



THE אש 'FIRE' METAPHOR IN THE BOOK OF OBADIAH

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Abstract:

God's anger is demonstrated in the book of Obadiah by the use of two metaphors: drink and fire. In this paper, I will analyze the אש 'fire' metaphor and argue that the אש 'fire' metaphor representing God's anger in the book of Obadiah is semantically related to the use of אף (to be hot-tempered) and תמיה (to inflame) in the prophecies against Esau/Edom. The reason for limiting this study to the prophecies against Edom is because the Prophecy in the Obadiah is specifically directed towards Edom. The pronouncement of this prophecy is in the context of judgment. For that reason, this metaphor fits well among the Kamba community who use a similar metaphor in the contexts of judgment.

Keywords: colon, bicolon, tetracolon and Edom

1. Introduction

The Hebrew Bible has eleven non-cognate lexical items (אף or אנה, זעם, זעף, זעמה, חרה, כעס, עבר, קנא, קנא, קצף, רגז and רוח) with a sense of angerⁱⁱ and which seem to have been randomly used in the Hebrew Bible but a study on each displays the rich knowledge the Jewish people had on anger as an emotion. These words are not synonyms of anger instead, they are different descriptions of anger as it was profiled and interpreted by the Jewish people.ⁱⁱⁱ Besides the words, there are metaphors for the emotion anger which are used in different parts of the Hebrew Bible. Among the many places where anger is spoken of in a metaphorical nuance is in the book of Obadiah. Although none of the eleven words for God's anger appear in this book, God's anger is demonstrated by the use of two metaphors: drink and fire. In this paper, I will analyze the אש 'fire' metaphor and argue that the אש 'fire' metaphor representing God's anger in the book of Obadiah is semantically related to the use of אף (to be hot-tempered) and תמיה (to inflame) in the prophecies against Esau/Edom.

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ⁱⁱ Willem A. VanGemeren, *New International Dictionary of the Old Testament Paternoster* (Zondervan, 2003), 686.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ellen van Wolde, "Sentiments as Culturally Constructed Emotions: Anger and Love in the Hebrew Bible.," *Biblical Interpretation* 16, no. 1 (January 2008): 7.

Since the use of the *שֵׁן* 'fire' metaphor in Obadiah and the uses of *אֵף* (to be hot-tempered) and *תִּקְהָה* (to inflame) in the prophetic utterances occur within an entire narrative of the relationship between Esau and Judah, I will analysis this metaphor with that understanding. This paper will consist of three major areas: analysis of *אֵף* (to be hot-tempered) and *תִּקְהָה* (to inflame) in the prophesies against Esau/Edom, analysis of *שֵׁן* 'fire' metaphor in Obadiah and lastly give a theological implication of this metaphor to African Christianity.

2. Analysis of *אֵף* (To Be Hot-Tempered) and *תִּקְהָה* (To Inflame) In the Prophesies against Esau/Edom

Although Esau/Edom is mentioned in different passages in the Hebrew Bible, there are only four prophets who have spoken specifically against Edom beside Obadiah (Isaiah 21:11-12; 34; Jeremiah 49: 7-22; Ezekiel 25:12-14; 35:1-15; 36; and Amos 1:11-22). In these passages, where Edom is spoken of, the words for anger are *אֵף* and *תִּקְהָה*. The word *אֵף* has been translated differently in the Old Testament although it literally means 'hot nose' in the context of anger. This literal translation of 'hot nose' is informed by the studies on anger that have proved that, people conceptualized anger culturally depending on the part of body which was affected.^{iv} Therefore, the Jewish people had a 'hot nose', presumably their noses turned red when angered. Considering this from a *שֵׁן* 'fire' metaphor concept, a 'hot nose' is a result of increased body heat.

The other Hebrew word being considered under this metaphor is *תִּקְהָה* which also has varied meanings and 'to inflame' is one of them. In the anger contexts where *תִּקְהָה* occurs, it can be assumed that the offending party or event 'inflamed' the offended. Some scholars like kotzé described the 'inflame' or 'the heat' that the angered person experienced as the fluid which was released by the gall bladder.^v As a result, the offended person experienced heat inform of fire burning within him.

