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STUDYING מָשָׁל WITHOUT READING PROVERBS: AN EXTRA-WISDOM ANALYSIS OF THE TERM מָשָׁל

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Resumen
Aunque ignorados por los comentarios de estudios sapienciales, los textos de Balaam utilizan más a menudo el término מָשָׁל que todo el libro de Proverbios. Lo mismo sucede con Ezequiel. Las aproximaciones a la definición de מָשָׁל basadas en Proverbios se limitan al estudio de (a) material posterior, (b) cuando el término es menos utilizado. En contraste, los estudios basados en los textos de Balaam se enfocan en (a) un uso más temprano, (b) un uso concentrado, y (c) el contexto narrativo. Este estudio de מָשָׁל en las narrativas de Balaam y en otros materiales extra sapienciales propone un desarrollo diacrónico del significado consistente con el desarrollo histórico del texto bíblico.

Abstract
All but ignored by commentaries on wisdom study, the Balaam texts make more use of the term מָשָׁל than does the entire book of Proverbs, as does the book of Ezekiel. Approaches to מָשָׁל definition that focus on Proverbs amount to study (a) later material, (b) where the term is less used. By contrast, examination of the Balaam texts focuses on (a) earlier usage, (b) the most concentrated usage, and (c) a narrative context. This study of מָשָׁל in the Balaam narratives and other extra-wisdom material proposes a diachronic development of meaning consistent with the historical development of the biblical text.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Hebrew Bible never calls the book of Jonah a מָשָׁל, but George M. Landes thinks it should.[1] Landes' comment suggests that the biblical מָשָׁל possesses certain recognizable characteristics by which we may judge compositions not so named. Thinking along similar lines, Madeline Boucher lists nine Old Testament passages which, perhaps by accident, may not be labeled as מָשָׁל.[2] The wide variety of compositions bearing the name further encourages broad application of the label. Biblical ut-

[1] George M. Landes, "Jonah: A *Māšāl*?," in *Israelite Wisdom* (ed. John G. Gammie et al.; Missoula, Mo.: Scholars Press, 1978), 137-58.

[2] Madeline Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable* (CBQMS 6; Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1977), 88. The nine are Jotham's parable to the Shechemites (Judg 9:7-20), Nathan's ewe lamb (2 Sam 12:1-7), a tale of two brothers by the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14:5-13), the anonymous prophet's escaped prisoner (1 Kgs 20:39-42), Israel's King Joash on the thistle and cedar (2 Kgs 14:9, 10), and four prophetic oracles (Isa 5:1-7; 28:23-29; Ezek 19:1-9; 10-14).

terances so called include examples of popular ridicule, oath of integrity, prophetic prediction, salient quip, mournful reminiscence, and more.[3]

Within Comparative Semitics two distinct views coexist with regard to Hebrew מָשָׁל. Some contend that despite its emphasis on comparison, Akkadian *māšālu*, in its various inflections, is not equivalent to Hebrew מָשָׁל.[4] Nor are Ancient Aramaic, Phoenician, and Punic *mšl* with their sense of "rule".[5] These scholars prefer to see Hebrew מָשָׁל as two homonymous Hebrew roots. Others see a single Hebrew root combining the senses of similarity and rulership.[6] This study discusses why it is appropriate to see both meanings in a single root, and how the two meanings might have developed through time in Syro-Palestinian culture and biblical literature. The paper is an analysis of the development of meaning in the biblical Hebrew term מָשָׁל.

3 On popular ridicule, see 1 Samuel 10:12, oath of integrity—Job 27, prophetic prediction—Ezekiel 21, salient quip—sentence proverbs, mournful reminiscence—Psalm 78.

4 *CAD* s.v. *māšālu*. The Akkadian term means "be similar", "be equal in rank", "be half', "be rivaled", and possibly "be equidistant".

5 Richard S. Tomback, *A Comparative Semitic Lexicon of the Phoenician and Punic Languages* (SBLDS 32; Missoula, Mo.: Scholars Press, 1978), 202.

6 Paul Haupt, George M. Landes, J. Alberto Soggin, K.-M. Beyse, and S. Gross, are among those who distinguish two roots (Paul Haupt, "Hebrew *Mâšal*", *JBL* 36 (1917): 140-42; Landes, "Jonah: A *Mašal*?"; J. Alberto Soggin, "*mašal*", *TLOT* 2:689-91; K.-M. Beyse, "מָשַׁל *mašal* I", *TDOT* 9:64-67; H. Gross, "מָשַׁל *mašal* II", *TDOT* 9:68-71). Haupt observes that Hebrew "like", and "rule", are "generally regarded as two different stems, but the primary connotation of both verbs is *to shine*" (p. 140, italics his). Landes understands that despite its association with "two distinct homographic etymons," the root *mšl*, by its etymology, content, and usage, must derive from "like" and not from "rule" (p. 139). Otto Eissfeldt, Derek Kidner, William McKane, Robert Alden, R. N. Whybray, and Michael Fox, are among those who see a single root (compare here Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* [trans. Peter R. Ackroyd; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965], 66; Derek Kidner, *Proverbs* [TOTC 15; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1964], 58; William McKane, *Proverbs* [OTL; London: SCM, 1970], 22-33; Robert L. Alden, *Proverbs* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1983], 19; R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs* [NCBC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994], 12-13; Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9* [AB 18A; New York: Doubleday, 2000], 54). Karin Schöpflin outlines her case for a single root in "Ein eigentümlicher Begriff der hebräischen Literatur," *BZ* 46.1 (2002): 1-24, in which she explains that מָשָׁל should not be attributed to a specific *Gattung* as has been done in the past. The term designates a verbal statement which she calls a "Gleichwort/Vergleichswort" or "statement of equation or comparison". Christine Yoder considers the מָשָׁל phenomenon difficult to precisely define, but explains that whereas, on the one hand, the word is an authoritative word that enables one to master living—the sense of "rule", its other aspect implies that it "offers trustworthy counsel based upon a perceived order in the world". In instructional texts, it is generally used for any sapential form including poems, parables, dialogues, and, most commonly, the proverb (see Christine Yoder, "Proverb," *EDB* 1089-90). Abraham Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Old Testament Using the Hebrew and Aramaic Text* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer Publishing House, 1985), 719-20, distinguishes eighty-one cases of the verbal root as "rule", and seventeen cases of its comparative connotation, along with thirty-nine occurrences of מָשָׁל as noun of comparison.

