

# Psalm 69:36c-37b: A reinterpretation of a deuteronomic- deuteronomistic formula?

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## Abstract

*In Psalm 69:36c-37b reference is made to the deuteronomic-deuteronomistic formula “yrš ‘rs” (i.e. possession of the land). A reinterpretation of this formula in these verses is proposed. The promise regarding the possession of the land is not made to the whole of Israel, as is the case in Deuteronomistic literature, but, instead, possession of the land is promised only to the “offspring of the servants”, in other words “those who love his name”, the pious, the community of the “servants”. The aim of this article is to deal with the issue of the “possession of the land” in Psalm 69:36c-37b in more detail.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The sense of being lost, displaced, and homeless is pervasive in contemporary culture. The yearning to belong somewhere, to have a home, to be in a safe place, is a deep and moving pursuit. Loss of place and yearning for place are dominant images. They may be understood in terms of sociological displacement. They may be understood in terms of psychological dislocation, as today an increasing number of persons are disorientated, characterised as possessors of the homeless mind.

This, of course, is not a new struggle, but it is more widespread and visible than it has ever been. Nor is this sense alien to the Old Testament (OT) promise

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of faith (Brueggemann 2002a:2). The OT itself is primarily concerned with the issue of being displaced and yearning for a place. Land is a defining theme in OT tradition, if not the central theme. The OT is preoccupied with the concrete particularity of land; thereby assuring that Israel's faith is in touch with material as well as sociopolitical-economic aspects of living in the world. Therefore, one cannot consider the faith of the OT or the God of the OT (Yahweh) without at the same time being concerned with socio-economic analysis, since the issue of the land evokes and hosts profound hope, imaginative social policy, deep moral conflict, savage acts of violence and also acute communal disappointment.

No other people in the history of mankind was as preoccupied as the people of Israel with the land in which they lived. The whole of OT historiography revolves around the Land (Weinfeld 1993:183). According to OT tradition God's first encounter with Abraham and Sarah (who were to become the ancestors of Israel) concerned land (Gn 12:1). Indeed, the pivot of the patriarchal stories is the promise of the land for the Patriarchs and their descendants. The entire ancestral narrative of Genesis is preoccupied with God's promise of land and, derivatively, with the presence of an heir who will carry the land promise into the future. This ancestral promise of land - in a sure oath from God - is defining for all events that follow in the OT (cf Gn 15:18-21). Israel lives in the conviction that sooner or later it will receive a secure land. The ancestral promise is matched in the Mosaic tradition, which is organized around God's deliverance from Egypt. According to Deuteronomy 26:8-9 Yahweh brought Israel out of Egypt with a mighty hand, he brought them into that place and gave them that land, namely a land flowing with milk and honey. The exodus is completed by the entry into the land of promise.

The great articulation of land theology is found in the book of Deuteronomy: Yahweh gives the land, Israel takes possession of the land (Brueggemann 2002b:121; Habel 1995:36, 52; Lohfink 1990:383-90; Perlitt 1994:97-108; Schechter 1981:3)<sup>2</sup>. The book of Deuteronomy can be regarded as a political document. The ideology of this book promotes a theocracy in which Yahweh has conquered the land for Israel's occupation, demands all the credit for these achievements, and expects a corresponding sense of total indebtedness on Israel's part. The image of the land as good and prosperous is designed to heighten Israel's sense of total gratitude. All the good things of the good land are

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<sup>2</sup> It is most often stated that Israel will enter and possess the land (cf e.g. Dt 4:1; 8:1; 11:8).

derived from Yahweh. The importance of the collection of sermonic addresses and commandments is to assert the non-negotiable conditions of land possession, conditions that are worked out in policy and public action but that are understood theologically as the commandments of Yahweh.

The story of the early part of the OT is thus a movement from land anticipation to land governance and finally to land loss, culminating in the deportation and displacement from the land, signaled as the “exile” (Brueggemann 2002b:122). Remarkably in this tradition preoccupied with land, the exile is the defining signature event of ancient Israel. The exile, moreover, became the matrix in which the ancient promises of land were reiterated afresh. Thus the great prophetic traditions of Isaiah 40-55, Jeremiah 30-31 and Ezekiel 33-48 all assure exilic Israel that God will once again give land to Israel as it was first given to the heirs of the ancestors<sup>3</sup>. With these utterances the gift of land is again in prospect. Again Yahweh guarantees, and again Israel is to trust the promise and receive the gift.

