

Appetite for Destruction

|| A Note on Isa 25:8a

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It is of course possible to read Isaiah 25:8a from the perspective of the resurrection of the dead. A good example of this is Martin-Achards treatment of the text in his book ¹. In this article, however, I will propose a different approach, which will try to leave systematic theological issues like the resurrection of the dead bracketed, and concentrate more on some literary features of the text, which are sometimes ignored by commentators².

Within the drama, which is performed in Isaiah, the chapters 24-27 are commonly known as the apocalypse of Isaiah³, and within this apocalyptic and eschatological framework the theme of the so-called messianic or eschatological banquet is worked out in Isaiah 25:6-8 (cf. other eschatological meals in: Zech. 9:9-17, Isa. 49:9-12, 55, 65:13-16, Zeph. 3:8-13), where it is told how God will prepare a great feast for all the nations on his mountain⁴. Apocalyptic imagery, as used here, combining the theme of an eschatological banquet, the coronation of YHWH⁵, also deals with a final battle⁶ between YHWH and his opponents, other gods, or as

¹ R. Martin-Achard, *The Resurrection of the Dead in the Old Testament* (Edinburgh:1965), pp. 125-130, and Reinhard Scholl, *Die Elenden in Gottes Thronrat (BZAW 274, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000)*, pp. 141-145

² Cf. Scholl, *o.c.*, pp. 93-95 and 113-4, further: G.D. Gray, *Isaiah I-XXVII (ICC)*, (Edinburgh:T&T Clark, 1911), pp. 426-431, J.D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33 (WBC)* (Waco:Word Books, 1985), pp. 331-333, B.S. Childs, *Isaiah (OTL)*, (Louisville:Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 184-185, U. Berges, *Das Buch Jesaja* (Freiburg:Herder, 1998), pp. 130, 135, 141, 187, 197, E.J. Kissane, *The Book of Isaiah (Vol. I)* (Dublin:Brown & Nolan, 1941), pp. 285-286, G.N.M. Habets, *Die Grosse Jesaja-Apokalypse* (Bonn:1974), p. 108, pp. 251-269, M.A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39* (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 333-337, J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39 (AB)*, (New York:Doubleday, 2000), pp. 357-360, esp. p. 359 names the problem, but does not have the space to work it out more detailed, which I plan to do here. All other exegetes mentioned do not know the problem or ignore it. The only remarks which are made about the theme have to do with the resurrection of the dead, or with the kingship of God necessarily overruling all other rulers, including death.

³ Cf. Scholl, *o.c.*, p. 1, he disagrees with the designation 'apocalypse', which he considers the common designation for these four chapters, but agrees with the eschatological character of the prophecy, and that is what really counts here.

⁴ J. Priest, 'A Note on the Messianic Banquet' in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Messiah*, pp. 222-238, cites Isaiah 25:6-8 as the clearest example of the eschatological meal in the Old Testament available. This opinion is shared by Dennis E. Smith in his article 'Messianic Banquet', *ABD IV*, pp.788-791, who calls it the classic example of the divine banquet (p. 789).

⁵ For the connection between the theme of the coronation / enthronisation of YHWH and Isaiah 25:6-8a, see, Peter Welten, 'Die Vernichtung des Todes und die Königsherrschaft Gottes', in: *TZ* 38:3 (1982), pp. 129-146, esp. pp. 144-146. Also Hans Wildberger, 'Das Freudenmahl auf dem Zion', in: *TZ* 33:6 (1977), pp. 373-383, esp. pp. 377ff., with parallels from other ANE cultures. Also cf. Scholl, *o.c.* pp. 104-115, esp. pp. 113-114 and Berges, *o.c.*, pp. 186ff.

