

## ANOTHER LOOK AT THE FUNCTION OF נִשְׂאָה IN PROPHETIC LITERATURE

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### INTRODUCTION

A number of investigative studies have been conducted on the meaning and function of נִשְׂאָה 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; Melugin & Sweeney 1994; Sweeney 1996; Floyd 2002) with the latest study conducted by M.J. Boda (2006: 338-357), which classifies נִשְׂאָה as an editorial marker. This article seeks to expand on previous attempts to explain the purpose of נִשְׂאָה by categorizing the occurrence of נִשְׂאָה in line with its various semantic domains.

In the approach, a summative overview of the key suggestions of the term נִשְׂאָה will provide a conceptual background for the investigation. Following this, the use of נִשְׂאָה 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 categorize נִשְׂאָה into specific semantic domains and to determine how the sense in which נִשְׂאָה is used in prophetic literature compares. The study concludes with a proposition that נִשְׂאָה functions as a literary device to bind *maššā'*-prophesies together intertextually into a virtual corpus.

### A SUMMATIVE OVERVIEW OF נִשְׂאָה STUDIES

The word נִשְׂאָה is used several times in the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Text (HT) to introduce a prophetic message delivered by a prophet of YHWH to a specific audience. Etymologically נִשְׂאָה is derived from the trilateral root נִשָּׂא with the basic meaning *to lift, to carry* (Brown et al., 1996: 669). When used as a noun in terms of נִשְׂאָה, the derived sense of (1) *something that is raised or lifted up*, or alternatively (2) *a load, burden* – that which is borne or carried in a physical sense – appears to flow logically from the basic meaning of the verb. From this logical connection it is not surprising that several scholars have suggested that the meaning of נִשְׂאָה in prophetic literature can be related to the root נִשָּׂא. Thus Torczyner (1932: 273) argues in connection with 2 Kings 9:25 that נִשְׂאָה had its origin as a paronomastic supplement to נִשָּׂא as verb, which gave

rise to the inoffensive meaning of *utterance* or a similar but, in his opinion, neutral nuance.<sup>1</sup> More recently, Floyd (2002: 402) commented on previous scholarly attempts to relate נִשְׁמָה etymologically to the idiomatic expression לִקוֹל נִשְׁמָה *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 discourse between YHWH and his people. He comes to the conclusion that the נִשְׁמָה-prophecies belong to a separate prophetic genre.<sup>2</sup> The problem with this line of interpretation is that it cannot be applied consistently to all occurrences of נִשְׁמָה in the HT where נִשְׁמָה is associated with a prophetic word, since not all prophecies labelled as נִשְׁמָה relate to *spoken* utterances<sup>3</sup>.

Boda's criticism (2006: 340) of an etymological analysis of the origin of the term נִשְׁמָה 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 *masśā'* genre, but concludes that Weis fails to substantiate *masśā'* as an established genre. On the use of *masśā'* 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 *masśā'* as 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

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<sup>1</sup> In this passage, Jehu – after killing Joram – refers to a previous prophecy which stated that the blood of Naboth will be requited from Ahab and his sons: וַיִּשָּׂא נָשָׂא עָלָיו אֶת־הַנְּבִיאָה הַזֶּה: *Yahweh lifted this prophecy against him*.

<sup>2</sup> 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 נִשְׁמָה genre as a "prophetic reinterpretation of a previous revelation", and makes the suggestion that this term, due to its cumbersome nature, might even be left untranslated.

<sup>3</sup> Of note here are the two oracles labelled as נִשְׁמָה in Proverbs (30:1; 31:1). Further, in Eze 12:10 נִשְׁמָה refers to a prophetic act and not a pronouncement. There are also indications that the נִשְׁמָה 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 Judah while still under the oppressive yoke of Assyrian rule. The use of סִפְרָה in Nah 1:1 would hint to this as Nahum's *Sitz im Leben*. This article suggests that the term *announcement*, which is more neutral with regards to the mode of communication, be considered here.

therefore, *maśśā'* in Zechariah 9-14 and Malachi 1:1 “serves as an 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 נִשָּׂא IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

The word נִשָּׂא occurs 66 times in the text of the Hebrew Bible: 13 times in the Torah, 38 times in the N<sup>e</sup>vi'im, and 15 times in the K<sup>e</sup>tuvim.<sup>4</sup>

In the Torah, the use of נִשָּׂא 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 נִשָּׂא in the K<sup>e</sup>tuvim 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 uttering a prophecy.