Michael Fox's magisterial commentary on Proverbs 1-9 mentions four important studies on the nature of the מָשָׁל produced by Eissfeldt, McKane, Suter, and Polk.[7] Suter's attempt to apply Wittgenstein's family resemblance theory permits him a careful enumeration on the variety of textual phenomena labeled מָשָׁל.[8] But because he is controlled by the popular understanding of מָשָׁל as comparison, he does not arrive at Polk's insight, with which I agree, that we should strive for greater precision "in specifying the uniquely religious force of the material to which the concept is applied."[9] In this effort, I may range somewhat more widely than Polk, given his focus on Ezekiel, or McKane, who deals only with popular Old Testament proverbs. I may not reach, perhaps, as far as Landes and Suter, who either address the label to forms not so marked, or analyze its use in extra-biblical literature.

2. מָשָׁל IDIOMS

Tracing the nuances of its meaning in biblical Hebrew requires an examination of the various Hebrew idioms which make use of the term מָשָׁל. About these twenty-four idiomatic occurrences[10] several summary statements are in order: Across the range of biblical books (1) there is no general distribution of מָשָׁל or מָשָׁל idioms; (2) מָשָׁל occurs

7 Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 55; Otto Eissfeldt, *Der Maschal im Alten Testament* (BZAW 24; Giessen: Töpelmann, 1913), McKane, *Proverbs*; David Winston Suter, "*Māšāl* in the Similitudes of Enoch," *JBL* 100.2 (1981): 193-212; and Timothy Polk, "Paradigms, Parables, and *Mešālîm*: On Reading the *Māšāl* in Scripture," *CBQ* 45.4 (1983): 564-83.

8 Suter, "*Māšāl* in the Similitudes of Enoch," 193-212. Commendable as his list may be, it shows how closely guided he is by the sense of comparison as fundamental to the מָשָׁל: "A *māšāl* may be a short saying of one or two lines, a prose story, or a long poem. It may characterize a particular situation by holding it up to a time-honored image, or create new insight by comparing two seemingly incomparable things. It may illustrate and clarify or obscure and mystify (cf. Mark 4:11, 12). It may repeat a commonplace assumption or subvert the mythic world of the hearer. It may state a riddle of human existence (Psalm 49 or Job 27-31) or a prophetic likeness or potential reality (Isaiah 14). Its subject matter may be nature and society, righteousness and wickedness, wisdom and folly, or a number of other topics. The Similitudes of Enoch may vary markedly from all other *mešālîm* and yet, because of various perceived resemblances to this or that feature of other examples, be characterized by its writer as a collection of *mešālîm*" (197).

9 Polk, "Paradigms, Parables, and *Mešālîm*, 564.

10 (1) Of the 24, נָשָׂא מָשָׁל appears twelve times: Numbers 23:7, 18; 24:3, 15, 20, 21, 23; Job 27:1; 29:1; Isaiah 14:4; Micah 2:4; and Habakkuk 2:6. (2) The verbal root with its cognate accusative appears four times in the G stem, as well as once in the D stem: מושׁל מושׁל (Ezek 12:23; 17:2; 18:3; 24:3) and ממשׁל מושׁל (Ezek 21:5). (3) היה למושׁל occurs four times: Deuteronomy 28:37; 1 Samuel 10:12; 1 Kings 9:7; and Psalm 69:12). (4) נתן למושׁל occurs twice: 2 Chronicles 7:20 and Jeremiah 24:9. (5) Its equivalent, שׂים למשׁל, occurs once: Ezekiel 14:8. (6) Ecclesiastes 12:9 features the unusual Hebrew syntax of three consecutive verbs applicable to the study of מָשָׁל (תקן, חקר, אזן—all D stem), mostly emphasizing the intensity of Qoheleth's effort, and, by implication, the challenge of the undertaking. Perhaps predictably then, the substantive is also four times used in parallel with חידה (Ps 49:5 [4]; 78:2; Prov 1:6; and Ezek 17:2), a phenomenon of enigmatic character, more so by reason of its rarity, and generally translated "riddle".

more often in idiomatic contexts (see note 10) than anywhere else, even in reference to sentence proverbs; (3) the term is used more often outside the wisdom books than within them—no more than fourteen of its thirty-nine references belong to traditional wisdom material;[11] (4) particular idioms of three verbs (שׂים, נתן, היה) cluster within specific texts; (5) different texts use synonymous rather than identical expressions; (6) Ezekiel and Numbers (eight and seven times respectively), make more use of the term than does Proverbs, the ultimate מָשָׁל book (six times);[12] (7) historical narrative, and Jeremiah's oracles feature Deuteronomy's מָשָׁל-referenced rhetoric. 1 Kings, 2 Chronicles, and Jeremiah all make use of the sentiment and imagery of Deuteronomy 28. In 1 Kings 9:7 the idiom is the same as in Deuteronomy 28:37 (היה למשׁל). But 2 Chronicles 7:20 and Jeremiah 24:9 employ a distinct idiom (נתן למשׁל), with Jeremiah's language being a significant intensification of Deuteronomy's denunciatory predictions.

3. IDIOMATIC CONNOTATIONS

This study of מָשָׁל idioms facilitates a clearer understanding of the term's meaning than exclusive focus on the sentence literature, the מִשְׁלֵי שְׁלֹמֹה. Six of the seven idioms where מָשָׁל occurs leave little basis for interpretive dispute. For example, שׂים למשׁל is evidently an ominous threat. The full idiom, unique to Ezekiel 14:8, is one of more than a score of Old Testament occurrences of the expression שׂים ל, where more than one object of the verb is always present—as in "to present or appoint X as Y." In this construction "as" is equivalent to the preposition *lamed*, bearing this transformational force, with the second substantive identified as the "accusative of the product."[13] Lin-

[11] The fourteen references are 1 Kings 5:12; Job 13:12; 27:1; 29:1; Psalms 44:1 [title of משׂכיל]; 49:5; 78:2; Proverbs 1:1, 6; 10:1; 25:1; 26:7, 9; and Ecclesiastes 12:9.

[12] Distribution by book: Ezekiel (8), Numbers (7), Proverbs (6), Psalms (4), Job (3), 1 Samuel, and 1 Kings (2 each), Deuteronomy, 1 Chronicles, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, and Habakkuk (1 each). Even-Shoshan's seventeen related verbal forms show some limited consistency with this pattern. Ezekiel alone uses eight of the seventeen, while four appear in the Psalms, two each in Job and Isaiah, and the other in Numbers.