In support to this metaphor are similes in the Bible that have associated both *אֵף* and *תִּקְהָה* with *שֵׁן* 'fire'. Here are some examples: The Psalmist in Psalm 89:46 said: "*How long, Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? Will your anger תִּקְהָה burn like fire (שֵׁן)?*" Another verse which is almost similar in meaning to this passage but uses *אֵף* instead of *תִּקְהָה* is Psalm 79:5 which says: "*How long, LORD? Will you be angry (אֵף) forever? How long will your jealousy burn like fire (שֵׁן)?*" The Jealousy which is a simile of fire can as well be taken as an attributive noun which would give the interpretation: "*How long, LORD? Will you be angry (אֵף) forever? Will your jealous anger (gapping of אֵף) keep burning like fire?*" The attributive jealousy is the preferred option in New American Bible (NAB). Here are two different passages where *אֵף* and *תִּקְהָה* are both likened to fire and this simile enforces the *שֵׁן* 'fire' metaphor of both *אֵף* and *תִּקְהָה*. This brief analysis of these two anger words form a basis for the examination of prophesies against Esau/Edom, where the two words feature prominently.

^{iv} Zouhair Maalej, "Figurative Language in Anger Expressions in Tunisian Arabic: An Extended View of Embodiment.," *Metaphor & Symbol* 19, no. 1 (January 2004): 52.

^v Zacharias Kotze', "Humoral Theory as Motivation for Anger Metaphors in the Hebrew Bible," *Text.Serial.Journal*, August 18, 2005, 406,

In Ezekiel 25:14, God said: "I will take vengeance on Edom by the hand of my people Israel, and they will deal with Edom in accordance with my anger (אף) and my wrath (חמה); they will know my vengeance, declares the Sovereign LORD." A further prophesy in Ezekiel 35:11 God said: "Therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I will treat you in accordance with the anger (אף) and jealousy you showed in your hatred of them and I will make myself known among them when I judge you." Prophet Ezekiel brought a close to his direct message to Esau in Ezekiel 36:6 when he said: "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I speak in my jealous wrath (חמה) because you have suffered the scorn of the nations." Prophet Amos in 1:11-12, in his message against Edom said: "This is what the LORD says: "for three sins of Edom, even for four, I will not relent. Because he pursued his brother with a sword and slaughtered the women of the land, because his anger (אף) raged continually and his fury flamed unchecked, I will send fire on Teman that will consume the fortresses of Bozrah." In this last quote from Amos, the word translated as fury can also mean 'passing through' as an emphasis to the anger that is raging continually. This is a main reason why scholars have differed on how to translate it. In fact, in the Hebrew-English concordance, it is not marked as meaning anger in this verse.^{vi}

The four prophets who speak about Edom prophesied at different times of history and it is amazing that they have similar usage of anger vocabulary concerning Edom. Since there is no evidence that Obadiah, who uses the אש 'fire' metaphor, had access to the message or writings of the other prophets except that of Jeremiah, then the usage of the same anger vocabulary can only be argued at the semantic level. As for Jeremiah, whom scholars believe Obadiah used his material, does not use anger word in the contexts where he spoke about Edom.

3. Analysis of the אש 'Fire' Metaphor in Obadiah

This metaphor is mentioned in verse 18 in Obadiah. Before I analyze it, let me first look at the content flow of Obadiah so that I can place verse 18 in context. This book can be divided into four main sections: vv. 1-9 is about the intention by God to punish Edom, vv. 10-14 is about the sin committed by Edom, vv. 15-16 is a pronouncement of the day of the Lord and lastly, vv. 17-21 which is about God's plans to bless Israel in the future after punishing her enemies. Verse 18 therefore falls into the last section and its central focus is the destruction of Esau. Below is verse 18 in Hebrew and its English translation.

וְהָיָה בֵּית־יַעֲקֹב אֵשׁ
וּבֵית יוֹסֵף לֶהֱבֵה
וּבֵית עֵשָׂו לְקֵשׁ
וְדָלְקוּ בָהֶם וְאֶבְלִיחַם
וְלֹא־יִהְיֶה *שָׂרִיד לְבֵית עֵשָׂו
כִּי יִהְיֶה דְבַר:

*"Then the house of Jacob will be fire
The house of Joseph a flame*

^{vi} John R Kohlenberger and James A Swanson, *The Hebrew English Concordance to the Old Testament: With the New International Version* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 1170.

