

The Poetry of Poetic Justice: A Comparative Study in Biblical Imagery

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Ancient Israelite literature reflects the notion that divine justice is often of a highly poetic variety. That is to say, divine retribution often exhibits a measure for measure correspondence between a crime and its punishment. Thus one is to be punished specifically through that with which one sins. A particularly striking case in point is afforded by the depiction of Haman suspended from the very gallows he had erected for Mordecai.¹

The doctrine in question is most explicitly formulated in the so-called Wisdom material of the Bible,² and appears in various psalms and proverb collections. When reduced to proverbial form, the idea is quite consistently expressed by essentially two distinct figures of speech, or sets of images. It is the aim of this study to examine the particular imagery that has seemingly attached itself to the notion of poetic justice. This will involve discussion of some of the individual associations and nuances of each set of images, as well as the combined effect of their appearance together. To this end, the imagery will be viewed both from the standpoint of internal biblical usage, and in relation to its affinities to attested ancient near eastern literary conventions.

The most frequently encountered representation of poetic justice at work employs the imagery of pits, nets and traps, e.g. Ps. 7:16, "He dug out a pit (*bwr*), excavated it, / May he fall into the very pit (*šḥt*) he made;" Ps. 9:16, "The nations have sunk down into the pit (*šḥt*) they made, / their foot has been caught in the very net (*ršt*) they concealed;" Ps. 35:8, "...and may the net (*ršt*) he concealed catch hold of him;" Ps. 57:7, "...They have dug a

No student of Professor T. H. Gaster's work could fail to appreciate in particular his ever-fruitful application of the comparative method to the study of the ancient Near East. It is hoped that the present offering may contribute in some token way to further delineating, through this method, elements of the aesthetic of biblical literary patterns. For it is especially this field of inquiry which has been and continues to be so enriched by the gifted sensitivities and insights of the man we seek to honor in this volume.

1 Est. 7:10. Note also the incident recorded in Dan. 6:24-25.

2 Note the participial construction employed in, e.g., Prov. 26:27; 28:10a; and Eccl. 10:8a cited below. This kind of formulation lends to these verses the quality and force of a general principle, much as in, e.g., Gen. 9:6 (cf. the participial formulation of various biblical laws). For a most explicit statement of the principle see Wisdom of Solomon 11:16 (cf. Jubilees 4:31-32; Test. of Gad 5:10-11).

pit (*šyḥb*) before me, / they themselves have fallen into it;" Prov. 26:27a "One who digs a pit (*šḥt*) will fall into it;" Prov. 28:10a, "As for one who diverts the upright onto an evil course, he will fall into his very own pit (*šḥwt*);" Eccl. 10:8a, "One who digs a pit (*gwmš*) will himself fall into it."³

The survival and perpetuation of this particular mode of expressing poetic justice form a most fascinating chapter in the literary history of biblical poetry. The biblical imagery and terminology are taken over intact in Ben Sira 27:26, "One who digs a pit will fall into it, / one who sets up a trap will be caught in it."⁴ So too, the same figurative representation is preserved in the Thanksgiving Scroll of the Dead Sea sect: "And as for them, may the net (*ršt*) they have spread for me seize their own foot, / and may they fall into the very traps (*pḥym*) they have concealed for my person."⁵

The image of the entrapped trapper as expressed in proverbial form enjoyed even further longevity and considerable geographical diffusion by virtue of its consistent inclusion in the many versions and translations comprising the Aḥiqar literature.⁶ The latter, being built around a moralizing tale of treachery and its recompense, effectively employs our figurative maxim as a motto summarizing the story as a whole. For purposes of convenience, the Syriac version of the proverb may be taken as fairly typical of its appearance in the various Aḥiqar versions: "Whoever digs a pit (*gwmš*) for his fellow man fills it with his own figure."

Ultimate punishment through such devices as pits, nets and traps may be appreciated as most fitting, since the biblical evildoer is quite often portrayed as initially employing these very contrivances. This usage is evident, for example, in Jer. 18:22 (cf. verse 20) where the prophet complains: "For they have dug a pit (*šyḥb* | *šwḥb* Qr.) to hold me fast, / and concealed traps (*pḥym*) at my feet."⁷ The figurative description employed here is amply paralleled elsewhere in biblical poetry.⁸ Moreover, this conventional representation of the wicked in action would also seem to have been assumed in Ps. 94:13b where divine punishment for some otherwise unspecified crime is indicated by the phrase: "Until He digs (!)⁸ a pit (*šḥt*) for the wick-

3 Seemingly relevant here is Ps. 141:10a (cf. verse 9), textual problems notwithstanding. Thus one would expect *yptw bmkmyrbm* (!) *ršym* "May the wicked fall into their (!) own snares."