Having given this background, I will now give attention to specifically Psalm 69:36c-37b as the issue of the “possession of the land” is also addressed in these cola. The main aim of the subsequent section is to elaborate on the way this formula functions in its context in this psalm text.

## **2. PSALM 69:36c-37b: A REINTERPRETATION OF THE LAND PROMISE?**

Colon 36c is syndetically linked to the preceding cola (36ab) by means of the conjunction “and”. It, however, differs substantially from these cola. This colon (as well as the following cola) does not describe salvatory act(s) of God anymore, but reveals the consequences of these acts of salvation which have just been described in the preceding two cola (Sedlmeier 1996:115). In “and they will live” the conjunction “and” has a consecutive function: The verb is hereby assigned to a future domain and thus concurs with the verbs (which are both in the *yiqtol*) in 36ab in the sense that it also indicates an act which is hoped for, but it is yet to come. Of special importance is also the change of subject which has taken place. In 36ab the subject of both verbs is indicated as 3rd person masculine singular (“he”); the appellative *Elohim* (“God” – 36a) here functions as the subject of both

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<sup>3</sup> Cf Is 49:19-20; 51:2-3; Jr 31:12-14.38-40; Ezk 37:13-14; 47:13-14.

these two verbs (“he will save” and “he will rebuild”). In 36c, on the contrary, the subject of the verb is indicated as 3rd person masculine plural (“they”). The question which inevitably comes to the fore is whether it is possible to establish the identity of this subject, which is just merely indicated by means of an impersonal “they”. Here we encounter an example of delayed identification. The identity of this subject is only made known to us in the ensuing colon, namely in 37a as “the offspring of his servants”. The verb “and they will live” is followed by the adverb “there”, which indicates location. This adverb refers back to the nouns in 36ab, namely “Zion” and “the cities of Judah”. We encounter another verb in the final position, namely “and they will possess her”. This conjunction “and”, attached to the verb, also has a consecutive function: Both verbs in this colon are thus to be seen as a continuation of the preceding *yiqtol* forms (namely “he will save” and “he will rebuild” in 36ab) (Michel 1960:114 §16,27; cf also Tillmann 1992:91). The object of this verb is indicated by means of the pronominal suffix (psf) 3 f s attached to it – it surely has “Zion” (36a), which is a feminine noun, as its antecedent. The composite “the offspring of his servants” (37a) also functions as the subject of this verb.

The two cola 37a and 37b are syndetically linked by means of the conjunction “and” (37b). Colon 37a commences with the construct construction “the offspring of his servants”, in which the *nomen rectum* – a collective concept functioning as genitive attribute of the *nomen regens* – takes up a concept which has already appeared as a self-indication of the supplicant, and namely in the singular form in colon 18a (“your servant”). “The offspring of his servants”, functioning as the subject of the colon, is followed by the predicate “they will inherit her” which occurs in the final position. The object of this verb is indicated by means of the psf 3 f s attached to it. It surely has “Zion” (36a) as its antecedent; corresponding to “and they will possess her” (36c)<sup>4</sup>.

Colon 37b also commences with a construct construction (“and those who love his name”). The *nomen regens* is, parallel to 33b, also formulated as a participle m pl and, in all likelihood, indicates the same group; it here functions as the subject. The *nomen rectum*, functioning as a genitive object, has the psf 3 m s attached to it; this psf refers to *Elohim* (36a). The predicate “they will live” occurs

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<sup>4</sup> The two verbs *yrš* and *nhl* seem to function as synonyms. In this regard compare Lipinksi (1998:320) and Wanke (1997:731).

in the final position. Linked to it, by means of the *maqqeph*, is the preposition *beth* with the psf 3 f s attached to it (“in her”); it functions as an adverbial indication of place (cf Jenni 1992:181). Once again this psf 3 f s (“in her”) has “Zion” (36a) as antecedent. Cola 37a and 37b display homoioteleuton; they are thus synonomously parallel to one another (Tillmann 1993:59).

The construct construction the “name of God” has already been referred to in colon 31a. Whereas in 31a it is only stated that the supplicant will praise the “name of God”, it is now said that those who love his name (i e the name of God) will live in (the restored) Zion (36a). One can thus detect a progression which has taken place from the first colon (31a) of this last stanza of Psalm 69 (31a-37b) to the last colon (37b)<sup>5</sup>. This progression can be explained by means of the term “Fortschreibung”. The group responsible for these verses give expression of their own identity in these verses: They identify themselves with the “original” supplicant who wants to praise the name of God. They, however, do not only want to praise God’s name, but they are “those who seek God” (33b) and therefore also the ones who love his name.

