
Why was the ma^{ca}lôt collection (Ps 120-134) written?

H Viviers

Rand Afrikaans University

Abstract

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A close reading of the ma^{ca}lôt collection (Ps 120-134) proves that it is a work of unity and poetic worth. If the 'answer' communicated by the text is 'trust in Yahweh', what might the 'question' or 'problem' be? How does the social context illuminate the text? With the sociological insights of C Geertz and W Brueggemann the sociological function of the collection is determined. Relevant sociohistoric data are used in reconstructing the possible social setting of the collection. Text and context match! The first in fact 'mirrors' the latter. The (macro-) context is that of disconsolation (ca 445-350 B C in Jerusalem) and a dire need for a message of trust and hope – which the text does provide. The theme of trust is given substance within the world view and ethos of Zion, national and God-with-us-theology.

1. INTRODUCTION

With what purpose was the ma^{ca}lôt collection written? In the past different answers were given. A few viewpoints will suffice (cf Viviers 1990; Day 1990): Liebreich (1955) views these fifteen psalms as the commentary of the people on the Aaronite benediction (Num 6:24-26) pronounced on the steps of the temple court. Preß (1958) is of the opinion that this collection was used by the returning exiles shortly before 538 BC (cf also Deurloo 1992). Keet (1969) sees it functioning at the feast of the First Fruits. In Seybold's eyes (1978; 1979) the collection functioned as a cultic-liturgical manual reflecting the participants' arrival, the feast itself and their departure, during feast processions in Jerusalem. Seidel (1982) also admits its use at cultic processions but views the collection rather as a meditation book. Not one of these viewpoints has been completely convincing. What immediately jumps to the eye is how the later redactional heading *šîr hamma^{ca}lôt* in all cases usually forces the exegesis. However, one appreciates all these efforts with their specific exegetical tools (e.g. historical critical) to try and contextualise these psalms in 'a flesh

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and blood social world' (Sheppard 1991:69; cf also Brueggemann 1991:14). 'Social' unfortunately receives little focus. It is exactly here that the sociological or social-scientific questioning of a text opens new horizons, especially when it comes to the dynamic role that social factors play in text production (Gottwald 1985:6-34).

Lang (1985:17) underlines this by stating that biblical scholars do not only need more answers, but also more questions, which anthropology (inter alia) can provide. The sociological approach is being criticized for concentrating on similarities and commonalities at the expense of the unique (Le Roux 1985). Malina (1991:258-259) rightly argues that the first can become a gateway for the second. This is one of the reasons why the abovementioned answers do not satisfy-'unique' (unproved) events are being used as starting points for arguments. Also the fact that it is speculative, hypothetical (also anachronistic, ethnocentric) makes it no different than traditional approaches. It at least has the advantage of using as starting point that which actually exists, customary behaviour (eg a modern pre-industrial cult) and then moving back to the past rather than departing from untestable or inductively constructed scenarios of the possible (Malina 1991:258-259).

The question on the purpose and function of the *ma^{ca}lôt* collection is then being asked again, but from a sociological point of view. Following Gous (1988, 1993) who made use of the sociological insights of Geertz (1973) and Brueggemann (1979) in determining the origins of Lamentations, the *ma^{ca}lôt* collection is investigated. The socio-cultural anthropologist Geertz (1973:87-125) defines the purpose and meaning of religion in society within the frame of symbolic anthropology. Religion is a too complex phenomenon to describe it only as (deterministic) projections of society to maintain it, positively or negatively (e g, Durkheim, Weber, Freud, Feuerbach, Marx). Religion has a markedly intellectual function. It not only reflects societal patterns, it also creates such patterns (Geertz 1973:119, 124). Geertz views religion as a cultural system, a system of symbols which naturally flows forth from human beings' inherent need and search for meaning (Gous 1988:45). To be human is to conceptualize, to create symbols in order to give meaning to experiences, to shape and order life (Geertz 1973:140; Gous 1988:38; 1993:69). Without symbols (objects, acts, events, qualities, relations) man cannot exist, cannot function and would have been nothing else than a talented ape (Geertz 1973:99). Sacred symbols form the blueprint, the key to understand a human's social conduct. Religion supplies man with a world view, a picture of how reality is, works and is ordered (a model of reality). A world view explains man's place in the world, that of God, nature, and society. World view comprises the most general ideas of order. What man learns intellectually from his world view, determines how he should live existentially (a model for reality). Bafflement, suffering and a sense of intractable

ethical paradox, challenge the orderliness of life and should be overcome (Geertz 1973:100). Religious ritual involves the symbolic fusion of ethos and world view, keeps faith alive and constitutes meaning (Geertz 1973:112-118).

