
The Hebrew terminology for the poor in Psalm 82

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Abstract

The meaning of the Hebrew words for the English term 'poor' continues to be disputed. Two main schools of thought have developed. Some believe the terms refer to literal and material poverty, others that the terms refer to literal-metaphorical poverty. The result has been an impasse. This study suggests that the different Hebrew words for poor should be understood as metaphors for the concept of powerlessness. In addition, the concept of powerlessness is understood to have different perspectives. Psalm 82 is exegeted to provide a basis for this suggestion. The exegesis confirms the contention that poverty is powerlessness.

1. INTRODUCTION

'The late Helmut Thielicke poignantly reminded his world that there are many who eat their daily bread with tears. Today our planet weeps as every corner of the globe shudders from the pain, agony and death caused by endemic poverty' (Crutchley 1993:v). Into this scenario Jesus speaks the words 'the poor you will always have with you' (Mt 26:11). Poverty is a perennial problem, yet it provides us with a unique opportunity to serve God by serving the poor. But if such service is to be effective the meaning given to terms such as poor and poverty needs careful consideration. That there is confusion on this issue will become clear from what follows below. An attempt is also made, however, to point a way forward out of the confusion.

The meaning of the Hebrew words for the English term 'poor' continues to be disputed. So Gutierrez (1974:210) comments that discussion of the term poor involves dealing with 'a theological concept very seldom thought through carefully'. Similarly Croft (1987:69) speaks about the 'conflicting theories concerning the meaning of the terms [for poor] produced by Old Testament scholars'. This is evident from the diversity of explanations given for the meaning of the different Hebrew terms for 'poor'.

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Rahlf's (1892), for example, maintains that the term poor means 'bend down'. He says the Hebrew words עָנָה and עָנָה derive from עָנָה. With time, the words developed separate meanings, namely, עָנָה = 'affliction' or 'depression' and עָנָה = 'to humble oneself'. Driver (1902:19-20) holds to a similar point of view.

This perspective is also shared by Kraus (1966:63, 93, 94) and Mowinckel (1962:91), and represents one approach to the meaning of the Hebrew words for poor.

Another view is that of Gutierrez (1974:220) who says that poverty is 'material poverty ... an inhuman condition'. The emphasis is on literal and material poverty. Similarly James Cone (1975:75-82) believes that the poor are those who are really poor (my emphasis); affected by real hunger, thirst, sickness, nakedness, and so on. They are the literal socio-political poor. In fact the Lausanne Occasional Paper (1980:22) questions whether there is any evidence 'that it [the Hebrew terminology] ever had this [i.e. religious] meaning. So poor is understood in an exclusively literal and material sense. The Kairos Document (1986:57, 61) and Walker (1990:61, 65) holds to the same point of view.

Finally, there are those who believe the meaning of the Hebrew terminology can be explained in literal-metaphorical manner. Among these is Jones (1978:219) who comments: 'it is not a priori impossible that the same term might be used to designate both a sociological situation and an attitude of mind'. Similarly Kvalbein (1987:86; my emphasis) remarks that:

to speak biblically and clearly about Jesus and the poor, it is imperative to recognise the two basic meanings of the word poor: in its literal meaning it refers to beggars, to the material need of people not able to sustain themselves. In its *transferred meaning* it refers to the fundamental position of man before God as helpless, as sinner, regardless of material resources or social position.

Other scholars who support such an understanding of the meaning of the Hebrew terms for poor are: Rodor (1986:351, 352, 354, 344), Croft (1987:50-52, 53, 55, 71) and Henry (1979:543-553).

2. EVALUATING THE DESCRIPTIONS OF THE HEBREW TERMINOLOGY

There has been dissatisfaction with each of these descriptions of the meaning of the Hebrew terminology for the poor. So with reference to the position which sees the terms for poor as 'bend down' or 'to be humble' it can be stated that it has accepted

uncritically the dominant philosophy of its time, namely, gradualism or developmentalism. Furthermore, the distinction drawn between *אָנִי* and *אָנִי* as far as their meaning is concerned is invalid since Kethib and Qere readings do not make such a distinction. In fact they use the terms interchangeably (cf Rodor 1986:351, note 3; Is 32:7; Ps 9:9; Job 24:4; Ps 18:28; 22:26; 34:6).

