

ADRIANUS VAN SELMS (1906–1984): WHAT DOES ABIDE? ASPECTS OF HIS LIFE AND LITERARY CONTRIBUTION

J. F. (Hans) Janse van Rensburg

University of Johannesburg
E-mail: hansvr01@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Three decades have passed since the death of Adrianus Van Selms (22/1/1906–30/4/1984). He had become a legend in his own lifetime, and was even posthumously honoured at the centenary celebrations of the University of Pretoria as one of its hundred greatest academic achievers. But who was he? And what was his contribution in essence to the fields of Old Testament and Semitic languages? In this paper, an edited version of the SASNES Van Selms Memorial Lecture (September 2014), recollections of personal acquaintance with Van Selms, and impressions of others, are combined with a reflection based on archival material, a selection of his books, biblical commentaries and vast number of articles. Attention is given to his life (including controversies in which he was involved), his literary contribution, and particularly his analytical, comparative, and creative approach to the study of texts. Quite informative is a remark made by Van Selms (1967:50) in his book about northern Israel: “In my scientific work I have always been alert to the power of my own imagination, but without the power of imagination no significant scientific work can be done.”

INTRODUCTION

The question implicit in the title, namely “What does abide (i.e., remain) three decades after a prominent scholar’s death?” may seem easy to answer.

An obvious response would be: that which a person published remains as tangible heritage. The problem is, however, that what Van Selms wrote is not easy to access. Books and old editions of journals to which he contributed lie scattered in libraries. Many of his articles in journals are not available on Google (not even in Sabinet’s archives). And even if the researcher manages to track them down, the languages in which a great portion of them were written, namely Dutch and Afrikaans, are foreign tongues for several English speaking members of this society.

Another answer to the question would be that the person concerned remains a living reality in the memory of his contemporaries. This is true, but Van Selms’

contemporaries, whether students or colleagues, are themselves growing old and will not live forever.

I am therefore thankful that the annual SASNES memorial lecture provides the opportunity to revive recollections of the work of such a great scholar as Adrianus Van Selms. Thus far these lectures have not (except for Loader 1995) exclusively focused on the commemorated person, but rather dealt with topics in the fields of Van Selms' expertise, Semitic languages and Old Testament. However, in this paper I would like to reintroduce Adrianus Van Selms himself again. The perspective will at first be a general one, but will eventually narrow down to Van Selms' unique, but also controversial exegetical approach.

For the purpose of the paper the following aspects pertaining to Van Selms will be elucidated:

- Chronological overview of Van Selms' life
- Overview of Van Selms' books and articles
- Van Selms' approach to texts upon which he focused
- Van Selms' approach to texts related to the focused text
- Van Selms' distinctive personal input demonstrated in publications.

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CHRONOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

A chronological overview of Van Selms' life is to be found in an article by Van Wyk (1985:171–182), his successor at the University of Pretoria.

General biographical information

Van Wyk's article *inter alia* provides information about general biographical aspects, particularly of Van Selms' early and formative years.

Adrianus Van Selms was born on the 22 January 1906 in Amsterdam, Netherlands. He received his primary and secondary (gymnasium) education at

Hilversum. He began his academic study in arts and theology in 1923, at the Rijksuniversiteit in Utrecht. During 1926 he was the assistant to Prof. F.M. Th de Liagre Böhl at the excavations at Sigem under the leadership of Geheimrat E. Sellim. In addition to this he enrolled for a course at the Deutsch-evangelisches Institut für Altertumswissenschaft des Heiligen Landes in Jerusalem under the supervision of Prof. A. Alt.

After completing the candidate's exam in theology in 1927 and the candidate's exam in Semitic languages in 1928, Van Selms became a pastor of the Netherland Reformed Church at Hansweert (Zeeland) in 1930. He married Johanna Schrijvers at Amhem on 21 May 1930.

The marriage produced three children: Marrigje Marianne [Koorts] in 1932, Jeanette Silvia [Bekker] in 1933, and Adrianus in 1936.

While serving as pastor at Hansweert, Van Selms continued his postgraduate studies, and in 1933 the doctoral degree (DD, in the science of religion) was conferred upon him by the University of Utrecht after the acceptance of his thesis, "*De Babylonische termini voor zonde en hun betekenis voor onze kennis van het Babylonische zondebesef*", with Prof. H. Th Obbink as promoter.

In 1935 Van Selms became pastor at Culemborg where he remained until 1938 when he received his demission (honourable discharge) after accepting an appointment as senior lecturer in Semitic languages at the University of Pretoria.

At the outbreak of war Van Selms took service with the Royal Netherland-Indian army as lieutenant and was promoted to the rank of captain in 1942. In the same year he was taken captive by the Japanese and remained prisoner of war until 1945. In 1946 he resumed his work as senior lecturer in Semitic languages at the University of Pretoria, and in 1948 he was promoted to professor and head of the department, a position he retained until his retirement at the end of 1971.

Van Selms' relocation to South Africa and his academic appointments

An important document for acquiring additional information regarding van Selms' life is Oberholzer (2010). He uses as source the minutes of the theological faculty's board as well as those of council meetings of the Hervormde Kerk.

Oberholzer (2010) first provides data from which background information regarding Van Selms' relocation to South Africa and his academic appointments may be excerpted.

Theological training at Transvaal University College (TUK, predecessor of UP) had been approved in 1916, but commenced officially in 1918 as a joint venture between the Presbyterian Church and Hervormde Kerk. Alfred Croom Paterson (who became registrar in 1916 and rector in 1917) provided tuition in Hebrew and Old Testament. He was assisted by Ebenezer MacMillan. On 26 August 1925 the faculty, however, decided to insist on the appointment of a professor in Hebrew and Old Testament with knowledge of Hebrew and Arabic as a requirement, and a knowledge of Assyrian and another "Eastern" language as a recommendation. Dr B. Gemser, a Netherlands minister of Ludjegast who also taught Hebrew at the gymnasium at Groningen, was offered the position and commenced duties in January 1927. In 1930 TUK became UP, and at the beginning of 1938 the Nederduitsch Hervormde of Gereformeerde Kerk also established a theological faculty, known as "Afdeling B" (Division B).

Van Selms is mentioned in the leader article of *Die Hervormer* of 23 February 1938, which mentions that it was the twenty-first year of the existence of the theological faculty (Division A), and welcomes Dr Van Selms (as senior lecturer in Semitic languages).

The appointment of Van Selms was probably made by a committee of the Faculty of Humanities (or its equivalent). In an article commemorating the jubilee of Prof. Gemser as professor in the Faculty of Theology, Van Selms (1951a:141) mentions that it was Gemser who had nominated him (Van Selms) for the (academic) position (in which he was appointed) at the University of Pretoria. At that stage the 32 year-old Van Selms was already in possession of a DD degree, had been the pastor of two

congregations, had written a commentary on Ezra and Nehemiah, and had published approximately 10 articles.

Van Selms' name first appears in the minutes of the theological faculty's board at the meeting on 2 June 1938, where approval was given for Van Selms to become the assistant (on lecture level) of Prof. B. Gemser in the theological faculty. This was in addition to Van Selms' appointment as senior lecturer in the department of Semitic languages. His task was to teach biblical archaeology to theological students of the Hervormde Kerk.

Van Selms retained this position under the successor of Prof. Gemser, namely E.S. Mulder (1955), until 30 June 1962 when he resigned as lecturer within the Faculty of Theology. This led to the termination of his status as minister of the Hervormde Kerk after August 1963. However, he remained a member of the church until 1967 when he joined the St Andrews Presbyterian congregation in Pretoria together with other academics (B. J. van der Merwe and J. A. A. A. Stoop) and pastors (J. A. Swanepoel and J. J. Coetzee).

Lecturer in the theological faculty of the Hervormde Kerk, and minister

In between Van Selms' appointment as lecturer in the theological faculty of the Hervormde Kerk, and simultaneously as minister, until his resignation and eventual leaving of the Church lies a period of excellent, but eventually strained, relationships.

Van Selms was highly rated as an academic within the Hervormde Kerk. During Van Selms' absence on military service (1942–1946) he was, for example, one of the six nominees for the position of professor of New Testament studies in the place of Prof. Greyvenstein. However, A. S. Geyser was eventually appointed in August 1944.

He (Van Selms) was, at least formally, trusted as preserver of traditional values and often acted as spokesperson of the church.

As chairperson of the Council for Church Music (Kerkmusiek) of the Hervormde Kerk, for example, he endeavoured to retain the existing melodies of psalms sung in church. In the journal *Die Hervormer*, Van Selms (1960:11) criticised attempts to introduce within public worship the so-called "Voortrekkerwysies" (i.e., melodies

associated with the early pioneers). He called upon readers: “Let us keep to the pure and true heritage of the Reformation”.

The latter sentiment is also expressed in his exegetical activities, e.g., when discussing “The continuity of the church under the old and new covenant”. Van Selms (1953a:100) concludes that just as the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk of Africa never will be persuaded to part with the bond with the Church of Van Riebeeck and the Church of Willebrord, in the same way “we keep as the Apostles the bond with Israel and patriarchs from before Israel”.

