

## The Witch in Psalm 59: An Afro-centric Interpretation

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In the traditional western interpretation it has been argued that the enemy in the individual lament of Psalm 59 is no more than an unbeliever and a traitor. However, an afro-centric interpretation of the Psalm reveals that this adversary shares various traits with the contemporary African witch. The Psalm contains magical formulas and a counter-curse that is comparable to traditional African ways of dealing with the problem of witchcraft. It is argued that this content makes the Psalm an ideal protective text that can be added to the list of Psalms already used by African churches for protection against magical assaults.*

### **A INTRODUCTION**

In the traditional western view, witchcraft is a baseless, pagan superstition associated with so-called 'primitive peoples' that will disappear with the spread of western civilization, education and Christianity (Niehaus 2001b:186). Despite attempts to condition Africans by means of education and law, such as the Suppression of Witchcraft Act No. 3 of 1957, Niehaus (2001b:184-205) has found that witchcraft remains a reality in post-colonial South Africa. Poverty, violence, and the general hardship of life in Africa provide ample evidence of evil powers at work (cf. Ashforth 2001:206-225). Similarly, the ancient Israelites attributed almost all misfortunes in the society to witchcraft (Mowinckel 1919:5-12). Despite the abundance of evidence testifying to this fact, traditional Old Testament scholarship affirms that the ancient Israelites and the Hebrew Bible were less 'infected' with this primitive fallacy (cf. Blau 1898:23; Guillaume 1938:59-60; Burden 1973:109; Van Rooy 1973:136-138; Bakon 1987:234-235; Schmidt 2004:62).

As a result of this misconception, many Old Testament texts are misinterpreted, especially in the Book of Psalms. Psalm 59, for example, vividly describes the nature and deadly attacks of the witch (cf. Mowinckel 1919:67-73). It also contains magical formulas and counter imprecations designed to protect the psalmist against these attacks (cf. Nicolsky 1927:59-67; Doyle 2005:50-53). However, in the traditional western interpretation, the text

has been reduced to a personal lament in which the psalmist complains about the lies, betrayal, murderous intent, and false accusations of his adversaries (cf. Ridderbos 1939:252; Ridderbos 1958:132; Kraus 1961:581; Becker 1967:59; Delekat 1967:158; Beyerlin 1970:27; Beaucamp 1976:248; Lamparter 1977:290; Goulder 1990:131-132; Rozenberg & Zlotowitz 1999:358; Limburg 2000:196; Clifford 2002:278; Terrien 2003:444; Riede 2005:25; Zenger 2005:86).

The sterility of the western approach to the study of witchcraft in the Hebrew Bible needs to be countered. One of the ways to do this is to adopt an afro-centric approach to Old Testament studies. Such an approach requires that the text be analyzed and interpreted from the perspective of African worldviews and cultures (Adamo 1999:67-68). It entails the rereading of ancient Hebrew texts from a premeditatedly afro-centric point of view. In doing so, we will be able not only to understand the Old Testament text better, but also to end the deprecation of ancient Near Eastern beliefs and break the hermeneutic hegemony and ideological stranglehold of European biblical scholarship.

In this article, I will make use of the comparative approach, which is the flagship methodology of African cultural hermeneutics (cf. West 2005:51-52), to demonstrate the similarities between the witch in ancient Israel and its equivalent in African culture.<sup>1</sup> This technique simply involves the interpretation of Old Testament motifs in terms of real or supposed African parallels (Dapila 1998:215-221; West 2005:51). The goal is not to impose African practice on that of ancient Israel, but to take advantage of existing beliefs and practices in exploring those of ancient Israel (Dapila 1998:216). The African perspective has the potential to make Israelite culture understandable by shining the light of the known on the unknown.

## **B THE WITCH IN ANCIENT ISRAEL AND IN AFRICA**

When it comes to the study of the Psalms, the western preoccupation with authorship and dates, editorial history, literary forms and structures, and others are of little interest to the ordinary African (Adamo 1999:89). He/she is more interested in the content of the text and its possible use. In the process of reading the Hebrew Bible with his/her own eyes, the African discovers great affinities with his/her own worldview and culture, especially as they relate to painful experiences (Adamo 1999:67). The similarities between the witch of the times of ancient Israel and the witch in African culture today serve as a good example in this regard.

In the ancient Near East dark forces were commonly associated with the air (cf. Keel 1972:71). It is therefore not surprising that the enemies of the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the Zulu *nyanga*, Sotho *baloi*, Yoruba *ota*, etc.

psalmist ‘rise up’ (קום) against him (v. 2) and gather ‘over’ (על) him (v. 4) at night in an attempt to capture his soul (v. 4). Similarly, to the African, a witch is anyone with the ability to leave his/her body at night and attend meetings in the air with people having similar qualities (Dapila 1998:222). Their goal is usually to prey on human souls. Their activities take place in spiritual form and their victims are captured spiritually. It is believed that once an individual’s soul is ‘arrested’ by a witch or group of witches through sympathetic magic, pain can be inflicted on the body of the bewitched.

