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

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1. The word *şalmāwet* 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 *sel*, «shadow», and the second one is *mawet*, «death», being as an alternative the hypothesis that *salmāwet* has arisen through folk-etymology from a form *salmūt* «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 salmāwet is correct but not its traditional meaning considering «the superlative force which attaches to not die" and not "death" in Hebrews. 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 *şalmāwet* would be darkness, on the other, to question his view concerning the supposed superlative use of *mawet*.

Indeed, I would argue that the term $salm\bar{a}wet$ is cognate with the Semitic root ZLM (= to be dark) and that it should be read $salm\bar{u}t$ as an abstract noun with the ending $-\bar{u}t$ (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

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

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

³ D.W. Thomas, op. cit., 200.

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» imaginery 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, sel, might have been used within such an expression as «shadow of death» (besides the word meaning death!).

– One of the major arguments against the $salm\bar{u}t$ 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 slm II (the writer calls in this way the Semitic root ZLM = 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 slm 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 . bzlm . bqdš. aphm
- (9) kšpm. dbbm. ygrš. hrn
- (10) hbrm. wglm.d tm.lk
- P. Bordreuil and A. Caquot have proposed such a provisory rendering of this passage:

Which is supported for instance by I.H. Eybers, The Root 5- L in Hebrew Words, JNSL 2, 1972, 23-36

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

⁸ D.J.A. Clines, op. cit., 24-25.

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 slmwt, except to lend support to the traditional interpretation (...) the etymology and the meaning of zlmt/glmt is unclear».

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

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 jouvenceau (chassera ces) associés en ta faveur»¹³.

On reading this passage it is interesting to draw attention to the expression *bzlm* in line 8. This is the commentary of the authors: «le nom *zlm* est nouveau, mais s'explique aisément par l'arabe *zalima* "être obscure"»¹⁴. On the basis of the context I think that the writers are right in connecting the term *zlm*, 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 explaine or, indeed, incomprehensible, the presence of the term zlm 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 *zlmt*, was examined by Clines in this manner:

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

Before trying to consider whether such an argument is reasonable 17, one has to notice that the word *slmt* 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 «*slm* II» (that is from ZLM) does not, in fact, exist!

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

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

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 salmāwet.

¹⁶ D.J.A. Clines, op. cit., 24.

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 glm und slm, UF 19, 1987, 407. More in particular M. Dietrich - O. Loretz, Der ugaritische Konsonant g, WO 4, 1967-68, 308.

82 G. Mazzini

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 *glmt* is always *zlmt* (and never *slmt*)¹⁸:

KTU 1.8:5-11	KTU 1.4.VII:52-56
(5) () .lġlmh	(52) ().lģ
(6) b'l. ysh. 'n. gpn.	(53) [1]mh . b · I . kyṣḥ . · n
(7) wugr. bn. ġlmt	(54) [gpn] . wugr . b <n> glmt</n>
(8) $^{c}mm.ym.bn.zlm[t]$	(55) [cmm.] ym.bn.zlmt.r
(9) rmt. pr t. ibr [. mnt]	(56) [mt . pr ^c]t [.] <i>ibr mnt</i>

Given the textual evidence regarding the presence of the term zlmt in these passages, I would simply suggest considering zlmt and glmt as terms issued from different roots and hinting at the peculiar concept of the «obscurity». On the one hand zlmt would be cognate with the well-known Semitic root ZLM meaning «darkness, obscurity», on the other glmt might be connected with the root 'ālam widely attested in the Old Testament. Indeed the root 'ālam 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 zlmt / bn glmt in the light of a more general view of the context: the god Ba'l is sending his messanger 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 Ba'l's speech as such:

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(7) ( ... ) . bn . glmt
(8) 'mm .ym .
bn . zlmt
(9) mt . pr 't . ( ... )
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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.

As regards the Ugaritic passage and the phonetic question (g/z), it seems to me noteworthy to mention Segert's hypothesis (in *The Ugaritic Voiced Postvelar in Corrispondence 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, *glmt* can be considered the usual form, while the B-word *zlmt* is a less comon 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 *zlmt/glmt* might reflect a situation parallel to what seems to be attested in the Old Testament. On the meaning of 'ālam in Hebrew see also M.J. Dahood, *Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qohelet*, *Biblica* 33, 1952, 206.

- (7) (...) in the darkness
- (8) is involved the sea in the obscurity
- (9) the primeval heights (...).
- 5. In conclusion, I would suggest that the Masoretic word salmāwet might have been a late reinterpretation (the well-known etymology sel = shadow, mawet = death) of another term, issued from the Semitic root ZLM meaning «darkness», which should be vocalized salmūt. The causes of such a kind of misunderstanding could go back to two main factors: on the one hand, the problematic attestation of the Semitic root ZLM in Biblical Hebrew, on the other the disputed question regarding the history of the Hebrew language.

On the basis of these main factors one could try to sketch a general view capable of giving a more adequate explanation to the linguistical and historical puzzle underlying the Masoretic expression salmāwet.

- We have the root ZLM which does not seem to be attested as frequently as in other Semitic languages (for instance in Arabic) and might have already been a relic during the earliest stages of the Hebrew language (as well as in Ugaritic), the reasons for it remain unknown.
- Within the Masoretic tradition of the Biblical text, the root ZLM seems to disappear and instead, is replaced by another word *şalmāwet* whose meaning and etymology has no connection with the root ZLM.
- A reasonable assumption might be that this rare root, scarcely present in the text of the Old Testament, should have become obscure in its meaning and therefore etymologically reintepreted²⁰. That a rare root might have become obscure and then reinterpreted within a text like the Old Testament, may depend on the fact that, at the time of the Masoretic period, the Hebrew language should have been a completely dead language; a view which has been many times supposed as one of the main characters of the history of the Biblical text and its language²¹.

Consequently, in my opinion, the reading *şalmūt* could help to improve the general understanding of the Biblical passages in which this term is attested, and to shed new light on the earliest stages of the making of the Old Testament.

W.L. Michel, op. cit., 6-7, draws attention to a significant reflection: «that more than half of all the occurences of slmt are in Job leaves no doubt that the study of the word and its use in the various passages in Job is very important». Since the frequent attestations of zlmt in Arabic, one could connect the presence of this word with a general hypothesis concerning some Arabian features emerging from the language of the book of Job, for this issue see G. Rendsburg, Kabbîr in Biblical Hebrew: Evidence for Style-Switching and Adressee-Switching in the Hebrew Bible, JAOS 112, 1992, 649-51.

²¹ G. Garbini, Il semitico nordoccidentale. Studi di storia linguistica, Roma 1988, 89-100; J. Barr, Which Language Did Jesus Speak? Some Remarks of a Semitist, BJRL 53, 1970-71, 9-29; G. Mazzini, Riflessioni sul pronome di prima persona in Semitico, EVO 16, 1993, 193-97.