

THRESHING FLOORS AS OBJECT AND METAPHOR

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1. Introduction

Agricultural language forms a critical part of the biblical text.¹ Threshing floors were an integral part of the daily life within the biblical world. While scholars have always recognized the importance of threshing floors, what has not been explored is their larger significance as object and metaphor within the biblical world.

Given the biblical writers heavy reliance on agricultural language it is crucial to recover the agricultural life from ancient Israel in order to more fully understand the biblical text. However, since the farming methods of ancient Israel were vastly different than those of today, the use of agricultural terms as metaphor is not always clear.

One vital agricultural expression in need of examination is the term “threshing floor” (Hebrew גֶּרֶן; *gō-rēn*),² which occurs 33 times in the Hebrew Bible. Out of these, the expression is used 9 times in a prophetic or wisdom context. Additionally, the verb “to thresh” (Hebrew דָּרַשׁ; *dûš*)³ occurs 16 times, 10 of them in a prophetic or wisdom context. Winnowing (Hebrew רָרַח; *zā-rā(h)*)⁴ occurs 38 times, 34 of which are in a prophetic or wisdom context. Altogether the connotation of a “threshing floor” along

¹ King and Stager note, “Agriculture, the basis of the economy in ancient Israel, influenced practically every facet of daily life, especially the religious, economic, legal, and social spheres. To describe the various aspects of daily life, the biblical texts refer constantly to agriculture in the literal sense, and almost as often to agriculture in the figurative, allegorical, or symbolic sense.” Phillip King and Lawrence Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 85.

² William L. Holladay, “גֶּרֶן,” *CHALOT*, 64.

³ William L. Holladay, “דָּרַשׁ,” *CHALOT*, 69.

⁴ William L. Holladay, “רָרַח,” *CHALOT*, 92.

with related language deserves serious attention. This article will first explore threshing floors as object, examining physical threshing floors, ancient narrative and legal accounts of threshing floors (both biblical and extra biblical), and ethnographic studies regarding threshing floor use and the process of threshing. Then this article will apply the physical characteristics of threshing floors to the uses of threshing floors in poetic and wisdom contexts, demonstrating that threshing floors were a versatile metaphor, accurately illustrating a wide array of ideas.

2. Threshing Floors as Object

2.1 Threshing Floors

Threshing floors were generally located near the villages and cities they served. The reason for this was two-fold: first, it was much more secure⁵ and second, it made transporting the grain inside the village easier.⁶ In biblical times, it appears threshing floors were often situated near the city gate, as evidenced by 1 Kgs 22:10 and the *Aqhatu Epic*.⁷ Threshing floors were however always outside the city in open areas that had access to wind (an essential part in winnowing) and also because winnowing would be disruptive to daily life.⁸ This could either be in the bottom of a valley or on the side of a hill; however hilltops themselves were generally unattractive as the winds tended to be too strong there.⁹

Since threshing achieves its goal, the separation of grain from the stalk through force,¹⁰ a hard surface is required. Otherwise, the grain is simply beaten into the ground instead of beaten apart. Thus, the ideal surface for threshing floors was rock, as it is naturally hard and smooth while also

⁵ Gustav Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 7 vols. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1987), 3: 69.

⁶ John C. Whittaker, "Alonia and Dhoukanes: The Ethnoarchaeology of Threshing in Cyprus," *NEA* 63.2 (2000): 64.

⁷ James B. Pritchard, ed. *ANET*, 3rd. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 154.

⁸ Ruth Shahack-Gross, Mor Gafri, and Israel Finkelstein, "Identifying Threshing Floors in the Archaeological Record: A Test Case at Iron Age Tel Megiddo Israel," *JFA* 34.2 (2009): 181.

⁹ Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 3: 69.

