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**“I Will Lead the Blind by a Road They Do Not Know:”**  
**Disability in Prophetic Eschatology**  
Program Unit: Biblical Scholarship and Disabilities

*Introduction*

This paper uses rhetorical criticism, including the study of metaphor, to examine some prophetic passages that use metaphors of physical impairment in their description of an eschatological vision. In regard to the employment of metaphor theory in the study of prophetic literature, this paper has been influenced by the work of Kirsten Nielsen, Carol A. Newsom, Gören Eidevall, and Peggy L. Day.<sup>1</sup> Day’s work has had a particular impact on the present paper because of her engagement with the way rhetorical figures and strategy can shape a response in readers.

This paper is particularly influenced by the working definition of metaphor set out by Janet Martin Soskice: “*speaking about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another.*”<sup>2</sup> An important emphasis of Soskice’s theory is her clarification that “the meaning of the metaphor” should be thought of “as the meaning of the complete utterance in its context of

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<sup>1</sup>Kirsten Nielsen, “‘From Oracles to Canon’ – and the Role of Metaphor,” *SJOT* 17 (2003): 22-33; \_\_\_\_\_, *There is Hope for a Tree: The Tree as Metaphor in Isaiah* (JSOTSup 65; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989); Carol A. Newsom, “A Maker of Metaphors – Ezekiel’s Oracles Against Tyre,” *Interpretation* 38 (1984): 151-64; Göran Eidevall, *Grapes in the Desert: Metaphors, Models, and Themes in Hosea 4-14* [ConBOT; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1996], 24-26; and Peggy L. Day, “The Bitch Had It Coming to Her: Rhetoric and Interpretation in Ezekiel 16,” *BibInt* 8/3 (2000): 231-54.

<sup>2</sup>Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 49.

uttering.”<sup>3</sup> In following her emphasis on context, this paper will examine these metaphors of impairment within the context of entire pericopes.

As readers of this paper are no doubt aware, to examine passages that seem to incorporate a “prophetic eschatology” is to swim into churning waters. Exegetes have not reached anything like a consensus about the existence of eschatology in the Hebrew Bible, including the prophetic books. Some have even challenged the use of the term “eschatology” to describe any phenomena in the texts of the Hebrew Bible, since the term itself is derived from Greek language.<sup>4</sup> Among those scholars who find it useful to speak of eschatology in reference to prophetic literature, there exists no commonly accepted definition for that feature.

While this paper acknowledges these difficulties, there exist, nevertheless, some intriguing correlations between metaphors of physical impairment and a vision of a strikingly distinctive future era in prophetic passages. This paper will explore these correlations in the following prophetic passages: Micah 4:6-14; Isaiah 29:1-8, 9-14, 15-24; 35:1-10; 42:1-9, 10-17, 18-25; Jeremiah 31:1-26; and Zephaniah 3:14-20. To examine these metaphors of physical impairment in the context of prophetic eschatology, Henning Graf Reventlow’s working definition for eschatology in prophetic books is helpful. He states, “we are dealing with a change between two historical periods . . . the concluding period – and this is essential for ‘eschatology’ – bears the character of finality.”<sup>5</sup> As Reventlow points out, this understanding of the term “eschatology” is

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>4</sup>Henning Graf Reventlow, “The Eschatologization of the Prophetic Books,” in *Eschatology in the Bible and in Jewish and Christian Tradition* (ed. H. G. Reventlow; JSOTSup 243; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 169-88 (170).

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 171.

well rooted in the history of exegesis. Responding to an earlier version of Reventlow's definitional perspective, Benjamin Uffenheimer clarifies that "In sociological terms, one might say that eschatology encompasses not only utopias that bring history to an end, but also imminent 'reachable' utopian situations."<sup>6</sup>

*Micah 4:6-14*

The introductory verse of Micah 4:6-14 clearly establishes the passage as an eschatological vision by means of the unmistakable formula, "on that day" (בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא), signifying in this case a time of restoration after catastrophe. The time frame is apparently the same as that envisioned in the previous pericope, Micah 4:1-5, and designated in verse 1 as "at the end of days" (הַיָּמִים בְּאַחֲרֵי הַיּוֹם). The formula, בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא, refers back to the previous time designation. As William McKane argues, the passage speaks of the march home by the returnees at the end of the exile.<sup>7</sup>

Micah 4:6-14 evokes the root metaphors of YHWH as shepherd and Israel as flock, as Micah 2:12-13 does, though the earlier passage is explicit in this association, while Micah 4:6-14 alludes to this root metaphor implicitly.<sup>8</sup> The metaphors of divine shepherd and communal flock

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<sup>6</sup>Benjamin Uffenheimer, "From Prophetic to Apocalyptic Eschatology," in *Eschatology in the Bible and in Jewish and Christian Tradition*, 200-217 (200).

