

# METAPHORICAL EXPLORATIONS OF THE HEART (לבב/לב) IN THE OLD TESTAMENT:

## A FEW REMARKS

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### Abstract

*Ancient Israelite anthropology considered the heart to be the seat of emotions, personality, rationality and volition. Multiple allusions to the heart in the Old Testament support such a notion. This paper investigates four conceptual metaphors, namely The Heart as a Living Organism, The Heart as an Object of Value, The Heart as a Solid and The Heart as a Container as a means of illuminating the cognitive reality behind the metaphorical expressions of the heart occurring in the Old Testament. Through a cognitive analysis of the relevant textual information it is demonstrated that there exists a link between metaphors, body and experience.*

**Key words:** Anthropology, Conceptual metaphors, Emotions, Heart

### 1. Introduction

As a source of biblical anthropology, the Old Testament affords us insight into the way the ancient Israelites assigned various functions to different internal body parts such as the heart, liver and kidneys, especially with regard to the expression of emotions.<sup>1</sup> As Johnson (1949:88) writes “the various members and secretions of the body, such as the bones, the heart, the bowels, and the kidneys, as well as the flesh and blood, can all be thought of as revealing psychic properties”. Given the relation between certain organs and emotions, the numerous references to the heart in the Old Testament should come as no surprise. The complex metaphors employed by the Old Testament authors underscore the importance of the heart in ancient Israelite thought (cf. Van Ryken *et al* 1998:369). The fact that the heart functions as a source of thoughts and reflections accentuates its intellectual capacities (cf. Harrison 1980:651; Edwards 1985:377; Schroer & Staubli 1998:47; Van Ryken *et al* 1998:369). According to Keel (1994:162) “The Hebrews ascribe different functions to the heart than modern Westerners do. For the latter, the heart is the seat of emotions; for the former, it is the seat of understanding, thought, and planning...”<sup>2</sup> However, ancient Hebrew anthropology did associate emotions such as joy, courage, anger, grief, fear and distress with the heart (cf. Fabry 1984:430; Edwards 1985:377; Smith 1998:429; Kruger 2005:653, 656; Steinberg 2006:1). Banwell (1980:625) argues that “It was essentially the whole man,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the remark of Smith (1998:434) “as with the nose and mouth for anger, the heart for a range of emotions, and the innards for distress, biblical prayer reflects an ancient association of emotions with body parts where these emotions are felt”. For an overview of the history of research on the topic of emotions in the Old Testament, see Kruger (2004).

<sup>2</sup> Wolff (1977:77) claims that “In den weitaus meisten Fällen werden vom Herzen intellektuelle, rationale Funktionen ausgesagt, also genau das, was wir dem Kopf und genauer dem Gehirn zuschreiben” (cf. also Janowski 2003:168).

with all his attributes, physical, intellectual and psychological, of which the Hebrew thought and spoke, and the heart was conceived of as the governing centre for all these". Our biblical counterparts regarded it as representative of thoughts, emotions, designs and inner dispositions. The heart is "...der Sitz alles Sinnens, Plannens, Nachdenkens, Erörterens und Trachtens ... die zentrale Stätte, in der Freude ... und Schmerz, Angst und Frucht ... Erbitterung ... und Hoffnung ... mit ihrem den ganzen Menschen bestimmenden Gewicht erlebt bzw. Erlitten werden" (Kraus 2003:181).<sup>3</sup> Even though allusions to the heart in the Old Testament abound, the different conceptualisations thereof is still in need of investigation. To achieve this, the current contribution applies four conceptual metaphors as identified by Niemeier (2000), viz. *The Heart as a Living Organism*, *The Heart as an Object of Value*, *The Heart as a Solid* and *The Heart as a Container* to the representations attested in the Old Testament and highlights the metaphorical linguistic expressions of these conceptual metaphors. The paper draws on the basic tenet of cognitive linguistics, namely that concepts (metaphors) arise from, and are interpreted through the body, the brain and experience in the world. Conceptual metaphors are thus grounded in experience (cf. Kovecses 2002:X). Even though the "embodied mechanisms of conceptualisation and thought are hidden from our consciousness ... they structure our experience and are constitutive of what we do consciously experience" (Lakoff & Johnson 1999:497). We utilise our bodily experience as source domains for metaphors as a means of comprehending abstract concepts i.e. target domains. Since the ancient Israelites expressed their emotions through the heart, a cognitive analysis of the different conceptualisations is indeed capable of yielding interesting results. The examples to be highlighted in this paper should be seen as representative presentation of the textual occurrences in the Old Testament

## 2. Conceptualisations of the Heart

### 2.1 The Heart as a Living Organism

The heart may often be experienced as a living, autonomous entity in its own right. Consequently it is conceptualised as having the ability to rejoice, to fear, to cry out, to sing, and to be sick. In the Old Testament such a perspective gives rise to the following expressions:

Then the Lord's anger burned against Moses and he said, "What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet you, and his heart will be *glad* (שמח) when he sees you (Exod. 4:14).

