

## “*Before Him Went Pestilence*” (Hab 3:5): Biblical Lexis and Semantic Field of Epidemics

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines the various biblical terms for epidemics and their etymologies in order to define their meanings in their literary and theological contexts. It considers the possible divine or demonic background of the lexemes for epidemics, from the triad of Hebrew terms *deber*, *qeteb* and *rešep*, which are used in some of the mythological passages of Bible. Major works on the subject proceed from the assumption that these terms were demons in the ancient Near East or that they were deities who became demonised by the authors of the Hebrew Bible. Close attention is paid to the linguistic and semantic aspects of the texts in their immediate contexts in order to determine the function of each term. The study shows a clear difference in meaning between the terms, although in some cases their semantic contents overlap. However, their function as God’s negative agents prevail regardless of their original meaning and this is a consistent phenomenon with other Hebrew concepts of mythological origins in the Bible.*

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19, Epidemic, Lexemes, Etymology, Divine and Demonic Background, Mythological origin.

### A INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has caused unprecedented health, economic and societal damage across the world. As follow the news or talk to people about the widespread contagious disease COVID-19, we hear the new coronavirus being referred to as a “plague.” Most of us have never lived through pandemics such as the coronavirus before but we have learned about them—from the Spanish flu to, more notoriously, plagues like the Black Death. Historian Walter Scheidel in his book, *The Great Leveler*, talks about the Black Death in the mid-1300s, in which about 24 million people died in Europe and the population of England fell by half.<sup>1</sup> Already Thucydides, in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* (II.vii.3–

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Scheidel, *The Great Leveler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 291–313.

54), mentioned the plague in Athens during the Peloponnesian war and Tacitus,<sup>2</sup> in *The Annals* (2.47), referred to the plague in Rome during the time of Nero. Most importantly, in numerous places in the Bible, deaths by plagues, pestilence or pandemics are mentioned. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the definition of the English word *pestilence* is "a contagious or infectious epidemic disease that is virulent and devastating" or "something that is destructive or pernicious." Likewise, the definition of the English word *plague* is "an epidemic disease causing a high rate of mortality" or "a disastrous evil or affliction."<sup>3</sup>

Under the umbrella term *plague*, the scope of this article includes the current pandemic, which has killed millions of people all around the world and has reduced the quality of everyone's life, especially of the younger generation.<sup>4</sup>

Cultures of the Ancient Near east (ANE) attributed epidemics, illnesses and all kinds of natural evil to the work of demons. This view seems to be understandable since at that time there was no knowledge of bacteria, viruses, other biological causes of illness or medical theories and concepts that are well known to us today. This ANE view is apparently shared by ancient Israelites. The biblical terms for plague and epidemic share a very close etymology to the ANE terms, but describe a specific context.

This article sheds light on the lexis of epidemics and its semantic field in the original biblical texts. The research goal of the present study is to take a closer look at the Hebrew and Greek texts in which the basic terms of the semantic field of epidemics occur and to probe their meaning in their context in the biblical texts. To accomplish this goal, the study will provide exegetical remarks on the relevant biblical passages in which the Hebrew terms for epidemics appear, namely three main terms, *deber*, *qeteb* and *rešep* and cognate terms *negep*, *maggepah* and *bechor mawet*. Attention is paid also to the etymology and usage of terms in the ANE and then to linguistic, semantic, and structural levels of the biblical texts in order to determine the meaning of the terms and their theological contexts. The reading focuses on how the various signals within the text can guide one towards meaning, noting how the biblical author uses theological concepts, the various poetical devices and mythological elements.

## **B     *DEBER* – PESTILENCE, PLAGUE**

<sup>2</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary [cited 10 July 2022]. Online: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> Hedviga Tkáčová et al., "Social Media and Students' Wellbeing: An Empirical Analysis during the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Sustainability* 13 (2021): 10442. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su131810442>.

## 1 Occurrence

The Hebrew noun *deber* (דִּבְרָה) occurs 49 times in the Old Testament, almost half of these in prophetic texts (in Jeremiah, 17 times; Ezekiel, 11 times; Hos 13:14; Amos 4:10; Hab 3:5). Although generally translated as “plague/pestilence,” *deber* is best understood as “destruction,” possibly by infectious disease.<sup>5</sup> In the Bible, *deber* is one of the three proverbial causes of death on a wide scale besides war (sword, blood) and famine (and it occurs mainly in Jeremiah and Ezekiel). The term is mostly used in a personified sense as an agent of Yahweh. In the 17 occurrences in Jeremiah, it most often appears with ‘sword’ and ‘famine’ (15x), deadly forces that always come as a punishment from Yahweh for the Israelites’ disobedience in form of idolatry. In Ezekiel, *deber* occurs 11 times as a personified deadly force accompanied by others, often by sword and famine as well as other elements such as *dam* (bloodshed) and *hayyah ra’ah* (beings of evil).

## 2 Etymology

Scholars generally associate *deber* with Akkadian *dibiru* (calamity, disaster) but this is disputed by the Assyrian Dictionary. According to this influential dictionary, the Akkadian logogram, *dibiru* or *dibiri*, is probably a Sumerian word with no connection to the Hebrew term *deber*.<sup>6</sup> Driver connects it to Ugaritic *dbr* (death).<sup>7</sup> Arabic has the words *dabrah* (calamity) and *dabarah* (running sore, abscess)<sup>8</sup> and cognate terms *dabr* (death) and *dabrat* (misfortune).

## 3 *Deber* in the Ancient Near East

Pettinato argues that the title on the Eblaite tablet (TM. 75.G.1464 v. XI 12–18) suggests that *Dabir* was a patron god of the city of Ebla, the earliest kingdom in Syria (3000–1600 B.C.).<sup>9</sup> However, Pomponio and Xella question his hypothesis and suggest an identification of *Dabir* with *Rasap* (i.e. *Rešep*), a well-known

<sup>5</sup> Judit M. Blair, “De-Demonising the Old Testament,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh), 2008, 175 [cited 2 July 2022]. Online: <https://era.ed.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1842/3480/Blair2009.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1>.

<sup>6</sup> A. L. Oppenheim et al., eds., *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (1956–2010), 1959: 134–135 [cited 18 June 2022]. Online: <https://oi.uchicago.edu/research/publications/assyrian-dictionary-oriental-institute-university-chicago-cad>.

<sup>7</sup> Godfrey R. Driver, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark 1956), 154.

<sup>8</sup> Günter Mayer, “דִּבְרָה *debher*,” in *TDOT* 3 (ed. Johannes G. Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 126.

<sup>9</sup> Giovanni Pettinato, *The Archives of Ebla: An Empire Inscribed in Clay* (Garden City: Doubleday 1981), 247.

Eblaité deity.<sup>10</sup> In Mesopotamia as well as among the Hittites, the representation of illnesses as demons is very common and this perception can support the occurrence of *dbr* in the Ugaritic texts *KTU* 1.5 vi:6–7 and *KTU* 1.5 v:17–18 about the death of victorious Baal and his journey to the netherworld.<sup>11</sup> Both texts speak in a parallel way of the (*ars*) *dbr*//šd *šlmmmt* (*land of steppe // coast of the realm of death*). However, the personification of *deber* as “demon of pestilence” here can only be assumed, according to Dahood,<sup>12</sup> if *šlmmmt* is construed as “the lion of Mamettu” but which Del Olmo Lete says is unlikely.<sup>13</sup> The empirical meanings of “pestilence” or “steppe” are more suitable.<sup>14</sup> More cogent is the parallelism with *rešep* in Hab 3:14, given the presence of this deity in the Ugaritic text *KTU* 1.14 i:18–19 as a god of destruction and epidemics.<sup>15</sup> The eschatological hymn in Hab 3 presents *deber* and *rešep* marching by Yahweh’s side as his helpers (Hab 3:5). This follows the ancient Mesopotamian tradition in which “plague” and “pestilence” are present in the entourage of the great god, Marduk.<sup>16</sup> Ishtar also appears with her footmen beside, before and behind her.<sup>17</sup> Thus, both suggestions—that *dbr* is a place name and that it is related to the realm of death—are equally possible. Personification of *deber*, however, is questionable.

