

'Rescue me from the Young Lions'. An Animal Metaphor in Psalm 35:17¹

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ABSTRACT

References to enemies who ceaselessly orchestrate the downfall of the righteous abound in the psalms of lamentation. Whereas the identity of the wicked remains a point of debate among scholars, their evil character is beyond dispute. A salient feature of the psalms of lament is the poet's employment of an array of metaphors to describe the malevolence of the enemy. Often the portrayal of the adversaries is cast in animal imagery to accentuate their belligerence. A favourite among the animal metaphors utilised by the psalmist is that of the lion. It is reasonable to assume that the threat posed by lions accounts for the occurrence of leonine metaphors as a poetical strategy to depict the hostile forces. Given the prevalence of lion imagery in the psalms of lamentation, this paper endeavours to elucidate the reference to 'young lions' in Psalm 35:17 in terms of the conceptual metaphor theory. It is argued that the threatening associations of lions serve as an apt metaphorical source domain to explicate the abstract experience of antagonistic human behaviour in terms of a particular animal metaphor.

A INTRODUCTION

References to enemies who ceaselessly orchestrate the downfall of the righteous abound in the psalms of lamentation. Whereas the identity of the antagonists remains a point of debate among scholars, their evil disposition is beyond dispute. A salient feature of the psalms of lament is the poet's employment of an array of metaphors to describe the malevolence of wicked. Often the portrayal of the adversaries is cast in animal imagery to accentuate their bellicosity. Fauna provided the psalmist with a language for the metaphoric representation of categories of people such as the wicked and righteous (cf. Eilberg-Schwartz 1990:126).² 'Most references to animals in the Psalter find a home in the rho-

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² 'Alles, was das Alte Testament über das Verhältnis von Mensch und Tier aussagt, geschieht ... über den Umweg von Geschichten, poetischen Metaphern oder weisheit-

ric of affliction as in the psalmist's cry for rescue ... Evoking a world ravaged by conflict and contention, animal imagery serves to label both the psalmist and the perceived enemy' (Brown 2002:136).³ A favourite among the animal metaphors utilised by the psalmist is that of the lion.⁴ According to Borowski (2002:297) 'almost any animal possessed the potential to convey symbolic meaning, but some such as the bull, *lion* (my emphasis), eagle, and dog, were especially prone to this kind of exploitation'. In the Hebrew Bible, the lion is portrayed as majestic, bold, stealthy, fearless, powerful, and savage, evoking ferocity, having destructive power and irresistible strength (cf. Ryken *et al* 1998:515). It is reasonable to assume that the threat posed by lions accounts for the occurrence of leonine metaphors as a poetical strategy to depict the hostile forces.⁵ Strawn (2005:274) posits that when the lion metaphor stands for a human entity the clear preference of the Hebrew Bible is to associate the image with a human enemy. In this paper, it will be argued that, given its strength, courage and rapacious reputation, the lion serves as an apt metaphorical source domain to describe the psalmist's abstract experience of the enemies as hostile forces. The aim is to illustrate that the threatening associations of lions allow for the metaphorical mapping onto any aggressive human being who threatens to separate the supplicant from Yahweh. The contribution endeavours to elucidate the reference to 'young lions' in Psalm 35:17 in terms of the conceptual metaphor theory as a means of explicating the abstract experience of antagonistic human behaviour in terms of a particular animal metaphor. More often than not, animal imagery depicts situations of affliction that require rectification, prompting a call for help from Yahweh on the part of the individual or the community (cf. Brown 2002:152).

B A FEW REMARKS ON CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY

In their seminal work, Lakoff & Johnson (1980) developed the conceptual metaphor framework in an attempt to explain how source and target concepts interact to yield metaphoric meaning (cf. Glone 2007:111). Scholars in various disciplines such as cultural anthropology, literary studies, economics, political

lichen Sätzen' (De Pury 1993:112). The biblical writers manipulated animal images to meet literary and religious ends (Borowski 2002:289).

³ Compare also the remark of Strawn (2005:275) 'While other animals are used to describe the enemies in the Psalms, the lion is among the favorite terms — the favorite in the lament psalms — when animal images are employed'.

