

Semantic Change and Anachronism in the *Book of Isaiah*: A Diachronic Linguistic Analysis of Key Theological Terms in the King James Version

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Abstract

This study investigates semantic change and anachronism in selected Isaianic lexemes as rendered in the King James Version (1611) and understood in contemporary English, with the aim of showing how diachronic linguistic analysis clarifies theological vocabulary and prevents interpretive distortions. Employing a qualitative-descriptive design grounded in diachronic linguistics, lexical items were purposively sampled from Isaiah according to their theological centrality and evidence of semantic drift. Analysis followed Campbell's typology of semantic change, triangulated with Hebrew concordances, historical lexicons, modern dictionaries, and comparative English Bible translations, with findings cross-validated against authoritative commentaries to ensure doctrinal and semantic reliability. Results revealed six recurrent categories of semantic change: broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical and metonymic extension, and archaism or opacity in translation. Broadening often spiritualized originally communal and juridical concepts such as *redeem*, *salvation*, and *righteousness*, while narrowing reduced richly textured terms such as *šālôm*, *remnant*, and *ʿēbed* to thinner modern categories. Amelioration heightened evaluative registers (*kābôd* → *glory*), while pejoration intensified moral colouring (*ʿāwōn* → *iniquity*). Figurative extension became dominant in modern usage, and archaisms such as *bulwark* and *satyrs* created interpretive barriers. These findings highlight how semantic anachronism can obscure Isaiah's covenantal and historical emphases. The study contributes to research by demonstrating the value of typology-driven qualitative methods alongside computational approaches, to pedagogy by offering practical tools for exegetical training, and to translation by stressing balance between historical fidelity and intelligibility. Future research should integrate computational techniques and extend analysis across biblical corpora, though this study is limited by its qualitative scope, focus on Isaiah in the KJV, and the inherent challenges of polysemy and transliteration.

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Introduction

Semantic change, the process by which word meanings evolve over time, lies at the intersection of linguistics, literature, and theology. Its study provides insights not only into how languages adapt to shifting cultural and historical conditions but also into how interpretive traditions are reshaped across generations (Hamilton et al., 2016; Kutuzov et al., 2018). Within biblical studies, semantic change assumes heightened importance because translations mediate theological concepts across centuries, and subtle shifts in meaning can alter doctrinal interpretation, liturgical practice, and modern engagement with scripture (Naudé, 2022).

The *Book of Isaiah*, with its rich theological vocabulary and centrality to both Jewish and Christian traditions, represents a particularly fertile site for diachronic linguistic inquiry. The text traverses themes of judgment, redemption, covenant, and eschatological hope, all of which are encoded in lexical items whose meanings have shifted over millennia. From Hebrew originals through the 1611 King James Version (KJV) to present-day English, these shifts produce both enrichment and distortion, sometimes deepening theological resonance and at other times generating semantic anachronism that risks obscuring Isaiah's original intent (Hindson et al., 2005).

Recent scholarship underscores that semantic change is driven by interlocking linguistic, cultural, historical, and technological factors. High-frequency and morphologically transparent words tend to remain stable, while low-frequency or opaque forms shift more readily (Dubossarsky et al., 2016; Masliš, 2021). Social upheavals such as war, colonization, and industrialization accelerate lexical innovation, while theological developments and cultural re-contextualizations influence biblical semantics across time (Asri et al., 2024; Guidi, 2014). In this light, studying Isaiah's lexicon requires both historical linguistic sensitivity and theological awareness to avoid the pitfalls of reading present-day meanings back into ancient texts.

The King James Bible, in particular, occupies a privileged position in this investigation. As Naudé (2022) notes, it stands as a culmination of successive translation traditions dating from Old English manuscripts to Tyndale and Geneva, achieving cultural authority unmatched by its predecessors. Yet this longevity also means that its lexicon reflects 17th-century semantic fields that no longer map seamlessly onto contemporary English usage (Ephratt, 2016). For example, words such as *judgment*, *righteousness*, and *salvation* have undergone broadening, narrowing, or amelioration, reshaping how modern readers perceive Isaiah's message.

