrificed to demons, not God, to deities they had never known, to new ones recently arrived, whom your ancestors had not feared. 32:16–17)

The Israelites make Yhwh jealous of another deity—one who, in some sense, is undeserving of the appellation “god”—by worshipping the no-god instead of Yhwh. Therefore, Yhwh promises to exact vengeance, measure for measure, by making them jealous of another nation, one which, in some sense, is undeserving of the appellation “people”:

He said: I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end will be; for they are a perverse generation, children in whom there is no faithfulness. They made me jealous [**קִנְאוּנִי**] with what is no god, provoked me [**כִּעֲסוּנִי**] with their idols. So I will make them jealous [**אַקְנִיאֵם**] with what is no people, provoke them [**אַכְעִיסֵם**] with a foolish nation. (Deut 32:20–21)

By clear implication, Yhwh’s jealousy is aroused when faced with other gods. Admittedly, together with mentioning Yhwh’s jealousy of other gods, the text stresses these deities’ worthlessness compared to Yhwh, calling them “vanity” and “no-god.”[[24]](#footnote-40)

The unique nexus between the terms **כעס** and **קנא** is found in other biblical texts:

They provoked him to **כעס** [**יַּכְעִיסוּהוּ**] with their high places; they moved him to jealousy [**יַקְנִיאוּהוּ**] with their idols. (Ps 78:58)

A stone is heavy, and sand is weighty, but a fool’s **כַּעַס** is heavier than both. Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming, but who is able to stand before jealousy [**קִנְאָה**]? (Prov 27:3–4)[[25]](#footnote-41)

Surely **כָּעַשׂ** kills the fool, and jealousy [**קִנְאָה**] slays the simple. (Job 5:2).

Given these significant parallels, it seems justified to interpret **כעס** as connected with jealousy, even in passages where the root **קנא** does not appear. For example, Rachel’s prolonged infertility, in stark contrast to the fertility of Jacob’s second wife, prompts her to **קנא** (Gen 30:1), and the same condition stirs Hannah’s **כעס**, as we have seen (1 Sam 1:5–18). Hence, **כעס** is a special kind of sorrow or insult, resembling **קנאה,** “jealousy,” in the sense that it surfaces in response to the success of the other or to something possessed by the other. This is also evident in the passage discussed above:

My eyes waste away because of **כעס**; they grow weak because of all my foes. Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for Yhwh has heard the sound of my weeping. (Ps 6:7–8 [Heb 8–9])

The evildoers’ success evokes the narrator’s **כעס**, which he manifests in weeping and in wishing his enemies to be “disappointed and struck with terror” (Ps. 6:10, Heb 6:11).[[26]](#footnote-43) In another Psalm, it is stated that the evildoer will experience **כעס** when he observes the success of the righteous: “The wicked man shall see it and he shall **כעס**; he shall gnash his teeth; his courage will fail” (Ps 112:10, NJPS). And Nehemiah describes Sanballat’s **כעס** in view of the Jews’ construction of the wall (Neh 3:33).

The connection between **כעס** and jealousy is reflected in most of its occurrences in the Hebrew Bible, including virtually all occurrences in the Pentateuch and the Prophets,[[27]](#footnote-45) most occurrences in the Psalms,[[28]](#footnote-46) and some occurrences—although not in all of them—in Job,[[29]](#footnote-47) Proverbs,[[30]](#footnote-48) Ezra-Nehemiah,[[31]](#footnote-49) and Chronicles.[[32]](#footnote-50) Only in Qohelet does **כעס** seem to have no connection with jealousy.[[33]](#footnote-51)

 In summary, in Classical Biblical Hebrew, a special relationship can be found between **כעס** and **קנא** “jealous,” expressed particularly in passages in which there is an explicit parallel between the verbs. This conclusion is consistent with the conclusion that **כעס** is often associated with sorrow or insult and not with anger. It is on the basis of these findings that we now reexamine the meaning of **הכעיס את יהוה**—to provoke YWYHto **כעס.**

3. Causing כעס to Yhwh—make him Jealous

The verb **כעס** *hiphil*with Yhwh as the direct object is characteristic of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic literature.[[34]](#footnote-52) Apart from the Song of Moses, discussed above, it appears three times in Deuteronomy, eighteen times in the Former Prophets, nearly all of them in the Deuteronomistic redaction, eleven times in Jeremiah—mainly in the prose sermons—and ten times in the rest of the Hebrew Bible.

