

ON THE MEANING OF *ṢALMĀWET* A DISCUSSED WORD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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1. The word *ṣalmāwet* attested in the Old Testament has troubled scholars over the years¹. In JSS 7, 1962, D. Winton Thomas² offered a comprehensive study of this puzzling term, discussing all its occurrences in the Old Testament and presenting its different renderings in the course of history, as from the LXX.

This word is generally regarded as a compound noun whose first member is *ṣel*, «shadow», and the second one is *mawet*, «death», being as an alternative the hypothesis that *ṣalmāwet* has arisen through folk-etymology from a form *ṣalmūt* «darkness» (Semitic root ZLM = to be dark).

Scholar's interpretation is the following: «Whichever be the correct explanation (...) the meaning is the same "deepest shadow, thick darkness"»³. Thomas, indeed, argues against the traditional rendering of the term in question on the basis of the context of every passage in the Old Testament in which it is attested. For Thomas the traditional vocalization *ṣalmāwet* is correct but not its traditional meaning considering «the superlative force which attaches to מוֹת 'die' and מוֹתוֹת 'death' in Hebrew»⁴. Therefore the writer suggests that: «“(a) shadow of death” means accordingly “(a) very deep shadow, thick darkness”»⁵.

2. In the present paper my purpose is, on the one hand, to offer further support to Thomas' view, the very meaning of *ṣalmāwet* would be darkness, on the other, to question his view concerning the supposed superlative use of *mawet*.

Indeed, I would argue that the term *ṣalmāwet* is cognate with the Semitic root ZLM (= to be dark) and that it should be read *ṣalmūt* as an abstract noun with the ending -ūt (frequently found in Hebrew).

My arguments are as follows:

– I agree with Thomas when he argues that all the contexts, in which this term occurs, evoke a situation of obscurity and darkness rather than something like the «shadow of death».

– The supposed etymology «shadow of death» does not take into consideration the peculiar perception of the shadow which was widespread in the Near East. In the

¹ W.L. Michel, *ṢLMWT, «Deep Darkness» or «Shadow of Death»?*, BS 29, 1984, 5-13. The author reviews the whole scientific discussion on the issue; his personal opinion follows the Masoretic tradition whereby *ṣalmāwet* would be a compound noun meaning «shadow of death».

² D.W. Thomas, מוֹתוֹת in the Old Testament, JSS 7, 1962, 191-200.

³ D.W. Thomas, *op. cit.*, 200.

⁴ D.W. Thomas, *op. cit.*, 196.

⁵ D.W. Thomas, *op. cit.*, 197.

previous study dealing with this matter, I have focused on the «positive» imagery of the shadow concept both on a cultural and lexical level. On the basis of Syrian, Mesopotamian and Arabic sources it is possible to point out that shadow was a special metaphor connected with the *welfare*. Therefore it would be unsuitable to maintain that the term for shadow, *šel*, might have been used within such an expression as «shadow of death» (besides the word meaning *death*!).

– One of the major arguments against the *šalmūt* hypothesis⁶ is that one argued by D.J.A. Clines⁷ in the following manner: «Apart from these dubious instances (mentioned by the writer in the previous pages) in Hebrew and Ugaritic the root *šlm* II (the writer calls in this way the Semitic root *ṢLM* = to be dark) does not appear elsewhere in Northwest Semitic; it is noteworthy that by contrast in those languages in which it does appear, it is used frequently. It seems probable, therefore, that we should not suppose the existence of *šlm* II «to be dark» in Hebrew ... »⁸.

But the question of the existence of this root in Northwest Semitic, is, in my opinion, the core of this issue and needs further examination, especially in the light of an Ugaritic tablet discovered recently⁹.

3. The tablet KTU 1.169 was found in 1978 by the French Mission in the site of Ras Ibn Hani. The text of this tablet was published by P. Bordreuil and A. Caquot in *Syria* 57, 1980¹⁰. The tablet in question, preserving only its upper part (16 lines perfectly legible)¹¹, might be either a section of a mythological text, as supposed by the editors of the text, or simply an incantation against some evil spirits.