#### 4 Meaning of *deber* in the Bible

*Deber* is the most frequently used term for pestilence in the Bible (nearly 50 times). It is not used in a secular setting in the Old Testament. According to the typical translation, pestilence is always a divinely sent punishment for disobedience. Mayer offers catalogues of the term *deber* within the Prophetic-Deuteronomistic Explanatory Scheme where most occurrences are found.<sup>18</sup> *Deber* can be sent by God upon Israel and foreign nations (Exod 9:15; Ezek

<sup>10</sup> Francesco Pomponio and Paolo Xella, *Les dieux d’Ebla: Étude analytique des divinités éblaïtes à l’époque des archives royales du IIIe millénaire* (Münster: Ugarit – Verlag, 1997), 123–124.

<sup>11</sup> Gregorio del Olmo Lete, “Deber,” *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*: Edited by (2nd ed.; ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking and Pieter W. van der Horst; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 231; Ondřej Stehlík, *Ugaritské náboženské texty: Kanaanské mýty, legendy, žalmy, liturgie, věštby a zařikávání pozdní doby bronzové* (Praha: Vyšehrad 2003), 144.

<sup>12</sup> Mitchell Dahood, *Ras Shamra Parallels: The Texts from Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible* (Analecta Orientalia 51; Roma: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum 1981), 54–55.

<sup>13</sup> Del Olmo Lete, “Deber,” 232.

<sup>14</sup> Johannes C. de Moor, *The Seasonal Pattern in the Ugaritic Myth of Baalu* (AOAT 16; Kevelaer: Butzon und Bercker, 1971), 186.

<sup>15</sup> Stehlík, *Ugaritské náboženské texty*, 176.

<sup>16</sup> Johannes C. de Moor, *The Rise of Yahwism: The Roots of Israelite Monotheism* (BETL 91; Leuven: Peeters, 1990), 134.

<sup>17</sup> Eberhard Schrader, *Die Keilinschriften und das AT* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1903), 455.

<sup>18</sup> Mayer, “דְּבֵר debher,” 126.

28:23), groups (Jer 42:17, 22; 44:13) or individuals (e.g. Gog in Ezek 38:22–23). Before God sends it (cf. Hebrew verb *šillach* in Jer 24:10; Ezek 14:19; Amos 4:10), *deber* mythologically abides with him (Hab 3:5). The term *deber* is always part of a list or at least in parallelism (Num 14:12; Hab 3:5). It occurs in *multipartite lists* of the Egyptian plagues (Exod 7:8–10:29 cf. 5:3, 15; Ps 78:50): pestilence, famine, sword, dispersion (Ezek 5:12); famine, wild beasts, pestilence, blood, sword (Ezek 5:17); famine, wild beasts, sword, pestilence (Ezek 14:12–23; cf. Jer 15:1–3); sword, pestilence, blood, hail, fire, brimstone (Ezek 38:22); famine, drought, damage to crops, fall of cities, locusts, pestilence, sword (Amos 4:6–11); lack of rain, famine, pestilence, damage to crops, locusts, enemies, misfortune, disease (1 Kgs 8:36–40; cf. 2 Chr 6:24ff; 7:11ff; 20:6ff); disease, enemies, lack of rain, famine, wild beasts, sword, pestilence (Lev 26:16ff); pestilence, disease, damage to crops, lack of rain, enemies (Deut 28:21ff). *Deber* also appears in nearly 30 *tripartite lists*: sword, famine, pestilence (Jer 14:12; 21:6, 7, 9; 24:10; 27:8, 13; 29:17, 18; 32:24, 36; 34:17; 38:2; 42:17, 22; 44:13; Ezek 6:11, 12; 7:15; 12:16; 2 Sam 24:13, 15 = 1 Chr 21:12, 14); war, famine, pestilence (Jer 28:8); pestilence, blood, sword (Ezek 28:23); sword, wild beasts, pestilence (Ezek 33:27).

This review reveals that the lists focus on prophetic and deuteronomic passages. They give details about God’s judgment, which is brought on by Israel’s breaking of the divine covenant. The triad of famine, pestilence and sword is connected with the downfall of the Judean state in 587 B.C. and it describes the war with its most dreadful consequences. When we set this alongside the triad of sword, wild beasts, pestilence of the word of judgment in Ezek 33:27, which came upon those left behind after the fall of Jerusalem and Jeremiah’s summation of the prophetic message as “war, calamity, pestilence” in 28:8, we must, of course, come to the conclusion that under the formal pressure of the number “three,” these lists arose on the basis of life’s experiences. Accordingly, the multipartite lists were not expansions of the tripartite lists; conversely, the tripartite lists (cf. Num 14:12) constituted only a selection from the catalogue represented by the multipartite lists.<sup>19</sup> The execration tablets of the ANE boundary stones and vassal treaties, which threaten a fixed consequence (e.g. famine, epidemics) for breaking a treaty, support this supposition. Wiseman notes that no form of the root *dbr* is used in the list for “pestilence” but the word *mutanu*.<sup>20</sup> These lists of curses were modified to conditions in Israel not only in descriptions of the judgment of Yahweh but also in the story of the Egyptian plagues and then again in the description of a pestilence as punishment for David in 2 Sam 24:13, 15.

Besides this empirical meaning, the term *deber* appears a number of times in a personified sense as a demon or an evil deity (in Hab 3:5 – “*Before him went*

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>20</sup> Donald J. Wiseman, “Jonah’s Nineveh,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 30 (1979): 51.

deber, and rešep followed close behind”; Ps 91:3, 5–6 – “For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly deber ... You will not fear ... deber that stalks in darkness, nor qeteb that wastes at noonday”; and Hos 13:14 – “O death, where are debarecha? O šeol, where is qotobcha?”). These three poetic passages gather together images applied to the Lord which recall mythical associations. However, only Hab 3 has clear mythological elements. According to the ancient Mesopotamian tradition, “plague” and “pestilence” are present in the entourage of the great god, Marduk.

Keel argues that foreign cults of *deber* and *rešep* are “demonised” in the Hebrew Bible and became integrated into Yahweh’s court, as in Hab 3:5.<sup>21</sup> Thus, following his line of argument, it would seem that since terms that are related to foreign cults refer to demons, the other occurrences of *deber* and *rešep* would have to be taken as referring to demons. Fabry’s view is similar to Keel’s in that he argues that demons in the Old Testament are remnants of an earlier polytheism and he sees various groups of individual demons (*deber*, *rešep*, *qeteb*) as well as “demonic animals” (the jackals, ostriches and owls in Isa 13:21–22; 34:13–14; Jer 50:39 and Job 30:29) in the Old Testament.<sup>22</sup> The other recent works (analogous to Keel’s and Fabry’s) proceed from the assumption that the terms *deber* and *rešep* referred to demons in the ANE or later or that they were deities who became “demonised” by the authors of the Hebrew Bible. In our opinion, it is much more objective to talk about the so-called demythologised deities or demons. Taking *deber* to mean disease is consistent with both the context of Ps 91:3, 6 and its other occurrences. In Ps 91:6, *qeteb* refers to some sort of destruction. If *deber* is taken here to refer to infectious disease as elsewhere, then, the idea is that such a force was unstoppable. It is only Yahweh who can warn of the dangers or who can prevent the spread of the disease.

Hebrew examples of some demythologised deities in the Bible abound. For example, *jareach* (moon) is the etymological equivalent of Jarik, the moon-god, known from the Ugaritic texts. Although the moon may have retained faint traces of divinity in the Bible, it has been divested basically of its divine status. The same holds true of the “sun” (*šemeš*). The Hebrew word *šemeš* corresponds

<sup>21</sup> Otto Keel, “Schwache alttestamentliche Ansätze zur Konstruktion einer stark dualistisch getönten Welt,” in *Die Dämonen/Demons: The Demonology of Israelite-Jewish and Early Christian Literature in Context of Their Environment* (ed. Armin Lange, Hermann Lichtenberger and Diethard K.F. Römheld; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 228–230.

