

A Comparison of the *Witchcraft is Poison* Metaphor in Soweto and Selected Old Testament Passages

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ABSTRACT

African Old Testament interpretation has been asserting itself against mainstream Euro-American biblical scholarship. In doing so, various tools have been crafted, mostly in accordance with the goal of addressing the life concerns of ordinary Africans. The preferred method for the majority of African OT scholars has been the comparative paradigm. This article introduces a cognitive methodology for the comparison of cultural elements and belief systems in contemporary Africa and the ancient Near East. Although the method can be used for the scrutiny of both socio-political and religio-cultural fundamentals, the approach is demonstrated with reference to African and ancient Israelite conceptions regarding witchcraft.

A INTRODUCTION

The comparative paradigm is the most pervasive methodology of African Old Testament interpretation.² African biblical scholarship has been characterised by its tendency to emphasise similarities in African and ancient Near Eastern worldviews and experience. It is further typified by its inclination to assert itself against colonialism and address the concerns and needs of people living on the African continent. The ubiquity of studies making use of this approach on the African continent has been ascribed to a lack of Euro-American scholarly resources.³ However, the functional value of the method in focusing attention on the life interests of the peoples of Africa probably serves as the key motivation for the utilisation of the paradigm. In his evaluation of shifting

¹ The author distances himself from the supposed distinction between shamanism and witchcraft (or *isangoma* vs. *baloyi*, so-called "black" vs. "white" magic, etc.). The term, "witchcraft," is retained, however, to imitate the cognitive variance that has been created for social and political purposes since the beginning of history, possibly even earlier; see Fabian Dapila, "The Socio-Religious Role of Witchcraft in the Old Testament Culture: An African Insight," *OTE* 11/2 (1998): 215-239 and Nevill Drury, *Magic and Witchcraft: From Shamanism to the Technopagans* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 61ff.

² Cf. Gerald West, "Shifting Perspectives on the Comparative Paradigm in (South) African Biblical Scholarship," *R&T* 12/1 (2005): 51.

³ West, "Shifting Perspectives," 58.

perspectives on the comparative paradigm in African biblical scholarship, West⁴ focuses attention on the opportunity of South African OT scholarship to facilitate dialogue between the religio-cultural focus of biblical interpretation north of the Limpopo and the socio-political interests that dominate scholarly endeavours in South Africa. Holter⁵ has also observed that South African OT scholarship is ideally positioned to bridge the gap between traditional Euro-American learning and the products and methods of African biblical interpretation.

The cognitive theory of metaphor constitutes an ideal tool for the endeavour of African biblical scholarship. The fact that most of our conceptual world, including religio-cultural and socio-political abstractions, is constituted by metaphorical projections has been rediscovered in recent years.⁶ Although the theory of conceptual metaphor has been successfully utilised to study ancient Israelite cognition,⁷ its potential value for African biblical scholarship has gone largely unnoticed. The method allows for an analysis of concepts as reflected in cultural elements, especially language. This study will endeavour to demonstrate how the method can be used to facilitate a meaningful comparison of cultural beliefs in contemporary Africa and ancient Israel. Following a brief overview of the comparative approach and an introduction to the theory and practice of the cognitive theory of metaphor, the method will be utilised to point to similarities and differences in the South African and ancient Israelite conceptualisation of witchcraft in terms of poison.

⁴ West, "Shifting Perspectives," 48.

⁵ Knut Holter, "It's Not a Question of Money! African Old Testament Scholarship Between the Myths and Meanings of the South and the Money and Methods of the North," *OTE* 11/2 (1998): 250.

⁶ Cf. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); René Dirven, *Metaphor and Nation: Metaphors Afrikaners Live By* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 1994).