The 38 occurrences in the N<sup>e</sup>vi'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).

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<sup>4</sup> The occurrences of נִשָּׂא as proper noun in Gen 25:14 and 1Ch 1:30 are excluded from this total, since they do not fall into the category of prophetic utterances.

6. *The prophetic utterance* (24x):<sup>5</sup>

- 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 a careful analysis of the 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 linked to the idiomatic import of the verb נָשָׂא *to lift*, for example, at:
  - a. 2 Chronicles 19:7— *בְּיָאֵין עִם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ עוֹלָה וּמִשָּׂא פָּנִים וּמִקַּח־שֹׁחַד: because with YHWH there is not iniquity or favouritism (lit. **lifting up of faces**) or taking of bribes.*
  - b. Ezekiel 24:25— *וְאָת־מִשָּׂא נִפְשָׁם and their delight (lit. and the **lifting up of their soul**).*
- (2) The sense of מִשָּׂא is connected with the literal meaning of the verb נָשָׂא *to carry a burden* or linked to the figurative sense of the verb נָשָׂא *to bear an emotional load* in terms of:
  - a. A physical burden, for example, at 2 Kings 8:9— *מִשָּׂא אַרְבָּעִים גָּמַל the burden of forty camels;* at 2 Chronicles 35:3— *אֵין־לְכֶם מִשָּׂא בְּכַתֵּף no burden will be upon your shoulders;* and at Nehemiah 13:19— *לֹא־יָבֹא מִשָּׂא בְּיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת: no load may be brought in on the Sabbath day.*
  - b. A burden of tribute, for example, at 2 Chronicles 17:11— *וּמִן־פְּלִשְׁתִּים מְבִיאִים לִיהוֹשָׁפָט מִנְחָה וְכֶסֶף and some of the Philistines brought presents to Jehoshaphat, even silver [as] homage.*
  - c. A positive burden such as duty, service or responsibility in ministry, for example, at Numbers 4:15— *אֵלֶּה מִשָּׂא בְּנֵי־קָהָת בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד: this is the duty of the burden of the sons of Kohath in the tent of meeting.*

<sup>5</sup> 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).

- d. A negative burden such as (i) a liability or foreign taxes, for example, at Hosea 8:10— וַיִּחַלּוּ וּמַעַט מִמִּשְׁאָה מִלְּדָד שָׂרִים *and they will begin to diminish by reason of liability [with respect to] the king of princes*; and at 2 Chronicles 24:27— וּבְנָיו וְרַב הַמִּשְׁאָה עָלָיו *now concerning his sons, and the magnitude of the taxation against him*; (ii) a burden of blame, for example, at Psalm 38:5— כִּי לְשׁוֹמֵם אֶת־מִשְׁאָה כָּל־יְעֹנְתִי עָבְרוּ רֹאשִׁי כְּמִשְׁאָה כְּבֵד יִכְבְּדוּ מִמֶּנִּי: *for my iniquities crossed over my head like a heavy weight they are too heavy for me*; (iii) a burden of anxiety, for example, at Numbers 11:11— לָשׂוּם אֶת־מִשְׁאָה כָּל־לֵבִי עָלַי: *to lay the concern for this entire people upon me*.

- (3) In the third instance, the sense of מִשְׁאָה can be said to link to the figurative sense of the root נָשָׂא with the connotation of נָשָׂא קוֹל *to lift one's voice in the utterance of a prophecy or prophetic oracle* as, for example, at Nahum 1:1— מִשְׁאָה נִינְוָה *The oracle of Nineveh* (cf. Wildberger 1997; Sweeney 2000:423).

The following table provides a statistical analysis of the 66 occurrences of מִשְׁאָה 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 idiomatic use of נָשָׂא <i>to lift up</i> :				
a. Favour ( <i>lit. lifting up of faces</i> )			1	1
b. Delight ( <i>lit. uplifting of the soul</i> )		1		1
2. Related to the literal sense of נָשָׂא <i>to carry a physical burden</i> or to the figurative sense of נָשָׂא <i>to bear an emotional load</i>				
a. A physical burden	1	9	3	13
b. A burden of tribute		1	1	2
c. A (positive) burden of service, duty, ministry	9		4	13
d. A (negative) burden:				
(i) of liability		1	1	2
(ii) of blame			1	1
(iii) of anxiety	3	2	1	6
3. Related to the figurative sense of נָשָׂא קוֹל <i>to lift one's voice (to speak aloud)</i>				
a. Prophecy, prophetic oracle		24	3	27
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>66</b>

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

## מִשְׁאָה 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 YHWH (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 scrutinized in the following.