<sup>22</sup> Heinz-Josef Fabry, “‘Satan’ – Begriff und Wirklichkeit: Untersuchungen zur Dämonologie der alttestamentlichen Weisheitsliteratur.” *Die Dämonen/Demons: The Demonology of Israelite-Jewish and Early Christian Literature in Context of their Environment* (ed. A. Lange, H. Lichtenberger, and K. F. D. Romheld; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck) 269–271.

to the god Šamaš in Akkadian and the goddess Šapšu in Ugaritic.<sup>23</sup> The Hebrew Bible frequently uses also mythological motifs such as God’s struggle with the chaos monster, variously marked by expressions such as *tehom* (the deep), *rahab*, *yam* (the sea), *tannin* (the monster, the dragon, etc.); or thunder as the voice of God (Ps 29:3–9); the stars as armies of the Lord; death personified (Isa 28:15; Ps 49:15); and the mountain of the gods (Isa 14:13; Ps 48:3). These mythological motifs are poetic devices that demonstrate that God has dominion over the chaotic forces and nothingness. The function of mythopoetic motifs is more important than the identity of those beings controlled by the Lord. Schökel points out that although there are mythical motifs in it, the Hebrew Bible clearly has not admitted myths in its ideological and literary configuration.<sup>24</sup> Caird argues that mythical motif is a specialised kind of metaphor.<sup>25</sup>

A similar personification of *deber* is suggested also in Jer 21:6, “*And I will smite the inhabitants of this city, both man and beast of a great deber and they will die*” (cf. also Ps 78:50). *Deber* as a personified dangerous force which brings death and destruction, appears as one of Yahweh’s agents who carries out his punishment or simply emphasises his awesome power as a member of his retinue. This is also clearly the case in Deut 28:21; Exod 9:3, 15; Ps 78:50 and 2 Sam 24:13, 15. Thus, some passages present the personified *deber* more clearly than others. However, the personification of *deber*, as in texts of the ANE, remains questionable also in the Bible. There is lack of evidence to suggest that there are mythological figures behind the personification of *deber*. Although the *deber* seems to be one of Yahweh’s angels, one of the *malache ra’im*, there is no evidence to suggest that this was one particular angel and thus that *deber* would be a proper noun.<sup>26</sup> It is rather a function. However, the mythological motifs (e.g. in Hab 3:5 and Hos 13:14) are used merely as a poetic device. It is not possible in many cases to identify the precise disease on the basis of information given in the Bible.<sup>27</sup> The term *deber* was understood by many scholars as a bubonic plague of bacterial origin due to its diffusion in the Middle Ages. The usual meaning given to *deber* is plague/pestilence and this certainly is possible. Wars in the ancient world were often accompanied by famine and disease. Epidemics, the outbreak of infectious diseases, were amongst the greatest killers of the ancient as well as the medieval world. However, Meyers points out that there is

<sup>23</sup> Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking and Pieter W. van der Horst, “Introduction,” *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*: XVI.

<sup>24</sup> Luis Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2000), 18.

<sup>25</sup> George B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 220.

<sup>26</sup> Blair, “De-Demonising the Old Testament,” 194.

<sup>27</sup> Mayer, “דֵּבֵר *debher*,” 126.

a difference between pestilence and plague.<sup>28</sup> Whereas one is an "endemic parasitic disease that is infections which occur in a community more or less all the time without much alteration in their effects from year to year or even century to century," the other is an "abnormal occurrence of acute infectious disease." She suggests that *deber* is used to refer to the former, that is, pestilence and that *maggēpah* is used to describe plague (e.g. in Numbers and Exodus). However, none of the passages discussed in Jeremiah specifies what kind of disease is meant by *deber*. The emphasis is on it being a deadly force that together with sword (i.e. war) and famine brings total destruction to the people and only occasionally is there a hope of survival. Thus, a more general translation such as suggested by Bright, "disease," seems preferable to pestilence or plague.<sup>29</sup>

## 5 Greek Version of *deber*

As indicated by the change from *deber* to *mawet* (death) in Jer 15:2 and the consistent Septuagint (=LXX) rendering with the Greek term θάνατος – *thanatos*, "death" – (except in Hab 3:5, where *logos* reverts to the reading *dabar* and in passages which omit the word), *deber* denotes a fatal pestilence (Jer 27:13; Ezek 33:27, etc.) that comes upon humans and domestic animals as infectious disease (Exod 5:3; 9:3, 15). *Deber* should be translated as the Greek term λοιμός (*loimos*, pestilence) in the Old Greek LXX translation but *deber* is exclusively rendered as *thanatos* (death) because pestilence was the cause of death on a wide scale. In the LXX, there are other occurrences of the term *loimos* that are without an equivalent Hebrew term. The literal meaning of *loimos* is pestilence or plague and in the LXX occurs five more times in Ezek 7:21, *pests of the earth*; 28:7, *strange plagues*; 30:11, *plagues sent forth from the nations*; 31:12, *strange plagues*; 32:12, *plagues from the nations*. In the deuterocanonical book of Sirach (39:29), there is a word pair, *limos kai thanatos* (famine and death) in the catalogue of nine evil things (vv. 28–30) for sinners. However, the Hebrew text of Sirach contains a word pair, *ra'ab wedeber*.<sup>30</sup> Modern Bible translations (RSV, EBN and Slovak Ecumenical Bible) render the Greek term, *thanatos*, as pestilence. In addition, in the Hebrew text of Sir 48:21, we encounter once again *deber* in "God struck the camp of the Assyrians and routed them with a plague." The author credits the defeat of the Assyrian army to the people's prayer (Sir 48:20), which brought down a deadly plague. It has nothing to do with the angel's work (LXX *angelos*, 2 Kgs 19:35–37) or the prayer of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 19:14–19).

<sup>28</sup> Carol Meyers, "The Roots of Restriction: Women in Early Israel," *BA* 41/3 (1978): 95–99.

<sup>29</sup> John Bright, *Jeremiah: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 21; Garden City: Doubleday, 1965): 121.

<sup>30</sup> Pancratius C. Beentjes, *The Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew: A Text Edition of All Extant Hebrew Manuscripts and a Synopsis of All Parallel Hebrew Ben Sira Texts* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006).



## C *REŠEP* – PLAGUE

### 1 Occurrence

The Hebrew term *rešep* (רֶשֶׁף) occurs eight times in the Hebrew Bible (Deut 32:24; 1 Chr 7:25; Hab 3:5; Pss 76:4; 78:48; Job 5:7; Cant 8:6bis). It appears to be a personal name of uncertain etymology. Indeed, in 1 Chr 7:25, *Rešep* is a proper noun, the name of one of Ephraim’s descendants. The other six occurrences are taken to be references to the West Semitic deity, *Rešep*, and because of this deity’s association with the plague in the ANE, the term in the Old Testament is regarded either as a demon or as appearing completely demythologised.<sup>31</sup>

### 2 Etymology

The etymology of the word *rešep* is unclear. The term probably contains a primary noun used as a reference to the deity of which the Samaritan verb *ršp*, “inflare,” is then a denominative.<sup>32</sup> In other Semitic languages, *rešep* is the designation for a widely worshipped deity whose name possibly was pronounced *rasapu* and possibly derived from an original *Raspu* that would then mean “one who burns” hence the reference to fire, lightning, flame, burning and pestilence.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, there is a proposal that the term is linked to the Akkadian verb *rasabu(m)* (to be awe-inspiring) and *rasbu(m)* (demanding reverence),<sup>34</sup> which some consider as misguided and essentially linked to the nature of the deity *Rešep* itself.<sup>35</sup>

### 3 *Rešep* in the Ancient Near East

The worship of the god *Rešep* was extremely widespread throughout the Mediterranean region – from the Anatolia and Cyprus to Egypt.<sup>36</sup> *Rešep* is attested at Syriac Tell Mardikh-Ebla in the third millennium B.C. where it seems he was a very popular deity. He was probably related to the royal necropolis as a chthonic god.<sup>37</sup> The name of the god *<sup>d</sup>ra-sa-ap* even occurs frequently in

<sup>31</sup> Blair, “De-Demonising the Old Testament,” 56.

<sup>32</sup> *HALOT* 3:1297a.

<sup>33</sup> Hartmut Gese et al. eds., *Die Religionen Altsyriens, Altarabiens und der Mandäer* (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1970), 141–142.

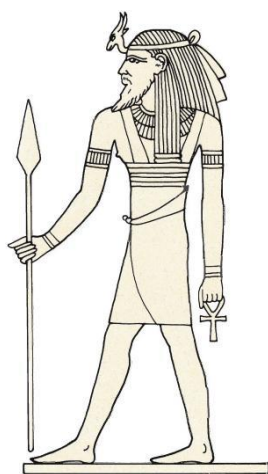
<sup>34</sup> Hans-Peter Müller, “Religionsgeschichtliche Beobachtungen zu den Texten von Ebla, Müller,” *ZDPV* 96 (1980): 7–10.

<sup>35</sup> Martin J. Mulder, “רֶשֶׁף *rešep*,” *TDOT* 14:11.