Good relations with the Hervormde Kerk are also reflected by the regular contributions of Van Selms from 1938 to 1961 in the popular periodical *Die Hervormer* and the more academically orientated *HTS (Hervormde Teologiese Studies)*.

Van Selms was also clearly identified and honoured as academic. He was a collaborator and member of the editorial board of the project *Bybel met verklarende aantekening*, a commentary accompanying the 1953 Afrikaans Bible translation and published in 1958. Together with A. S. Geysers and E. S. Mulder his nomination as a member of the Commission for the Revision of the Afrikaans Bible Translation was approved at the general meeting of the Hervormde Kerk during March 1961. During the same meeting approval was also given for a new catechetical course book by Van Selms titled *Die Belydenis van die Hervormers*.

Van Selms and the Hervormde Kerk part ways

However, in 1961 Van Selms and the Hervormde Kerk began to part ways, leading to his resignation as lecturer in biblical archaeology at the Faculty of Theology (Division A) with effect from 30 June 1962.

The situation playing a predominant role was the church’s official sanctioning of the division of races at congregational level. Van Selms’ views on segregation had already been pronounced in a careful way in an article regarding mixed marriages in the Old Testament (Van Selms 1953b:34–47). His investigations led him to conclude (1953b:46–47) that the Old Testament concerns itself about opposing religious convictions, but provides “no ground to prohibit marriages between people of different

colour”. According to Van Selms this did not mean, on the one hand, that the state may not prohibit such marriages, but on the other, that the church should not try to seek grounds in the Old Testament for the said prohibitions by the state.

Cottesloe Conference (7–14 December 1960)

A rift between Van Selms and the Hervormde Kerk, however, became manifest at the time of the so-called Cottesloe Conference (7–14 December 1960). The meeting was attended by ten delegates of the World Council of Churches and members of the various Christian churches in South Africa. Representatives of the Hervormde Kerk explained government policy and the official view of their church. The latter was explicitly expressed by the 1951 articulation of article III (relating to membership of the church) of the “Law of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika” (Netherlands Reformed Church of Africa), stating:

The Church, aware of the dangers inherent in mixing of white and non-white for both groups, does not want unification (gelykstelling) in its midst, but envisages the establishment of nation-related churches (volkskerke) within the different ethnic groups (volksgroepe), convinced that the command of the Lord – ‘Make disciples of all nations’, Matthew 28:19, is best accomplished and that the unity in Christ will not be detrimentally affected through such a division of work. Membership of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk of Africa extends therefore only to white people (Tot die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika behoort daarom slegs blanke persone).

Van Selms and Geyser, who had a different conviction, were disallowed by a Church Meeting (28 November) to table their views at Cottesloe.

A further turn to the matter came at a General Church Meeting in March 1961 when Prof. Geyser challenged a report about the validity, in the light of Scripture, of article III and article 7 of chapter 4 of the church law, and requested that a new commission of exegetes be appointed to test the above articles in the church law. However, the meeting rejected the proposal of Geyser (supported by Dr J. A. A. A.

Stoop and M. J. Redelinghuys, Prof. Van Selms and Reverend C. J. Labuschagne), reaffirming the existing policy of the church and insisting on adherence to it. (It was, nevertheless decided to replace the reference to “gelykstelling” in article III with “vermenging” [mixing]).

In response Van Selms declared, according to J. P. Oberholzer (compiler of the source used here), that, as in the past, he would not discuss the church law “from the pulpit”. As in the past, he would not discuss the church law “from the [academic] desk”. As in the past, Scripture and Confession would be his guide in future when expressing himself orally or in writing.

Article in the Dutch journal *Kerk en Theologie*

However, Oberholzer also refers to an article by Van Selms (1961c) in which Van Selms (1961c:164) repeats the above response but adds an item (excluded by Oberholzer in his resume): “As in the past, I maintain my constitutional right in future to express my thoughts, as determined by Scripture and Confession when I deem it appropriate (‘oorbaar’).” Van Selms (1961c:164) furthermore states that the Hervormde Kerk in fact elevated article III to a confession notwithstanding assurances to the contrary, had lost sight of the difference between confession and church law, and that the decision of the Church Meeting was contrary to article XXXII of the Netherlands Confession of Faith.

Professor J. P. Oberholzer comments that the apologetic tenor of Van Selms’ article shows that he was “particularly eager to find greater acceptance in the Netherlands world ... Amidst his high qualities his ego was still important, and he was completely different from the average Netherlands academic such as Gemser, for example, was.”

The same kind of accusation is expressed in an article by J. Dreyer (1966:15ff.) in which he comments on two articles by Van Selms in the journal *Pro Veritate* [possibly the September and October issues] with the theme “Being Christian in this country” (using Is. 33:14 and 1 Peter 4:17 as points of departure). According to Dreyer, Van Selms spoke as a believing Christian. However, his articles were interspersed with criticism in between his serious admonitory biblical meditation. “And it is exactly

here, where it appears, between the lines, that with him in his articles the great world opinion is continuously looking round the corner.”

Both Oberholzer and Dreyer’s accusations reflect legitimate responses to the respective publications by Van Selms. However, it is doubtful whether they are in accord with the intention of the author (Van Selms). Particularly in Van Selms’ article in *Kerk en Theologie* (Van Selms 1961c) he was evidently not seeking for applause abroad, but defending himself for having initially cooperated in formulating article III quoted above.

His objective, Van Selms (1961c:153) argues, was to provide room (within the said article) for missionary activity by the Church while retaining the traditional exclusivity (“oude eksklusiviteit”). As previously expressed in his book *Licht uit Licht* (1948), Van Selms (1961c:154) opined that it was best to treat racial differences within the church in analogy to what had been done in the Netherlands where separate congregations within one church (without exclusive membership) were established for different (French and Dutch) language groups.

Nevertheless, the Commission of the General Church Meeting and members of the Supervisory Committee (Kuratorium) of the faculty had an interview with Van Selms regarding the said article in *Kerk en Theologie* on 19 September 1961.

On 20 June 1962 the Commission of the General Church Meeting approved a concept of the declaration in which reasons were given for the Hervormde Kerk’s resignation as member of the World Council of Churches.

Van Selms resigns from position as lecturer in biblical archaeology

On 1 August 1962 the Supervisory Committee of the faculty discussed the formal resignation of Van Selms as lecturer in biblical archaeology. In it Van Selms alleged that, in the opinion of the Commission, a staff member of the University of Pretoria was not subjected only to the object of his study, the Holy Scripture, but also to the decisions of the church and the Commission’s interpretation thereof. “My conscience does not allow me to be prescribed what the divine Word says. Therefore I can no longer fulfil a task that I have performed out of love and with love since 1938, and I feel obliged to resign as lecturer in the Faculty commencing the 30th June 1962.”

The exact reasons for Van Selms' resignation cannot be ascertained. However, it may be seen against the background of another controversy, regarding Prof. A. S. Geysler, in which he was indirectly involved.

Complaints of heresy against Geysler

There were strained relations between Geysler and the Hervormde Kerk for a considerable period of time due to Geysler's objections against article III at general meetings of church councils, and through his publications, for example in *Vertraagde aksie* (Geysler and Marais et al. 1960). However, matters reached a climax when he was accused of heresy (subordination of Christ) at a meeting of the Supervisory Committee of the Faculty (3 October 1961) by three theological students. They objected to his interpretation of Phil 1:20 (especially the interpretation of *morphe*). Geysler denied the charges. However, his explanation was unacceptable to the Supervisory Committee. His appointment as professor was provisionally terminated. The matter was subsequently referred to the Commission of the General Church Meeting, notwithstanding Van Selms' objection that the charge sheet was full of inaccuracies, misunderstandings, logical mistakes and matters that were interpreted out of context. The Commission decided on 24 October 1961 to consider the complaints of heresy against Geysler. Thirty-eight sessions were dedicated to the case, and the transcription of the hearing consisted of 2672 folio pages. Geysler was eventually found guilty on the charge of heresy as regards Christology (10 votes to 2). Geysler resigned as professor (and was later [August 1964] appointed as head of the Department of Divinity at the University of the Witwatersrand). However, in May 1963 the matter was taken to the civil court by Geysler. During the court hearing an agreement between the two opposing sides was reached, in which Herbst (administrator of the Hervormde Kerk) and Van Selms played a significant role. In essence the outcome of the church procedures which had found Geysler guilty of heresy was annulled, and it was declared that he was still minister of the Hervormde Kerk, and would retain his status even while not being a member of the Faculty anymore. Note was taken of the agreement at a meeting of the Commission of the General Church Meeting on 26 August 1963. At the same meeting a report was also tabled regarding a meeting with Van Selms

pertaining to his resignation as lecturer (30 June 1962) and his ensuing loss of status as minister within the Hervormde Kerk.

Geyser was allowed to address the General Church Meeting that commenced on 24 April 1964. In it he gave his account of affairs accusing the Supervisory Committee and the Commission of the General Church Meeting of a politically inspired conspiracy behind his back (and also that of Van Selms) to terminate his membership of the theological faculty. In this regard the names of Prof A. D. Pont and S. P. Engelbrecht were pertinently mentioned.

