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LIGHT AND DARKNESS: FROM REALITY TO LITERATURE

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Abstract

The present contribution focuses on the biblical concepts of light and darkness. As a recurring element in biblical reflection, both light and darkness have a highly meaningful influence in our religious speech and thought. In order to understand it well, it is important to trace its origin and development. The first part of this contribution will therefore focus on light and darkness as a cosmic, physical reality in the context of the ancient Near East (I). The second part will look at light and darkness as a narrative motif in biblical narratives (II), and the third and final part will shed light on the use of light and dark imagery in biblical metaphors (III).

Key Words: Old Testament Theology, Light and Darkness, Creation Poem, Plague Narrative

Introduction

To speak of light and darkness today does not, initially at least, bring to mind anything special. Even buildings with no windows do not necessarily have to be dark inside. We just flip a switch and, almost as if by magic, we have light. It was not so in the world of the ancient Near East, where artificial light was scarce or even quasi-nonexistent. The reality of light and darkness and the experiences of these phenomena were fundamentally different from ours, and it is precisely this radically different lived reality that is reflected in biblical expressions of light and darkness.

This contribution focuses on this concept that, as a recurring element in biblical reflections, it has had a great amount of influence on and has been highly meaningful to our religious speech and thought.[1] In order to understand it well, it is important to trace its

[1] For a general introduction to the concepts of light and darkness in Old Testament literature, cf. the enriching contributions given in various biblical dictionaries. I provide here a short selection: Cf. Art. אוֹר (‘Or), in GJ Botterweck & H Ringgren (eds.), *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, Volume I, Stuttgart – Berlin-Cologne-Mainz: Kohlhammer, 1973:160-182 and Art. חשך (Hosek), in *Ibidem*, Volume III, Stuttgart – Berlin-Cologne-Mainz: Kohlhammer, 1982:262-278. Note that more specific bibliographical references can be found in both articles. More recently one can find similar information in, i.a. Art. אוֹר, in WA van Gemeren (ed.), *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Vol. 1, Carlisle, Cumbria, 1997:326-329 and Art. חשך (Hosek), in *Ibidem*, Vol. 2, Carlisle, Cumbria, 1997:312-315; Art. *Darkness*, in L Ryken e.a. (eds.), *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Downers Grove, Illinois, USA-Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, 1998:191-193 and Art. *Light*, in *Ibidem*, pp. 509-512; Art. *Darkness*, in AC Myers (ed.), *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987:261 and Art. *Light*, in *Ibidem*, pp. 656-657 and finally, Art. *Licht*, in JB Bauer (ed.), *Bibeltheologisches Wörterbuch*, 4de ed., Graz-Vienna-Cologne: Styria, 1994:403-407. See also more generally, H Weippert, *Altisraelitische Welterfahrung: Die Erfahrung von Raum und Zeit nach dem Alten Testament*, in H-P Mathys (ed.), *Ebenbild Gottes – Herrscher Über die Welt: Studien zu Würde und Auftrag des Menschen* (Biblisch-Theologische Studien, 33), Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1998:9-34. The present article is an elaborate and reworked version

origin and development. The first part of this contribution will therefore focus on light and darkness as a cosmic, physical reality in the context of the ancient Near East (I). The second part will look at light and darkness as a narrative motif in biblical narratives (II), and the third and final part will shed light on the use of light and dark imagery in biblical metaphors (III).

Let it be emphasized that this contribution does not seek to be anything more than an accessible exploration of the issue at hand and in no way pretends to provide a technical-scientific – let alone exhaustive – exposition of this issue, even for any single one of the three aspects mentioned above.

Light and Darkness: A Cosmic, Physical Reality

The Biblical Reality of Light and Darkness in the Pre-Solar Conceptual Framework of the Ancient Near East

When discussing how people of the ancient Near East spoke of light and darkness, one must first of all bear in mind that they did so from within a pre-solar conceptual framework, such as one can also find in Ugaritic, Sumerian and ancient Egyptian thought. Typical of this pre-solar conceptual framework is the subordinate role assigned to the heavenly bodies. As a product of this framework, the Old Testament gives no indication of the insight that daylight comes from the sun. In the texts, one can identify a distinction between light on the one hand and the sun on the other. This difference between light and the sun is based on visual observations in everyday reality. The sun does appear during the day and there is indeed light during the daytime, but this does not necessarily imply that the light actually originates from the sun. The night has similar heavenly bodies in the moon and the stars, and yet there is no light at night. One can draw similar conclusions from the fact that there is plenty of light even under cloudy skies, though the sun is nowhere to be seen. Furthermore, it becomes light at dawn even before the sun actually rises. Such experiences were at the origins of the pre-solar mentality that held that heavenly bodies do not, of themselves, produce any light. In this context, the sun is simply one of these heavenly bodies that is not independent of, but rather subject to the rhythm of day and night. One can find a clear example of this representation in the creation poem of Genesis 1:1-2,4.

The Biblical Creation Story of Genesis 1,1-2,4 as an Illustration

We encounter two creation stories at the beginning of the Bible. The first, found in Genesis 1:1-2,4, can be characterized as a poem. In a most beautifully balanced textual composition, it speaks of a creation in seven days that culminates in the climax of the seventh day.[2]

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of a Dutch contribution in H Debel (ed.), *Verbonden door het boek. Bijbelse essays voor Paul Kevers*, Averbode: Averbode, 2011:19-41.

