

ANOTHER LOOK AT THE FUNCTION OF נִשְׁמָה IN PROPHETIC LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

In this article some of the previous considerations on the meaning and function of נִשְׁמָה in the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible are critically considered. The function of נִשְׁמָה is then reviewed by systematically analysing its use in various textual contexts throughout the Hebrew Bible to identify how this term was applied in popular speech, literature, and translation. An attempt is made to categorise נִשְׁמָה into specific semantic domains in order to determine how the various ways in which נִשְׁמָה is used in prophetic literature compare with each other. It is suggested that the נִשְׁמָה-label not only came to be used as an emphatic marker but also functioned as a literary device, more specifically a mnemonic bridge, to bind *maššā'*-prophecies together intertextually to form a virtual corpus.

INTRODUCTION

A number of investigative studies have been conducted on the meaning and function of נִשְׁמָה in the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Scriptures, some of which include comprehensive reviews of previous attempts to explain the use of this term either lexically (cf. Sellin 1930; Procksch 1930; De Boer 1948; Lambert 1955; Tsevat 1958; Naudé 1969; Calvin & Owen 1989) or as a form-critical tag (cf. Weis 1992;¹ Melugin & Sweeney 1994; Sweeney 1996; Floyd 2002) with the latest study conducted by Boda (2006:338–357), which classifies נִשְׁמָה as an editorial marker. This article seeks to expand on previous attempts to explain the function of נִשְׁמָה by categorising the occurrence of נִשְׁמָה in line with its various semantic domains (De Blois 2002; cf. Evans & Green 2006).

¹ See Weis (1986). Although this work was never published, Weis did provide a précis in Weis (1992).

This study follows the theoretical framework of De Blois (2002:1–17). First, a summative overview of the key suggestions of the term נִשְׁמָה will provide a conceptual background for the investigation. Following this, the use of נִשְׁמָה is systematically analysed in its various textual contexts throughout the Hebrew Scriptures to identify how this term was applied in popular speech, literature, and translation. From this analysis, an attempt will be made to categorise נִשְׁמָה into specific semantic domains and to determine how the sense in which נִשְׁמָה is used in prophetic literature, compares. The study concludes with a proposition that the term נִשְׁמָה functions as a literary device to bind *maśśā'*-prophecies in the Hebrew Bible together into a virtual corpus.

A SUMMATIVE OVERVIEW OF נִשְׁמָה STUDIES

The word נִשְׁמָה is used several times in the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible to introduce a prophetic message delivered by a prophet of Yahweh to a specific audience. Etymologically נִשְׁמָה is derived from the trilateral root נִשַׁן with the basic meaning “to lift, to carry” (Brown et al., 1996:669). When used as a noun in terms of נִשְׁמָה, the derived sense of (1) something that is raised or lifted up, or alternatively (2) a load, burden – that which is carried in a physical sense – appears to ensue from the basic meaning of the verb. From this connection it is not surprising that several scholars have suggested that the meaning of נִשְׁמָה in prophetic literature can be related to the root נִשַׁן. Thus Torczyner (1932:273) argues in connection with 2 Kings 9:25 that נִשְׁמָה had its origin as a paronomastic supplement to נִשַׁן as verb, which gave rise to the inoffensive meaning of “utterance” or a similar but, in his opinion, neutral nuance.² More recently, Floyd (2002:402) commented on previous scholarly attempts to relate נִשְׁמָה etymologically to the idiomatic expression נִשַׁן קוֹל “to lift one’s voice”. He notes that from this, נִשְׁמָה came to be understood as utterance or pronouncement, in terms of a prophetic word communicated orally. By identifying specific rhetorical elements, Floyd goes on to suggest that נִשְׁמָה may be regarded as a marker of prophetic

² In this passage, Jehu – after killing Joram – refers to a previous prophecy which stated that the blood of Naboth will be required from Ahab and his sons: וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם וַיִּשָּׂא עָלָיו אֶת־הַמְּשָׁא הַזֶּה: “Yahweh **lifted** this **prophecy** against him”.

discourse between Yahweh and his people. He comes to the conclusion that the *maśśā*-prophecies belong to a separate prophetic genre.³ The problem with this line of interpretation is that it cannot be applied consistently to all occurrences of נִצְּנָה in the Hebrew Bible where נִצְּנָה is associated with a prophetic word, since not all prophecies labelled as נִצְּנָה relate to spoken utterances.⁴