⁷ Cf. Alec Basson, "'You are my Rock and Fortress.' Refuge Metaphors in Psalm 31: a Perspective from Cognitive Metaphor Theory." *AcT* 25/2 (2009): 1-17; Zacharias Kotzé, "Linguistic Relativity and the Interpretation of Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible: The Case of לֵטַשׁ עַן in Job 16:9," *OTE* 20/2 (2007): 387-394; Zacharias Kotzé, "A Cognitive Interpretation of the Combination עֵצָה עִיַם in Proverbs 16:30," *JSem* 16/2 (2007): 471-482; Zacharias Kotzé, "קֶרֶן עַיִן as Conceptual Metaphor for the Evil Eye in Ps 35:19," in *Metaphors in the Psalms* (ed. Pierre van Hecke and Antje Labahn, Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 137-141; Paul A. Kruger, "A Cognitive Interpretation of the Emotion of Anger in the Hebrew Bible," *JNSL* 26/1 (2000): 181-193; Phillip J. Nel, "I am a Worm.' Metaphor in Psalm 22," *JSem* 14/1 (2005): 40-54; Phillip J. Nel, "Animal Imagery in Psalm 22," *JNSL* 31/1 (2005): 75-88; Hans Rechenmacher, "Kognitive Linguistik und althebräische Lexikographie," *JNSL* 30/2 (2004): 43-59.

B THE COMPARATIVE PARADIGM IN AFRICAN OLD TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION

Several tools have been developed in accordance with various goals of African OT interpretation.⁸ In order to counter negative views of Africa and Africans in traditional American and European OT scholarship,⁹ the "Africa and Africans in the Bible" approach investigates African presence in the OT¹⁰ while pointing to African contributions to the religious, economic, social, military and political heritage of the ancient Near East.¹¹ The "Bible as Power" approach presumably attempts to fill the void created by the Western polemic against paganism in African culture.¹² Instead of making use of traditional African ways of protecting the self against illness, misfortune and death, the Bible is used in various ways to effect good fortune, health, and wealth.¹³ In some instances, various methodologies of African OT Interpretation are combined in the reading process. In his appropriation of "African Cultural Hermeneutics," for example, Adamo makes use of the "Bible as Power" and "Reading with the Ordinary Reader" approaches.¹⁴ Analysis of the OT text is done from the perspective of African worldviews and cultures. Rather than making use of traditional tools of European and Western scholarship, interpretation of the biblical text is done from a premeditatedly African perspective. In accordance with the tradition of African biblical interpretation, the focus is on life interests of African Christians rather than a pseudo-objective interpretation of the biblical text. West¹⁵ has observed that such a hermeneutic of trust is more characteristic of African

⁸ For a detailed overview, see David T. Adamo, "Historical Development of Old Testament Interpretation in Africa," in *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective* (ed. David T. Adamo, Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2006), 7-30.

⁹ Cf. Knut Holter, "'A Negro, Naturally a Slave': An Aspect of the Portrayal of Africans in Colonial Old Testament Interpretation," *OTE* 21/2 (2008): 373-382.

¹⁰ Cf. David T. Adamo, *Africa and Africans in the Old Testament* (San Francisco: Christian University Press, 1998). For a critique of Adamo's work, see Knut Holter, "Should Old Testament Cush be Rendered 'Africa'?" in *Yahweh in Africa* (ed. Knut Holter, New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 107-114 and Marta Hóyland, "An African Presence in the Old Testament? David Tuesday Adamo's Interpretation of the Old Testament Cush Passages," *OTE* 11/1 (1998): 50-58.

¹¹ Cf. Adamo, *Historical Development*, 16.

¹² See, for example, Jasper J. Burden, "Magic and Divination in the Old Testament and their Relevance for the Church in Africa," *Missionalia* 1 (1973): 103-112; Shimon Bakon, "Witchcraft in the Bible," *Dor le Dor* 15/4 (1987): 234-243.

¹³ Cf. David T. Adamo, "African Cultural Hermeneutics," in *Vernacular Hermeneutics* (ed. Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 66-90, David T. Adamo, "Decolonizing the Psalter in Africa," *Black Theology Int J* 5/1 (2007): 20-38, David T. Adamo, "Reading Psalm 109 in African Christianity," *OTE* 21/3 (2008): 575-592.

¹⁴ Adamo, "African Cultural Hermeneutics," 66-68.