<sup>7</sup>McKane cites an impressive list of scholars who place this passage in an exilic context, including David Kimchi, who takes בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא as a reference to the end of exile. See William McKane, *The Book of Micah: Introduction and Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 128.

<sup>8</sup>Francis I Andersen and David Noel Freedman *Micah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 24E; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 430. Eidevall states that for "the most influential and enduring models we may use the term *root metaphor*" (*Grapes in the Desert*, 37).

are clearly “root metaphors” within the writings of the Hebrew Bible in the sense that Paul Ricoeur uses the term.<sup>9</sup> According to Ricoeur, root metaphors “are capable of both engendering and organizing a network” of metaphors.<sup>10</sup> Thus, many subordinate metaphors may be brought into association within a network connected with and surrounding the root metaphor.<sup>11</sup> The root metaphor of YHWH as shepherd and Israel as flock shows just such a generative capacity, to spawn innovative metaphors associated with and adding richness to this primary relationship.<sup>12</sup> In the particular instance of Micah 4:6-14, the text constructs a metaphor of an injured sheep (הַצֵּלָעָה, “the limping one”) to speak of a wounded nation to be assembled together by YHWH the shepherd.<sup>13</sup>

In an effort to describe a future time of restoration, Mic 4:6 depicts an extraordinary transformation of circumstance, communicated by divine utterance. To convey the depth of the

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<sup>9</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 64.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>See, also, Claudia V. Camp’s discussion of root metaphor in “Woman Wisdom as Root Metaphor: A Theological Consideration,” in *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm.* (ed. K. G. Hoglund, et al.; JSOTSup 58; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 45-76, especially pp. 48-49.

<sup>12</sup>It is evident that YHWH as shepherd and Israel as flock is a root metaphor from its frequent occurrence in the Hebrew Bible. See, for example, Gen 48:15; 49:24; Ps 23:1; 28:9; 74:1; 78:52; 80:1; 95:7; 100:3; and Isa 40:11. There are also a significant number of passages that portray leaders of the community as shepherds and the community as flock. See, for example, Isa 56:11; Jer 3:15; 12:10; 23:2, 4; etc.

<sup>13</sup>*HALOT* gives a basic meaning for the Qal of the verbal root צִלַע “to limp.”

transformation, Micah pictures a formal speech of YHWH in which the divine promises to gather in the “limping one.” The vehicle of the “limping one” conveys the underlying topic of the shepherd who gathers in *all* the sheep, including those with injuries that impair their mobility. Israel is described as the “limping one” (הַצֵּלְעָה), the one who is wounded.<sup>14</sup>

Verse 6a constructs a “bicolon of classical merit” – so the phrase “I shall gather the limping one (הַצֵּלְעָה)” is parallel to the clause “and the outcast (הַנִּדְּחָה) I will assemble.”<sup>15</sup> David Noel Freedman states that the first colon together with the second construct “complete synonymous parallelism with chiasmus.”<sup>16</sup> Though M. O’Connor’s cautionary remarks about synonymy in so-called Hebrew poetic parallelism are well advised, it seems that a syntactical analogy or equivalency has been constructed between “the limping one” and “the outcast” in verse 6.<sup>17</sup> The same two terms -- הַצֵּלְעָה, “the limping one” and הַנִּדְּחָה, “the one driven out” – are constructed in an analogous fashion in Zephaniah 3:19 as well. One could say that in the eyes of these prophetic poets, the limping one is equivalent in some way to an outcast from society, or

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<sup>14</sup>The terminology of *topic* to indicate “what the text is speaking about” and *vehicle* for the term which speaks about the topic in a way that is suggestive of something else comes from Eva F. Kittay (*Metaphor: Its Cognitive Force and Linguistic Structure* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1987], 25-26). She also uses the terminology of *perspective* to refer to the interaction that occurs between the *vehicle* and the *topic* (Ibid., 22; See also Eidevall, *Grapes in the Desert*, 24-26).

<sup>15</sup>The phrase “a bicolon of classical merit” is Andersen’s and Freedman’s description (*Micah*, 431).

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>M. O’Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eiesenbrauns, 1997), 50-51.