[2] For an accessible and more detailed exploration of the construction and theological thematics of the creation poem, see i.a. H Ausloos & B Lemmelijn, *The Book of Life: Biblical Answers to Existential Questions* (Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs, 41), Leuven-Paris-Walpole, MA: Peeters & Grand Rapids, MI Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2010:121-143. With regard to the creation poem in Genesis 1:1-2:4, the literature is nearly inexhaustible. We refer here to a few studies: O Keel & S Schroer, *Schöpfung: Biblische Theologien im Kontext altorientalischer Religionen*, Göttingen-Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 2002; E van Wolde, *Verhalen over het begin: Genesis 1-11 en andere scheppingsverhalen,* Baarn: Ten Have, 1995; M Vervenne, *Mens, kosmos en aarde: een exegetische reflectie over Genesis 1-3*, in J De Tavernier & M Vervenne (eds.), *De mens: verrader of hoeder van de schepping,* (Nikè-reeks, 26), Leuven: Acco, 1991, pp. 27-62; M Vervenne, *The Compositional Texture of the Priestly Overture to the Pentateuch*, in A Wénin (ed.), *Studies in the Book of Genesis: Literature, Redaction and History* (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 155), Leuven: Peeters/University Press, 2001:35-79 and W Vogels, *The Biblical Creation Myth of Gen 1:1–2:4a*, in *Kerygma* 21. 1987:3-20.

Following a transitional verse in Gn 2:4, a second creation account begins immediately, unfolding in Gn 2:5-3,4 and taking the form of a dramatic story in which the human condition and its brokenness stand central and are etiologically explained. However, it is above all the creation poem that demonstrates the aforementioned distinction between light and the heavenly bodies as these were understood in the pre-solar conceptual framework of the Ancient Near East. For this reason, we will first give a short treatment of the poem's structure and content below, after which we will offer an interpretation of the places that light, darkness and the heavenly bodies occupy in the narrative.

- *The structure of the poem*

Gn 1:1-2,4 opens with a title verse (1:1) that is taken up again with the same wording in the hinge verse of Gn 2,4, thereby creating the first frame (inclusio) around the text. The opening verse in 1:2 describes a disorder and unrest that is then perfectly countered by the order and rest of the conclusion (2:1-3). This provides a second framework around the central section of the text. The creation itself is recounted between verses 1:3 and 1:31, and can be further split into two sections. The first three days describe the basic 'construction' of the creation: day and night, sky and sea, and dry land with plants are called forth in 1:3-5; 1:6-8 and 1:9-10, 11-13 respectively. The three days that follow see the filling out of this basic frame in an order that perfectly parallels the first three days. The sun and the moon belong to the day and the night respectively (1:14-19). The birds and the fish populate the sky and the sea (1:20-23), and the animals and humans inhabit the land (1:24-25, 26:31). Thus is the creation called to life in this diptych consisting of two sets of three days that perfectly correspond to each other. Each individual day features one work of creation, except for the fourth and sixth days, on which two acts of creation take place, and yet even these complement each other. The story ends with God resting on the seventh day.

Represented schematically, one can see the following structure:

A Title: God created heaven and earth (Gn 1:1)
- B Opening verse: disorder and unrest (Gn 1:2)
  - C1 Day and night (Gn1:3-5: the first day): light and darkness
  - C2 The firmament (Gn 1:6-8: the second day)
  - C3a Sea/land (Gn 1:9-10: the third day)
  - C3b Vegetation (Gn 1:11-13: the third day)
  - C4 Day and night (Gn 1:14-19: the fourth day): heavenly bodies
  - C5 Birds/fish (Gn 1:20-23: the fifth day)
  - C6a Land animals (Gn 1:24-25: the sixth day)
  - C6b Humans (Gn 1:26-31: the sixth day)
- B' Closing verse: order and rest (Gn 2:1-3)
- A' Conclusion (and hinge verse to the second creation account): God created heaven and earth

- *Interpretation*

When one examines how this poem speaks of day and night on the one hand and the heavenly bodies on the other, one notices that these two realities do not appear simultaneously, but on two different days. The story begins with the creation of light, or perhaps one should say the separation of light from darkness, which brings about the fundamental rhythm of day and night. That happens on the first day.

> Gn 1:3-5: Then God said: "Let there be light!" And there was light. And God saw that the light was good. God separated the light from the darkness; God named the light day, and the darkness He called night. It became evening and it became morning; that was the first day.[3]

The light on this first day corresponds of course to daylight, and one can see here how this daylight comes into being before the 'lights in the sky' appear. The 'great and small lamps', that refer to the sun, moon and stars,[4] are not placed 'in the dome of the sky' until the fourth day:

> Gn 1:14-19: And God said: "There must be lights in the dome of the sky, that shall separate the day from the night; they must serve as signs for both the feasts as for the days and the years, and as lamps in the dome of the sky, they are to light up the earth." And so it happened. God made two great lamps – the greater one to rule over the day and the smaller one to rule over the night, and He also made the stars. God gave them a place in the dome of the sky to light up the earth, to rule over the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. It was evening, and it was morning; that was the fourth day.

