

## CRITICAL NOTES ON PSALM 22:30

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Various translations are suggested for this verse, which has been preserved in some of the ancient versions as well as in these modern translations.<sup>1</sup> There is a scribal error in this verse, and also a later addition by an editor. In addition, some of the phrases, such as *the fat ones of the earth* and *all who go to the dust* are not clear at first glance. Therefore, we here look into the etymology and the literary structure of our verse in addition to some of the critical opinion. The end result of our study will offer a modified translation with some changes. This critical note will give the reader a better understanding and reading of the Masoretic text.

Verse 22:30: *aklu veyistahvu kol dishnei eretz lefnav yikru kol yorday afar vnafsho lo hiyah.*

Jewish Publication Society translation: *All those in full vigor shall eat and prostrate themselves; all those at death's door, whose spirits flag, shall bend the knee before Him.*<sup>2</sup>

King James Version: *All they that be fat upon earth shall eat and worship. All they that go down to the dust shall bow before him and none can keep alive his own soul.*

Revised Standard Version: *Yea, to him shall all the proud of the earth bow, before him shall bow all who go down to the dust and he who cannot keep himself alive.*

Several proposals have been raised to explain the difficulties in our verse, but, as we shall see, most of them are unsatisfactory. These will be considered as: (A) The subject of eating is not clear since eating was already ended in verse 27. (B) The biblical term *dishnei eretz* [the fat ones of the earth] appears only once in the Hebrew Bible. Therefore, who are *the fat ones of the earth*? (C) The meaning of the phrase *all who go to the dust* is not clear. (D) The last phrase of our verse, *Even he that cannot keep his soul alive*, was often thought of as a later addition, which is difficult to understand.

## THEY HAVE EATEN

Reading Psalm 22 shows that the subject of our verse is not eating, since eating was already ended in verse 27. From verse 27 on, the subject is praising God. It is more likely that we have here a scribal error in joining two separate words; instead of *aklu* [they have eaten] we should read *ak-lo* [indeed to him].<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, using the verb "to eat" in our text destroys the parallelism. On the other hand, reading instead *Indeed to Him* makes a better parallelism between the first and second phrases: *Indeed to Him/before Him . . . the fat ones of the earth*.

It has been pointed out that there is a parallelism between *the fat ones of the earth* and *all who go down to dust*. Therefore, it was suggested to amend *dishnei erez* [the fat ones of the earth] to *yeshanei erez* [those who sleep in the earth]. This is because the Hebrew Bible refers many times to the dead as in state of sleep (Isa. 26:19; Ps. 13:4; Job 2:13; Dan. 12:2). Dahood arrived at the same conclusion without an emendation, by taking "d" as a relative pronoun as in Ugaritic and Aramaic, and regarding "šny" as the syncopated form of "yešēnē."<sup>4</sup> The difficulty with this proposal is that according to the Hebrew Bible there is no link between God and the dead in Sheol. Does the text tell us that the dead will worship God in Sheol? Many times we read in the Hebrew Bible that the dead cannot praise God and that death is final.<sup>5</sup> Later Dahood changed his rendition of the term "*dihšenei erez*" on the basis of Ugaritic evidence; thus, he reads *the fat ones of the earth*. According to him the reference is to the denizens of the netherworld who will be well fed by Mot.<sup>6</sup> However, the interpretation of *erez* in KTU 1. 4. VII. 52 as netherworld is erroneous in this case.<sup>7</sup>

We believe that the reading of the Masoretic text can be preserved here without major changes. The Hebrew root "dsn" and its derivative means "be fat," "grow fat."<sup>8</sup> In the Dead Sea Scrolls we read "so that you will eat and grow fat."<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, we find in Arabic the term "*dasima* [to be fat],"<sup>10</sup> Akkadian "*duššumu* [very fat]," and probably Akkadian "*dašnu*" as a synonym of "*dannu* [huge, big],"<sup>11</sup> and Aramaic "*dišnā* [fat ashes]." Etymologically, all are related to the Hebrew root *dsn*.<sup>12</sup> The adjective "*dāshēn* [fat]" is found three times in the Hebrew Bible and it refers to people who became satiated and fat (Deut. 31:20; Isa. 30:23; Ps. 92:15). In our verse it refers to the strong and powerful people. We have to remember that fat animals were

considered the healthiest and fat was regarded as the best part of sacrificial animal; therefore, the metaphorical usage of fat as referring to strong and powerful people is easily understood. Indeed, Radak in his commentary says that *the fat ones of the earth* refers to people. According to him, we have here a prophecy that even the fat and contented Persians and Medes will return to God and humble themselves before Him. Briggs follows a similar path in saying that our verse deals with two classes of worshipers: "*all the fat ones of the earth* which are the rich, prosperous, powerful nations, and *all about to descend to the dust*, those decaying, dying, who are going to the pit."<sup>13</sup>