“one driven far away” to the margins of society.<sup>18</sup>

While the time of composition for Micah 4:6-14 is not certain, of course, the terms **הַצִּלְעָה**, “the limping one,” and **הַנִּנְדָּה**, “the one scattered,” make good metaphorical sense within an exilic context.<sup>19</sup> For instance, the metaphor of **הַצִּלְעָה** would state in that context that Israel in exile is an injured sheep, wounded with a marked, visible impairment. **הַצִּלְעָה** is a vehicle that expresses the underlying topic that a deeply wounded nation can be gathered in and returned to Zion. God, like a kindly and conscientious shepherd will gather in even the wounded members of the community, to return them to their land. Similarly, in an exilic context, the metaphor **הַנִּנְדָּה** expresses the underlying idea that a nation scattered through exile can be gathered into a unified flock by YHWH.

Verse 6 completes the parallelism between **הַצִּלְעָה** and **הַנִּנְדָּה** through the statements, “I will assemble the limping one” and “(I) will gather the one who has been driven away.” As a shepherd collects injured and scattered sheep, so will YHWH gather up the deeply wounded and banished nation. The two statements of verse 6a evokes for the reader a sense of YHWH as the caring and attentive shepherd who will carefully gather in the flock.

However, verse 6b introduces a new wrinkle to the extended metaphor: YHWH also intends to bring back into the fold “those whom I have afflicted.”<sup>20</sup> This final phrase constructs a partial

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<sup>18</sup>*HALOT* gives a meaning for this *nip\al* fem. sing. part. as “one who is scattered,” referring to an animal (II, 673).

<sup>19</sup>Of course, v. 10 states explicitly that “daughter Zion” will travel to Babylon, where she will be rescued.

<sup>20</sup>In this instance, *HALOT* gives the meaning for Micah 4:6 **הִרְעִיתִי** “to treat someone badly.”

parallelism with the preceding bicolon; that is, those who are lame and scattered are made equivalent in some way to those whom YHWH has treated harshly. In the context of the exile, those whom YHWH has afflicted are perhaps those whom YHWH punished by means of banishment to Babylon.

This equivalence established between the limping one, the scattered one, and the one YHWH has afflicted indicates perhaps that the state of “limping” is the result of YHWH’s harsh treatment. In the context of exile, it would imply, perhaps, that Israel limps because YHWH has punished her.<sup>21</sup>

Verse 7 presents some difficulties as well, since it speaks of the divine transforming the “limping one” into a “remnant” (רִשְׁמוֹתַי). Like verse 6, verse 7a constructs a parallel between two phrases: the first, “I will make the limping one (הַצֵּלָעָה) into a remnant;” the second, “and the one that was cast off (הַנִּזְנָה לְסָרְסָרִים), a strong nation.” As in verse 6a, parallels are constructed here that draw a kind of equivalency between the limping one and the one who was cast off. The term הַנִּזְנָה לְסָרְסָרִים, “the one who is cast off,” is a *nip'al* feminine singular participle, like הַצֵּלָעָה, “the lame.”<sup>22</sup> The implication is that the limping one occupies a similar social position to the one who has been cast off.

Again, the metaphoric equivalence of “the limping one” and “the one cast off” makes particular sense in a context of exile. Israel in exile is injured and rejected. However, the verse

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BDB suggests the meaning “to do injury, hurt” (949).

<sup>21</sup>I use the feminine pronoun to refer back to “Israel” since the passage uses feminine participles for “the lame one” and “the one driven away.”

<sup>22</sup>*DCH* suggests as a meaning for הַנִּזְנָה לְסָרְסָרִים as “far removed one” (II, 543).

indicates that even those who are impaired and cast off will serve as the basis for a new Zion community under the rule of YHWH. Thus, the limping one will serve as a remnant from which YHWH will build a strong nation.

A problem for an emancipatory approach to disability is that verses 6 and 7 of Micah 4 associate the “limping one” with the punishment of YHWH (הַרְעֵתִי). According to verse 7, the limping one will be transformed into a remnant from whom YHWH will make a great nation. The very thing that helps the metaphor to be striking is that the groups that will become a great nation are so unexpected, from the passage’s point of view. The reader gets a vision of YHWH’s transformative power because YHWH can make a great nation out of the most unlikely people. The physically impaired are as unlikely a foundation for a nation as are those who were cast off. These groups will become a nation, under the rule of the divine, in Jerusalem, forever and ever.