4 Significantly, the Greek words employed here for 'pit' (*bóthros*) and 'trap' (*pagís*) are those used by LXX to render these same terms in the Hebrew verses cited above. Thus *bóthros* = *šyḥb* in Ps. 57:7; = *šḥt* in Ps. 7:16; Prov. 26:27; *pagís* = *pḥ* in Ps. 141:9; = *ršt* in Ps. 9:16; 57:7;

5 II:29. For the edition consulted see J. Licht, *M^egīlat Habōdayōt* (Jerusalem, 1957), 71.

6 See F. C. Conybeare et al., *The Story of Aḥiqar*, 2nd ed., (Cambridge, 1913), 23 (Slavonic); 55 (Armenian); 85 (Armenian Recension B); 98 (Old Turkish); 127 (Syriac); 161 (Arabic). For the proverb in a Roumanian version see M. Gaster, *Studies and Texts* (1928; reprint: New York, 1971), 1:241, no. 13. The proverb is, however, lacking in the earliest known Aḥiqar version, the fifth century B.C. Aramaic text from Elephantine. Its inclusion in so early a version is, perhaps, suggested by the language of the paraphrase of the Aḥiqar tale in Tobit 14:10: "Aḥiqar escaped from the fatal trap Nadab set for him, and Nadab fell into the trap himself and was destroyed (NEB)."

7 See, e.g., Pss. 31:5; 35:7; 64:6; 119:85, 110; 140:6; 141:9-10; 142:4.

8 The MT vocalizes *ykrb* as a *niphal*, but this masculine form does not agree with the feminine noun *šḥt*. Accordingly, the form is taken here as a third-person, masculine singular *qal*, the subject of the verb being the Deity (see S. Chayes, *Sēfer tēbillīm* [1902; reprint: Jerusalem, 1970], 206). For the notion that it is the Lord who effects the entrapment of the unjust in their own contrivances, cf., e.g., Job 5:13.

ed." Similarly, Job 18:8-10 and 22:10a enumerate elaborate punishments for the wicked which all involve entanglement in various types of nets and traps. Such punishments may be properly understood in terms of exact retribution for the stereotyped activity ascribed to the evildoer.

The associations suggested by the various terms denoting trapping devices may be schematized in a variety of ways. A first and most basic observation concerns the extent to which the different implements form a coherent and unified set of images. That is, within the context of scheming to do evil, the terms for 'pit, cistern' are functionally equivalent to and are readily interchangeable with those for 'net' or 'trap'. Indeed, one may speak of a family or constellation of related images all sharing the basic idea of entrapment.⁹ It is for this reason that one encounters the parallelism of *šyḫb* (*šwḫb*) // *phym* 'cistern' // 'traps' in Jer. 18:22, or *šḫt* // *ršt* 'pit' // 'net' in Ps. 9:16.¹⁰ Note that the parallelism is employed despite the fact that the two terms in each case are not synonymous. Rather, the parallelism is one of semantically distinct but imagerially related terms for entrapment devices. The coupling of 'pit' with 'net' or 'trap' may, perhaps, be viewed alongside a rather difficult passage in the Gilgamesh epic where a hunter complains: "He filled in the pits (*būru*) I dug, / he pulled up the 'wings'¹¹ I sp[read out]." ¹² Although the precise significance of 'wings' is unclear, context demands here reference to some apparatus distinct from the pit, but also regularly used by the hunter.

The clear association of pits and related devices with hunting serves to equate, in turn, the classically portrayed evildoer and the hunter. The equation is made explicit in Prov. 6:5 where the prudent man's escape from his exploitative fellow is said to be: "like a gazelle from the clutches <of a hunter,>¹³ / like a bird from the clutches of a fowler." Further, the identification of the rather negatively conceived hunter-fowler with the particular apparatus he employs is clear from a comparison with Ps. 124:7 (cf. 91:3a): "Our life is like a bird rescued from the fowler's trap, the trap being broken, we escaped."

The conceptualization of the evildoer as a predatory hunter is succinctly expressed in Ps. 10:9 (cf. v.8): "He lies in ambush in a concealed place like a lion in his lair; / he lies in ambush to sieze a poor man, / he siezes a poor man, dragging him along in his net." The combination here of the evildoer and his hunting net with the lion in ambush is highly evocative. The lion is elsewhere depicted as the hunter *par excellence* in passages which stress his cunning use of

9 For groupings of such related images in biblical poetry see, e.g., Ps. 140:6; Job 18:8-10. For a similar phenomenon in Akkadian literature see, e.g., *Maqlû* III:158-64 (cf. II:162, 164).

10 Compare also *ršt* // *šyḫb* 'net' // 'pit' in Ps. 57:7. As often noted, in Ps. 35:7 *šḫt* 'pit' belongs with the verb *ḥpr* 'to dig' in the second stich, rather than constituting a hendiadys with *ršt* 'net' in the first stich (see, e.g., *BDB*, 1001b, s.v. *šḫt*). As such, Ps. 35:7 also exhibits the parallelism 'net' // 'pit'. So, too, in verse 8b of that psalm *ršt* // *šw'b* may be an error for *ršt* // *šwḫb* (see, e.g., *BHS*, ad loc.).