¹⁵ West, "Shifting Perspectives," 48.

scholarship north of the Limpopo. However ordinary Christians in the South also commonly use it as a magical object for protection and good fortune.¹⁶

The "Comparative Approach" is the most enveloping approach in African biblical interpretation. It facilitates the interpretation of biblical texts and motifs in terms of supposed or real African parallels. Traditional Euro-American methods are subordinated to the goal of illuminating the similarities between African and ancient Near Eastern cultures. Various common themes have been investigated, such as concepts and names of God, proverbial wisdom, the concept of peace, traditions of circumcision, the role of ancestors, etcetera.¹⁷ Although it is sometimes suggested that the comparative paradigm was developed to counteract the Western notion that African Traditional Religion were pagan, West¹⁸ notes that this mode of interpretation is much older than colonialism. He points to a time where Africans were in control and free to decide whether to reject the Bible or use it selectively to complement their traditional African religious practices. Indeed, despite subsequent colonial pressures and subjugation, Africans have always been pragmatic and selective in their use of the Bible, carefully using it to assist them in their life struggles. West¹⁹ suggests that we continue letting our African life interests determine how we draw on Western biblical scholarship. Further, in view of the increasing lack of scholarly and financial resources, especially north of the Limpopo, African biblical scholarship's way forward seems to be a focus on its neo-indigenous legacy and a partnership with non-scholarly readers who assert their control over the interpretive process.

¹⁶ Cf. Gerald West, "The Bible in South African Black Theology: The Bible as *Bola* and Other Forms of African Biblical Interpretation," in *Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective* (ed. David T. Adamo, Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2006), 31-60.

¹⁷ For a more detailed discussion and bibliographical references, see Adamo, *Historical Development*, 18; Knut Holter, *Old Testament Research for Africa: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography of African Old Testament Dissertations, 1967-2000* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002). Also see Ernest A. McFall, *Approaching the Nuer of Africa through the Old Testament* (Pasadena: William Carey, 1970); Jacobus A. van Rooy, "God's Self-Revelation in the Old Testament and African Concepts of God," *Skriflig* 28 (1994): 261-274; Dapila, "The Socio-Religious Role of Witchcraft"; Madipoane J. Masenya, "Wisdom and Wisdom Converge: Selected Old Testament and Northern Sotho Proverbs," in *Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa* (ed. Mary Getui, Knut Holter and Victor Zinkurature, BTA 2, New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 133-146; Edwin Zulu, "An Ngoni Assessment of the Role of Ancestors within Israelite World Views and Religion in Genesis 11:28-50:26," (DTh thesis, University of Stellenbosch), 1999.

¹⁸ West, "Shifting Perspectives," 52.

¹⁹ West, "Shifting Perspectives," 61.

This study has as its goal the presentation of a method of doing comparative research from a cognitive perspective. In recent years the cognitive linguistic theory of metaphor has been successfully utilised in the investigation of ancient Israelite beliefs and practices. Having first been developed for the study of concepts as reflected in the language and symbols of modern cultures,²⁰ the method is equally well suited for research on African belief systems.²¹ Contemporary African biblical scholarship is characterised by the prominence it gives to African culture as dialogue partner in the interpretive process. The theory of conceptual metaphor presents a workable method that facilitates the comparison of cultural elements across the boundaries of time and space that separate Africa from the ancient Near East. Further, although the method focuses on phenomenology and interpretation, this does not preclude the potential value of cognitive research for addressing pressing concerns and life interests of the African context. OT scholarship has a responsibility to approach not only the Biblical text with suspicion, but also aspects of contemporary worldview and culture that perpetuates suffering and oppression.²² Before attempting to demonstrate the potential use of a cognitive approach to comparative African Cultural Hermeneutics, the theory and methodology of conceptual metaphor will first be outlined in more detail.

C THE COGNITIVE THEORY OF METAPHOR

The cognitive linguistic view of metaphor has challenged the traditional view of metaphor as a mere rhetorical device by demonstrating that it is an essential element of human thought.²³ Metaphor is not a mere figure of speech that we can do without. Rather, it is an indispensable cognitive tool that is effortlessly used in everyday language to form concepts. In this theory, a distinction is

²⁰ Cf. John R. Taylor and Thandi, G. Mbense, "Red Dogs and Rotten Mealies: How Zulus Talk about Anger," in *Speaking of Emotions: Conceptualisation and Expression* (ed. Angeliki Athanasiadou and Elżbieta Tabakowska, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter), 191-226.

²¹ Cf. Edward Slingerland, "Conceptual Metaphor Theory as Methodology for Comparative Religion," *JAAR* 72/1 (2004): 1-31.