<sup>36</sup> Francesco Vattioni, *Il dio Rešep* (Napoli: Istituto universitario orientale, 1965), 41.

<sup>37</sup> Paolo Xella, “Resheph,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking and Pieter W. van der Horst, (2nd ed.; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 701.

Ugaritic texts.<sup>38</sup> Like Hebrew, Ugaritic also attests the plural form *ršpm* that may reflect the various manifestations of the deity.<sup>39</sup> The worship of *Rešep* became especially widespread in Egypt, particularly from the period of Amenophis II.<sup>40</sup> It was Amenophis II who adopted *Rešep* as a deity. Mulder mentions *rešep* as a theophoric element in Semitic personal names from Mari and Ugarit, in Phoenician and Punic names and in names from Cyprus.<sup>41</sup> In Ugaritic texts, *Rašap* often can be read in reference to Nergal or even be identified with him;<sup>42</sup> he serves as the gatekeeper of the sun goddess, the guardian of the netherworld. In the Aramaic linguistic evidences, one of the first inscriptions to mention *rešep* is on the Hadad statue of king Panammuwa I of Sam'al from the mid-eighth century B.C. (*KAI* 2:214).<sup>43</sup> *Rešep* occupied an extremely high position; he was after Hadad and El, the third deity in the pantheon.<sup>44</sup>



*Rešep* appears in the Egyptian texts and iconography as a god warrior with a short kilt and tassels and with the crown of Upper Egypt on his head, often bearing an emblem in the form of the head of a gazelle (cf. side picture from [www.isthatinthebible.wordpress.com](http://www.isthatinthebible.wordpress.com)). Sometimes other (Asiatic) gods accompany him such as Anat, Astarte, Sulman or Horon, who appears in a triad with Min and Qudsu.<sup>45</sup> According to a text composed in the Sumerian-Akkadian language, in Ugarit, he was identified with the Mesopotamian god of pestilence and the underworld, Nergal.<sup>46</sup> Like Nergal, *Rešep* also sends sickness and death, as we read in the difficult beginning to the Keret text *KTU*

1.14, i 18–19: “One-fifth *Rešep* gathered unto himself.”<sup>47</sup> Although *Rešep* sends pestilence and plague, for example, through the heat of the sun, he was considered to be a helper and deliverer from the very disasters that he sent, something that emerges, for instance, in the mention of this god in Ugaritic lists of gods and sacrifices. These characteristics make him on the one hand a salvific

<sup>38</sup> Johannes C. de Moor, “The Semitic Pantheon of Ugarit,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 2 (1970): 214–215.

<sup>39</sup> Jean-Michel Tarragon, “Le Culte à Ugarit,” *CahRB* 19 (1980):108.

<sup>40</sup> Reiner Stadelmann, *Syrisch-palästinensische Gottheiten in Ägypten* (Probleme der Ägyptologie 5; Leiden: Brill, 1967), 56–76.

<sup>41</sup> Mulder, “רֶשֶׁפְּ rešep,” 11–12.

<sup>42</sup> William J. Fulco, *The Canaanite God Rešep* (AOS 8; New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1976), 34.

<sup>43</sup> Herbert Donner and Wolfgang Röllig, in *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 1969), 2:214.

<sup>44</sup> Fulco, *The Canaanite God Rešep*, 43.

<sup>45</sup> Stadelmann, *Syrisch-palästinensische Gottheiten*, 134.

<sup>46</sup> Vattioni, *Il dio Rešep*, 54–55.

<sup>47</sup> Stehlík, *Ugaritské náboženské texty*, 176.

“highest god” and on the other hand a chthonic god, i.e. of the underworld and god of disaster.<sup>48</sup> Thus *rešep* appears in two forms, as both a benevolent and generous deity (in later Egyptian magical texts, *Rešep* is a god of healing) and as a dangerous one. In contrast, Blair insists that there is no evidence in the ANE that *Rešep* was regarded as a demon or an ‘evil’ deity.<sup>49</sup> His association with plague and disease was only one of his traits; he was worshipped mainly as a god of war and protector of kings.

#### 4 Meaning of *rešep* in the Bible

The Hebrew term *rešep* is a segolate form, a fact which confirms the original trilateral structure of the name. Apart from 1 Chr 7:25 where *Rešep* is a personal name of one of Ephraim’s sons often substituted with the alternative reading *wešutelach* (instead of names *werešep wetelach*), the other seven occurrences of *rešep* are in poetical texts (Deut 32:24; Hab 3:5; Pss 78:48 [plur.]; 76:4 [plur.]; Job 5:7; Cant 8:6 [bis plur.]). In addition, *rešep* is also in the original Hebrew text of Sir 43:17c. The plurals of *rešep* in four cases (out of a total of eight occurrences) remind us of the *rspm* attested both in Ugaritic and in Phoenician texts. It is difficult to translate the term appropriately in every instance. Mulder considers the idea that *rešep* evokes in the Bible the old Semitic god, a form that over the course of Hebrew linguistic history passes through certain stages even though the original, personal character of the god can still play a role in these nuanced meanings.<sup>50</sup>

The tradition of *rešep* as a god of pestilence is attested in Deut 32:24 and Ps 78:48. In the first text, the Song of Moses, *rešep* also appears alongside other destructive forces, such as famine and *qeteb meriri* (Deut 32:24). Those who provoked God to anger and were unfaithful. They are punished with hunger and destroyed by *rešep* and *qeteb*: “*I will heap disasters upon them, spend my arrows against them: wasting hunger, burning rešep, bitter qeteb*” (Deut 32:23–24a). There is no doubt that we have to deal here with the echo of two ancient Canaanite gods—*rešep* and *qeteb* (perhaps conceived as flying demons), personifications of the scourges that they spread. *Rešep* is usually translated in English versions as “consumption/heat” and *qeteb* as “pestilence/plague.” *Rešep* metamorphoses from the god who shoots arrows into an arrow in the hands of the Lord, who then uses this arrow to punish human beings. The specific phrase *leḥume rešep* can be understood as “consumed by fiery sparks” or “by the deity *rešep*.” The root *lḥm* in the sense of “eat” occurs in Prov 4:17. It is implausible however that this is a reference to the god Resheph, even though *qeteb*, which follows immediately, is also the name of a deity because nowhere in the Bible is *rešep* ever considered to be a divine being. Rashi (1040–1105) explains both *rešep* and *qeteb* in this verse as the names of demons, not deities. A similar

<sup>48</sup> Stadelmann, *Syrisch-palästinensische Gottheiten*, 55.

<sup>49</sup> Blair, “De-Demonising the Old Testament,” 58.

<sup>50</sup> Mulder, “רֶשֶׁפַּי *rešep*,” 14.

approach was taken by Caquot, who maintained that *qeteb* and *rešep* should be rendered as proper names and taken to be a reference to demons.<sup>51</sup>

In the second text Ps 78:48, we have an allusion to the seventh plague of Egypt (Exod 9:25): God has given up the cattle to *barad* ("hail") and the herds to the *rešeps* (plur.). Many interpreters citing the Greek translation of Symmachus view the word *barad* in this context as a scribal error from verse 47 for *deber*. In this case, there would be a word pair of *deber* and *rešep* as in Hab 3:5. In contrast, Xella notes that the poet deals with decayed deities, Barad // Rešep(s), depicted as malevolent spirits which accompany God in his destructive action.<sup>52</sup>

Habakkuk 3 offers in his eschatological poetry a fascinating example of divine council, describing a scene in which Yahweh comes up from the south to engage in conflict with the waters of chaos thus recalling the Canaanite myth of Baal's struggle with the sea. What is interesting here is Yahweh's military retinue in verse 5, *deber* and *rešep*. *Deber went before him, and rešep followed close behind*. This verse has two stichoi, with three words in each. Though these names are typically translated as "pestilence" and "plague" in English, they are actually the names of two West Semitic deities.<sup>53</sup> Day recalls the Ugaritic text that mentions Baal's victory over the dragon and in which Rešep plays the role of an assistant to the deity.<sup>54</sup> The word *rešep* evokes not only the demonic character of such plagues but also the personified form of epidemics (Heb. *jaša leraglaw* – followed at his feet).