The connection between **כעס** and **קנא** “jealousy” explains why Yhwh’s **כעס** is virtually always the outcome of idol worship.[[35]](#footnote-54) Deut 4:23–25, for example, links Yhwh’s being a “jealous god” to the injunction against constructing an idol, which may provoke his jealousy (**להכעיסו**, v. 25). In light of the affinity between the terms, it becomes clear that the verb **להכעיסו** does not mean “to cause him anger,” but to cause the deity a form of sorrow or insult that verges on what we would call jealousy. For this reason, unlike other so-called terms of anger, **כעס** is always triggered by actions of the people of Israel and never by those of other peoples.[[36]](#footnote-55)

This distinction is important due to the prominence of **כעס** in the Deuteronomistic literature, which has led scholars to conclusions such as: “In Deuteronomy and in the Historical Books, Israel’s past is interpreted through the lens of divine anger.”[[37]](#footnote-56) This conclusion is problematic because it defines the subject of “divine anger” too broadly, making it impossible to discern the unique meaning of **כעס** and its centrality in the Deuteronomic and Deuteronomistic literature.

Indeed, a study of the occurrences of **כעס** in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History reveals a strict and systematic distinction between **כעס** and other expressions that are considered by most scholars to be terms of anger. Deut 9:1–10:11, for example, recounts the sins of Israel in the desert and emphasizes Yhwh’s displeasure with their actions.[[38]](#footnote-58) Before reciting their many sins in detail, Moses describes Israel’s conduct in the desert in a general way by means of two verbs of which the Israelites are the subject and Yhwh is the object, **קצף***hiphil* and **מרה** *hiphil*: “Remember and do not forget how you provoked Yhwh your God to wrath [**הִקְצַפְתָּ**] in the wilderness; you have been rebellious [**מַמְרִים**] against Yhwh from the day you came out of the land of Egypt until you came to this place” (Deut 9:7). The text goes on to supply the specifics of their actions, followed by an account of the sin of the golden calf (vv. 8–21), the misdeeds at Taberah, Massah, and Kibroth-hattaavah (v. 22) and the sin of the spies (vv. 32, 25–29). In relating the latter, a general statement is again made: “You have been rebellious [**מַמְרִים**] against Yhwh as long as I have known you” (v. 24).

Many so-called terms of anger appear in this passage: **קצף** (vv. 7, 8, 19, 22), **אַף/הִתְאַנַּף** (vv. 8, 19, 20), and **חֵמָה** (v. 19). However, among all the misdeeds listed in the passage—the calf, the spies, Taberah, Massah, and Kibroth-hattaavah—only about the calf is it said that Israel caused **כעס** to Yhwh (v. 18). The reason for this can now be clearly understood. The sin of the calf transcended mere disobedience or disbelief; it involved constructing an idol—an act that is considered doing what is evil in the sight of Yhwh and causing him **כעס** (Deut 4:25). Consequently, it appears adjacent to the description of Yhwh as a “jealous god” [**אֵל קַנָּא**] (Deut 4:24).

Thus, it appears that the expression “to cause Yhwh **כעס**” is not a general category that signifies inciting divine displeasure by any means. Rather, it has a specific meaning of provoking Yhwh’s jealousy by means of idol worship in the two senses of this term found in Deuteronomy and in the Deuteronomistic literature: worship of other gods or worship of Yhwh in an illegitimate way.

This distinction can be illustrated with some examples from the Deuteronomistic History. Nathan’s reproachful sermon to David (2 Sam 12:7–12) strongly resembles Abijah’s reprimand of Jeroboam (1 Kgs 14:7–11) in structure and style.[[39]](#footnote-60) In both passages, the prophet describes Yhwh’s selecting the king and assisting him against his enemies (2 Sam 12:7–8; 1 Kgs 14:7–8), and contrasts this with the ingratitude of the king, who did “evil” (2 Sam 12:9; 1 Kgs 14:9) and warns of the “evil” that Yhwh will bring upon him in retribution (2 Sam 12:11; 1 Kgs 14:10). Given this similarity, it is significant that the verb **כעס** *hiphil* appears only in the sermon to Jeroboam (1 Kgs 14:9). This is not because Jeroboam’s actions are worse than those of David, who “despised” (**בזה** *qal*) the word of Yhwh and even Yhwh himself (2 Sam 12:9, 10), but because David is not accused of idol worship, which is the only behavior that evokes **כעס** in Yhwh.

