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**THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL IN THE OLD
TESTAMENT IN DIALOGUE WITH THE
NEIGHBOURING CULTURES**

A critical, semantic, and exegetical analysis

- SUMMARY -

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Object, hypothesis and methodology of the research

The area of research surveyed is that of the Old Testament. The main topic of this doctoral research is the belief in the afterlife as it is reflected in the Old Testament writings, and, for this, we propose to make a critical, semantic and exegetical analysis of the Old Testament Hebrew terms used to designate *the soul* as well as those that express its state or location once the body with which it was united has died. We wish to consider how the God of Abraham, the One who reveals himself to him in order to bring him into the promised land (cf. Acts 12:1-9; 15:7) and who inaugurates a new faith for all humanity, progressively revealed in the Old Testament the elements that were to make up the Israelite conception of the immaterial side of man ("the soul" or "the spirit"). which, for the purposes of this thesis, will be treated as synonyms) and about the reality after his death. As a support for a more detailed research of the biblical texts, we will introduce in the presentation the broad religious framework of the Levantine Mediterranean space in order to see to what extent human contact can extorally and descriptively complete the revealed notions, thus completing the understanding we have of the Israelite faith in the afterlife. The main concern of our study, however, will remain the way in which the Old Testament scriptures understand the soul and its state after the death of the body.

Examining the Old Testament, we find currents of thought that are complex and sometimes as opposing as nationalism and universalism or free will and predestination. The same will be true of the notion of *soul*. This reality, which we describe in Romanian using a single word with a unitary and homogeneous meaning, will be described by the Hebrew of the Old Testament through a multitude of polysemantic terms. Our research seeks to identify the meaning of these terms and what they describe, and how these terms led to the notion of the afterlife that is present in the Old Testament scriptures. We want to critically analyze the Old Testament writings in order to identify how the reality called by our language by the term soul is described and what is said about its fate once the body that contained it dies.

We will examine the presuppositions behind the meanings of the Old Testament Hebrew terms that designate the soul and describe its state or location after the death of the body, drawing a kind of doctrinal map that covers their theological and historical maturation until the fulfillment ($\pi\lambda\eta\rho\acute{\omega}$) brought by Christ and described in the New Testament was reached. According to the biblical scholar Julio Treballe (emphasis added):

"Today it is recognized that the history of biblical exegesis starts from the beginnings of its own Bible. Some Bible books interpret others; the most recent to the oldest. The interpolations or reelaborations of the texts are no longer considered as mere by-products of a decadent and late era, but as a testimony of Jewish exegesis, the predecessor of the Christian one. [...] The exegesis that the writings of the New Testament make on the books of the Old Testament has been intensely studied, often going so far as to qualify the New Testament as a kind of great midrash of the Old Testament."¹

In order to provide as complete an investigation as possible, we do not regard the Old Testament as a self-contained and self-sufficient reality, but as a trunk whose branches are the writings of the New Testament. Even the distinction between these two and their division can leave the impression of a division, when, thematically speaking, they represent a single unitary reality that unfolds throughout all the texts. Summing up, the objectives of the research are the following:

- We want to consider, first of all, the Old Testament scriptural terms that refer to both the reality we call the *soul* and its experiences after it leaves the body. Our analysis, which focuses on the ancient texts of the Israelites and the reflections they imprinted on them, also focuses on God's revelation and progressive revelations within the Old Testament. Implicitly, we will also analyze the way God is understood throughout it. The way in which the divinity of the Israelites was perceived and described throughout the Old Testament texts constitutes a fundamental theological, philological, philosophical, social, cultural and historical testimony, optimally representing the development of the religious thought of this people, and the study of this development is imperative in a research that aims at a critical analysis of the development and maturation of such a religious paradigm;
- We critically analyze and identify the results and implications of these revelations that took place in the Old Testament environment. When God communicates with mankind, He not only reveals Himself, but also reveals truths about the reality He has created and how the people He has placed within it must relate to it. The sum of these religious realities and truths resulting from the divine revelations will come to make up the religion of the Israelites, and, later, of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. Of all Old Testament revelation, we will focus only on the revelations related to the afterlife and all the religious elements related to it. What is the origin of faith in the afterlife in Old Testament revelation, and how did this faith develop throughout the Old Testament to the mature faith taught to the

¹ TREBOLLE, *The Bible*, 52.