[13] Lamed here functions distinctly from such standard usages as genitive ("belonging to"), purposive ("for"), locative ("to", "at"), instrumental ("by means of"), or pleonastic ("you yourself"). See *GKC*, 119 r-u. See particularly, 119 t: "To introduce the result after verbs of making, forming, changing, appointing to something, esteeming *as* something; in short, in all those cases in which […] a second *accusative* may also be used." [italics original]. On verbs which take two accusatives, the second called "accusative of the product," see 117 ii. As otherwise stated, lamed here marks a "transition into a new state or condition, or into a new character or office"—*BDB*, 512. Examples may include the Lord building [בנה] Adam's rib לאשׁה (Gen 2:22), or promising to make Abram לגוי גדול (Gen 12:2); also with the verb היה in its sense of becoming, in such statements as Genesis 2:24: ויהיו לבשׂר אחד; also Genesis 9:13; 17:4, 11, 16, where character/status rather than process of actualization may already be in view, but clearly not locative, instrumental, or ל auctoritatis (*GKC*, 129 c). These are to be contrasted with the Lord's threats to give his people over to destruction (Mic 6:16), or identification of fruit trees as a food source (Gen 1:29). Other clear instances include Isaiah 21:4; 41:15; 49:2; Jeremiah 13:16; 25:9; Ezekiel 44:8; Hosea 2:14; Zephaniah 3:19. TNK and TOB read Psalm 18:44 locatively ["at

guistically, the idiom in Ezekiel 14:8 is notable as the unique occurrence of שׂים in the Hiphil first common singular. It is also one of only three biblical occurrences of the plural מְשָׁלִים (Eccl 12:9; Ezek 21:5).[14]

Ezekiel 14:8 is part of an eleven verse pericope (14:1-11), whose integrity is not disputed.[15] As it opens, a delegation of elders "of Israel" convenes in the prophet's presence as elders "of Judah" have before (8:1), burdened perhaps, but by unmentioned concerns. To these Ezekiel bluntly and unceremoniously responds, as cued by the word of the Lord. By implication of the divine rage the men before Ezekiel are hypocrites who will receive their due through the oracle entrusted to him. Determined as they are to serve their own idols, they nevertheless claim to be interested in divine guidance (v. 3). Instead, they must absorb the fury of an outburst of jealousy from a deity who brooks no rivals, and is insulted by their syncretism: In the priestly benediction of Numbers 6:24-26, the Lord promises to "shine the light of his countenance," and "lift up his countenance" upon his people for peace. But now the divinity's triple threat enunciates a triple paradox. It is by the mouth of the priestly prophet that the Lord will undo the priestly blessing. It is by an answer in his own person (v. 7) that he will spurn those who seek him. And it is with a rhetoric insistent with idioms of "the face" that he will hostilely confront those who seek his face while setting their iniquitous stumbling blocks before their face (v. 4). What specifically will the Lord do? He will set his face against the presumptuous idolater (v. 8a).[16] He will make of him sign and מָשָׁל (v. 8b).[17] And he will cut him off from among the chosen congregation (v. 8c).

The word מָשָׁל in v. 8b is often translated byword, if not "proverb".[18] However, *Eerdman's Bible Dictionary* shows its grasp of the genius of מָשָׁל application in this context by pointing to an expression which draws on both the notion of comparison and of rule. It is the idiom "to make an example of someone."[19] The object of such treatment is established as a stridently negative symbol, the authoritative statement of what not to be. As Polk understands, "people who become a מָשָׁל-byword have fallen from

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the head of the nations"], but the LXX and the Vulgate, with many modern versions [RSV, NAB, NAU, NIV] read it transformatively ["as head of the nations"]. So also Ps 85:14 [13], where TNK reads "as He sets out on His way," while NAU renders "and will make His footsteps into a way."

14 The full idiom, שׂים ל, occurs twice besides, both in Ezekiel (21:24; 44:8). The present is the only instance of the three in which God is agent.

15 For discussion and emphatic defense of its unity, see Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel I* (trans. Ronald E. Clements; Hermeneia; Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress, 1979), 305-6; and more recently, Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1-24* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 421-24.

16 ונתתי פני באיש ההוא.

17 והשׁמתיהו לאות ולמשׁלים.

18 NAB, NIV, NRSV, TNK. Also Zimmerli, *Ezekiel I*, 302; Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 179; also John W. Wevers, *The Century Bible* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1969), 113. Versions and commentaries reading "proverb" include KJV, NKJV, NAU, see Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1-24*, 421.

19 "Proverb", *EBD*, 855.

high to low estate and find themselves the objects of horror and astonishment, being spat at, ridiculed, taunted, and abhorred. In fact, they have become a paradigm […]."[20] This, I dare say, is Fox's "trope", the exemplum which belongs to the set it represents. Ezekiel's object of ostracism embodies and explicates the rules both for being ostracized and for avoiding such a fate.[21] As מָשָׁל, the exemplum is a symbol possessed of authority, not in itself, but in what is done to it, not in itself, but in what it is made to stand for. Ezekiel underlines this interpretation with his familiar and trenchant recognition formula: "So will you know that I am the Lord" (v. 8d). By suffering the cryptic fate of being "cut off" from among the chosen people, the symbolically disappeared person will stand as the normative statement on how to provoke the divine judgment, and provides a model and lesson by which those who would be taught will learn.

The semantic range of the term אוֹת extends from the sense of "mark" (as put upon Cain) to sign as here in Ezekiel. The fact invites reflection on Ezekiel's furious idiom in relation to the coincident terminology in Genesis 4:15. In Genesis the Lord puts a mark on Cain (אוֹת, v. 15), while in Ezekiel he sets someone as a sign (אוֹת). Whether understood as "mark" or "sign" the אוֹת "serves as a means of transmitting information." That is its "basic characteristic."[22] And being set as sign equates to being set as מָשָׁל. Thus Ezekiel's delicate modification of the Genesis material successfully evokes the first fugitive's status as a negative symbol in the very act of turning the blight of Cain upon Israel's apostate elders. In the process Cain's dubious survival status evolves into the continuous reproach to which people are doomed whose very survival teaches lessons about provoking divine disapproval.

Ezekiel's syntactic reversal does not diminish the teaching function of the sign. A sign would not be a sign if it were not known.[23] And both in the case of Cain as in that of the outrageous elders it is their survival that enables the sign to work, and testifies to its validity and effectiveness. Those who see Cain will not kill him. Thus, the sign, functioning as sign, keeps him alive to continue to display the sign by which he lives. The religious eclectics, too, who seek the Lord while devoted to idolatry, receive from Ezekiel a promise to live by the Lord's appointment as sign. As those who observe

[20] Polk, "Paradigms, Parables, and *Mešalîm*, 577. Polk's study of Ezekiel's usage nevertheless exhibits, upon occasion, an inconsistent attitude to מָשָׁל. He reads approvingly the people's use of מָשָׁל in 12:22, and 18:2; but then, contradictorily, he claims that their use of the term in 21:5 is to be heard as critical: They are allegedly criticizing Ezekiel for using מִשְׁלִים. If מָשָׁל is good for them how could they persuasively argue that it is bad for someone else [Ezekiel]? It seems more consistent to hear Ezekiel as critical of the popular attitude whether in citation of the proverbs of 12:22, and 18:2, or in ridicule of the prophet as a user of מִשְׁלִים (21:5).