Psalm 76:4 (*There he broke the flashing arrows /rišpe-qašet/, the shield, the sword, and the weapons of war*) mentions the *rišpe-qašet*, which could be interpreted as *rešeps* (plur.) of the bow that Yahweh breaks in his dwelling place on Zion, followed by the "shield, the sword, and the weapons of war." The Hebrew term, *rišpe-qašet*, could be related to the imagery of the god armed with a bow (Heb. *qešet*) and arrows especially in Egypt and in Cyprus as late as the fourth century. It cannot be ruled out that the Israelites understood *Rešep* as a deity associated with the atmosphere or lightning, similar to Baal or Hadad. Dahood points out that the "arrow that flies by day" (*chec ja'up jomam*) in Ps 91:5, alongside *deber* and *qeteb* in verse 6, may refer to *rešep*, possibly recalling one of the epithets of the god *Rešep* and emphasising the "fiery" aspect of the word in Hebrew.<sup>55</sup> In Cant 8:6b we have another echo of the "fiery" character of

<sup>51</sup> André Caquot, "Sur quelques démons de l'Ancien Testament," *Semitica* 6 (1956): 55.

<sup>52</sup> Xella, "Resheph," 703.

<sup>53</sup> Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 149.

<sup>54</sup> John Day, "New Light on the Mythological Background of the Allusion to Resheph in Habakkuk III 5," *Vetus Testamentum* 29 (1979): 353–354.

<sup>55</sup> Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II: 51–100* (AB 17; Garden City: Doubleday, 1968), 372.

*Rešep*, whose flashing arrows ignite an irresistible fire. No one can resist the power of love. The ardour of passion is like *rešep*’s “fieriness”; *its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame* (Heb. text *rešapeha rišpe ’eš šalhebetjah*). *Rešep*’s (twice in plur.) fire parallels a raging or Yahweh’s own flame in that love is like a divine or demonic fate one cannot escape. *Rešep* functions as a mythological metonymy.<sup>56</sup> We might therefore consider the mythological backdrop of the verse, which invokes the deities *Šeol* (cf. Cant 8:6a) and *Rešep*. The former is a mythical figure who swallows up the dead and is never satisfied (Isa 5:14), whereas *Rešep* is the god of plague and pestilence.

Job 5:7 is a very difficult text, inserted in Eliphaz’s first speech (“*but human beings are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward*”). It stresses the need for humans to have absolute trust in God. Here, “sparks” refer to “the sons of fire/of *Rešep*” (Heb. *bene rešep*). They seem to be winged demons, particularly if we think of Ps 91:5, where the expression “the arrow that flies” (mentioned already above) could be an allusion to god *Rešep*.<sup>57</sup> Even though the meaning “fire, lightning” is preferable in most translations, the meaning “winged demons that fly in the heavens” also fits. In these OT passages, the word *rešep* still resonates with characteristics of the deity who causes plagues, conducts relentless wars with his fiery arrows and was perhaps understood as being a winged figure. Scholars have linked the development of *rešep* with the more “secular” meaning, “bird (of prey)” and in Hebrew Sir 43:17c (the mention in v. 14 was already disputed because of the Greek and Latin translations), where one can translate *rešep* as “bird.” The Septuagint has *neosoi de gypos* (“the vulture’s young”) and the Peshitta has the generic, “sons of birds.” This may be an echo of an ancient tradition, reflected in a bilingual Hittite-Phoenician inscription from Karatepe that mentions “*Rešep of the birds*.”<sup>58</sup> In Ben Sirach, *resheph* has the sense of bird of prey and the Old Greek LXX translation (presumably) translates *rešep* with the word *peteina*.

In sum, with Blair, we remind ourselves of a crucial theological feature of the above-mentioned biblical passages—that in none of the poetic passages does *rešep(s)* appear alone; it is always accompanied by other destructive forces, which are agents or enemies of Yahweh but always inferior to him.<sup>59</sup> Even though there is a possible connection with the Semitic deity *Rešep*, the mythological motifs in the Old Testament are used merely as a poetic device. Similar to *deber* also *rešep* is best regarded as one of Yahweh’s angels of evil (Deut 32:24; Ps 78:48) or Holy Ones (Job 5:7; Hab 3:5). There is no evidence to

<sup>56</sup> Mulder, “רֶשֶׁפַּי *rešep*,” 15.

<sup>57</sup> Xella, “Resheph,” 703.

<sup>58</sup> Richard D. Barnett, Jacob Leveen and Cyril Moss, “A Phoenician Inscription from Eastern Cilicia,” *Iraq* 10 (1948): 65.

<sup>59</sup> Blair, “De-Demonising the Old Testament,” 234.

suggest that *rešep* is used as a proper noun but it is best regarded as a function (to bring destruction), which any of Yahweh’s angels could take on.

## 5 Greek and Other Version of *rešep*

Even though the translations of *rešep* in the early versions (LXX, Vulgate and Peshitta) is not always consistent, they do demythologise the god *Rešep* by never mentioning him by name. They present him as a winged demon or flying object. Mulder offers an overview of *rešep* in ancient translations.<sup>60</sup> In Ps 76(75):4, the Old Greek text in the LXX renders the Hebrew word *rešep* as *kratos* (power, i.e. of bows) and in 78(77):48 as *pyr* (fire). In Job 5:7, the phrase *bene rešep* is translated as *neossoi de gypos* (young vultures). In Cant 8:6, the LXX renders the plural as *pepiptera pyros* (that which flies around the fire, i.e. sparks) and in Deut 32:24, as *(brosei) orneon* (devouring by birds). In Hab 3:5, the LXX translates *rešep* as *en pedilois* (in sandals, i.e. are his feet). Jerome in the Vulgate also often thinks of birds and translates *rešep* as *volatilia* (Ps 76:4[3]), *volucribus* (Ps 78:48), *avis* (Job 5:7; Deut 32:24[pl.]), in Cant 8:6 as *lampades* (lamps) and Hab 3:5 even as *diabolus* (devil).<sup>61</sup> The Peshitta more or less follows the translation of the LXX but then in Cant 8:6, it thinks of the “rays” of a fire. In Hab 3:5, it translates *rešep* as “birds of prey” and in Deut 32:24, it offers the translation, “I will deliver them to the evil spirits.”

## D QETEB – PLAGUE, DESTRUCTION

### 1 Occurrence

The Hebrew term *qeteb* (קֶטֶב) appears four times in the Hebrew Bible (Deut 32:24; Ps 91:6; Isa 28:2; Hos 13:14). Its basic function is “destruction,” though the contexts suggest that other nuances are present.<sup>62</sup> Various scholars have translated it as “plague” or “pestilence” in the context of its parallel use with *deber* and *rešep*. The term also has overtones of a divine name.

<sup>60</sup> Mulder, “רֶשֶׁפַּי *rešep*,” *TDOT* 14:16.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Anna Angelini, *L’imaginaire du démoniaque dans la Septante: Une analyse comparée de la notion de “démon” dans la Septante et dans la Bible Hébraïque* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

<sup>62</sup> Nicholas Wyatt, “Qeteb,” *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. van Karel der Toorn, Bob Becking and Pieter W. van der Horst (2nd ed.; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 673.

## 2 Etymology

The connection of the term with Syr. *qurteba* (“sting, thorn”) is possible though Blau considers it questionable.<sup>63</sup> The link is more probable with Arabic *qutb* (kind of plant) with yellow flowered creeping thorn or *qutub* (sting, thorn).<sup>64</sup> Jewish Aramaic renders the term *qitba*’ as the name of a demon – *disaster*.<sup>65</sup> Bauer and Leander derive *qeteb* from *qoteb* (𐤒𐤙𐤏) in Hos 13:14.<sup>66</sup> The basic meaning of *qeteb* is “pruning” from which are derived other meanings.<sup>67</sup>

## 3 *Qeteb* in the Ancient Near East

The term *qzb* occurs once in the broken Ugaritic text (*KTU* 1.5 ii: 24) and may be a kinsman of Mot.<sup>68</sup> This parallel of both terms is similar to Hos 13:14 (*qeteb* // *mawet*). Del Olmo Lete links this word with Canaanite word *qsb* (cut).<sup>69</sup> In the treaty between Esarhaddon and Baal of Tyre, Dussaud detects a deity *Qatiba* without a specific reference.<sup>70</sup>

## 4 Meaning of *qeteb* in the Bible

Of the four occurrences in Deut 32:24, *qeteb* appears in parallel with *rešep* in Ps 91:6 and in Hos 13:14 in parallel with *deber* (in company with *šeol* and *mawet*); only in Isa 28:2 does it appear on its own. All of these texts are poetic.

