



# Semantic Change in the King James Version of Genesis: A Diachronic Linguistic Analysis of Theological Terms

Luijim Jose<sup>a\*</sup> 

<sup>a</sup> Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology, Philippines.

Email: [luijimjosepublication@gmail.com](mailto:luijimjosepublication@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

The King James Version (KJV) of the Bible, first published in 1611, has profoundly shaped English-speaking theological discourse. However, the evolution of English over four centuries has resulted in semantic shifts that risk obscuring the original meanings of biblical texts. This study employed a qualitative-descriptive design within a diachronic linguistic framework to investigate the semantic development of twenty-eight purposively selected lexical items in the Book of Genesis. The analysis utilized a typology of semantic change—comprising broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical extension, metonymic shift, and obsolescence—to trace the evolution of word meanings from Biblical Hebrew to Early Modern English and into contemporary usage. Findings indicate that semantic shifts have substantial implications for theological interpretation, particularly in key doctrinal concepts such as creation, covenant, and sin. The study underscores the need for linguistic awareness in exegesis and translation, recommending the integration of diachronic analysis into theological education and biblical hermeneutics. Limitations include the restricted lexical sample and exclusive focus on the KJV. Future studies may extend this approach to other biblical books and translations. The study contributes to biblical linguistics by demonstrating how semantic change affects the interpretive integrity of sacred texts.

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## Introduction

The Book of Genesis stands as a foundational text in Judeo-Christian theology, offering a profound narrative of creation, covenant, human fallibility, and divine-human interaction (Kline, 2023). Among its various translations, the King James Version (KJV), first published in 1611, remains highly influential due to its literary style and historical legacy (Campbell, 2010). Despite its continued use in modern worship and theological discourse, the KJV presents interpretive challenges, primarily due to its early modern English vocabulary—a language that has undergone substantial semantic evolution over the past four centuries (Eliason, Crawford, & Petrey, 2023; Nelson, 2023). Understanding semantic change involves becoming aware of the historical shifts in word meanings that influence both clarity and interpretation (Andrews, Lightfoot, & Kenyon, 2022). Semantic change can manifest in several forms, including broadening (where a word acquires a wider meaning), narrowing (a more specific meaning), amelioration (a more positive connotation), and pejoration (a more negative connotation). These transformations are critical when interpreting theological texts whose meanings hinge on precise lexical understanding. For instance, the word *replenish* in

\*Corresponding Author

Email: [luijimjosepublication@gmail.com](mailto:luijimjosepublication@gmail.com)

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Genesis 1:28 historically meant “to fill,” yet its contemporary interpretation as “refill” introduces potential theological misconceptions (Hamlin & Jones, 2010). Such examples underscore the necessity of diachronic linguistic analysis in engaging faithfully with sacred texts.

Previous studies in biblical linguistics have often prioritized the Psalms and prophetic literature, leaving Genesis relatively underexplored in terms of semantic evolution (Holmstedt, 2012; Johnstone, 1998; Poythress, 1979; Procházková, 2021). This oversight neglects Genesis’s theological significance and reveals a notable gap in scholarly inquiry. Moreover, existing research typically focuses on isolated word studies without applying a comprehensive typological framework, thereby limiting the capacity to systematically assess how semantic changes shape interpretation (Andrews, 2025; Stine, 2011). To address this gap, the present study applies a structured typology of semantic change, offering a systematic method for tracing and categorizing lexical development in the KJV of Genesis.

This research is guided by three key questions: (1) Which lexical items in the KJV of Genesis exhibit significant semantic shifts? (2) How do these shifts influence contemporary theological interpretations? (3) In what ways can historical linguistic analysis enrich our understanding and engagement with the text? Addressing these questions will clarify the relationship between language change and doctrinal interpretation, especially the risks of misrepresenting authorial intent due to semantic drift. To pursue these objectives, the study adopts a recognized framework for categorizing semantic change (Campbell, 2010), systematically tracing the historical trajectories of selected lexical items. Rather than merely cataloging changes, this analysis aims to illustrate how awareness of semantic development can either enhance or hinder interpretive clarity. By bridging historical understanding with present-day application, the study supports a more contextually grounded and theologically informed engagement with Genesis.

The implications of this study are both linguistic and theological. Linguistically, it demonstrates how semantic shifts can obscure the historical meaning of ancient texts. Theologically, it argues for integrating linguistic awareness into scriptural interpretation. Given the KJV’s ongoing liturgical and academic relevance, recognizing how evolving meanings affect interpretation is critical (Bagley, 2011). This sensitivity is essential for scholars, clergy, and lay readers who seek both doctrinal fidelity and exegetical clarity. Ultimately, this investigation affirms that linguistic sensitivity is indispensable to responsible theological reflection. By examining the historical evolution of language in Genesis, the study contributes to both biblical scholarship and theological pedagogy, enabling a more faithful and critically aware interpretation of sacred texts.