Interestingly Brueggemann (1988) comes close to Geertz with his view of 'worldmaking' in the Psalms. All religion works basically in this way and also the religion of the *ma^{calôt}* collection. Where Geertz is concerned about religion in general, Brueggemann (1979) narrows the circle and points out two religious options contained in the Old Testament. He identifies two trajectories or tradition complexes in the Old Testament, each with its own world view and ethos. The Mosaic trajectory originated pre-monarchically and the Davidic during the monarchy and continues throughout Old Testament times. All the traditions in the Old Testament can be classified within these two main streams. In the Mosaic trajectory (Northern Kingdom) God is a God of freedom and righteousness and in society marginal people with their sense of decentralization of power and equality are most important. People are here allowed to act revolutionary and criticize the powerful and the status quo. In the Davidic trajectory (Southern Kingdom) God is a holy God of order, those who have power along with the elite in society are important, as well as the centralization of power and a hierarchic society. Here people should act orderly and consolidating, legitimize the powerful elite as well as the status quo. Gous rightly criticizes Brueggemann for focusing only on symptomatic differences and by applying only a conflict model (oppressor – oppressed) to his material. With the help of Geertz, Gous (1988:64) convincingly argues that both trajectories function in the same way, both have an underlying base of order (not only the Davidic). He then corrects Brueggemann by showing that the Mosaic trajectory focuses on a 'human-made' order, whilst for the Davidic the 'God-given' order is most important.

Before the context and the question of origin and purpose of the *ma^{calôt}* collection are highlighted, it is important to have a solid grasp of the text of these psalms. The 'answer' to the question of the background and purpose is already partly contained in that which the text wants to communicate.

2. THE TEXT OF THE *ma^{calôt}* COLLECTION

A century ago Duhm (1899:xiv, xxv) already expressed his appreciation of the poetry of the *ma^{calôt}* collection. Recent studies have confirmed the literary worth of the collection (cf Beaucamp 1979; Mannati 1979; Auffret 1982; Marrs 1982; Grossberg 1989; Viviers 1990, 1994).

Each of these short psalms (the long Ps 132 is in essence part of the collection; cf Marrs 1982:203) is a sophisticated, unified work. Although each poem is unique with its own theme there is an organic coherence binding the collection to a unity. This is done by a network of word repetitions, corresponding syntax, similar figures of speech, a characteristic synthesis overall and a main theme throughout.

A network of word repetitions is present throughout the collection (cf Viviers 1990:181-217; 1994:4-6). There is also a distinct predilection for unusual, probably poetic forms in the collection (Beaucamp 1979:74-75; Grossberg 1989:48-50). Similar expressions and corresponding syntax occur: Psalm 130:1b and Psalm 129:1b start similarly with the call upon Yahweh; Psalm 128 and Psalm 125 are concluded with an identical blessing and also Psalm 128:5 and Psalm 134:3 (cf also Ps 133:3b; 132:13-18; 128:4); Psalm 123:4 and Psalm 120:6 end almost identical; Psalm 124:8 and Psalm 121:2 use the same creation tradition (cf also Ps 134:3); in both Psalm 120:6 and Psalm 129:5 enemies are described as 'haters'; Psalm 132:12a, Psalm 130:3 and Psalm 127:1c use the same conditional construction and so do the opening stichoi of Psalm 127 and Psalm 124; Psalm 129 and Psalm 124 start similar with an 'appeal' to Israel; the same *merism* occurs in Psalm 131:3, Psalm 125:2 and Psalm 121:8; *hinnê* functions as *anacrusis* in Psalm 134:1b, Psalm 133:1b, Psalm 132:6, Psalm 128:4, Psalm 127:3, Psalm 123:2a and Psalm 121:4; the second half turning points of all the *ma^{ca}lôt* psalms are introduced by *anacrusis* (Ps 120:5; 121:3; 122:6; 123:3; 124:6; 125:4; 126:4-5; 127:3; 128:4; 129:4; 130:5; 131:3; 132:1b, 6, 11a, 13 (intr of 4 stanzas); 'affirmative' *kî* occurs in Psalm 133:3b, Psalm 132:13, 14, Psalm 130:4 (*kî* adversative), Psalm 128:2, 4, Psalm 127:5b, Psalm 125:3a, Psalm 123:3, Psalm 122:5 and Psalm 120:5; 'semantic-sonant'-*chiasmi* occur throughout the collection and remarkably bind the collection with *inclusio* with its (almost identical) occurrence in Psalm 121 and Psalm 134 (cf Viviers 1992a); there is also a high concentration of *inclusio*, *closure*, *parallelisms* of different kinds, *anadiplosis* and *onomatopoeia* in the collection; apart from Psalm 129 and Psalm 133 each psalm focuses prominently on Yahweh right at the beginning and apart from Psalm 120, Psalm 126, Psalm 127 and Psalm 128 also at the end of the poems; most *ma^{ca}lôt* psalms display a *chiastic* pattern in their integral synthesis of which *inclusio* mostly forms the outer poles.

