# Divine Anger and Biblical Hebrew: The Case of כעס

### [0]

Most of the studies on anger in the Hebrew Bible assume that a range of expressions denote the concept of anger, including **חרה, אף, קצף**, and others. Even scholars who offer some insights into nuances differentiating so-called “terms of anger” tend to treat the terms essentially as synonyms, regarding any differences identified among them as inconsequential in the interpretive and conceptual analysis of anger. At the same time, most studies either assume or seek to prove another distinction—between human and divine anger—in terms of meaning, terminology, and even justification.

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, emerge not from readings of the biblical texts, but rather from scholarly preconceptions about anger and the divine. This limitation consequently impedes our ability to properly analyze the phenomenon of divine anger.

In this paper, I demonstrate that semantic analysis, based on philological linguistical considerations, rather than theological considerations, reveals that biblical authors clearly distinguished between different phenomena by using very specific words and idioms to describe crises in man–deity relations, intentionally using terms 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, Therefore, its meaning is usually considered to have been the same in Classical Biblical Hebrew as well. The novel semantic analysis of **כעס** in Biblical Hebrew I advance 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 particular kind of offense specifically associated with jealousy, in view of the special semantic proximity of **כעס** and **קנא**.

While neither of these claims is totally unprecedented in scholarship, no comprehensive analysis of them has yet been undertaken. This will lead to my **third** proposition that:

This analysis will lead to 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]

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—as we shall see. This has led to inconsistencies in defining the word. The HALOT dictionary, for example, defines the verb **כעס**, *hiphil* as “provoke to anger” whenever the reference is to the deity, but as “to grieve” when it appears in interhuman relations; the noun **כעס** is defined as “grief” or “vexation” in human contexts, but as “vexation” only when related to YHWH.

Deena Grant, in her book *Divine Anger in the Hebrew Bible* reinforces this distinction, arguing that unlike human **כעס**, divine **כעס** regularly appears in proximity to so-called “terms of anger”; Samantha Joo, in her study on **כעס** in Deuteronomistic theology, distinguishes between internal irritation and external reaction; and Matthew Schlimm, in his study on anger in Genesis, proposes a hierarchical distinction. All of them agree, then, that the meaning of **כעס** depends on the question who is experiencing the **כעס:** YHWH or human beings.

But is there a real ambiguity or duality in the semantics of **כעס**? Did biblical authors use the same word, sometimes in one sentence, to express very different meanings? I will suggest that there is no need for such complicated distinctions and that the meaning of **כעס** is quite consistent in most of its occurrences in Classical Biblical Hebrew.

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:

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 cause her כעס. 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. […] I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and כעס all this time.”

Evidently, **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.”

Anger must have an object or an addressee; it is always directed *at* someone. 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 any individual. In fact, most verbal appearances of **כעס** are in transitive verbs—usually in the *hiphil*, here in *piel;* only six in the *qal* stem, all of them in Late Biblical Hebrew, and only one with an object, with the preposition אֶל. The common Mishnaic and Modern Hebrew **כָּעַס עַל** never appears in the Hebrew Bible. This reflects the passive character of**כעס**, which is not consistent with the meaning of anger. One can cause **כעס** to another; one cannot feel **כעס** or act in **כעס** toward another.

Hannah’s **כעס** is also accompanied by weeping and tears, as found, for example, in Psalm 6:

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.

In this passage, the eyes are wasted by **כעס**, which clearly belongs to the semantic field of tears, weeping, sorrow, and groaning.

The link between **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.

**כעס** is contrasted with “laughter” and resembles “sadness of countenance” (רֹעַ פָּנִים, literally “bad face”). 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.

Arguably, then, **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 one, the primary meaning for them—perhaps the only one in relation to divine **כעס**—being “anger.”

Before addressing divine **כעס**, let us suggest a particular kind of sorrow that arises in certain situations with respect to both divine and human **כעס**. To establish this, we need to demonstrate how **כעס** relates to **קנאה** (“jealousy”).

### [2]

Biblical Hebrew does not distinguish between envy and jealousy; both fall within the semantic field of קנא, although “jealousy” seems to be more common. For this discussion,ק**נאה** 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, any threat 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 in Numbers, Chapter 5, 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.”

Many biblical passages indicate a special relationship between the roots **כעס** and **קנא**. The most significant examples are found in the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32. Three or four times in this poem—depending on questions of textual criticism—a verb from the root **קנא** appears in parallel to a verb or a noun from the root **כעס**:

They made him jealous [יַקְנִאֻהוּ] with strange gods, with abhorrent things they caused him כעס [יַכְעִיסֻהוּ]. They sacrificed to demons, not God, to deities they had never known, to new ones recently arrived, whom your ancestors had not feared.

The Israelites make YHWH jealous of another deity by worshipping this no-god instead of YHWH. Therefore, YHWH promises to exact vengeance, measure for measure, by making them jealous of another people, or “no-people,” relating:

They made me jealous [קִנְאוּנִי] with what is no god, caused me כעס [כִּעֲסוּנִי] with their idols. So I will make them jealous [אַקְנִיאֵם] with what is no people, cause them כעס [אַכְעִיסֵם] with a foolish nation.