As far as the exclusively literal and material understanding of the Hebrew terms for the poor is concerned, it can be remarked that the context of Scripture is not given the attention it deserves since Scripture itself witnesses to a diversity in connotation regarding the Hebrew terminology for the poor. Moreover, Deist (1977:64-66) comments that 'the categories of poor, captives and the like cannot be confined to the economic and political spheres of life'. This is so because the terms widow and orphan are symbols for the faithful community, the faithful remnant (cf Jr 3:7-8; Lm 1:1; 5:3). Furthermore, Jones (1978:209) questions the a priori exclusion of the spiritual meaning of the Hebrew terms for poor as found among those who hold to an exclusive literal material understanding of the Hebrew terms for poor. It tends to limit the way Scripture is allowed to speak.

The literal-metaphorical understanding of the Hebrew terminology for the poor has its own problems. According to Skillen (1978:227f) it is a move in the wrong direction. The real issue, he maintains, is the fact that 'the socio-economic condition of the poor and rich appear to be related to the condition of mankind before the face of God'. In other words the question of the poor and the rich is put in a broader framework than the narrow conception of the literal-metaphorical description allows. Another weakness is the wrong understanding of metaphor evident in the literal-metaphorical description (cf Croft 1987:47). It works with a limited definition of metaphor. Metaphor is used as code language (i.e. to refer to objects and reality) whereas the concept of metaphor is more flexible and multi-dimensional with regard to meaning. Kvalbein (1987:81) and Conn (1978:229f) also have problems with this understanding of the meaning of the Hebrew terms for poor.

3. SUMMARY

Given the state of affairs depicted above, Gutierrez (1974:210) is quite right when he maintains that despite everything done, we are still dealing with an idea 'which remains ambiguous'.

To move beyond this it is suggested that we see the different Hebrew terms for the poor as metaphors in the first instance, and secondly, as metaphors for the concept of powerlessness. Several scholars have already alluded to such an approach. Among these are: Handy (1990:55); Gowan (1942:341-353); Deist (1977:58-69); Fensham (1962:129-139); Kvalbein (1987:83); Gillingham (1988-89:18); Weir (1988-89:13-15); Shourie (1987:254-260) and Henry (1979:550).

J L Croft (1987) is one person who has worked with this approach which sees the Hebrew terms for poor (i.e. עָנִי, אֶבְיָוֹן, אֶבְיָוֹן, אֶבְיָוֹן, אֶבְיָוֹן, אֶבְיָוֹן, אֶבְיָוֹן, אֶבְיָוֹן) as metaphors for the concept powerlessness which has multiple meanings. That is, poverty is viewed as a multi-dimensional concept. The main contribution Croft makes is the following:

- * He emphasises the importance of the concept metaphor for understanding the meaning of the Hebrew terms for poor in the Psalms.
- * He works with a multi-dimensional concept of metaphor as opposed to the single meaning concept which sees metaphor as code language.
- * The crucial insight that the endeavour to determine the meaning of the different Hebrew terms for poor in the Psalms is an attempt 'to chart the different facets of one concept used in a number of different metaphors' (1987:53). The latter is, in my opinion, the most significant contribution. It points towards a solution to the problem of the meaning of the Hebrew terms for poor in the Psalms.

His attempt has weaknesses though. Among these are:

- * He deals almost exclusively with עָנִי. The meaning of the other terms are determined on the basis of the meaning of עָנִי. In this way the meaning of אֶבְיָוֹן is transferred to the terms אֶבְיָוֹן, אֶבְיָוֹן and אֶבְיָוֹן.
- * Croft sees the terms for poor as metaphors for the ideas: community, individual and king (cf Croft 1987:71). I believe Psalm 82 shows them to be metaphors for the single concept powerlessness. This thesis is developed further below.
- * It would seem that Croft falls into the trap of the 'root fallacy' (Barr 1961:100), since context does not really have the weight Croft (1987:55) claims to give it in arriving at the meaning of the Hebrew for the poor. It actually only serves to indicate which of the predetermined meanings fits the particular term best. What really determines meaning is the 'root meaning' of עָנִי and the extension of this root meaning as is demonstrated by his diagram (Croft 1987:70).

4. CONCLUSION

We have seen that the meaning of the Hebrew terms for poor in the Psalms is still an open question. Moreover, the investigation by J L Croft (1987) has made some valua-

ble contributions and has pointed towards a possible solution. It has its limitations, however, and we have pointed to these.