Boda's criticism (2006:340) of an etymological analysis of the origin of the term נִצְּנָה is that it leads to interpreting a word diachronically (its development over time), which tends to end in speculation. He rightly submits that speculation is not always helpful for understanding its synchronic meaning, i.e., its sense at a specific time. Boda (2006:341–350) then continues to offer a focused analysis of Weis' (1986) definition of the *maśśā*' genre, but concludes that Weis fails to substantiate *maśśā*' as an established genre. On the use of *maśśā*' as a general tag for denoting prophetic revelation, Boda (2006:350) submits that it is unhelpful for form critical research, "except for identifying in a general way the presence of prophetic literature". For Boda (2006:350) the quandary lies in the significance of *maśśā*' as an editorial marker in the books of Zechariah and Malachi. He therefore takes a closer look at its significance as tradition-historical marker in the book of Jeremiah and Zechariah 9–14 and comes to the conclusion that the prophetic word remained authoritative in the midst of the present prophetic crisis in the closing phase of the kingdom of Judah. In his deduction therefore, *maśśā*' in Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi 1:1, "serves as an

³ Floyd (2002:409) employs the three rhetoric elements identified by Weis (1986) in his analysis: (1) An assertion about YHWH's involvement in a particular historical situation; (2) a clarification of the impact or implication of this divine involvement; (3) the response to YHWH's involvement and its implications for the future. Floyd cryptically summarises the נִצְּנָה genre as a "prophetic reinterpretation of a previous revelation", and makes the suggestion that this term, due to its cumbersomeness, might even be left untranslated.

⁴ Of note here are the two oracles labelled as נִצְּנָה in Proverbs (30:1; 31:1). Further, in Ezek 12:10, נִצְּנָה refers to a prophetic act and not a pronouncement. There are also indications that the נִצְּנָה of Nahum was not delivered orally but in written form. Serfontein (2008:44) quotes Van der Woude (1985:113-124) who argues that Nahum should be regarded as a "smokkelpamflet" (smuggle pamphlet) which was circulated in secret and had the purpose of comforting Juda while still under the oppressive yoke of Assyrian rule. The use of נִצְּנָה in Nah 1:1 would hint to this as Nahum's *Sitz im Leben*.

editorial marker that in the end bolsters the status of prophecy in the Persian period, rather than sounding its death knell” (Boda 2006:350–356).

THE USE OF נָשָׂא IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

The word נָשָׂא occurs 66 times in the text of the Hebrew Bible: 13 times in the Torah, 38 times in the Nevi’im, and 15 times in the Ketuvim.⁵

In the Torah, the use of נָשָׂא occurs in the literal sense of bearing a physical burden only once, nine times in the sense of service in the Tabernacle, and three times in a figurative sense of bearing the emotional burden of the people of Israel. Against this, the occurrence of נָשָׂא in the Ketuvim is semantically more diverse. Once it is used idiomatically, three times in relation to the bearing of a physical burden, four times in connection with the service in ministry, once with the literal association of a tribute or a gift, once in relation to a burden of oppression, twice in the figurative sense of bearing an emotional load, that is, the burden of sin and the burden of responsibility towards the people, and three times in the figurative sense of uttering a prophecy.

The 38 occurrences in the Nevi’im can be classified as follows:

1. A physical burden or load (9x): 2 Kings 5:17, 2 Kings 8:9 (a load to be carried by a beast of burden); Isaiah 22:25 (referring to a weight hanging from a peg hit into a wall); Isaiah 46:1, 2 (the burden of carrying idols around); Jeremiah 17:21, 22, 24, 27 (prohibition against the carrying of a burden on the Sabbath day);
2. A gift or a tribute (1x): Ezekiel 20:40 (first-fruits brought to the Temple as gifts);
3. The burden of oppression (1x): Hosea 8:10 (God pronounces judgement that his people will waste away under the oppression of a foreign king);
4. The burden of responsibility towards people (2x): 2 Samuel 15:33, 19:36 (servants being a burden to David);
5. The emotion of delight (1x): Ezekiel 24:25 (delight in sons and daughters);

⁵ The occurrences of נָשָׂא as a proper noun in Gen 25:14 and 1Chr 1:30 are excluded from this total, since they, as personal names, do not contribute to understanding the term semantically.

6. The prophetic utterance (24x):⁶
 - a. Reference to a prophetic word: 2 Kings 9:25; Isaiah 14:28 and Ezekiel 12:10;
 - b. Reference to a prophetic act: Ezekiel 12:10;
 - c. Introducing a prophetic word: Isaiah 13:1; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; 21:1, 13; 22:1; 23:1; and 30:6; Nahum 1:1; Habakkuk 1:1; Zechariah 9:1; 12:1; and Malachi 1:1.
 - d. Wordplay on oracle and burden: Jeremiah 23:33, 34, 36, and 38.