¹⁰ Jaime L. Waters, "Threshing Floors as Sacred Spaces in the Hebrew Bible" (PhD diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 2013), 7.

requiring the least amount of time for upkeep.¹¹ These could be naturally occurring rock formations, smoothed and flattened into usefulness, or artificially created using rock slabs cobbled together as a stone surface for threshing.¹² If that was not an option, a lime plaster could be used to create a smooth, flat surface¹³ or as in the case of Gezer, a beaten earth surface.¹⁴

Noting the public use of threshing floors, Borowski suggests at least some of the threshing floors were publically owned.¹⁵ However ethnographic information from Cyprus points out most people owned their own threshing floors.¹⁶ Furthermore, in Mesopotamia, fees were paid to the owners of threshing floors by less affluent farmers for the use of it. On occasion, threshing floors were set up as collateral.¹⁷

Although there are instances of threshing floors being used as cultivated land,¹⁸ in general they were in places where agriculture was difficult, if not impossible, either because it was on rock or because the ground had been made rock hard.¹⁹ Since threshing floors were not suitable for cultivation, they lay dormant between uses. However, they were not unused in these times.

As S. Smith elucidates, threshing floors appear to be connected with gates. In 1 Kgs 22:10, King Ahab of Israel and King Jehoshaphat of Judah are both at a threshing floor at the gate area to hear a group of prophets prophesy about whether or not to go to war with Aram. Smith additionally notes the Ugaritic leader Dan'ilu also going to the threshing floor to administer justice, also mentioned in conjunction with the gate.

¹¹ Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 3: 69-70.

¹² Whittaker, "Alonia and Dhoukanes," 67.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ William G. Dever, ed., *Gezer IV: The 1969-71 Seasons in Field VI, the "Acropolis,"* (Jerusalem: Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology, 1986), 73.

¹⁵ Oded Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 62.

¹⁶ Whittaker, "Alonia and Dhoukanes," 67.

¹⁷ A. Leo Oppenheim and Erica Reiner, "adru," *CAD* 1.1: 129-30; A. Leo Oppenheim and Erica Reiner, "maškantu," *CAD* 10.1: 369-70.

¹⁸ Georgia Tsartsidou et. al., "Ethnoarchaeological Study of Phytolith Assemblages from an Agro-pastoral Village in Northern Greece (Sarakini): Development and Application of a Phytolith Difference Index," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 35 (2008): 600-613.

¹⁹ Shahack-Gross, Gafri, and Finkelstein, "Identifying Threshing Floors," 177.

He suggests the reason for having a threshing floor so close to the gate would be so the gate guards would be able to also provide protection for the threshed grain until it is transported inside.²⁰ The administrative and public nature of gates has long been understood²¹ and Waters points out the proximity of a wide, open, flat space would make an unused threshing floor excellent for holding court.²²

Matthews notes threshing floors functioned as a place to pay debts, quoting the Law of Eshnunna in which a man, "shall make (the debtor) pay on the threshing floor"²³ and threshing floors were used as the location at which debts were delivered to be paid.²⁴

As Waters points out, threshing floors are places of cultic activity.²⁵ Joseph is noted as having stopped at the "threshing floor of Atad" to conduct mourning rites for his father in Gen 50:10-11. Gideon encounters the Angel of the Lord while threshing in a wine vat in Judges 6. Later in that same chapter, Gideon places his famous fleece out on a threshing floor. Ahab and Jehoshaphat contacting Yahweh through the gathering of prophets at a threshing floor has already been noted (cf. 2 Chr 18:9). Uzzah was struck down touching the Ark near a threshing floor, although it is debatable whether or not that counts as "cultic activity" in 2 Sam 6:5-11 (cf. 1 Chr 13:10-11). Most famously perhaps is David purchasing the threshing floor of Arunah the Jebusite in 2 Sam 24:15-25 (cf. 1 Chr 21:14-27), the site which later became Solomon's Temple (2 Chr 3:1).