#### *Isaiah 29:1-8*

Isaiah 29:1-8 is the second in a series of three woe sayings, which I include here because of its close, introductory connection with verses 9-14 following and because the entire chapter appears to be interrelated. The middle subsection, vv. 9-14, includes a vehicle of blindness to illustrate the underlying topic of spiritual imperception and the last subsection, vv. 15-24, envisions an eschatological era when the deaf shall hear and the blind shall see.<sup>23</sup> The first passage, 29:1-8, speaks of the unpredictable and inscrutable plan of YHWH. First, it seems that Jerusalem’s fate is to be under siege by YHWH, through the multitude of nations encamped against her. She is reduced to near extinction, her voice like a faint whisper, like a ghost

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<sup>23</sup>Joseph Blenkinsopp notes that Isa 29:1 marks the introduction of a second woe-saying in a series of three (*Isaiah 1-39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 19; New York: Doubleday, 2000], 400).



muttering from under the dust. Then, inexplicably, the tide of forces turns against Jerusalem's enemies and YHWH exacts punishment against the hoards of peoples that attempted to conquer the ancient city which David had claimed.

In verses 1, 3, and 7, the passage refers to Jerusalem five times as Ariel, a word that Blenkinsopp argues means "altar hearth," alluding pars pro toto to the city.<sup>24</sup> Through this synecdoche, Jerusalem is depicted as a potential scorched place of sacrifice and slaughter.<sup>25</sup> However, the slaughter and scorching will not be complete, for YHWH will enact an extraordinary reversal for the fortunes of "the multitude of nations" that "fight against Mount Zion" (v. 8).

*Isaiah 29:9-14*

Following on the humbling synecdoche of Jerusalem as אֲרִיֵּל, the next paragraph of vv. 9-10 uses vehicles of blindness and dullness to convey the underlying topic of Jerusalem's spiritual insensibility. As the NRSV renders verse 9a, "Stupefy yourselves and be in a stupor, blind yourselves and be blind!" An immediate problem raised by the passage is the depiction of the people of Jerusalem as those who would deliberately blind themselves. As persons with disabilities hear this line of poetry, they resist the idea that anyone would seek to impair their own faculties. To those who have an impairment, it is inconceivable and distressing that anyone would seek to impair themselves.

It is problematic as well to use a vehicle of blindness to convey a lack of spiritual acuity. As

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<sup>24</sup>Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, 401. See the use of this term in Ezekiel 43:15, 16.

<sup>25</sup>Soskice describes synecdoche as a trope "in which one uses a species term to stand in for a genus, or a genus term for a species, or a more comprehensive term for a less and vice versa . . ." (*Metaphor and Religious Language*, 57).

the visually impaired know, spiritual discernment is a gift unrelated to one's physical abilities. A person with a physical impairment is neither more nor less likely to possess spiritual insight than any able bodied individual.<sup>26</sup>

In addition, verse 9a constructs an equivalence of some kind between those who choose to be obtuse and those who choose to blind themselves. On some level, the two metaphors in juxtaposition equate blindness and dullness, a constructed equivalence which the visually impaired would surely resist. The passage goes on to convey spiritual "blindness" with metaphors of drunkenness and deep sleep. Finally, the passage describes the lack of spiritual discernment on Jerusalem's part by depicting those who would refuse to open a sealed document in order to read its message or those who cannot even read. It suggests that these individuals will be unable to discern the predicted reversal of fortunes which is coming. Nevertheless, like the previous subsection of vv. 1-8, the pericope, vv. 9-14, ends with a reversal that only YHWH could bring about. The passage indicates that YHWH will do amazing things with these spiritually dull people. Those whom the community deems as wise will find that their status is reduced and those found discerning will be humbled, but those who suffer from spiritual "blindness" will be transformed by YHWH's power.

The passage shapes in the compliant reader a tendency to accept vehicles of physical impairment as an adequate means to portray a willful refusal to seek spiritual discernment. However, perhaps even more problematic is the portrayal of YHWH as deliberately causing spiritual "blindness" ("he has closed your eyes, you prophets," v. 10). This may suggest to the

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<sup>26</sup>Nancy L. Eiesland emphasizes the need for persons with disabilities to be seen as living ordinary lives, to be seen as non-heroic (*The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1994], 46-48).

reader, however subtly, that YHWH is responsible for physical blindness, as well and the transformation of spiritual blindness may imply that YHWH can transform physical blindness.

*Isaiah 29:15-24*

Finally, we arrive at the passage in Isaiah 29 that focuses most distinctly on a reversal of fortune for Jerusalem, which will be ushered in with the eschatological age, but not until the people's deeds have been justly punished (vv. 1-8). The passage begins with a woe-statement, like 28:1 and 29:1 above, disabusing the reader of the idea that her ways are hidden from YHWH. Verse 16 stresses the difference between creator and created, speaking with irony of those who would limit God's power.