SEMANTIC DOMAINS OF מִשָּׂא

From an analysis of various contexts of Scripture in which the term מִשָּׂא is used, three main categories of semantic domains emerge into which the incidences of מִשָּׂא can be grouped:

1. The sense of מִשָּׂא is connected with the literal meaning of the verb נָשָׂא “to carry a burden” where the burden or load is physical, for example:
 - a. 2 Kings 8:9 – מִשָּׂא אַרְבָּעִים גָּמַל – “the burden of forty camels”;
 - b. 2 Chronicles 35:3 – אִין־לְכֶם מִשָּׂא בְּכַתֶּרְךָ – “no burden will be upon your shoulders”;
 - c. Nehemiah 13:19 – לֹא־יָבֹא מִשָּׂא בְּיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת: – “no load may be brought in on the Sabbath day”;
2. The sense of מִשָּׂא is linked to the idiomatic import of the verb נָשָׂא “to lift”, for example:
 - a. 2 Chronicles 19:7 – כִּי־אֵין עִם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ עוֹלָה וּמִשָּׂא פָנִים וּמִקְח־שֹׁחַד: – “because with Yahweh there is not iniquity or favouritism (lit. **lifting up of faces**) or taking of bribes”;
 - b. Ezekiel 24:25— וְאֶת־מִשָּׂא נַפְשָׁם – “and their delight” (lit. and the **lifting up of their soul**);
3. In the third instance, the sense of מִשָּׂא can be said to link to the figurative sense of the root נָשָׂא:

⁶ Cf. Gehman (1940:114, 115) who cites Procksch (1930) in his translation of מִשָּׂא as *Last* (burden) or even *Schicksalslast* (burden of fate/doom) and *Schicksalsspruch* (oracle of fate/doom).

- a. נָשָׂא קוֹל at Nahum 1:1 – מִשְׁאֵי נִינְוֶה “The oracle of Nineveh”, has the metaphorical connotation of lifting one’s voice in the utterance of a prophecy or prophetic oracle (cf. Wildberger 1997; Sweeney 2000:423);
- b. A positive burden such as duty, service or responsibility in ministry, for example, at Numbers 4:15 – אֵלֶּה מִשְׁאֵי בְנֵי־קֹהַת בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד: “this is the duty of the burden of the sons of Kohath in the tent of meeting”;
- c. A negative burden such as a burden of foreign taxes, for example, at Hosea 8:10 – וַיִּחְלוּ מֵעַט מִמִּשְׁאֵי מֶלֶךְ שָׂרִים [with respect to] the king of princes”; at 2 Chronicles 17:11 – וּמִן־פְּלִשְׁתִּים מְבִיאִים – לִיהוֹשָׁפָט מִנְחָה וְכֶסֶף מִשְׁאֵי וּבָנָיו וְרַב הַמִּשְׁאֵי – וּבָנָיו וְרַב הַמִּשְׁאֵי “and some of the Philistines brought presents to Jehoshaphat, even silver [as] homage”; and at 2 Chronicles 24:27 – וּבָנָיו וְרַב הַמִּשְׁאֵי “now concerning his sons, and the magnitude of the taxation against him”;
- d. An emotional load, for example, a burden of anxiety at Numbers 11:11 – לְשׂוֹם אֶת־: מִשְׁאֵי כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה עָלַי: “to lay the concern for this entire people upon me”; and a burden of blame at Psalm 38:5 – כִּבְדוֹ מִמְּנִי: כִּבְדוֹ מִמְּנִי: “for my iniquities crossed over my head like a heavy weight they are too heavy for me”.

The following table provides a statistical analysis of the 66 occurrences of מִשְׁאֵי in the Hebrew text in line with the three main semantic domains identified above:

Semantic Domain	Torah	Nevi'im	Ketuvim	Total
1. Related to the literal sense of נָשָׂא “to carry a physical burden” or to the figurative sense of נָשָׂא “to bear an emotional load”				
A physical burden	1	9	3	13
2. Related to the idiomatic use of נָשָׂא “to lift up”				
a. Favour (lit. lifting up of faces)			1	1
b. Delight (lit. uplifting of the soul)		1		1
3. Related to the figurative sense of נָשָׂא קוֹל “to lift one’s voice (to speak aloud)”				
a. Prophecy, prophetic oracle		24	3	27
b. A burden of tribute		1	1	2
c. A burden of service, duty, ministry	9		4	13
d. A burden:				
(i) of liability		1	1	2
(ii) of blame			1	1
(iii) of anxiety	3	2	1	6
TOTAL	13	38	15	66

For the purpose of this investigation the semantic domain of מִשָּׁא as a prophetic utterance will now be examined in more detail.

מִשָּׁא AS PROPHETIC ORACLE OR BURDEN

The category of מִשָּׁא in the semantic domain of a prophetic utterance is striking in comparison with the two other identified semantic domains wherein מִשָּׁא is found. Such a comparison gives rise to the following questions: What is the relationship between an oracle of God and a load that is to be carried? If such a relationship does exist, how does this burden relate to the role players in the prophecy? Does the relationship have a bearing on Yahweh (the source), the prophet (subject), the prophecy itself (object), or should it rather be seen as a burden placed by the prophet upon the addressee (indirect object)? If, however, such a relationship does not exist, should these two diverse definitions (an oracle of God/a load) be considered as independent homonyms which – despite being derived from a common root – developed into semantically independent meanings?