## Literature Review

The Book of Genesis articulates core theological themes—creation, covenant, sin, and divine-human relationships—that have profoundly shaped Judeo-Christian thought (Kline, 2023). Among its many English translations, the King James Version (KJV) holds enduring significance due to its literary elegance and historical influence. However, the early modern English in which it was written presents interpretive challenges for contemporary readers. Over the centuries, key lexical items in the KJV have undergone semantic shifts, prompting the need for diachronic linguistic analysis to clarify potential misunderstandings and preserve theological accuracy (Andrews et al., 2022; Eliason et al., 2023; Nelson, 2023).

Recent scholarship has increasingly addressed how evolving word meanings affect the interpretation of sacred texts (Andrews, 2025; Légrádi & Szabó, 2023; Procházková, 2021). For instance, Légrádi and Szabó (2023) emphasize that semantic change alters how readers engage with literature, highlighting the importance of historical linguistic awareness. This issue is especially critical in biblical interpretation, where modern connotations can obscure original doctrinal intent. As De Souza (2022) demonstrates in his study of *replenish* in Genesis 1:28, the modern sense of “refill” contrasts sharply with the 17th-century usage, which simply meant “to fill.” Such changes have theological consequences when imposed upon the biblical text.

Naudé (2022) traces the development of English Bible translations in the Tyndale–KJV tradition, showing that shifts in language reflect not only linguistic transitions but also theological realignments. His findings reveal how successive translations encode evolving doctrinal priorities, underscoring that semantic change can alter the theological trajectory of biblical interpretation. The doctrinal implications of lexical shifts are further explored in Smidt (2024) analysis of the terms *dominion* and *stewardship* in Genesis 1. He argues that reinterpretations of these terms have significantly influenced Christian attitudes toward environmental ethics. This demonstrates that semantic change in biblical language can shape contemporary ethical and theological frameworks.

Using stylometric techniques, Yoffe et al. (2023) reveal how shifts in linguistic structure correlate with theological emphasis in the Priestly source of Genesis and Exodus. Their empirical approach exemplifies how computational linguistics can enhance the precision of biblical studies, particularly in tracing patterns of lexical recurrence and semantic distribution. Demsky (2023) investigates the genealogical passages of Genesis, arguing that these records encode more than lineage—they carry embedded cultural and social meanings. As vocabulary changes over time, the societal functions of such texts risk being misinterpreted or overlooked without diachronic linguistic awareness.

Miller (2022) distinguishes Genesis from other ancient Near Eastern cosmologies by emphasizing its unique theological vision. He warns that failure to account for historical semantics—both in Hebrew and early English translations—can lead to misreadings that obscure the distinctiveness of the Genesis account. Likewise, Coleman (2023) explores the doctrine of *imago Dei* (image of God) and highlights the theological centrality of precise lexical interpretation. He contends that semantic drift in terms such as “image” and “likeness” can dilute doctrinal clarity and compromise theological orthodoxy. Walker-Jones (2017), taking a step further, examines the evolving interpretation of human-animal relationships in Genesis 1–3, showing how changes in the semantics of *dominion* influence ecological and ethical theology. His work calls for renewed attention to the original linguistic frameworks in ethical exegesis. Interestingly, from an interfaith perspective, Hyun (2023) analyzes the Joseph narrative’s capacity to foster dialogue among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities. He argues that understanding the historical semantics of key terms enhances the narrative’s theological resonance and its potential to bridge religious traditions.

Despite these significant contributions, there remains a lack of a systematic, typology-based study focusing specifically on semantic shifts within the KJV translation of Genesis. Existing studies tend to focus on isolated terms or general translation issues without employing a comprehensive framework for categorizing types of semantic change. Collectively, these studies affirm that semantic shifts in Genesis are not merely linguistic phenomena but carry deep theological, ethical, and cultural implications. As lexical meanings evolve, there is an urgent need to analyze these changes through diachronic linguistic methods. Such analysis not only corrects potential anachronisms but also strengthens doctrinal fidelity and deepens theological understanding by aligning interpretation with the original intent of the biblical text.

### *Theoretical Framework*

This study is grounded in the theoretical principles of diachronic linguistics, which examines how language changes over time, particularly in its semantic dimensions. A central component of the framework is Campbell (2013) typology of semantic change, which categorizes shifts into several types: semantic broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical extension, and metonymic shift (Georgakopoulos & Polis, 2021). These categories provide a structured lens through which the evolution of biblical terms may be analyzed—especially useful when assessing how meanings in the KJV no longer correspond with contemporary English usage (Qiu, Stifter, Bauer, Lash, & Ji, 2018). Following the methodological outline developed by Jose (2024), the study integrates various linguistic tools, including Strong’s Concordance, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), interlinear biblical texts, and comparative translation methodologies. This approach enables the tracing of lexical development from Biblical Hebrew through Early Modern English to present-day English. It also helps highlight lexical discrepancies that may influence doctrinal clarity and spiritual application (Abitay & Bekkozhanova, 2023; Balduino, de Araujo, & Agostinho, 2021).