Reading the text with the aforementioned context in mind, one can see that the interchanging of day and night had already begun by the time the heavenly bodies came into being. In the first creation poem, the darkness is in any case present even before the creation. God creates the rhythm of day and night precisely by separating the light from the pre-existent darkness of the primal chaos. The heavenly bodies constitute neither the day nor the night in this fundamental rhythm; they are merely their respective attributes.

Looking more closely at the darkness, it appears that the darkness in Genesis 1 is an essential element of the chaos. It already exists and is no creation of God as such. This does not of course mean that one can immediately characterize this darkness as an independent power opposed to God. The Old Testament itself exhibits little to no vision of any dualistic battle between light and darkness such as the one that would emerge as a religious motif in later eras. Nevertheless, the Old Testament darkness cannot be completely reduced to a purely neutral absence of light. Its qualities are always recognized as being hostile to life, and that is precisely why it is necessary for God to restrain it. In this representation of the creation, Yahweh therefore establishes boundaries in time and space by incorporating the darkness in the rhythmic interchange between day and night. God does not create the darkness, and neither does He eliminate it. He gives it a place in the world order that He establishes, thereby making the darkness an 'ordered power of chaos,' both implying and immediately emphasizing that God rules the darkness.

- *Conclusion*

Against the background of the framework described above, it is evident that light and darkness are highly significant cosmic and physical realities in the Old Testament as well as in the ancient Near East. They are fundamental existential givens over which human beings have no control. Out of this experience and these notions, light and darkness come to play an important role in Old Testament literature, both in the narratives and in the poetry.

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[3] The Biblical text is quoted in a translation of the author, made against the background of the Dutch Willibrordvertaling 1995 and the English New Revised Standard Version.

[4] It is highly probable that these texts were composed during the Babylonian exile. Within this framework, it is no coincidence that these heavenly bodies were not called by name. In this way, the biblical authors emphasize that these heavenly bodies are not gods, but merely Yahweh's 'handiwork.' Cf. H Ausloos & B Lemmelijn, *The Book of Life* , pp. 136-137.

Indeed, all human thought and therefore all literature on each and every theme, no matter how phantasmatically conceived, will either depart from or arrive at the life and thought of what we know, at least to some degree. Nothing can be thought that doesn't touch reality at some point. Furthermore, these strong realities that fundamentally influence people's lives – even giving them form – have had their impact on literature, equally on the Bible.

Light and Darkness as a Narrative Motif

Darkness: Fear and Menace

No matter how clear it may seem from the description above that, within biblical thought in general and through the representation of the creation poem in particular, darkness has received a well-defined place in the world order of the lives of human beings, we find that it was nevertheless not wholly unambiguous within the biblical texts themselves. Connotations associated with darkness appear in countless texts and stories. When one studies the darkness as a literary motif,[5] one soon notices that it plays an important role in the evocation of a certain atmosphere. More specifically, it appears that the fear of night and darkness has to do with the threatening element that comes out of the 'unknown.' Darkness as such is associated with the *unheimliche* – with that which is 'beyond control.' Darkness is also literally intangible.[6] Trying to grab it will leave you empty-handed.

When one combines this notion with the sheer reality of the severely limited availability of artificial light in the ancient Near East, it quickly becomes evident that darkness is not only sinister, but dangerous. Darkness in this context becomes synonymous with the end of daily activities. All work stops after sundown. This fact led also to a situation in which public life came to an almost complete stop after dusk and the fading away of the light. When one is properly aware of this, it comes as absolutely no surprise that this historical-sociological and physical reality formed the basis of an exceptionally strong narrative motif.[7] One could say with WW Fields that the mere mention of the evening or the night in many narratives was often enough to shroud the story in an atmosphere of menace and danger. He compares it to a modern story being situated in the New York metro around midnight.[8] Add a little ominous music, and the tone has literally been set. In an analogous way, it seems that the setting of a biblical story at dusk, in the evening or at night had an immediate frightening effect. One finds a very telling example of such a story in the account of the darkness in the so-called Plagues of Egypt in the book of Exodus (Ex 7:4-11,10).

Illustration: 'Tangible Darkness' in the Plague Narrative (Exodus 10:21-29)

- The literary context of the ninth plague in the Plague Narrative

When one brings up the account of the Egyptian darkness, it is evident that this pericope must first be framed within its literary context, namely the Plague Narrative in the book of

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5 This point is given explicit treatment in W.W. Fields, *The Motif 'Night as Danger' Associated with Three Biblical Destruction Narratives*, in M Fishbane – E Tov (eds.), *`Sha`arei Talmon'. Studies in the Bible, Qumran and the Ancient Near East. Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon*, Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1992:17-32.

6 Cf. in this regard the even stronger expression used in the Plague Narrative to convey the seriousness of the darkness. The darkness of the ninth plague was so dreadful that it became literally 'tangible' (see Exodus 10:22). See below.

7 This paragraph paraphrases WW Fields, *The Motif 'Night as Danger',* pp. 31-32.

8 Cf. WW Fields, *The Motif 'Night as Danger',* p. 31: "It is quite similar to the apprehension that would be evoked by a modern story which began with the condensed time-space notice: New York-Midnight-the subway."