²² Cf. Gerald West, "Biblical Scholars Inventing Ancient Israel and 'Ordinary Readers' of the Bible Re-Inventing Biblical Studies," *OTE* 11/3 (1998): 629-644; Gerald West, "The Historicity of Myth and the Myth of Historicity: Locating the Ordinary African 'Reader' of the Bible in the Debate," *Neot* 38/1 (2004): 127-144; Gerald West, "The Vocation of an African Biblical Scholar on the Margins of Biblical Scholarship," *OTE* 19/1 (2006): 307-336; Gerald West, "Doing Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation @home: Ten Years of (South) African Ambivalence," *Neot* 42/1 (2008): 147-164; Gerald West, "Unstructural Analysis of the Bible Reinforcing Unstructural Analysis of African Contexts in (South) Africa?," *OTE* 23/3 (2010): 861-888.

²³ Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), viii.

made between metaphorical linguistic expressions and conceptual metaphors. In the process of conceptual metaphor, one domain of experience, the source domain, is used to understand another domain of experience, the target domain. This process involves a set of correspondences between the source and target domain. These correspondences, also called mappings, provide much of the meaning of the metaphorical linguistic expressions that make the conceptual metaphor manifest. Source domains are usually concrete domains and typically include bodily experience, animals, food, light and darkness, heat and cold, and movement and direction, to name a few examples. These are used to conceptualize more abstract target domains, such as emotion, morality, religion, politics, events and actions, time, and life and death.²⁴ In order to distinguish conceptual metaphor from linguistic metaphor, conceptual metaphors are usually written with small capital letters.

In addition to being expressed linguistically, conceptual metaphors can also be realized in sculptures, buildings, myths, cultural symbols, and gestures.²⁵ Metaphor is present not only in the way we speak, but also in our nonlinguistic reality. It pervades much of our social, artistic, psychological, intellectual, and cultural lives. A clear understanding of the cultural and historical context in which a metaphor is utilised is of vital importance to its correct interpretation. Cognitive linguists and biblical scholars often assume universal experience as motivation for metaphors while their basis are sometimes to be found in culture-specific concepts and theories.²⁶ In order to avoid the common pitfalls of metaphorical interpretation, Kotzé²⁷ has developed a methodology for the interpretation of conceptual metaphor in the Old Testament. It is based on a step-by-step approach designed by Steen²⁸ to facilitate the process of metaphor interpretation. The method focuses on the identification of the vehicle of the concept, the image used to convey the concept, and the main meaning focus of the metaphor in question.

In the context of cognitive linguistics the vehicle of a conceptual metaphor is defined as the linguistic unit that carries the mental image that is

²⁴ Kövecses, *Metaphor*, 25.

²⁵ Kövecses, *Metaphor*, 57-66.

²⁶ Cf. Dirk Geeraerts and Stefan Grondelaers, "Looking Back at Anger: Cultural Traditions and Metaphorical Patterns," in *Language and the Cognitive Construal of the World* (ed. John R. Taylor and Robert E. MacLaury, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995), 153-180; Zacharias Kotzé, "Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things in the Hebrew Bible: Insights from the Cognitive Linguistic Theory of Metaphor," *OTE* 17/2 (2004): 242-251.

²⁷ Zacharias Kotzé, "A Cognitive Linguistic Methodology for the Study of Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible," *JNSL* 31/1 (2005): 107-117.

²⁸ Gerard J. Steen, "From Linguistic to Conceptual Metaphor in Five Steps," in *Metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics* (ed. Raymond W. Gibbs and Gerard J. Steen, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999), 57-77.

communicated.²⁹ This medium can be any unit of speech, such as phonological, lexical, and phrasal agents. Identifying the vehicle of conceptual metaphor is usually an uncomplicated first step in the process of metaphor interpretation. Establishing the image that is used to picture the target concept is often more challenging than anticipated since various experiential and cultural elements may be invoked as motivation for the use of a particular metaphor.³⁰ Geeraerts and Grondelaers,³¹ for example, challenged the traditional theory that bodily experience and physical symptoms motivated the formation of conceptual metaphors for anger in various Indo-European languages and cited Classical humoral theory as basis instead. Identifying the main meaning substance of a particular source domain also serves to assist cognitive linguists in establishing the conceptual content of figurative language. The source domain of fire, for example, although used to conceptualize various emotions in American English, always focuses on the aspect of emotional intensity.³² In the ensuing part, the metaphor WITCHCRAFT IS POISON will be analysed in the cultural contexts of Southern Africa and ancient Israel illustrating the use of this methodology in more detail. Having analysed the concept in both these cultural contexts, one will be able to establish with considerable clarity the cross-cultural similarities as well as cultural variations in the understanding of this particular concept.