Ultimately, this study underscores the need for scholars, pastors, educators, and theological readers to cultivate a deeper linguistic awareness. Cultivating linguistic literacy enables these audiences to engage more faithfully with biblical texts, particularly those that have undergone significant semantic transformation through translation and time (Garcia & Salido, 2019; Miceli & Round, 2022). A diachronic approach thus becomes not only an academic exercise but also a hermeneutical imperative.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Design*

This study employed a qualitative-descriptive research design, utilizing a diachronic linguistic approach, to examine the semantic changes of selected lexical items in the Book of Genesis, as translated in the King James Version (KJV). The primary aim was to trace the evolution of word meanings from their Biblical Hebrew origins through 17th-century English usage to their contemporary semantic forms. A qualitative method was deemed appropriate as it enabled in-depth analysis of lexical development, interpretive implications, and theological relevance. The study adhered to the typological framework of Campbell (2013), which systematically classifies semantic change such as broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical change, and metonymic change. Through this framework, the research aimed to explore not only how specific words have changed over time but also how such changes may influence the reader’s theological understanding of the Genesis narrative.

### *Data Collection*

The data for this study were collected from the King James Version (1611) of the Book of Genesis. Using purposive sampling, the researcher selected 28 lexical items based on three criteria: (1) the term’s theological or narrative significance within Genesis; (2) the presence of observable semantic change from the KJV era to modern English usage; and (3) the availability of comparative lexical evidence from Hebrew, 17th-century English, and modern English sources. The selected words appear in key passages that relate to themes such as creation, fall, covenant, and morality. To trace the semantic evolution of these words, several tools and

references were employed. The Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible was used to identify the Hebrew roots of each term and determine their semantic range in the original context. The historical meanings of the KJV English terms were sourced from the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and other Early Modern English references. For comparison with contemporary usage, definitions were derived from modern dictionaries such as Merriam-Webster and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). Furthermore, other Bible translations, including the New International Version (NIV), the English Standard Version (ESV), and the New Living Translation (NLT), were reviewed to compare rendering decisions and identify translational shifts. To establish theological implications, relevant passages were interpreted using classical commentaries such as those of Matthew Henry and Keil and Delitzsch, which provided contextual insights into how these terms were historically understood within Christian exegesis.

### Data Analysis

Each selected word was analyzed following a structured diachronic process. First, its usage in the Genesis text of the KJV was identified and examined within its immediate scriptural context. Second, the Hebrew term behind the English translation was established using Strong's Concordance, allowing for theological anchoring of its original meaning. Third, the English term's 17th-century usage was verified through historical linguistic resources. Fourth, the modern semantic value of the term was determined through reference to contemporary dictionaries and corpora. Finally, the change in meaning was categorized according to Georgakopoulos and Polis (2021) typology of semantic change: broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical change, or metonymic change.

The interpretive significance of each semantic change was also evaluated. For instance, a word whose modern usage bears significantly different connotations from its 1611 counterpart—such as *replenish* (originally “fill,” now “refill”) or *suffer* (originally “permit,” now “to endure pain”)—was discussed in terms of its potential to distort modern theological or doctrinal understanding. All data were recorded and organized in tabular form to facilitate clarity, consistency, and comparative analysis.

### Validation of Findings

To ensure reliability and credibility, the researcher triangulated findings through cross-verification with scholarly biblical commentaries, academic lexicons, and interlinear biblical tools. Linguistic and theological consultants also reviewed selected semantic interpretations. This multi-source validation process strengthened the trustworthiness of the study's classifications and interpretive claims. In sum, the methodology combined tools and insights from historical linguistics, biblical hermeneutics, and lexical semantics to provide a thorough and systematic examination of semantic change in the Book of Genesis. By integrating diachronic analysis with theological reflection, the study contributes to a more informed and faithful engagement with one of Scripture's most foundational texts.

## Results

This study examined twenty-eight (28) lexical items from the Book of Genesis in the King James Version (KJV) that have undergone semantic change. Each word was traced from its Hebrew origin, contextualized within its 1611 English usage, and compared with its modern meaning. These changes were categorized according to Campbell (2013) classification of semantic change: semantic broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical change, metonymic change, and obsolescence. Tables are presented for each category, followed by brief interpretations highlighting the theological or hermeneutical implications of such changes.

### Semantic Broadening

Semantic broadening refers to the process by which a word's meaning expands over time to include more general or abstract concepts than originally intended. In the Book of Genesis, several lexical items from the 1611 King James Version exemplify this linguistic shift. These transformations, while natural in the evolution of language, can affect how contemporary readers interpret sacred texts, particularly in theological or doctrinal contexts.

Table 1 presents five lexical items from Genesis that illustrate semantic broadening. A detailed analysis follows.