[21] Fox *Proverbs 1-9*, 54. The Vulgate renders אוֹת as "exemplum" and מִשְׁלִים as "proverbium".

[22] Paul A. Kruger, "אוֹת," *NIDOTTE* 1:331.

[23] "By the 'sign,' which consists in the judgment upon the idolater, what had previously been hidden is made clear to everyone" (Zimmerli, *Ezekiel I*, 308).

them recognize their undoing and ostracism as the Lord's sign, the deity's will is done, and people come to know that he is the Lord.[24]

Besides their common subject matter, further intertwining linguistic threads link Ezekiel 14:8 to two other מָשָׁל idioms already identified. They are היה למשל (Deut 28:37; 1 Sam 10:12; 1 Kgs 9:7; Ps 69:12), and נתן למשל (2 Chron 7:20; Jer 24:9). The force of שׂים ל and its companion idiom נתן ל obtrudes in Jeremiah 12:11 where, in tandem, they express Jeremiah's lament upon the paradox of abusive shepherds who made [שׂים ל] the Lord's inheritance a desolation, and made [נתן ל] his pleasant field a desolate wilderness.

The second of these, נתן ל, is the instrument of a range of instances, beginning with Abram the day he is circumcised and becomes Abraham.[25] The Lord, in this first instance, will bless Abraham exceedingly (במאד מאד), he will make him nations (נתן לגוים, Gen 17:6), a destiny he assures him will also be Ishmael's (v. 20). This major promise reverberates in Jacob's ear as well. The Almighty will make him a congregation of peoples (נתן לקהל עמים; 48:4). Evidently, God's covenant (Gen 17:7) involves a dramatic transformation—from smallness to grandeur, from isolation to father of multitudes. And the covenant concept figures conspicuously in Isaiah's use of the idiom, as the Lord declares his intention to make his servant the people's covenant (42:6; 49:8), and the people's light (Isa 42:6; 49:6). Based on this explication of the idiom נתן ל, the servant is better seen, not given as light, provided to be perceived in illuminating function, but made and appointed the people's light and covenant: Hence "I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations," (42:6); and "I will also make You a light of the nations" (49:6).[26] Nor may we fairly ignore Isaiah's sense that it is the creator God (בורא השׁמים; 42:5) who effects this miracle. The root ברא applies particularly to God as the one who works miracles with nothing—*ex nihilo* (Gen 1:1). Isaiah's introductory allusion to Genesis sets up his audience for the miracles the creator God will do (נתן ל).[27]

Jeremiah too expresses the transformational authority inherent in the idiom. And with him, except for a first statement of prophetic appointment (1:5), the idiom is

[24] Ezekiel 13:9 lists three idioms appropriate to Ezekiel's intent when he speaks of those who will be cut off, in this case, false prophets. They will not be in the council (סוד) of God's people, nor be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel (כתב בת ישׂראל), nor enter the land of Israel. The exclusionary force of the sign seems to be its ostracism rather than elimination by destruction.

[25] Genesis includes three applications of the idiom (17:6, 20; 48:4).

[26] See TNK, NAU, TOB. In Isaiah 42:6 verse the strength of the metaphor may be diluted by reading "as" comparatively (that is, 'you are like a light'). The statement does not report a simile, but signifies assigned role, "in the position of […]." TNK successfully avoids "as" by rendering "I created you, and appointed you a covenant people, a light of nations", with a marginal note on "a covenant people" which explains that the Hebrew literally means "covenants of a people". The servant is either, more interpretatively, "a covenant people" or, literally, "covenants of a people".

[27] Isaiah employs the idiom four times, all within ten chapters (40:23; 42:6; 49:6, 8), with three applied to the servant, and the other, the first, also involving divine agency.

consistently pejorative.[28] In that first case God silences Jeremiah's objections to inadequacy by stating that he had appointed him a prophet to the nations before he formed him in the womb. Beyond this proof of divine transcendence, the idiom's least negative application alludes to hostile confrontation as Jeremiah is to be fortified against the people's assaults (1:18; 15:20). Its most frequent application destines God's people and temple for horror: The Lord's wrathful judgments on his people will be unrestrained though Moses and Samuel should stand before him. He will "make them an object of horror (נתן לזעוה) among all the kingdoms of the earth because of Manasseh […]." (Jer 15:4). In 29:18 four more nouns, אלא, "curse", שמה, "horror", שׁרקה, "hissing", and חרפה, "reproach", accompany זעוה, "object of horror", already used in 15:4 to describe the Lord's angry purpose. But the prophet's fiercest outburst occurs in 24:9 where a total of six epithets, including מָשָׁל, declare the divine intention with regard to an apostate people:

The Lord will make them (נתן ל) "a horror—an evil—to all the kingdoms of the earth, a disgrace and a proverb (משל), a byword and a curse in all the places to which I banish them" (TNK).

Clearly, the nuances of Isaiah's idiom are not necessarily identical to those of Jeremiah. Both prophets visualize astonishing futures. But these futures materialize in very different directions, as diametrically opposing miracles. While Isaiah's is redemptive, restorative, Jeremiah's is damnation and destruction. Also, his use of מָשָׁל in Jeremiah 24:9, in context of fierce denunciation, is consistent with its contemporary employment in Ezekiel, to express divine fury toward the hypocritical elders who sit before him (14:8). It reminds us too, and supports as well, that sense of the genius of מָשָׁל as "example", (EDB), Fox's "exemplum", in this case, a collective victim, by contrast with Ezekiel's individual victim of God's wrath. In מָשָׁל as teaching example, Jeremiah and Ezekiel offer us an opportunity to freely compare, both with what the example illustrates, and with the category to which the object once belonged. That which is made into a מָשָׁל is now made into something it once was not. We may then compare it with that earlier identity. It is also now, in the specific cases of Ezekiel's and Jeremiah's idioms, an illustration of tragic and miserable destiny. And whether individual or collective, the מָשָׁל is a demonstration of the rules which govern and determine such a destiny. As exemplary statement, as effective description of divinely depicted reality, the מָשָׁל of Jerusalem, like Ezekiel's elders, becomes an authoritative symbol of what God can do. Instead of the depiction of some wonderful ideal, Lamentation 2:15 now sees Jerusalem as teaching of misery appointed by God. Its transformation moves people to whistle and wag their heads as they ponder the horror of the difference between before and after, in full knowledge that this is what God has done to the city once hailed as "the joy of the

[28] There are fourteen occurrences, nine of which speak to Jerusalem, its temple, population, and rulers (Jer 9:10; 12:10; 15:4; 17:3; 24:9; 25:18; 26:6; 29:18; 34:17). The others concern the prophet himself (1:5, 18; 15:20), Pashur (20:4), and Babylon (50:25). A tone of similar harshness characterizes Ezekiel's eight usages (5:14; 7:20; 23:46; 25:5; 26:4, 14; 28:18; 35:7).