D THE WITCHCRAFT IS POISON METAPHOR IN SOWETO AND ANCIENT ISRAEL

Mbiti³³ has observed that the most disturbing element in African life is probably the fear of bad magic, sorcery, and witchcraft. Belief in the function and dangers of evil forces is deeply rooted in African life, and despite modern education and Christianity such beliefs are difficult to eradicate. Commenting on the indigenous understanding of illness and HIV/AIDS in South Africa, Liddell et al³⁴ have noted that Africans commonly distinguish between proximate and ultimate causes of illness and misfortune in general. In African villages many things are constantly going wrong. Since people firmly believe that there are invisible, mystical forces and powers in the universe and that certain human beings have the ability to tap, control, and use these forces, it is commonly assumed that some human agent is to blame for adversity. Therefore, although infection or contagion through a pollutant may be accepted as the proximate

²⁹ Dirven, *Metaphor and Nation*, 12.

³⁰ Kotzé, "Cognitive Linguistic Methodology," 110-112.

³¹ Geeraerts & Grondelaers, "Looking Back at Anger."

³² Zoltán Kövecses, "The Scope of Metaphor," in *Metaphor and Metonymy at the Crossroads. A Cognitive Perspective*, (ed. Antonio Barcelona, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000), 84-86.

³³ Mbiti, John S., *Introduction to African Religion* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1991), 165.

³⁴ Christine Liddell, Louise Barrett and Moya Bydawell, "Indigenous Representations of Illness and AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Soc Sci Med* 60 (2005): 691-700.

cause of some illness, an African would usually also want to know why an illness was contracted and who caused it. The ultimate cause for sickness, accidents, and death are usually attributed to witchcraft.

Ashforth³⁵ has found that the form of witchcraft most commonly invoked in Soweto³⁶ as the cause of death where symptoms suggested AIDS,³⁷ was *isidliso*, or *idliso* in isiZulu,³⁸ which means "poison," or "poisoning."³⁹ This word for poison is clearly related to the isiZulu verb "to eat,"⁴⁰ which is not surprising, since the witch is commonly believed to send *isidliso* by means of *muthi*.⁴¹ Although associated with the notion of poison, however, *isidliso* cannot be limited to a Western understanding of toxicology. To distinguish it from other toxic substances, *isidliso* is also commonly known as "black poison."⁴² The concepts and imagery evoked by this term seem to be rich and varied, as a closer investigation will demonstrate.

As an illness thought to be caused by witchcraft, *isidliso* slowly consumes the victim while causing all manner of hardship and pain along the way, such as friendships fading, lovers leaving, and jobs disappearing. The term is used to refer to a variety of symptoms affecting the lungs, stomach, digestive tract, or that leads to a slow wasting illness. Although sometimes attributed to *muthi*, *isidliso* is directed against victims by means of intention rather than the chemistry associated with toxic substances. For example, it is believed that a witch can place *muthi* in food consumed in a dream. However, this is only one of the many techniques of the witch who can use incantations, words, rituals, and magic objects to inflict harm on a victim.⁴³ A witch may use nails, hair,

³⁵ Adam Ashforth, "An Epidemic of Witchcraft? The Implications of AIDS for the Post-Apartheid State," *African St* 61/1 (2002): 129.

³⁶ English syllabic abbreviation for *South Western Townships*, now incorporated in the City of Johannesburg.

³⁷ For a detailed discussion of the shared characteristics of AIDS and witchcraft, see Fiona Larkan, "Narratives and Silences in Discussions of AIDS/HIV amongst Young People in Mpumalanga, South Africa," *IJA* 7/1 (2004): 55-57.

³⁸ The Sotho equivalent is *sejeso*.

³⁹ In a more recent study, Caswell M. Matima, "Secondary Stigma: A Case Study of People Affected by HIV/AIDS in White City Jabavu – Soweto," (MA Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2010), 80, noted the following causes as cited by research participants in Soweto: poverty and unemployment, multiple concurrent sexual partnerships, alcohol and drug abuse, crime and gangsterism, dry sex, lack of good nutrition, wrath of the ancestors and God, and witchcraft, or *isidliso*, which is defined by locals as "black poison used by witches to kill someone very slowly and without hard evidence before the law."