Then, as a metaphor of unexpected restoration, verse 17 employs the vehicle of Lebanon, to signify a people who have been decimated then rebuilt. Like Lebanon, whose thick forests were cut down by YHWH, Israel will begin its rebuilding from a mere remnant. No more than a fruitful field shall very soon expand into an abundant forest. The metaphor of Lebanon signifies the great power of YHWH to transform a remnant of a people into a great nation.

Similarly, verse 18 offers the healing of the deaf and the blind as a sign that the eschatological age has been ushered in: "On that day (בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא) the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see." To illustrate the power of YHWH to transform unfortunate circumstance, people with physical impairments are transformed into able-bodied individuals

People with physical impairments are not alone among those who will experience YHWH's transformative power – the meek and the poor will have joy in YHWH; the tyrants and those who look for evil things to do will be cut off. Perhaps the elimination of tyrants and evil-doers (v. 20) is the surest sign of an era that is strikingly different from the era which precedes it. This

is a mark of a final age; one cannot conceive of a more ideal time. To signify the depth of reversal and the many people who will be transformed, verse 22b dramatically concludes: “No longer will Jacob be ashamed, no longer shall his face grow pale.”

The previous passages in Isaiah 29 lend credence to spiritual imperception as the underlying topic for the vehicles of the deaf and the blind in v. 18. Especially the reference to the scroll (סִפְרָה), which occurs also in v. 11, supports the interpretation that verse 18's deaf and blind are vehicles to convey the underlying topic of spiritual insensibility. Yet, the vehicle also conveys physical impairment. On some level, the passage declares that the people of Jerusalem will be healed of their impairments. Not only shall the people of Jerusalem be healed from their deafness and blindness, they shall no longer suffer shame (לֹא-עֲתִידָהּ יְבוֹשׁ יַעֲקֹב). Though the text separates the lines in this case (vv. 18 and 22), physical impairment is associated with a state of shame. This vision of the eschatological age imagines a time when both things will be eliminated. Finally in that age, the people of Jerusalem shall gain spiritual discernment (v. 24) and will regard God with proper reverence (v. 23).

#### *Isaiah 35:1-10*

In stark contrast with chapter 34's picture of devastation for Edom, Isaiah 35:1-10 constructs a future vision of marvelous reversal and complete restoration for Judah and its people. It is a wonderful mosaic of transformation. The metaphor of a glad land speaks of a complete make over: the desert shall “rejoice and blossom” and become like the fertile lands of Lebanon and Carmel. The exiles who have been ransomed by YHWH will return to Zion with singing (v. 10). Brevard S. Childs observes that both chapters 34 and 35 reflect the “same typological tendency to transcend the specificity of earlier texts and to extend the prophecy in a

more radically eschatological move.”<sup>27</sup>

To support this “radically eschatological move,” the passage uses bodily metaphors that communicate the reliability of the predicted transformation: “Strengthen the weak hands; and make firm the feeble knees” (v. 3). The physical weakness that accompanies fear will be reversed. In another metaphor of transformation, verses 5 and 6a state it even more radically: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing.” The latter half of verse 6 suggests that the metaphors of healed impairment for persons formerly disabled are regarded as the same kind of miracle metamorphosis as waters breaking forth in the wilderness, as streams gushing in the desert.

Verse 10 constructs the healing of physical impairment as a sign of God’s great power, a sign as miraculous as the return of the ransomed to Zion. Isaiah 35 ends with the restoration of the exiles to their homeland. This is the climactic statement for Isa 35:1-10, that an exiled nation shall return to Zion, then experience everlasting joy.

The passage pictures the healing of physical impairment – represented by the blind, the deaf, the lame, and the mute – as the way God will exercise divine power, the same kind of power that can return a banished nation to Judah. The passage intends to reassure an exiled nation that restoration is possible. The God who can make the desert like Carmel, who can heal the physically impaired, can restore a banished people to Zion. The passage suggests to the compliant reader that God has the power to heal serious disability and that when the eschatological day arrives God will do so.

One implication of the passage, Isa 35:1-10, is that the healing of physical impairment is a

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<sup>27</sup>Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 256.

sign that circumstances have been reversed and made right. When the divine one makes circumstance right again, the exiled people are returned to Zion and the physically impaired are made normal. The assumption of the passage is that physically impaired people are a sign that all is not right with the world. When YHWH makes the world right, surely YHWH will heal those with physical impairment. This communicates to the non-resistant reader that physical impairment is a distortion of world order, a distortion that YHWH would surely want to correct in the eschatological age.