The secret knowledge and power of the witch in ancient Israel allowed them to rob innocent victims of their lives, wealth and health (Mowinckel 1919:8-12). It is against the background of this belief that the epithets *powerful practitioners* (פעלי און) and *mighty men* (עזים) should be understood. In ancient Israel, the witch was also conceptualized as a murderer, as is evidenced by the appellation, *men of blood* (אנשי דמים) in verse three. The powers of the African witch to do harm are also limitless (cf. Ashforth 2001:207). They can cause illness, death, psychological disorders, loss of property and employment, car accidents, divorce, family discord, etcetera (cf. Adamo 1999:71). According to Ashforth (2001:207), the feature that distinguishes witchcraft in Africa from other legitimate occult procedures designed to accumulate wealth and power, is the killing of others. The witches of the Yoruba people of Nigeria report that they drink human blood day or night (cf. Adamo 1999:71).

Another interesting parallel between witchcraft in the ancient Near East and Africa is the association with saliva. The witches in Psalm 59 are described as ‘foaming at the mouth’ (יביעון בפיהם, v. 8). Interestingly, this characteristic salivation at the mouth<sup>3</sup> was also ascribed to witches in Akkadian incantations (cf. Dapila 1998:228). In the same way, the *mulozi* of Zimbabwe uses *mate mabi* ‘bad spittle’ to effectuate ruin (Wendland 1992:215).

In verse 13 of the Psalm under investigation, the psalmist says that they utter curses (אלה) and spells (כחש) (cf. Mowinckel 1919:15-20). No doubt, it is because of these pain inflicting and dangerous utterances that the psalmist associates the witch’s lips with swords (חרב, v. 8). Such powerful words are also associated with the witch in Africa, which utter imprecations, or formulaic expressions, that they direct against particular individuals. In these, they often

<sup>2</sup> Mowinckel (1919:29-32) notes that the term, און, which commonly denotes supernatural power, is regularly used with reference to the witch in the Hebrew Bible. His interpretation of this word has been widely criticized. However, the fact that the epithet, פעלי און is sometimes applied to witches cannot be denied (cf. Schmidt 2004:117-118).

<sup>3</sup> According to Gruber (1980:540), this constitutes epileptic imagery. It is also commonly used to conceptualize the wrath of Yhwh in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Kotzé 2005).

cite the calamity that is to follow (Wendland 1998:215).

Interestingly, the enemies of the psalmist manifest in animal form (v. 7). Many European commentators have been bemused by the reference to dogs in this text and commonly interpret this figure as a metaphor for the nefarious nature of the psalmist's enemies (Ridderbos 1939:250-251; Ridderbos 1958:133; Beaucamp 1976:250; Lamparter 1977:290; Kraus 1978:582; Goulder 1990:134; Rozenberg & Zlotowitz 1999:357; Limburg 2000:196; Clifford 2002:279; Terrien 2003:444; Hossfeld & Zenger 2005:90; Riede 2005:35-36). Some have also pointed to the association between dogs and demons in ancient Mesopotamia (Mowinckel 1919:69; Nicholsky 1927:64; Schmidt 2004:191-192). The African, however, would rather view these dogs as witch familiars. It is well known that canines, such as hyenas and dogs are the most commonly cited animal associates of *balози* (Wendland 1992:219). According to Niehaus (2001a:49), the African belief that a witch can metamorphose into animal forms lies at the heart of the concept of witchcraft as a form of superhuman power. The fact that the witch is commonly associated with wild animals in the Psalms, such as a pack of wild dogs, lions and bulls,<sup>4</sup> suggests that the ancient Israelites shared this belief. This interpretation also seems to find support in the material culture of ancient Palestine. Of particular interest are the terracotta images of dogs dating from the iron period in Palestine, which had an apotropaic function (cf. Schmidt 2004:190-193). The Mesopotamian parallels of these images are sometimes accompanied by warning inscriptions in Akkadian, such as 'mauler of his enemy' (Schmidt 2004:192).

The foregoing parallels clearly suggest that the enemy in Psalm 59 should not be reduced to a traitor who speaks lies, as suggested by the majority of western interpreters. Rather, he is a master of the dark arts who uses various supernatural means to inflict grievous harm.