⁴⁰ *Ukudlisa*

⁴¹ Mixtures of herbs and other magical substances.

⁴² Ashforth, "Epidemic of Witchcraft," 121.

⁴³ Mbiti, *Introduction*, 167.

clothes, or other possessions of an intended victim which he/she ritually burns, pricks, or wishes evil to in order to inflict harm. Alternatively, magic objects are buried on the path where a victim will pass. Another belief is that the spirits of witches leave at night to go and eat away at a victim thus causing weakness and eventually death. Alternatively, they change into animal form to go and feed on, or attack the victim. In the case of *idlliso*, for example, the poison is said to take the form of a small animal, such as a crab, or frog, in the gullet.⁴⁴ It may even take the form of a human being and devour the victim from the inside out. The effects are that the inflicted becomes thin, loses appetite, and coughs continually. From this can be concluded that the image of the WITCHCRAFT IS POISON metaphor, as conveyed by the vehicle *isidlliso*, seems to be an animal or entity consuming the victim from the inside. The main meaning focus is clearly that of the victim wasting away and losing strength.

The conceptualisation of witchcraft in the Old Testament has received scant attention in traditional Old Testament scholarship. The work of Mowinckel⁴⁵ early in the twentieth century has been met with much criticism.⁴⁶ Similarly, Nicolsky's⁴⁷ investigation of magical elements in the Psalms has gone largely unnoticed. More recent works on the topic, while admitting the possibility of a belief in magic and witchcraft in ancient Israel, usually emphasise the biblical prohibitions against such practice.⁴⁸ This approach echoes the repeated attempts of biblical authors and editors to rid the Old Testament of superstition.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, traces of the belief in witchcraft are still clearly discernable throughout the Old Testament. A careful investigation of conceptions of this belief as expressed in ancient Hebrew linguistic expressions yield interesting results. For the purposes of this study, special attention will be given to Pss 58 and 140.

⁴⁴ Ashforth, "An Epidemic," 130.

⁴⁵ Sigmund Mowinckel, *Buch I-II* (vol. 1 of *Psalmstudien*; Amsterdam: P. Schippers, 1919).

⁴⁶ Nicolaas H. Ridderbos, *De "Werkers van Ongerechtigheid" in de Individuele Psalmen: Een Beoordeling van Mowinckels Opvatting* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1939). See Vorländer, Hermann, *Mein Gott. Die Vorstellungen vom persönlichen Gott im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1975), 275, who argues with Mowinckel and Nicolsky that the enemy in the individual laments constitutes demons and witches and that all other interpretations depend on mere speculation.

⁴⁷ Nicolaj Nicolsky, *Spuren magischer Formeln in den Psalmen* (BZAW 46, Gießen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1927).

⁴⁸ Cf. Burden, "Magic and Divination," 112; Van Rooy, Jacobus, A., "Witches and Wizards in the Light of Scripture," *Missionalia* 1 (1973), 136-138; Bakon, "Witchcraft," 235; Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Magic in the Biblical World," *TynBul* 34 (1983): 199.

⁴⁹ Cf. Nili Wazana, "A Case of the Evil Eye: Qohelet 4:4-8," *JBL* 126/4 (2007): 689.

Recent studies on the enemy psalms have adopted a psychological interpretation, suggesting that conceptualisations of the enemy are projections of the psalmists own fears and insecurities.⁵⁰ The tendency to ascribe misfortune to imagined enemies with supernatural powers in the ancient Near East accords with the African search for ultimate causes of hardship.⁵¹ In the individual lament of Ps 58, the psalmist complains about the enemy working evil (עויל)⁵² in his heart and spreading violence (חמס) on earth (v. 3). In v. 4 he is said to speak lies (דברי כזב) from the day that he is born. Maré⁵³ adopts a socio-political interpretation of the Psalm, suggesting that it constitutes a Jewish protest document against unjust rulers that could also be used by the church to pray for the downfall of immoral politicians. The emphatic opposition of the צדיק and רשע in v. 11 indeed puts one in mind of the factions in Jewish society of Maccabean times. A socio-political reading of the Psalm has also found support in the rendering of אֱלֹמִים in v. 2 into "congregation," referring to a host of powerful human enemies.⁵⁴