**Table 1: Lexical Items Undergoing Semantic Broadening.**

Word	Verse Reference	1611 Meaning	Modern Meaning
<b>Want</b>	Genesis 18:28	To lack or be deficient	To desire or wish
<b>Birthright</b>	Genesis 25:31	Right of the firstborn	Any inherited right
<b>Communed</b>	Genesis 18:33	To talk or converse	To engage in spiritual reflection
<b>Fruit</b>	Genesis 1:29	Produce or harvest	Moral or spiritual outcome
<b>Host</b>	Genesis 2:1	A great number (army/beings)	A person entertaining guest

The word *want* in Genesis 18:28 originally denoted a state of deficiency or lack—Abraham inquires whether the city would still face destruction if it *lacked* five righteous people. In contemporary English, however, *want* has broadened to mean *to desire* or *to wish for something*, which may shift the emphasis from material absence to personal longing. Similarly, *host* in Genesis 2:1 once referred to vast celestial or military assemblies—“the host of heaven”—reflecting magnitude and divine organization. Today, the term more commonly refers to a *person who entertains guests*, a drastic shift that narrows the grandeur implied in the original Hebrew context.

Another term, *Birthright*, in Genesis 25:31 signifies the unique privileges of the firstborn son, including spiritual authority and material inheritance. Over time, the term has come to represent any form of inherited right or entitlement, sometimes used in legal, social, or metaphorical frameworks. The verb *communed* in Genesis 18:33 originally meant to engage in ordinary conversation. Yet modern usage, especially in religious contexts, associates the word with *deep spiritual reflection* or *mystical communion*, which may lend unintended sacred weight to what was originally a dialogue. Finally, *fruit* in Genesis 1:29 refers to literal agricultural produce given for sustenance. In modern discourse, the term often implies metaphorical or abstract outcomes such as *moral fruit* (e.g., fruits of the Spirit), thereby expanding its semantic range beyond the literal to the figurative.

These broadened meanings reflect the dynamic nature of language but also present a challenge to biblical interpretation. When modern readers unconsciously impose contemporary definitions onto ancient texts, they risk misrepresenting theological meanings and historical intentions. For this reason, semantic analysis is essential in preserving the integrity of scriptural exegesis.

### Semantic Narrowing

Semantic narrowing refers to the process by which a word's meaning becomes more specific over time, resulting in a reduction of its original semantic range. In the Book of Genesis, several lexical items found in the 1611 King James Version exhibit this linguistic shift, which may significantly influence how modern readers interpret key agricultural, dietary, and behavioral themes. Table 2 presents six such words, each of which demonstrates a clear case of semantic restriction that may obscure the broader intent of the original text.

**Table 2:** *Lexical Items Undergoing Semantic Narrowing.*

Word	Verse Reference	1611 Meaning	Modern Meaning
Replenish	Genesis 1:28	To fill	To refill
Meat	Genesis 1:29	Any kind of food	Animal flesh
Suffer	Genesis 31:7	To allow or permit	To endure pain
Cattle	Genesis 1:25	Domesticated livestock	Bovine animals
Corn	Genesis 41:49	Grain in general	Maize
Fowls	Genesis 1:20	Birds	Domestic poultry

The term *replenish* in Genesis 1:28 originally meant simply *to fill*, especially in the context of populating the earth. However, modern usage has narrowed its scope to mean *to refill something that was once full but has been depleted*. This semantic shift has theological implications, as it may lead readers to infer a prior population of the earth before the events of creation described in Genesis—a view not supported by the original Hebrew term *male'*. Similarly, *meat* in Genesis 1:29 referred broadly to any kind of food or sustenance, whether plant- or animal-based. Today, however, it almost exclusively denotes *animal flesh*, which may cause confusion in understanding God's provision of plant-based food to both humans and animals in the pre-Fall world. The verb *suffer* in Genesis 31:7 originally meant *to allow* or *to permit*, as seen when Jacob says that God “suffered him not to hurt me.” In contemporary English, however, the word has narrowed to mean *to endure pain or hardship*, potentially distorting the passage into one about emotional or physical suffering rather than divine restraint.

The word *cattle* once denoted all domesticated livestock, including sheep, goats, and oxen. In modern usage, it is more narrowly associated with *bovines*—primarily cows and bulls—thus diminishing the diversity of animal husbandry depicted in Genesis. *Corn*, as used in Genesis 41:49, referred to grain in general, including wheat and barley. In today's context, particularly in American English, *corn* typically refers to *maize* (*Zea mays*), a New World crop unknown to the ancient Near East. This semantic narrowing may lead readers to anachronistically imagine Egyptian storehouses filled with yellow kernels rather than traditional Middle Eastern grains. Lastly, *fowls* in Genesis 1:20 referred broadly to *birds*, including all winged creatures of the air. The modern term is often associated with *domestic poultry*, such as chickens or ducks, which narrows the scope and may obscure the text's reference to the diversity of avian life created by God.

These shifts illustrate how semantic narrowing can subtly alter interpretive possibilities, especially in passages concerning creation, dietary laws, or divine-human interactions. Awareness of such linguistic evolution is crucial in ensuring accurate exegetical work and theological clarity in biblical studies.

