The Weeping Eye in Bible as a Vehicle for Regimenting the Female Body

The shedding of tears is a biological and emotional phenomenon mentioned in several places in the Bible and attributed to men and women. A close examination reveals, though, that there is a clear distinction between the way biblical authors relate to the shedding of tears from the male eye and the female eye. Using gender sensitive semantic discourse, I will argue that phrases which combine ‘eye’ and ‘tear’ in the biblical text are revealing of conceptions of gender in biblical society.

In the Bible, the noun ‘eye’ appears alongside the noun ‘tear’ eight times. When the eye is that of a man or a group, the first person possessive form is used and the shedding of tears is attributed to the eye, as in Jeremiah 13:17: “…and my eye will run down with tears….” See also, Jeremiah 8:23; Jeremiah 9:17; Jeremiah 14:17; Psalms 116:8; Lamentations 2:11.) In contrast, the two cases which describe the weeping eye of a female figure employ the second person possessive form and the speaker commands the woman to control her weeping. Thus, the speaker in Jeremiah 31 commands the image of Rahel to withhold tears from her eyes: “…Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears…” (Jeremiah 31:16). Similarly, the speaker in Lamentations 2:18 demands and commands the opposite action from the female image—that she continue to weep: “…O wall of the daughter of Zion, let tears run down like a river…let not the apple of your eye rest.”

My lecture will discuss the two female figures, ‘Rahel’, and ‘bat Tzion’, and the biblical author’s attitude to their weeping. Although these commandments differ in content, they are identical in attitude. Human tears are a biological manifestation of strong emotion; in effect, they are an expression of that emotion. Using the imperative form in relation to women’s tears requires them to control emotional expression, thereby expropriating the spontaneous aspect of their emotions in exchange for a functional benefit. These two commandments adhere to a utilitarian approach to tears and are therefore blind to the true pain of women, invalidating it. The gap between the observer/speaker and the women who expresses her pain through weeping is reflected also in the comparison between Lamentations 1:2 and 16, which I will expand on in my lecture. Beyond that, the unique use of the imperative form for female figures alone illuminates perceptions related to the female body and expresses the need to regiment the female body and control its fluid boundaries.

Examination of differing uses of phrases containing ‘eye’ and ‘tears’ in the Bible reveal patterns of thought hidden between the words. By means of gender sensitive semantic discourse which offers a philological analysis comparing phrases in terms of gender, we can investigate the gender perspectives of the authors and reveal cognitive archetypes that existed in biblical society. In my opinion, this discussion constitutes a test case for cognitive linguistics at its best.