The most useful information about *qeteb* comes from Deut 32:24, where the following tricolon occurs in Yahweh’s curse of apostate Jacob/Israel: “wasting hunger, burning consumption (lehume *rešep*), bitter pestilence (*weqeteb meriri*).” We have already analysed the term *rešep*, where pestilence is personified as *Rešep*, the plague-god, who in Ugaritic poetry is represented as an archer (*KTU* 1.82:3). However, other words here are also ambiguous, giving rise

<sup>63</sup> Joshua Blau, “Über homonyme und angeblich homonyme Wurzeln II,” *Vetus Testamentum* 7 (1957): 98.

<sup>64</sup> Carl Brockelmann, *Lexicon syriacum* (2nd ed.; Halle: Niemeyer, 1928), 695.

<sup>65</sup> *HALOT* 3:1092. The basic meaning of the term *qeteb* is ‘pruning’ from which other meanings such as ‘epidemic’, ‘disaster’ and ‘sting’ have been derived.

<sup>66</sup> Hans Bauer and Pontus Leander, *Historische Grammatik der hebräischen Sprache des Alten Testaments* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1922), 582.

<sup>67</sup> Franz König, *Religionswissenschaftliches Wörterbuch* (Freiburg: Herder, 1956), 406.

<sup>68</sup> Johannes C. de Moor, “O Death, Where Is Thy Sting,” in *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of P. C. Craigie* (ed. L. Eslinger and G. Taylor; JSOTSup 67; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 100–107; Stehlík, *Ugaritské náboženské texty*, 139.

<sup>69</sup> Gregorio del Olmo Lete, *Mitos y leyendas de Canaan* (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1981), 617.

<sup>70</sup> René Dussaud, *Les religions des Hittites et des Hourrites, des Phéniciens et des Syriens* (Mana 2; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1945), 361.

to rich nuances. Wyatt notes that “wasting hunger” is probably an epithet of *Mot* (Hebrew *mawet*), god of death.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, *qeteb* appears to be a divine name like the other two, while the Hebrew word *meriri*, “bitter,” may also have the sense of “strong” or “eclipse.”<sup>72</sup> Gordis points out the clearly mythological sense of this passage, which mentions a triad of demonic figures (*mot*, *rešep*, *qeteb*), all associated with death and its motifs of “destruction.”<sup>73</sup>

Psalm 91:5–6 lists enemies from whom Yahweh will rescue the faithful. They appear, following verse 3, with its reference to the pestilence (*deber*) as an element of death.<sup>74</sup> The tetracolon of verses 5–6 is complex and needs to be analysed as a whole: “*You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, or the pestilence (deber) that stalks in darkness, or the destruction (qeteb) that wastes at noonday.*” *Qeteb* occurs in verse 6 in parallel to *deber*. In some sense therefore, it complements it. However, *deber* and *qeteb* are not mere names for illnesses; they according to some scholars are actually a sort of demonic representative of plague and can be considered to be demon-induced illnesses in Ps 91.<sup>75</sup> The complementation of word pair *deber* and *qeteb* precedes the parallel of the diurnal arrow and the terror by night in verse 5. The immediate causes of the illness are in visual poetry depicted as physical objects—arrows that smite people and transfer illness into the body. This may correspond to the prayers offered at the solstices to the Mesopotamian deity Nergal, who was represented by arrows and was a god of the burning heat of the sun, the netherworld and pestilence.<sup>76</sup> The arrow provides the clue, being also a metaphor for the fevers sent by *Rešef* the plague-god. Since *deber* seems here to be his double, the two agents operating by day and by night, respectively, we can arrive at the following equation: the terror is *deber*, while the arrow (of *rešep*) is *qeteb*, the personification of the “destruction” wreaked by the divine.<sup>77</sup> This seems to corroborate the conclusions in Deut 32:24 above. However, there may also be a chiasmus over the whole tetracolon, giving rise to the equations: terror > *qeteb* (*a* and *d*) and arrow > *deber* (*b* and *c*). These powers seem to be of extremely variable form and character. However, caution is required here in interpreting the terms in relation to demons.

<sup>71</sup> Wyatt, “Qeteb,” 673.

<sup>72</sup> Mitchell Dahood, “Qoheleth and Recent Discoveries,” *Biblica* 39 (1958): 309–310; Marvin H. Pope, *Job* (AB 15; Garden City: Doubleday, 1973), 29.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Gordis, “The Asseverative *kaph* in Ugaritic and Hebrew,” *JAOS* 63 (1943): 178.

<sup>74</sup> Gerrit C. Vreugdenhil, *Psalm 91 and Demonic Menace* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

<sup>75</sup> Caquot, “Sur quelques démons,” 67–68.

<sup>76</sup> Ida Fröhlich, “Demons and Illness in Second Temple Judaism: Theory and Practice,” in *Demons and Illness from Antiquity to the Early-Modern Period* (ed. Siam Bhayro and Catherine Rider; Leiden: Brill, 2017), 91.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Wyatt, “Qeteb,” 673; David Scott-Macnab, “The Many Faces of the Noonday Demon,” *Journal of Early Christian History* 8 (2018): 22–42.



Furthermore, in Hos 13:14, “*Shall I ransom them from the power of šeol? Shall I redeem them from death? O death, where are debarecha? O šeol, where is qotobcha?*,” the two bicola of the verse, *šeol* and *death*, are found twice in parallel, indicating that *šeol* is metonymy here and another name for the god of death. This meaning affirms Paul’s rhetoric in 1 Cor 15:55 with the double term, *thanatos*. In the second bicolon, the word pair, *deber* and *qoteb*, are in plural—*debarecha* “plagues” and *qotobcha* “destructions”. Both are parallel terms and are clearly the agents of death.<sup>78</sup> The LXX translates both terms in a demythologised way and in singular, *diké* (punishment/penalty) and *kentron* (sting).

The text of Isa 28:2 with *qeteb* disparages Ephraim, alluding to the agent of Yahweh’s destructive visitation which is imminent: “*See, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong; like a storm of hail (barad), a destroying tempest (ša’ar qateb)...*” Vorländer pictures a whirlwind which comes from *qeteb*.<sup>79</sup> The word pair *barad* and *qeteb* used here suggest a mythological interpretation and of some climate features. *Qeteb* appears to operate here through the tempest and disaster. According to Wyatt, there is deliberate ambiguity where *ša’ar* (tempest) suggests the arch-demonic form of a *satyr* (Heb. *ša’ir*).<sup>80</sup> The tempest metaphor, following that of *barad* – (hail), probably combines the two figures of overwhelming floodwaters, and the dart-like effects of hail and heavy rain, evoking the arrows of the plague god. Both are metaphors for death and its powers.

All four passages are allusive rather than informative but suggest that *qeteb* is more than a literary figure, living as a spiritual and highly dangerous reality in the minds of poets. We can conclude that in all four passages, *qeteb* is used in an almost personified sense. However, there is nothing to support a demonological interpretation in any of the passages.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, as in the case of *deber*, there is no evidence to suggest that *qeteb* was the name of one particular angel of Yahweh that is an agent of ‘scourge’ or ‘bringer of destruction.’ There is no literary evidence in the passages in question that a mythological figure would lie behind the *qeteb* of the texts in the Hebrew Bible. Nonetheless, demonic or divine names of diseases (e.g. *qeteb*, *deber*, *rešef*) do not necessarily determine the demonic identity of the diseases themselves in the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>78</sup> Bauer and Leander, *Historische Grammatik*, 582.

<sup>79</sup> Hermann Vorländer, *Mein Gott: Die Vorstellungen vom persönlichen Gott im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament* (AOAT 23; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1975), 263.

<sup>80</sup> Wyatt, “Qeteb,” 674.

<sup>81</sup> Blair, “De-Demonising the Old Testament,” 206.

## 5 Greek and Latin Versions of *qeteb*

There is observably a slow process of reinterpretation in the treatment of the four passages in the LXX, where in each instance, it is translated by a different term. These are respectively in Deut 32:24, *opisthotonos* or “vengeance” (lit. bending backwards or drawn, as in a bow) (Vulgate *morsus*); in Ps 91:6, *symptoma* or “occurrence, accident” (Vulgate *daemonio*); in Hos 13:14, *kentron* or “goad, sting” (Vulgate *morsus*, i.e. bite/sting) and in Isa 28:2, *ouk ... skepe* or “no ... shelter” (Vulgate *confringens*, i.e. chilling).