Confrontation between Geyser and Pont

Indirect confrontation between Geyser and Pont eventually led to direct confrontation. Commencing in January 1964, Pont wrote a series of articles in *Die Hervormer* under the heading “Chronicle” commenting critically on theological perspectives of “co-theologians” (e.g., February 1964). In the January 1965 edition Pont discussed a meeting (25 May to 2 June 1964) organised by the World Council of Churches, the Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation, and the Institute for Race Relations, that took place in the Zambian city of Kitwe, and attended by himself and other observers from the Hervormde Kerk, but also by Geyser and Rev. C. F. B. Naudé. Pont accused the “co-theologians” (clearly referring to Geyser and Naudé) of collaborating with anti-government movements with a view to conquering South Africa for “the black man” through military power. He accused them of being traitors to God and their churches. Geyser (through attorneys) insisted on an official apology and retracting of what had been said, or the payment of R20 000. J. G. M. Dreyer, editor of *Die Hervormer*, apologised but Pont (against the advice of his legal representatives) was adamant that the claim had to be challenged in court. The judge, however, decided in favour of Geyser and Naudé. Pont was ordered to pay the legal fees of the claimants and R20 000 compensation. The all-inclusive amount due by Pont was R120 000.

Van Selms resigns membership of the Hervormde Kerk

In response the Commission of the General Church Meeting declared that it would deal with the people concerned in accordance with the Church Law, but requested

members of congregations to support the Adriaan Pont Defence Fund because the church and people (“volk”) still had great appreciation for the preservation of conservative Christian-national values by the church and people. Furthermore, *Die Transvaler* of 10 June 1967 reported that Rev A. J. Nolte, chairperson of the Commission said that, although Professor Pont had not used the correct wording, the articles were written “in the best interest”.

The response of the Commission led to Van Selms resigning his membership of the Hervormde Kerk. According to *Die Beeld*¹ he declared: “It is impossible for me to be member of a church that identifies itself with the conduct of Professor Pont.”

All the controversies above that led to the resignation of Van Selms, first as lecturer and secondly as member of the Hervormde Kerk, can be associated with his close relationship with Professor Geysers. Dates are important. In an obituary to Van Selms in *Die Hervormer* of August 1984 (p. 7) it is stated that he resigned as lecturer in “1963” (should be 1962!) and joined the Presbyterian Church in 1964 (should be 1967!). Both dates mentioned in the obituary are wrong.

As far as Van Selms’ resigning as lecturer in biblical archaeology and member of the Hervormde Kerk are concerned, it would seem as if there are clear affinities as far as the respective contexts and motivations are concerned.

Van Selms resigned as lecturer in biblical archaeology due to the curtailing of the right of expression laid upon members of the theological faculty after the formal debate in the church of article III and Van Selms and others’ response in publications in South Africa and abroad. His resignation, however, was handed in during the period after the initial decision of the Commission that Geysers was guilty of heresy.

Furthermore, Van Selms resigned as member of the Hervormde Kerk due to the – for him – undesirable response of the Commission of the General Church Meeting in the aftermath of Professor Pont’s having been found guilty of slander against Geysers and Naudé.

¹ Possibly Tuesday 13 June 1967; date not mentioned by Oberholzer (2010, Chapter 6, p. 17).

In the first resignation episode Van Selms might by implication have argued that freedom of speech was curtailed, in the second episode he revolted against what contradicted his sense of justice.

The second of the two said episodes in particular had a profound effect on his relationship with the church. Resigning from the Hervormde Kerk with which he had formerly completely associated himself, and joining the Presbyterian Church solely for practical reasons led to clerical estrangement. As regards his membership of the St Andrews Presbyterian Church very little is known of his activities, except that at his request opportunity was created for public worship in Afrikaans (besides regular services in English).

Good relationship with staff members continued

On a personal level Van Selms' good relationship with staff members of the Faculty of Theology continued even after his resignation as lecturer and his leaving the church. At the end of 1971 when he retired he was, for example, given an office on the ground level of the Old Faculty of Arts building (reserved for staff members of 'Division A' (Hervormde Kerk) of the Faculty of Theology), where he could continue with his research and the writing of commentaries and articles.

How people remember Van Selms

Tributes by academics

The controversies that marked Van Selms' ties with the church were relatively absent in the academic context, during his 33 years' attachment to the department of Semitic languages. He was highly honoured and appreciated. This is reflected in tributes by Fensham (1984), Loader (1984, 1989), Jongeleen (1984), Van Wyk (1985), Oberholzer (1985), and Van der Woude (1984) quoted by Oberholzer (1992:67–82).

Van der Woude (1985:265–267), for example, refers to Van Selms as a “brilliant scholar” with an “unbelievable erudition”, “great didactic talents”, “encyclopaedic knowledge”, “pious Christian”, “bountiful of wisdom”. “Science and belief were for

him no contradictions, but integrated magnitudes ('grootheide')". "Indeed magnitudes!"

The other reviewers echo the sentiments of Van der Woude. Fensham (1984:1–2) also refers to Van Selms' "deep feeling of sympathy for the less privileged in South Africa", Loader (1984:5–17) mentions Van Selms' "affection for the Jews", and his ability to teach students "a respect for the Hebrew Bible" and simultaneously encouraging a "critical mind" (Loader 1989:7). Van Wyk (1985:171–182), his successor, experienced Van Selms as a "pleasant colleague". Oberholzer (1985:67) characterises him as "ardent" in his love for his "fatherland".

Anecdotes

A multitude other qualities of Van Selms can be added. There are many anecdotes about Van Selms. Jan Spies (a writer of humoristic narrations) even describes some.

Most undergraduate students would call to mind the oral examinations at the end of the year. They had to queue in the passage outside the lecture room leading to Van Selms' office on the first floor of the Old Arts (Ou Lettere) building, and were then summoned one by one to be interrogated about ancient Near Eastern history or were asked to translate some Hebrew Old Testament text or one of a cognate Semitic dialect. Examinations usually focused upon self-study, requiring students to apply information conveyed in class to the work they had been asked to study independently.

Van Selms would lavishly reward good insights into the work, but could be almost merciless if he sensed a lack of knowledge. Students, for example, warned one another that Van Selms would easily fail a person if he or she could not find a certain portion of text in the Hebrew bible (of which the sequence differs from that of most translations). Focusing on a few random selected themes or passages from the prescribed text could be fatal, but was practised by students usually without success, although there were some miraculous escapes.

Among his students, Van Selms will be remembered as an upright and stately figure always engaged with research activities. He kept his posture under all circumstances. Once while walking from his office to the parking area, he was studying an article and did not notice a barrier at the side of the lawn he intended

crossing. He tripped over the chain and fell onto the grass. However, according to tradition, he got up, tidied himself and simply continued on his way reading the article as if nothing had happened.

Van Selms was an excellent teacher. He impressed with the meticulous way in which he analysed texts, but he could also revive the contents in a dramatic way. I remember how, when reading from the episode of the building of temple in the Ugaritic Baal epic, he would sing to demonstrate that the metre was in tune with the using of the bellows by Kathar wa-Hasis. I also call to mind how he managed to reconstruct the context of an Old Aramaic text in such a way that it was as if Panamuwa arose from death and became alive again.

Van Selms used to come to work just after 9 o'clock and left more or less at 1 o'clock for lunch.

Professor Daan Swiegers of the department of psychology remarked that being so consistent as regards hours of work probably asked for great self-discipline. Van Selms replied that it was simply an imbedded custom.

He was born a Netherlander and always spoke a kind of Afrikaans that reminded of Dutch. Furthermore, as a Netherlander he highly valued European scholarship above that done in the New World. In class on one occasion I suggested a certain interpretation which I had found elsewhere. Van Selms wanted to know the name of the author. I could only remember that he was an American, whereupon Van Selms immediately lost interest in the alternative I had brought to his attention.

Van Selms was a true academic for whom certain things in the outside world often held no interest. I once gave him a lift home after class, explaining that my car was the Fiat close by. He responded that he had no knowledge of the different makes of cars.

Van Selms did not have many postgraduate students. Only the brave had the courage to continue with their studies in Semitic languages. Because he was an individualist with a wide field of interest, he did not systematically develop a certain niche within the spectrum of possible domains. Neither did he give systematic attention to the creating of a representative or focused library collection. His explanation was that it was the task of the subject librarian to bring to the attention of lecturers publications with a view to being ordered.

Van Selms occasionally raised points of criticism during the Ou Testamenteiese Werkgemeenskap in Suid-Arika (OTWSA) congresses, for example, as regards newer theoretical approaches of scholars such as Deist. But he would at times side with students or post-students when they were in the line of fire. In a lecture at a meeting of the Old Testament Society more or less forty years ago I drew a few parallels between the Young Babylonian poem *Ludlul bel nemeqi* and the biblical book of Genesis. This caused the then formidable James Barr to enquire, in his matter of fact but piercing way, if comparisons of this kind were academically sound. Van Selms came to my rescue stating that he had, at times, found that the English poet Shelley provided the best parallel to a feature in a Semitic text. (In my research for the present paper I found the text, or at least an example, which will be discussed in a following subdivision.)