### Semantic Amelioration

Semantic amelioration refers to the process by which a word's meaning becomes more elevated, noble, or positive over time. In the Book of *Genesis*, certain lexical items from the 1611 King James Version

demonstrate this upward semantic shift, where formerly neutral or modest meanings have acquired more exalted or doctrinally rich connotations in contemporary usage. Although relatively less frequent than broadening or narrowing, this process can significantly impact theological interpretation by intensifying the spiritual or moral weight of biblical terms. Table 3 presents two such lexical items in *Genesis* that have undergone amelioration:

**Table 3:** *Lexical Items Undergoing Semantic Amelioration.*

Word	Verse Reference	1611 Meaning	Modern Meaning
Grace	Genesis 6:8	Favor	Divine blessing or salvation
Commend	Genesis 47:29	To entrust or present	To praise

The word *grace* in Genesis 6:8—“But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord”—originally denoted *favor*, typically in the sense of goodwill or kindness shown by a superior to a subordinate. In the context of the King James Version, the term carried a relational and covenantal tone. However, in modern Christian theology, *grace* has taken on a much more profound salvific meaning, referring to *unmerited divine favor bestowed for the purpose of salvation*. This theological intensification can heighten the perceived spiritual significance of Noah’s standing before God, linking the Old Testament narrative more directly with New Testament soteriology. Likewise, the verb *commend* in Genesis 47:29 initially meant *to entrust* or *to formally present*, often with the sense of transferring responsibility. In this verse, Jacob is entrusting his burial instructions to Joseph. Over time, however, *commend* has come to be more commonly associated with *praise* or *public approval*. Modern readers encountering the word may be inclined to interpret it as *approval of character*, rather than its original connotation of *entrusting a task or request*—a subtle but meaningful shift that can influence how readers view the interpersonal dynamics of biblical figures.

These instances of amelioration enrich the theological lexicon but also pose interpretive challenges. While modern meanings deepen spiritual reflections and doctrinal connections, they can obscure the historical-linguistic context in which the original text was written. Consequently, an awareness of diachronic semantic shifts is vital for scholars, translators, and theologians committed to preserving both the authenticity and the richness of biblical interpretation.

#### *Semantic Pejoration*

Semantic pejoration refers to the process by which a word’s meaning deteriorates over time, acquiring more negative, morally loaded, or unpleasant connotations than it originally possessed. In the Book of *Genesis*, several terms found in the 1611 King James Version have undergone such semantic decline. This shift has significant implications, particularly in theological and character-based interpretations, as readers may project modern biases onto ancient texts, misjudging intentions or moral dimensions not present in the original context. Table 4 identifies five lexical items from *Genesis* that demonstrate clear patterns of pejoration:

**Table 4:** *Lexical Items Undergoing Semantic Pejoration.*

Word	Verse Reference	1611 Meaning	Modern Meaning
Cunning	Genesis 25:27	Skillful	Deceitful or sly
Dreadful	Genesis 28:17	Awe-inspiring	Terrifying or horrible
Subtil	Genesis 3:1	Clever or discerning	Sly or deceptive
Lust	Genesis 31:30	Strong desire/longing	Sexual craving
Pit	Genesis 37:24	A cistern or well	A hopeless condition

The word *cunning*, used to describe Jacob in Genesis 25:27, originally denoted a person who possessed skill or craft, especially in hunting or practical affairs. However, in contemporary English, *cunning* has acquired strong negative connotations, often associated with manipulation, deceit, and trickery. This pejoration can unjustly cast Jacob in a morally ambiguous light, even when the original Hebrew word implies capability rather than deception. *Dreadful*, as used in Genesis 28:17 to describe Jacob’s reaction to a divine encounter, originally meant *awe-inspiring* or *worthy of reverence*, capturing the sense of holy fear. In modern usage, however, the word typically means *terrible*, *horrific*, or *something to be avoided*. This semantic change may diminish the sacred weight of Jacob’s experience, substituting reverence with horror.

The term *subtil* (modern spelling: *subtle*) in Genesis 3:1 is particularly noteworthy. It was used to describe the serpent as *clever* or *discerning*—traits not necessarily negative in the 1611 context. However, due to its association with the fall of man, and its semantic decline over time, *subtil* now often implies *slyness*, *deception*, or *moral corruption*. This pejoration intensifies the sinister characterization of the serpent beyond what the original lexical choice may have intended. The word *lust* in Genesis 31:30 originally conveyed a general *strong desire* or *longing*, which could be either positive or neutral, depending on context. In modern usage, however, it has become almost exclusively associated with *sexual craving* and *immorality*. This semantic shift may mislead readers into interpreting passages involving desire as inherently sinful, thereby oversimplifying complex emotional or spiritual motivations in the text.

Lastly, *pit* in Genesis 37:24 refers to a literal *cistern* or *underground well*, into which Joseph was thrown by his brothers. In present-day usage, *pit* often connotes a metaphorical *hopeless condition* or *state of despair*. While this figurative reading may offer fruitful theological reflection, it is important to distinguish it from the original physical referent to avoid unintended dramatization of the narrative. These examples of semantic pejoration highlight the importance of historical linguistic awareness in biblical interpretation. Without such sensitivity, modern readers risk imposing present-day connotations onto ancient texts, potentially distorting theological meanings, moral assessments, and the original authorial intent.