In order to answer these questions, the use of מִשָּׁא in the context of prophecy will be scrutinised in the following.

Jeremiah – a wordplay

At Jeremiah 23:33–38, מִשָּׁא is used as part of the construct relationship יהוה מִשָּׁא where Yahweh is seen as the source or subject of the מִשָּׁא. In this context, the expression מִשָּׁא יהוה denotes a prophetic word communicated by Yahweh, which the people request to be made known to them by the prophet:

Jeremiah 23:33:

וְכִי־יִשְׁאַלְךָ הָעָם הַזֶּה אֹי־הַנְּבִיא אֹי־כֹהֵן לֵאמֹר מַה־מִּשָּׁא יְהוָה וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵיהֶם אֶת־מַה־מִּשָּׁא וְנִטְשֵׁתִי אֶתְכֶם נְאֻם־יְהוָה:

And when one of this people, or a prophet or a priest asks you saying, ‘What is the oracle of Yahweh?’ then you shall say to them, ‘Which burden?’ and ‘I

will forsake you, declares Yahweh.’

In answer to the people’s inquiry about Yahweh’s word concerning a specific situation (מה־מִשָּׁא יְהוָה “What is the oracle of Yahweh?”), the prophet responds with a clever world play, by changing the construct of מִשָּׁא as the intended subject of Yahweh’s speech into an object of His burden (אֵת־מַה־מִּשָּׂא “Which burden?”), which He plans to get rid of (וְנִטְשְׁתִּי אֶתְכֶם “I will forsake you”). This play of words brings to light the close relationship between מִשָּׁא as oracle and מִשָּׂא as burden.

Taking the context of Jeremiah’s message into account, two possible interpretations can be offered:

1. This prophetic speech is uttered in the *Sitz im Leben* of a theology of complacency and comfort, which can be attributed to Judah’s over-confidence in its national identity as the chosen and divinely protected people of Yahweh. At Jeremiah 7:4 the prophet warns the people – when they lay claim to Yahweh’s Temple as cultic object that would guarantee His divine protection – not to put their trust in deceptive words that would only disappoint.⁷ From the immediate context of Jeremiah’s speech it is clear that the people did not heed Yahweh’s true word. For this reason He will reject them despite the presence of the Temple in their midst. At Jeremiah 3:16 it is suggested that the Ark of the Covenant was treated in the same way.⁸ This milieu of complacency, disrespect towards cultic objects, and disregard of the true nature of Yahweh, is the background against which Jeremiah 23:32–38 should be understood. The prophet infers that the heavy burden of the true and divine prophetic word is regarded as light and unimportant by the people. Furthermore, that the enquirers did not employ מִשָּׂא in reference to a burdensome prophetic word of doom is substantiated from the linked context of Jeremiah 23:17, which indicates that the popular prophetic word of the day was one of

⁷ Jer 7:4 אַל־תִּבְטְחוּ לָכֶם אֶל־דְּבַר־יְהוָה הַשֶּׁקֶר לֵאמֹר הַיְכָל יְהוָה הַיְכָל יְהוָה הַיְכָל יְהוָה הִמָּה Do not put your trust in deceptive words, saying ‘The Temple of Yahweh! The Temple of Yahweh! The Temple of Yahweh this is!’

⁸ Jer 3:16 לֹא־יֹאמְרוּ עוֹד אֲרוֹן בְּרִית־יְהוָה They will no more say ‘The Ark of the Covenant of Yahweh!’

enunciating peace (שְׁלוֹם יְהוָה לָכֶם “May peace be upon you!”) and divine protection against calamity (לֹא־תָבוֹא עָלֵיכֶם רָעָה “May no evil come upon you!”).

2. It can be suggested that the question מִה־מְשָׂא יְהוָה was spoken mockingly or even uttered as an insult.⁹ In that case, the prophet’s remarkable and unexpected harsh response makes sense. The insulting tone of such sacrilegious rhetorical mockery would then also explain Yahweh’s proclaimed wrath upon the enquirers, a dilemma excellently worded by Torczyner (1932:274): “Zu den seltsamsten Stücken der Bibel gehört jener Abschnitt in den Reden des Buches Jeremia 23:33–40, worin der Prophet das volle Maß seines Zornes über ein anscheinend ganz harmloses Wort ergießt.” Possibly, the expression מְשָׂא in Jeremiah was already employed in pre-exilic times as a technical reference to Yahwistic prophecy. This would mean that the formula יְהוָה מְשָׂא had become part of the colloquial discourse of the people and was used as a proverbial phrase to mockingly challenge or disaffirm vexing prophetic utterances. A further point in argument is that מְשָׂא is built into the structure of the discourse, as opposed to other instances where it is used as part of the introductory formula to a prophetic oracle, as found in Isaiah and the Minor Prophets.

