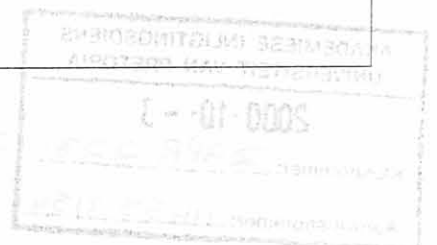


BEYOND SHEOL:

**RETHINKING THE CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND OF
THE POETIC IMAGERY IN PSALM 23 AND ITS
POSSIBLE PARALLELS IN CANAANITE
THANATOLOGICAL MYTHOLOGY**

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THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES, UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA,
FOR THE MASTERS DEGREE IN SEMITIC LANGUAGES
IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ANCIENT LANGUAGES.

Study Leader: Professor G. T. M. Prinsloo.



FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study represents the result of four years of reading and rereading, thinking and rethinking, discovery and abandonment, frustration and inspiration. The theme discussed here and its scope is such that, after finishing the study, I still felt that so much more could and probably need to have been said. As for its nature, the novelty of some of the proposals and the radicality of some of the claims make the need for elaboration and justification of its contents all the more forthcoming.

Because of the controversial and complex nature of the subject matter, for example mythology, hermeneutics, thanatology and comparative religion, I feel that a hesitant and sometimes apologetic manner of presentation is appropriate and hardly out of place. Also, because of the limited scope of this study on the one hand and the novelty of some of the personal speculations on the other hand, it was virtually impossible to furnish every sentence with a myriad of references to make it look more impressive and give the impression that the writer has read every bit of data in any way related to the concerns of his study.

I do however admit that the dependency on many sources does not necessarily rule out the possibility of presenting a novel interpretation. To be sure, it often does give evidence of a well-informed piece of research. Still, for the purpose of this present study, I have for the most part synthesized ideas which I can no longer remember exactly where most of them are written down, or by whom they were mediated to me. And because much of the speculation first arose through independent consideration and without awareness of possible similar ideas by other scholars, I have in many instances written large portions of the study without justification by, or recognition of reference material.

This does not mean that I have not read a lot nor that I am not indebted to others for much of what I propose to be the case. It simply means that I think the quantity of references

interpretation. However, on realizing that my own findings were independent of his influence, (since I only read his works after my research was already virtually complete), as well as many other matters of difference in the details of constructing a possible mythological conceptual background and supposed parallels to Psalm 23, I felt myself motivated to continue. I would like to think that this study presents a more elaborate and justified argument than Dahood's interpretation of Psalm 23 though the end result still echoes some features of his commentary.

All in all, without your own enthusiasm for the OT, Ugaritic, and the cheerful yet compassionate way of lecturing, counseling and general assistance in all areas, this study would not have been possible. As a human person and a professor you have become a role-model to me in my own struggle for identity. Your terminal illness hangs like a shadow over this study and while I envisaged a somewhat different future a year ago, the 4 years I was privileged to be your student has been of such quality as to be sufficient despite the relatively short duration. This study is presented in honour to you, A A da Silva, and I can only hope that as a pupil I may provide satisfaction to my mentor for your generous investment in my academic formation. Thank you, for everything.

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Then Professor H Potgieter. As head of the department you too have been a role-model of a Semitic scholar which I continually strive to emulate. Having started my studies at the 'wrong time' (but at the right place), the only formal contact we had, has been in Judaica and Qumran classes. However, while I still do not regret my decision to avoid Arabic, you too have played a role in my forming more than may at first seem the case. You too, with your friendly and accommodating manner, your interest in your students' welfare and your vast treasury of knowledge has made the Department of Semitic languages a veritable oasis in the desert all students of theology have to traverse. Your enthusiasm for this study of a Psalm you yourself know all too well was indeed part of what motivated me to commence further research past the Honours level. I hope that, on reading this study, you are not disappointed and that an even more enthusiastic response will be evoked by a study which also wishes to acknowledge you as an invaluable agent in all that I have become and strive for. Thank you.

Thanks also to my parents, without whom I wouldn't even be here or anywhere for that matter. Your love, care, support and concern for all my needs, hopes, fears and ambitions are appreciated more than words could say. Thank you dad, for assisting me in editorial matters and allowing me to work undisturbed on your computer. This study is also a tribute for all you and mom have made possible in my life. Thank you.