11 For *nuballu* 'wing' see *AHW.*, 799 where the word in our passage is construed 'Flügel als Fangnetze', cf. *CAD B*, 342.

12 Gilg. I, iii:9-10 (cf. 36-37).

13 For the restoration see, e.g., R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs*, Anchor Bible, no. 18 (New York, 1965), 56, n. b.

ambush.¹⁴ Indeed, the use of ambush by the predator is little different from the setting of traps, both being seen as particularly treacherous ploys of the hunter. It will be noted that alongside digging of pitfalls for animals as a hunting device, the use of a pit to conceal a waiting hunter is known to have been an ambush technique in ancient Mesopotamia.¹⁵ Accordingly, the assertion in Prov. 1:18 that the wicked "lay ambush against their own lives, and conceal themselves against their own person," is clearly the functional equivalent of saying that they fall into their own pit, net or trap.¹⁶

Further, like a devouring lion, the evildoer in Prov. 1:11-12, for example, conceals himself in ambush against the unwary specifically to "swallow them alive like Sheol." It will be observed that the motif of swallowing, be it literal or figurative, is most compatible with the use of various entrapment images encountered above.¹⁷

The compatibility of predator and entrapment images is particularly evident from the juxtaposition in Amos 3 of verse 4b in which a lion is said to 'seize' (*lkd*) his prey, and verse 5b in which a trap (*ph*) is described in identical terms. The same imagerial association of a predatory lion with the use of various types of nets and traps may be demonstrated from a series of similes employed in an Akkadian incantation text:¹⁸

ša kīma nēši iṣbatu amēlu
kīma ḥuḫāri iṣḫupu eṭlu
kīma šēti ukattimu qarrādu
kīma šušḫalli ašariddu ibarru
kīma gišparri iktumu danna

Which seized hold of a man like a lion,
 Clapped down on a man like a bird trap,
 Enveloped a warrior like a net,
 Trapped the pre-eminent like a net,
 Covered over the strong man like a trap.

Here the sequence of closely related terms for hunting devices along with verbs of entrapment are juxtaposed with the figure of a lion without betraying any incongruity.

At this point a word should be said concerning the clearly negative associations shared by

¹⁴ See, e.g., Ps. 17:12; Job 38:39-40; Lam. 3:10 and note especially the Aramaic version of Ahiqar col. vi:88-89 in A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (1923; reprint: Osnabruck, 1967), 215. For the latter see the translation in ANET³, 428b.

¹⁵ See A. K. Grayson, "Ambush and Animal Pit in Akkadian," *Studies Presented to A. Leo Oppenheim* (Chicago, 1964), 90-94. Idem, "New Evidence on an Assyrian Hunting Practice," in J. W. Wevers and D. B. Redford, eds., *Essays on the Ancient Semitic World* (Toronto, 1970), 3-5.

¹⁶ See the figurative reference to capture in a net which precedes our verse in Prov. 1:17. Further, note the close association of ambush and physical entrapment in the imagery of, e.g., Lam. 4:19-20; Ps. 64:5-6; Prov. 23:27-28.

¹⁷ For the verb *bl* 'to swallow' said of the wicked see also Hab. 1:13. It will be observed that the latter is immediately followed in verses 14-16 by a series of images involving fishing nets as the tools of iniquity. A similar combination appears in Ps. 124 where acts of swallowing (v. 2) and devouring (v. 6), as well as entrapment (v. 7), epitomize the wicked. Also significant here is the specific comparison of the activity of an evildoer to swallowing by Sheol in Prov. 1:12. This comparison may be viewed alongside the conventional association of the engulfing Sheol with those very entrapment devices said to be employed by the wicked. Thus Sheol appears with the terms *ḥbl* and *mwqš* in 2 Sam. 22:6 (=Ps. 18), with *bwr* in Isa. 14:15 and with *šḥt* in Ps. 16:10.

¹⁸ *Maqlû*, III:160-164.

implements of entrapment. The treachery associated with an open pit, for example, may be viewed in terms of the biblical injunction in Exod. 21:33, 34 which treats the reopening or excavation of a pit as a possible source of malicious behavior, or at least criminal negligence. Even more explicit is the metaphorical usage employed in several proverbs to characterize an evil woman: Prov. 22:14, "The mouth of a foreign woman is a deep cistern (*šwḥb*)," Prov. 23:27, "Surely a harlot is a deep cistern, / and a woman from abroad a narrow well (*b'r*)."¹⁹ One is again aware of the imagery of the hunt when it is borne in mind that an empty cistern could serve to entrap an unwary animal, as is recorded in 2 Sam. 23:20 (=1 Chr. 11:22). In Eccl. 7:26 related images of entrapment drawn from the world of hunting are again applied to a wily woman, who is said to be 'traps' (*mšwdym*) and 'nets' (*ḥrmym*).