## E COGNATE TERMS AND SYNONYMS OF EPIDEMICS

### 1 *Negep, maggepah* – Plague, Torment

The most important synonyms of pestilence in Bible are *negep* (נֶגֶפַּ) and *maggepah* (מַגְּפָה), meaning “plague, torment.” Both substantives derive from the verb נָגַף (*nagap*, i.e. “strike, smite”). The root *ngp* is also found in other Semitic languages including Samaritan, Jewish Aramaic, Middle Hebrew as well as Ethiopic, Arabic and Akkadian. To date, the root has not been identified in Canaanite, Punic or Ugaritic.<sup>82</sup> The verb *nagap* occurs 49 times in the Hebrew Bible with the meanings “to strike, smite, plague.” Yahweh is usually the subject of the verb. Smiting is principally part of a punitive act. If it affects Israel’s enemies, then, salvation for Yahweh’s people is implicit (e.g. Exod 7:27; 12:23 (twice); 32:35; Josh 24:5; Judg 20:35; 1 Sam 4:3; 25:38; 26:10; 2 Sam 12:15; Isa 19:22 (twice); Ps 89:24; 91:12).

The derivative *negep* occurs seven times. Once (Isa 8:14), it means “stumbling (block), offense.” Elsewhere it means “plague” or “(divine) punishment.” It translates as pestilence in 17:11, 12 and in Josh 22:17. The more used derivative is *maggepah*, meaning “plague, slaughter, pestilence, torment.” It occurs 26 times and indicates a *pestilence* against the Israelites in Num 14:37; 17:13–15; 25:8, 9, 18, 19; 31:16 and a pestilence against Philistines in 1 Sam 6:4. In other cases, it means slaughter or plague (e.g. 2 Sam 17:9; 24:21, 25; Ezek 24:16; Zech 14:12, 15 [twice], 18; Ps 106:29, 30; 1 Chr 21:17, 22; 2 Chr 21:14). These nouns often appear in the same context as the verb and can therefore be discussed with the verb, which often has an indefinite meaning. According to the cult aetiology in 2 Sam 24:21, 25 (cf. 1 Chr 21:17, 22), by building an altar, David averted a plague (*maggepah*) in term of pestilence sent as punishment for his census. Considering this an act of atonement, Preuss recognises here a precursor of the thought later found in Priestly tradition (P) in the Pentateuch.<sup>83</sup> Exodus 30:12 speaks of a similar act of atonement to avert a plague (*negep*) that

<sup>82</sup> Horst D. Preuss, “נָגַף *nāgap*; נֶגֶפַּ *negep*; מַגְּפָה *maggēpā*,” *TDOT* 9 (ed. Johannes G. Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 210.

<sup>83</sup> Preuss, “נָגַף *nāgap*; נֶגֶפַּ *negep*; מַגְּפָה *maggēpā*,” 212.

is associated with a census. Similarly but with a more explicit theological concern, Num 8:19 (P) speaks of averting such a plague (*negep*) through an act of atonement when approaching the sanctuary (cf. Exod 30:12 [P]; Josh 22:17). Numbers 17 (vv. 11–12 *negep*; vv. 13–15 *maggpah*) likewise establish a connection with atonement. Yahweh’s “smiting” with a plague and the possibility of averting it become elements of priestly theological reflection.<sup>84</sup>

In the Ark narrative (1 Sam 4–6), the Ark of Yahweh had brought *maggpah* (infectious plague) on the Philistines (1 Sam 6:4). The text relates to the events of the 11th century B.C. We are dealing here with the first identifiable epidemic due to its symptoms. The infection was related to tumours caused by mice (or rats) in cities of Philistine Pentapolis. The original Hebrew text uses two words to describe the plague’s pathology, namely the plural *’opalím* (“boils”), which is replaced every time in 1 Sam 5:6, 9, 12; 6:4, 5 (cf. Deut 28:27) by *techorim* (tumors) in 1 Sam 6:11–17. The current English Bibles translate the terms as “umours.” The Septuagint translation and Vulgate expand the original Hebrew to show that the tumours were in the “groin” (*bubo* is derived from the Greek word for groin). A fairly detailed description of the symptoms lead some scholars to diagnose this infection as bubonic plague,<sup>85</sup> dysentery<sup>86</sup> or tularemia.<sup>87</sup>

## 2 *Bekor mawet* – Firstborn of Death

The Hebrew phrase *bekor mawet* (בְּבוֹר מָוֶת) means “firstborn of death.” In Job 18:13, we find a likely metaphor for pestilence: “*By disease their skin is consumed, the firstborn of death consumes their limbs.*” We already noted that the cult of the Canaanite god *Rešep* is well attested throughout and far beyond Syria-Palestine (Egypt, Ugarit, Phoenicia, Cyprus and Mesopotamia) usually in syncretism with other deities.<sup>88</sup> Here, it is relevant to note that *Rešep* in Northwest Semitic mythology was a god of pestilence and, contrary to Mot, was thought to have children (cf. *bene rešep* in Job 5:7). A pantheon list from Ugarit identifies *Rešep* with *Nergal*, the Mesopotamian deity of pestilence and the underworld. It is associated with “arrows” at Ugarit (KTU 1.82:3) and in Cyprus (KAI 32:3–4), which to some refer to his role of bringing plagues.<sup>89</sup> *Rešep*’s

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>85</sup> John P. Griffin, “Bubonic Plague in Biblical Times,” *JRSocMed* 99 (2006): 387.

<sup>86</sup> William M. S. Russell, “Plague, Rats and the Bible Again,” *JRSocMed* 98 (2005): 533.

<sup>87</sup> Siro I. Trevisanato, “The Biblical Plague of the Philistines Now Has a Name, Tularemia,” *Medical Hypotheses* 69 (2007): 1144–1146.

<sup>88</sup> Theodore J. Lewis, “First Born of Death,” *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking and Pieter W. van der Horst; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 332.

<sup>89</sup> William J. Fulco, *The Canaanite God Rešep* (AOS 8; New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1976), 49–51.

connection with plagues and pestilence is also found in Hab 3:5 (cf. Deut 32:24) where he forms part of Yahweh’s chthonian entourage along with *deber* (pestilence). For the present discussion, most noteworthy about the meaning of the *firstborn of death* is the reference to *bene-rešep* (sons of rešep) in Job 5:7. Historians of Israelite religion use Job 5:7 and *bekor mawet* material to form one of two conclusions: (a) the children of *Rešep* (= minor deities) who, like their father, bring disease or (b) a transformed biblical idiom for various forms of illness.<sup>90</sup> However, these are not mutually exclusive positions. A vivid mythology can still underlie figurative language. Pope admits that because Mot had no children, any death dealing force like disease or pestilence could be regarded as his offspring.<sup>91</sup> Other scholars suggest that *Rešep* would be a more likely candidate for a Canaanite god of pestilence who has children.<sup>92</sup> The other view looks to the mythological cognate material, particularly the Ugaritic sources. *Bekor mawet* is here viewed as an attributive genitive in which the two words stand in apposition to each other.<sup>93</sup> Thus, they translate “firstborn Death” as a title of Mot who, they postulate, was the firstborn of god El. Wyatt remarks that by seeing Mot behind the term *ben mawet*, we can identify a plausible offspring of a death deity. Furthermore, he argues, death-like plagues are often personified by *Rešep* who is described as a child of Mot in the sense of pestilence.<sup>94</sup>

### 3 *Barad* – hail

First, it must be said that the term *barad* (בָּרָד) is not a synonym of plague.<sup>95</sup> We could see it as a very marginal term in the semantic field of epidemics. Only in two biblical passages, Ps 78:47–48 and Isa 28:2, is *barad* used as if it were a demonic name close to the term *deber* and *qeteb* for pestilence. According to *HALOT*, *barad* has a possible etymological connection with the terms *[b]rd* in old Aramaic; *barda*’ in Jewish Aramaic and Syriac and *barad/baradun* in Arabic denoting “hail.” Xella interprets *barad* as the name of an ancient deity of the Canaanite pantheon.<sup>96</sup> In some texts from Tell Mardikh-Ebla of the third

<sup>90</sup> Lewis, “First Born of Death,” 333. However, this phrase in the superlative could mean fatal disease, possibly the worst and deadliest form of disease (cf. Isa 14:30 – *the firstborn of the poor* = the poorest of the poor).

<sup>91</sup> Pope, *Job*, 135.

<sup>92</sup> John B. Burnst, “The Identity of Death’s First-Born (Job xviii. 13),” *Vetus Testamentum* 37 (1987): 363.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Bruce K. Waltke and Michael O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 149–150.