Scholars have increasingly applied computational tools to track semantic drift across corpora, identifying statistical laws of change and demonstrating the influence of frequency, polysemy, and contextual volatility (Englhardt et al., 2020; Xu & Kemp, 2015). While these approaches enrich our understanding of general linguistic trends, biblical texts require complementary hermeneutical frameworks that account for theological nuance, intertextual resonance, and liturgical appropriation (Collins, 2011). Thus, this study positions itself at the intersection of diachronic linguistics and biblical hermeneutics, employing qualitative analysis to investigate semantic change and anachronism in Isaiah's key lexical items.

The significance of this inquiry is twofold. First, it advances linguistic scholarship by testing established typologies of semantic change—such as broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical extension, and archaism—against a text of enduring theological and literary importance (Campbell, 2013). Second, it contributes to biblical interpretation by demonstrating how diachronic awareness safeguards doctrinal integrity, ensuring that translation and exegesis remain contextually faithful. By examining Isaiah through the lens of historical semantics, this study seeks to illuminate how shifts in language reshape theological understanding and to offer strategies for mitigating semantic anachronism in contemporary interpretation.

Literature Review

Semantic Change in Linguistics and Literature

The phenomenon of semantic change has remained a foundational concern in linguistic research, particularly because shifts in word meanings illuminate how language interacts with culture, history, and cognition. Early studies identified general tendencies such as broadening, narrowing, amelioration, and pejoration, while recent scholarship has advanced statistical and computational accounts of how meanings evolve across time. Hamilton et al. (2016) demonstrated that semantic change follows statistical regularities, including the law of conformity and the law of innovation, where word frequency and polysemy significantly affect rates of change. Subsequent research has confirmed that verbs tend to change more frequently than nouns, and nouns more than adjectives, a trend described as the Diachronic Word Class Effect (Dubossarsky et al., 2016).

Lexical semantic change detection has also become an active research area, with advances in diachronic word embeddings allowing for scalable identification of shifts across languages and corpora (Kutuzov et al., 2018). Benchmarking initiatives such as SemEval-2020 have further standardized evaluation procedures

(Schlechtweg et al., 2020). Despite these advances, challenges remain, including the interpretability of computational models and the scarcity of robust diachronic corpora (Tang, 2018). These developments underscore the dual need for computational innovation and humanistic interpretation in semantic change studies.

Mechanisms and Drivers of Semantic Change

Semantic change is shaped by both linguistic and extralinguistic factors. Mechanisms such as metaphor, metonymy, and pragmatic inference facilitate shifts in meaning by extending or narrowing semantic fields (Hansen, 2011). Historical and cultural forces—including wars, colonization, industrialization, and globalization—further accelerate lexical transformation (Asri et al., 2024). Semantic change is also conditioned by word usage frequency, with high-frequency words exhibiting greater stability, while infrequent or morphologically opaque terms shift more readily (Englhardt et al., 2020; Masliš, 2021).

These insights are complemented by broader socio-cultural explanations. Amaral (2021) highlights how ideological and social movements reshape lexical fields, while studies of context volatility demonstrate that semantic associations fluctuate across time, influencing interpretive outcomes (Kahmann et al., 2017). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that semantic change is both systematic and context-sensitive, requiring multidimensional approaches for accurate analysis.

Semantic Change in Biblical Texts

Biblical literature offers a unique case for semantic change due to its long history of transmission across languages, cultures, and theological traditions. The translation of Hebrew and Greek terms into English has produced both enrichment and distortion, as words acquire new connotations across contexts. For example, studies of the Psalms reveal how *blessed* underwent amelioration while *fool* experienced pejoration in English reception, reflecting shifts in theological emphasis. Similarly, in Genesis, terms tied to creation and covenant illustrate the interpretive challenges posed by diachronic semantic drift. In Matthew, the semantic restriction of words demonstrates how narrowing processes reshape theological interpretation.