Exodus.[9] The Plague Narrative must in turn also be delineated with regard to its broader context, but as for what precisely this broader consensus is, exegetical research has reached no consensus on this question. Whenever one reads the Plague Cycle, it immediately appears as if both the beginning and the end are firmly connected to what came before and what follows.

Concerning the beginning of the story, two main positions can be distinguished. The story can begin in either Ex 7:8 or Ex 7:14. Exegetes who choose Ex 7:8 as the opening argue that Ex 7:8-13 forms a prologue to the Plague Narrative, both in form and content. Most biblical scholars, however, consider Ex 7:14 to be the opening verse of the Plague Cycle. They are convinced that the content of Ex 7:8-13 is distinct from the actual Plague Narrative, which is then held to begin with Ex 7:14. In addition to these main positions, still others prefer to situate the beginning of the narrative in 6:28 or 7:1, or simply refer to the broader context of the story, namely 5-11 or 7-11.

- *The Structure of the Plague Narrative*

The plague narrative consists of an account of ten plagues. We must, however, make a remark at this point, namely that there are in fact nine plagues that are concluded with the announcement of a tenth 'stroke' – the death of the firstborn children. It is moreover highly probable that these nine plagues originally formed a separate story that did not succeed in forcing the Pharaoh to allow the exodus. Through the redactional association of the Plague Narrative with the account of Mazzot and Pesach in Exodus 12-13, a redactional transitional passage was created in Exodus 11 that called forth a tenth plague, thereby bringing

[9] For various aspects of the interpretation and study of the 'Plague Narrative,' see i.a. B. Lemmelijn, *Het verhaal van de 'Plagen in Egypte' (Exodus 7:14-11,10). Een onderzoek naar het ontstaan en de compositie van een Pentateuchtraditie*, doctoral dissertation in the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at KU Leuven, Leuven, 1996, LVI p. + 629 p. + 172 p. appendices; promoter: M Vervenne. See also B Lemmelijn, *De plagen van Egypte*, in *VBS-Informatie* 27, 1996:33-41; B Lemmelijn. *"Zoals het nog nooit geweest was en ook nooit meer zou zijn" (Ex 11:6). De 'plagen van Egypte' volgens Ex. 7-11: historiciteit en theologie*, in *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 36, 1996:115-131; B Lemmelijn, *Transformations in Biblical Studies: the Story of the History of Research into the 'Plague Narrative' in Exod 7:14-11,10*, in *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 22, 1996:117-127; B Lemmelijn, *De 'Plagen van Egypte'. Het bijbelse wonder doorgelicht*, in A-M Korte, G ter Haar, Y Schaaf (eds.), *Wonderen die de wereld nog niet uit zijn*, Kampen, 1998:21-28; B Lemmelijn, *As Many Texts as Plagues. A Preliminary Report of the Main Results of the Text-Critical Evaluation of Exod 7:14-11:10*, in *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 24/2, 1998:111-125; B Lemmelijn, *God, geweldig of gewelddadig? Naar Exodus 7-11*, in P De Mey, L. Devisscher (eds.), *Wordt verteld. Levende geloofsverhalen*, Antwerpen, 2000:18-22; B Lemmelijn, *The So-Called 'Major Expansions' in SamP, 4QpaleoExod^{m} and 4QExod^{j} Exod 7:14-11:10. On the Edge between Textual Criticism and Literary Criticism*, in B Taylor (ed.), *X Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies – Oslo 1998* (Society of Biblical Literature. Septuagint and Cognate Studies Series, 51), Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001:429-439; B Lemmelijn *The So-Called 'Priestly' Layer in Exod 7:14-11:10. 'Source' and/or/nor 'Redaction'?*, in *Revue Biblique* 109, 2002:481-511; B Lemmelijn, *'Free and Yet Faithful. On the Translation Technique of LXX Exod 7:14-11,10'*, in *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 33, 2007:1-32; B Lemmelijn, *Not Fact, Yet True. Historicity versus Theology in the 'Plague Narrative' (Ex. 7-11)*, in *Old Testament Essays* 20, 2007:395-417; B Lemmelijn, *A Plague of Texts? A Text-Critical Study of the So-Called 'Plagues Narrative' in Exodus 7:14-11,10* (Oudtestamentische Studiën/Old Testament Studies, 56), Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2009, XII-384p and finally B Lemmelijn, *Influence of a So-Called P-redaction in the 'Major Expansions' of Exod 7-11, Finding Oneself at the Crossroads of Textual and Literary Criticism*, in A Piquer Otero & P Torijano Morales (eds.), *Florilegium Complutense. Textual Criticism and Dead Sea Scrolls Studies in Honour of Julio Trebolle Barrera* (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism, 157), Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2012:207-226. See also H Ausloos & B Lemmelijn, *The Book of Life*, pp. 35-44 and 212-216.

the Plague Narrative to a 'succesful' conclusion.[10] When reading the Plague Narrative in its current form, we find the following structure:

I.	Blood:	Ex 7P:14-25
II.	Frogs:	Ex 7:26-8,11
III.	Lice:	Ex 8:12-15
IV.	Vermin/flies:	Ex 8:16-28
V.	Livestock disease:	Ex 9:1-7
VI.	Infections, sores:	Ex 9:8-12
VII.	Hail, thunder, fire and rain:	Ex 9:13-35
VIII.	Locusts:	Ex 10:1-20
IX.	Darkness:	Ex 10:21-29
X.	Announcement of the deaths of the firstborn:	Ex 11:1-10