whole earth" (Lam 2:15). Given the semantic proximity of the terms שׂים and נתן, Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's use of the idioms שׂים ל and נתן ל further elucidate our understanding of the basic identity of the מָשָׁל. And the unexpectedness of their articulations is, at the same time, consistent with the unpredictability resident in the idiom נתן ל, as used in Genesis and Isaiah. The transcendent God who alone can assure the future of Abraham and Jacob in Genesis is the unique source of Jeremiah's oracle of disaster, so opposed to the wondrous fulfillment of his Genesis prediction. What Jeremiah and Ezekiel make evident through their use of the idioms שׂים ל and נתן ל, is that being or becoming a מָשָׁל is no conventional expectation, not to be taken as a commonplace.[29]

4. BALAAM AND THE מָשָׁל

The מָשָׁל collections of Solomon, Agur, Lemuel's mother, and the rest of the wise are recognizable in the aggregate because the label מָשָׁל is already and otherwise defined. Centuries before Solomon a Mesopotamian soothsayer was taking up his מָשָׁל to utter unexpected articulations. By respecting this earlier material as context for the prophetic literature I acknowledge the chronological spine which should not be ignored, as we trace out the biblical usage of the term, מָשָׁל. Proceeding in this way leads us to see how the term's meaning in these earlier writings impacts its later usage in the corpus of sentence proverbs. The Balaam context of מָשָׁל is, in fact, not only among the earliest biblical usages, but also the most concentrated. Seven of a total of thirty-nine מָשָׁל occurrences in Scripture (approximately 18%) appear within the range of two of the three chapters of a single narrative, the Balaam story. Linking Numbers' idiom נשׂא משׁל to Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's שׂים ל משׁל and נתן ל משׁל, presents an increasingly accessible picture of the term's basic meaning. It also affords us insight into how its earlier and radical understanding might have yielded the wider and, perhaps more popular, range of connotations.

Having studied the famous Balaam texts from Deir 'Alla, J. Hoftijzer, opines that their most probable dating, based on stylistic and morphological attributes is around 700 BCE, though "the prophet who (allegedly) spoke the words in question was a man who already in that time could be considered as having lived in a relatively remote past."[30] Hoftijzer cites Isaiah 30:8, as well as 8:1, Jeremiah 30:2; 36:2, 28; and Habakkuk 2:2, to support the argument that certain prophecies were "meant to keep" their

[29] In Ezekiel 44:8, one of Ezekiel's two other uses of the idiom, God is indignant because uncircumcised aliens have been appointed (שׂים ל) to minister in his sanctuary. In its other application (21:24) the Lord advises the prophet to make himself two roads on which the sword of Babylon's king may advance.

[30] Jean Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij, eds., *Aramaic Texts from Deir 'Alla* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 271. For transcription, and translation of the texts, as well as Hoftijzer's philological commentary, see pp. 173-267

value even after the events they addressed had passed.[31] Thus, he insists, "it is not amazing, […] that a prophecy, which stood in the name of Balaam, was still considered an important document in the seventh or eighth century BCE."[32] For their part, G. van der Kooij, and M. M. Ibrahim dated the Deir 'Alla texts to a century earlier than Hoftijzer.[33] And Baruch A. Levine considers the biblical Balaam material to belong to the text's older JE stratum, specifically, "from an El repertoire, preserving the creativity of the Israelites in Gilead," and featuring early Hebrew usage and syntax.[34] William Foxwell Albright's own view was that the material was composed about 1200 BCE, and written down no later than 900 BCE.[35]

Exhaustive exegesis, either of the entire narrative, or exclusively of the Balaam speeches would take us farther afield than we need to in this study, and is also readily available in the commentaries. But whether swiftly skimmed or closely scanned, Balaam's seven utterances resound, from first to last, as the utter undoing of Balak's expectations. The oracles leave Moab's king flabbergasted and confounded. His single intent in summoning the soothsayer is to curse Israel. Balak has seen Israel's havoc on the Amorites (22:2). He is terrified (v. 3). He sends for Balaam, at home on the Euphrates, imploring him to come and curse–for him (v. 6), this people who is mightier than he. Balak's scheme is broadly contemplated. It follows high level deliberations between Moab and Midianite elders (v. 4). It involves a time investment by significant elements of Moab's diplomatic corps (שׂרי בלק, v. 13; שׂרים רבים ונכבדים מאלה, v. 15). It involves financial outlays, as yet undetermined, on the part of the royal treasury, that depend on the breadth of Balaam's demand (v. 17). It contemplates specific outcomes—Balak will judge his success by more than the fact of a soothsayer's charmed words. He plans his own follow up work because he does not expect the prophetic oracle to affect his enemies' disappearance. Disappeared people become so not on the basis of words, but of actions. Balak is committed to Balaam's coming (vv. 6, 16). And he is committed to doing his part. He declares his intent to launch an offensive which will hopefully drive the people out of the land (v. 6). But his own success depends on Balaam's curse. The king speaks his guarantee of support for whatever issues from Balaam's mouth (וכל אשׁר תאמר אלי אעשׂה, v. 17), regardless of the cost to himself or his nation. For Balak knows that whatever Balaam says is well said, whatever he blesses is blessed, and whatever he curses is cursed (v. 6).

Instead, when Balaam speaks, at the height of a parodied and circuitous build up which eventually brings him and the reader to the point of climax, Balaam takes up his

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 G. van der Kooij, M. M. Ibrahim, eds., *Picking up the Threads: A Continuing Review of Excavations at Deir 'Alla, Jordan* (Leiden: University of Leiden Archaeological Centre, 1989), 63.

34 Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20* (AB 4A; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 49, 63, 73.

35 William Foxwell Albright, "The Oracles of Balaam," *JBL* 63 (1944): 226.

מָשָׁל and speaks a profusion of blessings on Israel. "Curse them", says Balak (22:11); "curse them" (v. 17). "I told you to curse them" (23:11). But Balaam only blesses and blesses (vv. 7-10, 18-24). Whereupon Balak, still valuing Balaam's word, exclaims, "Don't curse them and don't bless them!" (v. 25, TNK). Whereupon Balaam blesses again, but now adds curses as well, not on Israel, but on her enemies, including Balak's people Moab: Israel will "devour enemy nations, crush their bones, and smash their arrows" (24:8); "A scepter comes forth from Israel; it smashes the brow of Moab, the foundation of all children of Seth (v. 17). Edom becomes the possession of its enemies, but Israel triumphs (v. 18); Amalek's fate is to perish forever (v. 20). Asshur will take the Kenites captive (vv. 21, 22), but Ashur too, and Eber, will come to destruction (v. 24). In Balak's livid fury, and Balaam's hard earned impoverishment—dignity gone, credibility lost, and still no Moabite shekels, the king, the soothsayer, and the story meekly subside.