### **Jeremiah— a wordplay**

In Jeremiah 23:33-38, מִשָּׁא is used as part of the construct relationship יהוה מִשָּׁא where YHWH is seen as the source or subject of the מִשָּׁא. In this context, the expression יהוה מִשָּׁא denotes a prophetic word communicated by YHWH, 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 וְנִטְשִׁיתִי  
 :אֶתְכֶם נְאֻם־יְהוָה: *And when one of this people, or a prophet or a priest asks you saying, 'What is the oracle of the LORD?' then you shall say to them, 'Which burden?' and 'I will forsake you, declares the LORD.'*

In answer to the people's inquiry about YHWH's word concerning a specific situation (מַה־מִּשָּׁא יְהוָה *What is the oracle of YHWH?*), the prophet responds with a clever word play, by changing the construct of מִשָּׁא as the intended subject of the LORD's speech into an object of His burden (אֶת־מַה־מִּשָּׁא *Which burden?*), which He plans to get rid of (וְנִטְשִׁיתִי אֶתְכֶם *I will forsake you*). This play of words brings to light the close relationship between מִשָּׁא as *oracle* and מִשָּׁא 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 YHWH. In Jeremiah 7:4 the prophet warns the people —when they lay claim to YHWH's Temple as cultic object that would guarantee His divine protection— not to put their trust in deceptive words that would only disappoint.<sup>6</sup> From the immediate context of Jeremiah's speech it is clear that the people did not heed YHWH's true word. For this reason He will reject them despite the presence of the Temple in their midst. In Jeremiah 3:16 it is suggested that the Ark of the Covenant was treated in the same way.<sup>7</sup> This milieu of complacency, disrespect towards cultic objects, and disregard of the true nature of YHWH 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 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 מַה-מִּשָּׂא יְהוָה was spoken mockingly or even uttered as an insult.<sup>8</sup> 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 YHWH'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 מִשָּׂא in Jeremiah was already employed in pre-exilic times as a technical reference to Yahwistic prophecy.

<sup>6</sup> Jer 7:4 הַמָּוָה הַזֶּה הַיְהוָה הַיְהוָה הַיְהוָה הַיְהוָה הַיְהוָה לֹא-תִבְטְחוּ לְכֶם אֶל-דְּבָרֵי הַשָּׁקֶר לֵאמֹר הַיְהוָה הַיְהוָה הַיְהוָה הַיְהוָה הַיְהוָה הַמָּוָה הַזֶּה הַיְהוָה *Do not put your trust in deceptive words, saying 'The Temple of Yahweh! The Temple of Yahweh! The Temple of Yahweh this is!'*

<sup>7</sup> Jer 3:16 לֹא-יֵאמְרוּ עוֹד אַרְוֹן בְּרִית-יְהוָה *They will no more say 'The Ark of the Covenant of Yahweh!'*

<sup>8</sup> In his article about insults in Biblical Hebrew, Kim suggests (2013: §2. Conversational Strategies in Insults) 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 אֵל-יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר אֶשְׁמַע בְּקוֹלוֹ לְשַׁלַּח 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 זֶנֶד וּמִי בְּרִי-יְשׁוּי *Who is David, and who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants today who are breaking away—each from his master.*

This would mean that the formula *מִשָּׁא יְהוָה* 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 *מִשָּׁא* 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— *מִשָּׁא* as a prophetic act**

At Ezekiel 12:10, YHWH 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— *תֵּלְלֵם אֶלֵיהֶם כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה הַנְּשִׂיא הַמַּשָּׂא הַזֶּה בִּירוּשָׁלַם וְכָל־בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר־הֵמָּה בְּתוֹכָם: Tell them 'Thus says Adonai YHWH: "This *maśśā*' concerns the prince in Jerusalem and the entire house of Israel in whose midst they are."*