2.2. Threshing

Before any threshing could take place, the threshing floor had to be cleaned and prepared. Cleanliness of the threshing floor was of paramount importance in order to keep the grain clean, provide a smooth surface, and to discourage vermin from inhabiting the floor.²⁶ Stone floors were the easiest to clean as they simply needed to be swept clean.²⁷

²⁰ Sydney Smith, "The Threshing Floor at the City Gate," *PEQ* 78. 1 (1946): 5-14, 12.

²¹ King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, 234.

²² Waters, "Threshing Floors," 65.

²³ Victor Harold Matthews, "Entrance Ways and Threshing Floors: Legally Significant Sites in the Ancient Near East," *Fides Et Historia* 19 (1987): 29.

²⁴ Oppenheim and Reiner, "adru," *CAD* 1.1: 129-30.

²⁵ Waters, "Threshing Floors," 13.

²⁶ Shahack-Gross, Gafri, and Finkelstein, "Identifying Threshing Floors," 171-184, 172-73.

²⁷ Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 3: 69-70.

Packed earth floors would often have to be repacked after a year or so lying unused. Dirt floors also needed to be weeded.²⁸ In the excavation of his threshing floor at Gezer, Dever suggested that another method of cleaning floors was to burn off the chaff, basing his conclusion on ashy laminae found there.²⁹

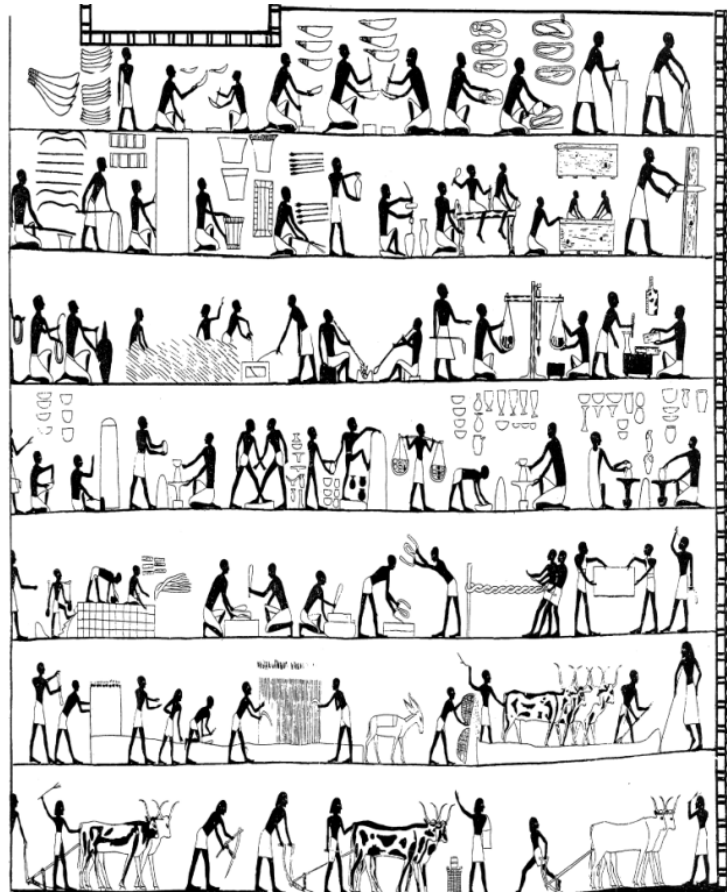


Figure 1: Harvest image from Beni Hasan. Note the threshing sledge at the bottom left corner (Prichard, plate 122).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Dever, *Gezer IV*, 73. It should be noted that while Dever claims burning of threshing floors as a common practice, he cites no ethnographic data to support this.