In Akkadian Wisdom literature anti-feminist sentiments are expressed in similar terms: *sinništu būrtu būrtu šuttatu ḥīritu* "A woman is a pit, a pit, a ditch, a hole."²⁰ Once again, a hunting image comes to mind especially in light of the usage of the word *šuttatu* 'pit, ditch', for example, in a passage describing Ishtar's treachery: "Having loved the lion, perfect in strength, you (Ishtar) nevertheless dug for him numerous pits (*šuttatu*)."²¹

The decidedly negative use of entrapment metaphors, however, is not restricted to female subjects.²² Thus in an Akkadian Wisdom text one encounters: "A dispute is a . . . pit (*šuttatum*)."²³ Similarly, in an Akkadian incantation text one reads in connection with an evil man: "With respect to people, that man is a tangled cord (*qû*) stretched out as a net (*šētu*)."²⁴

The practice of using the imagery of pits, nets and traps to express figuratively such negative notions as treachery, deceit or imminent unseen danger would thus seem to be a convention shared by both Akkadian and Hebrew literatures. Yet it should be pointed out that use of entrapment images specifically to express the concept of poetic justice is not encountered in ancient near eastern literature with the marked frequency seen in biblical literature. A possible Akkadian parallel to this specific usage may be sought in a regrettably ambiguous saying concerning the fate of a spider: "A spider has spun a web²⁵ for a fly, even as a lizard

19 BWL, 146:51.

20 Gilg. VI:51-52.

21 For the figurative use of the entrapment devices *ph* and *mwqš* in a variety of contexts see, e.g., Exod. 10:7; Deut. 7:16; Josh. 23:13; Ps. 69:23.

22 The problematic word *šetitum* is rendered 'covered' by Lambert (BWL, 101:38) and discussed briefly by him (ibid., 313); cf. CAD S, 87.

23 BWL, 100:38.

24 R. Campbell Thompson, *The Devils and Evil Spirits of Babylonia* (London, 1903), 1:114, 336-37. For the cord (*qû*) as an entrapment device see Heb. *ḥbl* in, e.g., Ps. 119:61; Prov. 5:22; Job 18:10. Note the usage of Sum. GU 'cord' in B. Alster, *Dumuzi's Dream* (Copenhagen, 1972), 70:157-58 (cf. 74:184-85; 78:219-20) "They twist a cord for him, they bind a net for him. / They weave a *ziptum*-cord for him. . . ." Cf. Akk. *qû naḥbalu* 'cord for a snare or trap' in MSL 6, 70, 195 cited in CAD K, 111, s.v. *kamāru*; cf. AHw., 714.

25 For a biblical parallel to the use of a spider's web as a negative image, cf. Isa. 59:5. Note that the Akk. term used here for 'web' *bunzirru* also denotes a blind used by fowlers as they await their catch. For the latter usage see CAD B, 322.

...ed²⁶ above the web toward the spider."²⁷ What would seem to be clear here is that the spider is doomed to suffer at the hands of the lizard the same fate it had intended for the fly. Yet the repetition of the term for 'web' (*bunzirru*) introduces an ironic element and, perhaps, suggests that the very device employed by the spider figured, in some way, in his own demise.

It is interesting to note that what may be the closest Akkadian parallel to the depiction of poetic justice through entrapment imagery is to be found in the Mari letters. In light of the relatively limited Mesopotamian usage, the presence of this image in letters so permeated by West-Semitisms in lexical and syntactical features might suggest a western provenance for our figure of speech. In one of the 'Prophetic' letters a god is reported to have said concerning the 'man of Eshnunna': *u ana šētim ša ukaššaru akammissu*, "And I will gather him up in the very net he is fabricating."²⁸ It will be noted that this image directly follows the figurative characterization of the man in question as a particularly treacherous individual whose outward protestations are not to be trusted.²⁹ In such a context, the use of entrapment imagery would exactly parallel the biblical usage delineated above. With specific reference to the net as an image, the parallel is all the more arresting in light of Prov. 29:5 "A man who fawns over his fellow is spreading out a net (*ršt*) at his feet."³⁰

Also on a comparative note, it may be observed that an equally striking parallel to the figurative representation of treachery and its recompense through the imagery of the net is encountered in Greek tragedy. Significantly, this usage is to be found in the classic treatment of the subject of divine retribution, Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. In the *Libation Bearers*, an outraged Orestes vows: "as they by treachery killed a man of high / degree, by treachery tangled in the self same net / they too shall die, in the way Loxias has ordained, / my lord Apollo, whose word was never false before."³¹

Alongside the constellation of entrapment images there exists a less frequently encoun-

26 For the differing interpretations of the verb employed here see, e.g., *AHw.*, 760, s.v. *našāšu* 'sich beranschlängeln' and contrast *CAD A*², 425, s.v. *ašāšu* B 'to catch (in a net), to engulf, overwhelm'. Also note the suggestions in *CAD E*, 396 (cf. *CAD S*, 255) 'lies in wait(?)', and *CAD B*, 322 'watches(?)'.