Most exegetes recognize an upward ascension towards a climax in this structure. This rising slope manifests itself in various ways. First of all, the plagues start off being merely unpleasant (polluted water and stinking frogs), escalate to the level of being harmful (to crops, possessions, health) and eventually becoming fatal (the deaths of the firstborn). Next, the concessions Pharaoh gives before the end of each plague also gradually become stronger. The role that Pharaoh's magicians play – namely the imitation or countering of the disasters that Moses and Aaron summon – also develop, albeit in a regressive fashion. Where they first succeed, they must steadily give more and more ground. Furthermore, one can also see a development in the role of the servants, and finally, the tone of the dialogue between Moses and Aaron on the one hand and Pharaoh on the other changes from being civil and polite at the beginning of the narrative to life-threatening at the end.

- *The significance and function of the darkness in the ninth plague*

The darkness of the ninth plague is recounted in the following way:

> Ex 10:21-27: Then the Lord said to Moses: "Raise your hand to the heavens, and darkness will come over all of Egypt, so thick that it can be touched." Moses raised his hand to the heavens and a black darkness fell over Egypt for three days. The people could not see each other, and for three days they could not move from where they were. But where the Israelites lived, it remained light. The pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron once again and said, "Go away to worship the Lord, but you must leave your small livestock and your cattle behind. You may take your children with you." But Moses answered, "Do you yourself want to provide us with burnt and slaughtered offerings to give to the Lord our God? Our livestock must come with us. Not a hoof may remain here, because we want to use them to worship the Lord our God, and we will not know what we must offer to the Lord until we arrive there." But the Lord hardened the pharaoh's heart and he did not want to let them go.

Many scholars are of the opinion that, if one were to try to place the plague of the darkness in the context of an ascendance towards a climax, the ninth plague occupies a rather strange place in this structure. According to them, the darkness does not reflect the gravity that the ninth and (originally?) final (normal) plague should exhibit. According to them, the darkness is little more than a quasi-harmless inconvenience. However, in light of two

[10] Cf. This hypothesis was proposed in B Lemmelijn, *Setting and Function of Ex 11:1-10 in the Exodus Narrative*, in M Vervenne (ed.), *Studies in the Book of Exodus. Redaction, Reception, Interpretation* (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 126), Leuven: Peeters – University Press, 1996:443-460.

particular interpretative trends that will be explained below, this idea must, in my opinion, be strongly refuted.

Two Particular Interpretative Trends for the Plague Narrative

The Plague Narrative as an anti-creation story – To begin with, one can interpret the Plague Narrative as an 'anti-creation story.'[11] According to this framework, there is a correlation between the creation poem of Genesis and the Plague Narrative of Exodus 7–11. This latter narrative would, in other words, contain the destruction of everything that was created in the first narrative. Concretely speaking, one would refer here to the "He said" of Yahweh, mentioned ten times in the creation poem and corresponding to the ten plagues in Exodus. Each individual plague would then refer to the elimination of a corresponding work of creation. The first plague that changes the water into blood would therefore destroy the water and the land; the livestock disease would refer to the deaths of the animals, and the storms and locusts would signify the destruction of the vegetation. After these plagues, Egypt would become a barren and depopulated land where the creation has been completely undone. This all leads to one conclusion: the God who brought order to everything in Genesis is also the one who can reduce everything to chaos once again.[12] God shows Himself to be both the 'lord of creation' and the 'master of life and death.'[13]

Competition with the Egyptian pantheon – A second interpretative trend places the plagues of Exodus 7-11 in competition with the Egyptian pantheon.[14] One can perceive an escalating competition in the Plague Narrative between Moses and Aaron on one side and Pharao and his magicians on the other side. This could mean that this competition does not

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[11] For more information on this point and for literary references to scholars who reflect on it, see B Lemmelijn, *Genesis' Creation Narrative: the Literary Model for the So-Called Plague Tradition?*, in A Wénin (ed.), *Studies in the Book of Genesis. Literature, Redaction and History* (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 155), Leuven: Peeters, University Press, 2001:407-419. Cf. also i.a. T.E. Fretheim, *The Plagues as Ecological Signs of Historical Disaster,* in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110, 1991:385-396 and especially Z Zevit, *The Priestly Redaction and Interpretation of the Plague Narrative in Exodus*, in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 66, 1975-1976:193-211 as well as Z Zevit, *Three Ways to Look at the Ten Plagues*, in *Bible Review* 6, 3/1990:16-23; 42; 44.

[12] Cf. in this regard the excellent and exceptionally detailed commentaries of C Houtman: *Exodus; vertaald en verklaard.* Dl. 1: *Exodus, 1:1-7:13* (COT), Kampen, 1986; Id., *Exodus; vertaald en verklaard.* Dl. 2: *Exodus, 7:14-19:25* (COT), Kampen, 1989; Id., *Exodus I. Een praktische bijbelverklaring* (Tekst en Toelichting), Kampen, 1988 and in English translation (reworked) see also Id., *Exodus*, Vol. 1: *Exodus, 1:1-7:13* (HCOT), Kampen, 1993; Id., *Exodus*, Vol. 1: *Exodus,7:14-19:25* (HCOT), Kampen, 1996.