Scholars also emphasize the KJV as a pivotal site of semantic change. Naudé (2022) traces its lineage through earlier English versions, showing how its lexicon reflects seventeenth-century English semantics that often diverge from both biblical Hebrew and modern English. Ephratt (2016) further illustrates how semantic secularization transforms religious terms, shifting meanings from sacred to secular domains. These dynamics reveal that without diachronic awareness, modern interpreters risk semantic anachronism when engaging with biblical texts.

Computational methods have been applied in this field as well. Rodda et al. (2017) demonstrated how distributional semantics identifies lexical shifts in Ancient Greek, showing that the tools developed for general linguistics can also illuminate theological and historical transformations in sacred texts. Such findings underscore the interdisciplinary potential of combining diachronic linguistics with biblical hermeneutics.

Theological and Hermeneutical Implications

Theological interpretation depends heavily on semantic stability, yet diachronic research shows that meanings often diverge significantly across time. Collins (2011) argues that interpretive debates between textual originalists and evolutionists often rest on semantic misunderstandings, highlighting the need for diachronic awareness in hermeneutics. Liturgical recontextualization further shapes meaning, as passages acquire new resonance when embedded in worship (Guidi, 2014). These transformations underscore that theology is never divorced from linguistic change, and that semantic analysis is essential for doctrinal fidelity.

It is also observed that awareness of semantic evolution safeguards against doctrinal misinterpretation by aligning exegesis with historical semantic fields. This approach not only enriches theological discourse but also equips modern readers, clergy, and scholars to navigate the challenges of semantic anachronism.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the typological framework of semantic change articulated by Campbell (2013), which identifies key processes such as broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical extension, and metonymic shift. These categories provide a systematic basis for analyzing the lexical items of Isaiah, allowing for classification of observed semantic trajectories across Hebrew, seventeenth-century English, and modern English.

In addition, theoretical insights from computational linguistics support the conceptualization of semantic change as governed by statistical regularities, including the law of conformity and the law of innovation (Hamilton et al., 2016). Complementary theories such as the Law of Differentiation and Law of Parallel Change (Liétard et al., 2023; Xu & Kemp, 2015) inform the broader interpretive lens, though the primary analysis remains qualitative and context-sensitive. By combining Campbell's typology with these computational and theoretical models, the framework balances linguistic rigor with hermeneutical sensitivity.

This hybrid theoretical foundation ensures that semantic change in Isaiah is examined through multiple lenses—linguistic, historical, and theological—thus reinforcing the study’s objective of producing contextually faithful and theologically responsible interpretations.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative-descriptive research design, grounded in the principles of diachronic linguistics, to investigate semantic change and anachronism in selected lexical items from the *Book of Isaiah* as translated in the King James Version (KJV). The primary objective was to systematically trace how the meanings of key theological and narrative terms have shifted from their original usage in Biblical Hebrew, through their 17th-century English renderings in the KJV, to their current interpretations in contemporary English. The qualitative approach was selected for its capacity to support detailed contextual analysis and nuanced interpretation of lexical evolution within a complex literary and theological text (Campbell, 2013).

Data collection

The textual data comprised the entire *Book of Isaiah* from the 1611 KJV. Lexical items were purposively sampled using three main criteria: (1) the word’s centrality to Isaianic theology, prophecy, or narrative; (2) clear evidence of semantic change across historical periods; and (3) the availability of robust comparative lexical data from Biblical Hebrew, early modern English, and contemporary English sources. Words frequently examined included those relevant to themes such as redemption, judgment, righteousness, servant, and restoration. This approach ensured that the study captured both doctrinally significant and semantically dynamic terms within Isaiah’s literary corpus.