Once the threshing floor was cleaned and the harvest completed, the grain was brought to the floor. Dalman notes this task generally fell to the women,³⁰ something Whittaker corroborates.³¹ Women hauled grain from the fields either by hand or on donkey back.³² At the floor, the sheaves were laid open and spread out to dry.³³

As soon as the grain was deemed dry enough, the actual threshing began, which was done almost exclusively by men.³⁴ The purpose of threshing was to separate the grain from the stalks so it could be then ground into flour and used for food.³⁵ This was done by beating the kernels from the stalks. The main tools of threshing were the object that threshes the grain (stick, animals, sledge, or wheel-thresher), a broom to keep the floor clean, a winnowing fork, shovel, and a sieve.³⁶

Sticks are perhaps the simplest and most primitive tools for threshing as they were used by hand to whack the stalks until the grain pops out. Obviously this is a difficult and time-consuming process and therefore was not employed except in certain circumstances. One, if there was not much grain needing to be threshed (e.g. Ruth retuning from Boaz's field in Ruth 2:17). Two, if the main threshing floor was unusable for some reason (e.g. Gideon threshing in the wine vat in Judg 6:11). Three, certain crops were too small or delicate for larger and heavier equipment, such as the sledge, to be used, such as cumin.³⁷

The second method for threshing was to have a team of animals, typically oxen or donkeys. Oxen were likely preferred as their heavier weight and bigger hooves were better suited for crushing the wheat or barley.³⁸ Judging by a relief from Sakkarah in Egypt,³⁹ it is possible they were organized in a line to go around in circles. The sledge was probably

³⁰ Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 3: 53-56.

³¹ Whittaker, "Alonia and Dhoukanes," 64.

³² Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 3: 53-56.

³³ Whitaker, 64. In Cyprus, the sheaves would be up to 30 cm thick.

³⁴ Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 3: 108-109.

³⁵ Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel*, 63.

³⁶ Oded Borowski, *Daily Life in Biblical Israel* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 28.

³⁷ Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel*, 63.

³⁸ Oded Borowski, *Every Living Thing: Daily Use of Animals in Ancient Israel* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 1998), 124.

³⁹ Pritchard, *ANET*, pl. 89.

employed in similar fashion but no detailed information on exactly how they were used is available.⁴⁰



Figure 2: Donkeys Threshing in Egypt

The donkeys in Figure 2 do not appear to be muzzled, although it seems that was a common practice, certainly common enough for Yahweh to prohibit the muzzling of oxen or donkeys while threshing (cf. Deut 25:4). In more recent times, the practice of muzzling animals has been observed in Palestine.⁴¹ There was good reason to muzzle one's animals as a single ox could consume 3-4 kilos of grain *per day* while threshing. Depending on how long the threshing took, unmuzzled oxen could take a serious bite out of a village's subsistence, which already would experience a 60-day shortfall.⁴²

Threshing sledges were the most common and effective means of threshing mass quantities of grain.⁴³ These were large wooden boards infixed with flint (most commonly) or metal studs underneath to crush the grain stalks. According to ethnographic data collected by John Whittaker, in Cyprus threshing sledges were constructed using two pine

⁴⁰ Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel*, 64.

⁴¹ Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 3: 104; plates 14, 15, and 24.

⁴² Sandra Richter, "Environmental Law in Deuteronomy: One lens on a Biblical Theology of Creation Care," *BBR* 20.3 (2010): 355-376, 371-72; see this article for more on this curious command and the environmental interest of Yahweh in the OT.

⁴³ Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel*, 65.

boards fastened together with dowels, forming a platform roughly 2 m long and 60 cm wide. The nose of the sledge was slightly upturned.⁴⁴



Figure 3: Threshing Sledge from Cyprus

The sledge worked by hooking it up to a team of animals and having a driver stand, or occasionally sit, on it while the animals plodded around the threshing floor in a circle. The weight of the driver, sometimes helped by stones, pressed the teeth of the sledge into the grain, crushing it and separating the stalks from the kernels.⁴⁵ As time went on, the flint teeth would naturally wear out and have to be replaced. The old teeth were then generally just discarded.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Whittaker, "Alonia and Khoukanes," 62-69, 65; also Figure 3.

⁴⁵ Whittaker, "Alonia and Dhoukanes," 64.