*Isaiah 42:1-9*

In Isaiah 42:1-9, one of four passages identified as “servant songs” in Second Isaiah, the great creator, YHWH, suggests that servant Israel has been given as a covenant to the nations in order to “open the eyes that are blind” and “bring out the prisoners from the dungeon” (v. 7). Among the “new things” (v. 9) that YHWH will accomplish is the transformation of those without sight into those who have vision.

Though the idea of sightedness serves as a vehicle to communicate spiritual insight or the ability to enact justice, the power of the metaphor in its ancient context may be rooted in the way it evokes YHWH’s extraordinary ability to radically heal or transmute a physical impairment. According to the ideology of Second Isaiah, a physical impairment like eyes that cannot see is a happenstance that a creator God like YHWH must have the capacity to correct at the same time that prisoners will be freed from dungeon and darkness. In the eschatological vision of Isaiah 42:1-9, the miracle is not that the blind experience full fellowship or inclusion within the covenant community as they are. YHWH’s “new things” do not constitute a vision of a community that recognizes and appreciates the gifts of the blind one. The assumption is that in the eschatological day when YHWH’s servant establishes justice, the physical imperfection of

blind eyes will be wiped away.

Of course, Klaus Baltzer points out that the identity of those with “blind eyes” is ambiguous.<sup>28</sup> Since the servant is called as a light to the nations (v. 6), perhaps the “eyes of the blind” belong to the nations. Yet, as Baltzer notes, Israel could be blind, also, as seems to be the case elsewhere in the passage (for example, see v. 19). The ambiguity extends also to the nature of “blindness” in this introductory section (vv. 1-9). Is it a reference to mental or spiritual blindness or physical impairment? Of course, on some level, at least, the vehicle does ultimately remind the reader of physical blindness and the implications of healing for the physically impaired.

*Isaiah 42:10-17*

In this song of victory for YHWH the warrior God, a general reversal of the natural environment is envisioned, which includes YHWH leading the blind by unfamiliar paths. Like a woman at the apex of bearing a child (v. 14), YHWH’s creative power will be unleashed. To clear a path for God’s restored people, YHWH will level mountains and hills, transform rivers into islands, and dry up the wet places (v. 15). Then YHWH will enable the blind to follow the divine lead through unknown territory. It is unclear whether the phrase “I will turn the darkness before them into light” signifies that the blind will be enabled to see or whether YHWH’s leadership will be so effective that it will seem as though the blind can see. Yet, like other passages that convey a prophetic vision of the future to the reader, Isaiah 42:10-17 uses the metaphor of physical impairment to demonstrate how YHWH will exercise the magnificent, divine power to return Israel to the homeland. No physical obstacle can prevent YHWH from gathering in the flock from exile. The vehicle of the blind exiles communicates the underlying

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<sup>28</sup>Klaus Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 132-33.

topic that YHWH will gather *all* of the flock, including those who need YHWH's help the most.

Once again, a prophetic text uses an image of physical impairment to communicate YHWH's intent to include the most marginalized persons within the postexilic community. The writer presumes, it would seem, that the reader will understand through this image how inclusive the returning community will be. Nevertheless, the rhetoric reinforces the understanding of the reader that the blind are vulnerable and marginalized members of the community. Once again, the vehicle of physical impairment is used to draw attention to the power and compassion of the divine.

#### *Isaiah 42:18-25*

In this passage, Second Isaiah uses the metaphor of physical impairment to communicate exiled Israel's lack of historical understanding and spiritual insight.<sup>29</sup> The passages that precede this section envision either YHWH's care to return wounded Israel to the promised land or depict a restored Israel who has been healed of its injuries. Yet, in the wake of two passages that suggest either the reversal of physical impairment or the removal of obstacles for those who have disabilities, Isaiah 42:18-25 uses the metaphors of people who are deaf and blind, to suggest that servant Israel has not understood the punishment doled out to them, a chastening that resulted in Israel's impairment. In verses 24-25, YHWH reminds the people in exile that it was the divine "who gave up Jacob to the spoiler."

In Isaiah 42:18-25, the reader gains an impression that Israel is willfully blind or unable to break free from exile because of an obstinate refusal to hear. Isaiah 42:1-9 indicates that

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<sup>29</sup>Joseph Blenkinsopp argues that the vehicles of "deaf" and "blind" in this particular instance allude "to a lack of spiritual discernment on the part of Jewish communities" (*Isaiah 40-55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 19; New York: Doubleday, 2000], 218).