Rashi, on the other hand, understands *the fat ones of the earth* as referring to the good and fat produce of the land. Indeed, the noun *deshen* appears seven times in the Hebrew Bible with the meaning fat: Fatness of the olive tree (Jud. 9:9) and with reference to food and drink (Isa. 55:2; Jer. 31:14; Ps. 36:9; 63:6; 65:12; Job 36:16).<sup>14</sup> Therefore, he renders the phrase: *They* [the humble ones in v. 27] *will eat the fat of the land* [finest produce of the earth] *and bow down* [to praise and thank God]. According to Rashi, our verse refers back to verse 27 and its sequence is inverted. The problem with Rashi's interpretation is that he does not take into account that, as we have already pointed out, we might have here an error with the verb *they have eaten*.

Spronk suggests that we interpret the term *kol dishnei erez* [all the anointed ones of the earth] as a reference to the dead as shown by *mrqdm dšn* [the anointed dancers] in KTU 108.5.<sup>15</sup> In the Ugaritic text, this expression appears in a text where the *rp 'um* are mentioned. Similarly, Block and Smith suggest that our verse deals with the cult of the dead in which the dead were fed.<sup>16</sup> This reading ignores the meaning of the root *dsh* in Hebrew, Akkadian, and Arabic. Interestingly, in the Hebrew Bible we find the parallelism of *tov* [good things] and *desen* [fatness] (Isa. 55:2; Jer. 31:14; Ps. 23:5-6, 65:12). The same parallelism is also found in KTU 108.5, where we find *dšn* [fatness] and *tbm* [good things]. Similar parallelism is found in the writing of Ben Sirach (14:11; 26:13; 26:1-20).

#### ALL WHO GO DOWN TO DUST

The second phrase of our verse reads: *All who go down to dust will kneel before Him*. We have here a parallelism between *bow down* in the first phrase and *kneel* in the second phrase. In other words, the psalmist says that all hu-

mans must bow down to God. Dust is prominently associated with the underworld. This is to be expected, since, as God told Adam: *'you are dust, and to dust you shall return'* (Gen. 3:19). Ben Sira reiterates the point: All [that came] from earth – to earth will it return (40:11). The verse in Genesis means that human beings are created from the dust and after death return there – to "dust" as a specific place, as indicated by the use of the locative preposition "to." In extra-biblical sources, too, dust was identified with death and the underworld. The word "*afar*" is found in Ugaritic, too, in association with death and in parallel with "*eret*z" [We have planted my foes in the nether world, and in the mud those who rose up against your brother]."<sup>17</sup> In Akkadian we find "*epru in bit epri* [House of Dust]" used for "netherworld."<sup>18</sup> In the Epic of Gilgamesh we find "*ana É ep-ri ša ērubu anāku* [in the House of Dust, which I entered]."<sup>19</sup> However, we have to stress that *all who go to the dust* in our verse means mortals. The reference is to the future when all humans will descend into the underworld and return to dust (Gen. 3:19; Isa. 26:19; Job. 10:21; 21:26; Dan. 12:2). According to the Hebrew Bible, the good and the bad go to the same place: to Sheol – the underworld.

#### *BUT HE WILL NOT REVIVE HIS SOUL*

In the third phrase of our verse we read: *but He will not revive his soul*. According to Weiser these words are probably "a later doctrinal addition."<sup>20</sup> Some suggest reading it with the next verse 31, and to render it *and* [when one] *is no longer able to keep himself alive* [when his time to die has come] *then* [his] *descendants shall serve Him* [the Lord].<sup>21</sup> This explanation fails to consider that there is a contrast here between the soul of the man and his descendants (Ps. 25:13). It is more likely that instead "*vnaḥsho lo hiyah* [but He will not revive his soul]" can be read "*vnaḥshi lo hayah* [my soul also lives to Him]" as it appears in the Septuagint and Peshitta, and thus, we have here a continuation of the praises to God.

In conclusion, our verse is a continuation of the praises to God which started in verse 23 and ends in verse 32. In the previous verses, the author mentioned the *seed of Jacob*, *seed of Israel*, *The humble*, and *all the families of the nations*. In our verse, he continues this description by mentioning the strong and powerful people, and in contrast to them all the humans who will

descend into the underworld, and in the third part of our verse the poet himself will continue to praise God. Therefore, we should read our verse:

*Indeed to Him, shall bow down all the powerful people of the earth* [ak lo yishtahvu kol dishnei erez]  
*all who shall go down to dust, will kneel before Him* [lefanav yikru kol yorday afar]  
*and my soul lives for Him* [vnafshi lo hayah].