In order to further explore the significant insight of J L Croft mentioned above, we undertake an exegetical study of Psalm 82:1-4. The aim is to show that the Hebrew term for the poor are metaphors for the concept powerlessness. Particular attention will be given to meaning parallelism, merismus, and anti-thetical chiasmus, since they are significant for the interpretation of the Psalm and the achievement of our aim.

5. EXEGESIS OF PSALM 82 : 1-4¹

5.1 Introduction

We intend to show that the various Hebrew terms for poor are metaphors for the concept powerlessness.

The text of Psalm 82 has been preserved in a fair state. In this regard Prinsloo (1992:2) remarks that 'Although there are one or two proposals regarding text-critical change (17), these do not really carry any weight and the Massoretic text may be accepted'. We concur with this view (cf Dickson 1993:38-41).

The exact historical setting of the Psalm is difficult to establish. View points vacillate between a pre-exilic and exilic/post-exilic date (cf Tate 1990:333; Dahood 1968: 269; Mowinckel 1962:221; Schelling 1985:218; Briggs 1976:64; Anderson 1981:593; Prinsloo 1992:9). But the dominance of the prophetic characteristics of the Psalm shows that it is dependent upon prophetic preaching (Bellinger 1990:81). In addition, the verbs of verses 2-4 'stel die "gode voor as regters" in die Israelitiese sin van regsuitoefening wat veral in die voorkoningstyd aan die orde van die dag was' (Van Zijl 1970:71). I believe that Psalm 82 should be dated in the pre-exilic monarchial period.

Determining the setting of this Psalm is difficult and opinions vary widely (cf Anderson 1981:591-592). We concur with the prevailing view that we are dealing here with a prophetic prayer or lament.

Generally the Psalm can be classified as an individual song of prayer which through reinterpretation became a national or communal song of prayer. According to Anderson (1983:239) it is difficult to determine its *Sitz im Leben*. This is borne out by

1. The whole Psalm is exegeted in detail in the dissertation of the author. Verses 3-4 can be regarded as the crux interpretum in relation to the question of the meaning of the Hebrew terms for poor in Psalm 82.

the fact that verses 1-2 is mythological, verses 2-7 didactic prophetic, and verse 8 a prayer. We therefore have a Psalm of mixed form. Because the prophetic character dominates the Psalm it could be described as a cultic-prophetic Psalm (Bellinger 1990:81). We would agree with this categorisation of the Psalm.

Structurally, the Psalm is a closely knitted unit (Prinsloo 1992:7-8) and can be divided as follows:

- A 82:1 God's judgement of the gods
- B 82:2-4 judicial questioning
- C 82:5-7 judicial sentence
- D 82:8 God as judge over the earth.

5.2 God's judgement of the gods: 82:1

5.2.1 The unity of verse 1

This verse describes the scene in the divine council. Verse 1a is the heading of the Psalm. אֱלֹהִים is the subject of verse 1b and verse 1c, thus linking them. נִצְוָת verse 1b, is paralleled by קָרָב in verse 1c demonstrating the unity of verse 1b and 1c. According to Handy (1990:52-53) both sound pattern and word play makes for the unity of verse 1b and verse 1c. This verse is therefore a well designed unity.

5.2.2 The meaning of verse 1

The participial form of the verb נִצָּב indicates that God stands in the divine council. Implied here is the idea of self appointment. God sets himself up as the one who presides over the proceedings of the council. As the presider he rises to address the council (Dahood 1968:269). In this way reference is made to his sovereignty, lordship and kingship over the gods. Therefore when אֱלֹהִים stands up, it is to take control; to exercise his sovereign authority and power.

Important for the interpretation of this Psalm is the meaning of אֱלֹהִים and אֱלֹהִים . A variety of answers have been given to this issue (Gaebel 1991:533-536). These terms could refer to human judges (Keil & Delitzsch 1978:401-402); principalities and powers of the nations oppressing Israel (Briggs 1976:215; Pödehard, in Van der Ploeg 1974:55-56); pagan deities, i.e. gods of the nations subject to God (Dahood 1968:268, 269 note 2; Mowinkel 1962:222); it can refer to angels; literal Israelite judges; the 'wicked rulers of foreign nations who oppress Israel' (Anderson 1981:592); 'the divine servants of Yahwah' (Anderson 1981:592-593).