### Metaphorical Change

Metaphorical change occurs when a word's literal meaning evolves into a figurative, idiomatic, or symbolic usage over time. In the Book of *Genesis*, such shifts often involve euphemisms, culturally embedded idioms, or theological metaphors that carry profound implications for understanding key biblical themes. These changes reflect the rich metaphorical language of Hebrew and its interpretive complexity when rendered into English, especially in early translations like the King James Version. Without awareness of these shifts, modern readers may misinterpret nuanced references related to covenantal intimacy, divine provision, and spiritual symbolism. Table 5 highlights three lexical items from *Genesis* that illustrate metaphorical change:

**Table 5:** *Lexical Items Undergoing Metaphorical Change.*

Word	Verse Reference	1611 Meaning	Modern Meaning
Know	Genesis 4:1	Sexual intimacy (euphemism)	Mental or cognitive awareness
See	Genesis 22:14	To provide (idiomatically: "God will see to it")	Literal visual perception
Covering	Genesis 3:21	Garment or protective clothing	Concealment, disguise, or deflection

The verb *know* in Genesis 4:1—"And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived"—is a euphemistic expression for sexual union. In the biblical Hebrew context, *yada'* conveyed not only physical intimacy but also covenantal and relational depth. Over time, the English verb *know* has undergone metaphorical detachment from this euphemistic use and is now generally understood as *mental recognition* or *cognitive awareness*. This shift may lead modern readers to overlook the intentional theological richness of the original expression, which implies a deep, sacred connection between spouses.

Likewise, the verb *see* in Genesis 22:14—"In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen"—is idiomatic, meaning "God will provide" (as in "God will see to it"). The underlying Hebrew (*ra'ah*) includes the idea of providential foresight and action. However, in contemporary English, *see* is primarily understood as *visual perception*, which strips the phrase of its providential nuance. Without recognizing the metaphorical usage, readers may miss the theological message of divine provision and care.

The term *covering* in Genesis 3:21 originally referred to literal garments provided by God for Adam and Eve following their fall: "Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them." The primary meaning was *protection* and *restoration of dignity*. Today, however, *covering* is often used metaphorically to mean *concealment*, *disguise*, or even *avoidance of truth*. This change in connotation can shift interpretive focus from divine grace and care to implications of shame or deceit, which are not inherent in the original use.

These metaphorical changes illustrate the evolving relationship between language and theology. They underscore how literal, concrete terms in the biblical text have taken on abstract, figurative meanings that may either enrich or obscure the original message. For biblical interpreters and theologians, tracing these metaphorical shifts is vital for recovering the layered meanings of the text, especially in passages related to human intimacy, divine provision, and the implications of sin and redemption.

### Metonymic Change

Metonymic change occurs when a word's meaning evolves through association—typically from an abstract or symbolic concept to a more literal or restricted interpretation. In biblical texts such as *Genesis*, such metonymic shifts are often tied to rich theological and cultural frameworks. Over time, however, these symbolic associations may be lost or diminished in modern understanding, leading to a reduced appreciation of the theological depth originally embedded in the vocabulary. The Book of *Genesis* contains several examples where this type of semantic change has occurred, with implications for doctrinal and literary interpretation. Table 6 highlights key lexical items in *Genesis* that have undergone metonymic change:

**Table 6:** *Lexical Items Undergoing Metonymic Change.*

Word	Verse Reference	1611 Meaning	Modern Meaning
Heart	Genesis 6:5	Inner being—mind, will, and emotions	Emotions or feelings
Hand	Genesis 9:2	Symbol of authority, control, or power	A literal body part
Name	Genesis 11:4	Reputation, fame, or legacy	Literal designation or label

In Genesis 6:5, the word *heart* is used to describe the depth of human corruption: “every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” In the 1611 context, *heart* was a metonym for the *entire inner being*, encompassing *thoughts, decisions, desires, and emotions*. This usage aligns with Hebrew anthropology, which saw the *lev* (heart) as the center of cognition and moral direction. However, in modern usage, *heart* is primarily associated with *emotion or feeling*, often detached from intellect or volition. This narrowing of meaning may lead readers to perceive sin as an emotional failing rather than a comprehensive corruption of thought, desire, and will.

*Hand*, as seen in Genesis 9:2—“into your hand are they delivered”—functioned metonymically to signify *authority, dominion, or power*. The hand represented the execution of one's will and symbolized responsibility or control. Today, however, *hand* is typically understood only in a physical, anatomical sense. This shift can obscure the theological message of God's delegation of authority to humankind over creation, reducing the richness of the covenantal language.

In Genesis 11:4, the builders of the Tower of Babel state, “let us make us a name.” Here, *name* referred not simply to a verbal identifier but to *fame, legacy, and reputation*. It symbolized the builders' desire for renown and autonomy apart from divine purpose. In contemporary language, *name* has largely lost this metonymic sense and is understood more narrowly as a *label or personal identifier*. Without grasping the original meaning, readers may miss the prideful ambition and theological rebellion embedded in the passage.

These examples demonstrate how metonymic change can weaken the symbolic and theological resonance of biblical vocabulary. Modern readers may unconsciously flatten the text by interpreting symbol-laden terms through a literal lens. For biblical scholars and theologians, recovering these original associations is essential for maintaining the integrity of scriptural interpretation and appreciating the richness of biblical language.