Then Hannah prayed and said: "My heart *rejoices* (עלץ) in the Lord ..." (1 Sam. 2:1).

With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are *greedy* (בצע) for unjust gain (Ezek. 33:31).

My heart *cries out* (זעק) over Moab... (Isa. 15:5).

This is what the Lord says: "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart *turns away* (סור) from the Lord (Jer. 17:5).

Their heart is *deceitful* (חלק), and now they must bear their guilt (Hos. 10:2).

The hearts of the people *cry out* (זעק) to the Lord... (Lam. 2:18).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also Comblin (1987:222) "Das Herz ist Innerlichkeit, Sensibilität, Gefühlsleben, Emotionalität, Denken, Reflexion, Meditation, Aufmerksamkeit für die Realität und für anderen".

The man who was dying blessed me; I made the widow's heart *sing* (רנין; Hif.) (Job 29:13).

Therefore my heart is *glad* (שמח) and my tongue rejoices... (Ps. 16:9).

Though an army besiege me, my heart will not *fear* (ירא) (Ps 27:3).

The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart *trusts* (בטח) in him, and I am helped (Ps. 28:7).

My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh *cry out* (רנין; Piel) for the living God (Ps. 84:3).

I slept but my heart was awake (עור). Listen! My lover is knocking (Songs of Song 5:2).

Hope deferred makes the heart *sick* (חליה; Hif.) ... (Prov. 13:12).

A man's own folly ruins his life, yet his heart *rages* (זעף) against the Lord (Prov. 19:3).

Do not envy wicked men, do not desire their company; for their hearts *plot* (דגה) violence, and their lips talk about making trouble (Prov. 24:1, 2).

Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord *rejoice* (שמח) (1 Chron. 16:10).

But Hezekiah's heart was *proud* (גבה) and he did not respond to the kindness shown him; therefore the Lord's wrath was on him and on Judah and Jerusalem (2 Chron. 32:25).

## 2.2 The Heart as an Object of Value

At a more general level of conceptualisation, the heart may be seen as something of great value to its owner and possibly to other people (Niemeier 2000:204). It is considered an entity that can be lost or even be destroyed. Furthermore, another person can take one's heart away without permission (Niemeier 2000:205). So, for example, it is narrated that:

Absalom behaved in this way toward all the Israelites who came to the king asking for justice, and so he *stole* (גנב) the hearts of the men of Israel (2 Sam.15:6).

The notion of a stolen heart is also attested in the Song of Songs, where the man declares:

You have *stolen* (לבב) my heart,<sup>4</sup> my sister, my bride; you have *stolen* (לבב) my heart with one glance of your eyes... (Song of Songs 4:9).

Moreover, the heart may be represented as a fragile object which can be broken and which must be handled with care. Such a conceptualisation is exemplified by the following occurrences:

He has sent me to bind up the *brokenhearted*, (שב־לב; Nif.) to proclaim freedom for the captives ... (Isa. 61:2).

Concerning the prophets: My heart is *broken* (שב־לב; Nif.) within me; all my bones tremble (Jer. 23:9).

<sup>4</sup> The Piel denominative verb לבב derived from the noun לבב is a *hapax legomenon*. Even though it has an intensifying nuance ("You make my heart beat faster") (cf. Keel 1994:162), the above translation prefers to read לבב as a privative ("you have stolen my heart") (cf. also Kinlaw 1991:1228; Garret 1993:403). The representation of a stolen heart likewise appears in a Palestinian love song: "She stood opposite me and deprived me of reason (literally "took my heart" ... the darkness of your eyes have slain me ... it is worthwhile falling in love with you" (as translated by Stephan 1922:213).

The Lord is close to the *brokenhearted* (שֹׁבֵר־לֵב; Nif.) and saves those who are crushed in spirit (Ps. 34:18).

Scorn has *broken* (שֹׁבֵר) my heart and has left me helpless (Ps 69:20).