Many more examples from my own or other people's experience of Van Selms can be given. Let me close with a reference to Van Selms' smoking habit. Van Selms and his cigar were inseparable. He smoked while teaching his afternoon honours class. Behind the desk where he was sitting there was a huge notice: SMOKING FORBIDDEN. Sometimes he would leave the desk to enter his office (that was adjacent to the lecture room) in order to fetch an article or book he needed for his lecture with the cigar (still burning) balanced between two sets of pages of the Hebrew Bible. I remember once taking him home after acting as examiner for a postgraduate student at the Rand Afrikaans University/University of Johannesburg; he was smoking his cigar on our way to my car. I drove to Pretoria and returned about two hours later, taking the same lift to my office that we had used. The lift still had the unmistakable smell of Van Selms' cigar.

OVERVIEW OF VAN SELM'S BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Van Selms published a multitude of articles in local and international journals. The summary below is based upon lists by Van Wyk (1985:171–182) and Oberholzer (1992:67–82) as points of departure, although both authors declare that their respective bibliographies of Van Selms are incomplete.

South African journals

Local journals to which Van Selms contributed were particularly those under the auspices of the Hervormde Kerk.

The more popular journals are the *Almanak van die Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika* in which eight articles appeared between 1938 and 1958; and *Die Hervormer* for which Van Selms wrote approximately 29 articles between 1938 and 1963.

HTS (Hervormde Teologiese Studies), which catered for the academically orientated Afrikaans market, published more or less 18 articles by Van Selms between 1946 and 1961.

Local journals not under the jurisdiction of the Hervormde Kerk were the *OTWSA* that appeared once a year containing papers read at the annual meetings of the Ou-Testamentiese Werkgemeenskap in Suid-Afrika (Old Testament Society in South Africa). Van Selms was a founding member of the said organization and 14 of his articles were printed between 1959 and 1979.

In *Semitics*, published by UNISA, four articles by Van Selms appeared between 1971 and 1982.

JNSL (Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages), published by the University of Stellenbosch, contains two articles by Van Selms in the 1971 and 1974 volumes respectively.

Jewish journals/magazines that were published in South Africa were also supported by Van Selms through sporadic articles, e.g., *Jewish Affairs*, three articles between 1951 and 1965; *South African Jewish Observer*, three articles between 1958 and 1969; and *Pretoria Jewish Review*, three articles between 1949 and 1951. Van Selms also published one article (1969) in *Barkai*, a presently unknown magazine.

At the opposite side of the spectrum Van Selms contributed one article each in the *The Muslim Digest* (1952) and *Arabic Studies* (1979).

Van Selms was also asked to share his knowledge by way of an article in *Die Huisgenoot* (1938) and *Lantern* (1956). The same applies to *TWK (Tydskrif vir Wetenskap en Kuns)* (1956). He was also a frequent contributor to *Standpunte* particularly by way of a series "From the books I own" I–X between 1962 and 1965.

In addition Van Selms published several articles, e.g., a series in 1966, in the journal *Pro Veritate*, a publication of the Christian Institute of South Africa. (The journal was banned on 19 October 1977 under the Internal Security Act of South Africa.)

He furthermore contributed (1969) to a periodical, *St Andrews News*, published by the Presbyterian congregation which he joined in 1967.

Journals published abroad

As far as can be established Van Selms' first publication was a report in *Eltheto* (1927). Early literary activities are also reflected in *Jaarbericht EOL (Ex Oriente Lux)*, four articles between 1934 and 1939; *NTS (Nieuwe Theologische Studien)*, four articles between 1934 and 1938; and *OEV (Onder Eigen Vaandel)* in which he wrote two articles, one in 1936 and another in 1938.

Other international journals in which he occasionally published in the first part of his career were *Archiv für Orientforschung* (1939), *Archiv Orientalni* (1950), and *Oudtestamentische Studien* (1958f.).

Thirteen articles by Van Selms appeared in the Dutch journal *Kerk en Theologie*, commencing in 1951 and continuing until the end of his career in 1982.

In the 1970s Van Selms made one contribution each to *Welt des Orients* (1977) and *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* (1979), and two contributions to the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* (1971 and 1974). He published more frequently in *UF (Ugarit-Forschungen)* where six articles appeared between 1970 and 1979.

VT (Vetus Testamentum) published (as far as can be established) one article (1964) by Van Selms, while *BO (Bibliotheca Orientalis)* provides evidence of one article (1975) and at least two reviews (1974 and 1977). Other reviews also appeared in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, *Journal of Semitic Studies*, and *Theologische Literaturzeitung*.

Reference works

Van Selms was asked to deal with specific topics in *New Bible dictionary* (1962), *Interpreters dictionary* (1976), *International Standard Bible encyclopaedia* (four themes, 1979), *RGG*³ (1958) and *Illustrated Bible dictionary* (1980).

Commentary series

Van Selms will particularly be remembered as interpreter of the Bible (Old Testament).

In the series *Tekst en Uitleg* he wrote commentaries on Ezra and Nehemia (1935), 1 Chronicles (1939) and 2 Chronicles (1947).

Bybel met verklarende aantekening, featuring explicative notes added to the 1933/57 Afrikaans Bible translation, made use of Van Selms' expertise as regards 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Ezekiel, published in 1958, and a supplement on "Measures, weights and money in the Old Testament" as well as one explaining biblical geography with a register and maps published in 1959.

Van Selms also wrote commentaries for the series *De Prediking van het Oude Testament*, namely Genesis parts 1 and 2 (1967), Jeremiah parts 1 (1972), 2 and 3 (including Lamentations, 1974), and Job parts 1 (1982) and 2 (1983).

His last commentary published was *Job, Een Praktische Bijbelverklaring* (1984), while a discussion of Psalms 1–40 was left incomplete at the time of his death (cf. van der Westhuizen 2012).

Books and contribution to books

In addition to his doctoral thesis (1933) and commentaries Van Selms published approximately 17 other books in the period 1937 to 1979. Between 1958 and 1978 he furthermore contributed to eight books, and wrote a chapter each in *Festschriften* dedicated to the honour of Vriezen (1966), Gemser (1968), W. F. Albright (1971), H. L. Gonin (1971), Beek (1973) and FM Th de Liagre Böhl (1973). Van Selms also wrote articles in editions of journals honouring specific individuals, e.g., Gemser (Van Selms 1961a:329–343) and Claude F. A. Schaeffer (Van Selms 1979:739–744).

VAN SELM'S APPROACH TO TEXTS UPON WHICH HE FOCUSED

Reviewing Van Selms' literary contribution² thematically can be done from many different angles. The approach chosen below responds to the question relating to the methodological foci in Van Selms' dealing with primary and secondary texts.

Establishing the original text

Reconstructing texts

Texts that had been discovered in the ancient Near East were seldom in an undamaged condition. Parts of an inscription (be it a stela or a clay tablet) were often missing, lines were incomplete, or the writing might have faded and become almost illegible.

In these cases (if there are no parallels available) textual reconstruction is often the only way out. This implies logical deductions and sometimes intelligent guesswork. The researcher needs to isolate words among a string of orthographical signs, then determine the context of a word or clause within the line that has to be amended, look for related words or lines in the greater textual corpus, and finally use his/her imagination in a linguistically sound way.

It is thus predictable that different scholars would arrive at reconstructions that deviate even considerably at times. Later scholars would use previous researchers' attempts, adding their own, in order to restore a portion, line or word. Van Selms was part of the latter group. He was a master of the art. I was often amazed, when reading Old Aramaic inscriptions, by his astounding ingenuity during honours classes.

In the articles that were excerpted for the purpose of the present paper several endeavours by Van Selms at textual reconstruction may be found, e.g., suggesting a missing word (with a key function) at the end of a line (Van Selms 1975b:477–482), combination of texts to elucidate a preconceived theme (Van Selms 1970:251–268), and the reinterpretation of a phrase (Van Selms 1954:19²⁴).

Possibly the best example of Van Selms' expertise in recreating a text is illustrated in the article "Some remarks on the 'Ammān Citadel Inscriptions'" (Van Selms 1975a).

² Articles and books by Van Selms that were excerpted for the present paper are listed separately in the bibliography as "Van Selms' publications".

In the article Van Selms analyses the said inscription and while doing so reviews previous attempts in this regard. Scholars concerned are G. Garbini (1972), whose transliteration is used, S. H. Horn (1969), F.M. Cross (1969), W.F. Albright (1970) and J. Teixidor (1970).