### Obsolescence

Lexical obsolescence occurs when words fall out of common usage, becoming archaic or unintelligible to modern readers. In the 1611 King James Version (KJV) of the *Book of Genesis*, several terms that were once standard have since become obsolete in contemporary English. These words now pose significant challenges to comprehension, especially for lay readers unfamiliar with Early Modern English. Without explanatory footnotes or updated translations, the theological and narrative clarity of these passages can be severely diminished. Table 7 presents four lexical items from *Genesis* whose meanings have been lost to modern usage:

**Table 7: Obsolete Lexical Items in Genesis (KJV).**

Word	Verse Reference	1611 Meaning	Modern Status
Asswage	Genesis 8:1	To subside	Obsolete
Peradventure	Genesis 24:5	Perhaps	Obsolete
Betimes	Genesis 26:31	Early	Obsolete
Wot	Genesis 21:26	To know	Obsolete

In Genesis 8:1, the verb *asswage* is used in the context of the flood narrative: “and the waters asswaged.” In the 1611 context, *asswage* meant *to subside* or *to decrease in intensity*. Today, the term is almost entirely obsolete, replaced by verbs such as *recede*, *diminish*, or *subside*. Without clarification, modern readers may misread or skip over the word entirely, missing the critical theological moment of divine intervention and restoration after judgment.

*Peradventure*, found in Genesis 24:5, originally meant *perhaps* or *by chance*. In the narrative, it expresses uncertainty regarding the success of a mission. Though once common in English literature and biblical texts, *peradventure* is now archaic, with its meaning better rendered in contemporary translations as *perhaps* or *what if*. Its continued use in older versions of the Bible may obscure the emotional and narrative tension of the verse.

In Genesis 26:31, *betimes* means *early* or *at an early time*. It describes the timing of an action undertaken by Isaac and Abimelech. Though the word once appeared frequently in English prose and poetry, it has since fallen out of usage. Today's readers may find it unfamiliar or misinterpret it, thereby weakening the narrative's temporal clarity.

Finally, the term *wot* in Genesis 21:26—“I wot not who hath done this thing”—means *I do not know*. The verb *wot* is a relic of Old English and Middle English, and has disappeared from contemporary use entirely. Most readers today would not recognize it as a synonym for *know*, leading to confusion in grasping the character's claim of ignorance.

These obsolete lexical items highlight the need for modern Bible translations to offer either footnotes, glossaries, or updated equivalents to preserve accessibility without compromising textual fidelity. For scholars, understanding these terms is essential for engaging with the historical linguistic context of the KJV. For general readers, however, failure to recognize obsolete terms risks disengagement from the theological message and literary coherence of the text.

## Discussion

The *Book of Genesis*, as rendered in the 1611 King James Version (KJV), contains a rich tapestry of lexical items whose meanings have undergone significant semantic change over time. These transformations are not merely linguistic but carry profound theological implications, particularly when interpreting core narratives of creation, covenant, sin, and redemption. Campbell (2013) categorizes such changes into six major types: semantic broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical shift, and metonymic shift. Each of these categories offers unique insight into how evolving word meanings influence contemporary understandings of sacred Scripture.

Semantic broadening, where a word expands in scope or meaning, presents both interpretive risks and opportunities. For example, the word *want*, as used in Genesis 18:28, once meant “to lack” but has since shifted toward connotations of desire or longing. This semantic expansion introduces ambiguity, especially in contexts related to divine justice and human intercession. Similarly, the term *host*, once denoting celestial armies or divine beings, now frequently refers to someone offering hospitality. This evolution dilutes the theological gravity of references to “heavenly hosts,” which originally emphasized God’s sovereignty and authority over creation (Lowder, Zhou, & Gordon, 2024).

Despite these risks, broadening may also enrich theological reflection. For instance, the term *fruit* has transitioned from a literal reference to edible produce to a symbolic expression encompassing both physical and spiritual abundance. This metaphorical richness aligns with covenantal and eschatological themes in *Genesis*, prompting readers to view the text not just as an ancient narrative but as a spiritually relevant guide for modern life (Lowder et al., 2024).

In contrast, semantic narrowing, wherein a word’s meaning becomes more restricted over time, tends to obscure the text’s original intention. Words such as *meat*, *replenish*, and *cattle* originally held broad meanings. In Genesis 1:29, *meat* referred to any type of food, yet today it specifically denotes animal flesh. This shift may lead readers to infer a divine endorsement of carnivorous diets at creation, contrary to the plant-based ideal implied in the original Hebrew. Likewise, *replenish*, once meaning “to fill,” now suggests “to refill,” introducing theologically problematic notions of a pre-Adamic world or previous creation (Horvat, Despot, & Hržica, 2024). These examples show how narrowing can limit theological richness and introduce doctrinal distortions.