The overarching structure of the whole of the collection can be described as a non-rigid *chiasmus* with strong links between Psalm 133, Psalm 134 and Psalm 120, Psalm 121; Psalm 132 and Psalm 122, Psalm 126; Psalm 131 and Psalm 123, Psalm 125; Psalm 130 and Psalm 120, Psalm 121; Psalm 129 and Psalm 124; and Psalm 128 and Psalm 127. It is remarkable that this chiastic pattern on the macro level is also reflected on a micro level in each psalm as indicated above.

The poets of the *ma^{cal}lôt* collection were inspired by a wealth of traditions and motifs in and outside the Old Testament. Familiarity with the Aaronite blessing (cf Liebreich) cannot be denied but a host of other motifs such as evildoers, idolatrous forces, the intimate-personal and domestic life (cf Croft 1987:199-200, note 25), Zion/Jerusalem and the cult were applied as illustrative decor for each poem.

The same theology is present, throughout the collection. Yahweh is portrayed as the Creator, Saviour and benedictory God. His creative power underscores his saving activities. The first half of the collection focuses on Yahweh, the Saviour and the second half on him as the benedictory God. This almighty Creator, merciful Saviour and abundant-benevolent God can be trusted unconditionally. This is also the main theme or fundamental 'atmosphere' of the whole collection, namely *trust in Yahweh* (cf also Wilson 1985:224). Of the fifteen Gattungen in the collection nine are psalms of trust. The others are prayers, wisdom psalms and hymns of thanks. Motifs of lament do occur, but motifs of trust dominate overwhelmingly (cf Viviers 1992b).

This literary profile of the *ma^{cal}lôt* collection has important implications for the sociological investigation further on:

- * The original unity of each psalm and the collection as a whole refute the view-point that these psalms underwent a redactional reworking from popular poetry to official (Zion-) temple poetry (cf Seybold 1978; 1979; Zenger 1991: 128-129). Glosses are minimal and difficult to identify (cf Marrs 1982:11, note 8; Berlin 1982:112). This points to an origin over a shorter time span and the unity also points to one psalmographic school of authors.
- * The overall synthesis of the collection does not display a logic-dramatic movement from point A to Z, but rather that of a non-rigid *chiasmus*. This questions the original use of the collection as a cultic-liturgical manual.
- * The literary analysis of the text convincingly highlighted the main theme of trust of the collection. It is important to know exactly what the 'answer' of the text is, before the 'question' or 'problem' of the context which generated this text is investigated.
- * Linking up with the previous point: Not only could the main theme be identified, but also the way in which it was very effectively communicated – that is with the help of a vast repertoire of poetic devices. The poets definitely wanted to make an impact on their first audience. The 'problem' of the situation must have contributed to this.

- * The characteristic, deliberate structuring of the collection (on micro and macro level) indirectly 'reveals' something of the ideology of the poets who wrote the collection.

3. THE CONTEXT OF THE *ma^{ca}lôl* COLLECTION

Texts are interpretations of reality, at the most paintings thereof and not photographic resemblances. This applies all the more to the Psalms which is poetry – elevated, expressive, universal, supramundane and timeless language. To reconstruct something of the world and specific era underlying a psalm text is very difficult.

From good studies from the past, it seems quite reasonable that the *ma^{ca}lôl* collection can be dated post-exilic (cf Seybold 1978:75; Seidel 1982:38; Croft 1987). Even the long Psalm 132 can be dated post-exilic, using archaic theology and language to inspire for future times (Kruse 1983:281; Tournay 1991:19, 206-209). A closer dating of the collection is probably 445 BC-350 BC. This date fits *inter alia* Psalm 122 which presupposes the rebuilt temple (and city walls; Viviers 1993; Day 1990:62-63). Because the collection forms a close knit unity in all aspects, this date (5th-4th century BC) applies to the whole collection (Zenger 1991:128-132).

