

MY PSALM, MY CONTEXT

TEXTS@CONTEXTS

**Edited by
Athalya Brenner-Idan and Gale A. Yee**

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PSALM 49
TWO UNSOLVED RIDDLES AND ONE NEW PROVERB

Klaas Spronk

Forty years ago I started working on my dissertation. Following the advice of my promotor, Johannes de Moor, I abandoned my own vague ideas of studying something about animals or something about sexuality in the Old Testament and chose as my topic the rise of positive ideas about life after death in ancient Israel. That was a hotly debated subject in that period, due among other things to the assertion by Mitchell Dahood in his Anchor Bible commentary on the book of Psalms (1970) that many psalms and also proverbs express the belief in resurrection of the dead and of immortal heavenly afterlife. Dahood's ideas in this matter fitted well to the Christian belief in life after death, but went against the common scholarly views. Dahood based his ideas on the comparison with ancient Ugaritic texts. De Moor had criticized Dahood's methodology in a number of review articles, calling it 'pan-Ugaritism' (de Moor and van der Lugt 1974). Nevertheless, according to my Doktorvater, a comparison with the Ugaritic conceptions of the afterlife, especially concerning the cult of the dead, would help me get a better view on related – be it clearly related, but clearly distinguished – expectations in ancient Israel with regard to the afterlife (de Moor and van der Meer 1988).

When dealing with the Psalms, I had to position myself in my dissertation also in another much-discussed field of research, namely the study of poetic structures. Here, de Moor had developed some firm convictions. With a number of colleagues he had established the 'Kampen school' (named after the location of our university), propagating in many publications a method based on the idea that poetry and poetic prose in the Hebrew Bible was built up of strophes in well-balanced bigger structures. So, it was obvious that I would start my discussion of the relevant psalms for my research of ancient Israelite ideas about life and death with a formal analysis according to the 'Kampen' rules.

Although I did not mention this in my dissertation (Spronk 1986: 327–34), here some first doubts about the concepts handed to me by my supervisor crept in. It started with the structural analysis of Psalm 49. With every new attempt to find a regular structure I ended with different results. This should have come as

no surprise, because an overview of recent research on the structure of the psalm shows that consensus in this matter is not in sight. When I returned thirty years later to Psalm 49 in my contribution to the Festschrift for Oswald Loretz, I added to the increasing number of proposed structures no fewer than two possible new reconstructions (Spronk 2016).

Then why is this psalm among my favourites? It is, because I managed to solve its riddle – not the riddle of its structure, but the riddle that is explicitly mentioned in the poem itself. Looking for the former I found the latter or – to be more precise – the proverb solving the riddle. This started with my focus on the repetition of words. This is an important element for the analysis of the structure, because it yields hard formal evidence of the way the poet may have related different parts of the poem to each other. Among the many repetitions in Psalm 49 was the one based on the Hebrew root מַשַּׁל, connecting vv. 5, 13 and 21. Verse 5 is part of the rather bombastic announcement of the riddle in vv. 2-5 as something all people should know and as something wise. It speaks in v. 5 of a riddle which shall be solved in a proverb:

I will incline my ear to a proverb;
I will solve my riddle with the lyre.¹

The riddle is indicated by the question in the following verse, ‘Why do I have to be afraid in the days of evil?’, and is further described as the fact that everyone has to die and that death makes no distinction between rich and poor. The emphasis is on the fact that you cannot buy your way out. Death also stops the boasting of the rich. So it can be concluded in v. 13:

Yea, a man with wealth does not abide;
he is like the beasts that are destroyed.

This does not look like a convincing solution to the riddle. It is just another description of the problem. Nevertheless, it seems to point to the proverb announced in the introduction. In Hebrew the verb נִמְשַׁל (*nimshal*), which is translated here as ‘he is like’, is closely related to the noun מַשַּׁל (*mashal*), which stands in parallelism to ‘riddle’ in v. 5 and is translated as ‘proverb’. The fact that the riddle is not solved yet is also indicated by the fact that in vv. 14-21 another description of inescapable death follows, which leaves no hope for the rich, contrary to those who trust in God. The concluding v. 21 repeats v. 13, but with a slight difference:

A man with wealth, but who does not understand,
is like the beasts that are destroyed.