Church? We therefore propose to study the historical, cultural and religious context of the concepts related to the afterlife in the Old Testament and to follow all the occurrences that can be evidence of their development.

- To achieve our goals, we will use a varied methodology of study of biblical texts. If we wish to analyze the occurrences in which divine revelation is expressed on the theme of *the soul* within the Old Testament, as well as what resulted from this revelation in the matter concerned, then the study will have to focus predominantly on the Masoretic Old Testament text. The main methodology with which we will carry out our research is the analysis from a critical, semantic and exegetical perspective of the biblical texts pertinent to our theme. Nor will we neglect the various branches of modern and contemporary biblical criticism, referring to the criticism of sources ("which is especially concerned with the analysis of the literary structure, the words used and the style that we can appreciate in the Scriptures, with the aim of discovering the various oral and written traditions that lie behind the writing and writing of biblical texts"²), to the criticism of forms ("which targets the literary forms of the passages studied in order to make connections between them and between the oral forms in which they circulated long before they were transposed into writing")³ and to editorial criticism ("which seeks to identify the literary genres and themes that lie behind biblical books in order to try to identify the theological and thematic motivations that led to their writing and their possible relationship with other much older materials"⁴). We will use these methods and others derived from them, making a clear distinction between the natural and supernatural development of the religious ideas present in the sacred texts. Where necessary, we will turn our attention to patristic exegesis or other Christian or Jewish theological commentaries if we consider its use beneficial for comparing different perspectives in the analysis of the text.

- We will study and analyze different aspects and concepts of the three great cultures and religious traditions with which the Old Testament Israelite people had the most important contact: Mesopotamia (Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian, and Neo-Babylonian periods), Ancient Egypt, and Ancient Greece (from the Homeric writings to the Hellenistic period). This approach does not imply on our part the assumption a priori of an

² PAGÁN, *Introduction*, 60.

³ PAGÁN, *Introduction*, 61.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

evolutionary hypothesis of the religion of Israel, which would have been formed over time only by the adoption and adaptation of foreign beliefs, but it is important to observe what Israel's neighbors believed about the fundamental conceptions that came to make up the Old Testament religion.

Our intention is not for this doctoral research to be tributary to biblical deconstruction. This term, having its origin in the literary movement initiated by the writer Jacques Derrida, refers, in the biblical context, to "the process of systematic dissecting and often rejection of the faith with which one grew up. Sometimes the Christian will deconstruct until he reaches atheism. Some stay there, but others are experiencing a reconstruction."⁵ This doctoral research does not aim at such an objective, nor does it use this approach.

2. Justification of the title

The biblical scholar Bruce Metzger justifies, in his book⁶, the need to establish a critical analysis of the New Testament texts on two grounds: the original manuscripts of the New Testament texts are not available, and the texts we have contain variations of varying degrees. Following this line of thought, we wish to justify the need for a critical analysis of the original Hebrew Old Testament terms for the *soul* and for its state or location after the death of the body, with the desire to try to draw a doctrinal map as clear as possible both historically and theologically. Our concern is, first of all, scientific and academic. They involve the objective and impartial examination of sources and texts, without applying a priori a theological or religious reading to them, trying to draw hypotheses with the texts and the context of their writing as a starting point. These do not imply the elimination of pious reading or the religious and theological message of the Holy Scriptures, but only the reconstruction and historical tracing of the development that these Old Testament religious and philosophical conceptions had.

We will begin by explaining the subtitle of our thesis, *A Critical, Semantic and Exegetical Analysis*, because it gives substance to the title. Usually, criticism denotes a hostile attitude towards something, but *the critical analysis* to which we refer designates the objective evaluation of the elements we have at our disposal in order to draw impartial conclusions based on them. Quoting historian Reinhart Koselleck, "the word 'criticism' [...] and the word 'crisis' [...] derives from the Greek

⁵ Alisa CHILDERS, *Another Gospel? A Lifelong Christian Seeks Truth in Response to Progressive Christianity* (Carol Stream: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), 24.

⁶ Bruce M. METZGER, *The Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), xv.