27 *BWL*, 220:23-25.

28 *ARM* 10, 80:14-15; See W. Römer, *Frauenbriefe über Religion, Politik und Privatleben in Māri*, *AOAT* 12 (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1971), 22 "und in das Netz, das er knüpft, werde ich ihn (selbst) einbringen." Contrast the translation in B. Alster, *Dumuzi's Dream*, 112 "I shall gather him into a net which I am binding." For a different interpretation of the verb *kašāru* in this passage see W. L. Moran, "New Evidence from Mari on the History of Prophecy," *Biblica* 50 (1969), 52-53 with 53, n. 1: "but I shall gather him into a net which holds fast," cf. *ANET*³, 632b.

29 See *ARM* 10, 80:11-14; "The conciliation of the man of Eshnunna is treachery; under the (dry) straw flows water."

30 Significant for the association of the net with deceitful flattery is the *LXX* rendering of Heb. *ḥlq* (*šptym*) 'flattery, deceit', lit. 'smoothness (of the lips)', in Prov. 7:21 by *bróchos* 'noose, mesh of a net'.

31 Lines 556-59. For the edition consulted see H. W. Smyth, *Aeschylus II*, Loeb Classical Library, no. 146 (1926; reprint: Cambridge and London, 1963), 214. For this translation see R. Lattimore, *Aeschylus I: Oresteia* (Chicago and London, 1953), 113. Note that the Greek word translated 'net' is *bróchos* (see above, n. 30.).

tered set of images also employed to express figuratively the notion of poetic justice. This second grouping is comprised of various throwing and striking weapons, some employed in hunting but, as a group, associated most closely with warfare. The specific usage in terms of portraying exact retribution may be seen, for example, in Ps. 37:14-15: "The wicked have whetted a sword / and they have bent their bow / to fell the poor and wretched / to slaughter the righteous; May their sword enter their own insides / and may their bows be broken."

In the above passage, the parallelism of 'sword' (*ḥrb*) // 'bow' (*qšt*), like that of 'pit' // 'net', 'trap', is one of related images. The two terms also appear as a parallel pair in e.g., 2 Sam. 1:22; Isa. 21:15; Ps. 7:13; 44:7. This coupling of images is closely associated with the parallelism of 'sword' // 'arrow' (*ḥš*) in, e.g., Deut. 32:42; Isa. 49:2; cf. Ps. 57:5. The interchangeability of these terms as images is evident from a comparison of Jer. 9:7a, "Their tongue is a . . . ³² arrow" and Ps. 64:4a, "Who have sharpened their tongue like a sword." Further, in the latter verse the image of the sword is paralleled by the employment of an arrow in the second stich, both images depicting treachery and its poetic recompense, as in Ps. 37:14-15 above.³³

Another member of the family of striking-throwing images is the stone used as a projectile weapon. The relationship is clear, for example, from the parallelism of *bn qšt* // *bny ql* 'arrow' (lit. 'son of a bow') // 'slingstones' in Job 41:20. The latter may be directly compared to the Ugaritic parallel pair *ḥz* // *abn yd* 'arrow' // 'hand-stone'.³⁴ Also significant here are the groupings 'bow' (*qšt*), 'stones' (*bnym*) and 'arrows' (*ḥšym*) in 1 Chr. 12:2 and 'arrows' (*ḥšym*) and boulders (*bnym gdlwt*) in 2 Chr. 26:15 (cf. v. 14). Like the associated images of sword, bow and arrow, the stone is employed to depict the workings of poetic justice, as in Prov. 26:27b: "And as for one who rolls a stone (*bn*), it returns back to him." Similarly, in Ben Sira 27:25a the very same figurative portrayal appears: "One casting a stone on high is really casting (it) upon his own head."

The imagery of the sword, arrow and stone expresses poetic justice by concretely depicting the physical reversal of weapons in motion. That is, the malicious pronouncements and actions of the wicked as expressed by the direct and forceful thrust of their weapons,³⁵ are shown literally to 'backfire' against them when these various objects change direction. Shakespeare, for example, effectively exploited the dramatic potential of this highly visual image in *Hamlet* (IV:3:21-24), where Claudius, fearing that his slandering of the young prince before the adoring public would meet stiff opposition and prove a threat to his own position,

32 The adjectival *šwḥt-šḥwt* 'slaughtering (?)' of MT is most unusual. The adjective usually modifying *ḥš* 'arrow' is *šwn* 'sharp, pointed', as in Isa. 5:28; Ps. 45:6; Prov. 25:18 (cf. Isa. 49:2 and Jer. 51:11).