Data Sources and Tools

To accurately trace semantic development, the study utilized a comprehensive set of resources. Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible provided Hebrew roots and semantic domains, allowing identification of the original lexical field. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and other specialist historical English lexicons were used to determine 17th-century English meanings and contextual usage. For current English definitions, standard dictionaries such as Merriam-Webster and digital corpora, including the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), were referenced. Comparative analysis with modern Bible translations—such as the New International Version (NIV), English Standard Version (ESV), and New Living Translation (NLT)—enabled observation of how key terms are rendered in contemporary English. Academic commentaries on Isaiah, both classic and recent, were also reviewed to clarify doctrinal significance and the interpretive history of each word (Barton, 1998; Hindson et al., 2005).

Data Analysis

A structured, multi-stage process guided the analysis of each lexical item. First, the word’s function and immediate context were established within the KJV text of Isaiah. The corresponding Hebrew term was then identified using concordances and lexicons, ensuring accurate reconstruction of the original semantic domain. Historical usage in early modern English was confirmed through the OED and other period-specific resources, while present-day meanings were determined by consulting contemporary dictionaries and language corpora.

Crucially, all observed semantic changes were classified according to the widely recognized typology of Campbell (2013), which includes broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical extension, and metonymic shift. This typological framework was selected for its established clarity and applicability to historical word studies in biblical texts. Each identified instance of semantic change was then evaluated for its potential interpretive and doctrinal impact, with special attention to cases of semantic anachronism—where present-day understanding of a term might diverge significantly from its original or 1611 usage (Campbell, 2013). All findings were systematically documented in comparative tables, ensuring transparency, consistency, and ease of cross-referencing.

Validation of Findings

Reliability and academic rigor were ensured through triangulation and peer validation. Lexical definitions and semantic classifications were cross-verified with authoritative biblical lexicons, interlinear Hebrew-English texts, and respected academic commentaries on Isaiah (Barton, 1998; Hindson et al., 2005). Where ambiguity arose, further review was sought from specialists in biblical linguistics and historical semantics. Discrepancies in translation among major English versions were documented and analyzed for their implications, further strengthening the credibility of interpretive claims.

Ethical Considerations

All sources utilized in this research are either in the public domain or derived from scholarly materials cited according to academic standards. No human participants or sensitive data were involved in the study.

The research process adhered strictly to principles of transparency, reproducibility, and intellectual honesty. Through this comprehensive and systematic methodology, the study provides a robust examination of semantic change and anachronism in Isaiah. The integration of diachronic linguistic analysis with theological reflection aims to support more accurate exegesis and promote informed engagement with the language of one of the Old Testament's most influential prophetic books.

Results

The diachronic analysis of key Isaiah lexemes shows six recurrent change types: semantic broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration (in reception), metaphorical/metonymic extension, and archaism/opacity in translation. Unless marked †, contrasts below compare the Hebrew source sense in Isaiah with dominant modern English usage; items with † trace English-diachronic drift from KJV/1611 to present usage. For each category, a synoptic table is followed by interpretive commentary foregrounding doctrinal and hermeneutical implications.

Semantic Broadening

Semantic broadening, as seen in Table 1, denotes expansion from concrete, communal, or situational meanings toward more abstract, individualized, or universal senses.

Table 1: Lexical Items Undergoing Semantic Broadening

Word	Verse	Isaiah-Era Sense	Dominant Modern English Sense
Redeem	Isa 1:27	Ransom/liberate; concrete social or juridical deliverance	Spiritual/moral deliverance; salvation in a soteriological frame
Righteousness	Isa 32:17	Covenantal rightness/justice within the community; public rectitude	Inner moral virtue/uprightness, often individualized
Light	Isa 9:2	Literal brightness; visible, historical divine action	Knowledge, hope, spiritual revelation
Salvation	Isa 12:2	Immediate rescue/deliverance (political, physical)	Eternal/spiritual salvation and security

Broadening is clearest where terms with material-historical force (e.g., *redeem*, *salvation*) are increasingly heard through spiritualized lenses. The gain in theological depth risks anachronism if readers overlook Isaiah's sustained focus on communal justice, historical intervention, and embodied restoration. "Righteousness" now commonly connotes private morality, potentially obscuring its covenantal and judicial contours in Isaiah.