κρίνω: to differentiate, to select, to judge, to decide [...]. "Crisis" designated discrimination and dispute, but also decision, in the sense of a final sentence or evaluation, which, today, is part of the category of criticism".⁷ We do not agree with the diatribe that theologian Gerhard Maier advances against this methodology. He argues as follows: "The problem is the word 'critical' in the historical-critical method, because it links the interpreter a priori to a secular approach to the Bible. [...] Far from being an open and unprejudiced interpretation, the historical-critical method 'represents a prejudice in the sense of a priori decision regarding the result'".⁸

We consider it unfounded to criticize a sincere search for the foundations of the presuppositions that make up the religious paradigm of which we belong and which we profess. Maier gratuitously presupposes the constituent elements of the worldview and of the paradigm of the exegete who approaches the biblical text. It is certain that the exegete can present a materialist, evolutionary or atheistic point of view on history and sacred texts, and that he can use the critical method of evaluation of the text to argue in this direction, but it is equally certain that the exegete can come from a paradigm radically opposed to it, and argue obstinately for the biblical premises with which he already came loaded. We believe that both approaches are ineffective if we aim to identify as clearly as possible the historical and theological truth of the texts we will study, and that in any research the Aristotelian aphorism should prevail: *in medio virtus*. The researcher should be free to use all the methods at his disposal to objectively and impartially evaluate the elements at his disposal and to draw conclusions based on them. Of course, each researcher comes from a certain context, and maintaining objectivity throughout the research can be difficult, but it is an effort that must be made so that the fruits of their study are as close as possible to truth and reality.

Once we have explained what we mean by the phrase *critical analysis*, we will explain what we refer to by *semantic analysis*. The *semantic* term "refers to the meanings of words".⁹ In our research, we want to analyze the meaning of the Hebrew words that designate the reality described in Romanian by the term *soul* and of the terms that designate the locations or fate of this *soul* once the body dies. We are interested in the varied semantics that the words of the original Hebrew Old Testament texts have adopted on various occasions. Our interest is therefore not an etymological one, since we do not necessarily want to analyze the grammatical inflections of words, nor their origin.

⁷ Reinhart KOSELLECK, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 103.

⁸ David R. LAW, *The Historical-Critical Method. A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark International, 2012), 9.

⁹ Elena COMȘULEA, Valentina ȘERBAN, and Sabina TEIUȘ, *Dicționar explicativ al limbii române de azi* (Bucharest: Editura Litera, 2008), 818.

We are interested in the meanings and definitions that those words carry and transmit within the Old Testament scriptures.

The last analytical approach we will use is *exegesis*. According to Anthony Harvey, Abbot of Westminster:

"Exegesis is a set of procedures for establishing the meaning of a text. Its necessity arises whenever a text continues to arouse interest or to be considered important, as in the case of laws, treatises or literary classics. It is not a requirement of the text at the time of composition: authors and editors aspire to clarify its perfect meaning. Nor is it a private transaction between the text and the individual reader, allowing for an unlimited range of interpretation. It is a product of the needs of the community that uses or values text. Exegesis is of particular importance in a religious community that bases its doctrine, moral norms, and spirituality on texts believed to be inspired. Such a community will have an interest both in developing procedures for finding meanings and applications hitherto unsuspected in the text, and in controlling the types of exegesis that could influence the beliefs and conduct of its members."¹⁰

The need for exegesis stems, fundamentally, from the lack of contact with the original authors of a text. Without access to that primary source that gives rise to a writing, we are left with a lot of words that are doomed to interpretative mistakes. The meanings of words change with each era, and this truth is even more relevant when considering translations. The situation is even worse if we add the fact that the texts belong to ancient civilizations, which wrote them thousands of years ago. Contemporary man is always on the prowl for the danger of making *issegesis*, that is, of attributing to the text his own presuppositions, prejudices and conceptions, without letting the text speak for itself. Although absolute neutrality may seem impossible to achieve, the goal of exegesis is to deduce as much as possible the original meaning of a text. The objective of our research is to let the Old Testament texts that we will analyze speak without any confessional prejudice on our part and convey what they have to say about the nature *of the soul* and its fate once the body with which it has been united ceases its biological activity.