Ezekiel 12:10 – מְשָׂא as a prophetic act

At Ezekiel 12:10, Yahweh instructs Ezekiel to dig a tunnel through Jerusalem’s wall and to carry his possessions through it in clear view of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. He was to do this as a prophetic act symbolising God’s impending judgement on Israel by means of captivity and exile from the land:

Ezekiel 12:10:

⁹ In his article about insults in Biblical Hebrew, Kim suggests (2013:§2) that “...questions demonstrate a malleability of nuance that is very conducive for insults... A speaker with a different agenda, however, can manipulate the socially encoded meaning of this idiomatic utterance to pursue the very opposite effect.” He cites two examples in demonstration of his argument (1) Ex 5:2 וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה מִי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁמְעֶ בְּקוֹלוֹ לִישְׁלַח אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל Pharaoh said, ‘**Who is Yahweh**, that I should listen to his command to send forth Israel?’ And (2) 1 Sam 25:10 מִי מְשָׂא דָוִד וַיְמִי כְּרִי־יָשִׁי הַיּוֹם רַבּוֹ עֹבְדִים הַמְתַּפְּרָצִים אִישׁ מִפְּנֵי אֲדֹנָיו: **Who is David, and who is the son of Jesse?** There are many servants today who are breaking away—each from his master.

אָמַר אֲלֵיהֶם כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה הַנְּשִׂיא הַמַּשָּׂא הַזֶּה בִּירוּשָׁלַם וְכָל־בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר־הֵמָּה
בְּתוֹכָם:

Tell them ‘Thus says Adonai Yahweh: “This maśśā’ concerns the prince in Jerusalem and the entire house of Israel in whose midst they are.”’

From the immediate context (Ezek 12:1–16) it is clear that the phrase הַמַּשָּׂא הַזֶּה “this *maśśā*” denotes the prophetic act in which the prophet carries the physical burden of his possessions out of Jerusalem. In other words, in the context of this prophecy, the phrase הַמַּשָּׂא הַזֶּה “this *maśśā*” represents the actual physical burden and not the subsequent prophetic word that interprets the act and discloses its message to the audience (Ezek 12:11–16). By playing out the prophetic utterance, the prophet underscores the seriousness of the impending doom.

The Latter Prophets – a tautology?

In the Latter Prophets, at Zechariah (9:1, 12:1) and Malachi (1:1), מְשָׂא is used as part of an introductory phrase דְּבַר־יְהוָה, commonly translated as either “the oracle” or “the burden of the word of Yahweh”. Gehman (1940:118) cites Sellin (1930), who refers to these phrases as an “unnatural tautology”, which does not make sense if מְשָׂא is understood as “oracle” and suggests the quandary would be eliminated by translating מְשָׂא with “burden”.

It may, however, be suggested that this duplication does make sense in the light of the introduction of intermediary agents in post-exilic times, visually, the Word, Spirit, Angel of Yahweh – concepts which had a strong influence on the post-exilic redaction of the Hebrew Bible. The function of דְּבַר in the said introductory clauses may therefore be regarded as that of intermediary between Yahweh and his message, where דְּבַר is more closely related to יְהוָה than it is to מְשָׂא by notion of the *maqeph*, which joins two or more closely connected words to indicate one idea. Taking all other occurrences of מְשָׂא in the Hebrew Bible into account, Sellin’s rejection of the meaning of מְשָׂא as oracle may be discarded.

מִשָּׁא AS INTRODUCTION TO A PROPHETIC UTTERANCE

In this section, an attempt will be made to categorise the occurrence of מִשָּׁא as introductory formula to a prophetic utterance in the Hebrew Scriptures from the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic relationships in which the formula occurs in Isaiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zechariah, and Malachi (cf. Van Petten & Kutas 1991:95–112; Goodman, McClelland & Gibbs 1981:580–586).

מִשָּׁא introducing a prophetic word in the Major Prophets

In Isaiah, the term מִשָּׁא occurs in connection with prophecies of judgement that are pronounced upon gentile nations and cities. Its use is remarkable, since in each instance it relates to a prediction, which involves Yahweh's judgement on a gentile nation in retribution for its destructive treatment of Israel. The term מִשָּׁא is randomly translated in the different English Bible translations with either “burden” or “oracle”. For the sake of parity, this study will translate מִשָּׁא with the English word “utterance”.

