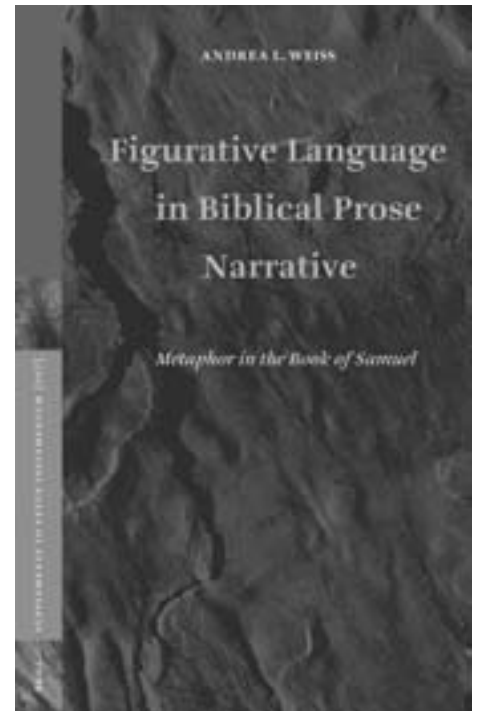


# Figurative Language in Biblical Prose Narrative: Metaphor in the Book of Samuel

Andrea L. Weiss, Brill, 2006

This study applies several linguistic approaches to the book of Samuel in order to investigate the defining features of metaphor and the way metaphor and other forms of figurative language operate in biblical narrative. This in-depth analysis of the figurative language in 1 Samuel 24-25 and 2 Samuel 16:16-17:14 yields a better understanding of the mechanics of metaphor and a more insightful reading of these particular stories.



When the Tekoite woman appears before King David, she states: “They would quench my last remaining ember” (2 Samuel 14:7). In this narrative context, the utterance describes her kinsmen’s purported desire to kill her sole living son. In another setting, the very same words might refer to an attempt to extinguish a fire. Elsewhere, they might indicate the satisfaction of a long-held desire. A single lexeme, when situated in different linguistic contexts, can convey different meanings and nuances. Depending on the components of the surrounding text segments, the interpretation of the lexeme and its effects may vary. In the example at hand,



how does one determine the referents of the verb and

object and the implications of the utterance as a whole? What marks a sentence like this as a metaphor? What distinguishes this statement from other forms of figurative language? This book seeks to answer these questions, thus gaining greater insight into the way metaphor and other tropes operate in biblical prose narrative....

As the literature review above demonstrates, scholars have restricted their studies of metaphor primarily to the poetic sections of the Bible. No one has yet conducted an in-depth investigation of metaphor in biblical prose narrative. Just as parallelism, considered a defining characteristic of biblical poetry, also appears in prose passages,<sup>1</sup> so metaphor is utilized by writers of prose as well as poetry. While metaphor, like parallelism, does

not dominate prose narrative the way it does poetic passages, nonetheless it functions as an important and effective literary device. Like other literary devices, metaphor provides a means by which “the text intimates its meanings”; it stands out as one of “the distinctive, artfully deployed features of ancient Hebrew prose and poetry that are the instruments for the articulation of all meaning, message, insight, and vision.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, metaphors found in prose texts are not complicated to the same extent as those in poetic passages by the other intertwining features that define biblical poetry, such as terseness, parallelism, repetition and patterning.<sup>3</sup> These factors make biblical narrative a promising setting in which to examine metaphor and other forms of figurative language.

## Rabbi Andrea L. Weiss, Ph. D.

Dr. Andrea Weiss is Assistant Professor of Bible at the Hebrew

Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York. She grew up in San Diego, California and received her undergraduate education at the University of California at Berkeley, where she majored in Literature. After her ordination at HUC-JIR in New York in 1993, she studied for her doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania, focusing on the Bible and ancient Near Eastern languages and civilizations. Recently, Dr. Weiss published a book entitled *Figurative Language in Biblical Prose Narrative: Metaphor in the Book of Samuel* (Brill, 2006) and an introduction to *Hills of Spices: Poetry from the Bible* (Jewish Publication Society, 2006). She currently serves as the Associate Editor of *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, a joint project of the Women of Reform Judaism and the Union for Reform Judaism Press. Dr. Weiss lives in the Philadelphia area with her husband, Alan Tauber, and their two children, Rebecca and Ilan.