Unfortunately, the possibility of reading Ps 58 as a ritual incantation has been underexplored in recent scholarship. Although the text is clearly corrupt and demonstrates evidence of numerous editorial alterations, evidence of its original nature as a protective spell abounds.⁵⁵ Following Mowinckel's suggestion that the enemy in Ps 58, as in most individual laments, represents the practitioner of bad magic, Nicolsky⁵⁶ lists evidence for a reading of original elements of Ps 58 as a ritual incantation against the witch. He⁵⁷ suggests that מלחשים (v. 6) serves as a technical term for snake charmers as well as shamans whispering spells. The other technical designation in v. 6, חובר חברים, refers to the symbolic ritual binding of an enemy while uttering spells.⁵⁸ Further, the

⁵⁰ Cf. Othmar Keel, *Feinde und Gottesleugner. Studien zum Image der Widersacher in den Individualpsalmen* (Stuttgarter biblische Monographien 7, Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1969); Bernd Janowski, *Konfliktgespräche mit Gott. Eine Anthropologie der Psalmen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2003).

⁵¹ Cf. Anton Jirku, *Die Dämonen und ihre Abwehr im Alten Testament* (Leipzig: A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1912). Even in modern Palestine, people commonly ascribe illness and misfortune to unseen evil spirits; cf. Taufik Canaan, *Dämonenglaube im Lande der Bibel* (Leipzig: Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1929), 1ff.

⁵² Cf. Rudolf Kittel et al, *biblia hebraica stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1967): 1139.

⁵³ Leonard P. Maré, "Psalm 58: A Prayer for Vengeance," *OTE* 16/2 (2003): 322-331.

⁵⁴ Cf. John S. Kselman and Michael L. Barré, "A Note on אֱלֹמִים in Psalm 58:2," *VT* 54/3 (2004): 400-402.

⁵⁵ Cf. Klaus Seybold, "Psalm 58. Ein Lösungsversuch," *VT* 30/1 (1980): 55-56.

⁵⁶ Nicolsky, *Spuren*, 29-42.

⁵⁷ Nicolsky, *Spuren*, 33.

⁵⁸ Cf. Deut 18:11.

imprecation of v. 8: “let them melt away like water” is characteristic of ritual incantations of the ancient Near East.⁵⁹ Following the LXX reading of v. 9, Nicolsky⁶⁰ further suggests that the Psalm was recited with accompanying ritual actions, such as the symbolic melting of wax figures of the enemy.⁶¹ Although corrupt, v. 10 may also hint at the waving of a thorn tree twig (טאט) in a ceremonial destruction of the witch. Following ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian belief, thorn bushes were believed to have apotropaic qualities.⁶²

It would seem, therefore, that נגב, rather than referring to lies, signifies powerful, imprecatory words. The following verse aptly compares these utterances with the poison of a serpent that will not be charmed (vv. 4-5). The depiction of the enemy in terms of a lion in v. 6 also functions to put him in the realm of the demonic. Following ancient Mesopotamian tradition, the ancient Israelites did not always distinguish between demons and witches.⁶³ Countering these supernatural attacks of the witch and his spells, the psalmist invokes his deity to destroy them by breaking their teeth (v. 7), shooting them with arrows (v. 8), and causing them to melt away (v. 8).⁶⁴ The prayer for the destruction of the enemy’s teeth is motivated not only by fear of their incantations, but also the image of the witch as demon devouring the supplicant.⁶⁵ This puts one in mind of the South African understanding of *isidliso*, where poison is also conceptualised as a living creature consuming the life substance of the victim.

The enemy lament of Ps 140 is thematically closely related to Ps 58. The enemy is again said to fabricate evil (פעל עול) in his heart (v. 3). He is called a violent man (איש חמס, v. 5) and a man of tongue (איש לשון, v. 12). This latter designation is to be understood in terms of v. 4: “They have sharpened their tongues like a serpent; adder’s poison is under their lips.” The tongue and lips in this verse metaphorically stand for the imprecations uttered by the witch, while the snake’s poison is used as an image for the destruction associated with

⁵⁹ Nicolsky, *Spuren*, 34.

⁶⁰ Nicolsky, *Spuren*, 31.