At Isaiah 13:1 – מִשָּׁא בְּבֵל אֲשֶׁר תִּזְהַר שְׁעָתָהּ בְּרֹאֲמֹזִין: “The utterance of Babylon, which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw”, the term מִשָּׁא is used in connection with the verb of perception תִּזְהַר “he saw”. At Isaiah 14:28 – בְּשָׁנַת־מוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחָז תִּהְיֶה הַמִּשָּׁא הַזֶּה: “In the year that King Ahaz died, this utterance was”, מִשָּׁא is preceded by the verb הִיָּה. The so-called מִשָּׁא entails a warning to the Philistines not to rejoice at the death of the King of Judah, because his successor will impose even more heavy burdens on them. War and famine will cause their eventual destruction, concerning which they are encouraged to already start mourning. The utterance is concluded by a promise of protection to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Isaiah 15:1 commences with the formulaic opening – מִשָּׁא מוֹאָב – “The utterance of Moab” whereby the sudden destruction of Moab's cities within the course of one night is announced, accompanied by the description of graphic scenes of its inhabitants hiding from their enemies and mourning their losses. Violent casualties are implied by the mention of the loss of blood, and even nature will execute the killing of those left alive by the attackers. The sins of arrogance and pride are adduced as reasons for

Yahweh's judgement. In reaction to Yahweh's judgement Moab will turn to Israel for protection.

Isaiah 17:1 similarly opens with the formulaic address – מִשָּׂא דְמִשְׁקָא “The utterance of Damascus (Syria)”. In this utterance, Israel is not only indicated as co-receiver of the word of judgement with Damascus, the capital of the Kingdom of Syria, but is also treated as the main focus of the pericope.¹⁰ The destruction and desolation of both Damascus and Israel's fortified cities is announced, which will bring a humiliating end to both Syria and Israel's regional power and influence. This pericope lacks scenes of graphic violence, whilst only employing metaphors to describe humiliation. Israel's sins of idolatry and turning away from Yahweh as helper, is mentioned as the cause of judgement to which even nature obliges. Unique to this oracle is its peroration, which promises Yahweh's ultimate supernatural intervention and protection of Israel – with no mention of Damascus – against invading forces that now become the object of judgement due to their invasion of Israel.

At Isaiah 19:1 – מִשָּׂא מִצְרָיִם “The utterance of Egypt” announces judgement by means of civil war and a merciless and foolish despot upon Egypt for the sin of idolatry. It will be ensnared by fear and its human wisdom will come to nothing. Even nature will assist in the execution of Yahweh's judgement. In conclusion, Yahweh promises salvation and protection if Egypt will call upon Him for help.

Similarly, at Isaiah 21:1 – מִשָּׂא מִדְּבַר־יָם “The utterance of the wilderness of the sea (Babylon)”, concerns Yahweh's judgement on an unsuspecting Babylon by the hand of the Elamites and the Medes, who are compared to whirlwinds eloping through the desert. Israel is encouraged to await this event like a watchman manning a watchtower.

At Isaiah 21:11 – מִשָּׂא דִּימָה “The utterance of Dumah (Edom)”, no direct mention is made of divine judgement, violence or sin. The temporal indicators “morning” and

¹⁰ Syria, the small Aramean kingdom neighbouring Israel to the north with which Israel had a close relationship, defined by political and commercial treaties, should not be confused with the Assyrian Empire. Top explains (2007:38), “During much of Isaiah's day, Syria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel had united their forces in an attempt to rebel against Assyrian domination.”

“night” are used as metaphors to hint at times of divine mercy and judgement, which are close at hand. The utterance is concluded by a call to repentance.

At Isaiah 21:13 – מִשָּׁא בְּעֶרְבַּי “The utterance of Arabia”, the formulaic opening concerns a violent war in Arabia, which will cause its inhabitants to flee and hide. No reference is made to sin as the cause of judgement or to Israel. The single positive aspect of the utterance is the indication that only the most valiant soldiers will survive, which should rather be attributed to the measure of the severity of the onslaught than to the aspect of Yahweh’s mercy.

At Isaiah 22:1 – מִשָּׁא גֵיאַת הַחַיִּיּוֹן “The utterance of the valley of vision (Jerusalem)”, the term מִשָּׁא is used to indicate Yahweh’s judgement on Jerusalem by an invasion of a foreign army that causes utter and violent destruction to the city. Strategic human wisdom is not able to bring deliverance. Complacency and frivolity are mentioned as the sins that evoked divine judgement.

Similarly, at Isaiah 23:1 – מִשָּׁא צֹר “The utterance of Tyre”, מִשָּׁא is used in connection with an utterance of divine judgement on the harbour city of Tyre, denouncing the sins of arrogance and pride. The city’s harbour will be destroyed in such a way that naval commerce will subside and the inhabitants will be forced back to agriculture to make a living. The news of its destruction will be published widely and the resulting humiliation forms part of the judgement. The only reference to violence is an analogy to the Assyrian conquest of Babylon. The prophetic utterance ends with a promise of restoration, but only with regards to its benefit to Israel.