How does the story help us to understand the מָשָׁל? It helps here by making God the clear inspirer of Balaam's מָשָׁל. Balaam only speaks because God puts a word in his mouth: From his first encounter with Balak's dignitaries, his position is that his action and utterance must wait on the Lord's word (22:8). Can he go off to curse Israel? God answers with an absolute negative (v. 12). Balak, unsatisfied, sends higher emissaries with the same request. But Balaam can only act as God gives him to (v. 18). So he asks again. The diplomats must wait some more (v. 19). Balaam's interpretation of God's response grants him permission to go. But only the word or matter (דבר) that God speaks will he be able to perform (v. 20). On the road, Balaam's hollow confession of sin and protested willingness to turn back is answered with leave to continue on, as well as the narrative's fourth insistence, "Go […] but only the word which I speak to you will you speak" (v. 35). It is not because of sacrifices of bullocks that Balaam may speak. It is only when God puts a word in his mouth that he may utter one (22:8, 18, 20, 35, 38; 23:3, 5). God gives a word. Balaam speaks a מָשָׁל. Balaam speaks only what God gives him to speak. Seven times the narrative reiterates that Balaam's utterance and action are under divine control. Then upon the seventh iteration, Balaam speaks a sequence of seven מְשָׁלִים (23:7, 18; 24:3, 15, 20, 21, 23). He speaks oracles of blessing when he is commissioned to curse. He speaks curses on the one whom he is summoned to serve. He speaks curses on the one who has, by promise, bribed him to bless. As with every instance thus far studied, the word of מָשָׁל is a word of surprise, of astonishment, often explicitly of divine ordaining: It sounds sometimes for bane—as upon Ezekiel's spiritually confused elders (שׂים למשל, 14:8); similarly, for Zedekiah, his officials, Jerusalem, and Judah's surviving remnant from the second Babylonian captivity of 597 BCE. At other times it sounds for blessing, as upon Israel in Balaam's first two oracles (Num 23:5-11, 18-24). At still other times it sounds for both weal and woe, as is the case in Balaam's later oracles distributed between Israel and its enemies (24:3-9, 15-25).

Reflection on מָשָׁל in the Balaam narratives points us not only to the term's basic sense, but to how it might possibly have trended toward the more popular under-

standing as "saying," especially given the accepted priority of the Balaam narratives within the diachronic sweep of the Bible's major מָשָׁל texts.[36]

By contrast with Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and a variety of modifications on the language of the book of Deuteronomy (Deut 28:37; 1 Kgs 9:7; 2 Chron 7:20), the earlier identity of the מָשָׁל, as heard with Balaam, is oral. While the temple, the elder, or the nation may later be made into a מָשָׁל, the oracle itself bears the label in Numbers. The word מָשָׁל came to possess two binary pairs of signification, one in relation to comparison versus rulership, the other in relation to physicality versus orality. I have already spoken to the nexus between comparison and rule: With regard to "rule" an unexpected but authoritative prediction enunciates an unassailable rule, underlined by the astonishment of its exceptional character. And the fulfillment of the exceptional prediction stands as authoritative demonstration of that rule. The rule is unassailable not only because it may be of divine articulation, but because its realization violates and transcends logical anticipation. The indisputability of the divinely sourced מָשָׁל is what R. B. Y. Scott acknowledges when he defines it as "a saying or poem setting forth the mysterious unseen order with which all things must conform because God wills it so."[37] For Scott the מָשָׁל embodies "mysterious and powerful wisdom as related to a particular matter, as this has been formulated by an authoritative speaker or in accepted tradition."[38] James Crenshaw bolsters this respect for the מָשָׁל with his statement that the sense of "a powerful word" inherent in the term derives from the meaning "to rule."[39] Sages notwithstanding, there exists no higher biblical authority for rulership or word of power than God himself. And Balaam, biblical מָשָׁל pioneer, receives his word of מָשָׁל from God.

As for comparison, things true, soft, large, deep, and other, are forever being measured against rules of integrity, texture, grandeur, profundity, and "differentness." The notion of rule, whether as authority or principle, is ever more immanent in, than absent from, the fact of comparison.

The options for orality and physicality of מָשָׁל are possible, because rules exist, and people do comparisons, not only on material elements, but on their articulation, the way they are described. Job (17:6; 30:19) and the psalmist (69:12) show consciousness of the physical dimension of מָשָׁל. As people of integrity, brought, undeservedly, to physical misery and the sackcloth of mourning, they are clearly not what you would ever expect. They are an astonishment, a surprise, a tax on the paradigm. Job and the

[36] The Balaam material has been virtually ignored in מָשָׁל analysis. This is quite remarkable, for focus on Balaam is focus on (a) earlier usage, (b) more concentrated usage, and (c) an account which repeatedly employs the term in narrative context, giving some indication of a much earlier usage as far as Syro-Palestinian history and biblical material are concerned.

[37] R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (2nd ed.; AB 18; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), 13.

[38] Ibid.

[39] James Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (rev. & enl. ed.; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 56.

psalmist also show awareness of the oral dimension of מָשָׁל which partakes of the sense of the Balaam label. This oral aspect of the מָשָׁל idea eventually flourishes in the maxims and epigrams which set forth their ethical or economic, moral, and theological principles in the sentence literature of the wisdom tradition. Contrary to some popular thinking, the biblical proverbs are not commonplaces. The king's men did not mean to dedicate themselves to the collection of trivia (Prov 25:1). In an era when authority resided in hoary age and the elders were the final court of appeal, the wisdom sayings offer themselves as the distilled wisdom of the ages, the voice of the father and the fathers (Prov 1:10; Job 15:10). The classic validation of this rule, that the fathers rule, is Job's subtle criticism because Eliphaz, in a wisdom setting, grounds proof in himself (Job 12:12). A little later Job stuns the whole company by dismissing their memorable utterances as proverbs of ashes (משלי אפר, 13:12). "Your attempt at wisdom is not worth it", he implies. "It is not what you think." Eliphaz then attempts to regain the high ground by arrogating to himself the Joban vocabulary on sources of authority. "Wisdom is with the aged," Job has said (ישישים, 12:12). "The aged (ישיש) are on our side," Eliphaz retorts (15:10). What they both agree on, however much they disagree with each other in this battle of words, is that dedication to wisdom is dedication to antiquity. To this point in the interlocution, victory in the war still seems to depend on the inspired authority of yesterday's words.