## NOTES

1. For details see: *Biblia Hebraica*, 3rd Ed.
2. In a footnote "meaning of Heb. Uncertain."
3. BH3 is emended *how to Him shall bow down all those who sleep in the earth*. This reading ignores the subject of verses 22-31 which is praises and thanksgiving to God.
4. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I 1-50* (New York: Doubleday, 1966) p. 143.
5. See for example: Psalms 6: 6; 30:10; 88:11-12; Job 7:6-10.
6. M. Dahood, "Hebrew-Ugaritic Lexicography X," *Biblica* 53 (1972) p. 397.
7. C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Literature* (Roma: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum, 1949) p. 37.
8. F. Brown, S. Driver, C. Briggs. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2003) p. 206; *fat, healthy* – A. Negoitǎ, H. Ringgren, "dāshan; deshen; dāshēn," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* III (1978) pp. 310-312; Othmar Keel-Leu, "Nochmals Psalm 22, 28-32," *Biblica* 51 (1970) pp. 405-413; doshen *fatness* – Mitchell Dahood, "Philological Notes on the Psalms," *Theological Studies* 14(1953) pp. 86-87.
9. Dead Sea Scrolls 4Q 285 1.7.
10. Driver suggests to read "what is hidden" based on the Arabic دثر. He suggests two roots I *dsn* 'was fat' and II *dsn* "was hidden, shrouded." Thus *those hidden in the earth*. But as he himself said, this reading is not based on the Hebrew *dsn* "fat" but may be referred to the Arabic دثر. More so his explanation for the interchange of the final *n* in Hebrew and *r* in Arabic is not satisfactory. See: G. R. Driver, "Textual and Linguistic Problems of Book of Psalms," *Harvard Theological Review* 29 (1936) pp. 176-177.
11. Krahmalkov pointed out that in a synonym list "*Malku = šarru*" *dašnu* is equated with "*amurrū* [Amorite]." Thus, he gusses the meaning of "nomadic bandits or marauders" and reads our verse: "To Him will all nomads of the land bow." See: Charles Krahmalkov, "Psalm 22, 28-32," *Biblica* 50 (1969) pp. 390-391; *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* D:120; Nober based on the Akkadian "dūšmū [slave born in the house]." See: Petrus Nober S. J., "Notae philologicae: c. Ps. 22, 30: "vernae Inferorum (?)," *Verbum Domini* 39 (1961) pp. 111-113.
12. Negoitǎ-Ringgren, "dāshan," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 3 (1978) p. 310; Robert J. Way, "dāshan" *Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* 1 (1997) pp. 1000-1002.
13. Charles Augustus Briggs and Emilie Grace Briggs, *The Book of Psalms* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906) vol. 1:200.

14. Dshen also means "ashes" in: Leviticus 1:16; 4:12; 6:3; I Kings 13:3,5; Jeremiah 31:40; See: R.Tournay, "*Relectures bibliques concernant la vie future et l'angélogologie*," *Revue Biblique* 69 (1962) pp. 499-501.
15. Klaas Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Neukirchener Verlag Neukirchen-Vluyn: Verlag Butzon & Bercker Kevelaer, 1986) p.282.no.1; *Die Keil Alphabetische Texte aus Ugarit* 1.108.5; M. S. Smith, "The Magic of Kothar, the Ugaritic Craftsman God, in KTU 1.6 VI 49-50," *Revue Biblique* 91 (1984) p. 379 n. 12.
16. Smith and Bloch-Smith, "Death and Afterlife in Ugarit and Israel," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 108 (1988) p. 283. We have to stress that mentioning food and feast together with the dead does not mean that we deal here with feeding the dead. In the Talmud we read: "The rabbis said to Rav Hamnuna Zuti during the wedding feast of Mar the son of Ravina: Let the master sing for us. He said to them: Woe to us that we are destined to die! Woe to us that we are destined to die!" Singing of death appears inappropriate at a wedding. However, one of the functions of marriage is reproduction. So by singing of death it causes people to reflect on the significance of marriage which is to insure the continuation of the human race. It is customary in Judaism till this day in any happy occasion and feast to mention the dead. See: Berachot 31a.
17. *Die Keil Alphabetische Texte aus Ugarit* 1.10. ii: 24–25.
18. *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, E, p. 246, s.v. epru.
19. "The Epic of Gilgamesh," *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*. VII. Iv. 45, p.87.
20. Artur Weiser, *The Psalms* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962) p. 219.
21. A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms* (Greenwood, S.C: Attic Press, 1972) p. 194; A. Cohen, *The Psalms* (London: Soncino, 1962) p. 66.