<sup>94</sup> Nicholas Wyatt, “The Expression *Bekôr Māwet* in Job xviii 13 and Its Mythological Background,” *VT* 40 (1990): 208.

<sup>95</sup> *Barad* is used approximately 30 times in the Hebrew Bible. In approximately 25 other biblical texts, it has the meaning “hail/hailstone” (Exod 9:18–34 /14 times/; 10:5, 12, 15; Isa 28:17; 30:30; Hag 2:17; Ps 18:13–14; 105:31; 148:8; Job 38:22; Josh 10:11).

<sup>96</sup> Xella, “Barad,” 160.

millennium B.C., *Baradu* (or *Madu*) occurs as a divine name.<sup>97</sup> Etymologically, both the biblical *barad* and Eblaitic *Baradu* (or *madu*) are related to the Semitic root *brd* and translated as “(big) chill.” It is very likely that *baradu* was a personification of the hail, a minor deity of the local pantheon or a specific manifestation of the storm-god Adda/Hadad. Xella notes that the same god occurs perhaps as a theophoric element in the Ugaritic personal name *bbrd*, “Haddu is Hail.”<sup>98</sup> In Ps 78:47–48, *barad* occurs twice in a poetic passage which mentions the seventh plague of Egypt. *Barad* occurs in verse 47 and in parallel with *rešep* (plur.) in verse 48: *He (=Yahweh) gave up their cattle to barad, and their herds to the rešeps.* Caquot argues that *barad* should be changed here to *deber* thus restoring the word pair *deber* and *rešep* as in Hab 3:5.<sup>99</sup> He regards both terms as “demons” but further suggests that *barad* in verse 47 is probably a “demon” too. In Isa 28:2, *barad* is parallel with a power in the service of Yahweh, *qeteb* (destruction) and presents a very interesting antithesis between the chill and the stifling heat caused by the hot wind: “Behold, the Lord has a mighty and strong one, like a tempest of barad, like a storm of qeteb.” In the Hebrew text of Sir 32:10, *barad* is used also in the phrase, “the lightning that flashes before a hailstorm (barad)” instead of the Greek *bronté* (thunder).<sup>100</sup>

#### 4 Greek Terms *loimos* and *thanatos*

In the Greek Bible, these two terms *λοιμός* (*loimos*; pestilence) and *θάνατος* (*thanatos*; death) are used to indicate plague or pestilence. *Loimos* occurs 25 times in the Old Greek text of the LXX and in New Testament. In New Testament, it is used only by Luke in Luke 21:11 (cf. also later manuscripts of Matt 24:7) and in Acts 24:5. Luke in the Jesus eschatological discourse in chap. 21 had added *loimoi* (plagues), probably under the influence of Greek literary pair, *loimoi kai limoi* (plagues and famines), as in Hesiod, Op. 243; Thucydides *Hist.* II.54; apocryphal *Testament of Judah* 23:3 and *Sibylline Oracles* 8.175.<sup>101</sup> Even though political and cosmic cataclysms are mentioned, these two natural catastrophes, plagues and famines, need not to be understood as referring to anything else than the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. They are permanent portents of ongoing human history. In Acts 24:5 and in most of the Old Testament references (e.g. Prov 21:24; plur. Ps 1:1; 1 Sam 10:27; 25:17; 1 Macc 10:61; 15:21, etc.), *loimos* is used metaphorically as an adjective to describe humans as *public menace/enemy* or *pestilential, diseased*. In Acts 24:5,

<sup>97</sup> Pettinato, *The Archives of Ebla*, 268.

<sup>98</sup> Xella, “Barad,” 161.

<sup>99</sup> Caquot, “Sur quelques démons,” 62. Some translations therefore include this correction of *barad* to *deber* in verse 48 (e.g.: *He exposed their cattle to plague* /NAB/; *Ihr Vieh überließ er der Pest* /EIN/).

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Beentjes, *The Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew*.

<sup>101</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV* (AB 28a; Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 1337.

the public menace is Paul, Apostle of Christ. Five additional occurrences of *loimos* as "pestilence" are found in the expanded Greek texts of the LXX (Ezek 7:21; 28:7; 30:11; 31:12; 32:12).

In the case of *thanatos*, the translation of the Hebrew *deber* (pestilence) into Greek as *thanatos*, as already been noted. This phenomenon clearly suggests the polysemous meaning of *thanatos*, as death was an immediate consequence of pestilence in ancient times. The same occurrence of *thanatos* is noted in the book of Revelation. The risen Christ says to the seer that he has "the keys of Death and of Hades" (Rev 1:18). The key moment is Rev 6:8, where the seer sees in a vision a pale green horse and notes that "its rider's name was *Thanatos*, and *Hades* followed with him." In Rev 20:13–4, he sees that "Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them" and they "were thrown into the lake of fire." The mythological imagery of Revelation allows the author to develop the personification of death especially in Rev 6:8. Here is *thanatos*, on account of chromatic symbolism, untaken as *pestilence*. Following Peerbolte, we affirm that although infectious diseases and other sicknesses do not play a major role in the book of Revelation, the interpretation of the four horsemen (Rev 6) and the bowls of wrath (Rev 15; 16), especially when combined with Jesus' prediction in Luke 21:11, has given rise to a tradition in which epidemics and pandemics have been and are still being interpreted as part of the ongoing eschatological human condition.<sup>102</sup> Epidemics are presented as inflicted on humanity, ultimately by an angry God, whose wrath will lead to a final judgment.

## F CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

Snowden presents two popular models for categorising diseases (e.g. pestilence, plague) and their origins. The first is to see a disease as sent by a deity and therefore of divine origin, as we see in many biblical traditions.<sup>103</sup> The second way of accounting for the origin of a disease is to regard the ailment in question as demonic in origin.<sup>104</sup> The examples of this starting point are numerous in ANE. In some biblical books (Exodus, Numbers, Revelation), it seems a third theological approach to human suffering is offered. Here, suffering and afflictions are caused either by God himself or by his agents as if spontaneously in the scenario described in the books.

We have discussed the semantic field of pestilence including the occurrences in the Bible and etymology, as well as its occurrences and cult of deity in the

<sup>102</sup> Bert J. L. Peerbolte, "The Book of Revelation: Plagues as Part of the Eschatological Human Condition," *JSNT* 44/1 (2021): 90–91.

<sup>103</sup> Thomas Römer, et al., eds., *Entre dieux et hommes : Anges, démons et autres figures intermédiaires. Actes du colloque organisé par le Collège de France, Paris, les 19 et 20 mai 2014* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 172–203.

<sup>104</sup> Frank M. Snowden, *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 10–14.

various ancient civilisations around Israel and Judah. The discussion of the extra-biblical references also focused on the function of the deities or demons associated with pestilence and epidemics. A survey of the biblical evidence and the general indications of the contexts in which the terms occur were presented. The article also examined the functions of the terms used for pestilence in the Bible in relation to the judicial context and as well as their translations in ancient versions. In the Bible, *deber*, *rešep* and *qeteb* and cognate terms are the so-called demythologised deities and their synonyms demonstrate their rather immanent and subordinate association with death.<sup>105</sup> Through them, Yahweh’s power is manifested and at the same time a clear call to repentance in the sense of returning to God is made. The phraseology of many biblical verses containing *deber*, *rešep* and *qeteb* however is so closely connected to the divine decision that this hardly mitigates his involvement. The use of the similar terms in ANE texts does not in any way rule out the possibility that their meaning has changed drastically. In all instances, mythological terms are translated and contextualised in new theological and cultural settings. In most cases, those concepts were translated as ‘plague’ in the sense of a destructive force; this fits all the contexts. Their function is to bring destruction which comes as a punishment from Yahweh. There is nothing to support a demonological interpretation of *deber*, *rešep* and *qeteb* in Bible. Even in the untranslated cases of the terms, there is nothing to support a demonological interpretation. Any opposing arguments should have literary support in the text.

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<sup>105</sup> Cf. Mladen Popovic, “Anthropology, Pneumatology, and Demonology in Early Judaism: The Two Spirits Treatise (1QS iii, 13–iv, 26) and Other Texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Dust of the Ground and Breath of Life (Gen 2:7): The Problem of a Dualistic Anthropology in Early Judaism and Christianity* (ed. Jacques van Ruiten and George van Kooten; Leiden: Brill, 2016), 58–98.

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