Van Selms first identifies certain markers in the text, e.g., *dltbdl.t.bṭn* (line 5 in the original text) which he interprets as “the inner door inside”, literally “the door [dlt] within [b] the door [dlt] inside [bṭn]” (cf. 2 Kings 20:30, *ḥdr b-ḥdr*: [the] room within [the] room). Then he proceeds to different lines of the inscription (sequence 6, 7, 2, 4, 8, 3 and 1) identifying and translating various words and concepts, inspired by the basic assumption (used as *leitmotiv* throughout the interpretation of the inscription) namely that the objective of the inscription was to glorify the builder. Van Selms consults grammars and dictionaries of various Semitic languages, namely Biblical Hebrew, Akkadian, Arabic, and Aramaic. He even postulates a scribal error in line 4: “s[bb]tyl” (in the text) is seen as scribal error for as “s[bb]t. kl”. In the latter case Van Selms typifies his reasoning as *ultima ratio philogorum*. He argues that the stone cutter misread the -k- for -y- on the draft copy painted on the rock. His eventual reconstruction of the inscription is

- (1)... [m]lkm. bn-h. mb‘t. sbbt
- (2)... k-kl. lk. m[‘]t. ymtm
- (3)... [‘]kḥd. ‘kḥd. w-kl. m‘rb
- (4)... w-b-k[!]. s[bb]t. k[!]. ṣd-ṣd-h
- (5)... [št]l. [‘]t dlt-b-dlt. bṭn. krh
- (6)... h. [‘]t ‘št (<tšt‘). bbn. ‘lm
- (7)... w[‘]š[t] ... w-k[!]
- (8)... [‘]lm. lk. w

Van Selms accordingly translates:

- (1) [Mi]lkom ([m]lkm) has built (bn-) this (-h); the entrance (mb‘t), the enclosures (sbbt)
- (2) just (k-) as all (kl) this (lk) [that is enclosed] from (m[‘]t) the highest point (ymtm)

(3) [like (ʻk)] the one (ḥd) like (ʻk) the other (ḥd) and (w-) everything (kl) brought in (mʻrb)

(4) ... and (w-) in (b) all (k[l]) enclosures (s[bb]t), at all its sides (šdšd-h)

(5) [and he pla]nted ([št]l) the inner door (dlt-b-dlt) inside (bṭn); he dug (krh)

(6) ... [and he ma]de (...h) the ([ʻ]t = nota accusativi) plaque (ʻšt) outside (bbn) the porch (ʻlm)

(7) ... and the plaque (w[ʻ]š[t]) ... and all (wk[l])

(8) ... this (lk) [p]orch ([ʻ]lm) and (w)...

Viewed from a critical point of view, the emendation ʻšt in lines 6 and particularly 7 is suspect. However, his endeavour as explained in an abridged and detailed way above illustrates Van Selms' abilities as comparative linguist, archaeologist and scholar with a very good scientific sense.

Emending texts

Not all Van Selms' emendations are as rigorous as those in the said inscription. Nor does he unnecessarily resort to meddling with the canonically accepted text. In the conclusion at the end of part 2 of his Genesis commentary Van Selms (1967b:296) states that among the 1534 verses of Genesis he found only 52 examples of textual corruption. In 28 instances, he had the support of the Samaritan text or old translations; in 17 cases he had to resort to conjectures; and in seven cases he identified later additions to the text.

Determining chronological layers of texts

Poetry and prose

In striving to ascertain the original text, Van Selms demonstrates certain assumptions in some of his publications. One of them is that poetic parts of a text constitute the oldest layer.

In order to prove the ancient origin of the Book of the Covenant in Exodus, which he believed had attained its fixed form during the Israelites' sojourn in the land Goshen in Egypt, Van Selms (1961a:329–343) draws attention to its rhythmic language (oldest form of oracle justice), e.g., in Ex 22:2–11. In the said portion ten

sentences commence with “if”, five refer to the masculine slave, and five to the feminine slave.

Poetry is also used to discern chronological layers within a text, with exegetical implications.

In an article titled “Literary criticism of Ezekiel as theological problem” Van Selms (1961b:24–37) focuses on the problem of identifying poetical passages in the biblical book of Ezekiel, and interpreting them.

Arguing from the point of view that “the whole book of Ezekiel bears the imprint of one distinct personality”, and that the contents should thus be ascribed to the prophet Ezekiel himself, Van Selms (1961b:32) contends that the poet expressed himself both in poetry and prose.

Explicitly presented as poetry according to Van Selms (but not by NIV!) is, for example, Ezek 17:1–8 (two eagles and a vine), characterised (1961b:25) as *ḥîdâ* (riddle) and *māšāl* (parable) in verse 2; and 19:2–14 (Israel’s princes) characterised (1961b:26) as *qînâ* (lament) in verse 1. As indicators Van Selms (1961b:26), for instance, refers to stichoi with alternating accents (e.g., 3+3 or 2+2+2) in Ezek 17:2ff.

Secondly, many passages are evidently poetry, according to Van Selms, without the title saying so (1961b:27); e.g., 28:2–10 (prophecy against the king of Tyrus) consisting of two parts, 2–5 and 6–10. According to Van Selms each part has seven lines and both have 41 accents.

A third category identified by Van Selms (1961b:28) are “those passages which we have to consider as prose, but in which for the attentive reader here and there a poetical element is faintly visible behind the prosaic dress”, e.g., Ezekiel 7:3, 4 (not marked as poetry by NIV) in which Van Selms recognises certain metrical patterns and parallelism.

In Van Selms’ view prophecies announced by Ezekiel at several different occasions (in poetry) were afterwards enlarged (by way of prose) through commentaries and glosses. Van Selms (1961b:36) furthermore regards the “prose products [as] a commentary on the inspired poems”. In exegesis a careful distinction should be made (cf. 1 Peter 1:21) between “prophecy [structured in poetry]” and the later “commentary [structured in prose]” (Van Selms 1961b:37).

Weight ascribed to different seemingly identical canonised portions

Another problem regarding the interpretative weight ascribed to different seemingly identical canonised portions that differ is discussed by Van Selms (1951c:76–96).

In the said article Van Selms criticises the use of 2 Tim 3:16 by the dogmatic theologian De Bondt in his inaugural lecture “Text and exegesis of the Old Testament”. Attention is particularly given to the latter’s statement: “The whole of the Old Testament is God-breathed and filled with the Spirit of God” (1951c:77).

Focusing on the Psalms, Van Selms states that there are different stages between the initial writing of the individual psalm and its final canonization. These aspects have to be borne in mind during the exegetical process. Questions that should be asked (Van Selms 1951c:81) are:

What did the text look like when the book of Psalms was included in its final form in the canon?

What did the text look like after the eventual “Elohistic” editing?

What did the text look like when the psalm was included in one of the ancient cultic collections?

What did the text look like when the author completed his editing?

Van Selms uses as example Pss 14 and 53 that only deviate slightly from one another. After an analysis he remarks (1951c:95): “We may not maintain that the texts of both Ps. 14 and 53, when they differ from one another, provide us the word of God”. According to Van Selms (1951c:88) the exegete has one of two options, namely to attempt to reconstruct the “original text”, or to accept one of the two texts deemed to have been the product of the compiler of the book of Psalms. As regards Pss 14 and 53 Van Selms provides an example of a stylistically motivated reconstruction (1951c:88).

Van Selms (1951c:93) furthermore refers to article 3 of the Netherlands Confession of Faith in which it is stated that holy people of God, driven by the Holy Spirit “spoke”. He interprets it thus that the exegete should strive to ascertain the original version of what had been spoken.

Van Selms (1951c:96) directs attention to chapter 13 of his book *Licht uit Licht*, published in 1948, in which he discussed the space

between our [printed] text and the original,
between the written word and the spoken word, and
between man's word and God's word.

Within these three spaces textual criticism, historical and theological criticism have to do their respective tasks (1951c:96).

In the preceding discussion the focus has been on the first of the above three aspects, i.e., textual criticism or "establishing the original text". In the discussion below brief attention will be given to the other two aspects.

Relationship "between the written word and the spoken word"

Van Selms himself usually assumed a close relation "between the written word and the spoken word".

Historical context

In an article titled "The Year of the Jubilee, in and outside the Pentateuch", Van Selms (1977:75–85) argues, as regards historical context, for "the presence of the institution of the Jubilee as a practical reality in the times of the early divided monarchy" (1977:84). The said practice refers to the fiftieth year in which Israelites were to consecrate and proclaim liberty (Lev 25:10), implying, for example, no sowing (v. 11) and the manumission of slaves (v. 39f.).

Within the same category lies Van Selms' historical contextualisation as important aspect of the exegetical endeavour. Van Selms (1951b:7–8), for example, interprets Ps 137 as a letter from an exile in Babel to the sanctuary of the Godhead in Jerusalem, recited by a messenger. Van Selms (1951b:7–8) furthermore interprets the dashing of the infants of the daughter of Babel as destruction of the vassal states such as Edom (cf. the killing of ten thousand men from Edom by King Amaziah of Judah [2 Chron 25:11–12, cf. 14]). The said interpretation, however, has as background the actual killing of children by the enemy.

Editing process

Van Selms assumed an editing process between the written word and the spoken word that at times could alter the contents. One such instance is described by Van Selms (1967d:83–92). According to Van Selms the author of the biblical book Jonah omitted (1:3) the reference to Gath-Hepher, mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 as the abode of Jonah. Jonah 1:3 states that “Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the lord, went to Jafo [60 miles from Gath-Hepher] and found a ship going to Tarshish”. Van Selms suggests that he actually went to the harbour Acco (20 miles from Gath-Hepher). Jafo was mentioned in Jonah 1:3 because Acco was in the then distinct northern Israelite kingdom. For this reason Gath-Hepher was also ignored.