The next example of the semantic singularity of **כעס** relative to the other so-called terms of anger also involves two similar Deuteronomistic passages, however from a different perspective: here, the phrase “made Yhwh jealous (**קנא** *piel*)” serves as a clear equivalent to the widely used expression “caused Yhwh **כעס**”:[[40]](#footnote-61)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1 Kgs 14:22–23 | 2 Kgs 17:10–11 |
| Judah did what was evil in the sight of Yhwh; they provoked him to jealousy [**וַיְקַנְאוּ אֹתוֹ**] with their sins that they committed, more than all that their ancestors had done. For they also built for themselves high places, pillars, and sacred poles on every high hill and under every green tree. | They set up for themselves pillars and sacred poles on every high hill and under every green tree; there they made offerings on all the high places, as the nations did whom Yhwh carried away before them. They did wicked things, causing **כעס** to Yhwh [**לְהַכְעִיס אֶת יהוה**]. |

We have seen that in the Song of Moses, the verb *קנא* *piel* may express the meaning of the same root in *hiphil:* “They made me jealous [***קנא*** *piel*] with what is no god [...] So I will make them jealous [***קנא*** *hiphil*] with what is no people” (Deut 32:21).[[41]](#footnote-62) Similarly, in the left-hand passage in the above example, the verb ***קנא*** *piel* means to make Yhwh jealous. The statement “Judah did what was evil [***הרע***] in the sight of Yhwh; they provoked him to jealousy [***קנא*** *piel*]” resembles in wording and content the passage in the right-hand column: “They did wicked things [*דברים רעים*], causing ***כעס*** to Yhwh.” Given their semantic proximity, the Deuteronomistic writer of 1 Kgs 14:22–23 was free to use a verb from the root *קנא* instead of the common phrase *הכעיס את יהוה*.

3.1 כעס and “terms of anger”

In contrast to the similarity of **כעס** and **קנא**, the difference between **כעס** and **חרה אף**—the latter considered the most common “term of anger”—is usually ignored in research. First, as we have seen, like other so-called terms of anger, **חרה אף** may occur in diverse contexts, unlike **כעס**, which appears only in the context of idol worship. However, it is specifically when **כעס** and **חרה אף** appear in close proximity that the syntactic and semantic distinction between them becomes conspicuous. It is important to differentiate between the expressions because the occasional appearance of **כעס** in proximity to **חרה אף** and other “terms of anger” has led scholars to the imprudent conclusion that **כעס** is one of these terms.[[42]](#footnote-63)

For example, a passage describing the cyclical nature of the era of the Judges:

Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of Yhwh and worshiped the Baals; and they abandoned Yhwh, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them, and bowed down to them; they cause **כעס** to Yhwh. They abandoned Yhwh, and worshiped Baal and the Astartes. Then **חרה אף** Yhwh against Israel: He gave them over to plunderers who plundered them, and he sold them into the power of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies (Judg 2:11–14).

Abandoning Yhwh and worshipping Baal and the Astartes (vv. 11–12) is tantamount to doing what was evil in the sight of Yhwh (v. 11) and causing him **כעס** (v. 12). As a result of these deeds, Yhwh is **חרה אף** against the Israelites: He is striking them by surrendering them over to the hands of their enemies against whom the Israelites cannot defend themselves (v. 14). It bears emphasizing that the matter between **כעס** and **חרה אף** in this passage transcends mere stylistic diversity; the author of the text had no option of interchanging the two terms he used. Surrendering Israel to its enemies is the way Yhwh **חרה אף** at Israel; it is his response to Israel’s idol worship, the conduct that cause him **כעס**.

This relationship between **כעס** and **חרה אף** also surfaces powerfully in 2 Kgs 23:26–27:

Still Yhwh did not turn away from his awesome **חרון אף** that he had **חרה אף** against Judah because of all the **כעס** deeds by which Manasseh caused him **כעס**, and Yhwh said,[[43]](#footnote-64) “I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel; and I will reject this city that I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said, ‘My name shall be there.’”