YHWH’s jealousy is aroused when faced with other gods; the Israelites’ preference of powerless gods, “no-gods,” as objects of worship intensifies YHWH’s displeasure with their treachery toward him. This displeasure is signified by the verb **כעס** *hiphil* or *piel*. Hence, **כעס** is a special kind of sorrow or insult, resembling **קנאה**, “jealousy,” in the sense that it surfaces in situations when another person possesses or threatens to steal something that the subject believes or desires to be his or her.

The unique link between the terms **כעס** and **קנא** is found in other biblical texts, for example:

They provoked him to כעס [יַּכְעִיסוּהוּ] with their high places; they moved him to jealousy [יַקְנִיאוּהוּ] with their idols.

Surely כָּעַשׂ kills the fool, and jealousy [קִנְאָה] slays the simple.

Given these significant parallels, the interpretation of **כעס** as connected with jealousy appears reasonable, 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**, and the same condition stirs Hannah’s **כעס**, as we have seen.

This is also evident in the passage we saw earlier:

[מצגת]

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.”

The connection between **כעס** and jealousy is reflected in most of its occurrences in the Hebrew Bible. Only in Qohelet does **כעס** seem to have no connection with jealousy. In Classical Biblical Hebrew, then, a special relationship can be found between **כעס** and **קנאה** “jealousy.” This conclusion is consistent with the observation 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 YHWH to **כעס**.

### [3]

The intense usage of **כעס** in Deuteronomy and Deuteronomistic writings led scholars to stress the role of “divine anger” in these biblical strata, missing the unique meaning of **כעס** among so-called “terms of anger,” and therefore failing to recognize the specific theological concern of these authors and the way they perceived the divine persona.

In light of the semantic analysis I presented, it becomes clear that the verb **הכעיס** in relation to YHWH does not mean “to cause anger,” but to cause the deity a form of sorrow or insult that verges on what we would call jealousy. This also explains why YHWH’s **כעס** always occurs in reaction to idol worship, and also why, 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.

Deuteronomy 9–10, for example, sets forth the sins of Israel in the desert and emphasizes YHWH’s displeasure with their actions. Many so-called terms of anger appear in this passage: **קצף**,**אַף** or **הִתְאַנַּף**, and **חֵמָה**. However, among all the misdeeds listed in the passage—the spies, Taberah, Massah, and Kibroth-hattaavah—it is only about the golden calf that it is said that Israel caused **כעס** to YHWH (v. 18). This sin 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**.

Two other examples: Nathan’s reproachful sermon to David strongly resembles Abijah’s reprimand of Jeroboam in structure and style. [מצגת] Given this similarity, it is significant that the verb **כעס** *hiphil* appears only in the sermon to Jeroboam. This is not because Jeroboam’s actions are worse than those of David, who “despised” (בזה *qal*) YHWH and his word, but because David is not accused of idol worship, which is the only behavior that evokes **כעס** in YHWH.

The next example also involves two similar Deuteronomistic passages, however from a different perspective:

[מצגת]

In the left-hand passage, 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 this passage was free to use a verb from the root **קנא** instead of the common phrase הכעיס את יהוה.

#### [3.1]

Having established the meaning of**כעס** and its resemblance to **קנא**, we can now clearly distinguish between **כעס** and other so-called “terms of anger,” such as **חָרָה אַף** and **חֵמָה**, which scholars usually, albeit unjustifiably, consider nearly identical to **כעס**. It is important to differentiate between the expressions because the occasional appearance of **כעס** in proximity to **חרה אף** and other so-called “terms of anger” has led scholars to the unwarranted conclusion that **כעס** is one of these terms.

This relationship between **כעס** and **חרה אף** surfaces powerfully in this passage:

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 had said, “I will remove Judah also out of my sight…”

This historical-theological comment before the end of the account of Josiah—either original or redactional—means that despite Josiah’s good deeds, YHWH did not relent from his intent to destroy Judah because of Manasseh’s profound idolatry. Clearly, **חרה אף** represents YHWH’s response to feeling **כעס**, with the two terms separated by the preposition על, “for” or “because of.”

The subject matter between **כעס** and **חרה אף** transcends mere stylistic diversity; the author of this text had no option of interchanging the two terms he used. Deciding to destroy Judah is the way YHWH **חרה אף** at them; it is his response to Manasseh’s idol worship, the conduct that cause him **כעס**.

Similarly, **כעס** may to appear adjacent to another so-called term of anger—**חֵמָה**:

[מצגת]

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. Again, **כעס** is not interchangeable with other so-called terms of anger; indeed, it is not in any way a term of anger.

### [4]

To conclude: **כעס** in Classical Biblical Hebrew—either human or divine—does not denote “anger,” but a certain kind of sorrow, or insult, especially connected with jealousy.

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. For example, what exactly provokes YHWH to **כעס**? Is it only worshiping other gods, as reflected in pre-Deuteronomistic strata, or also making statues of YHWH, and even worshiping him out of the chosen place, as the Deuteronomistic writers claim? Why did some biblical authors totally avoid using **כעס** or another term, and how did they depict the emotions of YHWH? Why did YHWH experience this feeling, for example, when killing Uzzah for touching the Ark, or when refusing to accept Judah’s sacrifices because they oppressed the poor?

As I have shown, the terminology of divine emotions and actions has an internal logic, 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 rests on, and contributes to, a deeper analysis of human experience and interpersonal relationships depicted in the Hebrew Bible.