Relationship “between man’s word (as reflected by written text) and God’s word”

The relationship “between man’s word (as reflected by the established, written text) and God’s word” is the domain for theological criticism or reflection. A primary concern here is to identify “man”, that is the original editor or speaker.

Although he left ample room for editing, Van Selms preferably regarded the written word as an authentic reflection of “man’s word” spoken in ancient times. He did not regard all statements of a prophet as “inspired” (explanatory remarks were given a secondary status), but books such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel were almost totally regarded as originating from the respective prophets themselves.

Van Selms was also convinced that the psalms echo the setting in life of their writers or composers. He (Van Selms 1959b:1–12) agreed with Ridderbos that psalms always reflect a definite historical and geographical situation. In Van Selms’ view the revelation of God is bound to time and place.

VAN SELMS' APPROACH TO TEXTS RELATED TO THE FOCUSED TEXT

Function of comparison

While reviewing Van Selms' two-volume commentary on the biblical book Genesis (Van Selms 1967a, 1967b), Le Roux (1993:177) meticulously (although not comprehensively) lists the main "voices of the past" that are referred to.

According to Le Roux "most attention was given to the Babylonian and Ugaritic sources". Furthermore Le Roux states that "of all the targums the Jerusalemi I was the most frequently quoted". He also refers to a range of Jewish (Jubilees, Flavius Josephus, and Ibn Ezra) and classical sources/authors (Ovid, Homer's Iliad, Horace, Virgil, Pliny) as well as those of the Christian era (e.g., Augustine) quoted by Van Selms.

The function of comparative material within the context of the Genesis commentary is, however, only mentioned in general terms by Le Roux (1993:177), namely to "shed light on the understanding and the origin of the book Genesis and the Pentateuch".

In the said Genesis commentaries, e.g., part 1 (1967a), a range of detail functions of material used for comparison can be found.

Comparison with ancient sources is, for example, made as regards etymology. The Old Babylonian noun 'ilum is cited (1967:21) as parallel for 'lōhīm ['ēl] (MT, Gen 1:1).

Alternatively an ancient source is quoted to support his translation of a word. A Ugaritic parallel is used to confirm the rendering of rihḥēf (Gen 1:3) as "hover"; or the Babylonian ṣalmūt (darkness) and the cognate ṣ-l-l (shadow [cf. Ugaritic]) to motivate the interpretation of Gen 1:26 as: "Let Us make a mankind from our shadow (ṣèlèm)". In Gen. 2:3 the Hebrew verb y^eqaddēš (traditionally translated as "and He sanctified [it = the Sabbath]") is interpreted by Van Selms as "make shining" in accordance with the Babylonian qadāšu (shining) and in harmony with a paraphrase of the Dutch poet, J. I. de Haan: "God made the seventh day shining, beaming with joy".

Van Selms often presumed that the reader was familiar with sources. He thus refers to ancient Near Eastern texts without providing background information, e.g.,

the Babylonian creation epic (1967:23, cf. Gen 1:2), two lists of kings (1967:95 and 99, cf. Gen 5:3) and the Gilgamesh epic (1967:118, 127, and 133, cf. Gen 6:5–9:19).

In addition to detail provided in the commentary proper, Van Selms also draws attention to comparative material in his “literary analysis” of a portion, for example (1967b:103) that the biblical author most probably availed himself of Canaanite traditions, as is evident from the numerous affinities of Ugaritic with a biblical passage such as Gen 6:1–4 (“sons of God”).

As regards Van Selms’ Job commentary (1982; 1983), Le Roux (1993:346) comments that one of the “charming aspects” of Van Selms’ exegesis, making “his commentaries a delightful reading experience” is his “use of great authors to illuminate the text of Job”. Several examples are quoted by Le Roux (1993:347–348), e.g., Jan Greshoff (*Verzameld werk, Gedichten*, 1948:19; cf. Van Selms 1982:98).

The Dutch and other poets fulfil various functions in Van Selms’ contributions to the series “De Prediking van het Oude Testament”. The above example of Jan Greshoff can, for instance, be found in the portion of Van Selms’ commentary of Job (1982) with the superscript “The preaching of Job’s response to Bildad’s first round of ethical advice” (Job 9:1–10:22).

In the articles that were scrutinised for the purpose of the present paper comparison of the chosen text with other texts abound. The same applies to Van Selms’ books, for example, *Marriage and family life in Ugaritic literature* (1954) and *Levend Verleden, Een zwerftog door Noord-Israël* (1967). For Van Selms contextualization played an important role during the process of elucidation of a matter.

Various examples of textual comparison

An interesting example of textual comparison is the application of the Old Testament term for “inner room” (ḥdr b–ḥdr) used by Van Selms (1975a:5–8) to explain a related Ugaritic term (dlt-b-dlt) in one article, while the Ugaritic term is used as cross reference in a following article (Van Selms 1976:283–289) where the Hebrew term is discussed.

Comparison is utilised by Van Selms to elucidate the meaning (or etymology) of a word (e.g., jubilee; cf. Van Selms 1977:75–85), or a formula (“You are my ... ; I am your ...”; Van Selms 1958b:130–141) or even a biblical literary genre (“prophetic liturgy”; Van Selms 1971:235–248).

During the discussion of an Old Testament concept Van Selms may refer to NT parallels (“Man van God”; Van Selms 1959a:133–149), or he may explain a NT example by providing a presumed parallel within Old Testament context (“authority of the key”; Van Selms 1970: 247–260).

Sources used for comparison

Van Selms’ book *Marriage and family life in Ugaritic literature* (1954) provides an excellent overview of sources used by Van Selms when drawing comparisons.

Frequent use is made of studies focusing on aspects of law, e.g., Old Assyrian (Ehelolf 1929, Van Selms 1954:19¹), Assyrian (Driver and Miles 1935, Van Selms 1954:13¹), Old Babylonian (Schorr 1913, Van Selms 1954:13¹), Codex Hammurabi (Van Selms 1954:19²⁵), cuneiform texts in general (Alt 1947, Van Selms 1954:21⁴⁰), Sumerian (Rawlinson, Van Selms 1954:120⁶¹), biblical (Daube 1947, Van Selms 1954:11¹⁷; Neufeld 1944, Van Selms 1954:65¹²) and Hittite (Neufeld 1951, Van Selms 1954:12¹⁹) sources.

Dictionaries are occasionally cited, e.g., as regards Hebrew: Gesenius (1896, Van Selms 1954:19²⁹), Gesenius-Buhl (1921, Van Selms 1954:23⁵⁴); as regard Aramaic: Jastrow (1926, Van Selms 1954:33⁹³), L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner (1949, Van Selms 1954:78¹⁵); as regards Arabic: E. W. Lane (Van Selms 1954:60¹⁰²) and G. W. Freytag (1830, Van Selms 1954:101⁶⁶), A. de Biberstein Kazimirski (1875, Van Selms 1954:101⁶⁶) and J. B. Belot (1920, Van Selms 1954:100⁶⁶), and as regards Babylonian-Assyrian: Bezold (1926, Van Selms 1954:13¹).

Works by other authors related to marriage and family are also consulted, e.g., M. Burrows (1938, *The basis of Israelite marriage*; Van Selms 1954:21³⁹), A. van Praag (1945, *Droit matrimonial Assyro-Babylonien*; Van Selms 1954:26⁷²), R. H. Kennet (1933, *Ancient Hebrew social life and custom*; Van Selms 1954:43³⁸), J. Petersen (*Israel, its life and culture*; Van Selms 1954:58⁸³), and E. Neufeld (1944, *Ancient*

Hebrew marriage laws; Van Selms 1954:65¹²). Van Selms himself draws attention to comparisons that can be drawn between the Ugaritic and “the story of Abraham” as well as sections 146, 170 and 171 of Hammurabi’s code. He furthermore mentions “the similes used by Hosea and Jeremiah in describing YHWH’s marriage with Israel” (Van Selms 1954:11).

Reference is made to a range of journals, e.g. *Die Welt des Orients* (A. Alt 1947, Van Selms 1954:21⁴⁰), *Revue d’Assyriologie* (P. van der Meer 1934, Van Selms 1954:26⁷²; E. Dhorme 1940–41, Van Selms 1954:104⁹², 128²¹), *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, (J. Aisleitner 1939, Van Selms 1954:34⁹⁷), *Syria* (A. Herdner, 1942–3, Van Selms 1954:37⁷; F. Thureau-Dangin, 1937, Van Selms 1954:140²⁵), *Bulletin American Schools of Oriental Research* (U. Cassuto 1950, Van Selms 1954:38⁸, 88³⁶, 96⁴³; Th. H. Gaster 1946, Van Selms 1954:79¹⁷; W.F. Albright 1941, Van Selms 1954:127¹⁴; T. Mendelsohn 1941, Van Selms 1954:132²⁶), *Journal of Biblical Literature* (W.F. Albright 1950, Van Selms 1954:41²⁵, 61¹⁰⁷, 62¹¹⁸, 94⁷, 113⁵; Albright 1938, Van Selms 1954:70³⁶, 113⁵; C.H. Gordon 1951, Van Selms 1954:79¹⁶), *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* (F.J. Neuberg 1950, Van Selms 1954:41²⁸), *Bibliotheca Orientalis* (J. Friedrich 1948, Van Selms 1954:43³⁷), *Archiv Orientalni* (G.R. Driver 1949, Van Selms 1954:100⁶⁶; A. Alt 1950, Van Selms 1954:119⁵⁶, 137²), *Hervormde Theologische Studies* (F.M.Th. de Liagre Böhl 1951, Van Selms 1954:127¹²) and *Ugaritica* (F.A. Schaeffer 1939, Van Selms 1954:134⁵).