⁴ 'Von allen wildlebenden Tiere hat wohl keines die Menschen im Palästina der biblischen Zeit so geängstigt und zugleich fasziniert wie der Löwe, für den die hebräische Sprache nicht weniger als sieben Wörter hat und von dem zumeist in metaphorischen Kontexten die Rede ist' (Schroer 1987:76).

⁵ 'Regardless of real experiences, animal metaphors work because metaphors are open to individual reception. Such a reception can take up experiences actually gained in the contact with animals, but can also gather symbolic values' (Labahn 2005:96).

science and biblical studies have drawn on some of the assumptions of conceptual metaphor theory to illuminate the link between language and thought. One of the basic tenets of conceptual metaphor theory is that the creation and comprehension of metaphorical language are mediated by metaphorical correspondences that structure our mental representations of abstract concepts (Glone 2007:112). Reasoning patterns from well-structured source domains are used to draw conclusions about abstract target domains. Metaphor is thus a mechanism through which we comprehend abstract concepts and perform abstract reasoning (Lakoff 1993:244). Equally important is the notion that linguistic manifestations of cross-domain mappings are surface manifestations of deeper cognitive processes and conceptual structures. This means that a metaphoric structure such as *argument is war* exists independently of any specific metaphoric expression of it and can therefore continuously generate new and unforeseen linguistic expressions. Because the conceptual metaphor network is open-ended and flexible, it permits constant re-elaboration (Ponterotto 2000:297). Conceptual metaphors are pre-existent structures available to be concretely instantiated (cf. Eubanks 1999:419). Moreover, conceptual metaphor theory suggests that our most highly structured experience is with the physical world and the patterns we encounter and develop through interaction of our bodies with the physical environment serve as our most basic source domains. Our understanding of abstract concepts is guided by conceptual metaphors that assimilate target concepts into concrete source concepts (cf. Glone 2007:115). Conceptual metaphor theorists thus investigate the role of metaphor in human cognition which is to be understood as the production, communication, and processing of meaning. Even though mappings between source domain and target domain can be bi-directional, this investigation highlights the uni-directional and asymmetrical mappings across the two domains in the metaphorical structure *people are animals/enemies are animals*. The aim is to accentuate the conceptual fit between the source domain of animals and target domain of people. However, before we turn our attention to the use of the aforementioned metaphor in Psalm 35, a brief discussion of a related conceptual construct, namely the *great chain of being* is in order.

C THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING

The *great chain of being* metaphor is a folk theory of how things are related to each other in the world (Lakoff & Turner 1989). The *great chain of being* comprises a hierarchy of concepts, in which humans are perceived to possess higher-order attributes and behaviour, with animals having instinctual attributes and behaviour. Plants, complex objects and natural physical things have biological, structural and natural physical attributes and behaviour respectively. Although the *great chain of being* is a hierarchy of things and corresponding concepts that is structured on a vertical scale, it becomes a metaphorical system 'when a particular level of the chain is used to understand another level' (Kövecses 2002:124). As a conceptual construct, the *great chain of being* meta-

phor accommodates two types of mappings: the mapping of animal traits onto humans and the mapping of human traits onto animals. The first mapping, which is pertinent to the current investigation, allows us to observe the chain as a top-down hierarchy, in which higher-level human attributes and behaviour are conceived of in terms of lower-level, nonhuman characteristics and behaviour of animals, plants, complex objects and natural physical things. As far as the relation of humans to other levels in the hierarchy of the *great chain* is concerned it can be assumed that human attributes and conduct are often understood metaphorically in terms of traits and behaviour of animals, or those of plants and inanimate objects. As Lakoff & Turner (1989:172) observe, 'The great chain metaphor allows us to comprehend general human character traits in terms of well-understood nonhuman attributes; and, conversely, it allows us to comprehend less well-understood aspects of the nature of animals and objects in terms of better understood human characteristics'. According to Kövecses (1997) the general conceptual metaphor underlies the comprehension of human attributes and conduct via animal traits and behaviour. The notions of 'objectionability' and 'undesirability' could be considered the main meaning focus of the *HUMAN BEHAVIOUR IS ANIMAL BEHAVIOUR* and *PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS* metaphors (Talebinejad & Dastjerdi 2005:137). As regards the link between the *human behaviour is animal behaviour* and the *people are animals* metaphors, 'The great chain metaphor explicates why and how a number of seemingly isolated conceptual metaphors fit together in coherent fashion' (Kövecses 2002:79). From this, it could be concluded that most human beings might have in their conceptual system a highly general metaphor *HUMAN IS ANIMAL* (cf. Kövecses 2002:125).

D PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS

It is reasonable to assume that animal metaphors are prevalent in most world languages. According to Kövecses (2002:124) 'much of human behaviour seems to be metaphorically understood in terms of animal behaviour'.⁶ One of the most elaborate domains in which we understand the human in terms of the nonhuman is the domain of animal life (cf. Lakoff & Turner 1989:193). With regard to the pervasiveness of animal imagery in the Hebrew Bible, Eilberg-Schwartz (1990:121) avers that bovine metaphors provide the vocabulary for expressing the religious, natural, social and moral conceptions of ancient Israel.⁷ Figurative language in ancient Israelite literature had a repository of ani-

⁶ Kimmel (2004:281) writes, 'A ... potent source for metaphor is animals. The profound significance of animals derives from their double role as part of our enduring biological heritage as humans and as being outside society, so that metaphor allows men to be animals, while also remaining distinct'.

⁷ Compare also the following claim 'Fauna supplied the Israelites with images for thinking about human experience and social life and these metaphors shaped the practices and narratives of Israelite religion' (Eilberg-Schwartz 1990:117).

mal images and symbols to draw on (Borowski 2002:297). The employment of animal metaphors in the Hebrew Bible bears witness to the close relationship our ancient counterparts had with the animal world. It would appear that in societies where people live close to nature various existential dilemmas are more likely to be expressed through natural metaphors.

1 The metaphor *Enemies Are Animals* in Psalm 35

In Psalm 35, hostile forces surround a weak and vulnerable individual. Combining legal and military terminology,⁸ the opening verses set the stage for the drama that is about to unfold. Consecutive imperatives accentuate the need for an urgent and favourable response from the heavenly throne. It is clear that only divine assistance can bring about a change in a fear-stricken situation where life itself is threatened. Through an animal metaphor, the psalmist articulates the experience of hostility that threatens to engulf him. The subjective experience of affliction is associated with forces of animosity. In verse 12, foes lie in wait like a pride of lions, ready to strike, kill and devour their prey. 'The reality of the animal world and the negative ... experiences thereof are accordingly the source environment to facilitate and mediate the abstract dimensions of the anxiety ... fear, agony, suffering and death' (Nel 2005:76). The supplicant employs leonine imagery to describe a belligerent and potentially deadly foe who attempts to separate him from Yahweh.⁹ The adversaries hate, persecute, conspire, seek revenge, attack, bring on social shame and threaten to take the psalmist's life. Just as lions can kill humans, so the psalmist views the enemies as a threat to a meaningful existence.¹⁰ The adversaries are regarded as the dangerous 'other' because their presence is coupled with an extreme threat perception (cf. Fiebig-Von Hase 1997:2). Hence, the urgent plea in verse 17: 'rescue my life from the young lions'.

The portrayal of the antagonists as lions accentuates their dominance and the supplicant's helplessness.¹¹ The negative tenor of the lion makes it well suited for describing the enemies in Psalm 35. Suffice it to note that the lion is an ambiguous and polyvalent symbol carrying a number of connotations, all of

⁸ The use of warfare terminology adds vigour and colour to the situation, accentuating the seriousness of the threat from the foes (cf. Firth 1996:110).

⁹ Life in ancient Israel is rooted in the community and anything that jeopardizes this embeddedness signals the expulsion from society and subsequent social death (cf. Janowski 1999:57).

¹⁰ Goeke (1971:54) contends that 'Ziel allen feindlichen Vorgehens ist der Beter in seiner Existenz. Nie bedrohen die Feinde lediglich Teilbereiche des Menschen oder irgendwelche Güter, sondern immer den Menschen in seiner gesamten Existenz'.