If so far we have analyzed the subtitle of our thesis, now we will analyze the first part of the title: *The Immortality of the Soul in the Old Testament*. This is the central theme around which all our research revolves. Our goal is to find out what information the Old Testament presents about the immortality of the soul and what happens to it once man's biological life ceases. Although we will analyze the term and its meanings in detail in the corresponding chapter, here we will only advance that the Romanian term *soul* describes, in principle, "the spiritual substance that gives man life, being

¹⁰ Jean YVES-LACOSTE, *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 2005), 528.

of divine origin and with eternal existence".¹¹ In the Orthodox Church, for example, there is the conception that man is not only made up of what can be perceived at the sensory level, but also has a non-material side which, as long as the body lives at the biological level, is united with it, but once it dies:

"We believe that the souls of those who have fallen asleep are either resting or in torment, according to what each one has done, for when they are separated from their bodies, they immediately go either to joy or to sorrow and mourning. We confess that neither their joy nor their condemnation are complete, because only after the common resurrection, when the soul is united with the body in which it has behaved well or badly, will each one receive the perfection of either joy or condemnation."¹²

This is how *the Confession of Dositheus*, approved by the Orthodox Church in 1672, at the Council of Jerusalem, is expressed. This doctrinal statement represents the official position of this Church in relation to the activity and state of the soul of which I have just mentioned. The purpose of our research, as we have already explained, is to search in the Old Testament for the foundations for these notions, wanting to see what the Old Testament scriptures have to say about both *the soul* and its fate after the death of the body.

The title of this thesis ends by mentioning that our analysis will also be done *in dialogue with neighboring cultures*. The motivation behind this approach is not a Pan-Babylonian one. We do not seek to argue for a foreign influence on Old Testament writings. We also seek to look at the texts, notions and concepts of cultures adjacent to the Israelite one because we believe that they could bring light and clarification to the biblical topics that we are researching. We start from the hypothesis that, if there is a topic present both in the scriptures of the Old Testament and in the scriptures related to it (the subject representing a parallelism), then we can find out more information about the topic in the Old Testament through the explanations that its neighbors offer about that subject. We have no Old Testament scripture that has the concrete purpose of explaining the nature of the soul or its fate after the death of the body, but we have only collateral and incidental remarks on these subjects. Old Testament neighbors, however, sometimes present rich information on these topics in occurrences that we will analyze throughout this doctoral research.

The Old Testament interreligious contact between the Israelite culture and its neighbors is evident. We see this, for example, in the first eleven chapters of the book of *Genesis*, where Mesopotamian motifs and mythologies are used as a vehicle for expressing the Israelite religious vision. There are many examples, which is why we believe that the Israelites' neighbors can indirectly

¹¹ Comșulea, Șerban, and Teiuș, *Explanatory Dictionary*, 881.

¹² OVERBECK, ed., *The Acts and Decrees*, 150-151.

provide explanations about the Israelites' beliefs when the latter do not offer enough, and in our research we will present concrete cases in this regard. The mere presence of the same term in two cultures does not imply the presence of the same *meaning* of the term. We are aware of this fact, so we will note in each case what can be a parallelism and what cannot; we will emphasize what can be useful and what cannot in order to better understand how *the soul* is presented in the Old Testament and what can be known with certainty about its fate after the death of the body.

3. Structure of the thesis

In addition to the sections aimed at the technical aspects of the thesis, such as this introductory chapter and the final ones, in which we will present the conclusions and bibliography, the basic content of our thesis will be structured on the following four chapters:

- In the second chapter of this research we will study the way in which *the soul* was conceived in the Ancient Middle East. As we have previously explained, this broad designation refers, in our thesis, to the three great cultures with which the Israelites interacted throughout their history: Ancient Egypt, the Mesopotamian civilizations (Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian and Indo-Iranian) and Ancient Greece (from the period of the Homeric writings to the Hellenistic period). It is controversial to qualify Ancient Greece as a part of the Middle East. We have considered other names to replace *the Ancient Middle East*, such as *Mediterranean cultures* or *the Levantine area*, but each new possible name comes with its own controversies. We stick to the title initially proposed, explaining that we also include ancient Greece among the other civilizations studied. The term *soul* does not appear without controversy either. In antiquity there was no semantic equivalent of this term everywhere, so our research would sometimes seem anachronistic, making us part of the mistake of projecting contemporary meanings onto cultures that did not have them. Taking into account this danger, we will clarify when necessary that we are not dealing with an equivalent term, but with something different but similar at a semantic level. The best example is Ancient Egypt, where there is not a single term for what we call *soul*, but there were several complex elements that, interacting with each other, could construct a related word of the term having the same semantic characteristics as similar terms. The purpose of studying words related to biblical terms for the *soul* is to see possible clarifications where the biblical texts are silent or less detailed in terms of the terms they use, or do not propose, from the beginning, to deal

systematically with the question *of the soul*, being preoccupied with other matters and having other purposes. Due to the extensive contact between cultures, by observing the terms used in both the Old Testament scriptures and neighboring texts, we can better deduce the meaning they carry.