From the immediate context (Eze 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 (Eze 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, Zechariah (9:1, 12:1) and Malachi (1:1), *מִשָּׁא* is used as part of an introductory phrase *מִשָּׂא דְּבַר־יְהוָה*, commonly translated as either *the oracle* or *the burden of the word of the LORD*. Gehman (1940: 118) sites Sellin (1930), who refers to these phrases as an *unnatural tautology*, which does not make sense if *מִשָּׁא* is understood as *oracle* and suggests the quandary would be eliminated by translating *מִשָּׁא* 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 HT. The function of דבר in the said introductory clauses may therefore be regarded as that of intermediary between YHWH and his message where דבר is more closely related to יהוה than it is to מִשָּׁא by notion of the *maqeph*, which joins two or more closely connected words to indicate one idea. Taking all other occurrences of מִשָּׁא in the HT into account, Sellin's rejection of the meaning of מִשָּׁא as *oracle* may be discarded.

## מִשָּׁא AS INTRODUCTION TO A PROPHETIC UTTERANCE

In this section, an attempt will be made to categorize 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 & 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 YHWH'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 neutral word *utterance*.

At Isaiah 13:1 — מִשָּׁא בְּבֵל אֲשֶׁר תִּזְהָה יִשְׁעֶנְהוּ בְּרֹאֲמוֹץ: *The utterance of Babylon, which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw*, the term מִשָּׁא is used in connection with the verb of perception תִּזְהָה *he saw*. At Isaiah 14:28— בְּשָׁנַת-מוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחָז תִּהְיֶה הַמִּשָּׁא הַזֶּה: *In the year that King Ahaz died, this utterance was*, the מִשָּׁא is preceded by the verb הִיהָ. The so-called מִשָּׁא entails a warning to the Philistines not 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 YHWH's judgement. In reaction to YHWH's judgement Moab will turn to Israel for protection.

Isaiah 17:1 similarly opens with the formulaic address —מִשָּׁא דַּמְשֶׁק *The utterance of Damascus* (*Syria*). In this utterance, Israel is not only indicated as co-receiver of the word of judgment with Damascus, the capital of the Kingdom of Syria, but is also treated as the main focus of the pericope.<sup>9</sup> The destruction and desolation of both Damascus and Israel's fortified cities is announced, which will bring a humiliating end to both Syria's 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 YHWH as helper, is mentioned as the cause of judgement to which even nature obliges. Unique to this oracle is its peroration, which promises YHWH'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 —מִשָּׁא מִצְרַיִם *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 YHWH's judgement. In conclusion YHWH promises salvation and protection if Egypt will call upon Him for help.

Similarly, at Isaiah 21:1 —מִשָּׁא מִדְּבַר יָם *The utterance of the wilderness of the sea (Babylon)*, concerns YHWH'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.

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<sup>9</sup> 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 by 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."

At Isaiah 21:11 — מִשָּׂא דְדוּמָה *The utterance of Dumah (Edom)*, no direct mention is made of divine judgement, violence or sin. The temporal indicators “morning” and “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 — מִשָּׂא בְעֶרְב־ *The utterance of Arabia*, the formulaic opening concerns a violent war in Arabia will cause its inhabitants to flee and hide. No mention 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 YHWH's mercy.

At Isaiah 22:1 — מִשָּׂא גֵיאַת הַחַיִּיזוֹן *The utterance of the valley of vision (Jerusalem)*, the term מִשָּׂא is used to indicate YHWH'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 — מִשָּׂא צֹר־ *The utterance of Tyre*, מִשָּׂא is used in connection with an utterance of divine judgement on the harbour city of Tyre, denouncing the sins of arrogance and pride in. 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 — מִשָּׂא בְּהֵמוֹת נֶגֶב *The utterance of the animals of the Negev* addresses the toil of the beasts of burden, which carry merchandise through the Negev sympathetically 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 נִיְנוּהָ *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 YHWH'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 — הַמִּשָּׁא אֲשֶׁר חָזָה חִבְקִיָּק הַנְּבִיאָה: *The utterance which Habakkuk the prophet saw*, the prophetic word is seen in a vision wherein YHWH reveals the impending invasion of Israel by the Babylonians, whom YHWH 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 YHWH's judgement.

At Zechariah 9:1 — מִשָּׁא דְבַר־יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ חֲדָרָה וְדַמְשֶׁק׃ *The utterance of the word of YHWH 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 — מִשָּׁא דְבַר־יְהוָה עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל׃ *The utterance of the word of YHWH upon Israel*, concerns Jerusalem, which will be besieged by foreign armies. Divine protection and deliverance is promised to the LORD's people.