The preface of *Marriage and family life in Ugaritic literature* (1954) is dated 25 August 1951. Most of the research was seemingly done shortly before this date when Van Selms spent a sabbatical abroad. This gave him access to European library facilities. Such luxury was not always available in South Africa.

In an article published in *Kerk en Theologie*, Van Selms (1958a:217) apologises for not having perused a certain a journal article, explaining:

To the sorrow of the philologist this important journal is not present in the library of Pretoria’s university.

A similar remark is made in a contribution to *Ugarit-Forschungen* (1971:249, cf. Van Selms 1971b) when commenting on “The fire in Yamnu’s palace”:

I was not in a position to study the Egyptian text [identified as parallel and contrast to the Ugaritic] ... as the older publications of Egyptologists are rarely present in the libraries of the universities of this young country.

Lack of reference to available material is also, towards the end of Van Selms' life, ascribed to the sheer volume of what has been researched. Van Selms makes the following remark in his commentary on Job (1982:2):

Although it is self-evident that when writing the work I was surrounded by 'a cloud of witnesses [Hebrew 12:1]', I did not find it necessary to mention the different views of colleagues past and present. That would make writing and reading unpleasant ('verdrietig'). In any case there are enough commentaries such as that of Matthes (1865), Driver-Gray (1921) and Kroeze (1961) where this [information] may be found. Their bibliographies show clearly that, whoever wishes to read all that has been written about Job, a single lifetime would not be enough. In the present work [Job part 1] only the writer's [Van Selms'] own opinion is usually to be found, whatever value it may have in the judgement of the reader.

This does not mean that Van Selms did not consult any secondary sources. At the end of his commentary on Job (part two, 1983:255) he remarks:

We have used his [i.e. Kroeze's work], *Het boek Job verklaard* [The book Job interpreted] ([in the series] *Commentaar op het Oude Testament*), 1961, in a very fruitful way. It was refreshing to travel with a man who does not focus on the discovering of 'glosses' and 'insertions', but who concentrated his ingenuity on contents and meaning.

The given quotation, in short, provides an overview of Kroeze's (1961) commentary, revealing at the same time Van Selms' own preferred holistic, text-orientated approach to the Hebrew version of Job.

Dogmatic presupposition

Van Selms very seldom entered into direct debate with other scholars, challenging their views. There is, however, a remarkable example of such an episode early in his academic career.

In *Kerk en Theologie* (Van Selms 1958a:217) responds to two Dutch scholars. According to Van Selms, W. F. Golterman in *Woord en Dienst* of 12 January 1957 coined the expression “choice and confession” (implying that “choice” precedes “confession”). This expression, in turn, served as basis for a pamphlet by the dogmatic scholar, A. A. van Ruler, titled “Does it still make sense to speak of a ‘national church (volkskerk)’?” In line with Golterman’s thinking, van Ruler made the remark on p. 5 of the said pamphlet: “The election of God, regarding which there is no limit to his power, is reflected by, and realised in a choice of man: choose today whom you wish to serve.” In this regard van Ruler referred to Joshua 24:15 to substantiate his view. In the said verse Joshua addresses the Israelites:

But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourself this day whom you will serve ...

Within his article “Choose today whom you will serve” Van Selms (1958:210–218) expresses his disagreement with van Ruler about the “wrong use” of Joshua 24:15 in the said pamphlet.

Van Selms regarded it as incorrect to combine “choice and confession” (1958:217). He argues that the choice in this case (Joshua 24:15) is not between God and an idol. Human choice only applies when preference is given to idols. Although this verse is seemingly contradicted by a subsequent one, Joshua 24:22 (“Then Joshua said, ‘You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord’”), the latter (Joshua 24:22) should be understood within the context of Joshua 24:15. Van Selms argues that “choose” is utilised in Joshua 24:22 in an “uncommon (‘oneigenlijk’)” way, and that it is not specified in the said verse between what, or from what a choice is made. According to Van Selms man cannot choose God, he can only reject him.

In his response van Ruler (1958:218–223) summarises the theology underlying Van Selms' view as follows:

As far as man is concerned, he [i.e. man] is overwhelmed by the mercies of God, and can only be obedient and thankful.

Van Ruler agrees with Van Selms that Joshua 24:15 refers to the choosing of other [idol] gods. However, according to van Ruler (1958:220–221) Van Selms' view is not representative of other Old Testament scholars such as Ludwig Köhler (1936), H. W. Hertzberg (1953) and Joh. de Groot (1931) who interpret 24:15 in the light of the whole chapter and insist that the focus is on the choosing of the God of Israel rather than heathen gods. Furthermore verse 22 may by implication be used to interpret verse 15.

The criticism by van Ruler is that Van Selms enforces his dogmatic views upon the text, and that by not consulting authoritative commentaries is out of step with the extant (1958) Old Testament science.

It must be admitted that dogmatic presuppositions as exegetical determiner played a negligible role in Van Selms' writings. However, in a review of Van Selms' commentary on 2 Chronicles (1947) Gemser (1948–1949:68), for example, mentions Van Selms' inclination towards "theological exegesis", e.g., the "dark cloud" filling the temple (literally "house") is interpreted by Van Selms as a sign of the transcendence and immanence of God (2 Chron 5:10).

VAN SELM'S DISTINCTIVE PERSONAL INPUT DEMONSTRATED IN PUBLICATIONS

In the overview of Van Selms' life and the elucidation of aspects regarding his approach to texts, unique features of the scholar known as Adrianus Van Selms have been brought into relief. An important question, however, remains, namely what are the essential and distinctive features of his personal input demonstrated in his publications? What does abide?

Two past reviewers of Van Selms' biblical commentaries have responded differently in their characterisation and evaluations of the said aspects.

According to J. H. (Jurie) Le Roux (1993:213) outstanding characteristics demonstrated by Van Selms are, first, his erudition, i.e., his "vast knowledge of ancient and modern literature [including Dutch authors]". Secondly, Le Roux refers to Van Selms' distinctive method, consisting of "a 'close reading' of the text, sharp philological and historical observations, and intelligent guesses". Thirdly, Le Roux finds Van Selms' creativity striking. Van Selms (in Le Roux's view) "created many new possible interpretations of the text". Fourthly, Le Roux mentions Van Selms' "ability to narrate". Through "his lively and vivid narrations the ancient world of the text came alive". Fifthly, Le Roux observes that Van Selms (particularly in his commentary on Jeremiah) "used the text (and his imagination) to construe an authentic historical context". Finally Le Roux states that Van Selms' works "are truly human".

However, Le Roux opines that Van Selms had a "fairly idiosyncratic approach to the Old Testament", and although "he took historical critical results into account" (1993:89), Van Selms' "grossly neglecting critical scholarship" (particularly as regards Genesis) is regarded as a negative feature of his work.

James Alfred Loader in his 1995 Van Selms Memorial Lecture responds to the opinion expressed by Le Roux (1993) in his book, deciding that Van Selms' literary endeavours can be regarded as having abiding relevance. The accusation of Le Roux that Van Selms "did not take historical criticism seriously enough" (Loader 1995:248) does not mean that his views are invalid. As a matter of fact Van Selms' hypothesis, suggesting a priestly author for the book Genesis as whole, has again surfaced in modern critical scholarship (Loader 1995:248; Van Seters 1992).

However, Loader (1995:243) mentions as Van Selms' primary and lasting characteristic the point of view that "he was exceptionally sensitive to the cultural history of Israel and the ancient Near East". Several examples are quoted from Van Selms' commentaries on Genesis, Jeremiah, and Job. Van Selms, according to Loader, demonstrated clear insight into the historical context of the chosen portions from Scripture (that were commented on) and often addressed the situation of the modern reader. Loader uses expressions such as "moral rationalization" (1995:245),

“psychological explanation” (1995:246), and “existential” theological outlook (1995:248).

The above reviews illustrate Van Selms’ “blending of creativity and knowledge” (Le Roux 1993:175) with Le Roux by implication accentuating the first aspect and Loader the second. Van Selms himself was also aware of both trends in his work.

“I have always been alert to power of my own imagination”

Van Selms (1967c) provides his own views, within an archaeological context, on the relation between science and imagination.