[13] These expressions have been borrowed from C Houtman. See the references to his commentaries in n. 11 above.

[14] Regarding this point, see, for example, the explicit treatment in Z. Zevit, *Three Ways*, pp. 21-22, 42. Though it is not always as pronounced, compare also with ACC Lee, *Genesis I and the Plagues Tradition in Psalm CV,* in *Vetus Testamentum* 40, 1990:257-263, espec. pp. 258-259; F Michaéli, *Le livre de l'Exode* (Commentaire de l'Ancien Testament, 2), Neuchâtel/Parijs: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1974:85, 93-94 and in particular p. 94: 'Le combat est un combat de dieux"; GAF Knight, *Theology as Narration. A Commentary on the Book of Exodus,* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976:59, 62-63, 65, 67; E Zenger, *Das Buch Exodus* (Geistliche Schriftlesung, 7), Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1978:93, 114; JP Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus*(New Century Bible Commentary), Londen: Oliphants, 1971:99; NM Sarna, *Exploring Exodus the Heritage of Biblical Israël,* New York: Schocken Books, 1986:78-80; NM Sarna, *Exodus. The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (The Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary), Philadelphia, New York, Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1991:38-40; J Morgenstern, *The Despoiling of the Egyptians*, in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 68, 1949:1-28, 25-27; L Schmidt, *Beobachtungen in der Plagenerzählung in Exodus VII:14XI,10* (Studia Biblica, 4), Leiden-New York-Copenhagen-Cologne: Brill, 1990:60; DJ McCarthy, *Moses' Dealings with Pharaoh: Ex 7:8-10,27*, in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 27, 1965:336-347, 344 and J Reindl, *Der Finger Gottes und die Macht der Götter. Ein Problem des Aegyptischen Diasporajudentums und sein literarischer Niederschlag*, in *Erfurter Theologische Studien* 37, 1977:49-60, 49-60.

only take place between the human representatives of both sides, but also between the divine realities of both sides, namely Yahweh versus the Egyptian pantheon. Interpreted in this way, each of the plagues would also be an attack on various Egyptian gods. The pollution of the waters of the Nile, for instance, could be an attack on Hapi, the god of the Nile, or on Osiris, whose life-stream was the Nile. Similarly, the plague of the frogs could be a slap in the face of Hekhet, the goddess of fertility who was represented as a frog. Continuing in this same line of thinking, the livestock disease of the fifth plague could signify a defeat for Hathor, who was depicted as a bull.

Application with Regard to the Meaning of the Darkness

If we interpret the account of the plague of darkness in Exodus 7:21-29 within this double framework, the darkness no longer looks like some merely quasi-harmless inconvenience. It appears, rather, to signify something frighteningly serious, even dead serious. By no means can this darkness be reduced to the neutral absence of light.

Darkness in Relation to the Order of Creation

If we situate the darkness of the ninth plague within the idea of the Plague Narrative as an anti-creation narrative as described above, we will see that this ninth plague in fact completely destroys the interchange of light and darkness and therefore of day and night. What the ninth plague brings about is namely the sudden, simultaneous coexisting of light and darkness in different geographic locations. This therefore implies the fundamental disruption of the rhythm of day and night and therefore the fundamental disruption of the order of creation. Understood in this way, the darkness of the ninth plague truly has a powerfully terrifying effect. We indicated above that light and darkness stood in direct relationship to the existence and maintenance of the order of creation. Now, in Exodus 10,21-29, the darkness no longer has any boundaries, and there is no more rhythm to day and night. This means that the people have fallen back into the primeval chaos. What Yahweh makes clear in the ninth plague is, in other words, his power. He demonstrates that he is 'the lord of the creation',[15] to the extent that he can even nullify the fundamental rhythm of day and night. Understood in this way, the ninth plague most certainly has a strong if not extreme effect: it overturns the creation.

Darkness in Relation to the Egyptian Pantheon

If, on the other hand, we would situate the ninth plague of darkness within the interpretative trend that focuses on the competition with the Egyptian pantheon, we see that, from this perspective, we can also perceive an ascent towards a climax. If the plagues are indeed aimed at specific Egyptian gods, it would appear that the darkness of the ninth plague would be a victory over the light. Within the context of the Egyptian pantheon, this means that Pharaoh – the son of the sun god Ra – has been defeated. In other words, the narrative suggests that Yahweh defeats Pharaoh and triumphs over Ra, thereby overturning the most crucial religious belief – that Ra is the master of light. Yahweh shows his power over light and darkness, and therefore also his power over Pharaoh, Ra and the entire Egyptian pantheon. Yahweh has defeated the sun god!

[15] This expression has been borrowed from C Houtman. See the references to his commentaries in n. 11 above.

Conclusion

Both of the interpretative trends described above are nonetheless somewhat speculative. There are no direct indications in the text that point to a similar understanding of the narrative, and caution is therefore advised. Nevertheless, within the context of the meaning of light and darkness in the Old Testament – the issue at hand in this contribution – these interpretative trends unquestionably show that darkness and light are strong narrative motifs. In the example from Ex 10:21-20, 'tangible' darkness brings life to a literal halt by causing fearful immobility. In this framework, the darkness does not simply signify a minor inconvenience. It is the disturbance, or rather the overthrow of a fundamentally existential basic trust in the rhythm of the creation. In short, it implies the nullification of the creation. Boundaries are lifted and the fundamental order is completely disrupted.