The cola 37ab are not only syndetically linked to one another, but also display syndese with the preceding colon (36c); the conjunction “and” which occurs at the beginning of colon 37a (“and the offspring”) link them together. Thematically they also correspond to one another. Furthermore, these three cola (36c-37b) share the common characteristic that they all contain the psf 3 f s at the end of each respective colon; this psf surely has Zion (36a) – a feminine noun – as antecedent. Of further importance is the fact that these cola extend the cola 33a-34b: They list two more honorary titles describing this group of people who will receive God’s salvation. In cola 33a-34b they were named the “poor”, “god seekers”, “needy” and “his captives”. Over and above these four honorary titles, they are now designated as the “offspring of his servants” and “those who love his name”.

This promise that the offspring of the servants will inherit the land pre-supposes the great division within the land. It points to one of the dominant social issues which was at stake in the post-exilic times, namely the whole issue of land. The question of to whom the land belongs, which was depopulated as a result of the deportation, was a hotly debated question. According to Ezekiel

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<sup>5</sup> Cf Groenewald (2003a:153-175) with regard to the strophic demarcation of these cola.

11:15 those who were spared after the first deportation in 598/597 and were thus still living in Jerusalem claimed the land, arguing that those who had been deported were far from Yahweh. Ezekiel, however, contradicted their argument and thereby rejected their claim to possess the entire land (Ezk 11:16f). According to Ezekiel 33:24 those who still resided in the ruins of the land of Israel after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 asserted the same claim; this time they appealed to the example of Abraham who was only one man, yet he took possession of the land. The prophet, however, disputed the argument and again rejected their land claim (Ezk 33:25f). Isaiah 49:8 states the fact that the land will be established in a time of favour, as well as the desolate “heritages” (*n<sup>e</sup>hālôt*) will be reapportioned.

Psalm 37, an acrostic wisdom psalm, which uses the deuteronomic-deuteronomistic formula *yrš 'rs* (i.e. possession of the land)<sup>6</sup> for the righteous as a kind of *Leitmotif*<sup>7</sup>, clearly illuminates the social situation of Psalm 69:36c (cf Lohfink 1990:394). What usually happens in such situations of restoration, surely also happened in post-exilic Judah, namely the elite of the society easily got their share, whilst the little ones<sup>8</sup> were pushed aside<sup>9</sup>. This psalm in all probability refers to the small farmers, who increasingly faced class differences and were therefore risking to lose their land to the big landowners<sup>10</sup>. This concurs with the view of Nehemiah 5:1-5, according to which the poor, having mortgaged their

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<sup>6</sup> According to Lohfink (1990:383) “the *qal* of *yrš* with the conquered land as its object became a key theological concept in a Deuteronomistic narrative structure, probably dating from the period of expansion under Josiah, that can be observed from Dt 1 through Jos 22. The theme of the texts is Israel’s occupation of Palestine. They were composed as part of the narrative framework of the Deuteronomic law or added to it secondarily.”

<sup>7</sup> Ps 37:9, 11, 22, 29, 34; synonyms in 37:18, 27, 29 (cf Hossfeld & Zenger 1992:33 and Hossfeld 1993:24).

<sup>8</sup> Namely the “poor” and the “captives” (cf also Is 61:1 “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners”; NRSV).

<sup>9</sup> Albertz (2001:112); Berges (2001:73-4); Irsigler (1997:77-8) and Irsigler (1998:588-9) (cf also Wengst 1987:48: “Hier dürfen solche Menschen im Blick sein, die ihr Land ganz oder teilweise verloren haben, die von ihrem Grund und Boden verdrängt wurden”).

<sup>10</sup> Hossfeld (1993:24) and Wengst (1987:47) (cf Is 65:21-22, which witness to this situation: “they shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands”; NRSV).

fields in time of drought, or to raise taxes, found themselves foreclosed and, together with their children, reduced to servitude<sup>11</sup>. Psalm 37 does not promise possession of the land to the whole of Israel, as is the case in Deuteronomistic literature<sup>12</sup>. It, instead, assumes an Israel already living in the land, Yahweh's beneficent gift. There are some who are wicked, and there are some who are good, who adhere to Yahweh, i.e. the just. The latter, also called the "poor" and the "oppressed" in the land, are exhorted not to fret, but to keep their faith and hope in Yahweh. Possession of the land (*yrš 'rs*) is promised to them, whereas the wicked will be destroyed in the end.