This historical-theological comment before the end of the account of Josiah—either original or redactional—means that despite Josiah’s good deeds (2 Kgs 23:25), Yhwh did not relent from his intent to destroy Judah because of Manasseh’s massive idolatry. As in the foregoing quotation from Judges 2, here **חרה אף** represents Yhwh’s response to feeling **כעס**, with the two terms separated by the preposition **על**, “for” or “because of.”

Similarly, **כעס** may to appear adjacent to another so-called term of anger—**חֵמָה** (literally “poison” or “venom,” usually translated “wrath”):[[44]](#footnote-66)

Thus says Yhwh, I will indeed bring disaster on this place and on its inhabitants—all the words of the book that the king of Judah has read. Because they have abandoned me and have made offerings to other gods, so that they have provoked me to **כעס** with all the work of their hands, therefore my **חמה** will be kindled against this place, and it will not be quenched. (2 Kgs 22:16–17)

These words of the Prophetess Hulda establish a clear causal relationship between causing Yhwh **כעס** and his response, described in this case as the kindling of **חמה**. Since the people committed idolatry and thus caused **כעס** to Yhwh, his **חמה** will be kindled unquenchably. Just as there is no causal relationship between wrath and the act, so is there none between “My **חמה** will bekindled against this place” and “I am going to bring disaster upon this place,” for both describe one matter. In contrast, **כעס** is used to characterize Israel’s deeds—causing Yhwh insult and jealousy by idolatry—only after which does Yhwhs react. Again, **כעס** is not interchangeable with other so-called terms of anger; indeed, it is not a term of anger whatsoever.

This conclusion regarding the unique semantic value of **כעס** carries far-reaching implications for understanding the Deuteronomistic theology. The conventional statement in scholarship, that in the Deuteronomistic history the destruction of Israel and Judah was caused by divine anger, is inaccurate. The main precipitant of that event was causing Yhwh **כעס**, i.e., worshipping other gods, which evokes in Yhwh a sense of affront or outrage involving jealousy. Following this **כעס** comes Yhwh’s aggressive and destructive acts—often signified by so-called terms of anger, such as **חרה אף** and **חמה**—the worst among which was destroying Judah and the Temple in Jerusalem.

3.2 What Exactly Causes כעס to Yhwh?

Our realization that divine **כעס** is associated with jealousy and, accordingly, is mentioned only in contexts of idol worship, elicits another question. What, exactly, is it that provokes Yhwh’s **כעס**? In the context of jealousy between spouses, for example, the threshold for anger or jealousy may vary among couples and diverse cultural contexts. In most societies, sexual relations with another partner would be considered a breach of marital exclusivity. However, it is possible to imagine a different kind of relationship between one of the spouses and another—physical contact, shared leisure activity, or intimate conversation—that would be considered a jealousy-inducing breach of trust in one society or person, and as something of no consequence in another.

In light of this analogy, we can see how the Deuteronomic/Deuteronomistic writers, by their usage of **כעס**, gradually broaden the scope of Yhwh’s jealousy.[[45]](#footnote-67) This can be described, schematically speaking, in three stages.[[46]](#footnote-68) First, worshiping other gods is undoubtedly the prime trigger of jealousy in Yhwh, a jealous god who demands exclusivity in Israel’s ritual conduct. Indeed, various biblical writings, including some believed to be of early provenance, relate to worship of other gods as moving Yhwh to **כעס** (Deut 32:15–17; Hos 12:15–13:1). In the Deuteronomic material of the Pentateuch, however, we see the second stage: the incidence of **כעס** is expanded beyond outright idol worship. Making “an idol in the form of anything that Yhwh your God has forbidden you” (Deut 4:23), even one that is meant to represent Yhwh, provokes his **כעס** (Deut 4:25), because he is “a devouring fire, a jealous [**קנא**] God” (Deut 4:24). As we saw above, the golden calf—probably intended not for worship to another deity but to represent Yhwh—is depicted in the Deuteronomic narrative as causing **כעס** (Deut 9:18).

