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**THE IMAGE OF THE NETHERWORLD IN THE  
HEBREW BIBLE**

**Traditions Concerning the Netherworld in Psalm Poetry**

Thesis Booklet (Summary)

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## **Introduction**

In my dissertation I examine the traditions concerning the netherworld appearing in the psalm literature with the method of tradition criticism, taking into account the variability in the different formulations of each tradition and how each text adapts these traditions, and searching the literary character and rhetorical function of the traditions. Based on these four aspects, I also attempt to draw theological conclusions. The basic question of my work is not what we can learn from this traditions about the afterlife-belief of the Old Testament, the Israelite, the YHWH-faith, or the age of the Second Temple, or theological concepts about YHWH's power, these issues is addressed in a number of works. In contrast, the topic of my dissertation is the presentation of the Sheol-traditions of Israelite and early Jewish psalm literature in their thematic and theological diversity.

In my work, I examine the poetic prayers of ancient Israelite literature, which I call psalm literature. In addition to the Book of Psalms (MT, LXX, Peshitta, etc.), this group includes poetic prayers embedded in narrative, literary, and prophetic corpus of texts, poetic prayers from Qumran, and other texts which adapt various psalm traditions (Hodayot, Barkhi nafshi, etc.).

In the first main chapter of my thesis I have attempted to map how previous scientific interpretations have interpreted the traditions concerning the netherworld in psalm poetry. In the second main chapter of my dissertation, I made an attempt to define and specify the different traditions appearing in the psalm literature, and also to determine their origin or parallels, and to interpret the theological differences between each adaptations.

### **Theses of the dissertation**

1. In ancient Israelite psalm literature Sheol (the netherworld, the home of the dead) appears in several traditions. A shared feature of these traditions is that they uses the spatial image of the netherworld to express death, the human mortality and misery.

2. The most common tradition concerning Sheol may contain three basic elements: 1. the netherworld as the image of misery; 2. cry to YHWH from the netherworld; 3. thanksgiving for YHWH's deliverance from misery.

3. According to a statement in a hymnic context (1Sam 2:6), YHWH has the power to take one down into the netherworld and bring one up from there. From a tradition-historical point

of view, this idea is related to the motif of pleading for salvation from Sheol in prayers, and the latter may even be rooted in this formulation of YHWH's power over the netherworld.

4. In some passages of the psalms, the speaker of the prayer begs YHWH to punish the wicked and his/her enemies go to Sheol. On the one hand, this may be the starting point for the theological concept which would later appear in the prayers, according to which the netherworld can be considered a place of punishment after death, but at the same time it is by no means identical with this idea.

5. Other passages present death and the netherworld as the general destiny of human beings (Ps 89:49, 90:3, 146:4, cf. 139:15).

6. In the background of Psalm 88:5-6 we can discover a tradition that appears in the oracle against Egypt in Ez 32:17-32, which may coincide, or more precisely, be in polemics with a cultic tradition similar to the Greek hero-cults, and this may form the theological background of Psalm 88:5-6.

7. The occurrences of the "the dead do not praise YHWH" tradition may have different rhetorical and theological significance. When this tradition appears in the form of a question, it can usually be considered an *argumentum ad Deum*

(Ps 6:6, 30:10, 88:11-13). The declarative form, on the other hand, can be linked to the interrelated contexts of repentance and sickness and can be interpreted in a situation of thanksgiving. Since by “living” the texts mean those who have gone through some ordeal (Is 38 - sickness and sin, 1Bar 2, Sirach 17:27-28, 11Q5 19 - sin, stumbling, etc.) and not those who could not experience suffering: the saved is the one who gives thanks, not the one who did not have any misery.

8. Ps 16, 49 and 73 are related in their subject to the supplicating and thanksgiving prayers thematizing the question of salvation. These three texts differ from other psalms not in their theological perspective, but in their combining different traditions, in contrast to the simplicity of those prayers: 1. the exclusivity of YHWH; 2. human mortality; 3. communion with God; 4.a God guides the righteous with his counsel; 4.b eternal life through knowledge; 5. “Levite-” tradition: YHWH as inheritance; 6.a deliverance from Sheol in the Psalms; 6.b.1. tradition about Enoch and Elijah: God takes the Righteous; 6.b.2. Deliverance by theophany.

9. The sources adapt the netherworld traditions in the context of different theological concepts. The basic elements of the traditions remain constant in the texts despite the different theological content. Along with this constancy, however, there

is a great variability in the exact wording, which in many cases suggests the possibility of a further elaboration of a known written tradition.

10. The differences between the texts concerning the theme of deliverance from the netherworld are not rooted in the different theological perception of the writers or tradents of each text. It might even be suggested that many of the texts on deliverance from Sheol have parallels primarily with Mesopotamian traditions (especially those associated with the divine figure Marduk), while texts on deliverance from the waters of the depths, such as Psalm 18, which adapts the tradition in a theophany-scene, and Psalm 16, 49, 73 are more likely to be based on Canaanite traditions (which are known from Ugarit).

11. For most statements about deliverance from the netherworld, it is not clear whether it is a this-worldly or an after-death action. Nor is it clear that historically the former concept is necessarily earlier than the latter. That the texts speak of this-worldly deliverance is clear in those sources that apply tradition in a narrative.

12. Based on the psalms the afterlife conceptions of the period before deuteronomistic and priestly sources cannot be outlined. Nor do the psalms document the growth of YHWH's

competence (*Kompetenzausweitung*). Rather, the statements that suggest that the dead do not praise YHWH seem to imply that YHWH has the power to take someone to the netherworld and bring them up from there (cf. 1 Sam. 2:6). The psalms neither document the “pre-exilic” beliefs about Sheol, nor their replacement by a more positive belief after the exile. The former does not appear in these texts at all, but with regard to the latter we can see that the psalms apply the Sheol-traditions unproblematically when expressing these more positive notions.