The shock waves of the trauma of the exile continued into this period. Gerstenberger (1980:97) rightly summarizes: 'This event can only be compared with the gravest cases of collapse of nations and cultures in the course of world history'. The exiles lost everything: land, temple, city, Davidic king, their freedom and dignity, even their God, their trust in Him started slipping (cf Lamentations). Although the Persian empire allowed freedom of religion they were still the oppressors of the day. They took their pound of flesh by the severe taxing of the different provinces to maintain their vast empire and their extravagant lifestyle! Jerusalem did not become the centre of the world, only the small capital of an inferior sub-province of the bigger Persian satrapy West of the Euphrates (cf Ezra). There also existed fears for other neighbours (Ammon, Edom, Moab, Egypt) and an absolute low in their relations with the Samaritans of the erstwhile Northern Kingdom (cf Ezra and Nehemia). Nothing came of a unified Israel. The great visions and dreams of Deut-Isaiah, Haggai and Zacharia 1-8 only continued as dreams. The rebuilding of Judah was extremely tough and demanding. Even the second temple was small and uninspiring for many (Ezr 3:12-13; Hg 2:1-9; Zch 4:10).

In Jerusalem and vicinity, the immediate *Sitz* of the origin of the *ma^{ca}lôl* collection, life on grassroots level continued in its old harsh way (Le Roux 1987:151). Zenger (1991:130) draws an analogy with social tensions and conflict which existed in the time of Amos, Michah and Isaiah. Taxes forced small land-

owners from subsistence farming to *Mehrwertproduktion*. Gottwald (1993:8) describes this as a 'foreign tributary mode of production' by which the imperial power (Persia) was served through the native elite. These higher demands as well as crop failures caused few to survive. Many lost their land, and they and their children were taken as slaves by the rich landowners (Neh 5; Job 7:2-3). In the Israel of antiquity property and honour were of the highest 'goods' or assets a person could have, without which you were nothing (Gerstenberger 1980:23, 32; cf Ps 120; 123). The little people (Zenger) were definitely not only farmers but also the small ones of the city. Very soon there also appeared a class distinction: Rich aristocrats from within (not outsiders) mercilessly misused the poor and powerless (Zenger 1991: 131; Gerstenberger 1988:31). Gottwald (1985:537-541) is therefore correct when he considers the godless enemy – righteous relationship in the Psalms as that of the oppressors and the oppressed. However, as in the rest of the Psalter, so also in the *ma^{ca}lôt* collection, enemies are not only aristocrats, but also foreigners (Ps 125; 129), neighbours, friends, family members (Ps 133; Sheppard 1991:70, 77, 80; Croft 1987:40-41, 43, 47-48). Apart from fear for poverty, oppressors and other enemies, people also suffered from fear of idolatrous forces (Ps 121; 130:1; Gerstenberger 1980:62-68). In short: The real world in Judah in the 5th-4th century BC, was a disconsolate world, one of darkness, depression, turmoil and suffering overall.

Who were the writers who had to address this situation and where and how did the *ma^{ca}lôt* collection most probably function? It is difficult to exactly locate or identify the 'school' that produced this collection. When Gerstenberger (1988:32) states: 'Glorification of bygone power and new wealth (of a few) was the concern of the new class of priests and some other spiritual leaders of national renown. Sages, Levites, many scribes and early rabbis apparently leaned more to the side of the powerless', then the (literary) poetic worth of the *ma^{ca}lôt* collection points more to the elitistic group of writers, the priests. The solidarity with the powerless small people of society on the other hand points to the sages, scribes and Levites. In this time however the Levites became visionary apocalyptic orientated and therefore severely challenged the status quo Sadokite priests. The *ma^{ca}lôt* collection resembles overwhelmingly status quo theology which questions the Levites as writers. Probably the writers then were sages and or scribes. Whoever these psalmographers might have been we do know their ideology from the *ma^{ca}lôt* collection, they were drenched in Zion theology. Where was the collection used? Cultic as well as non-cultic songs are part of the *ma^{ca}lôt* collection (Viviers 1990:218). This does of course not mean that the cult and life outside the cult were mutually exclusive. The cult itself also functioned as a multi-functional organism in post-exilic times, inter alia as a place of teaching the people (Croft 1987:161).