The prophetic utterance at Isaiah 30:6 – מִשָּׁא בְּהֵמוֹת נֶגֶב “The utterance of the animals of the Negev” addresses the toil of the beasts of burden sympathetically, which carry merchandise through the Negev with the implication that all their effort is futile, since Egypt cannot be trusted as Judah’s ally in trade.

מִשָּׁא introducing a prophetic word in the Minor Prophets

At Nahum 1:1 – מִשָּׁא נִינְוֶה “The utterance of Nineveh”, the prophet announces his judgement in the form of total destruction upon the city of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian empire, against the backdrop of Yahweh’s omnipotence. In vivid language

describing scenes of dreadful violence, Nineveh's invasion by a foreign army is foretold. Israel is called upon to rejoice in their oppressor's annihilation.

At Habakkuk 1:1 – *הַמְּשָׁא אֲשֶׁר הִזָּה חִבְקִיָּק הַנְּבִיא*: “The utterance which Habakkuk the prophet saw”, the prophetic word is seen in a vision wherein Yahweh reveals the impending invasion of Israel by the Babylonians, whom Yahweh uses to punish his people for general discord, lawlessness, and social injustice. The prophet takes consolation from the fact that the Babylonians will eventually be judged for executing Yahweh's judgement.

At Zechariah 9:1 – *מְשָׁא דְבַר־יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ חֲדָרָד וְדַמְשָׁק* “The utterance of the word of Yahweh in the land of Hadrach and Damascus”, judgement is pronounced in the form of violent destruction upon Israel's neighbouring nations – allies and foes – due to their transgression of the statutes of Yahweh, whilst Israel remains protected.

At Zechariah 12:1 – *מְשָׁא דְבַר־יְהוָה עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל* “The utterance of the word of Yahweh upon Israel”, concerns Jerusalem, which will be besieged by foreign armies. Divine protection and deliverance is promised to Yahweh's people.

Last, at Malachi 1:1 – *מְשָׁא דְבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־יִשְׂרָאֵל* “The utterance of the word of Yahweh to Israel”, entails a prophetic warning to Israel to repent of religious hypocrisy, which will avert Yahweh's imminent judgement.

מְשָׁא introducing a prophetic word in the Ketuvim

There are two instances of מְשָׁא in Proverbs 30:1 and 31:1, respectively, which both form part of an introductory clause to a prophetic instruction: Proverbs 30:1 – *דְּבַר־י אָגוּר* – *בְּנֵי־יָקֹה הַמְּשָׁא* “The words of Agur son of Yakeh – the utterance”; and Proverbs 31:1 – *דְּבַר־י לְמוּאֵל מֶלֶךְ מְשָׁא אֲשֶׁר־יִסְרְתּוּ אִמּוֹ*: “The words of king Lemuel, an utterance which his mother taught him”. The context of these proverbial sayings makes it clear that these utterances are not regarded as the verbatim words of Yahweh received by direct revelation or via an ecstatic vision, as in the case of the Latter Prophets, but rather as wisdom gained by a person in authority and shared with the receivers, in the form of an exhorting or instructive teaching (cf. Müller in Floyd 2002:402).

Summative observations regarding the use of מְשִׁיב in the Latter Prophets and the Ketuvim

In pre-exilic (Isaiah, Nahum, Habakkuk) and post-exilic (Zechariah, Malachi) prophetic utterances, the use of מְשִׁיב as part of a fixed expression to introduce a prophetic word, is engaged twice in conjunction with a prophetic vision (Isa 13:1; Hab 1:1). The term מְשִׁיב may already have been employed when the prophecy was first written down or it may have been added during an editorial process.

In the majority of instances a strict formula is used in which the technical term מְשִׁיב appears to function as what may be referred to as *nismakh* (first word of the construct chain, i.e., a word that completely “relies on” the following word) in a *smikhut* (construct) construction. In the pre-exilic books of Isaiah and Nahum, the *smikhut* (construct state) is employed objectively to identify the addressees; in the post-exilic books of Zechariah and Malachi this genitive construct relationship identifies Yahweh as subject, whilst also employing the post-exilic theological concept of דָּבָר *word* as intermediary agent. This relationship may be expressed as follows:

- i. Addressee (City/People/Location/Animals) + מְשִׁיב
- ii. Source/Origin + Agent + מְשִׁיב

CONCLUSION

In the Hebrew Bible, מְשִׁיב was originally associated with the concept of a burden or a load, whether in a literal or figurative sense. By the time of the Babylonian exile, the meaning of prophecy had already developed, as evidenced in its usage by the pre-exilic prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk and Nahum).