Whereas other studies of metaphor tend to isolate distinct metaphors, such as the metaphor of the tree or the metaphor of God and Israel as husband and wife, this volume will investigate the various metaphors found in a particular passage and situate them in their surrounding narrative context. Agha argues that “the real task of analysis is not merely to catalogue the cases of metaphor but to understand the dramatic and rhetorical effects of the implicit meanings conveyed by tropes.”<sup>4</sup> Bar-Efrat emphasizes the value of this type of contextual strategy when he writes:

The best approach to a discussion of style is by undertaking a stylistic analysis of an entire narrative unit. Only in this way can the stylistic phenomena be seen within their contexts..., the interaction between them observed and their special significances discerned.<sup>5</sup>

This study begins with an analysis of 1 Samuel 25 and a discussion of how to identify and interpret the metaphors found in this chapter. Attention will be given to three main facets of metaphor: its anomalous nature, its underlying analogy, and the interactional effects it produces. Next, the metaphors in 2 Samuel 16:16-17:14 will be compared with other tropes in this narrative unit, primarily metonymy and simile. Finally, the notion of “dead” metaphors will be explored and challenged in the course of an examination of the figurative language in 1 Samuel 24....

In order to explore the mechanics of metaphor and other tropes, various theoretical approaches and heuristic devices have been applied to selected narratives in the book of Samuel. As has been acknowledged, these analytical tools do not always work flawlessly, in part because of inherent methodological imperfections as well as the challenges involved in the study of a restricted literary corpus written in an ancient language. Critics have raised legitimate objections to aspects of the theory of componential semantics, the concept of selection restriction violations, and assumptions about basic, context-free meanings of words. Likewise, White’s interpretive technique cannot be applied with equal success to all biblical metaphors. Nevertheless, the results of this study demonstrate that the benefits outweigh the weaknesses.

By its very nature, biblical narrative places a considerable exegetical burden on its audience. Marked by terseness and lacunae, reluctant to reveal motives and feelings, sparing in physical details, the style of biblical narrative necessitates close reading. Reflecting on the demands placed on the reader by “a multi-dimensional narrative,” Berlin writes:

The resulting narrative is one with depth and sophistication; one in which conflicting viewpoints may vie for validity. It is this that gives biblical narrative interest and ambiguity. The reader of such narrative is not a passive recipient of a story, but an active participant in trying to understand it. Because he is given different points of view, sees things from different perspectives, he must struggle to establish his own.<sup>6</sup>

The text-based approach to figurative language employed in this study enhances the reader’s ability to participate in this interpretive process. The methods introduced to identify and interpret metaphor and other tropes help the exegete to pay close attention to how language is used and to the rhetorical effects produced by the anomalous collocation of lexemes in a given utterance. An in-depth analysis of the figurative language in Samuel results in a richer, more nuanced reading of the story, its characters, and its language. A better understanding of the “internal drama performed by the actual words of the metaphor”<sup>7</sup> and other tropes contributes to a better understanding of figurative language in general and the compelling, artfully-crafted dramas that unfold in the Bible.

<sup>1</sup> Berlin, *Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), xii.

<sup>3</sup> See Adele Berlin, “Introduction to Hebrew Poetry,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. IV (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 301-315. As noted above, such literary features appear in prose as well, but not in the same dominant, defining fashion.

<sup>4</sup> Asif Agha, personal correspondence.

<sup>5</sup> Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 200.

<sup>6</sup> Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 82.

<sup>7</sup> Roger White, *The Structure of Metaphor* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 115.

## In Memoriam

**Hal Coskey**, member of the Los Angeles Board of Overseers and father of Rabbi Laurie Coskey, SJCS ‘83, LA ‘85, whose warmth and spirit infused his commitment to the School of Jewish Communal Service and the Los Angeles campus.

**Ruth Daniels**, beloved wife of Gerard Daniel, Governor Emeritus of the College-Institute, who will be remembered for her humanitarian efforts, leadership, and dedication to the Jewish people.

**Charles Kenis**, devoted husband of Audrey Skirball-Kenis, ז”ל, a beloved leader and benefactor of our institution, who together shared a vision for the arts, culture, and higher education that found expression through their commitment to HUC-JIR’s mission.

**Simha Lainer**, loyal son of the Jewish people, who together with his family established the Simha and Sara Lainer Beit Midrash at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles, where study of sacred texts has been joined with modern technology to create a vibrant learning community for our students.

**Lawrence J. Shapiro**, treasured friend and honorary member of the Cincinnati Board of Overseers, who established, with his wife Betsy, the Shapiro Interfaith Fellowship Endowment to promote Jewish education.

**Dr. Ronald Shlensky**, cherished husband of Evely Laser Shlensky, an esteemed member of the Board of Governors, who together shared a vision of social justice and human rights that endures as an inspiration.