⁴⁶ Robert Whallon Jr., "Threshing Sledge Flints: A Distinctive Pattern of Ware," *Paléorient* 4 (1978): 319-324.

Similar to the sledge was the wheeled-thresher which used teethed-rollers to crush the grain. Although this was used quite popularly around the turn of the 20th century,⁴⁷ there is little evidence of its use in biblical times. It is possibly referenced in Isa 28:27-28 and a possible model was found by Flinders Petrie at Tel el-Far'ah (south).⁴⁸ The stalks would be flipped over using a fork so that both sides were thoroughly crushed.⁴⁹

This was clearly a time-consuming process that involved a great deal of heavy labor. In Cyprus, it is noted families did not thresh their produce by themselves; instead they hired workers from the village and in turn would be hired back. As there was little cash available, workers were paid in large feasts. Indeed, the threshing season ended up being a time of celebration in addition to hard work. Classes would be dismissed early and children would play in the soft chaff, possibly similar to children jumping into leaf piles today. If the weather was good and the moon shone bright, the threshers would work into the night, singing songs.⁵⁰

The festive and communal nature of threshing is reflected in the biblical text as well. In Ruth 3, Boaz is noted as sleeping on the threshing floor after having "eaten and drunk and his heart was merry."⁵¹ Also with him at the threshing floor were his young men, who assumedly had helped him thresh.

However, Boaz sleeping on the threshing floor was not merely for fun. As threshing floors were located outside city, they and their contents were vulnerable to attack and theft. Dalman notes it as common practice for the owner of the grain being threshed to camp out on the threshing floor, often with his whole family.⁵²

During threshing time, the bulk of a community's food was gathered in a single spot beyond the protection of the city, making threshing floors particularly tempting targets for raiding armies or bandits. A successful strike on a threshing floor would, at the very least, reduce a family to poverty and could reduce an entire city to begging.⁵³

⁴⁷ Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 3: plates 21-23.

⁴⁸ Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel*, 65.

⁴⁹ Whittaker, "Alonia and Dhoukanes," 64.

⁵⁰ Ibid. Dalman also notes this in Palestine as well. (74-76).

⁵¹ Biblical quotations are taken from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

⁵² Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 3: 108-109.

⁵³ Waters, "Threshing Floors," 46.

Waters notes three biblical examples of threshing floors being used to debilitate a city.⁵⁴ While David is on the run, the town of Keilah is attacked by the Philistines who specifically target the threshing floors (1 Sam 23:1). In addition to cutting off the food supply of Keilah for the coming year, the Philistine army is now well-stocked with grain. After receiving the green light from Yahweh, David then rushes to their aid.

A second instance is found in 2 Kgs 6 when Samaria is besieged by the Arameans. Although the Arameans are not mentioned as specifically targeting the threshing floors, the king of Israel points out he cannot help his starving people because his access to the threshing floors has been hopelessly cut off (2 Kgs 6:27).

In the Gideon narrative, the main character is introduced threshing but not at a threshing floor but rather in a wine vat. This was to hide it from the Midianites who were oppressing Israel at that time. The implication is that the Midianites were targeting the threshing floors to drain the Israelites of their subsistence and resources and therefore Gideon had to resort to some rather unorthodox methods to preserve his family's livelihood.

In addition to the potential bandits or raiders, weather was another issue which could play a devastating role. Summer was the ideal time for threshing as it was often hot and dry, which made threshing the stalks much easier. However, from time to time dew would soak the floor or a fog would roll in, halting the activities. Another problem could be a windless day, as wind is essential for winnowing. On still days, the sheaves could still be threshed but winnowing hit a standstill.⁵⁵ One of the Cypriot farmers recalls a time when they had to stop work for 10 days waiting for the wind to pick up.⁵⁶

After the grain was deemed threshed, it was then winnowed, predominantly done by men. Although the next step in the process, winnowing, was often done along with threshing. Winnowing was done by taking a wooden pitchfork from five to seven times,⁵⁷ and tossing the threshed grain into the air. This would separate the heavier kernels, which would fall back to the ground, from the lighter chaff, which was blown

⁵⁴ Ibid., 45-55.