### C INCANTATION AND COUNTER-CURSE

The ancient Israelites had cultural ways of dealing with the problem of enemies long before the advent of Christianity (cf. Adamo 1999:72). Similarly, the means for dealing successfully with the witch has been developed in indigenous African culture (Adamo 1999:66). In the Yoruba culture of Nigeria, it has been a custom to use powerful imprecatory words, or incantations, called *ogede*, to protect the individual against the attacks of witches (cf. Adamo 1999:72). If a person does not have the potent words or medicine to deal with the witch, a medicine man (*babalawo* or *onisegun* or *oologun*) is consulted who prepares or teaches the person some potent words for attacking the enemy. In recent years, the African Independent Churches of Nigeria have started to rediscover the value of the Psalms for dealing with the problem of witches and

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Pss 22 and 57.

evil forces (cf. Adamo 1999:73-76). For example, Psalms 5, 6, 28, 35, 37, 54, 55, 83, and 109 have been classified as protective Psalms because of their imprecatory content (Adamo 1999:74).

Because of the magical formulas contained in Psalm 59, I would like to suggest that this Psalm could be added to this list. According to Nickolsky (1927:67), the incantation found in verse ten is the only element in the Psalm of uniquely Israelite origin. It is supposed to insure the intervention of God by eliminating the witch:

והשמדתי אתה מעל פני האדמה

My Strength, I wait for you, for God is my defence.

In verse 12, the psalmist entreats God to kill the witches that try to harm him (v. 12).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in the Ezon culture, incantations often contain magical words and phrases that say exactly what should happen to the enemies of the individual (Ifie 1983:100).

Doyle (2005:50-51) has demonstrated that the psalmist uses the metaphor of a pack of wild dogs hunting for prey in his counter imprecation (cf. Dahood 1968:69). Reliefs of wild dogs hunting from ancient Assyria, Syria-Palestine, and Egypt suggest that the ancient Israelites must have known that these animals usually single out their prey, chase it until it is exhausted, haul it to the ground, and start to eat while the animal is still alive (cf. Keel 1972:77). This image is evoked by verbs such as ניע 'to make wander, unsteady, scatter,' ירד 'to bring down, take down, make fall,' לכד 'to be trapped' – typically used for trapping or capturing animals, and כלה 'to finish off' (Doyle 2005:52). Because of its phonetic relation to the Hebrew word אכל 'to eat,' Doyle (2005:52) suggests that כלה should be read with the meaning 'to devour, eat alive.'

A similar counter curse can be found on a Hebrew plaster amulet found at the site of the small Assyrian town of Hadattu in upper Syria (cf. Torczyner 1947:18-29). The amulet dates from the seventh or eighth century B.C.E. and contains an incantation against the *Ephatot* (עפפת),<sup>6</sup> or dark spirits of the night, which are associated with strangling (חנק).<sup>7</sup> In the curse (אלה) against these *Ephatot*, three divine beings are being invoked: Ssm, son of Pdrsh (בן פדרש), the god Horon (חורן), and Sz (סז), one of the wives, represented as a dog or a she-wolf, devouring the slain spirits that are depicted in human form:

<sup>5</sup> אֵל should be changed to read אֱל: 'God, kill them' (cf. Nicolsky 1923:59).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Job 10:22; Am 4:13.

<sup>7</sup> In Am 2:13 this verb stands in parallel to טרף and is used of a lion choking or strangling its prey.



In my final translation of the Psalm, I've eliminated later additions to the text that obscure the nature of this Psalm as an incantation (cf. Nicolsky 1923). This includes the introduction, linking the Psalm with some historical event in the life of David (v. 1), the altered repetition of the reference to dogs (v. 15) and the doxology at the end (vv. 16-18):

2. Defend me against my enemies, my God; protect me against those who rise up against me.
3. Defend me against the workers of power, and rescue me from the men of blood.
4. For, look, they want to take my soul: the mighty men assemble over me despite the fact that I haven't transgressed or sinned, o Yhwh.
5. Although I have no evil, they rush to set themselves up. Awake to come and help me and cast your evil eye<sup>8</sup> on them.
6. You, Yhwh, God of hosts, the God of Israel, wake up to punish all the witches,<sup>9</sup> don't have pity on any master of the dark arts.
7. They return at night, bark like dogs and go round about the city.
8. Look, they foam at their mouth: swords are on their lips, for who hears?
9. But you, Yhwh, curse them, you utter imprecations against all the witches.<sup>10</sup>
10. My Strength, I wait for you, for God is my defence.
11. The reproof of my God will go before me: God will let me cast them with the evil eye.<sup>11</sup>
12. Kill them, God, lest the mighty men forget: scatter them with your power and bring them down, Adonai, my shield.
13. Because of the curses of their mouth and the destruction of their lips, trap them in their evil, for they utter curses and spells.
14. Consume them in violent anger, devour them completely.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kotzé (2008).

<sup>9</sup> Reading גאיים instead of גיים (cf. Mowinckel 1919:71).

<sup>10</sup> See note 11.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Kotzé (2007).

## D CONCLUSION

In conclusion it can be observed that the traditional western approach with its bias against witchcraft is of little value for reading Psalms 59 as a magical text. By contrast, the comparative approach of African cultural hermeneutics proves to be successful in elucidating various motifs with regard to the nature and identity of the witch in ancient Israel.

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