In the light of such a variety of opinions it seems best to maintain that אֱלֹהִים are divine beings who, as subordinate to Yahweh, have been entrusted to ensure the orderly functioning of society, but who, because of failure on their part, are now judged by God.

אֱלֹהִים can also be regarded as the gods (idols) of the nations. However, when it is remembered that idols are concretizations of divine beings, this view is not much different from what has been said above.

בְּעֵדוּת which usually has the sense of assembly, company or congregation called together at an appointed time or place (Brown, Driver, Briggs 1979:417) refers, in the context of Psalm 82, to a council of gods called together by אֱלֹהִים. The purpose for convening the council is expressed by יִשְׁפֹּט, namely, to judge the gods. Their failure to ensure orderly government has led to their judgement by God. Thus verse 1 sets the scene in which we have:

- * A divine council, a meeting of the gods.
- * God presiding over the meeting as the convenor.
- * God occupying the position of pre-eminence and power as is demonstrated by נִצָּב and יִשְׁפֹּט. He is the powerful and sovereign One.
- * Seated in the council are the gods (אֱלֹהִים) over whom God is, about to pass judgement (יִשְׁפֹּט) because of their unjust rule of the cosmos.

In essence verse one shows the sovereignty of God over the gods. It emphasizes the fact that the gods are sub-ordinate and accountable to God. He is powerful and the gods powerless.

5.3 Judicial questioning: 82:2-4

In this pericope God gives a command and a warning to the gods. They are instructed to rule the cosmos with justice by taking care of the poor. Failure to do this would result in serious consequences for the cosmos and themselves (cf verses 5-7).

An important issue to be dealt with in verses 3-4 is the question of the meaning of the terms for poor. Consideration of the question is crucial for our purpose. Beginning with verse 2 we give attention to this matter.

5.3.1 Unity of verses 2-4

The following elements provide for a closely knitted sub-pericope:

- * The *waw* (i.e. *waw*-copulative) of verse 2b.
- * The fact that verse 2b is epexegetical of verse 2a (cf Davidson 1901:185c). Verse 2b explains what is to be understood by *awel* in verse 2a (Van Zijl 1970:69).
- * The verbs in 2a and 2b are all Qal PC masculine plural verbs.
- * Stylistically the last word of 2a and 2b has a *segol* vowel and in this way link the two half verses.

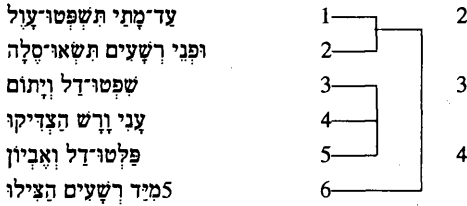
Several factors point to the transitional nature of verse 2a so that it does not form part of verse 1. Some of these factors are:

- * The speaker in verse 1 and verse 2a is different.
- * The verb in verse 2a has the characteristic ending 'u' with which all the verbs of verses 2-4 end despite the fact that it is Qal PC while the rest of the verbs are imperatives.
- * Verse 2a has the word **אֲנִי** which is an integral part of the pattern of verses 2-4 (cf verse 2a and verse 4b).
- * Syntactically, all the verbs in verses 3a-4a are imperatives and the syntactical pattern in verses 3-4 is the same: verb-noun/noun-verb.

On the basis of the above we agree with Handy (1990:54-56) who maintains that the sub-pericope is a unified whole.

5.3.2 Meaning of verses 2-4

The sub-pericope will be dealt with in two sections, namely, verse 2 and 4b and verses 3-4a. The internal structure is vital for establishing its meaning. Below is a diagram representing its internal structure of verses 3-4.



5.3.2.1 Verse 2 and 4b

The term רָשָׁעִים which appears on these verses is very significant. It serves as an *inclusio* for the whole section, that is for verses 2-4. In this way the section begins and end with רָשָׁעִים. Moreover, verse 2b is exegetical to verse 2a since it is a more detailed explanation of תִּשְׁפֹּטוּ־עוֹל so that תִּשְׁפֹּטוּ־עוֹל and תִּשְׁאוּ are to terms describing one idea. This syntactical link ensures the unity between verse 2a and 2b. Furthermore, verse 2a and 4b are parallel and part of the *inclusio* characteristic of verses 2b-4.