Semantic amelioration—the elevation of a word’s connotation—often enhances spiritual engagement. For example, *grace*, as used in Genesis 6:8, originally meant “favor” but now carries deeper theological significance related to salvation and divine mercy. This enriched understanding invites readers to explore themes of redemption and covenant more profoundly. Similarly, the term *commend*, which once meant to entrust or present, is now frequently associated with praise or affirmation. This shift allows for broader interpretive possibilities in patriarchal narratives that emphasize legacy and divine favor (Yin & Yang, 2022).

On the other hand, semantic pejoration introduces negative connotations to originally neutral or positive terms. The word *cunning*, for example, formerly denoted cleverness but now implies deceit. In Genesis 3:1, the description of the serpent as “subtil” has acquired a more sinister tone due to this shift. While this may heighten the narrative’s dramatic intensity, it risks exaggerating moral judgments beyond the text’s original scope (Du, 2022). Pejoration, therefore, demands careful hermeneutical attention, lest it skew character portrayals or doctrinal understanding.

Metaphorical shifts further complicate interpretation. The word *know* in Genesis 4:1, for instance, refers to intimate, conjugal relations. However, contemporary usage tends to associate “knowing” with cognitive awareness. This semantic drift may obscure the depth of relational intimacy originally intended in the text, thereby flattening theological reflections on human relationships, covenant, and the nature of divine-human interaction (Elliott-Cooper, 2018).

Similarly, metonymic change—where a concept is referred to by something closely associated—alters theological anthropology. In Genesis 6:5, *heart* once represented the holistic human self: mind, will, and emotion. Modern interpretations, however, often reduce the heart to merely the emotional realm, weakening theological understandings of human agency and moral responsibility. The word *name*, as used in Genesis 11:4, originally implied reputation and legacy but is now often read as a simple identifier. Such changes risk diminishing the spiritual weight of themes like calling, mission, and divine identity (Elliott-Cooper, 2018).

In addition, obsolescence poses practical challenges for modern readers. Words such as *assuage* and *peradventure*, common in early modern English, are no longer part of everyday usage. This lexical disconnection can hinder comprehension and reduce appreciation for the literary beauty of the KJV. Sánchez, Faber, and D’Angiulli (2011) argue that language attrition not only affects understanding but also diminishes the affective and aesthetic dimensions of sacred texts.

Ultimately, the evolving semantic landscape of *Genesis* requires an informed and sensitive approach to interpretation. Historical semantics and diachronic linguistic tools are indispensable in uncovering the original nuances of key lexical items. Such awareness enhances theological clarity, preserves doctrinal integrity, and fosters richer engagement with Scripture across diverse cultural and temporal contexts.

The semantic changes observed in the KJV translation of *Genesis*—including broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical, and metonymic shifts—illustrate the dynamic interplay between language, theology, and interpretation. These shifts not only challenge modern readers to grapple with textual complexities but also offer new avenues for reflection and spiritual growth. By carefully navigating these changes, scholars and lay readers alike can access deeper layers of meaning within *Genesis*, ensuring that its enduring theological truths continue to inspire across generations.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the semantic evolution of twenty-eight (28) selected lexical items from the Book of *Genesis* in the 1611 King James Version (KJV), using a diachronic linguistic framework guided by a typology of semantic change. The analysis identified major semantic shifts across categories such as broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical and metonymic transformation, and obsolescence. These changes, shaped over centuries, were shown to influence how theological concepts are interpreted in the modern era. The findings reveal that seemingly familiar terms such as *replenish*, *suffer*, and *grace* no longer convey the meanings intended by the original translators, potentially leading to doctrinal misinterpretations. This highlights the critical need for historically informed linguistic analysis in both scholarly exegesis and lay scriptural engagement.

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the analysis was confined to lexical items in the Book of *Genesis* within the KJV; other books and translations were not examined. Second, the selection of words, while purposive and criterion-based, remains limited in scope and may not represent the full semantic spectrum of the biblical corpus. Third, this research focused on semantic change but did not fully account for syntactic, phonological, or pragmatic shifts that may further impact interpretation.

The study makes the following recommendations. First, curricular integration should be carried out by theological institutions which should incorporate historical linguistics and semantic typology into their curricula to train future scholars and ministers in diachronic methods of biblical interpretation. Second, comparative reading of annotated or parallel Bible translations should be encouraged to consult to better understand lexical divergence and its doctrinal impact. Third, preaching, devotional, and catechetical resources that rely on early translations like the KJV should be revised and updated to contextualize semantically altered terms. Fourth, future research should conduct cross-translation semantic analyses, comparing how various versions handle terms with evolving meanings. Lastly, digital tools should be developed on semantic-tracing lexicons and platforms that can help visualize historical lexical changes within Scripture.

This study contributes to the growing field of diachronic biblical linguistics by providing a structured approach to analyzing how language change affects theological interpretation. It emphasizes that semantic evolution is not merely a linguistic curiosity but a significant factor in doctrinal clarity, pedagogical accuracy, and spiritual formation. Theologically, the findings stress the importance of aligning interpretation with the original linguistic and cultural context to preserve the integrity of the biblical message. Practically, this research urges biblical educators, translators, and clergy to adapt their methods to account for semantic shifts, ensuring that ancient texts continue to speak faithfully and intelligibly to modern readers.

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