In Psalm 69:36c-37b we encounter a terse summary of the theme which was extensively developed in Psalm 37<sup>13</sup>. The inheriting servants (36c.37a) have already been identified as the "poor" in cola 33a-34b. They, the poor and the oppressed, thus claim for themselves that they are the real pious, the real servants. Therefore they will reside in the restored Zion and in the newly built cities of Judah. This inheritance will be passed on to their offsprings, they will own it forever and it will not be taken away from them again. *yrš 'rs* is used similarly in Isaiah 57:13; 60:21; 65:9. According to these Trito-Isaian texts the poor, i.e. those who are chosen by Yahweh, his servants, will inherit both the land and the holy mountain and they will live there<sup>14</sup>. These parallels in Trito-Isaiah suggest that the "servants" (69:37a) and "those who love his name" (69:37b) do not indicate the returnees as a group, but rather those among them who are faithful to Yahweh (Lohfink 1990:394). In this regard Koenen (1994:85) infers as follows: "Sie ... gelten dadurch nicht mehr dem Volk als Ganzem, sondern nur der Gruppe der Frommen." This group of servants will bring forth the prophetic figure

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<sup>11</sup> According to Kippenberg (1978:59) "die wichtigste Ursache aber war nach der Darstellung des Nehemia das Interesse der Vornehmen und Vorsteher an der Verschuldung ihrer ärmeren Mitbürger" (cf also Albertz 1994:495; Crüsemann 1985:213).

<sup>12</sup> In this regard Hossfeld (1993:24) infers as follows: "die Sprache der traditionellen Landverheißung an das auserwählte Volk wird hier auf den Armen übertragen." See Schmid (1997:580) for a concise summary of the formulaic Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic presentation of the conquest of the land.

<sup>13</sup> Cf also Pss 25:13 and 61:6, as well as the similar passage in Ps 102:29 (with *škn* instead of *yrš*).

<sup>14</sup> According to Berges (2002a:12) "die Umformung der bisherigen Lebensverhältnisse wird zugunsten der Knechte (*Ebadim*) geschehen, die in Jerusalem und auf dem Zion Wohnrecht genießen"(cf also Berges 2002b:74).

(Is 61:1) who stands up against these kinds of social injustices of which the aforementioned texts testify. He – this prophetic figure – proclaims good news to the oppressed and liberty to the economically bound; this includes a year of God's favour as well as the day of God's vengeance. Isaiah 54:17, however, states it explicitly that it is nobody else than the group of servants that will step in for the poor and the oppressed (Berges 2001:74; cf also Berges 1998:397). This group will also accept the responsibility to rebuild the devastated cities of Judah (Is 54:3)<sup>15</sup>.

It is appropriate to draw some preliminary conclusions with regard to this section (69:36c-37b). This textual layer can be designated as a *Fortschreibung*; that is to say, a continued literary expansion of the text based upon the reinterpretation of its earlier material<sup>16</sup>. This present act of *Fortschreibung* only takes place in the last element of the text, namely the “vow to praise”. This *Fortschreibung* comprises the reinterpretation of concepts occurring in the older text, for example the “servant” (18a) which has now become the “servants” (37a). It seems quite apparent why the “servants” chose the text of Psalm 69 in order to add their “theology” to it: They indeed must have seen their lives prefigured in this specific prayer of the older afflicted “servant” (69:18a). Through the voice of the I-suppliant in this text they made their own voices heard; his situation thus became paradigmatic for their own. They certainly also would have regarded themselves to be inflicted and wounded by God (69:27a). Their affliction was even worsened because of the fact that their enemies talked about their pain as well, that is the pain of the ones who had already been slain by God (27ab). According to these cola their affliction is attributed to the fact that they are painfully aware that they will not live long enough to experience a sure residence in Zion. Therefore, the hope for a future restoration is extended to their descendants.