33 Thus in Ps. 64:4-5 the evildoers are portrayed as suddenly shooting arrows at the upright, and in verse 8 it is the Lord who suddenly shoots an arrow at them. Note the conscious repetition of those terms describing the crime in the depiction of the punishment (e.g., *lšwn* in verses 4 and 9; cf. Ps. 57:5b) and note particularly the interplay of the verbs *yrb* - *r'b* - *yr* in the crime and punishment sections.

34 IK:116-18: "Thine arrows shoot *not* into the city, (*nor*) thy hand-stones *flung headlong*;" for the translation see ANET³, 144a.

35 For the striking-throwing weaponry of evildoers also note, e.g., Ps. 11:2; Prov. 7:23; 25:18; 26:18-19.

explains: "... my arrows, / Too slightly timber'd for so loud a wind, / Would have reverted to my bow again, / And not where I had aim'd them" (cf. *Julius Caesar* V:3:1351).

In the context of biblical literature, poetic justice is divine retribution, and thus implicit in the imagery of the recoiling weapon is the active intervention of the Deity. The biblical passages cited above may thus be viewed alongside an incident related in the records of Esarhaddon.³⁶ According to the grateful king, Marduk foiled an attempt by the beleaguered city of Uppume to burn down the ramps of Esarhaddon's assaulting troops. The gods assisted him specifically by ordering the North wind to blow and turn back the menacing fire against the defences of the very ones who had set it.

Possibly relevant to the notion of divine control over one's own weapon is an ambiguous passage from the "Babylonian Theodicy," which, like much of biblical Wisdom literature, seeks to affirm the existence of divine retribution: "As for the godless rogue who possesses wealth, his (own?) murderous weapon pursues him."³⁷ Clearly, a direct comparison to the biblical usage holds only if the weapon in question belonged to the rogue, rather than to some agent of divine punishment. Regrettably, the lack of an explicit antecedent leaves the question unsettled, as does the loss of the strophe detailing the rogue's misdeeds.

Equally frustrating is the ambiguity of several Akkadian passages in which a god is represented as either actually reversing the course of a weapon, or, alternatively, simply deflecting it from its target. A case in point appears in the so-called "Babylonian Job": "It was Marduk who took away my pursuer's sling (and) reversed³⁸ (or 'deflected') his slingstone."³⁹ Both the underlying conception and language of this passage is paralleled by Jer. 21:4, "Behold I am turning back (or 'turning aside') your weaponry." In both cases, the verbs (Akk. *saḥāru*; Heb. *sbb* cf. Targum *sbr*) are employed without any prepositional phrase or suffix further specifying direction, and it is unclear whether the one initially using the weapon will become the target of that very weapon. Perhaps only his intention to employ that weapon effectively will be frustrated. What is clear, however, is that the weapon in question is totally subject to the divine will and necessarily responds to divine control and direction. Such a notion is clearly the conceptual basis for the figurative depiction of the administration of divine retribution *via* the very weapons employed to work evil. A modified form of this depiction appears in those biblical accounts recording how a divinely sanctioned hero, and thus an agent of the Deity, defeats an enemy by using the latter's own weapon.⁴⁰

A far more substantial source of parallels to the imagery of the striking or throwing weapon as an agent of poetic justice is the Aramaic version of Ahiqar. The recoiling arrow is effectively employed in the following passage: "[Bend not] thy [b]ow and shoot not thine arrow at a righteous man, lest God come to his help and turn it back upon thee."⁴¹ The

36 For the text and restorations see R. Borger, *Esarhaddon*, 104:ii, 5-7.

37 *BWL*, 84:237-38. See *CAD K*, 53; contrast *ANET*³, 603b..

38 See B. Landsberger, "Akkadisch *aspu* = 'Schleuder', *assukku* = 'Schleuderstein', *AfO* 18 (1957-58), 378: "*ibren Stein gegen ihn kehrte*."

39 *BWL*, 56, r.

40 E.G., 1 Sam. 17:50-51; 2 Sam. 23:20-21.

41 Col. ix, 126 in Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri*, 216. For the translation see *ANET*³, 429a.

same sentiment expressed in similar terms is repeated further on in the text: "[If thou be] nd thy bow and shoot thine arrow at a righteous man, from thee is the arrow but from God -the guidance."⁴²

It will be observed that this figurative expression of divine retribution was perpetuated in subsequent versions and translations of the Ahiqar tale, and in these the arrow image⁴³ at times is replaced by one depicting a recoiling stone.⁴⁴ Such a variation may be appreciated in terms of the interchangeability of sword, arrow and stone images in the biblical passages. The Ahiqar literature thus attests to the expression of poetic justice through the imagery of striking or throwing weapons, as well as through the entrapment imagery studied earlier.