YHWH's future intention is for the blind to be given sight. The second passage of Isaiah 42 (vv. 10-17) attempts to persuade the reader that physical obstacles to the blind making her way will be neutralized or reversed by YHWH's creative force. However, the final passage in chapter 42 suggests that Israel remains blind and deaf through a kind of determined refusal to see and hear.

Though the passage intends to represent the helpless and powerless condition of a people living in exile, on one level the passage depicts those who are physically impaired as refusing to believe that YHWH's future miracle is possible. It also suggests that the blind and the deaf remain so because they have not come to terms with the divine's hand in their exile and nor have they accepted their sin as a precipitating cause for God's punishment (v.24). Israel, though plundered by the Babylonians, refused to take God's chastisement to heart (v. 25). Of course, any passage that intimates that those who are physically impaired remain so because of a lack of faith is problematic for an emancipatory reading, even though blindness may be a vehicle for the underlying topic of a nation's spiritual dullness. It reinforces a tendency on the part of some readers to see physical impairment as a punishment for sin.

#### *Jeremiah 31:1-26*

Jeremiah 31:1-26 foretells of a re-gathering of the people of Judah from the farthest corners of the earth, a re-gathering motivated out of YHWH's everlasting love and faithfulness (v. 3) that explicitly includes "the blind and the lame" (v. 8). In this instance, the vehicles of "the blind" (עִוְרִים), "the lame" (פְּסִיחִים), "those with child" (הַרְרָה), and "those in labor" (הַלְדָּה) are indicators of the topic of a great, inclusive gathering. These groups are representative of the most vulnerable among the scattered people. If they are included, then all will be gathered.

Walter Brueggemann notes that the "term 'gather' (*q-b-ts*) (vv. 8, 10) is a key word for the

restoration of the exiles.”<sup>30</sup> The root קָבַץ not only occurs here in verses 8 and 10, but occurs prominently in Isa 11:12; 40:11; 43:5, 9; 54:7; 56:8; 60:4, 7; 66:18; Jer 23:3; 29:14; 32:37; Ezek 11:17; 20:34, 41; 28:25; 34:13; 36:24; 37:21; 38:8; 39:27 and elsewhere, to convey the underlying topic of restoration from exile to the land of Judah.

Thus, the vehicles of “the blind,” “the lame,” “those with child,” and “those in labor,” communicate the underlying topic of the totally inclusive company of the exiles whom God will return to Judah. The metaphor seeks to reassure the reader that the most vulnerable in society will be restored to the land. This passage presumes that a compliant reader will identify these vehicles with the most vulnerable and marginalized in society, so that the company of returnees will be seen as very inclusive and YHWH will appear to be a God who can restore *all* of Israel to Zion. The great shepherd (v. 10), the one who scattered Israel the flock, will gather each and every one back under divine care.

The eschatological vision of Jeremiah 31:1-26 depicts a final era in which Israel will sing on Mount Zion, enjoy YHWH’s bounty, and experience irreversible happiness (v. 12, “they shall never languish again;” NRSV). The passage also portrays an era when YHWH will care for the physically impaired and they will be included among the returnees. Since this divine care and full communal inclusion is a status for the physically impaired in the eschatological era, one presumes that they shall experience something less than this before the final time.

#### *Zephaniah 3:14-20*

Like Micah 4:6, Zephaniah 3:19 constructs a syntactical equivalence between הַצִּלְעָה,

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<sup>30</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 284.

“the limping one,” and **הִנְיָהּ**, “the outcast.” Like Micah 4:7, Zeph 3:19 uses **אֲשֶׁר־אֶמְהַרְאֶם**, “I will change them” in a transformative sense. However, Zephaniah 3:19 speaks of transforming the shame of the limping one and the outcast (**בְּשִׁמְתָם**) into praise and renown. Though the vehicle of transforming shame refers to the underlying topic of the shame Israel has experienced at the hands of its enemies, the passage specifically speaks of the shame of the limping one and the outcast. In this eschatological vision, made eschatological by the telltale expression “in that time” (**הַיְהוֹם**), the transformation of shame into praise and renown for the lame and the outcast serves as a profound example of YHWH’s power to dramatically and thoroughly change circumstances.

A difficulty with the metaphor of changing the shame of the lame and the outcast is that the metaphor’s capacity to convey YHWH’s incredible transformative power may lie within a cultural context that associates physical impairment with shame. Whether **בְּשִׁמְתָם**, “their shame,” refers to an embarrassment associated with a lack of physical perfection or whether “their shame” is due to a connection between physical impairment and punishment for sin, YHWH’s transformation of shame into praise and renown is problematic for an emancipatory interpretation for persons with disabilities.