Gerstenberger (1988:22) points out that in post-exilic times there were familial and religious institutions. A sort of a 'low' cult (family, local community, synagogue [if it existed?], wisdom groups) where religious rituals of life stations received attention for orientation, meaning and support. The 'high' cult (e.g., temple and feasts) concerned itself with seasonal cycles and national affairs. Both these 'types' of cult influenced each other. The *ma^{cal}ôl* collection most likely had a place in both. Its contents rather suggests that it originally functioned as meditation or devotion book (Seidel 1982:38; interestingly enough admitted also by Seybold 1978:73) rather than a cultic-liturgical manual (Seybold 1978, 1979). Gunkel & Begrich (1975:453) view it as a book somewhere in between. The later redactional heading *šîr hamma^{cal}ôl* could point to a cultic-liturgical re-interpretation later on.

4. THE SOCIOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF THE *ma^{cal}ôl* COLLECTION

What did the collection have to do in a situation plagued by uncertainty and turmoil, what function did it have to fulfil in society?

In the words of Geertz it had to give meaning to people, it had to order life, it had to establish a new hope and confidence in the future. It is remarkable how sacred symbols 'filled in' people's world view and ethos with meaning, how it constituted their vision of reality as it ought to be. A few 'images' or 'beacons' from the collection will suffice: *Zion/Jerusalem/temple* communicated Yahweh's presence. Where He is, there is harmony, order, peace, repose and safety (Ps 122:6-9; 125:1-2). Where He is, there is abundance, blessing (life in the fullest sense), unanimity and a wonderful future (Ps 132:13-18; 126; 128:5; 133; 134). His presence also spells justice (Ps 122:5). In Zion He is also represented by the Davidic king (Ps 122:5; 132) who had to imitate his character and deeds. Seybold (1979:268) is certainly correct with his typifying of the collection as *Zion-Segen-Theologie*. Linking up with the merciful, caring God of Zion, security in Him is strikingly portrayed by the mother-child and owner (father)-slave metaphors of Psalm 131 and Psalm 123. *Creation* and *nature* depict God's omnipotence. In creation it is mostly clear that He is the creator and sustainer of life-giving order. He is the creator of the mountains (habitat of idolatrous forces), the sun- and moon-'gods' (Ps 121). He effortlessly fights off the total onslaught of the enemies (Ps 124:8). Even in the temple people are inspired by his creative and caring power symbolized by the extended hands of the priest during benediction (Ps 134:3; Lv 9:22). All is in His hands, the elements, the seasons, changing from death to life (Ps 126). Whilst humans live mundane and suffer, He lives heavenly and exalted, He has to be constantly looked up to (Ps 120:1; 121:1; 123:1; 130:1). As creator He also blesses with earthly riches (wife, children, labour, food, a long life; see Ps 127; 128).

Without these you are considered not only a nobody, but also godforsaken (Gerstenberger 1980:27; cf also Hannah in 1 Sm 1). Yahweh also embraces time, from beginning to end (Ps 121:8; 125:2; 131:3; 133:3). *Nature symbolism* not only depicts God's omnipower, but also the powerful enemies and per implication the powerlessness of the righteous. The enemies are the 'chaos creators', they disturb the order and their deeds even reach cosmic dimensions. They can be idolatrous forces (inhabitants of mountains [mountains in Ps 125 positively], sun- and moon-'gods'; see Ps 121); enemies from within who oppress mercilessly: they are like the god Mot who wants to devour you alive or primordial waters engulfing you (Ps 124); external enemies ploughing your back (Ps 129); an enemy can be sin forcing you into 'the pits', '*sjeool*' (Ps 130); enemies also ruin the good *social order* by undermining peace (Ps 120), twisting the truth (Ps 120), jest and snigger at modesty (Ps 123), reject God and righteousness (Ps 125), despise justice (Ps 120; 123:3-4; 125:3-5; 127:5; 132:18). Both Geertz (1973:100-108) and Gerstenberger (1980:17) agree that religion functions not to evade chaos and disorder, but to be able to accommodate it, to cope with it. This can only be done in a world in which Yahweh has the upper hand, where He is in charge. His followers simply have to live within the force field of his Godly abilities.