In exploring some of the literary dimensions of the biblical expressions of poetic justice two distinct sets of images have been isolated, each forming a coherent and self-consistent group: images of entrapment and images of striking. It may be further observed that those poetic passages in which the two separate depictions are combined and juxtaposed manifest a unique kind of imagerial and conceptual parallelism. A case in point is the stylistic usage evident in Prov. 26:27 "One who digs a pit (*šḥt*) will fall into it // and as for one who rolls a stone (*abn*), it returns back to him." Here the parallelism is one of functionally equivalent images, each of which might be employed alone to depict poetic justice, but which are joined here as a complementary and mutually reinforcing pair.⁴⁵ Similarly, in Ben Sira 27:25-26 an image drawn from the 'striking' group is followed in the next verse by one from the 'entrapment' group, both verses together constituting a portrayal of poetic justice.

On a conceptual level, the juxtaposition of the two figurative portrayals of divine retribution involves the parallelsim of entrapment and striking as different expressions of hostility. This coupling of concepts is evident, for example, in the imagery of Lam. 3:53, "They put an end to my life in a pit (*bwr*) // they hurled a stone (*abn*) at me." So, too, an Akkadian passage, cited earlier only in part, also manifests the combination of entrapment and striking as a complementary pair: "A woman is a pit, a pit (*būrtu*), a ditch (*šuttatu*), a hole (*ḥirītu*) //: a woman is a sharp iron dagger (*patru*) that cuts a man's throat."⁴⁶

42 Col. ix, 128 in Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri*. See also xiii, 191 (p. 219). Cf. *ANET*³, 429b. For the proverbial form employed here cf. Prov. 16:33.

43 See Conybeare, *The Story of Ahiqar*, 52 (Armenian); 83 (Armenian Recension B); 95 (Old Turkish).

44 See *ibid.*, 123 (Syriac) and 157 (Arabic) and compare these to the same proverb on 21 (Slavonic), which speaks of an arrow. Observe that in terms of the recoiling projectile these three proverbs are actually incomplete and speak only of casting the object, that is, committing the sin. The Roumanian version presents the complete proverb and employs the stone rather than the arrow as its recoiling weapon; see Gaster, *Studies and Texts*, 1:242, no. 24.

45 Observe the partial use of this technique in Ps. 64:6 where the concealing of traps as a depiction of hostility immediately follows the portrayal of the evildoer shooting arrows at the righteous. The juxtaposition of entrapment and striking imagery as illustrations of poetic justice is suggested in Ps. 7:16, 17, where the first verse speaks of entrapment and the second employs language appropriate to a projectile of some sort. For the latter, which speaks of an evil deed returning to its perpetrator, cf. Landgon, *Etana*, 30:20 *šeritka isabḥura ana muḥḥiya* "your offense would turn back upon me." To be noted especially is the use of Akk. *saḥāru*, which is also used to describe a recoiling weapon (see the texts cited above in n. 36 and 39).

46 *BWL*, 146:51-52.

Clearly, the joint appearance in the Bible of entrapment and striking devices in depictions of poetic justice cannot be divorced from the more general pattern which links the two types of activity involved. Any detailed discussion of the rather pervasive entrapment-striking pattern and its various attestations in ancient near eastern literature is beyond the scope of this study.⁴⁷ However, it might be useful here to consider a few Akkadian passages which serve both as illustrations of that pattern and of its specific application to the theme of divine retribution. One need look no further than to the representations of Shamash, the god of Justice, for instances of this combined usage. Thus, in the Shamash Hymn it is said concerning an evildoer: "an evil (?)⁴⁸ snare (*kippu*) is prepared for him. . . , your weapon (*kakku*) heads straight for him, so that there might be no rescuer (for him)."⁴⁹ So, too, in the Etana legend one finds this double imprecation: "May the swift weapon (*kakku*) head straight for him, May the trap (*gišparru*) of the curse of Shamash overwhelm him and catch him."⁵⁰ Both of these literary passages may, in turn, be viewed alongside the iconography of Shamash in which a trap (*ḫuḫāru*) is paired with a stone double-axe (*ŠEN.TAB.BA=pāštu*) and depicted together as comprising his symbolic weaponry.⁵¹

Above all else, the present discussion of both the individual and combined portrayals of poetic justice in the Bible was motivated by a desire to discern patterns in the use of imagery. That is, it has been assumed that the choice of various images and their appearance in particular

47 The general pattern appears, for example, in the Sumerian composition "Dumuzi's Dream" (see above n. 24), where demons attacking Dumuzi prepare cords and a net for his entrapment (70:157-58) as well as throw objects at him (l. 160). The joint employment of entrapment devices and striking weapons in fighting is evident in the description of Gilgamesh confronting the monster Huwawa (OB Gilg. V, fragment C: rev. 18 in *JNES* 16 [1957], 256; see *ANET*³, 504b) where the *šuškalu* 'net' and *namšaru* 'sword' appear together (contrast the accounts in OB Gilg. III, iv:30-36; vi:8-15; cf. VIII, ii:4-5 where the net is not mentioned).