*But the house of Esau will be as stubble
And they will set them ablaze and devour them
So that there will be no survivor of the house of Esau
For the Lord has spoken."*

Since this passage is poetic, I will first analyze it with a focus on word order and poetic arrangement.

Table 1: Word order and poetic arrangement

Line	Word order	Hebrew passage and translation	Verse
A	Verb—Modifier	<i>וְהָיָה בֵּית יַעֲקֹב אֵשׁ</i> Then the house of Jacob will be fire	18
A ¹	Modifier—Object	<i>וּבֵית יוֹסֵף לֶקְבָהּ</i> The house of Joseph a flame	
B	Modifier—Object	<i>וּבֵית עֵשָׂו לְקֶשׁ</i> But the house of Esau will be as stubble	
C	Verb—Modifier	<i>וְדָלְקוּ בָהֶם וְאָכְלוּם</i> And they will set them ablaze and devour them	
C ¹	Verb—Modifier	<i>וְלֹא־יִהְיֶה *עֹרֵיד לְבֵית עֵשָׂו</i> So that there will be no survivor of the house of Esau	
	Excursus	<i>כִּי יְהוָה דִּבֶּר:</i> For the Lord has spoken	

This verse is a tetracolon since the last phrase, for the Lord has spoken, is treated as an excursus which is not part of the poetry. In the above analysis, line A and A¹ are semantically parallel. Lines C and C¹ are both semantically and syntactically parallel. Line B is sandwiched between these pairs of bicolon. However, since there is gapping of the verb *וְהָיָה* in line A¹ and B, lines A, A¹ and B can as well be taken as syntactically parallel making these three lines a tricolon. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that this tricolon is only syntactically parallel since only the first two lines, bicolon, is semantically parallel. This is the general observation of this verse poetically. More details on its information structure and the presence of poetic devices are incorporated in the exegesis.

3.1 Information Structure and Exegesis

This tetracolon begins with *ו* in each colon although the conjunction serves different purposes. In line A it is translated as 'then' since it is serving the purpose of conjunctive sequence connecting verse 17 and 18. In line A¹, it is left untranslated since this colon is parallel to line A and the *ו* is only put here for stylistic reasons. In line B, it has an adversative meaning and is therefore translated as 'but'. It is contrasting the information already conveyed in the first bicolon. In line C it has a copulative meaning 'and' because it is a

continuation of the information in the first bicolon. The information passed on is that, since Jacob will be fire and Joseph a flame, they will set Esau ablaze. In the last line of this tetracolon, C¹, it is translated as 'so that' because of its purpose as a conjunctive sequence to line C.^{vii} Therefore, the tetracolon begins and ends with *וְ* functioning as conjunctive sequence. The verb *קָיָה* which is in line A and is gapped in line A¹ and B, is a prophetic perfect which is also called perfect of confidence. Obadiah is confident that what he is saying will come to pass and this allows the verb to be also translated as 'made'. He then uses the noun *בֵּית* in the tricolon, which is in construct in all the three lines and it is a metonymy of subject for the attribute. It is the 'house' referring to both the people of that lineage and also people who belonged to those specific kingdoms. In this case, the three proper nouns: Jacob, Joseph and Esau are each a synecdoche of species for the genus. Jacob is representing the southern kingdom, Joseph the northern kingdom and Esau representing his descendants. A family-relational explanation on this is done by Zvi who commends that the usage of the 'house of' "*shapes a mini-world of discourse that explicitly categorizes groups, associates and disassociates them, in terms of the family narratives of the patriarchs.*"^{viii} The phrase 'house of' is a genitive of relationship in the tricolon.

Although the southern Kingdom was normally known as Judah and the northern kingdom as Israel, the use of proper names, Jacob and Joseph for the two kingdoms is one of the poetic devices that Lunn points out in poetry, the use of rare words. This is the only place the house of Jacob and the house of Joseph are put side by side, another poetic device. However, as Wolff points out, Isaiah 8:14 talked about 'both houses of Israel' and the unity of Israel is prophesied in Ezekiel 35:10; 37:16 and in Hosea 1:11.^{ix}

The use of 'house of Jacob' occurs 15 times in the entire Hebrew Bible while 'house of Joseph' occurs 13 times. Nevertheless, this is the only place 'house of Jacob' is used to mean the southern Kingdom although Barton argues that house of Jacob may be a synonym of house of Judah because of similar parallelism in Zechariah 10:6.^x As for 'house of Joseph' it is used in four other places (Amos 5:6; 6:6; judges 1:22, 35) meaning the Northern Kingdom.^{xi} This rare usage of words and phrases is done solely for stylistic reasons as it is the case in poetry.