⁵⁵ Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 3: 74-76.

⁵⁶ Whittaker, "Alonia and Dhoukanes," 64.

⁵⁷ Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 3: 74-76.

away.⁵⁸ Therefore the most important tool and factor was the wind. A good breeze was necessary however a strong wind was not desirable as it tends to blow the grain away with the chaff. In Palestine, the strongest winds are during the middle of the day with the winds calming down late afternoon and early evening. This is therefore the ideal time to winnow. On occasions, winnowing was done well into the night, as long as the breeze and light was good. The wind direction is irrelevant so long as it is at the appropriate strength.⁵⁹

The final stage is cleaning the grain which is done in two stages using the two different sieves described above. First the heavier particulates, such as rocks and dirt clods, are sifted clean. Then the lighter stuff is sifted out by tossing it through the small-holed sieve.⁶⁰

3. Threshing Floor as Metaphor

Since threshing was such a multi-faceted process, it lent itself to a wide range of metaphorical applications. Agriculturally, the threshing floor was the center of the process. As Waters puts it, "It is only when crops are processed at threshing floors that they truly become food."⁶¹ As the culmination of the harvest, the threshing floor was where the success or failure of the harvest was revealed. A full threshing floor would of course mean a successful season; an empty threshing floor meant a poor season. Therefore, as Waters notes, threshing floors became connected with dependence on Yahweh.⁶²

The process of threshing was clearly a violent one. The sheaves of grain were brutally crushed and ground to dust-like chaff, which is then tossed away into the breeze. Sledges in particular provided graphic imagery for divine punishment. The chaff which remained was highly flammable, as the ash layers at Gezer indicate. Threshing imagery could also be used to describe destruction and frailty of human existence.⁶³

⁵⁸ Seetha Narahari Reddy, "If the Threshing Floor Could Talk: Integration of Agriculture and Pastoralism During the Late Harappan in Gujaat, India," *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 16 (1997): 162-187, 170.

⁵⁹ Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 3: 128.

⁶⁰ Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel*, 66-67.

⁶¹ Waters, "Threshing Floors," 10.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Waters, "Threshing Floors," 41.

A detailed study of all passages employing threshing language is beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, four texts will be examined to illustrate the flexibility of the threshing floor metaphor: Job 39:12; Jer 51:33; Hos 9:1-2; and Mic 4:12.

3.1. Job 39:12

Job 39 is in the middle of God's answer to Job's questions (Job 38-41)⁶⁴ and vv. 9-12 specifically are God pointing out Job's inability to tame the wild ox (probably the extinct auroch).⁶⁵ The auroch (the KJV translates as "unicorn" or "rhinoceros" in the Vulgate), was one of the most powerful land animals in the ancient world.⁶⁶ While it was a popular hunting animal,⁶⁷ which probably led to its extinction, taming the beast was impossible to the point of absurdity.⁶⁸

As Newsom notes, "the hallmark of domestication is the exchange of food for service."⁶⁹ However, attempting to do so with the auroch is utter foolishness. The auroch would destroy any crops the farmer, Job in this case, might produce. Hence the statement in v. 12, "Do you have faith in him that he will return your grain and gather it to your threshing floor?"

The connection between the auroch and the threshing floor should bring to mind the use of oxen to pull the sledge or wheels in the threshing process, as well as to trample the grain. Given how much a domesticated ox would eat, letting an unmuzzled auroch loose on a threshing floor would devastate the harvest. The only way to use an auroch in threshing would be to muzzle, which is God's implicit challenge to Job and something rhetorically both know is impossible. Thus God's point that Job is unable to use an auroch to thresh his grain since he cannot muzzle it and an unmuzzled auroch would all his grain.

⁶⁴ Itzak Cornelius, "Job," in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 5: 292.

⁶⁵ Carol Newsom, "Job," in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 4: 610.