5. מָשָׁל AS BOTH WORD AND EVENT

I have shown that the Balaam narrative is ruled by the word, the word of God. Only what God says goes. Reasonably then, the later authority of speakers of wisdom sayings, validated as it is by its source in the fathers, may also reflect a further degree of derivation—that of the fathers from the deity, ultimate source and transcendent authority not only of the wisdom which created the cosmic order, but of everything besides. The linkage amply justifies Polk's sense of a need to strive for greater precision "in specifying the uniquely religious force of the material to which the concept [מָשָׁל] is applied."[40]

Again, in the Balaam narratives, ruled by the word of God, what God says is not what one anticipates. So that the מָשָׁל, at least in these episodes, is the unexpected utterance rather than the unexpected event. There are also cases where both the word and the event are comprehended in the label מָשָׁל. Examples include Ps 49, where psalmic content and the fools who make it true are both referred to as מָשָׁל; also Ps 78, where the poem and the perplexing national history it recounts are both מָשָׁל.[41] The

[40] Polk, "Paradigms, Parables, and *Mešālîm*, 564.

[41] Suter equates the מָשָׁל of Pss 49, 78 to extended discourses so identified in the Similitudes of Enoch. In Ps 49, for example, narrow commitment to something comparative as a basis for the label מָשָׁל limits his application to vv. 13-15, where he finds a contrast between the fates of wicked and the psalmist (compare Suter, "*Mašal* in the Similitudes of Enoch," 199-200). A more ample understanding

same is true in 1 Samuel 10:12, and its repetition in 19:24. Before summarizing, I shall elaborate on this example, from the historical literature, to show how thoroughly impregnated the term מָשָׁל is with surprise.

Anointed by Samuel as Israel's first king, Saul becomes mightily endowed (צלח) by the Spirit of God (רוח אלהים) and prophesies (התנבא) among the prophets (1 Sam 10:10). His acquaintances in the region of Benjamin are surprised and amazed. They talk a lot about it. They cannot really believe it. This repeated expression of their surprise and doubt becomes a מָשָׁל (היה למשל), a question, in incredulous surprise, converted in time into a quiet word of astonishment: "So Saul's a prophet too?" (1 Sam 10:12). This narrative information is neither neutral reportage nor insight into the development of some complimentary phenomenon.

As with שׂים למשל and נתן למשל, the expression היה למשל (be/become a משל) conveys a consistently negative sense.[42] The news that the patrician Saul is now among the prophets does not inspire his community. They greet it with ample doses of surprise and cynicism. And it occasions the troubled query, "What has happened to Kish's son?" (היה ל, 1 Sam 10:11). In the Hebrew Bible non-naming references to "so and so's son" are not flattering to their referents. Saul's name is not unknown.[43] But his new vocation disparages—his own lineage, and his father's stature. The loud wonder on Kish's son provokes more smart quips: "And who are their fathers?" (v. 12). It

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of the genius of the label would apply it to this entire psalm, focused on the astonishing blindness of successful fools, rather than on a few verses which mention a contrast. It is the people themselves, (ביקר ולא יבין, v. 21), and their story of living in pomp to perish like beasts (vv. 13, 21), that is the מָשָׁל and the riddle introduced at the beginning (vv. 2-5). As human מָשָׁל, Polk includes Ezekiel's threatened apostates (14:7, 8), and the king of Babylon in Isaiah's taunt song (14:4-23). Polk, "Paradigms, Parables, and *Mešālîm*, 576-77. Landes, "Jonah: A *Mašāl*?", 140, also cites the Babylonian king.

42 In Deuteronomy 28:37, no doubt a significant inspiration for other passages such as 1 Kgs 9:7, and Ps 69:12 [11], God's people will become "an appalment, a מָשָׁל, and a taunt among all the peoples to which the Lord will drive" them. The same text apparently lies behind Jeremiah's use of the similar idiom in the passage that I discussed earlier (24:9).

43 Nor is David's name unknown to Saul when he fails to turn up at the royal new moon banquet. Straightforward quotation adequately discloses Saul's mood, upon discovering that the former armor bearer he is determined to eliminate has escaped his murderous will: "It happened on the day after the new moon, the second day, that David's place was vacant. So Saul said to Jonathan, 'Why hasn't Jesse's son come to the feast either yesterday or today?' And Jonathan answered Saul, 'David really begged me to let him go to Bethlehem. […] That is why he hasn't come to the royal table.' But Saul flew into a rage against Jonathan and said to him, 'You son of a warped, rebellious woman, don't I know that you are choosing Jesse's son to your shame and your mother's [literally, 'your shame and the shame of your mother's nakedness']! For as long as Jesse's son is alive on the face of the earth you and your kingship are not established. So go and get him to me, for he is doomed to die.' (1 Sam 20:27-31). While Jonathan insists on naming his friend, Saul's growing rage turns his own son Jonathan into an object of similar scorn ("You son of a warped, rebellious woman"). Other similarly uncomplimentary epithet may be present in Leviticus 24:10-13, 23–the blasphemer is never given a name; also, perhaps, for a woman in Genesis 46:10, and Exodus 6:15 [though female namelessness is genealogically unremarkable], where Saul is twice identified as "the son of a Canaanite woman".

becomes a מָשָׁל (היה למשל, v. 12): "So Saul's a prophet too!"[44] It is doubtful that the words themselves, independent of the memory of that astonishing event, would convert to a permanent element in Benjamite folklore. More likely, repeated recountings of the phenomenon itself, of the strange behaviors of the handsome son of the distinguished Kish, echo and reecho the quip until it lodges for keeps in the popular mind: "So Saul's a prophet too!"

Comparing our first example (1 Sam 10:11, 12) with its repetition in 1 Samuel 19:24 discloses a genetic relationship between two different uses of the term מָשָׁל. By underlining the limits of this article, the connection also emphasizes the value and urgency of continuing מָשָׁל research.[45] As David the cult hero grows increasingly popular, hundreds of dissatisfied and disenfranchised citizens abandon their loyalty to King Saul to cast their sympathies with the celebrated fugitive (1 Sam 22:1, 2). In Saul's desperate attempts to forestall this and eliminate his perceived rival, he pursues David to the residence of the prophet Samuel. There the Spirit of God again possesses him as on the day he was first appointed king, and thus possessed he lies down naked through a day and a night, prophesying in Samuel's presence: The distortions of self-conceived jealousy and the frustrations of his unsatisfied resolve to murder have transformed the royal figure of the first example into a major fool. Saul's is now a more desperate, more ludicrous, and utterly more shameful form of madness than ever. So that even as it expresses the public astonishment, and allows for application of the binary pair of word and event, a repetition of the saying of 1 Samuel 10 serves a new purpose in 1 Samuel 19. Surprise and incredulity are not missing from the picture, but the words of ironic astonishment of the first case now become the expression of significant public contempt: "So Saul's a prophet too!" (1 Sam 19:24). It is the very sense in which the messages of Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, and the historians warn: Should Israel prove rebellious, the nation will come to naught, becoming a horror, a mašal, and a taunt among all peoples to which its citizens will be scattered.[46]

