Brittany Kim

“Lengthen Your Tent-Cords”: The Metaphorical World of Israel’s Household in the Book of Isaiah

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In her revised PhD thesis (Wheaton College) Brittany Kim discusses several metaphors for the people of Israel and its capital city that belong to the “root metaphor of household” in the book of Isaiah. Her goal is to know “what role they play in the communicative aim encoded in the text.” (7) In the context of an increasing number of studies dealing with the female personification of Zion, family metaphors, or the mixing of female and male metaphors for God in Isaiah, the particular contribution of Kim’s work is to relate the metaphor of servanthood with the household metaphor and what this “conveys about what it means to be YHWH’s people” (5). In order to achieve that she first discusses the household metaphors of sons/children, daughter(s), mother, wife, and servant(s) independently (chs. 2–5) before illuminating how they are interwoven within the book’s drama (ch. 6).

For several reasons, the book may serve particularly well as an introduction to the use of different household metaphors, their interrelation, and their contribution to the rhetoric of the book of Isaiah: (1) In her introduction (ch. 1) Kim provides a helpful summary of current metaphor theories (Black, Ricœur, Soskice, the conceptual metaphor theory of cognitive linguistics referring to Lakoff and Turner, its later development of conceptual blending as promoted by Fauconnier and Turner, a brief discussion of the relationship between metaphor and simile) and elucidates the main steps of rhetorical
analysis/criticism. (2) In her treatment of the individual metaphors, Kim is able to show the benefit of analyzing them independently, works out properly the different uses of the same metaphor, and provides a helpful compilation of the relevant passages that is further enhanced by three appendices: distribution charts, overview of passages, texts with implied metaphors.

Each chapter on the individual metaphors sketches the culturally dominant perceptions of the subsidiary subject (“associated commonplaces”), surveys the use of each metaphor in the ancient Near East and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, and provides a brief analysis of the individual passages. In chapter 2, “The People of Israel as Sons/Children,” Kim further differentiates between the people of Israel as YHWH’s children (Isa 1:2; 4: 30:1, 9; 43:6; 45:11; 63:8, 16, 64:7[8]; 66:13) and the people of Israel as Zion’s sons/children (37:3; 49:17, 20, 22, 25 + 50:1; 51:18, 20; 54:1, 13; 57:3; 60:4, 9; 62:5; 66:8). Chapter 3, “Zion and the People as Daughter(s),” contains four subsections: Zion/Jerusalem as daughter (including a convincing discussion of the translation of יֵשׁוֹבָה as a genitive of apposition; Kim includes 1:8; 10:32; 16:1; 37:22; 49:15; 52:2; 62:11); the occurrence of “daughter, my people” (22:4); the women of Israel as Zion’s daughters (3:16, 17; 4:4; 49:22; 60:4); and the women of Israel as YHWH’s daughters (43:6). In chapter 4, “Zion as Mother and Wife,” Kim analyzes the passages that speak of Zion as mother of the people of Israel (3:16, 17 + 4:4; 37:3; 49:17, 20, 22, 25 + 50:1; 51:18, 20; 54:1, 13; 57:3; 60:4, 9; 62:5; 66:8), of Zion as YHWH’s wife (50:1; 54:5, 6; 57:3; 62:5), and the odd passage about Zion as wife of her sons (62:4, 5). Chapter 5, “Israel, an Unnamed Representative, Zion, and the Faithful People as YHWH’s Servant(s),” divides into Jacob/Israel as YHWH’s servant (41:8; 9; 42:1; 42:19 + 43:10; 43:23 + 4:1, 2, 21, 26 + 45:4; 48:20), an unnamed representative of Israel as YHWH’s servant (49:3, 5–6; 50:10; 52:13 + 53:11), Zion as YHWH’s servant (51:22), the faithful people as YHWH’s servants (54:17; 56:6; 63:17; 65:8–9, 13–15 + 66:14).

This distinction between different but related metaphors is one important result of Kim’s study, which will help future studies cope with strangely mixed metaphors (e.g., when YHWH is said to marry Zion, who previously is designated his daughter or when the sons of Zion marry their mother). Related to this is another outcome of her study, a clearer perception of the multitude of passages that contain several metaphors interwoven, such as Isa 3:16–4:4; 37; 54; 62; 66. The repetitiveness of their treatments in this study, however, indicates also a conceptual problem: as important as the differentiation of the individual metaphors is for their perception, this procedure rather hinders a detailed and profound rhetorical analysis of each passage and how the individual metaphors work independently and interwoven in each text. One may ask, for example, how the metaphor of YHWH’s sons (1:2–3) and daughter Zion (1:8) contribute to the rhetorical strategy of Isa 1 and how the image of Zion in 1:21 relates to this.
Furthermore, taking up aspects of metaphor theory and rhetorical analysis, Kim is able to show the potential of combining both methodologies and inspires future studies. One interesting example is Kim’s treatment of the tension between the image of Zion’s widowhood and her portrait as an abandoned wife (Isa 54:4.6). She interprets the latter as “limiting the scope of the widow metaphor, hiding the associated commonplace of her husband’s death” (120). Both metaphors are used in order to highlight “the lack of a male protector and consequent vulnerability, as well as her grief and loneliness” (120). Even more detailed is her treatment of the puzzling image of Zion’s sons marrying their mother (62:4, 5). Kim convincingly uses conceptual blending theory and identifies this image as a “megablend” from three input spaces, the relationship between a mother and her sons; the relationship between a wife and her husband; and the relationship of city Zion to her inhabitants (see 130–31). One would wish for far more detailed treatments of this kind for the many mixed metaphors and incongruent metaphors, respectively, in this study, but it provides a foundation for further analyses also in this respect.