The phrase יהוה מְשִׁיב developed into a fixed expression commonly used in popular speech, to the extent where it was used mockingly, even as an insult (cf. Bergen 2013; Polak 2013). From the study, it appears that in a parallel development in literary language, מְשִׁיב came to be used as part of a technical formula to introduce a prophetic message. In the post-exilic era, it seems that מְשִׁיב was firmly established as a technical

term related to prophecy. In later biblical Hebrew the meaning of *נִשְׁאָר* was broadened to include other styles of utterances, such as witnessed by its usage in Proverbs.

The question, whether there are any common thematic threads to be found in the *נִשְׁאָר* of the Hebrew Bible, does not have a simple answer. A diverse set of themes is interwoven through all *נִשְׁאָר* in the Hebrew Bible, making it extremely difficult to identify common attributes to all prophecies labelled as such. Themes of judgement and violence are often present, but not consistently. When judgement is involved, the causative iniquities are often mentioned or implied, but not as a rule. The *נִשְׁאָר* are sometimes directed against gentile nations – either enemies or allies of Israel – but in other instances Israel stands at the receiving end of Yahweh's judgement. In some cases hope of restoration and salvation is given, in other cases the prophecy ends with doom and destruction. Sometimes nature is described as co-executioner of Yahweh's judgement; sometimes nature is a co-bearer of the impact of the prophetic word. In Proverbs, the term *נִשְׁאָר* is used to introduce words of personal teaching and exhortation, with none of the elements of the *נִשְׁאָר* to Israel and the Nations in the Latter Prophets present. It is therefore clear that the intrinsic polarity of *נִשְׁאָר* can only be deduced from the immediate context and cannot be defined in monolithic terms.

The *נִשְׁאָר*, furthermore, do not relate to a common mode of communication, since an utterance could be delivered orally, in writing, or even by means of a prophetic act. Even though Floyd (2002:409f) was successful in identifying common elements of discourse in the *נִשְׁאָר* of the Minor Prophets, an extrapolation of these principles to Isaiah's *נִשְׁאָר* against the nations fails. One common thread in the Latter Prophets is Yahweh's announcement of his intention to act with regards to a particular entity. This is a very broad definition, which is a common theme throughout the Hebrew Bible and cannot be used to define the *נִשְׁאָר* and to set them apart from other prophetic texts. When the use of *נִשְׁאָר* in Proverbs is added to the equation, even the said observation becomes invalid, since the term *נִשְׁאָר* later appears to have taken on the function of communicating the life-experience of an older generation to the younger generation. It no longer entails the direct word of the Yahweh. Regardless, *נִשְׁאָר* still functions as a prophetic communication within the bounds of the definition of Hebrew prophecy.

A second common thread is that each of these נִשְׁמָה or prophetic words is accompanied by a “burden”, this being either the implication of an imminent judgement or a responsibility placed upon the addressees. In the Hebrew Bible נִשְׁמָה is directly correlated to Yahweh as source, that is, the origin of the burden, the prophetic word itself or the carrier of the burden, as well as the addressees as indirect object. In all these instances, נִשְׁמָה functions as a burden of those upon whom the impact of uttering the prophetic word is laid.

The suggestion of this study therefore is to combine the definitions of both oracle and burden into one idea, since it is clear that a close relationship between these two meanings remained diachronistically. The label נִשְׁמָה could have been used by the prophet/author/editor of the text to add specific weight and emphasis to a particular prophetic word, of which the content already communicated a message that contained the burden of an utterance, that is, an important word with a heavy impact on its audience. When considering the lengthy redactional process these prophetic texts were subjected to, the נִשְׁמָה-label becomes an emphatic marker, not only to the first-generational reader (listener), but specifically to later generations who would interact with the text.

From a redactional perspective, it may further be suggested that נִשְׁמָה functions as a literary device that binds *masśā'*-prophecies together intertextually into a virtual collection of prophetic texts. In this regard, the נִשְׁמָה-label then functions as a mnemonic device that calls the other texts to memory when any one of them is read. This has an impact on the interpretation of the נִשְׁמָה addressed directly to Israel, e.g., Malachi. Since the majority of these נִשְׁמָה contain words of divine judgement upon gentile nations, the labelling of prophecies against Israel as נִשְׁמָה indicates the seriousness and gravity with which these prophecies are to be regarded, in no way less severe than those addressed against gentiles. Should Israel choose to remain unrepentant, it will not receive any preferential treatment, despite being the chosen people, and will be judged in the same way as the gentile nations. This function may even be relevant to the two נִשְׁמָה-oracles of Proverbs, adding gravity to the prophetic

advice whilst providing the subtext of impending judgement should the advice of the elders not be adhered to.

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