Last, at Malachi 1:1 — מִשָּׁא דְבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־יִשְׂרָאֵל׃ *The utterance of the word of YHWH to Israel* entails a prophetic warning to Israel to repent of religious hypocrisy, which will avert the LORD's immanent judgement.

### **מִשָּׁא introducing a prophetic word in the Ketuvim**

There are two instances of מִשָּׁא in the Proverbs 30:1 and 31:1 respectively, which both form part of an introductory clause to a prophetic instruction: (i) Proverbs 30:1a — בְּרִי־יָקֹהָ הַמִּשָּׁא׃ *The words of Agur son of Yakeh – the utterance* and (ii) Proverbs 31:1 - מִשָּׁא אֲשֶׁר־יִסְרְתָהּ 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 YHWH 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 מִשְׁמָחָה in the Latter Prophets and the Ketuvim**

In pre-exilic (Isaiah, Nahum, Habakkuk) and post-exilic (Zechariah, Malachi) prophetic utterances, the use of מִשְׁמָחָה 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 מִשְׁמָחָה 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 מִשְׁמָחָה 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 YHWH as subject, whilst also employing the post-exilic theological concept of דְּבַר *word* as intermediary agent. This relationship may be expressed as follows:

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

### **CONCLUSION**

In the HT מִשְׁמָחָה 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 יְהוָה מִשְׁמָחָה 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, מִשְׁמָחָה came to be used as part of a technical formula to introduce a prophetic message. In the post-exilic era it seems that מִשְׁמָחָה was firmly established as a technical term related to prophecy. In later biblical Hebrew the meaning of מִשְׁמָחָה 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 *תְּשׁוּבָה* of the HT, does not have a simple answer. A diverse set of themes are interwoven through all *תְּשׁוּבָה* in the HT, 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 *תְּשׁוּבָה* are sometimes directed against gentile nation's –either enemies of allies of Israel– but in other instances Israel stands at the receiving end of YHWH'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-executioners of Yahweh's judgement; sometimes nature is a co-bearer of the impact of the prophetic word. In Proverbs, the term *אָמַר* is used to introduce words of personal teaching and exhortation, with none of the elements of the *תְּשׁוּבָה* to Israel and the Nations in the Latter Prophets present. It is therefore clear that the intrinsic polarity of *אָמַר* can only be deduced from the immediate context and cannot be defined in monolithic terms.

The *תְּשׁוּבָה*, 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 *תְּשׁוּבָה* of the Minor Prophets, an extrapolation of these principles to Isaiah's *תְּשׁוּבָה* against the nations fails. One common thread in the Latter Prophets is YHWH's announcement of his intension to act with regards to a particular entity. This is a very wide definition, which is a common theme throughout the HT and cannot be used to define the *תְּשׁוּבָה* and to set them apart from other prophetic texts. When the use of *אָמַר* in Proverbs is added to the equation even the said observation becomes invalid, since the term *אָמַר* 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 LORD. Regardless, *אָמַר* still functions as a prophetic communication within the bounds of the definition of Hebrew prophecy.

A second common thread is that each of these *תְּשׁוּבָה* or prophetic words are accompanied by figurative 'burden', this being either the implication of an imminent judgment, or a responsibility placed upon the addressees. In the HT *אָמַר* is directly correlated to YHWH 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, *אָמַר* 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.

When regarded as an emphatic marker, Weis's (1986: 353-355) suggestion to which he gives "mild preference" comes of interest. Noticing the close relationship to תִּשְׁמָה smoke signal, he proposes that נִשְׁמָה could designate a fire or a smoke signal, which functions as a metaphor to illustrate the communicative intension of the prophecy. Building on the concept of such a smoke signal, it may be proposed for נִשְׁמָה to be considered a signal indicating to the reader the weight and importance of the prophetic word which follows. It may further be suggested that נִשְׁמָה, from a redactional perspective, functions as a literary device that binds this set of נִשְׁמָה-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 תִּשְׁמָה addressed directly to Israel, e.g. Malachi. Since the majority of these תִּשְׁמָה 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 as the gentile nations. This function may even be relevant to the two תִּשְׁמָה-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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