- In Chapter III we will consider what the Old Testament has to say about the subject *of the soul*. Our research will focus on a critical, semantic and exegetical analysis of the Hebrew Old Testament terms *nefesh*, *nešāmāh* and *rûaḥ*. Of all the terms used, we consider them to be the closest to the meaning that the word *soul* has in ecclesiastical and secular language; both because of their meaning in the texts and because they are usually translated into the Greek of the LXX as ψυχή (*psychē*), this being the classic term that designates *the soul* in our contemporary understanding and because, in Romanian translations, they are translated even as *soul*. The last term, *rûaḥ*, is much closer to the term *spirit*, but for the purpose of our research we will treat them as two related and synonymous terms. It is the equivalent of the Greek term πνεῦμα (*pneuma*). We will not discuss the relationship between the two terms in this sentence, but we will limit ourselves to considering them equivalent due to the fact that, however we understand them, they are also used to express the breath or breath of man, which represents the fact that man is a living being, or the non-material side of man who continues his existence after the death of the body.

- In the third chapter we will treat the state or destination of the soul after the death of the body according to the conceptions we find in the Ancient Middle East. Once we have established the possibility of man's continued existence (in one form or another) after the death of his body, it remains to see what the mentioned cultures have to say about this existence. It can refer to a simple state of existence or consciousness or it can refer to a specific location that, being in the same universe as our world, represents the destination of human souls after the death of bodies. In our research we will see results as varied as possible, ranging from a simple gloomy and gloomy existence in a diaphanous state of consciousness to a whole process of apotheosis by which man not only enjoys the fellowship of the gods, but becomes one of them. We will see both kingdoms under the dominion of deities who administer death and become its personification, as well as simple underground realms where the dead gather with their acquaintances. The reason we choose to study the way in which the afterlife locations or states were conceived among the

Israelites' neighbors is, in the first place, because of the brief way in which the afterlife is explained within the Old Testament scriptures. However, although this reality is not detailed to us, it shares many characteristics with the equivalent conceptions found among neighboring cultures, and we believe, once again, that studying them provides light where the Old Testament scriptures do not. We must remember that, as in the case of *the soul*, none of the Old Testament writings deal with this theme and does not aim to deal with this issue. It would be unfair of us to have such expectations from a text whose purpose is totally different. This does not mean that the text would not contain, tangentially and collaterally, information about the topics that interest us in our research, but any investigation on this subject must begin with awareness of this limitation. It is precisely to make up for these shortcomings that we have chosen to look at the texts of the cultures adjacent to the Israelite one.

- In the last chapter of the basic content of our thesis we investigate the nature and location of the soul's afterlife in the description of Old Testament writings. Using a procedure similar to the one we have used in the case of *the soul*, we will also in this chapter deal with the words of the canonical Old Testament Hebrew text that describe this reality, such as the term *sah'ol* or other terms and phrases that are, in our opinion, equivalent and related in the sense that they describe the same afterlife existence of *the soul* or *spirit* that continues its existence after the death of the body. We have advanced to the previous point about how briefly described this subject is in the Old Testament scriptures. This fact is certain, however, even those brief descriptions paint a rather suggestive and clear portrait. We note in particular the uniformity that can be deduced from all the words and phrases used to describe this reality. This again contrasts with the reality of *the soul* and with the exaggerated polysemantics of the words used to describe it. There is a common existence for all the deceased once the body dies. We will limit ourselves to making a critical, semantic and exegetical analysis of the most important words and phrases used to describe the reality of existence after death, just as in the case of the soul. About the genesis of this idea or its history we will only briefly recall, when necessary. Nor will we deal with the subject of resurrection, a fundamental doctrine of Christianity that goes beyond the theme of our research, focusing only on the afterlife of *the soul* and the nature of this existence, while the resurrection is a different mode of existence that begins at the end of the intermediate state of the soul and that involves its reunion with the body with which it lived on earth.