⁶⁶ Elmer B. Smick, "Job," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 4: 1038.

⁶⁷ Cornelius, "Job," 295. The Ugaritic goddess Astarte is recorded as having hunted the bull, as well as Ugaritic kings. Assyrian kings also ranged far hunting the auroch. Smick notes Thutmose III going on extended hunting expeditions for the bull; Smick, "Job," 1038.

⁶⁸ Newsom, "Job," 610.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

3.2. Jeremiah 51:33

Jeremiah uses the threshing floor as an image of divine punishment and destruction: “For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: The daughter of Babylon is like a threshing floor at the time when it is trodden; yet a little while and the time of her harvest will come.” (Jer 51:33). This verse is part of Jeremiah’s extensive oracle against Babylon comprising chs. 50 and 51, and almost half of the oracles against the nations (chs. 46-51).⁷⁰ While the date of this oracle is debated, commentators suggest the oracle was written at the time of the Seraiah embassy, around 594-593 BC,⁷¹ when Babylon was approaching the height of her powers. This particular pericope (Jer 51:27-33) focuses on a muster of the nations to destroy Babylon, which was eventually carried out by Cyrus the Great in the 6th century BC as he conquered much of the near eastern world.⁷²

Jeremiah utilizes the preparation of the threshing floor to describe the destruction of Babylon. Although stone was the ideal surface for threshing floors, since such a surface was not always available, dirt surfaces were used. As noted above, the preparation of a dirt floor involved stripping it utterly bare and then pounded into a hard, packed surface against which the grain stalks could be threshed effectively. This process could be done alone, or by several individuals to hasten the work. The message of Jeremiah regarding Babylon is that she will be prepared as a threshing floor is: the nations will gather to strip her bare and then pummel her flat.

3.3. Hosea 9:1-2

Hosea 9:1-2 uses the threshing floor imagery in the context of judgment but specifically to refer to a reversal of fortune:

Rejoice not, O Israel! Exult not like the peoples; for you have played the whore, forsaking your God. You have loved a prostitute’s wages on all threshing floors. Threshing floor and wine vat shall not feed them, and the new wine shall fail them.

⁷⁰ Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise, and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52*, WBC 27 (Dallas: Word, 1995), 357.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 362; also Charles Lee Feinberg, “Jeremiah,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*: ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 6: 672.

⁷² Feinberg, “Jeremiah,” 683.

The scene depicted is one of a harvest festival.⁷³ As explained above, the threshing season was a time of celebration and rejoicing as the culmination of the harvest and when the benefits of the labor were born out. Hosea seems to be suggesting that the results of the harvest are quite good, which would be a natural cause for celebration. However, commentators note the celebration of Israel is not a celebration of God's goodness in providing for his people but rather a celebration of fertility cults that appear to have worked.⁷⁴ In addition to being used for threshing, open threshing floors would also be used for religious activity as well, such as fertility cults.⁷⁵ Israel's prostituting themselves after other deities, arguably the most prominent motif in the book of Hosea, is again used here to describe Israel running after different gods to give them prosperous harvests.

This image was particularly apropos. Israel was portrayed as a prostitute flitting from threshing floor to threshing floor, exchanging her favors for pay. A full threshing floor indicated a rich harvest, which in this case meant Israel was servicing wealthy patrons, who were more likely paying excellent wages. In short, Israel's religious "prostitution" appears to have been paying off very well with a literal threshing-floors pay.⁷⁶ Hence, the implied celebration.

However, God is issuing a warning to Israel that if they persisted in their prostitutions to other gods, those threshing floors would not remain full. In the end, they would end up as empty threshing floors. The implied question what will Israel do then? How will she sustain herself when her patrons can no longer afford her services? She has become so reliant on the wages earned from prostituting herself after these other gods that when they inevitably fail her, she will be left destitute.⁷⁷

⁷³ Gale A. Yee, "Hosea," in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 7: 264.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 265; Leon J. Wood, "Hosea," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 7: 204; Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, WBC 31 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 142; M. Daniel Carroll Rodas, "Hosea," in *The Expositor's Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 8: 271.