Semantic Narrowing

As evident in Table 2, semantic narrowing reflects restriction from a wider, multipronged sense to a more specific or thinned sense in modern usage.

Table 2: Lexical Items Undergoing Semantic Narrowing

Word	Verse	Isaiah-era sense	Dominant modern English sense
Virgin	Isa 7:14	<i>ʾalmā</i> : young woman of marriageable age (sexual status not explicit)	Woman with no sexual experience
Peace	Isa 9:6	<i>šālôm</i> : wholeness/welfare (health, prosperity, social harmony)	Mere absence of conflict or war
Remnant	Isa 10:21	Surviving, elect group preserved by God	Small leftover/remaining group (neutral, non-theological)
Servant	Isa 42:1	<i>ʿēbed</i> : slave/servant/envoy; sometimes royal/messianic representative	Employee/helper/follower
Judgment†	Isa 1:27	KJV "judgment" translating <i>mišpāt</i> : just legal decision, governance	Punitive condemnation ("being judged")

Narrowing often attenuates Isaiah's theological density. "Remnant" shifts from a purposive, chosen survivor-community to a neutral leftover. "Servant" loses royal-representative nuance. For "judgment†," the English-diachronic drift funnels a balanced legal-justice sense into penal overtones, skewing reception toward condemnation rather than order-restoring justice.

English-diachronic note: For "judgment," the Hebrew field (*mišpāt*) remains juridically balanced; it is the English reception that has narrowed toward punitive emphasis.

Semantic Amelioration

Amelioration denotes movement toward a more exalted, laudatory, or theologically intensive sense. Table 3 lists lexical items undergoing semantic amelioration.

Table 3: *Lexical Items Undergoing Semantic Amelioration*

Word	Verse	Isaiah-era sense	Dominant modern English sense
Glory	Isa 40:5	<i>kābôd</i> : weight, honor, manifest significance	Divine majesty/radiance, transcendent splendor
Lovingkindness / Mercy (<i>hesed</i>)	Isa 54:10	Covenant loyalty; steadfast love within binding relationship	Sublime divine mercy/forgiveness; generalized benevolence detached from covenantal reciprocity

“Glory” intensifies from weight/honor to resplendent majesty, often decoupled from the tangible dimensions of God’s presence emphasized by Isaiah. Translating *hesed* as “mercy/lovingkindness” has, in reception, elevated the affective register while sometimes blurring its covenantal obligations (loyalty, fidelity) that structure Isaiah’s soteriology.

Pejoration (in Reception)

Here, pejoration names a receptional intensification: contemporary usage hears a more morally severe sense than the source field strictly requires. Table 4 lists items exhibiting pejorative intensification in reception

Table 4: Item Exhibiting Pejorative Intensification in Reception

Word	Verse	Isaiah-era sense	Contemporary reception tendency
Iniquity	Isa 53:6	<i>‘āwōn</i> : iniquity/guilt and its penalty (culpability + consequences)	Deep moral depravity as the primary sense, eclipsing the legal-culpability dimension

The servant text’s *‘āwōn* holds together wrongdoing, guilt, and liability. Contemporary English reception often foregrounds depravity and under-hears the juridical and reparative aspects crucial for Isaiah’s atonement logic.

Metaphorical and Metonymic Extension

Many terms that are literal in Isaiah also function as stock metaphors/metonyms whose figurative senses have become dominant in modern discourse. Table 5 lists lexical items with metaphorical /metonymic extensions.