1. Translation mine.

The difference concerns the verb at the end of the first line: *בין* (*bin*, *Hiphil*), ‘to understand’, instead of *לין* (*lin*, *Qal*), ‘to abide’. Also another negative particle is used: *לא*, *lo’*, instead of *בל*, *bal*. Taken together one notices that in both cases the same letters are used, but that the order has changed: from *בל ילין* (*bal-yalin*) to *לא יבין* (*lo yabin*). With Hermann Gunkel, the godfather of modern scholarly Psalms studies, it is often suggested that the text should be corrected and that we should also read *yabin*, ‘he understands’, in v. 13 (Gunkel 1929: 212). Others assume that it should be the other way around, and correct v. 21 on the basis of v. 13. This is found, for instance, in the NRSV, which reads in both verses (in the NRSV vv. 12 and 20) ‘Mortals cannot abide in their pomp’. It is far more attractive, however, to trust the accuracy of the transmission of the Hebrew text and assume a deliberate wordplay. One can go even a step further – this was my *aha!* moment: the wordplay contains the announced proverb as the solution to the riddle. The riddle is that there seems to be no difference between humans and beasts. The solution is that what does make a difference between humans and beasts is whether or not one has understanding. Put next to each other the related lines form a nice proverb:

אם לא יבין כי בל ילין
(*’im lo’ yabin ki bal yalin*),
‘If you do not have insight, surely you shall not stay’.

This can be compared to the famous saying in Isa. 7.9, with a wordplay with the Hebrew verb *אמן*, *aman*, first in the *Hiphil* (*ta’aminu*, ‘will believe’) and then in the *Nif.* (*te’amenu*, ‘be confirmed’):

אם לא תאמינו כי לא תאמנו
(*’im lo ta’aminu ki lo te’amenu*),
‘If you do not believe, surely you shall not be confirmed’.

In Psalm 49 the verb *בין*, *bin*, *Hiphil*, ‘to understand’, refers back to the word *תבונות*, *tebunot*, ‘insight’, used in the announcement in v. 4. What then is this insight? It is what is described after v. 13 and culminates in v. 16:

Truly, God will ransom my life;
He will surely take me from the hand of Sheol.

The poet underlined these words by introducing them with an exclamation (*אך*, ‘truly’), further emphasized by adding *selah* at the end of the line, possibly indicating that a later editor of the poem advises the reader to take some time to consider what is said here.

I have not solved the riddle of the regular structure of this psalm, at least not along the lines of my supervisor. It had put me on track, however, to better understand the literary style of the poet. The same goes for the other riddle I was facing: why does the Hebrew Bible contain hardly any indication of hope for the afterlife? I realized that I may have posed – again – the wrong question. Just as I had been looking for a literary structure which was more in my head than in the text, so I

ran the risk of finding a conception of the afterlife which was more inspired by later Christian traditions than by ancient Israelite ideas on this matter. The fact is that whereas v. 16 touches upon this subject, the text continues with advice about coping with the boasting of rich people in this life. What was meant exactly in v. 16 when it is said that God ‘will ransom my life’ remains a riddle. Perhaps it is better to leave it this way. History shows that as soon as people start speculating about it, they tend to try manipulating it and, in this way, take the role of God. There are many examples of how this can go terribly wrong.

In my dissertation I emphasized the reluctance of the Hebrew Bible with regard to everything related to the afterlife. Apparently, I was not clear enough, as can be divulged from the fact that, in a recent survey of scholarly research on this issue, I am mentioned next to Mitchell Dahood as someone assuming ancient Israelite belief in a blissful afterlife (Wyatt 2021: 155–56). For me this is a case of *bien étonné de se trouver ensemble*.

Be that as it may, as I see it now, in the end the two riddles remain: one about the structure of the psalms, and the other about the afterlife. I am comforted, however, with the find of an unexpected proverb.

My second choice would have been Psalm 73. More explicitly than Psalm 49, it discusses the problem of bad things happening to good people; but, from a literary point of view, it is less exciting.

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