Furthermore, they do not only regard themselves to be “servants”, but also attach the designation “those who love his [Yahweh's] name” (37b) to

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<sup>15</sup> The relatedness of these Deutero-Isaian texts with Ps 69 is obvious. Wischnowsky (2001:205) formulates it as follows: “Liest man 54,3b im Zusammenhang mit 54, 17b verblüfft die Nähe zu Ps 69,36f. Dieser kollektive Abschluß wirkt in der individuellen Klage Ps 69 allerdings kaum ursprünglich.”

<sup>16</sup> Cf Groenewald (2003a:239-60) for an extensive outline with regard to the *Fortschreibung* which took place in this section of the text of Psalm 69.

themselves. This designation immediately calls cola 31ab to mind: They, however, do not only praise the “name of God”, but, more importantly, they love his name. This is an indication that they must have regarded themselves to be the ones who are really faithful to Yahweh, that is to say the real pious Jews. The significance of the two concepts “Zion” (36a) and “the cities of Judah” (36b) is further explicated by defining them as the inheritance of the “offspring of his [Yahweh’s] servants”<sup>17</sup>. That is to say, the descendants of the real faithful will inherit Zion together with the cities of Judah. It thus seems that during this act of *Fortschreibung* an older text’s depictions of suffering has been related to the circumstances experienced by a new group in their specific circumstances; this group designates themselves with the concept “servants”<sup>18</sup>.

Perhaps it is convincing to proclaim that this *Fortschreibung* expresses the confidence that God’s cosmic and historical work (35a-36b) includes attention to the needs of his faithful servants (cf Tate 1990:202); that is to say, those who are responsible for this “ending”, or even “new ending”, of Psalm 69. If Yahweh would do this, his servants would be able to live in a restored Judah and take possession of it again as their divinely given inheritance, as the Israelites did long ago – as is described in Deuteronomy and Joshua. The restored servant community would dwell permanently in a restored land. The servant community is described as “those who love his [Yahweh’s] name”; That is those who honour the divine presence and power in the “name” and trust in it.

In these three cola we have thus distinguished not only a reinterpretation of pre-existing textual material, but also the convergence of two different streams of Judaeen traditions into one textual layer, namely the prophetic-eschatological tradition together with deuteronomic-deuteronomistic language. It is thus evident that these redactors did not only add material to an already pre-existing text, but they also creatively used traditions which had been known to them in order to create a new ending for an already existing text. It therefore will do justice to them to regard them as interpreters, and namely as productive and creative interpreters.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf Wischnowsky (2001:205): “... und es um die Sicherung des Erbes der ‘Gottesstadt’ für die Gruppe der ‘Knechtsgemeinde’ geht”.

<sup>18</sup> Cf Groenewald (2003b:748-757) for an explication of the social identity of this group designating themselves with the concept “servants”.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

From these three cola (36c-37b) we can deduce that the group of people in the post-exilic Judaeon society regarding themselves as the “servants” also experienced a sense of being lost, displaced, and homeless. Their yearning to belong somewhere, to have a home, to be in a safe place, was a deep and moving pursuit. They (the “servants”) were, however, painfully aware of the fact that they will not live long enough to experience a sure residence in Zion; therefore hope for a future restoration is extended to their descendants. These three cola were added to an already existing text as a “new ending”, namely a “servants”-adaptation: “and they will live there and possess her; and the offspring of his servants will inherit her, and those who love his name, they will live in her” (69:36c-37b). They – the descendants of the servants – were thus those who were destined to participate in the realization of the promised salvation of Zion. Subsequently, they would take possession of Yahweh’s holy mountain as well as the cities of Judah.

In this regard reference is made to the deuteronomic-deuteronomistic formula *yrš ‘rs* (i.e. possession of the land)<sup>19</sup>. This textual layer, however, does not promise possession of the land to the whole of Israel, as is the case in Deuteronomistic literature, but, instead, possession of the land (*yrš ‘rs*) is promised only to the “offspring of the servants”, that is to say “those who love his name” – the pious, the community of the “servants” (“Knechtsgemeinde”). In this regard Hossfeld (1993:24) justly infers as follows “die Sprache der traditionellen Landverheißung an das auserwählte Volk wird hier auf den Armen übertragen”.

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<sup>19</sup> See Lohfink (1990:386): “The Deuteronomic law incorporated in Dt 1 – Jos 22 and the various strata en recensions of the entire Deuteronomistic history build on these texts, using the *qal* and *hiphil* of *yrš* (with the land or the peoples inhabiting it as object) as a cliché in the stereotyped Deuteronomistic vocabulary.”

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