Taking the tricolon in its entirety, it is notable that the phrases *וְהָיָה בֵּית יַעֲקֹב אֵשׁ* (the house of Jacob will be fire), *וּבֵית יוֹסֵף לֶקְדָּה* (the house of Joseph aflame) and the phrase *וּבֵית עֵשָׂו* (house of Esau), each phrase occurs only here in the Hebrew Bible. This tricolon is only parallel at the syntax level but semantically, only the first two lines, bicolon, are parallel. Jacob and Joseph are used only for pragmatic reasons to imply the united Israel while fire and flame belong to the same semantic field. This bicolon bears the metaphor of fire which is contrasted in the third line, that the house of Esau is stubble. Since this metaphor is approached from the wider narrative context of Esau and Jacob relationships, elsewhere in the prophecy God alluded to making Jacob his agent of punishing Esau. Such prophecies are:

^{vii} C. L. Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* (Rev.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 284–5.

^{viii} Ehud Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Obadiah* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 193.

^{ix} Hans Walter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 65.

^x John Barton, *Joel and Obadiah: A Commentary* (1st ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 153.

^{xi} Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 66.

Ezekiel 25:14 "I will take vengeance on Edom by the hand of my people Israel, and they will deal with Edom in accordance with my anger and my wrath; they will know my vengeance, declares the Sovereign LORD." Notice in this verse God makes reference to his people Israel, pointing to the United Kingdom. The phrase 'by the hand of my people' אֱשֶׁר יִשְׂרָאֵל is a genitive of agency since אֱשֶׁר is in construct. The prepositional phrase 'by the hand' בְּיַד is a synecdoche of part for the whole meaning Israel, the God's people. The noun phrase 'my people Israel' עַמִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל is a noun-noun appositional phrase since Israel, which is in apposition explains further who 'my people' are. Therefore, God will take vengeance on Edom through the agency of Israel, his people who will be fire that consumes Edom according to Obadiah 18.

The אש 'fire' metaphor is mainly used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to God's anger or to his army. For example, in Isaiah 10:17 which is about God's judgment on Assyria, Isaiah said: "the light of Israel will become a fire, their holy one a flame; in a single day it will burn and consume his thorns and his briars." The usage of 'fire' and 'flame' here is in reference to God who is referred herein as the 'holy one.' In a different text, Joel 2:5, the אש 'fire' metaphor is used to refer to God's army. It says: "with a noise like that of chariots they heap over the mountaintops, like a crackling fire consuming stubble, like a mighty army drawn up for battle." A biblical scholar, McCimiskey noted this usage of fire in relation to God's anger and said: "fire is a frequently occurring metaphor for the wrath of Yahweh against his enemies."^{xii} In Obadiah context, it is plausible to conclude that Israel will be God's army, agent of his anger, against the Edomites. While the United Kingdom is fire, Esau on the other hand is stubble.

Straw or stubble is used 16 times in the Hebrew Bible. Barton has summarized that it is used for those who reject God as recorded in Isaiah 5:24, for the nations which are opposed to Israel as mentioned in Exodus 15:7, Isaiah 33:11 and Nahum 1:10, for astrologers as written in Isaiah 47:14 and to the godless as seen in Malachi 4:1. The significance of the stubble is that it "is intended to show that the flames have an easy prey, to the point that everything is consumed."^{xiii} It is also remarkable that this metaphor is only used here to refer to Edom.

Since stubble is easy to set ablaze, line C says: 'and they will set them ablaze and devour them.' This is a predicate focus which has a plural pronominal suffix, they. In predicate focus, the topic (subject) is presupposed but the focus (what they will do) is not known from the context. The predicate focus of this colon explains the emphasis of setting them ablaze and devouring them. Although the verb אֶלְקֵהוּ can also mean they will pursue them, the translation 'to set them ablaze' is preferred because of the context of the אש 'fire' metaphor. The pronominal plural suffix is referring to the people of the United Kingdom which has been recorded so far in singular. Even Esau is now represented by a plural pronoun אֲנֵם as opposed to the singular usage in the previous colon.