[44] One of the less emphasized examples of מָשָׁל as surprise relates to Saul's hunt for David in the caves of Ein Gedi. Saul has judged that David's death is his only means of ensuring his own royal lineage. In the euphemism of Hebrew idiom, he must go into a cave to "cover his feet" (1 Sam 24:4). David, concealed in the recesses of the cave, sneaks forward, cuts off the tail of the royal robe and returns to hiding. Once Saul is clear of the cave David emerges, calls out to him and shows him his coattails. "I won't kill you even if I could," he says, and quotes a מָשָׁל which seems at first sight a mere commonplace: "Wickedness comes from wicked people" (v. 14). The twist of surprise in the remark becomes more apparent as we hear it in context of the long strained relations between David and Saul, and his awareness that Saul has wronged him ("the Lord avenge me on you", v. 13). Given his consistent tone of deference and reconciliation toward God's anointed (1 Sam 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11), David's citation of the popular and ancient saying is a rather untypical and withering implication of Saul's own activity. "Wickedness comes from wicked people. And I won't be trying to kill you" (v. 14).

[45] My conclusion comments on this area of need—the study of genetic relationships between uses of the label מָשָׁל.

[46] Deuteronomy 28:37; 1 Kings 9:7; Jeremiah 24:9; and Micah 2:4.

The association of contempt and, or, horror with the מָשָׁל in so many passages (Deut 28:37; Mic 2:4; Hab 2:6; Jer 4:9; Ezek 14:8; 1 Kgs 9:7; 2 Chron 7:20) suggests that often enough, if not always, the element of surprise is itself intended to convey the distinctly negative connotation we can hear in the voices of Job and the psalmist (Job 17:6; Ps 44:15; 69:12), in many verbal constructions, particularly in Ezekiel (Job 30:19; Ps 28:1; Ps 49:13, 21; 143:7; Ezek 12:23; 16:44; 17:2; 18:2, 3; 21:5; 24:3), and can see in Micah, Isaiah, and Habakkuk taking up a מָשָׁל against (משל על) various subjects (Mic 2:4; Isa 14:4; Hab 2:6).[47]

6. Summary and Conclusions

For many Bible students, study of the מָשָׁל may be irresistible because they hear it as a word of wisdom, which we all seek. It remains very much an enigma, and we find enigmas absorbing. For all its enigmatic character, its mastery brings great fame. Such is apparently the archivist's judgment on Israel's ancient King Solomon. Supernaturally endowed with a grand store of wisdom (1 Kgs 5:9-14 [4:29-34]), he composed three thousand מָשָׁל, among other things. And the מִשְׁלֵי שְׁלֹמֹה are given to help us understand מָשָׁל.[48] Thus, if for no other reason than understanding מָשָׁל, we are compelled to their study. This study asks what the מָשָׁל really is, this thing we feel so called to study. I ask not merely what the words say, but what the label of the category stands for. My study has focused on four specific idiomatic contexts in which the term predominates, but has not ignored the rest of the Hebrew Bible's מָשָׁל corpus. I have found that the biblical מָשָׁל is frequently undertaken or given as a word from deity through prediction of event: in the Pentateuch (Deuteronomy); in the prophets (Jeremiah, Ezekiel); and in the historical writings (1 Kings, 2 Chronicles). I also find the מָשָׁל as divinely given oracle, as with Balaam's seven iterations in the book of Numbers. Early in my article I cite the insistence among some comparative Semitic philologists that the biblical term is not the equivalent of its apparent cognates in Akkadian, ancient Aramaic, Phoenician, or Punic. It now seems that the issue of cognates may deserve review. Whether or not, my understanding of the term's meaning respects the historical continuum of biblical texts. In determining the meaning of the label מָשָׁל, such respect would tend to privilege its use in Balaam over its use in the sentence literature of the later book of Proverbs. From the Balaam narrative we learn that his מָשָׁל are God given oracles, hence the appropriateness of the oral aspect of מָשָׁל as wisdom saying, and the first reason for respect as issuing from the source of first authority.

[47] Ezekiel may be replacing על with אל in 24:3, but the preposition may be translated either "against" or "to", as in 17:2, and 18:2.

[48] מָשָׁל need explaining, and explain each other. Proverbs 1:1, 6 is not a redundancy ("The proverbs of Solomon . . . [given] to understand a proverb").

The predominant element in Balaam's מָשָׁל recurs in the prophetic usage. It is the element of surprise, their violation of expectation. The מָשָׁל is a word of surprise, a sense present even in popular accounts that are removed from the context of divine, oracular inspiration. This is what we find in the historical narratives of 1 Samuel, chapters 10, 19, and 24. This surprise frequently communicated a negative sense which may be heard in verbal constructions, including the laments of Job and the psalmist, in which, at times, God is inculpated (Job 30:19; Ps 28:1).

Scholars have variously supported and rejected the association of the biblical מָשָׁל root with the idea of rulership. But instead of being separated from the term, authoritativeness should be seen as an appropriate and inherent aspect of the biblical מָשָׁל. Comparison, the word's more accepted sense, usually presumes and/or establishes a standard. Beyond this, the deity as early and frequent source of spoken and dramatized מָשָׁל gives rise to two binary pairs of options for interpreting the word—one on the axis of orality versus physicality, the other on the axis of comparison versus rule. Explanations for the word's popular comparative element often depend on the parallelism of sentence proverbs. However, the comparative value may well derive indirectly from the fact of deity as source of מָשָׁל words, and directly from the authoritativeness of such words. For those divinely inspired oracles establish their authority first by violating logical expectation, and finally by transcending it in their fulfillment. Once established, divine מָשָׁל, whether as oracle or event, becomes a conspicuous reference point. It stands as rule or statement of reality.

Popular wisdom, whether crystallized as manageable tidbits, or extended teachings, could safely and reasonably be called מָשָׁל, particularly as issuing from human sources of authority in family and society. In Christine Yoder's description their authoritative word enables one to master living—the sense of "rule", while its other aspect implies that it "offers trustworthy counsel based upon a perceived order in the world."[49] I would submit that the emphasis on the מָשָׁל as reflecting a sense of order in the world follows from an earlier consciousness of the מָשָׁל as articulated by the one who is the first source of cosmic order.

This study has focused more on מָשָׁל as noun and less on the verbal forms. There may be much to discover from further study in that direction. There is, too, in the area of diachronic differentiation and development of new meanings of the term, a matter with specific implications for intertestamental and later usage.

[49] Yoder, "Proverb," *EDB* 1089-90.