The speaker in this part of the pericope is אֱלֹהִים. He asks a question which constitutes the charge against the gods (cf 1 Sm 22:1,3; 1 Ki 2:42-43). This way of stating the charge gives the accused ample time to respond, thereby ensuring that justice is done (Van Zijl 1970:69); but see Ackerman, in Tate 1990:331, for a contrary view).

רָשָׁעִים which appears in verse 2b has a metaphorical meaning, namely those who are powerful (Hengstenberg 1848:35; Handy 1990:55). The gods show unwarranted honour and respect for those who are powerful (i.e. the רָשָׁעִים). This action on the part of the gods reflects their bias and partiality toward those with power. That the 'wicked' receive this preferential treatment at the expense of the powerless poor is evidence of their ability to manipulate the 'gods'. It is in this sense that the wicked are more powerful than the 'gods'. The irony is that those who are perceived to be powerful (the gods) are in fact powerless, whereas those who would, because they are human, be seen as powerless (human wicked) are in fact powerful. The poet uses this inversion to stress that the same inversion applies to their position vis-a-vis the powerful (wicked cf verse 4b).

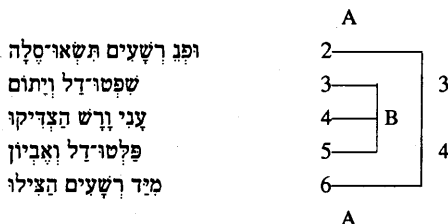
Therefore to honour the 'wicked' is to respect their power (Van Zijl 1970:69). The metaphorical nature of רָשָׁעִים is reinforced by its use in verse 4b in which the focus is on the יָד of the רָשָׁעִים. The terms face and hand are parts of the body and they are used symbolically, with hand (יָד) referring to the power of the wicked. The indications of chiasmus in these verses further underline the fact that in Psalm 82 רָשָׁעִים is used metaphorically to connote powerful. The indications of chiasmus are:

- * the stylistic repetition of רָשָׁעִים (verses 2b and 4b), as well as the repetition of parts of the body: face (verse 2b) and hand (verse 4b).
- * the syntactic pattern: verse 2b: particle=n-n=verbs and verse 4b particle=n-n=verb.

The picture we therefore have is one in which the wicked is seen as those who are powerful. The gods show deference for the power of the powerful and are judged by God for this because it leads to the depowering of the poor. They favour the powerful at the expense of the powerless. This act of theirs represents their failure to act in accordance with their position and nature as gods. Consequently, God calls them to account and sits in judgement on them.

5.3.2.2 Verses 3-4a

Structurally Psalm 82 is chiasmic (Tate1990:334; Handy 1990: 51-66). Verses 3-4a is a good example of this, as can be seen from the structure of verses 2b-4 represented below:



It is important to note that these verses contain three word-pairs. Linked to each pair is an imperative. Moreover, the word-pair *ani-ras* (verse 3b) is framed by two word-pairs both beginning with *dal* (verse 3a, verse 4a). The terms constituting the word-pairs are translated by the English word 'poor'.

The question that now arises is: What is the meaning of the various Hebrew terms translated by the English term poor? In what follows an attempt is made to address this question.

Of the rhetorical devices employed by the poet in this Psalm, the following are vital for our purpose: antithetical chiasmus, merismus and semantic parallelism. Con-

sequently we will look at the poet's use of these devices as a means to answer the question: What is the meaning of the various terms in verses 3-4a translated with the English word 'poor'?

5.3.2.2.1 Antithetical Chiasmus

One use of the rhetorical device chiasmus is to point out contrasts (Wittenberg 1986:53-55; Prinsloo 1992:3). In this sub-pericope the contrast is between the wicked and the poor (Rhode 1992:4; Gillingham 1988-89:16; Driver 1902:20; Kraus 1986:151; 18 McPolin 1989:92). The point of the contrast is to show that the wicked is powerful (Kvalbein 1987:81) and the poor are powerless.

Normally the opposite of wicked is virtuous or righteous. Since powerful is a metaphor for wicked, it follows that in the context of Psalm 82 the opposite metaphor is powerless. Moreover, the term poor has the connotation virtuous or spiritually poor, which is another perspective of powerlessness. So then, whereas wicked refers to powerful, poor refers to powerless (cf Fensham 1962:135) as is made clear by the rhetorical device: antithetical chiasmus.