Light and Darkness in Biblical Metaphor

In continuing with the exploration of light and darkness as cosmic and experiential realities on the one hand, and the elucidation of the use of these elements as narrative motifs on the other hand, this third and final section of the present contribution seeks to turn the reader's attention to the function of light and darkness as metaphors. If light and darkness indeed have such a deep impact on the lives of people that they come to occupy such an undeniable role in narratives, it becomes almost self evident that they would play an equally important role in the condensed articulation of human experiences that characterizes poetry. Despite the place it is given within the world order, the darkness is not completely unambiguous, as can be seen by the metaphorical use of light and darkness in Old Testament texts. This contribution will not, however, make any attempt to deliver a technical treatment of Hebrew poetry and its stylistic and formalistic characteristics. It shall only explore the motif of light and darkness in so far as it does not point literally to the physical reality of light and darkness, but rather utilizes metaphor to point to a deeper dimension in the texts.

Light and Darkness as Metaphors for Good and Evil

Very generally speaking, one can establish that light stands for happiness, wellbeing and wisdom in the Old Testament texts. Darkness, on the other hand, is associated with suffering, misfortune, ignorance, and in its ultimate consequences, even captivity and death. In this regard, light and darkness do not have to be understood in strictly religious terms. The Old Testament texts are, however, mostly religious texts, and within such texts, light and its general connotations as described above are related to God-given salvation, righteousness and fidelity. Even God himself is sometimes called the light of the human person in this context. This does not mean, however, that God is equated with natural light, regardless of the fact that natural light indeed does sometimes play a role in biblical theophanies. That these respectively positive and negative connotations are so common and seemingly self evident becomes clear in other related metaphors based on the imagery of light and darkness. The expressions 'walking in the light' or 'walking in God's light' are used quite frequently, just as the darkness is called 'the way of the godless and the sinner.'

Against this background, we can already conclude, simply based on this very brief exposition, that darkness is inferior to light in every situation, and is therefore also a tool in God's hands whereby he can use chaos to undo the creation (such as in Ex 10,21-29 described above).

Illustration: Light and Darkness in a few Biblical Pericopes

Following on the heels of the exploration given above, the present section of this contribution will present a number of examples of Old Testament texts that call forth the notions of light and darkness, primarily in the framework of poetry, and thereby refer not to their physical reality but to the deeper reality underneath.

- Examples from the prophetic books

  Isaiah 5:20:

  > Ah, those who call evil good
  > and good evil,
  > who make light out of darkness
  > and darkness out of light

A close reading of this verse will show that the poet made a so-called 'chiasm' in a rich, stylistic manner, placing darkness and light literally diagonally opposite of each other. A stylistic analysis of the verse in which the letter 'a' is assigned to evil and darkness while the letter 'b' is assigned to the good and light will result in the following chiastic scheme:

a — b
  ×
b — a

And in the second half:

a — b
  ×
b — a

This verse starts with the idea that the good is associated with light and the evil is associated with darkness. The prophet's indictment is that some people take the evil to be good, as well as doing the reverse of taking the good to be evil. In a parallel fashion, they also make light out of darkness and darkness out of light. In other words – and this is typical of Old Testament Hebrew poetry –, that which is expressed in the content of this verse is also mirrored in the form. Good and bad are analogous of light and darkness, and both pairs are placed literally diagonally opposite of each other. And here is where the essentially metaphorical bond between light and darkness on the one hand and good and evil on the other hand appears. In this verse, this metaphor is used to describe people who can no longer make any ethical distinctions, or at least act as if they cannot.

Isaiah 60:1-3:

> Stand up and shine,
> for your light has come,
> and the glory of the Lord is coming upon you.
> And see, the darkness covers the earth,
> and obscurity envelops the peoples,
> but the Lord will shine on you,
> His glory will appear before you.
> And nations will come to your light,
> kings to the brilliance of your dawn.

Also in these beautiful verses, in which Third Isaiah summons a new era and offers perspective to his people, it is clear how darkness is equated with ignorance and the unawareness of God. God, on the contrary, is associated with light and glory.[16] Thus are knowledge and ignorance, and thereby salvation and damnation respectively, evoked in the metaphors of light and darkness. It is, furthermore, striking how the positive aspects of light and glory are 'raised up' in each case in this metaphor (stand up, coming upon, shines on, coming to the light), while the negative aspects of darkness and gloom come 'down' and envelop or cover. It is worth noting that we continue to use expressions such as 'feeling down,' 'being de-pressed, 'hitting rock bottom' or 'being in a dark place' today, all of which intertwine connotations of both darkness and being low.

Micah 7:8-9:

> Do not rejoice over me, my enemy;
> though I fall, I will stand back up.
> though I may sit in the darkness, the Lord will be my light.
> …
> He brings me to the light
> and I shall see his righteousness.