Last, but not least, Mrs A. Grobler who has contributed to this project by being so kind as to assist in converting most of the handwritten manuscript into the more aesthetically

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THANK YOU ALL.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANE-	ANCIENT NEAR EAST
CTM -	CANAANITE THANATOLOGICAL MYTHOLOGY
NT -	NEW TESTAMENT
OT -	OLD TESTAMENT
TM-	THANATOLOGICAL MYTHOLOGY

LIST OF DEFINITIONS

CANAANITE - The word "Canaanite" in this study refers to the cultural matrix which was predominant in the north western Semitic world during the period ca1500-500 B.C.. It is used to denote a sociocultural entity rather than its use to identify a geographical region. More specific, in this study it refers to the religiocultural context of ca 1000-500 B.C. which features the deities El, Asherah, Baal, Anat, Dagan and Yahweh as the gods of choice. Textually the forms of literary expression peculiar to this context includes the Ugaritic texts as well as those fragments in the OT which can be dated to the pre-exilic period and which alludes to the religiocultural matrix when Yahwism was still part of a polytheistic culture and combined with the worship of other deities in the north western Semitic pantheon (like El, Baal and Asherah).

THANATOLOGICAL/THANATOLOGY-From the Greek-Thanatos-meaning "death". In this study "thanatological" mythology refers to those myths which have as part of its contents beliefs/tales/descriptions/settings which features death/dying/afterlife/the underworld/or a person/deity's relation to or experience of dying/personified death/post mortem realms.

MYTHOLOGY- In almost all genres of contemporary literature there are many uses of this term and one finds included both negative (myth= a primitive fiction of reality) and positive (myth = a different way of looking at reality) connotations. In this study the word myth simply denotes a story about reality based on a particular culture's world view. It is used to denote a particular perspective or interpretation of reality which is was and or is believed to be ontologically true. Included in this use of the term is mainly the pre scientific world views where natural, psychological and sociological forces are personified and postulated as sentient beings which influences human existence for better or worse. This study will remain agnostic with regard to the ontological status of such phenomena and use the word myth simply as denoting a story or perspective of reality without evaluating its relation to empirical reality.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND-in this study the words "conceptual background" refers to the frame of reference of a particular culture which contains a system of signs which it uses in the discourse about perceived reality. For example, words or phenomena like black holes, quasars and galaxies allude to the conceptual background of 20th century astronomy while others like carbohydrates, calories and metabolism allude to the conceptual background of contemporary nutrition science. Words like *Sheol* and *the pit* allude to an OT thanatological conceptual background.

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SUMMARY OF THIS STUDY

To define the research problem I distinguished between general and special concerns. In general the research problem was concerned with the way meaning has become problematic in our time.

The elusive nature of absolute meaning has become clear as we have become aware of the hermeneutical problem as never before. Inconsensus regarding the history of Israel, the religion(s) of Israel and the date, meaning, setting and genre of Old Testament texts have destroyed the initial optimism of historical criticism. Along with this, post modernist theories of science, history, hermeneutics, language and religion have plundered Old Testament

interpretation in relativism.

As a specific concern I identified Psalm 23 as a problematic text. While its incorporation into the Psalter and the Old Testament has provided a hermeneutical frame of reference, historical criticism knows that each psalm should be read on its own. Like the different books of the Old Testament, the different psalms provide different and often contradictory perspectives regarding certain religious belief held in ancient Israel. This, along with the awareness of the diversity of the Old Testament witness cautions us to assume before hand what any given text can or cannot possibly mean given our own construction of orthodox Yahwism. Finally we have come to know the mythical nature of much Old Testament texts and especially the psalms whose interpretation *via* historical method have been greatly assisted by elucidation by Canaanite mythology.

As for Psalm 23 the problem is that on the one hand it is probably the most familiar Psalm of all. And yet we have no idea when, where, why or by whom it was written. And since context determines meaning it seems that the original meaning of the Psalm is irretrievable given we have no idea of its original historical and religiocultural setting. This has resulted in our reading of the text in an historical way or, at best, in dialogue with other Old Testament texts which seem to provide decent parallel imagery. Virtually every element of the Psalm – genre, structure, date, authorship, meaning, allusions, translation and nature and function of its poetry is a matter of ongoing dispute.

This is obscured by its repeated used as cherished liturgy or favourite devotional readings.

In my attempt to answer this research problem I provided an hypothesis. This hypothesis concerns the conceptual reference of the poetic imagery in the Psalm and its religiocultural frame of reference. I have argued that the language of the Psalm is ambiguous. Not only can it be seen as having reference to literal shepherding customs and the geography of Palestine. A comparison with Canaanite mythology and ANE thanatology in general reveals an alternative possible conceptual background underlying the reference of the Psalm's poetic imagery.