In line 7, by which seems to begin a new passage of the text¹², it is possible to read as follows:

- (7) (...) *bmrmt*
- (8) *bmiyt . bṣlm . bqdš . aḫm*
- (9) *kšpm . dbbm . ygrš . ḫrn*
- (10) *ḫbrm . wḡlm . d'ṭm . lk*

P. Bordreuil and A. Caquot have proposed such a provisory rendering of this passage:

⁶ Which is supported for instance by I.H. Eybers, *The Root Ṣ- L in Hebrew Words*, JNSL 2, 1972, 23-36.

⁷ D.J.A. Clines, *The Etymology of Hebrew šelem*, JNSL 3, 1974, 19-25.

⁸ D.J.A. Clines, *op. cit.*, 24-25.

⁹ W.L. Michel, *op. cit.*, 11, takes into consideration Ugaritic evidences as well, but his conclusions are as follows: «Ugaritic studies have not, as yet, been very helpful in the controversy about the etymology and the meaning of *šlmwt*, except to lend support to the traditional interpretation (...) the etymology and the meaning of *ṣlmt* / *ḡlmt* is unclear».

¹⁰ P. Bordreuil - A. Caquot, *Les textes en cunéiformes alphabétiques découvertes en 1978 à IBN HANI, Syria* 57, 1980, 346-50.

¹¹ A good photograph is published by the writers in their article, 368, fig. 3.

¹² As suggested by the writers (P. Bordreuil - A. Caquot, *op. cit.*, 348): «Il est probable qu'une nouvelle phrase commence avec les quatre mots successivement introduits par la préposition b-».

« (...) sur les hauteurs, (8) dans les (plaines) arrosées, dans l'obscurité, dans le sanctuaire, ici-même (9) les sorciers font des incantations. Horon chassera (10) ces compagnons, le jeune homme (chassera ces) associés en ta faveur»¹³.

On reading this passage it is interesting to draw attention to the expression *bšlm* in line 8. This is the commentary of the authors: «le nom *šlm* est nouveau, mais s'explique aisément par l'arabe *šalima* "être obscur"»¹⁴. On the basis of the context I think that the writers are right in connecting the term *šlm*, emerging from this text, with the Semitic root meaning «obscurity»¹⁵.

Although the tablet KTU 1.169 needs further investigation, with many details difficult to explain or, indeed, incomprehensible, the presence of the term *šlm* provides, in my opinion, a strong argument against Clines' assumption mentioned above.

4. Since we have discussed this Ugaritic source, I believe it would be useful to remain in this domain, taking into consideration another Ugaritic text.

This text belongs to the main Ugaritic mythological poems and, because of the presence of the word *šlmt*, was examined by Clines in this manner:

«The sole case in Ugaritic where a derivative from *šlm* II has been proposed is Baal Frag. II 8, where *šlmt* is parallel to *šlmt*. Driver suggested that *šlmt* was a variant of *šlmt* and on the basis of the root *šlm* II translated both words as "gloomy darkness" and "dark gloom". However, in the parallel passage, Baal II VII 55, *šlmt* is written instead of *šlmt* as the word in parallelism with *šlmt*. Thus if, instead of regarding *šlmt* (wrong spelling in the original for *šlmt*) and *šlmt* as variants of *šlmt* (a word otherwise unattested in Ugaritic), we regard *šlmt* and *šlmt* as variants of *šlmt*, we may easily understand them as alternative spellings or pronunciations of the common word *šlmt* "lass, mid-servant", or perhaps as the personal name (Šalmat) of the goddess-mother of the messenger(s) of the gods, Gupn-and-Ugar»¹⁶.

Before trying to consider whether such an argument is reasonable¹⁷, one has to notice that the word *šlmt* in Baal Frag. II (= KTU 1.8:8), taken into account by Clines as «the sole case in Ugaritic» of a supposed attestation of the root «*šlm* II» (that is from *šlm*) does not, in fact, exist!

¹³ P. Bordreuil - A. Caquot, *op. cit.*, 350.

