LET SLEEPING GODS LIE?

Meindert Dijkstra

In ancient human religious perception, even the gods need sleep, are sometimes in stupor, suffer other incapacity or illness and occasionally die, disappearing into the Netherworld. They also have reasons to keep their mouth shut and their eyes closed. But what about the God of Israel in the Bible? In the paragraphs about the idea of divine incapacity and sleeping, the authors of ‘The Silent God’ observe:

Yet in this case too it may be surmised that the difference between Israel and its neighbours was less pronounced than it may seem, ...

It follows on a paragraph in which they say that there was little room for the concept of divine silence because of incapacity in view of the polemics on the incompetence of the foreign gods. This is all comparatively spoken—but in what way and to what extant comparatively spoken?

How to Compare ‘the Humanity’ of the Gods?

The Biblical authors, in particular its poets had no problem in speaking about the face, the eyes and the mouth of God as if parts of the human body used to show friendliness or anger, to see and to speak and also, indeed, to keep them shut if needed. In similar vein, YHWH shows human emotions, feelings of wrath, mercy and remorse. Nevertheless, even if in the Bible occasionally the reproach is found that God is asleep (Ps. 44,24), and occasionally the daring simile is used that God awakes, as if from sleep, or even like a fellow from the stupor of wine (Ps. 78,65), the Israelite supplicant

---

* This essay includes also a first, provisional edition of a Hittite prayer to El-Kunirsha (CTH 342.2). I would like to thank here Dr Silvin Košak (Mainz), Prof. Dr Theo van den Hout (Chicago) and Dr Dennis Campbell (Chicago) who read a first draft for this prayer to be used in this contribution and kindly helped me with some suggestions to restore the text and to correct and improve its translation. Of course, I am alone responsible for its publication, use and interpretation in this essay.

1 M.C.A. Korpel, J.C. de Moor, The Silent God, Leiden, Boston, 260.
would be stolidly aware of the ever vigilant deity Yhwh. There are other gods who may be unable to answer or asleep (1 Kgs 18,27), or who may even die, but never the Keeper of Israel, the living God, who neither slumbers nor sleeps. In the conclusions of the section that gave its name to the book some remarkable differences are summed up from the wealth of sometimes confusing evidence. The God of Israel is ‘slow to chide and swift to bless’, that is, prudent in his silence. Though at times very human and father-like in his merciful attitude, the idea of weakness and incapacity on the part of God is usually avoided. “The transcendence of God meant that the composers of the canon of the Hebrew Bible had to exclude certain typical human reasons for keeping silent.”

The authors collected an astounding wealth of material from the ancient Near East to prove their point, but conclude that the evidence for silence on the part of the deities in the ancient Near East appeared to be as meagre as in the Bible. And they did it very systematically, distinguishing all kinds of silence because of awe and fear, forbearance and prudence, incapacity (including illness) and sleep in the ancient Near East and the Bible. There are, however, a few problems in such an approach:

a) What is the ancient Near East? Or more precisely what is presented here as ancient Near Eastern documents or as ancient religious tradition?

b) For what reason is the Bible singled out from ancient Near Eastern tradition and compared to it?

c) And what is the ‘specific gravity’ of the different traditions of the ancient Near East and the Bible?

d) What about the interrelatedness and overlap of such aspects as incapacity and sleep, illness, dying and death?

Let me give an example of Problem a). Though a reasonable number of quotations from Greek and Latin authors were included, a great wealth of material from the Hurritic and Hittite world was hardly touched. From the Hurritic tradition that is understandable because it is still ill-understood. To be fair, there is a small section of Hittite texts but, when I checked, the

---

2 Ps. 121,4; see B. Becking, ‘God-Talk for a Disillusioned Pilgrim in Psalm 121’, *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 9 (2009), #1.


4 Korpel & De Moor, *Silent God*, 276.

5 Korpel & De Moor, *Silent God*, 274.