5.3.2.2.2 Semantic parallelism

It is characteristic of the whole Psalm. The following examples illustrate the point:

*	בְּעֹדֵת־אֵל	
*	בְּקִרְבֵּי אֱלֹהִים	(verse 1)
*	אֱלֹהִים אַתֶּם	
	וּבְנֵי עֲלִיּוֹן	(verses 5-7)
*	נָצַב	(verse 1b)
	קוֹמָה	(verse 8b)

Words which stand in a parallel relationship suggest similarity in meaning as Fabry (1978:213) shows when he remarks: 'that dll stands in parallelism with hbt would suggest that it has a similar meaning'. In verses 3-4a this fact is particularly important for establishing the meaning of the three word-pairs.

In verse 3a דָּל and יְתוֹם are parallel in meaning. They are in a general sense, synonymous. Lexically דָּל connotes 'a limb dangling down' speaking of its powerlessness (Harris et al 1980:190; Pr 26:7; Alexander 1975:350; Fabry 1978:216). On the basis of meaning parallelism therefore יְתוֹם can be construed as powerlessness as well. Moreover, Scripture generally depicts the poor as powerless (2 Sm 12; 1 Ki 21; Jr 52;

2 Ki 25; see also Deist 1977:65). Furthermore, the prophetic invective against Israelite society (cf Am 8:4-6) bears witness to this tendency of Scripture as well (see also Weir 1988-89:13). According to Gowan (1942:344, 347) the situation of distress from which the poor cry out to God, are circumstances reflecting their condition of powerlessness.

In vers 4b God commands the gods to deliver (נַצֵּל) the poor from the hand of the wicked. Van Zijl (1970:70) says concerning נַצֵּל that: 'in die meeste gevalle is dit 'n bevryding van iemand van die mag van sy vyand' (Ex 2:19; 18:9f; Hs 2:11; Gn 37:22). The use of נַצֵּל in verse 4b also suggests that the poor word-pair גַּל־יְתוּם connotes powerlessness.

The above discussion, therefore, points to the fact that in vers 3-4a the word-pair גַּל־יְתוּם should be construed as powerless.

Verse 3a has עָנִי and שָׁרָא as parallel terms. But this half verse is embedded in the framework beginning with גַּל and ending with גַּל as the diagramme shows:

שָׁפְטוּ־גַל יְתוּם	3	3
עָנִי וְרָשָׁ הַצְּדִיקוּ	4	
פְּלִטוּ־גַל וְאַבְיוֹן	5	4

Tsevat, quoted by Tate (1990:336) points out that the poetic device repetition is used effectively as can be seen in the pattern גַּל־יְתוּם־עָנִי־שָׁרָא־גַּל. This stylistic device indicates that the terms for poor are similar in meaning and can be construed as powerlessness (cf also Handy 1990:55-56, 58, 61; Tate 1990:336). Fensham's (1962:135) consistent use of the term 'weak' (powerless) as an umbrella concept for the metaphors widow, orphan and poor, serves as further proof that the terms for poor connotes powerlessness.

Ordinarily עָנִי coupled with שָׁרָא means needy as a result of material lack. Its placement, however, within the framework of the terms meaning powerlessness, suggests the connotation powerlessness for the word-pair שָׁרָא־עָנִי.

In addition to what has been said above, attention should also be drawn to the fact that the three word-pairs for poor are bounded by the word רָשָׁעִים in verse 2a and verse 4b. In other words, the terms for poor and wicked are in apposition to each other (Kraus 1986:151). רָשָׁעִים connotes powerful. The wicked (powerful) and the word-pair for poor are in a contrasting relationship to each other. Therefore on the basis of the grammatical principle of apposition, the three word-pairs for poor can be taken to mean powerlessness (cf Mowinckel 1962:150-151).

The contrasting connotations of powerful (wicked) and powerless (poor) can also be illustrated by the reference made to the parts of the body. Hand, which symbolizes power (Handy 1990:55; Rhode 1992:6; Ex 2:19; 1 Sam 7:14) is contrasted with limbs (*dal*) (cf Alexander 1975:350).

On the basis of meaning parallelism therefore it can be inferred that the three word-pairs for poor in verses 3-4a refer to powerless(ness).