¹¹ When the poet describes his foes as lions, he employs a metaphor of power and dominance (Strawn 2005:274). Compare also the remark of Keel (1993:180) in this regard 'Im alten Palästina war das Tier nicht nur der schwächere, oft ausgenützte Gefährte, sondern auch der gefürchtete, unter Umständen überlegene Feind'.

which seem to be dependent on the primary notions of danger and power (cf. Strawn 2005:27; cf. also Keel 1972:76).¹² The fact that the lion is conceived of as malicious in action, premeditated in harm, ruthlessly efficient in killing allows for the link between leonine behaviour and the evil conduct of the foes in the psalms of lamentation (cf. Ryken *et al* 1998:30). The lion is dangerous and must be avoided at all costs, for an encounter with it might result in death. One could argue that in the psalmist's conceptualisation of lions, the following thematic parts appear to be significant: 'size', 'appearance', 'behaviour', and 'relation to people' (cf. Wierzbicka 1996). These thematic parts constitute a body of culture-dependent, automatically retrievable knowledge about animals, in which the 'relations to people' appear to be the most fundamental (Martsa 2003:4).

Striking in verse 11 is the mentioning of violent witnesses rising up and posing questions the supplicant cannot answer. Metaphorically, the destructive discourse of the foes corresponds to the devouring mouth of the lion. The devouring words of the enemy consist of false accusations and slander, against which the supplicant has no hope for defence except from Yahweh (cf. Brown 2002:139). Their mouths become instruments of destruction, as is clear from verses 20 and 25 respectively: 'and against the quiet ones of the land, they devise words of deceit; let them not say in their hearts 'We have devoured him'. The focus on the lion's mouth corresponds to the wounds the supplicant claims to have suffered from the abusive discourse of the foes. The lion's mouth is emphasised as particularly dangerous, suggesting that the gravest weapon enemies wield is discursive in nature (cf. Brown 2002:139). Expressions such as 'they open their mouths wide against me' (v. 21a), 'they tear apart (v. 15d), gnashing against me with their teeth' (v. 16b) underscore the ferocity and voracity of the enemy.

One could argue that the reference to the gathering of the enemy in verse 15 already foregrounds the lion metaphor in Psalm 35, which is then augmented in verses 16-17. The focus on the rapacious nature of the foes underscores the notion that most animal related metaphors capture the negative characteristics of human behaviour (Kövecses 2002:125).¹³ While at times the positive attributes and behaviour are mapped onto humans, Psalm 35 is a clear example of only the negative traits being mapped onto humans. This concurs with the observation of Black (1962:44-45) that the metaphor 'selects, empha-

¹² 'If members of a particular culture hold a particular attitude toward a particular animal, then that animal might be used to stand metaphorically for a particular quality in their language' (Diegnan 2003:257).

¹³ 'It is only the essential, culturally and psychological salient properties, such as behaviour, internal states, desires, emotions, limited cognitive abilities of animals that are mapped onto humans, and consequently, it is these properties that are lexicalized in the form of various linguistic constructions' (Martsa 2003:5).

sizes, suppresses, and organizes features of the principal subject by implying statements about it that normally apply to the subsidiary subject'. Applied to Psalm 35, the animal metaphor highlights the aspects of ferocity, danger and destruction in order to foreground the wickedness of the enemy and vulnerability of the supplicant in the midst of ravenous beasts.¹⁴ Despite the perceived dominance of the foes, the supplicant still musters all his strength and lifts up his voice to the heavenly throne from where deliverance issues forth. His cry for deliverance bespeaks a hope in the transformative power of the deity that will prevail. This is no forlorn hope, but one rooted in the experience of Yahweh's past mighty deeds on behalf of the righteous.

E CONCLUSION

This paper endeavoured to illuminate the reference to the enemies as lions in terms of the conceptual metaphor theory. The aim was to illustrate how the psalmist exploits the threatening associations of lions as an appropriate source domain to describe the machinations of the wicked. A particular animal metaphor is utilised to structure a certain domain of experience. This discussion confirmed the importance of metaphor in human communication. Since metaphors of the mind are hard to find in ancient cultures, some might voice their concern as regards the application of conceptual metaphor theory to biblical Hebrew literature. However, this contribution has shown that even though we have no access to the inner lives of our ancient counterparts, we do have to a certain extent access to their metaphor systems and the way they reasoned using those metaphor systems (cf. Lakoff & Johnson 1999:284).

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¹⁴ Any human trait that can without undue strain be talked about in leonine language will be considered prominent, and any that cannot will be pushed to the background (cf. Black 1962:41).

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