In Chapter 1 I tried to show that while psalm 23 may be the most familiar psalm it is from a

historical critical perspective a hermeneutical nightmare being a text without context. There is no consensus among scholars regarding date, setting and just about every aspect which assist in the interpretive process. I also suggested that, given the absence of historical coordinates, a recourse to possible parallels in mythology might be the next best option and at least provide interesting possibilities for speculation. For this study I opted for recourse to CTM as its pastoral metaphors and mythological geography seems to have some similarities with the psalm. The choice of intertextual comparative material focuses on the Ugaritic texts of CTA 4-6 and 20-22.

In Chapter 2 I elaborated on the problematic nature of Old Testament interpretation. There I discussed how complex and relative interpretation is in practice. Issues presented include misunderstanding, domestication and the ambiguity of certain Old Testament texts. I also discussed hermeneutical obstacles facing the interpreter in a text like Psalm 23

In Chapter 3 I provided a short overview of the essentially Canaanite and mostly polytheistic nature of pre-exilic Yahwism as critical history has reconstructed understood it. This was supplemented by tracing a couple of Canaanite mythological motifs in the Old Testament and thus legitimizing a Canaanite mythological perspective if Psalm 23 is assumed to have originated in the religiocultural context of pre-exilic Yahwism.

In Chapter 4, I provided a commentary on the Psalm which was mainly concerned with exposing the possible parallels between the poetic imagery of the Psalm and that of CTM. By comparison with CTM I attempted to show how it is possible to make sense of Psalm 23 from a perspective which imply a different conceptual background than is popularly believed to underlie the imagery of the Psalm.

I concluded the study with Chapter 5 and presented a synthesis of the findings in the commentary by reading Psalm 23 from a narrative, historical and mythological critical perspective.

In all this I argued that my hypothesis does not seek to supplant other readings but to

supplement it. I also stressed the admittedly speculative nature of this study as well as the way indirect the parallels relate to Psalm 23. I hope that this paper will make interpreters think twice or at least that it has provided momentary amusement.

KEYWORDS

Psalm 23

Canaanite mythology

thanatology

mythological geography

postmodern hermeneutics

historical criticism

beatific afterlife

Biblical mythology

royal immortality

historical Israel

OPSOMMING VAN HIERDIE STUDIE

As navorsingsprobleem het ek 'n onderskeid tussen algemene en spesifieke belange getref. In die algemene sin het die navosingsprobleem betrekking op die problematiese aard van interpretasie in ons eie tyd. Die ontwykende aard van absolute betekenis dring hom toenemend tot ons op, en ons is meer as ooit bewus van die hermeneutiese probleem. Verskille aangaande die geskiedenis en die godsdienst van Israel asook die datering, genre en betekenis van Oud Testamentiese tekste het die aanvanklike optimisme vir histories-kritiese navorsing vernietig. Daarmee saam het postmoderne perspektiewe op wetenskap, geskiedenis, hermeneutiek, taal, en godsdienst Ou Testament interpretasie in relativisme

gedompeel.

Wat die spesifieke belang van die navorsingsprobleem betref, het ek Psalm 23 identifiseer as 'n problematiese teks. Alhoewel die insluiting van die psalm in die psalmbundel en in die OT 'n hermeneutiese verwysingsraamwerk geskep het, weet histories-kritiese navorsers dat elke psalm op sy eie geles moet word. Soos wat die verskillende OT boeke verskillende perspektiewe op godsdienstige sake kan hê, so kan verskillende psalms teenstrydige perspektiewe aangaande godsdienstige aangeleenthede in Israel verteenwoordig. Hierdie insigte aangaande die diversiteit van die Bybel waarsku ons om nie te gou te besluit oor wat 'n teks *nie* kan beteken nie op grond van ons eie konstruksie van "ortodokse" Jahwisme. Ons het ook bewus geword van die mitiese elemente in OT tekste en veral in die psalms, waar vergelykende studies met Kanaanitiese mitologie veel bygedra het tot die verstaan van baie psalms.