In accordance with this perception of bringing Yhwh to a state of **כעס** by representing him in a sculpted image, the Deuteronomistic authors use the words of the Prophet Abijah to blame Jeroboam: “You have gone and made for yourself other gods, and cast images, causing me **כעס**” (1 Kgs 14:9; see also 1 Kgs 15:29–30)—worshipping idols and worshipping Yhwh by means of “cast images” both lead to **כעס**. Other kings are accused of having “walked in all the way of Jeroboam son of Nebat, and in the sins that he caused Israel to commit, causing **כעס** to Yhwh, the God of Israel, by their idols” (1 Kgs 16:26; see also vv. 16:2, 7; 21:21; 22:53–54).

However, the Deuteronomistic literature expands the limits of **כעס** even beyond idol worship and worshipping a sculpted image that illegitimately represents Yhwh by including worship of Yhwh at the **במות** (“high places”), i.e., any cult place other than the chosen place:

Moreover, Josiah removed all the shrines of the high places that were in the towns of Samaria, which kings of Israel had made, causing [Yhwh][[47]](#footnote-69) **כעס** (2 Kgs 23:19)[[48]](#footnote-70)

The assertion that even “cult places” moves Yhwh to **כעס** recurs in Ezekiel:

For when I had brought them into the land that I swore to give them, then wherever they saw any high hill or any leafy tree, there they offered their sacrifices and presented their offerings of **כעס**; there they sent up their pleasing odors, and there they poured out their drink offerings (Ezek 20:28)

The wording of the passage in Ezekiel is not Deuteronomistic: in place of the common Deuteronomistic expression for “high hill,” **גבעה גבוהה,** the phrase **גבעה רמה** appears, the word “leafy” (tree) is **עבת** and not **רענן**;[[49]](#footnote-72) and maybe more importantly, instead of the verb **כעס** *hiphil* with Yhwh as a direct object, the expression “presented their offerings of **כעס** [noun]” is used. The substance of the allegation, however—that not only idolatry but also worship of Yhwh in many cult places triggers him to **כעס**—is consistent with the Deuteronomistic worldview and reflects the final expansion of the concept of divine **כעס** in this stream within the Hebrew Bible.[[50]](#footnote-73)

Thus, we see that the theological circles of **כעס** and, with them, the acts that may be construed as idol-worship expand steadily. The most obviously and blatantly illegitimate rite is worship of other gods, which is considered as causing **כעס** to Yhwh already in early writings not influenced by the Deuteronomic material, such as the Song of Moses and Hosea’s prophecy. In Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic redaction in the Former Prophets pursuant to it, the circle is expanded, and making sculpted images, even for representing Yhwh, is also a reason for **כעס.** Finally, in the Deuteronomistic history and in one of Ezekiel’s prophecies, even worship of Yhwh that does not necessarily include sculpted images evokes **כעס** in Yhwh if performed outside the central ritual location. According to these theological perceptions, even one who worships Yhwh through the medium of a sculpted image, or—in the most extended perception—not at the chosen place, causes **כעס** to Yhwh, just as would one who practices outright idol worship.

4. Conclusion

The common combination of the verb **כעס** *hiphil* with Yhwh as a direct objectdoes not denote any conduct enraging or irritating the deity and is not a general expression of strong negative emotions. Rather, **כעס**—in both human and divine contexts—has a distinct meaning of causing sorrow or affront involving jealousy and, in the case of Yhwh’s **כעס**, sorrow brought on by his fear of losing Israel’s exclusive loyalty to him. Indeed, study of the various manifestations of divine **כעס** shows that all occur in the context of idol worship.

An important relationship does exist between **כעס** and a violent act by Yhwh—described in so-called terms of anger, such as **חמה** or **חרה אף**: Yhwh’s**כעס** is his unassertive response to Israel’s actions, and driven by this feeling, he is liable to respond by force—and this aggressive reaction is often described by use of the terms **חמה** and **חרה אף**, which are not synonymous with **כעס**, nor interchangeable with it.

Recognizing the singular semantic force of **כעס** has far-reaching implications for biblical theological research. It liberates scholarship from the overly broad concept of “divine anger,” a theological interpretive category that is often imposed on biblical texts and that integrates a broad range of widely divergent phenomena. Thus liberated, scholarship may begin to map these different phenomena and analyze each on its own merits. It appears that the biblical authors’ choice of whether and when to use different “terms of anger” is neither arbitrary nor purely a matter of style, but rather intentional, and can reflect different theological perceptions.