### 2.3 The Heart as a Solid

The fact that certain emotions and types of behaviour are related to the heart results in the conceptualisation of the heart as consisting of certain materials with which different qualities are associated (Niemeier 2000:201). Some people are said to have hearts that are made of soft materials and in given situations such hearts can melt or be easily indented. In addition, hearts may be heavy and hard like stone or iron. These materials are “metaphorically endowed with qualities which technically speaking they do not possess but which are attributed to them due to the qualities that they display, i.e. the hardness in attitude and thus metaphorically mapped onto the domain of the heart”. Applied to the evidence found in the Old Testament, the abovementioned metaphor is expressed as follows:

But I will *harden* (קָשָׁה; Hif) Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you (Exod. 7:3, 4).

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh, for I have *hardened* (כָּבַד; Hif) his heart and the hearts of his officials so that I may perform these miraculous signs of mine among them (Exod.10:1).

For it was the Lord himself who *hardened* (הָזִיק; Piel) their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them... (Jos. 11:20).

But my brothers who went up with me made the hearts of the people *melt* (מָסָה; Hif.) with fear... (Jos. 14:8).

This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: “Because your heart was *soft* (רַכָּךְ) and you humbled yourself before the Lord ... I have heard you”, declares the Lord (2 Kgs. 22:18, 19).

Because of this, all hands will go limp, every man’s heart will *melt* (מָסָה; Nif) (Isa. 13:7).

I will remove from them their heart of *stone* (אֲבִן) and give them a heart of *flesh* (שֹׁבֵר) (Ezek. 11:19).

My heart has turned to *wax* (רוּגֵג); it has *melted* (מָסָה; Nif.) away within me (Ps.22:15).

### 2.4 The Heart as a Container

Reddy (1993) contends that one of the basic conceptual metaphors underlying the lexical field of communication is the conduit metaphor which lead to the assertion that words consist of interiors and exteriors. Linguistic expressions based on the conduit metaphor imply that “(1) language functions as a conduit transferring thoughts ... from one person to another ... (2) in writing and speaking, people insert their thoughts or feelings in the words ... (3) words accomplish the transfer by containing the thoughts or feelings and conveying them to others; and (4) in listening or reading people extract the thoughts and feelings ... from words” (Reddy 1993:170). What this metaphor does, is to draw attention to the all-pervasive container conceptualisation. According to Niemeier (2000:206) “Both the message and the words in which it is “packed” are seen as containers, which we unpack and

out of which we take the contents, i.e. the meaning.”<sup>5</sup> Words are thus viewed as having “insides” and “outside”.

Assuming that the same notion can be applied to the human body, its major parts such as the womb, heart, chest, and the head may all be viewed as containers. Containers have interiors and exteriors which can be filled and out of which things can be taken. It should therefore come as no surprise that the Old Testament authors conceived of the heart as a container that can be filled with emotions, opinions, knowledge etc. Moreover, the heart is conceptualised as a container, in which things can be stored and out of which they can be taken. The following examples may be indicative of such a conceptualisation:

The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was *filled with pain* (עצב; Hitp) (Gen. 6:6).

Though his speech is charming, do not believe him, for *seven abominations are in his heart* (שבע תועבות בלבו) (Prov. 26:25).

The hearts of men, moreover, are *full of evil* (מלא-רע) and there is *madness in their hearts* (הוללות בלבבם) while they live, and afterward they join the dead (Eccles. 9:3).

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have *sorrow in my heart* (יגון בלבבי)? (Ps. 13:2).

The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had *put in his heart* (נתן בלבו) (1 Kgs. 10:24).

“... you people who have *my law in your hearts* (תורתִי בלבבם) (Isa. 51:7).

If I *regard iniquity in my heart* (און ראיתי בלבי), the Lord would not have listened (Ps. 66:18).

*I have hidden your word in my heart* (בלבי צפנתי אמרתך) that I might not sin against you (Ps. 119:11).

*Folly is bound up in the heart* (אולת קשורה בלב) of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him (Prov. 22:15).

*Joy has vanished from our hearts* (שבת משובש לבנו); our dancing has turned to mourning (Lam. 5:15).

### 3. Conclusion

It was the aim of this article to examine four conceptual metaphors of the heart in the Old Testament. By applying a basic underpinning of cognitive linguistic to the relevant literary information, the contribution called attention to the notion of embodiment. To the ancient Israelites the heart became the vehicle through which their everyday experience in the world could be articulated. They experience through the heart, hence the different metaphors for this particular body part. A cognitive analysis of the metaphorical linguistic expressions illustrated that they conceived of the heart not just as the locus of emotions and rationality, but also regarded it as an object, as something existing in its own right and endowed with certain qualities.

<sup>5</sup> 1Cf. also the container image-schema as discussed by Johnson (1987:112-138).

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