Table 5: *Lexical Items with Metaphorical/Metonymic Extension*

Word	Verse	Literal sense	Figurative sense in Isaiah and reception
Light	Isa 9:2	Physical brightness	Revelation, hope, divine guidance
Arm	Isa 53:1	Physical limb	Power; decisive divine intervention in history (“arm of the LORD”)
Wilderness	Isa 35:1	Desert/uncultivated land	Spiritual testing, renewal, preparation
Hand	Isa 41:10	Physical hand	Power, agency, support (“hand of the LORD”)
Heart	Isa 6:10	Inner person: mind/will/emotions	Reduced in modern idiom to feelings, obscuring volitional/intellectual seat
Name	Isa 63:16	Reputation, identity, renown	Often defaulted to “label,” though “good name/reputation” survives in usage

Figurative conventionalization enriches theology yet risks de-materializing Isaiah’s imagery. “Heart” illustrates modern narrowing to affect; “name” shows that while reputational sense persists idiomatically, readers frequently retreat to mere designation, missing covenantal identity and honor themes.

Archaism and Translation Opacity (KJV)

These items are not “obsolete” in English per se but are rare/archaic or opaque in biblical translation, creating comprehension barriers without glossing. Table 6 presents archaic or opaque KJV renderings in *Isaiah*.

Table 6: *Archaic or Opaque KJV Renderings in Isaiah*

Word	Verse	1611/KJV sense	Contemporary status
Bulwark	Isa 26:1	Defensive wall/fortification	Rare/archaic; needs gloss (“ramparts/stronghold”)
Briers	Isa 7:23	Thorny plants	Rare/archaic register; plain “thorns/brambles” clearer
Satyrs (for <i>se’îrîm</i>)	Isa 13:21; 34:14	Mythic/demonic goat-figures / wild goats	Translation-opaque; moderns prefer “wild goats/creatures,” with note on demonological reading

Archaic diction (e.g., “bulwark,” “briers”) and opaque calques (“satyrs”) can mask imagery and intertexts. Targeted glosses or updated renderings preserve Isaiah’s poetic force while restoring accessibility.

Summary of Findings

This study reveals several scenarios. For example, across Isaiah, broadening typically spiritualizes once embodied and communal terms (*redeem*, *salvation*, *righteousness*), while narrowing compresses richly textured theological fields (*šālôm*, *remnant*, *ʿēbed*) into thinner modern categories. Likewise, amelioration elevates reception (e.g., *kābôd* → “glory” as transcendent radiance; *hesed* → sublime mercy) even as it risks loosening covenantal anchors. A reception-level pejoration intensifies moral coloring in *ʾāwôn* (“iniquity”), shifting attention from culpability-penalty integration to depravity alone. The study also shows that metaphor/metonymy has conventionalized figurative senses—in ways that, if unmarked, can eclipse Isaiah’s historical literalism—and KJV archaisms/opacity introduce preventable barriers to comprehension.

Taken together, these trajectories underscore a central hermeneutic imperative: sustained attention to source-language semantic fields and to English diachrony (where relevant) guards against semantic anachronism, enabling readings that are both textually faithful and theologically responsible for contemporary audiences.

Discussion

Overview of Principal Findings

The present study demonstrates that key Isaianic lexemes in the King James Version (1611) exhibit systematic diachronic behavior consistent with established categories of semantic change—broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration (in reception), metaphorical and metonymic extension, and archaism or translation opacity (Campbell, 2013). Broadening frequently spiritualizes terms once grounded in embodied and communal realities, such as *redeem*, *salvation*, and *righteousness*, while narrowing compresses semantically rich covenantal fields, as observed in *šālôm*, *remnant*, and *ʿēbed*. Amelioration elevates affective or transcendent connotations, evident in the intensification of *kābôd* to “glory,” whereas reception-level pejoration intensifies the moral coloring of *ʾāwôn* (“iniquity”). Figurative conventionalization, as in *light*, *arm*, *heart*, and *name*, has become dominant in modern English usage, while a number of KJV renderings (*bulwark*, *briers*, *satyrs*) are now archaic or opaque, necessitating explanatory glosses. Collectively, these findings show how English diachrony and reception history can divert interpretation away from the semantic fields of the Hebrew source text unless diachronic awareness is maintained.