Zephaniah 3:14-20 associates the salvation of the lame, the gathering of the outcast, and the transformation of shame to praise and renown explicitly with the withdrawal of judgment (v. 15). According to this passage the reduced state of the physically impaired and the shame connected to that status is a result of YHWH’s judgment. The envisioned reversal for the limping one comes about only after YHWH has executed the punishment of judgment.

*Conclusion*

This brief exploration of metaphors of disability in prophetic eschatology has shown that such metaphors are intended to illustrate the how inclusive the restoration community assembled by YHWH will be and to show that the divine who can heal physical impairment can restore Israel to Zion. The metaphors of physical impairment are also used to speak of an absence of spiritual discernment and a intractable unwillingness to understand God's intention for Israel.

This study of metaphors of physical impairment has also suggested some problematic assumptions behind these figures. These metaphors, in the context of prophetic visions of the eschatological age, reinforce an ideology that understands physical impairment as an indicator that a right, orderly world has not yet been achieved. In some cases, physical impairment is associated with divine punishment for sin or with a willful inability to believe in YHWH's power to transform.

Several times this paper has referred to a "compliant" reader or a "non-resistant" reader. These phrases are used in the context of passages' attempts to shape a reader response through rhetorical strategy. Of course, a reader need not be compliant or non-resistant. One goal of this paper is to suggest some problematic aspects that arise from metaphors of physical impairment as they are employed in prophetic eschatology. If the reader is made more aware of these problematic assumptions, the reader can develop a resistance to them. This paper intends to encourage non-compliance, in some cases, among readers of prophetic texts.

Doreen Freeman has declared that "the social and physiological space occupied by the disabled be analysed and heard." To do so "challenges avoidance tactics, and challenges disability as a marvellous plot device, to show God's power . . ." <sup>31</sup> Freeman's words offer

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<sup>31</sup>Doreen Freeman, "A Feminist Theology of Disability," *Feminist Theology* 29 (2002): 71-85 (80).

another perspective on the prophetic metaphors of impairment. The presupposition of some prophetic passages that God must step in to heal physical impairment and that this would be a sign of the utopian restoration in the eschatological age is unsatisfying to people with disabilities. One of the stereotypes that society has imposed upon persons with disabilities is the idea that they must want healing desperately and that a cure is necessary in order to live a full life. Freeman argues that society tends to view the disabled as “always in some space waiting to be healed or used as a prologue to better things,” rather than seeing persons with disabilities as having major, creative contributions to make and possessing a full, mature character.<sup>32</sup> The assumptions of the eschatological passages that healing is a must in the final age is a perspective that deserves to be challenged.

Carole R. Fontaine points out that the “dignity of the disabled and their status as potentially valued members of their societies is directly challenged by the Bible’s continuous portrayal of them as *objects* of divine action.”<sup>33</sup> She goes on to say that certainly healing for all who suffer is desirable, but the Bible’s focus on disabled persons is almost always as “objectified beneficiaries of divine healing.”<sup>34</sup> One gains this impression of objectification from the prophetic passages examined here, in which the metaphors of impairment speak of *categories* of impairment. In reading these passages, one does not encounter portrayals of individuals of distinctive, mature character, but reads instead of “the blind,” “the deaf,” and “the lame.” The passages indeed are

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Carole R. Fontaine, “Disabilities and Illness in the Bible: A Feminist Perspective,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament* (ed. A. Brenner; FCB 10; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 286-300 (293).

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 294.

more about the God who has the power to heal than the individual recipients of that healing.

In regard to passages that employ metaphors of physical impairment to show how attentive YHWH, the shepherd is, or to illustrate how inclusive the restoration community will be, they incorporate some questionable assumptions as well. What people with disabilities would hope for is full inclusion in the community of God today, not at the final age of restoration.

Individuals with physical impairment are more likely to want some assurance of God's caring and attentiveness, now. How preferable it would be if worshiping communities could embody that attentiveness and welcome toward disabled persons in the present time.

These prophetic eschatological passages tend to reinforce the idea that the physically impaired normally occupy a marginal space in the community. This assumption needs to be challenged by a perspective that easily welcomes persons with disabilities to the center of the community, without making the declaration, "look how inclusive this community is" or "look how inclusive God is." A truly inclusive community welcomes the person with disabilities without self-congratulation.

This paper attempts to read prophetic passages while listening to the voices of people with disabilities. In a very small way, the paper is intended as a step toward correcting the tendency on the part of biblical scholars and theologians to overlook the perspectives of disabled persons in theological and political discourse.