This colon, line C, 'and they will set them ablaze and devour them' is semantically parallel to colon C¹ which says 'so that there will be no survivor of the house of Esau.' In colon C¹ the author is not saying anything new since they will be devoured according to colon C. the message conveyed in this bicolon is hyperbolic since it does not imply total annihilation of the house of Esau. this hyperbolic way of speaking was common in the ancient near eastern culture as Renkema noted: "hyperbolic character of the ancient near Eastern

^{xii} McCimiskey, *The Minor Prophets*, 2:539.

^{xiii} Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 66.

rhetoric of warfare in which terms such as 'always' 'forever' 'total' are commonplace features."^{xiv} However, on the specific Obadiah context, he notes that it is a style that is "aimed rather at doing justice to a theological element characteristic of discourse relating to YHWH's judgement."^{xv}

This verse ends with the excursus phrases *כִּי יְהוָה דַּבֵּר* (for the Lord has spoken) which appears only 9 times in the Hebrew Bible. It is used here as a ratification of the utterance where the focus is the subject of the utterance.^{xvi}

4. Theological Implication of This Metaphor to the Akamba Christians

The *אש* 'fire' metaphor which represents God's anger in the context of justice for wrongs committed resonates well with a Kamba myth that a guilt person cannot go over fire. This myth is usually narrated by the aged to the young ones, explaining how in ancient days our grandparents used to light fire whenever someone in the community had done something wrong and the suspects were then asked to jump over the fire. They said that the *ũĩmĩ* tongue (flame) of the fire could not allow the guilt to go over it. This concept was further explained in a saying: *nyamũ yĩ mwĩthe ndĩkĩlaa mwaki*, 'an animal with a (long hairy) tail cannot go over fire'. The long hairy tail easily catches fire and was a representation of guiltiness.

The long hairy tail is equivalent to the stubble *אֵשׁ* which easily catches fire and eventually burns the entire animal as mentioned in the Obadiah context. Though this myth is not famous nowadays as it was in early days, the saying: *nyamũ yĩ mwĩthe ndĩkĩlaa mwaki* is still used today in homesteads and in churches to warn people against involvement in evil activities. This cultural concept is therefore a valid point that explains the *אש* 'fire' metaphor as mentioned in Obadiah in the teaching of justice.

The idea of God using human beings as his agent is not hard culturally to conceptualize. In the Kamba culture, the elderly men who were deemed to be above reproach (the wicked were believed to die while young although not everyone who died young was evil) served as agents of reconciliation and enforcers of justice in situations that needed such. However, because of the patriarchal system, women were not part of the council of elders. The reference to Jacob and Joseph, patriarchs, to represent the united Israel would be easily linked with the council of elders.

The punishment of Edom after many days of persistent evilness is sufficient to warn those who escape justice or use their key positions in society to uphold impunity that they will not escape justice forever. In Kamba community, they have a saying *noũkangwatĩwa nĩ walola* literally meaning 'walola will take hold of you for me'. Walola is a personification of a dark night which is perceived as too dark for anyone to escape. The idea is, one night when it will be too dark for you to escape; I will find you and bring justice to you for the evils you have committed. This saying like the former, are both alive in the community and are used in all social settings.

^{xiv} Johan Renkema, *Obadiah* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 42-3.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, 43.

^{xvi} Renkema, *Obadiah*, 206.

5. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the use אֵשׁ 'fire' metaphor in the book of Obadiah and shown that the אֵשׁ 'fire' metaphor representing God's anger in the book of Obadiah is semantically related to the use of אָרַח (to be hot-tempered) and תִּקְרַח (to inflame) in the prophecies against Esau/Edom. This metaphor in Obadiah is in agreement with the anger vocabularies that have been used in the prophecies against Edom. Since these prophets spoke at different times in Israel's history, with no evidence to show that they knew each other's content so as to harmonize their vocabulary usage, it is amazing to see how it all fits together.

This metaphor has a vital role teaching on justice, which is an important lesson for the African Christianity. Since a fire concept is alive in the Kamba community, this cultural ideology offers an open door to communicate this truth.

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