⁶ Cf. J. Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), and A. Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Missoula:176).

theology often wants to have it, other evil forces, which, however, belong to the created order.⁷

The latter is worked out in a number of apocalyptic texts (HB: Ez. 29:3-5, 32:2-8, 39:17-20, Isa. 51:9-11), and one particular feature of these texts, and a link might be suggested with the eschatological meal, is that the victor devours the defeated opponent, or uses it as food for creatures (2Bar. 29:1-8, 1En. 60:24). It within the context of these themes that I will read Isaiah 25:8a. The reasons for this are the following. First the link between eschatological banquet and the final battle between YHWH and his opponents has been established elsewhere⁸, and therefore it might be useful to explore the possibility, even if it is not immediately apparent, of the combination of these themes in this text as well. Second, the verb used in 25:8a בלע, translated as 'to swallow' also points in this direction, 'swallowing' is in the Hebrew Bible often both very aggressive, and has a lot to do with food and eating, which will be pointed out below. Third the word used for 'death' in 25:8a, מוֹת, is also the name of a Canaanite deity, the vocalisation of course being unclear. And is it not interesting that exactly something that sounds very much like a competing deity is swallowed in the context of an eschatological (enthronement) meal?⁹

In order to prove these connections, I will discuss the existence of (traces of the deity) Mot (death) in the Hebrew Bible. The same will be done for the verb בלע, and finally the results of these queries will be placed in the context of the meal in Isaiah 25:8a, which will be read in the context of other eschatological or enthronement meals.

מוֹת and בלע in the Hebrew Bible

As indicated above, מוֹת is both the Hebrew word for 'death', as the name of a Canaanite deity.¹⁰ Because of texts like Hosea 13:14, where the death is personalised, suggest that there are mythological overtones in these texts, which, perhaps in an earlier stage, dealt with a deity death.¹¹

In the cultures surrounding Israel, the main evidence for the existence of a deity מוֹת comes from the cuneiform texts from Ugarit. In the Baal cycle of myths, Mot appears as one of Baal's main opponents, even overcoming him and forcing Baal into his rule¹², which of course means that Baal is dead. Baal's sister Anat is seriously annoyed by the loss of her

⁷ From extra-biblical literature, Priest, *o.c.*, p. 227, extracts five elements of an eschatological meal: 1. There might be a messiah present, 2. There is a blurred boundary between an inaugural meal of a coming era and the feast as an expression of the perpetual joy in this new era, 3. Heroes of the past are guests at the meal, 4. Nature is renewed, 5. the mythological monsters Leviathan and Behemoth are fed upon.

⁸ Cf. Smith, *o.c.*, p. 789, Priest, *o.c.*, p. 237.

⁹ This challenges the thesis of Priest, *o.c.*, p. 236, that there is no Old Testament text, which links the defeat of the dragon, or the ultimate enemy of YHWH, with the eating and drinking of the redeemed.

¹⁰ Cf. J.F. Healy, 'Mot', in: Van der Toorn, Becking and Van der Horst, *Dictionary of Demons and Deities in the Bible* (Leiden:Brill, 1995), col. 1122-1132. See also M.J. Mulder, *Kanaänitische Goden in het Oude Testament* (Den Haag:1965), pp. 65-60. N.J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament* (Rome:Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969).

¹¹ An analogy could be suggested here with the way in which Asherah has been turned into a thing by the adding of the ה in front of the word, in Isaiah 25:8 the sentence would not be disturbed if the ה in front of מוֹת would be removed.

¹² Cf. *KTU* 1.5 v-vi.

brother, and decides to hunt for Mot, finds him, captures and tortures him, and in the end he releases Baal to her.¹³ Then the two deities, Baal and Mot, have one final fight, which, through the intervention of El, ends in a temporary draw – the final fight is still to come, suggests the text.¹⁴

As a deity, Mot represents nearly everything that Baal does not represent, such as heat, drought, sterility etc. A possible exception is a suggestion made on the basis of Anat's treatment of Mot as grain, when she overcomes him. However, as Healey also notices¹⁵, this treatment by Anat only refers to the destructive elements of grinding grain, and not to its fertility. In short: treating someone like grain does not make this person grain, as Mot himself has found out too, perhaps.