As this article has shown, the terminology of divine emotions and actions has an internal logic that can be traced both synchronically—distinguishing among different expressions used together—and diachronically, differentiating among ways in which different biblical works use one term or another to describe the divine personality in interaction with human beings. Finally, the correct understanding of divine **כעס** depends on, and contributes to, a deeper analysis of human experience and interpersonal relationships depicted in the Hebrew Bible.

1. See, for example, the unequivocal statement of Bruce Edward Baloian, *Anger in the Old Testament* (New York: P. Lang, 1992), 5: “[T]he use of a particular word, although conveying special nuance, is not found to enunciate a special theological meaning.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
2. See, for example, J. Bergman and E. Johnson, “אָנַף,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 1 (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1977), 348–360; Meyer I. Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication in the Ancient Near East* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1980), 2, 448–553; Paul A. Kruger, “A Cognitive Interpretation of the Emotion of Anger in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 26 (2000), 181–193; Ellen van Wolde, “Sentiments as Culturally Constructed Emotions: Anger and Love in the Hebrew Bible,” *Biblical Interpretation* 16 (2008): 5–17. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
3. E.g., Matthew Richard Schlimm, *From Fratricide to Forgiveness: The Language and Ethics of Anger in Genesis* (Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 65–88; 193–201; Grant, *Divine Anger,* 21–39. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
4. Schlimm, for example, limits his study on anger in Genesis to human anger, not because Genesis, in his opinion, does not deal with divine anger, but because of “a fundamental distinction between divine and human anger” (*From Fratricide,* 13). On attributing distinct meanings to one verb when it is used in divine or human contexts, see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
5. See Avi Hurvitz, *A Linguistic Study of the Relationship between the Priestly Source and the Book of Ezekiel: A New Approach to an Old Problem* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1982), 115–116. Hurvitz noted that in Tannaic midrash, the Sages use the verb **כָּעַס** toparaphrase a verse in which the verb **קָצַף** (usually translated “be angry”) appears. This phenomenon, he claims, was already manifested in the Book of Ezekiel, in which **כעס** is preferred over **קצף**, the latter being the common term in the Priestly literature. For Hurvitz, this demonstrates the later provenance of this book of prophecy compared to the Pentateuchal stratum. Regardless of the debate over Ezekiel and P, however, Hurvitz’s specific argument is hard to accept, given that **קצף** occurs many times in Ezekiel, whereas **כעס** is well documented in ancient biblical texts. It is possible that the phenomenon that Hurvitz identifies in rabbinic literature can be found in some texts in Late Biblical Hebrew. Nonetheless, even if this is the case, a synchronic semantic analysis is needed to clarify the differences in meaning between **כעס** and **קצף** and other “terms of anger” within Classical Biblical Hebrew. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
6. The root **כעס** appears in the Hebrew Bible mainly in transitive verbs, i.e., the subject of the sentence inflicts **כעס** on another: forty-six instances in *hiphil* and two in *piel*. Only in six places, all in the later writings, does the root **כעס** occur in *qal,* i.e., where the subject itself exhibits **כעס.** In addition, the nominative **כַּעַס** (or **כַּעַשׂ**) occurs twenty-five times in passages from various periods. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
7. See HALOT כעס, 2:491. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
8. Samantha Joo, *Provocation and Punishment: The Anger of God in the Book of Jeremiah and Deuteronomistic Theology* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 21 n. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
9. Schlimm, *From Fratricide,* 86. This distinction cannot explain, for example, the meaning of כעס in non-hierarchical situation like Ps 6:7 (Heb 6:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
10. Grant, *Divine Anger,* 31–32. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
11. Translations are taken from NRSV with minor changes and without the translation of כעס (which is inconsistent in this translation, as well as in NJPS and others.) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
12. The fact that both NRSV and NJPS do not use words from the semantic field of anger in this chapter lead to an intuitive perception that anger is not in any way the subject of the narrative. I will now try to confirm that there is a concrete basis for this perception, and that this passage is not a unique, but, rather, a representative case. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
13. See Robert C. Solomon, *True to Our Feelings: What Our Emotions are Really Telling Us* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University, 2007), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