⁷⁵ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 142.

⁷⁶ Yee, "Hosea," 265.

⁷⁷ This reversal of fortunes motif using threshing floors, as well as wine vats, is also used in Joel 2:24 roughly a century later, only going the other way. Empty threshing floors will become full. Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, NAC 19A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 294.

Depending on the dating of Hosea's oracle, the predicted reversal of fortunes would have been almost laughable to the northern kingdom (the target of this oracle). When Hosea began his ministry, Jeroboam II sat on the throne of Israel (Hos 1:1) and led the northern kingdom to its military, territorial, and economical peak.⁷⁸ Their threshing floors were full to the brim and life was good. Yet it would not be much longer until the destitution of the threshing floors came about when Israel was eradicated between 722-720 BC by Shalmaneser V and Sargon II.⁷⁹ Not only would the threshing floors be empty; most would be gone.

3.4 Micah 4:11-13

According to the introduction of his book, Micah's ministry covers a large part of the latter half of the 8th century BC, contemporary with Isaiah and Amos. As noted above, the first half of the 8th century was a time when the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah reached their peaks, almost attaining Solomonic power. However, under the able leadership of Tiglath-Pileser III and his Sargonid descendants, Assyria underwent a renaissance in the latter half of the 8th century, reclaiming their preeminent status in the near east, destroying Israel, and nearly wiping out Judah in the process.⁸⁰ The 8th century thus represented the two extremes Israel and Judah would experience in their history and at the time of Micah, both were on the wrong end of that spectrum. Ralph Smith suggests that Micah 4:11-13 specifically was written during Sennacherib's devastating campaign of 701 BC.⁸¹

Against this backdrop, chapters four and five offer hope that God's people, Judah and Jerusalem specifically, will win in the end.⁸² Micah 4:11-13 describes this turnabout:

Now many nations are assembled against you, saying, 'Let her be defiled, and let our eyes gaze upon Zion.' But they do not know the thoughts of the Lord; they do not understand his plan, that he has gathered them as sheaves to the threshing floor. Arise and thresh, O daughter of Zion, for I will make your horn iron, and I will make your

⁷⁸ Keith W. Whitelam, "Jeroboam," *ABD* 3: 742-746.

⁷⁹ A. Kirk Grayson, "Sargon," *ABD* 5: 984.

⁸⁰ Thomas Edward McComiskey, "Micah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 7: 395.

⁸¹ Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, WBC 32 (Dallas: Nelson, 1984), 42.

⁸² Daniel J. Simundson, "Micah," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 7: 539.

hoofs bronze; you shall beat in pieces many peoples; and shall devote their gain to the Lord, their wealth to the Lord of the whole earth.

Similar to Jeremiah 51:33, the violent nature of threshing is used here to describe Judah's rise from the ashes. Opposing nations are pictured as ignorant as the inanimate sheaves of grain God, served up on a platter for Judah to destroy at God's behest. God is pictured as the farmer who has gathered the grain for threshing, while Judah is pictured as an ox who is supposed to thresh the grain into oblivion. The image here is of oxen trampling the grain, instead of using a sledge or rollers. Therefore, God's promise to "make your hoofs of bronze" is a promise to give Judah whatever strength needed to utterly crush her enemies, as bronze hooves would be much more effective in threshing than would normal hooves. Here threshing floor imagery is used to illustrate a promise of future power by God to his people.

4. Conclusion

The threshing floor was a key part of ancient agricultural life and thus provided a rich well of metaphors that the biblical authors drew from. As demonstrated, the threshing floor imagery did not have a single, uniformed image applied across the board. Instead it was applied in multiple ways, from man's help/lessness to judgment to a barometer of economic prosperity to promises of future power. Given the complexity of the threshing process, this is not surprising.