5.3.2.2.3 Merismus

Merismus is another poetic device used in the Psalm. Miller (1986:40) defines merismus as 'a figure of thought wherein two polar or opposite terms are placed parallel so that together they convey the meaning of the totality' (cf Dahood 1968:11; Kaiser 1981:225-226). An example of merismus in Psalm 82 is the fact that *שִׁפְטוּ הַיְדֵדִיקִי* and *פְּלִטוּ* (verses 3-4a) all 'refer to aspects of ruling' (Handy 1990:56, 59, 61; Dahood 1968:270). The three terms are employed to convey the idea of total, complete rule.

Of the ten Hebrew words for 'poor' the poet uses only five, he therefore mentions the few as representative of the whole and by focussing on the categories *עָנִי*, *יְתוֹם*, *דָּל*, *שֶׁרֶץ* and *אֲבִיוֹן* the complete scope of the duty of the gods is emphasised. They must take care of all the poor. The various terms for poor form a mosaic of powerlessness which can be experienced in the cosmos, and which the gods have a duty to eradicate.

Thus the poet uses merismus to express the scope, diversity and extent of the powerlessness which is the result of the misrule of the gods. Hengstenberg (1848:36) remarks 'everything is ruined by them, [i e] they ruin everything'.

We pointed out previously that the meaning of the Hebrew terms for the English word 'poor' was still in dispute. By means of this exegesis of Psalm 82:1-4, and by focussing particularly on the poet's use of anti-thetical chiasmus, meaning parallelism and merismus we endeavoured to establish that *רְשָׁעִים* is contrasted with the Hebrew word-pairs *רֶשַׁע-עָנִי* and *יְתוֹם-דָּל*, and *אֲבִיוֹן-דָּל* with the result that poor is construed as powerless and wicked as powerful. Wicked is a metaphor for powerful and the poor word-pairs are metaphors for powerlessness.

6. DISTINCTIVE ASPECTS OF POWERLESSNESS

We said that the word-pairs for poor reflect the diversity of powerlessness. This diversity implies that the various Hebrew terms depict various aspects (perspectives) of powerlessness. Kraus (1988:153) remarks: "I am poor and needy" has reference to a wider range of concrete realities (my emphasis)' (cf also Gowan 1942:353; Kvalbein 1987:81; McPolin 1989:96). Gous (1991: 169) remarks:

[D]ie saak waarom dit in die gedeelte [1 Ki 21] gaan is dus eerder politieke as ekonomiese armoede. Nabot en sy volgelinge het nie gebrek gely omdat hulle nie die nodige besittings tot hulle beskiking gehad het nie. Hulle gebrek was aan mag'

Naboth and his friends were poor in the sense that they were powerless, that is, they were politically powerless as opposed to economically powerless. Thus we see that powerlessness can be regarded as a concept with a variety of perspectives or aspects. Fabry (1978:207-229) in discussing לָלַי maintains that it has several aspects, namely, psychosomatic weakness (Gn 41:19); military weakness (2 Sm 3:1); agricultural (economic) weakness (Jdg 6:6, 15); social weakness (Lv 14:21) and godliness (Is 9:6, 7; Ps 72).

Given this background we suggest that the concept powerlessness in Psalm 82 has the following aspects (perspectives), namely, physical powerlessness (Ps 22:24, 26; 41:1); psycho-emotional powerlessness (Ps 70:5; 12:5); socio-economic powerlessness (Ps 49:2; 132:15; 112:9); religious powerlessness (Ps 37:14; 107:10; Harris et al 1990:190) and military powerlessness (Ps 74:19; 18: 27).

7. CONCLUSION

The concepts power, powerful and powerless(ness) run like golden threads through Psalm 82:1-4. In verse 1 we encounter it in the participial by means of which the pre-eminence of God in the divine council is described. He presides; he is Sovereign. He is powerful and the gods are powerless.

Secondly, in verses 2-4 these concepts depict the relationship between the רָשָׁעִים and the Hebrew word-pairs רָשָׁעִים-עָנִי, יְתוּם-דָּל, אֶבְיֹן-דָּל. Using antithetical chiasmus, meaning parallelism, merismus, sound and word play the wicked is defined as a metaphor for powerful and the poor word-pairs as metaphors for powerlessness. We conclude therefore:

- * That the terms for poor and their combinations have the connotation powerlessness.
- * That the terms are metaphors for powerlessness.
- * That the one concept 'powerlessness' has various perspectives.

We consequently affirm that the Hebrew terms דָּל, יְתוּם, עָנִי, רָשָׁע and אֶבְיֹן usually translated in English by the equivalent poor, connote powerlessness.

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