14. A similar combination, כעס *qal* + אֶל, is evidenced only once (2 Chr 16:10). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
15. See HALOT שׂיח, 3:1321. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
16. See Gruber, *Aspects,* 1:386–400, on עשׁשׁ and עתק in the sense of drying of the eyes. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
17. “Bad face” signifies sadness also in Neh 2:2–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
18. As Gruber has shown, חרה ל—in contrast to חרה אף—does not mean “anger,” but sorrow or distress; See Gruber, *Aspects,* 1:370–379. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
19. A full discussion of **קנא** is beyond the scope of the current article and I hope to elaborate on it elsewhere. For now, see John H. Eliot, “God – Zealous or Jealous but Never Envious: The Theological Consequences of Linguistic and Social Distinctions,” *The Social Sciences and Biblical Translations*, ed. Dietmar Neufeld(Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 79–96. For a philosophical analysis see Martha C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (New York: Oxford University, 2016), 51–52; Solomon, *True,* 102–109. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
20. See the discussion of Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry,* trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University, 1992), 9–36. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
21. Certainly, the connection between **כעס** and **קנא** has been observed by scholars, e.g., N. Lohfink, “כָּעַס ka'as; כַּעַס ka'as,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* 7 (William B. Erdmans: Grand Rapids, 1995), 284–285. However, no one has developed the connection in a way that would lead to the broad conclusions reached in this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
22. The proximity of **כעס** and **קנא** in Deut 32 has been recently discussed by Petra Schmidtkunz, *Das Moselied des Deuteronomiums* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 171–187. Dating the poem to the Persian period, Schmidtkunz argues that its author paralleled these two words to create a new understanding of the sin of idolatry. While, according to Schmidtkunz, the Deuteronomists used (divine) **כעס**, in the context of worshiping other gods, mainly in the meaning of breaking the law, the (later) author of the Song of Moses integrated this idea with the meaning of (human) **כעס** in Wisdom Literature, thus depicting idolatry not only as a religious/legalistic crime, but also as immoral human behavior. In contrast, while I support the common early dating of the poem, I do not see an essential difference between the meaning of **כעס** in the context of idolatry in Deuteronomistic writings and its meaning in the same context in Deut 32. Rather, in the Deuteronomistic texts, idolatry is not only a transgression of the law, but, more importantly, it also represents a personal emotional insult to Yhwh from the Israelites, rendering him disappointed, sad, and jealous. The methodological principle is that words may express more than one meaning, but the distinction must be based on a linguistical consideration, not on a division between divine/human, which is not linguistical, but theological. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
23. MT, as well as the Samarian Pentateuch, do not have **קנא** in Deut 32:19. However, 4Qphyln has **ויקנא** instead of **וינאץ**,and a verb from the root **קנא** is probably reflected in LXX. Since 4Qphyln lacks the second half of the verse, and LXX is quite confusing, and seems to reflect both **וינאץ** and **ויקנא**, there is ambivalence in reconstructing the original verse. להשלים הפניות לפטרה, די ג'יי די, ואחד שפטרה מפנה אליו In any event, the noun **כעס** in the construct state “the **כעס** of his sons and daughters” means that they are those who cause the **כעס** (Cf **כַּעַס אוֹיֵב** in v. 27), which is the **כעס** that the enemy would cause to Yhwh by attributing Yhwh’s acts of punishment to his own military power. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
24. The Israelites’ preference of powerless gods as objects of worship intensifies Yhwh’s displeasure with their treachery toward him; as Jeremiah says: “Has any nation changed its gods even though they are no-gods? But my people has exchanged its glory for what can do no good” (Jer 2:11). See also Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry,* 25–30. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
25. Hurovitz sees these two verses as a unity since they are connected by כעס in v. 3 and חמה and אף in v. 4, assuming that they are all “terms of anger.” See Victor Avigdor Hurovitz, *Proverbs: Introduction and Commentary,* Mikra Leyisra’el (Am Oved: Tel-Aviv, 2012), vol. 2, 521. However, it emerges that the parallel of כעס is not חמה and אף, but, rather, קנאה, thereby even strengthening the unity, because both כעס and קנאה appear in the second unit of the parallelism and are presented as heavier than the mention in the first one. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
26. See Yael Avrahami, “בוש in the Psalms – Shame or Disappointment?,” *JSOT* 34 (2010), 295–313. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