Wat Psalm 23 betref, is die probleem dalk dat dit die bekendste van al die psalms is. Dit is egter ironies dat ons geen idee het oor *wie*, *wanneer*, *vir wie* en *waarvoor* dit geskryf was nie. Indien betekenis deur konteks bepaal word, volg dit dat ons nooit presies volledig sal verstaan wat die psalm wou kommunikeer nie, gegewe die feit dat ons nie oor die vaagste benul aangaande die psalm se oorspronklike historiese en godsdienstige kulturele konteks beskik nie. Gevolglik het ons die psalm gewoonlik geles in dialoog met ander OT tekste. Feitlik elke element van die psalm, te wete genre, struktuur, datering, outeurskap, betekenis en parallele, is sake waaroor daar weinig konsensus in die navorsing is. Die herhaalde gebruik van Psalm 23 in die kerk se liturgie en persoonlike lees verblind lesers verder vir die bogenoemde hermeneutiese dilemmas.

In 'n poging om die navorsingsprobleem aan te spreek, het ek 'n hipotese voorgestel. Die hipotese handel oor die konseptuele verwysingsraamwerk implisiet in die poëtiese beelde in die psalm en die godsdienstig-kulturele verwysingsraamwerk daarvan. Ek het daarop gewys dat die taal van die psalm dubbelsinnig is. Nie alleen kan die inhoud gesien word as verwysende na letterlike herderspraktyke en Palestynse geografie nie. Op grond van ooreenkomste met Kanaänitiese mitologie en Ou Nabye-Oosterse tanatologie is daar nou 'n ander perspektief op die psalm se pastorale metafore aan die lig gebring.

In hoofstuk 1 het ek probeer aantoon dat, ten spyte van Psalm 23 se bekendheid, dit vanweë 'n gebrek aan konteks, 'n histories-kritiese nagmerrie verteenwoordig. Onder navorsers is daar 'n gebrek aan konsensus aangaande feitlik elke aspek van die teks. Gegewe die gebrek aan 'n historiese konteks, het ek voorgestel dat vergelyking met ONO mitologie moontlik vrug kan afwerp om die inhoud en konteks van die psalm te probeer peil en daaroor te spekuleer. Vir hierdie studie het ek gefokus op Kanaänitiese tanatologiese mitologie waar die pastorale metafore en mitologiese geografie interessante ooreenkomste met Psalm 23 vertoon. As keuse van intertekstuele materiaal het ek o.a. die Ugaritiese CTA 4-6 en 20-22 geïdentifiseer.

tanatologie

In hoofstuk 2 is op die problematiese aard van OT interpretasie gefokus. Ek het probeer aantoon hoe relativisties die eksegetiese proses in die praktyk is. Aspekte waarop gefokus is, was misverstand, tuismaking, en dubbelsinnigheid in eksegeses. Ek het ook enkele hindernisse in die interpretasie van OT tekste en meer spesifiek Psalm 23 uitgewys.

In hoofstuk 3 word 'n kort oorsig verskaf aangaande die politeïstiese en hoofsaaklik Kanaänitiese aard van die godsdiens van Israel voor die ballingskap. Hiermee saam het ek etlike Kanaänitiese mitologiese elemente in die OT geïdentifiseer ten einde 'n Kanaänitiese perspektief op Psalm 23 tentatief as moontlikheid te legitimeer as sou dit in Jahwisme se pre-eksiliese godstienstig-kulturele milieu ontstaan het.

In hoofstuk 4 is 'n kommentaar op die psalm verskaf wat hoofsaaklik gefokus het op die identifisering van moonlike parallale in KTM om aan te toon hoe laasgenoemde die beelde in die psalm 'n totaal ander betekenis moontlikheid besorg as wat populêre en tradisionele lees van die psalm veronderstel.

In hoofstuk 5 word 'n sintese van die navorsingsresultate gebied deur Psalm 23 vanuit die perspektiewe van die narratiewe-, histories - kritiese en vergelykende mitologie te lees.

In dit alles het ek ook herhaaldelik probeer beklemtoon dat my interpretasie nie gesien hoef te word as 'n poging om tradisionele interpretasie te vervang nie, maar eerder om dit te supplementeer met 'n interessante alternatiewe perspektief wat volgens my ook op legitimiteit kan aanspraak maak. Ek het uitdruklik daarop gewys dat my interpretasie uiteindelik tentatief,

relatief en spekulatief is, soos (na my mening) alle interpretasie van alle ou tekste noodwendig sal wees. Ek hoop dat hierdie studie stof tot nadenke aan ander interpreteerders sal verskaf, of hulle ten minste tydelik amuseer.

SLEUTELWOORDE

Psalm 23

Kanaanitiese mitologie

thanatologie

mitologiese geografie

postmoderne hermeneutiek

historiese kritiek

aangename hiernamaals

Bybelse mitologie

koninklike onsterflikheid

historiese Israel

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