Alignment with Cross-Disciplinary Scholarship on Semantic Change

The distribution of change types in Isaiah aligns with general laws and mechanisms identified in linguistic and computational studies of semantic change. Broadening and metaphorical extension resonate with accounts that highlight metaphor, metonymy, and pragmatic inference as drivers of semantic innovation (Hansen, 2011). The observed stability of high-frequency terms and the instability of polysemous or less frequent items conform to statistical regularities, including the law of conformity and the law of innovation (Dubossarsky et al., 2016; Hamilton et al., 2016). Narrowing phenomena, illustrated by *virgin*, *peace*, and *servant*, reflect the law of differentiation, whereby synonym fields diverge over time, as well as the law of parallel change, which describes concurrent semantic evolution in related terms (Liétard et al., 2023; Xu & Kemp, 2015).

These findings also align with methodological reflections in computational semantics. Benchmarks such as SemEval-2020 have emphasized the importance of standardized evaluation, interpretability, and multi-method approaches (Schlechtweg et al., 2020; Tang, 2018). Although this study employed qualitative, text-based methods, its typological orientation is compatible with computational pipelines, including distributional semantics and hybrid frequency–embedding approaches (Englhardt et al., 2020; Kutuzov et al., 2018). Crosslinguistic evidence further contextualizes the Isaianic case within broader laws of change, demonstrating that semantic evolution often follows regular patterns across unrelated languages (Fugikawa et al., 2023). Moreover, recent onomasiological approaches that induce concepts rather than merely tracking lexical forms provide a promising complement for future studies of biblical semantics (Liétard et al., 2024).

Implications for Isaianic Exegesis and Doctrine

The exegetical consequences of these diachronic shifts are significant. Broadening often spiritualizes terms whose Isaianic sense was juridical, communal, and historically situated. As a result, *redeem* and *salvation* are frequently understood in purely soteriological terms, obscuring Isaiah’s emphasis on covenantal justice and historical deliverance. Narrowing diminishes theological density: the modern sense of *remnant* as a neutral leftover group eclipses its Isaianic role as a divinely chosen community, and *ʿēbed* is commonly reduced to “helper” or “employee,” detaching it from royal and messianic resonances. These findings echo similar diachronic trends observed in other biblical corpora, where narrowing and shifts in evaluative polarity complicate doctrinal interpretation.

Reception-level pejoration further complicates exegesis. The intensification of *ʾāwôn* toward moral depravity downplays the juridical integration of guilt and liability central to Isaiah’s atonement theology. Similarly, the amelioration of *kābôd* into transcendent “glory” risks obscuring its embodied dimensions of

honor and presence. Attending to these semantic trajectories ensures doctrinal interpretation that is both historically grounded and theologically responsible (Collins, 2011).

Translation History, Liturgical Recontextualization, and Secularization

The findings also illustrate the influence of translation history and liturgical recontextualization on meaning. The KJV, as Naudé (2022) observes, represents the culmination of English Bible translation traditions and reflects seventeenth-century semantic fields that do not map directly onto contemporary English. This explains why KJV renderings such as *bulwark* and *satyrs* now appear opaque to modern readers. Liturgical appropriation adds further semantic layers, as texts used in worship acquire new associations and connotations (Guidi, 2014). Simultaneously, processes of secularization shift once-sacred lexemes into ordinary domains, reshaping their reception in modern contexts (Ephratt, 2016). These intersecting factors highlight the necessity of diachronic awareness for both translators and interpreters.

Methodological Reflections and Future Directions

Methodologically, the study shows that a typology-driven qualitative design, anchored in Campbell (2013) categories, yields reproducible and pedagogically useful outputs. The structured comparative tables allow for transparent cross-referencing of Hebrew source terms, KJV renderings, and contemporary meanings. At the same time, future research may profit from integrating computational methods. Distributional approaches have been successfully applied to ancient languages, as demonstrated by (Rodda et al., 2017). Hybrid methodologies that combine qualitative exegesis with computational analysis—such as onomasiological concept induction Liétard et al. (2024), embedding-based detection of lexical drift Kutuzov et al. (2018), and frequency-informed modeling Englhardt et al. (2020)—could further validate and expand the findings. Addressing challenges of polysemy, corpus comparability, and interpretability remains crucial (Periti & Montanelli, 2024; Tang, 2018).