⁶¹ For an interesting commentary on the traditional rendering of שבלול into “snail,” see David I. Macht, “A Pharmacological Note on Psalm 58:9,” *JAOS* 42 (1922): 280-285.

⁶² Cf. Maqlû III, 153ff: “I am the spike of a thorn bush, don’t you dare step on me ... your witchcraft, spells, magic and evil machinations don’t come near me,” cf. Gerhard Meier, *Die assyrische Beschwörungssammlung Maqlû* (Berlin: Friedrich-Wilhelms Universität, 1937). See also Nicolsky, *Spuren*, 35-37.

⁶³ Cf. Kirsten D. Fricke, *Dämonen und Dämonenabwehr in Babylonien und Assyrien* (Münster: Grin Verlag, 2001), 12. Also see Maqlû III, 142, where a potsherd is interpreted as a witch (*kaššaptu*).

⁶⁴ It needs to be noted, however, that the invocation of Yahweh probably constitutes later additions to make the Psalm suitable for official use (cf. Nicolsky, *Spuren*, 41).

⁶⁵ Cf. Pss 22:13-15; 27:2.

these powerful words.⁶⁶ As in Ps 58, the psalmist attempts to counter these supernatural attacks by invoking his god to destroy the enemy: "let the evil (עמל) of their own lips cover them, let burning coals fall on them" (vv. 9-10). The burning and consuming qualities of fire makes it an ideal source domain for the conceptualisation of poison. Not surprisingly, references to poison in the OT are often accompanied by fire imagery.⁶⁷

From the foregoing summative evaluation of the WITCHCRAFT IS POISON metaphor in South Africa and the OT several interesting conclusions can be drawn. In South African belief the witch can administer poison to an intended victim through various means – spells, rituals, witch familiars, or magical substances. The dominating image, however, seems to be administration through adulterated food, as the linguistic vehicle, *isidliso*, suggests. This concept is also accompanied by images of the victim being consumed from the inside by an imagined creature. The main meaning focus is the loss of life substance and strength of the victim that is being consumed. The various linguistic vehicles of the metaphor in ancient Hebrew typically include the organs of speech, which suggests that the psalmist associated his misfortune or illness with evil spells uttered by the witch. The image of poisonous snakes serves as an ideal image of poison coming from the mouth of the enemy. Poison, on its turn, is also conceptualised as a consuming creature or entity, such as fire.⁶⁸ Despite the variations in imagery, the metaphor in both Southern Africa as well as the OT seems to focus on the loss of strength and life substance.

E CONCLUSION

The cognitive theory of metaphor serves as an ideal tool for the comparison of African and ancient Israelite belief systems. It allows for a detailed analysis of comparable cultural conceptions that facilitates an in-depth evaluation of the similarities and differences of African and ancient Israelite worldviews. Although it focuses on descriptive and interpretive interests, it successfully draws attention to cultural conceptions that impact on Africa's struggle against poverty and suffering. The notion that witchcraft induced conditions exist with symptoms similar to that of HIV/AIDS victims, for example, negatively

⁶⁶ There are numerous OT references to the enemy's words/tongue/lips as dangerous instruments/weapons where the imagery of poison may be implied (cf. Jer 9:8).

⁶⁷ Cf. Ps 120:4; Deut 32:23-24.

⁶⁸ The association of the consuming qualities of fire and poison is also found in the Egyptian coffin texts: "The fire will go up, the flame will go up from the bellies of those who creep, and the fiery one will be against them as the Eye of Rē," (Spell 423 v. 264, cf. Raymond O. Faulkner, *Spells 355-787* (vol. 2 of *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*; Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1994), 69. This association is also to be found in the etymology of the name of the Palestinian deity, Resheph; cf. Diethelm Conrad, "Der Gott Reshef," *ZAW* 83 (1971): 158.

impacts on prevention and treatment strategies.⁶⁹ On another level, the detailed knowledge available on African traditional beliefs draws attention to neglected aspects of ancient Israelite culture, such as their practice of sympathetic magic that may be of interest to ancient Near Eastern scholars and OT theologians interested in the anthropology of ancient Israel.

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⁶⁹ Seth C. Kalichman and Leickness C. Simbayi, "Traditional Beliefs about the Cause of AIDS and AIDS-Related Stigma in South Africa," *AIDS Care* 16/5 (2004): 572-580.

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