SWORDS TO PLOWSHARES: TEXT AND CONTEXTS

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Few biblical texts have had the public exposure of the "swords to plowshares" sayings in Isaiah 2 and Micah 4. These ancient texts may now be found in a great variety of new contexts. The Isaiah 2 version is engraved in large letters on the wall opposite the United Nations Headquarters in New York City:

THEY SHALL BEAT THEIR SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES. AND THEIR SPEARS INTO PRUNING HOOKS: NATION SHALL NOT LIFT UP SWORD AGAINST NATION. NEITHER SHALL THEY LEARN WAR ANY MORE

ISAIAH 2.4

The prophet Micah is also remembered at the United Nations. In the north garden area stands a nine-foot bronze sculpture of a muscular blacksmith beating a sword into a plowshare. On the base appear the words WE SHALL BEAT OUR SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES with a reference to Micah 4. The piece was the work of a Soviet sculptor, Evgeniy Vuchetich, and was presented to the UN by the Soviet Union in 1959.

In our own time, songwriters, sculptors and workers for peace throughout the world have been captured by the imagery of this prophetic saying and have used these words to express the hopes of all people. The purpose of this essay will be to offer an interpretation of the Isaiah and Micah settings of the saying, to note other biblical settings where the themes occur, and finally to point to a few contemporary contexts for the prophetic words about swords and plowshares.

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Isaiah 2:1-5 reads as follows, in the NRSV:

1. The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.
2. In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.
3. Many peoples shall come and say,
   “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
   to the house of the God of Jacob;
   that he may teach us his ways
   and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

4. He shall judge between the nations,
   and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
   they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
   and their spears into pruning hooks;
   nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
   neither shall they learn war any more.

5. O house of Jacob,
   come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

1. While some modern English translations consider the unit to be Isa 2:1-4 and take v. 5 with vv. 6-22 (NRSV and JPS), a good number now consider the unit as 2:1-5 (NAB, NIV, REV, CEV; so also the Revised Common Lectionary for 1 Advent). Verse 5 should be linked to that which precedes, picking up the thematic word “walk” (לֵיל) found three times in v. 3 (translated by the NRSV twice as “come”, once as “walk”) in both imperative and cohortative forms. Vs. 5 could be translated literally: “O house of Jacob, walk, let us walk in the light of the Lord.” The saying in 2:6-22 is then linked to 2:1-5 with the catch phrase “O house of Jacob.”

The location of this saying in the Isaiah collection testifies to its significance. The first chapter of Isaiah is an introduction to the entire book. After this, 2:1 introduces the collection of sayings “concerning Judah and Jerusalem” in chaps. 2–12, framed with hopeful words about Zion (2:2-3; 12:6). The lead-off piece in this collection is a word about the future Jerusalem “in days to come,” as are the concluding hymns, “in that day” (12:1, 3).

Isaiah 2:1-5 may be divided into a core saying (vv. 2-4, paralleled closely in Mic 2:1-4) and an editorial frame (1, 5). 2:1 is obviously the work of the editor of the book, signaling the start of the 2-12 collection. 2:5 is also the work of the editor, addressing and applying the core saying to the listening “house of Jacob.” The editor of Micah, as we shall see, also adapted the saying to a new context by

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1 Catchword linkages are frequent in the Isaiah book. Note, for example, the “Sodom, Gomorrah” link which ties 1:10-17 to 1:4-9.