Pedagogical and Ecclesial Applications

For pedagogy and ministry, the study underscores the value of making semantic shifts explicit. Comparative tables that juxtapose Hebrew source meanings, KJV-1611 renderings, and modern English receptions provide learners with a framework to recognize where broadening or narrowing has distorted Isaianic meaning. This approach builds on prior diachronic studies of biblical corpora, which have demonstrated that semantic awareness enhances exegetical accuracy and interpretive skill. In addition, situating semantic change within wider socio-historical contexts—including war, globalization, and ideological transformation—offers students and clergy a richer understanding of how language mediates theology (Amaral, 2021; Asri et al., 2024). Translation challenges, as observed in cross-linguistic and diachronic traditions Almohish (2024), further highlight the importance of balancing historical fidelity with present-day intelligibility.

In summary, the findings situate Isaiah's key lexemes within a typology-based framework of semantic change and demonstrate how English diachrony and reception dynamics reshape doctrinal understanding. By integrating established linguistic categories Campbell (2013) with theological sensitivity and aligning the analysis with contemporary scholarship on lexical semantic change, the study provides a model for mitigating semantic anachronism. Future hybrid approaches that combine qualitative exegesis with computational validation hold promise for sustaining exegetical fidelity and pedagogical clarity in the study of one of Scripture's most influential prophetic books.

Conclusion

This research has established that semantic change in the *Isaianic* lexicon, as mediated through the King James Version (1611) and subsequent English reception, follows recognizable diachronic patterns that significantly affect theological interpretation. By applying Campbell (2013) typology of semantic change, the study identified trajectories of broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, metaphorical and metonymic extension, and archaism or opacity. These processes demonstrate how originally embodied, juridical, and covenantal concepts can be reinterpreted in increasingly spiritualized, individualized, or morally intensified forms. The findings underscore the hermeneutic risks of semantic anachronism and highlight the value of diachronic linguistic awareness in producing exegetically faithful and theologically responsible readings of Isaiah.

Despite these contributions, the study is subject to several limitations. The analysis was qualitative and text-focused, relying on comparative lexicography, biblical concordances, and authoritative commentaries, without the incorporation of large-scale quantitative modelling. The scope was confined to selected Isaianic lexemes within the KJV, meaning that broader generalizations to the entire prophetic corpus or other biblical translations should be made cautiously. In addition, the challenges of polysemy and transliteration suggest that reconstructed semantic fields, while illuminating, cannot fully capture the semantic complexity of Isaiah's vocabulary.

Future research should expand this investigation by integrating computational tools such as diachronic embeddings, concept-induction models, and crosslinguistic corpora (Kutuzov et al., 2018; Liétard et al., 2024). Extending the framework to other prophetic and poetic books would test the robustness of the observed patterns, while comparative studies of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin versions could reveal additional layers of semantic shift. Collaborative projects between linguists and biblical scholars may also refine methodologies and strengthen interpretive validity.

The implications of this research extend to both scholarship and practice. For academic research, the findings demonstrate that typology-driven diachronic analysis enriches the study of biblical semantics and complements emerging computational approaches. For pedagogy, the comparative framework developed here offers a practical tool for theological education, helping students and clergy to identify and avoid anachronistic interpretations. For translators and practitioners, the study highlights the need for balance between historical fidelity and modern intelligibility. Taken together, these implications affirm that integrating diachronic linguistics with biblical hermeneutics not only strengthens scholarship but also equips contemporary readers to engage the Isaianic message with greater clarity, accuracy, and theological depth.

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