¹⁴ P. Bordreuil - A. Caquot, *op. cit.*, 348.

¹⁵ In this connection it is to be mentioned D. Fleming's interpretation «in the darkness» within a new edition of this tablet, *The Voice of the Ugaritic Incantation Priest (RIH 78/20)*, UF 23, 1991, 151; the author recalls occasionally the possible parallelism with the biblical word *šalmāwet*.

¹⁶ D.J.A. Clines, *op. cit.*, 24.

¹⁷ G. Garbini, *Il semitico di nordovest*, Napoli 1960, 29-30; M. Dietrich - O. Loretz, *Neue Studien zu den Ritualtexten aus Ugarit (II)*, UF 15, 1983, 18; *Ugaritisch šlm und šlm*, UF 19, 1987, 407. More in particular M. Dietrich - O. Loretz, *Der ugaritische Konsonant š*, WO 4, 1967-68, 308.

Indeed, the passage of the tablet KTU 1.8 mentioned by Clines is the exact repetition of that contained in Baal VII 55 (= KTU 1.4.VII:55), and in either case the term parallel to *ḡlmt* is always *złmt* (and never *šłmt*)¹⁸:

KTU 1.8:5-11

- (5) (...) .lḡlmh
 (6) bʿl . yšḥ . ʿn . ḡpn .
 (7) wuḡr . bn . ḡlmt
 (8) ʿmm . ym . bn . złm[t]
 (9) rmt . prʿt . ibr [. mnt]

KTU 1.4.VII:52-56

- (52) (...) . lḡ
 (53) [l]mh . bʿl . kyšḥ . ʿn
 (54) [ḡpn] . wuḡr . b<n> ḡlmt
 (55) [ʿmm .] ym . bn . złmt . r
 (56) [mt . prʿ]t [.] ibr mnt

Given the textual evidence regarding the presence of the term *złmt* in these passages, I would simply suggest considering *złmt* and *ḡlmt* as terms issued from different roots and hinting at the peculiar concept of the «obscurity». On the one hand *złmt* would be cognate with the well-known Semitic root ZLM meaning «darkness, obscurity», on the other *ḡlmt* might be connected with the root ʿālam widely attested in the Old Testament. Indeed the root ʿālam indicates the image of something «covering, hiding» which seems to be very close to the idea of obscurity¹⁹.

It is not my intention in this article to enter into details of a text (KTU 1.4.VII:52-56 = KTU 1.8:5-11) which has been the topic of much argument and which still remains very doubtful in its interpretation. I would only like to draw attention to the reasonableness of the parallelism of the pair *bn złmt / bn ḡlmt* in the light of a more general view of the context: the god Baʿl is sending his messenger *Gpn wUgr* to his enemy Mot, the sovereign of the underworld, and is giving all the geographical directions regarding the journey to Mot's residence. The expression in the beginning of Baʿl's speech as such:

- (7) (...) . bn . ḡlmt
 (8) ʿmm . ym .
 bn . złmt
 (9) rmt . prʿt . (...)

may function as general introduction to a broader description of the dark and gloomy world ruled by the god Mot:

¹⁸ I cite here the most recent edition of the Ugaritic Texts: KTU².

¹⁹ As regards the Ugaritic passage and the phonetic question (*ḡ / z*), it seems to me noteworthy to mention Segert's hypothesis (in *The Ugaritic Voiced Postvelar in Correspondence to the Emphatic Interdental*, UF 20, 1988, 296-97): «The form with the innovative appears as A-word, the form with the archaic as B-word in this parallelistic pair. Since the A-word is in principle more common, *ḡlmt* can be considered the usual form, while the B-word *złmt* is a less common word, a poetic archaism.». The same idea by E. Verreet, *Der Keret-Prolog*, UF 19, 1987, 330-31. On the basis of these observations, the Ugaritic opposition *złmt / ḡlmt* might reflect a situation parallel to what seems to be attested in the Old Testament. On the meaning of ʿālam in Hebrew see also M.J. Dahood, *Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qohelet*, *Biblica* 33, 1952, 206.