We find a similar reasoning or expression in the seventh chapter of Micah, in which the poet makes a connection between darkness and light on the one hand and damnation and salvation/righteousness on the other. Furthermore, in this case, things are going poorly for the faithful one: he has been defeated by his enemies and he sits in the darkness. However, even so, the Lord lifts him up to the light. It is God who brings him out of his misery and back to the light, which is associated with righteousness.[17] It is worth nothing that the negative 'falling' is paralleled with 'sitting down,' while the positive 'standing up' is connected to being brought 'to' the light, once again indicating a movement upwards.

- Examples from Wisdom literature

  Ecclesiastes 2:13:

  > I know that wisdom is greater than folly,
  > just as light is greater than darkness;
  > the wise have eyes in their heads,
  > while fools grope around in the darkness.

Reading these verses from the captivating book of Ecclesiastes, one notices that wisdom and folly are not associated with light and darkness in a chiastic pattern such as in Isaiah 5 above, but rather in perfect parallel. Consequently, the second part speaks of the wise who have eyes in their heads and can therefore see (the eyes are the source of light) while fools grope around in the darkness. Note furthermore how the connotations of the 'elusive' darkness also feature in this text: one 'gropes' in the darkness, but cannot grasp it.[18] If we were to express these verses schematically, we would come to the following result:

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16 Note also how in the last verse, light is again associated with daybreak and not with the sun. Cf. above.

17 Regarding the specific meaning of 'righteousness' in biblical wisdom literature, see B Lemmelijn, '*Het begin van de wijsheid is ontzag voor de Heer' (Sir 1:14): Levenswijsheid als levenswijze*, in H Ausloos & B Lemmelijn (eds.), *Bijbelse Wijsheid aan het woord*, Leuven-Voorburg: Acco, 2007:121-161, in particular pp. 123-125 and 139-142.

18 Cf. Part I above as well as the discussion of 'tangible darkness' in part II.

a — b
a — b

and in the second part:
a — b
a — b

It should be clear how, once again as is characteristic of Old Testament poetry, the central message of the content of the text is also reflected in the form of the poem. Wisdom and light are described as the opposites of folly and darkness.

Job 12:22-25:

> He enlightens the depths of the darkness,
> and brings the shadow of death to the light.
> He elevates nations and destroys them.
> He scatters peoples and gathers them again.
> He baffles the understanding of leaders
> and they wander along unbeaten paths;
> they grope around in the darkness
> and stagger like drunkards.

In these verses from the book of Job, light and darkness are once again opposed to each other in a relationship in which the light stands on the side of God while the darkness is the lot of the obstinate leaders. The darkness is associated with depth, death, baffled understanding and unbeaten paths – in other words, with chaos. Note also the movement 'downward.' Furthermore, it is also explicitly stated that the leaders 'grope' around in the darkness. This image fits very well with the 'wandering along unbeaten paths' of the previous line and the 'staggering like drunkards' of the line that follows. Indeed, to grope is to reach out in front of oneself when one stumbles, but not being able to grab onto anything. And again, it is striking how the darkness is brought into relation with groping (cf. above). The most remarkable thing about this passage, however, is the fact that the darkness and light are not simply brought into opposition with each other, but that God Himself can bring the depths of the darkness and the associated shadows of death into the light. In other words, God has the paradoxical power of being able to carry darkness to the light! One therefore sees here the same affirmation of God as 'master of the creation' (cf. above).[19]

- Examples from the book of Psalms

Finally, the third section of this paragraph will very concisely treat two examples from the preeminent collection of biblical poetry – the book of Psalms.

Psalm 82:5:

> But they don't want to know, they don't want to see,
> they just wander around in the darkness;
> the earth creaks everywhere.

This verse very clearly establishes a link between ignorance (not knowing, not seeing) and the hopeless walking and wandering around in the darkness. In addition, this darkness also

[19] Once again, this expression has been borrowed from C Houtman. See n. 11.

brings forth connotations of obstinacy – it's about not *wanting* to know and not *wanting* to see.

> Psalm 107:10.14:
>
> Others sat in the bottomless darkness
> miserably chained in iron shackles.
> He led them away from the bottomless darkness,
> he broke their iron shackles.

Psalm 107 provides a final example of what was described above. The ultimate consequences of the darkness are captivity and death. In this verse, we see people chained up in iron shackles and sitting in a bottomless (once again 'ungraspable') darkness. However pregnant with meaning the darkness as negative experience is in this verse, it must however also be stressed that captivity in ancient times would frequently involve being held in the literal darkness of a dungeon. Nevertheless, it is clear that it is Yahweh who leads people out of this bottomless darkness and breaks their iron bonds of captivity. God therefore stands on the positive side. The implication is that God leads people out of the darkness and towards the light, and the light itself is also therefore situated on the 'plus side.'

Conclusion

Looking in retrospect at the review of the meaning of light and darkness in the Old Testament given above, it becomes clear that light and darkness in the ancient Near East signified, in the first instance, an important, physical reality that effectively influenced people's lives. However, precisely because light and darkness evoke this profound, lived reality, they also gradually came to be used metaphorically and figuratively, representing good and bad in the broad sense. Precisely this idea would become much more important in later periods, as one can see, for example, in the way in which the New Testament incorporates the concepts of light and darkness in its theology, albeit in a much fuller sense, even naming God and Jesus the Light.[20]

[20] A general reference can be made here to the metaphor frequently used in the writings of the community at Qumran whenever there was discussion on the contrast between the 'sons of light' and the 'sons of darkness.'