The same usage with respect to divine warfare finds elaborate documentation in Enūma eliš. In the fourth tablet the following sequence of striking weapons may be noted: *qaštu* 'bow', *kakku* 'weapon' (l. 35), *mulmullu* 'arrow' (l. 36), *miṭṭu* 'mace' (l. 37), *qaštu*, *išpātu* 'quiver', (l. 38), *birqu* 'lightning shaft' (l. 39); cf. *abūbu* 'storm weapon', *kakku* (l. 49; cf., l. 75). This grouping, forming part of the description of the preparations for battle, is followed by mention of the *saparru* 'net' in ll. 41, 44. In the description of the actual combat, observe the *saparru* is employed in l. 95, followed by the *mulmullu* in l. 101. After his victory, Marduk's weapons are presented in VI:82-83, where the *qaštu* - *kakku* grouping is again paired with the *saparru*. For a similar coupling of entrapment and striking weapons see, e.g., Erra Epic IV:16 (*uṣṣu* 'arrow') and 18-19 (*šētu* 'net'); 94 (*šētu* and *kakku*).

In artistic representations, note, for example, the combination of mace and net on the "Stele of the Vultures" (*ANEP*, 283, no. 298) and on a fragment of a diorite stele of Sargon (?) of Akkad (A. Moortgat, *The Art of Ancient Mesopotamia* [London, 1969], 47 with n. 225, pls. 126, 127). For the latter reference I am indebted to my friend Allan Gilbert.

48 For the adjective *zīru* see *CAD* K, 400 (cf. 163) and contrast *CAD* Z, 89.

49 *BWL*, 130:90-91.

50 Langdon, *Etana*, 14:15-16 (cf. 15:3; 19-20:39). For *šētu* 'net' instead of *gišparru* 'trap' see 19:38; 20:24. Compare also *BWL*, 74:59-60; 61-62, where *mulmullu* 'arrow' and *ḫaštu* 'pit' (= 'netherworld' according to the ancient commentary) are the respective means through which divine retribution is meted out to the offending onager and lion.

51 See *CAD* H, 225, s.v. *ḫuḫāru*.

combinations are not merely the products of a haphazard, or random process. To go beyond this and try to determine exactly which associations and which principles of arrangement were most favored or esteemed by the biblical literary aesthetic is a far more ambitious, if not presumptuous an endeavor. The presumption, in this case, is that a modern Western reader qualifies to judge what was considered by a biblical stylist to be the skillful and effective use of imagery, as opposed to some lesser achievement. It is hoped that this study has not leaped too recklessly from the assumption that order exists to the flat assertion of what constitutes that order. And yet, it is felt that a comparative perspective towards biblical imagery is particularly useful at this very point; it makes the leap less reckless.

While comparisons to ancient near eastern literary usage are the most historically defensible, these hardly exhaust the possibilities open to the student of biblical imagery. In seeking to evaluate the entrapment-striking images of the Bible as effective expression of poetic justice, one also has recourse to comparison with the successful use of those images to express that same notion elsewhere. The folk-tale, for example, furnishes varied instances of the motif "Deceiver falls into his own trap (literally)."⁵² These give one some idea of the dramatic potential of entrapment imagery and allow for a more critical appreciation of the biblical usage. As for gaining some insight into the effect achieved by combining entrapment and striking images to dramatize poetic justice, the modern Western reader has at his disposal singularly fertile grounds for comparison. Indeed, he can take his cue from the masterful use of that very technique by an acknowledged dramatic genius of his own culture. Thus in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (V:2:310-311), Laertes, having been struck by the poisoned rapier he had intended for Hamlet, laments: "Why as a woodcock to mine own springe,⁵³ Osric. / I am justly kill'd with mine own treachery."⁵⁴

52 Motif K1601, for which see S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (Bloomington, 1957), 4:413. Note also the folk-tale type 1117 "The Ogre's Pitfall" in A. Aarne and S. Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, 2nd rev. ed. (Helsinki, 1964), 360. Sensitivity to biblical imagery may be heightened by folklore as well as philology. Comparison of various folk-tales portraying poetic justice reveals, for example, the same range of variation between pit and noose-trap as between the biblical *bwr / šbt / šwph* and *ph / mwqš / ršt* in the passages studied above. Thus in a Hottentot tale an enemy of mankind falls into his own pit (see A. Werner, *Mythology of All Races: Africa* [Boston, 1925], 7:214), while in a Bulu tale the trickster turtle is strung up in his own noose-trap (see G. Schwab, "Bulu Folk-Tales," *Journal of American Folklore* 27 [1914], 284-85, no. 29).

53 For the metaphorical use of 'springe', or bird-trap, elsewhere in *Hamlet* see 1:3:115.

54 Observe that in the two folk-tales cited above (n. 52) entrapment in one's own pit or noose-trap is similarly combined with being struck by the very kind of weapon initially employed (Hottentot: stone; Bulu: club).