As regards excavations Van Selms refers to his participation in an expedition to Sichern forty years earlier (1967c:52). According to him, when compared to the previous “wild treasure hunting” in Palestine, their diggings (in 1926) were done in a careful and scientific way. However, reports of expeditions he read show how the method of excavation has been refined in the meantime, leading to more profound results.

On the other hand, in Van Selms’ view scientific method does not exclude the use of one’s imagination. He states (1967c:50):

In my scientific work I have always been alert to the power of my own imagination, but without the power of imagination no significant scientific work can be done.

He applies it (while observing two elevations on different levels) in visualising a top and bottom gateway and a wall built at the south-west side of the Tel of Sarid, erected in such a way that it would be on the right hand side of an invading army. Carrying their shields on their left hand side, the enemy would thus be more vulnerable to arrows and stones of the inhabitants’ catapults (1967c:50).

Making assumptions

Another angle of science cum imagination is found in *Marriage and family life in Ugaritic literature* (1954). In order to provide a portrait of marriage and family life in Ugarit Van Selms deduces information from Ugaritic literature, and he often makes

assumptions. The main assumption that “lies at the base of three-quarters of our investigation”, he says, is the presupposition “that life of gods and mythical heroes as depicted in the epical texts is on the whole a reflection of human life as known to the poets of Ugarit” (1954:10).

Pertaining to detail aspects Van Selms states that “as a piece of mythical theology the poem of Yrḥ and Nikkal stands quite apart in the Ugaritic literature ... We may therefore *safely assume* that the oracle was delivered to Yrḥ by some other god, unknown to us ...” (1954:17).

As far as the Krt epic is concerned, Van Selms suggests: “*Perhaps* the real motive of the whole poem is to explain why at a certain moment a change of dynasty occurred in Ugarit ...” (1954:16⁶). Furthermore: “One *can imagine* that the part of the epic which has been lost told how ... Yṣb could not ascend to the throne ...” (1954:16⁶). And: “One *may imagine* that the bride [in the Krt epic], as token of submission to the bridegroom, adjusted the girdle to his loins” (1954:43). In the context of marriage life (Krt epic), Van Selms remarks: “*Perhaps* weaving was considered a man’s job, but cutting and sewing were probably the task of the woman (1954:55)”.

When comparing the two epics Van Selms remarks: “One *could maintain, perhaps* that ... the type of marriage in Krt’s case is quite other than that in the case of Yrḥ” (1954:31).

Regarding the Ba‘al epic Van Selms opines: “*Perhaps we may assume* that the poet regards such weapon in the hands of the gods as a kind of living being” (1954:91).

Furthermore, the ingenuity of Van Selms is demonstrated by his endeavouring to find new perspectives or themes within biblical context.

Choosing unique themes

Van Selms at times assumed that a certain theme which he had chosen was unique. In an article regarding “The title Judge”, Van Selms (1959c:41) claims: “Nobody has ever wondered why the seventh book of the Old Testament is called ‘The Judges’”. He draws attention to the fact that the term “Judges” is mentioned only outside the book of Judges, e.g., in Ruth 1:1: “in the days when the Judges ruled”.

Van Selms (1959a:133–149) furthermore discusses various verses where the expression “man of God” can be found. Referring to Johs. Pedersen (1947), L. Köhler (1953), and G. Kittel’s *Theologische Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testaments* (1950f.), he remarks that very little has been said about the said expression.

However, Van Selms (1967c) at one instance admits that he has been wrong in assuming an observation to be unique. Regarding his observation that the Bible says nothing bad of Zebulon (1967c:7) he says: “I thought that I was the first one to discover it. But much later, in my study among the books, it appeared that I could not take the honour of the discovery.”

Referring to the so-called *Testament of the twelve sons of Jacob* (found at Qumran) he admits: “Another [source] had stated it more than two thousand years ago.”

Reference has already been made to Van Selms’ use of modern poetry during the course of his biblical exegesis. At times, however, verses from contemporary anthologies are placed side by side with ancient texts in unexpected ways.

Surprising comparisons

In *Ugarit-Forschungen* Van Selms (1975b:477–482) provides suggestions regarding “A systematic approach to CTA 5,1,1–8”. He translates lines 1–8 as follows:

1. Because you smote Lotan the slippery serpent
2. made an end to the twisting serpent
3. the mighty one with the seven heads
4. [set alight] [weakened] the heavens like a [ruin]
5. I for my part, will ... you, devour [you]
6. [thigh (?)] [feet (?)] forearms, you will surely descend
7. into the throat of Ilu’s son, into
8. depths of the hero of Ilu

As regard the emendation at the end of line 4, “... [weakened] the heavens like a [ruin]”, Van Selms explains the relevant Ugaritic word, ttrp, as related to the Hebrew verb *tārāf* which has the meaning “to make soft”, “rot” and “decay” in the *hip’il*.

For the portrayal of the heavens as “ruin” he refers to Shelley’s poem “The cloud” (Shelley 1820:196):

For after the rain, when with never a stain,
the pavilion of heaven is bare ...
I laugh at my own cenotaph ...
I arise and unbuild it again.

Van Selms (1975b:481) explains that Shelley’s poem could be described as the finest European representative of the Baal mythology; also “the motive of motive of death and resurrection is much evident in the line quoted by us”.

The features of creativity and knowledge blend within Van Selms’ literary contributions, but also the horizons of past and present, text and audience, in his popular scientific works in particular.

Merging text and recital context

In *God en de mensen* (Van Selms [1938] 1968) the method of merging text and recital context is used in picturing the prehistory, particularly creation. The role of the priest as intermediary is accentuated.

Van Selms calls to mind a small temple, an altar with smoke of the sacrifice, priest and people, and celebrations of a new year where God’s first works are recited, as well as the song of the old world and its termination. Rather than indulging in the problematic issues of Genesis 1, Van Selms (1968:9) simply states:

The priest declaims: In the beginning God created heaven and earth.
Before the eyes of the people appears the image of the chaos: a dark mass; seething waves; undefined forms that change into one another; the whirling of the primordial waters.
– Let there be light!

A similar role as interpreter, but also as first person speaker, is ascribed to “someone from Jerusalem, from the temple circle” in Van Selms’ final work (cf. van der Westhuizen 2012:6).

Related to the context of creativity and knowledge (imagination and science) mention should furthermore be made of Van Selms' ability to project his personality, and perhaps his personal experience, upon his scientific work.

“His works are truly human”

A remark made by Le Roux (1993:213) in his review of Van Selms' Jeremiah commentary (1972 and 1974a and b) is that “his works are ‘truly human’, especially in the directives for preaching; scientific knowledge and personal experience”. Le Roux substantiates the latter observation by referring to various pages in volume 2 (1974b) of the Jeremiah commentary.

The same feature is also demonstrated in volume 1 (Van Selms 1972), e.g., pp. 122–123, where indications are given for the preaching of Jeremiah 6:1–30 which refers to the coming siege of Jerusalem (characterised as filled by oppression, 6:6) by an army from the north (6:22). The picture of despair drawn of the prophet prompts one to consider the possibility that the dilemma of Jeremiah, as formulated in his commentary, reflects something of Van Selms' inner thoughts living in the country where he did.

Finally it may be appropriate to conclude the present subdivision and the article with an elucidating extract from Van Selms' own reflection upon a day's work while doing biblical research in the present Israel.

Epilogue

After his journey by foot through the area where the tribe Zebulun resided, Van Selms (1967c:132) concludes his discussions by stating that “the best still remained to be said”. He explains:

On the hottest day of the month, when reaching the highway after an exhausting journey up and down the mountain, I sat in the shadow of a eucalyptus tree on a rock at the bus stop. On the other side of the road two courageous (‘brave’) donkeys were grazing. Overcome by the heat I decided, while waiting for the bus, to tidy myself. I then discovered that under

circumstances such as these the patient picking of thorns, seed and fibre [of plants] from my socks could be greatly satisfying. It was not the picking as such but the silence that surrounded me, and the peace in my heart. The day's work had been completed. It was something else as well, something that is not possible to tell. Only a few times in life does one experience such a moment of complete peace. It is always in solitude, but it can happen any time. I experienced it once while in my room as young student; once in Java in the midst of the Japanese war, at the bank of a small river. It cannot be expressed in words; the moment you do it, it splashes apart. But perhaps a melody or a line of a poem may come to your mind, one that may preserve the feeling and even provide deeper resonance than you could ever have imagined before. While on Java, between two bombardments, it was the final line of Reinaert: '... en maakten peys met alle dinge' [and make peace with all things]. This time [i.e., the present occasion] when on the way from Afula to Tiberias it was: 'Laudato sia Dio mio Signore'.

Praised are you, my God, my Lord, for the sun that shines upon me day
by day

Praised for the afternoon breeze that strokes me on the forehead

Praised for the trees along this road, in the shadow of which there is
good rest

Praised for the donkeys, so quiet and content

Praised for the wide plain of Iksal and the mountain Tabor on the other
side

Praised for the good land of Zebulon where the feet of your holy child
Jesus went

Praised for the thorns and thistles and for the rock on which I sit

Praised for the merciful hands of Elisheba, caring for the wound on my
foot

Praised for fatigue and comfort, for life and death

Praised for everything.

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