Equally, Kim is able to show that the metaphors of household play a central role in the rhetoric of the book of Isaiah. Throughout chapters 2–5 she notices the occurrence of each metaphor in every major part of Isaiah (meaning Isa 1–39; 40–55; 56–66). In chapter 6 she elucidates how the individual metaphors are interwoven: she relates the metaphors of YHWH’s children and his servant(s), compares the metaphors of Lady Zion and the Servant, touches on the significance of gender, and appropriately highlights the different feminine roles of Zion as daughter, mother, and wife. Finally, although she admits that “the book of Isaiah does not present a single, consistent family portrait” (187), she concludes that Israel and Zion are described as part of YHWH’s household, which should be understood as royal.

Noting the different distributions of the children and servant metaphors, Kim concludes that by portraying the remnant “as YHWH’s servants rather than his children, the latter chapters of the book heighten the people’s responsibility to live under his authority” (181), while the depiction of the people as children of Zion, rather than YHWH, stresses the “indissoluble bond between the people and their city-mother” (181). Comparing Zion and the Servant, Kim notes many traits they share, rightly maintains separate narrative roles for them, and clarifies how the servant theme is connected to the “drama of Mother Zion.” As regards the significance of gender, Kim concedes that Isaiah takes up the gender assumptions of the ancient world but also stresses with P. Tull that Isaiah contains some elements that undermine any static notion of God as powerful male in contrast to the feminine as truly powerless. While Zion’s roles as daughter, mother, and wife have some traits in common, each is associated with a particular facet of Zion’s character, depicts Zion’s relationship with YHWH, presents different perspectives on the exile, deals with
different implications of the concern for a woman’s sexual purity, and differentiates the relationship between Zion and her people.

As with the whole book, the final chapter lays a promising foundation for further studies in the relationship between household metaphors and their function for the rhetorical strategy of the whole book of Isaiah. Future studies would have to take into account more fully that the individualizing of the servant figure from Isa 49 onward does not necessarily mean a rejection of the nation as a whole as YHWHs servant (pace Kim, 181), because Isa 43:10 is a refinement of Israel’s servant role, not a rejection. The rhetorical analysis of the change between Zion and the Servant in Isa 49–55 has disregarded the addresses in the second masculine plural (esp. Isa 51:1–8; 52:11–12; 55). Moreover, Kim’s integration of all metaphors in the root metaphor of YHWH’s royal household does not do justice to the mixed and incongruent metaphors (e.g., Zion, the city, as YHWHs daughter and wife).

Finally, Kim’s study has dealt with a considerable amount of secondary literature (mostly in English), especially with more recent monographs on Isaiah and studies on metaphor in Isaiah, which could be helpful for anybody interested in studying Isaiah more thoroughly. However, for rhetorical analysis and final-form readings, respectively, further studies deserve consultation (see, e.g., Edgar Conrad, Reading Isaiah, 1991; Antti Laato, “About Zion I Will Not Be Silent,” 1998; Torsten Uhlig, The Theme of Hardening, 2009; Ulrich Berges, Jesaja: Der Prophet und das Buch, 2010; John Goldingay, The Theology of the Book of Isaiah, 2014; Ulrich Berges and Willem Beuken, Jesaja: Eine Einführung, 2016).

Kim contributes an inspiring study to the interpretation of the book of Isaiah that lays a promising foundation for future studies. She shows how central the metaphors of household are in Isaiah, rightly emphasizes the need to study them independently as well as their integration, and presents some noteworthy examples of the potential in combining rhetorical analysis and metaphor theory. As such this work forms a good starting point for further differentiations and substantiations in many respects.

As regards the interpretation of metaphors in Isaiah, one would wish for additional substantiation, for example, in respect to the relationship between source and target domain and how they interrelate. For instance, how do the Servant’s experiences of maltreatment and rejection relate to it as a metaphor and/or to the domain of a prophet (on Isa 50:10)? Moreover, Kim briefly sketches, what associated commonplaces of each vehicle/source domain are in the ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible, but often this would have to be clarified for each individual passage and its distinctive features. For instance, Isa 50:10 raises the question about violence and contempt in respect to a servant, which is not an issue in other passages. Future studies also would need to clarify
more thoroughly how the servant metaphor fits into the household metaphor, given that servant is also an honorary title and is used for exceptional leaders in the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, in many instances the potential of metaphor theories for elucidating the use of mixed and incongruent metaphors could be elaborated more fully. This also applies to the identification of a metaphor: Where do we find the particular metaphor? What other traits may serve to identify the metaphor apart from explicit naming? In this regard, the identification of Zion as YHWH’s daughter in Isa 49:14–15 by Kim deserves more substantiation.

This applies also to her rhetorical analyses. One may ask, for example, how the rhetorical strategy addressing metaphorical figures (e.g., Zion or the Servant or children) relates to the rhetorical strategy in respect to the book’s readers. How are the individual texts related to the broader rhetorical strategy? (Referring to one central passage, how do the different metaphors used in Isa 57:3–13 contribute to its rhetorical strategy, and how does this text fit together with the following passage, Isa 57:14–21? What does the placement of the different passages of Isa 57:3–13; Isa 60; Isa 66 mean for the overall rhetorical strategy?) Moreover, how is the rather limited use of many household metaphors in Isa 1–39 (compared with 40–66) to be interpreted? Which rhetorical situation does the book of Isaiah address?

These critical remarks are not meant to undermine the value of Kim’s study. They rather indicate how inspiring and thought-provoking it is.