Another main characteristic of Mot, is his enormous appetite, which he tries to satisfy, using his gigantic mouth: 'A lip to the earth, a lip to the heavens, ..., a tongue to the stars! Baal must enter his stomach, Go down into his mouth.'¹⁶ And one should be careful with him, 'lest he make you like a lamb in his mouth, and like a kid you be crushed in the crushing of his jaws.'¹⁷

Returning now to the Hebrew Bible, it appears that these characteristics of מוֹת return in a number of passages, such as Hab 2:5, where the insatiability of Death is mentioned. Also Isaiah 5:14, where Sheol, the realm of Death opens its mouth and enlarges its appetite (cf. also Prov. 1:12, 27:20, 30:15-16 and Psalm 141:7). In Job 18:13-14 Death is said to have a firstborn child, i.e. one of his characteristics: disease. In Isaiah 25:8, even if מוֹת is not personalised in a strict way, because of the prefix ה, Healy notes that there must be a parallel with Canaanite mythology because here God swallows מוֹת, instead of the other way around, as normal. I will return to this later, in order to establish this beyond doubt, after looking at the verb בלע in the Hebrew Bible, and one instance in a Ugaritic text.

בלע is often used in the context of destruction (e.g. Isa. 9:16, 49:19, Jer. 51:34, Lam. 2:2, 5, 8), and the verb also suggests a certain amount of speed, as is shown by the expression in Job 7:19, 'How long wilt thou not depart from me, nor let me alone till I swallow down my spittle?' (NRSV). The Lord never leaves Job alone, not even for the time that Job needs to swallow down his spittle. Very interesting for our present purposes are the texts which employ בלע to depict someone being swallowed up by the earth, or by Sheol (cf. Ex. 15:12, Numbers 16:30, 32, 34; 26:10 (Korah), Deuteronomy 11:6, Psalm 106:17 (Dathan and Abiram), Prov. 1:12 (general)). This sounds much like the behaviour of Mot in the Ugaritic texts, however, the only instance in which בלע and מוֹת are used in the same sentence is Isaiah 25:8. Death itself never swallows in the Hebrew Bible the same way as God swallow death in Isaiah 25:8. If one wants to find a swallowing מוֹת, one should go back to the Ugaritic texts, since there, at least one instance, מוֹת swallows indeed, in KTU 1.5.i:17 (transcribed 'b-l-t', from 'b-l-h'). He there wants to swallow 'clay', which could be a euphemism for human beings.

Having seen all this: the context of Isaiah 25:8 being the eschatological meal, the personification of מוֹת, and the use of the verb בלע, I think that a number of things can be established about Isaiah 25:8a. First of all, it makes excellent sense to suspect traces, very likely intended ones, of the existence of a deity Mot, one of whose properties is to swallow

¹³ *Idem*, 1.6.ii.

¹⁴ For this ancient example of a cliff-hanger see, *idem*, 1.6.16-35.

¹⁵ Healey, *o.c.*, col. 1126.

¹⁶ *KTU*, 1.6.ii:17-19.

¹⁷ *KTU*, 1.4.viii:17-20.

others. An arguments for this is that in the context of an eschatological meal one would expect God to kill (and eat) his enemies. Further, this is supported by the fact that the verb בלע is used, normally connected with מות, and finally the occurrence of other instances in the Hebrew Bible where death is personalised. Second, (Second) Isaiah shows a sublime piece of irony on the square centimetre, by having מות defeated by his own weapon: an enormous appetite: the swallower is swallowed, and that is, I think rather funny.¹⁸ Whether this should be read as a conscious piece of monotheistic polemic against polytheism, or whether it is in fact a polished up polytheistic verse (cf. the note on Asherah above), remains to be seen, of course. Healey already suggested (see above) that this parallel was there, but he did not point out the connections with the eschatological meal, nor the exact parallel between the uses of the verb בלע here and in the Ugaritic texts.

¹⁸ One could suspect St. Paul of picking up this irony, when he uses Isaiah 25:8 in 1 Cor. 15:54.