27. Most of them refer to the כעס of Yhwh, which I discuss in the next section. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
28. Including Pss 6:8; 31:10; 78:58; 106:29; 112:10. In Pss 10:14; 85:5, the context does not indicate jealousy. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
29. Job 5:2 explicitly parallels כעשׂ and קנא. Job 6:7, much like Ps 6:7–8 discussed above, can plausibly be interpreted in the context of jealousy. Job 6:2 and 10:17 are not necessarily connected to jealousy. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
30. See the discussion of Prov 27:3–4 above. In contrast, see 12:16; 17:25; 21:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
31. Neh 3:33, but not 3:37. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
32. 2 Chr 28:25; 33:6; 34:25. Very exceptional is 2 Chr 16:10, which has **כעס** *qal* with the preposition **אֶל** “toward.” [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
33. See Eccl 1:18; 2:23; 5:16; 7:3, 9; 11:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
34. As noted, for example, by Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
35. The only exceptional is Ps 85:5, which does not provide detail about the sin that caused **כעס**. So, there is not even one case of divine **כעס** in reaction to a known sin other than that of idolatry (including worship in the “high places”—see below.) [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
36. For other “terms of anger” referring to other nations, see—among many other cases—Jer 49:37 (חרה אף); Zech 1:15 (קצף); Is 34:2 (זעם). [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
37. Grant, *Divine Anger,* 152. Joo, *Provocation and Punishment,* focuses on **כעס** in the Deuteronomistic redactional strata, but also sees it primarily as signifying “anger,” as reflected in her book’s subtitle (*The Anger of God in the Book of Jeremiah and Deuteronomistic Theology*). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
38. This passage has been thoroughly studied, mainly in terms of its composition and relationship with other Pentateuchal material (which is not at the core of the current study). For a recent review and discussion, see Robert A. Di-Vito, “The Calf Episodes in Exodus and Deuteronomy: A Study in Inner-Biblical Interpretation,” *Golden Calf Traditions in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,* eds. Eric F. Mason and Edmondo F. Lupieri (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), 1–25, esp. 6–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
39. At least part of 2 Sam 12:7–12 is Deuteronomistic; see Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy,* 130 n. 4. 1 Kgs 14:7–11 seems entirely Deuteronomistic, see, e.g., Cogan. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
40. See Cogan. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
41. Elsewhere, ***קנא*** *piel* also can mean “be jealous of or for,” depending on the context and the preposition. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
42. See the literature in section 1 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
43. The action described in this statement did not happen at this point in the narrative, before Josiah’s death, but, rather, in the days of Manasseh, as related in 2 Kgs 21:10–15. Then, in Manasseh days, Yhwh חרה אף toward Judah, deciding to destroy them as he had done to Israel; and he never revoked this intention—neither in Josiah’s days nor anytime else—because of the **כעס** that Manasseh caused to him. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
44. On the meaning of חֵמָה see Gruber, *Aspects,* 2:513–553. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
45. Joo, *Provocation and Punishment,* presents a much more detailed account of the evolution of **כעס** in Deuteronomistic theology. While she is interested in questions of reward, theodicy, and Yhwh’s acts in history, my focus is on the ways biblical authors depict Yhwh’s persona, emotionality, and relationships. The current brief discussion is not meant to exhaust the topic, but only to demonstrate the potential of semantic inquiry into the “terms of angers” for understanding theological concepts such as “divine anger.” [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
46. Two clarifications are needed here. First, broadening the scope of **כעס** in some texts in the Hebrew Bible—all belonging to a specific tradition or stream—does not mean that any biblical text contemporaneous with those discussed here must share this theological concept. Second, even if one rejects the analysis as a historical reconstruction, because of different dating of the texts, and more, it can still be useful as a phenomenological distinction, showing the theological complexity and richness expressed by **כעס**, which we can see only if distinguishing it from other “terms of anger.” [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
47. Following LXX. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
48. See also 1 Kgs 17:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
49. Cf Deut 12:2; 1 Kgs 16:4, 17:10; Jer 2:20; 3:6, 13; 17:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
50. Although struggling for centralization of cult, this prophecy uses Priestly rather than Deuteronomistic style. See Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1997), 385–386. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)