It is quite clear from these few beacons or anchors in the *ma^{calôt}* collection that it most certainly wants to console, inspire and encourage. This is confirmed by Zenger (1991:128-129) who describes it '...als Lied der Hoffnung inmitten eines harten und verzweifelten Alltags'. According to Brueggemann's two trajectories it neatly fits the Davidic trajectory. It resembles as has been shown, Zion theology or establishment-theology (Le Roux 1987:104-106, 157-159). God is the primary giver and preserver of order. He is totally in charge of everything. Everything in life has its place – God himself, the believers and even the order-ruining enemies their non-place (Geertz 1973:130). Yahweh is always the initiator as Creator, Saviour and benedictory God. He is the One who saves and this only has to be accepted. Nowhere in the collection is there any talk of human beings trying to work out their own salvation. They accept and trust fully what God does. This sums up their ethos. This symbolic universe portrayed by the *ma^{calôt}* collection is one of safety and surety. This world is certainly not a fairy tale world as proved by so many old earthly realities as part of it. But it is a world in which the believer of the day could feel safe, provided for and 'at home'. It is also a predictable world like the previous bygone world propagated by Zion theology of old. Within an unstable, uncertain real world this world view and ethos of quiet trust would fulfil humans' needs for stability, steadfastness, meaning, order and structure – 'Man always draws meaning

for his life from the structure of the World' (Gerstenberger 1980:17). It is remarkable that the neat external structure of the *macalôl* collection indirectly, also reflects something of the inner world view thereof (cf also Gous 1993:80 on Lamentations).

In a more recent work of Brueggemann (1988) he confirms the abovementioned views on world view and ethos in principle when he focuses on the cult and the role psalms might have played therein. He views the cult as the place where 'world-making' happens, where a theoretical (symbolic) alternative world is being created to sustain hope (Brueggemann 1988:5). He actually follows Mowinckel in this, not the latter's well-known view of the new year's enthronement feast, but the fact that the cult is not only responsive, but also constitutive (Brueggemann 1988:6). Worship in the cult which consists of different rituals and sacred actions maintain this world (cf Geertz' ritual). He quotes Mowinckel (1988:9): 'What the congregation wants to achieve through the cult...is life'. Gerstenberger (1988:6) confirms that life in the fullest sense of the word is the goal of all religious ritual. Although 'worldmaking' is primarily the task of God, human beings participate in doing this (Brueggemann 1988:11). This does not only happen socially but also through the use of good literature. Here again he quotes Clines (see Brueggemann 1988:17): 'The text creates a world in which participants in the world of the text get to know their way around ...' (cf also Van Staden 1991:9, 13 on literature as social force). In the same way the use of the *macalôl* collection in the cult and also as literature, created new horizons, new possibilities of meaningful existence.

How correctly Geertz' views on religion are, is being confirmed in South Africa today. In a popular work of Van Niekerk (1992), which can be called a 'popular anthropology' born out of 'participant observation' (Lang 1985:2), he illustrates the mutual influence of world view and ethos amongst the rural Venda people in Northern Transvaal. To a large extent this is also true of many city dwellers. What people believe, they do, they 'live it out'. Sundermeier (1992:1) confirms this aptly: 'Tell me what your God is like and I'll tell you what your society looks like'. In times of utmost tension, in South Africa today, the old beliefs of Africa surface to give meaning to people's lives. Ancestor spirits, medicine men, witchcraft, belief in zombies, etc, are revitalized and are actually amazing in a country that claims to be 70-80% Christian! Unfortunately ritual killings and many other distasteful acts become 'legitimized'. Van Niekerk correctly points out that this is the enormous challenge for South Africa today in the post apartheid era, to try and reconcile the spiritual worlds of the West and that of Africa. Time will only tell if this will indeed succeed. The fact however remains that religion is an extremely powerful instrument of culture to constitute meaning.

The *ma^{calôt}* collection did 'answer' to the needs and aspirations of the community of its time, with a message of hope and trust. It 'mirrors' the (macro) context from which it arose. Sociologically it functioned as a book of comfort. It is consolatory literature to encourage people to keep going on.

5. CONCLUSION

I conclude with a few remarks:

- * It is clear that it is important to have a proper understanding of both the text – probable as well possible meanings (Van Staden 1991:15-18) - and the context before one dare say I think I know what the text actually 'meant' for the situation of its time, and how the social context might have generated a specific piece of literature. Textual 'answer' and situational 'problem' normally 'match' in some way or another as indicated by the *ma^{calôt}* collection. Admittedly the relationship text: context is extremely more complex than has been suggested by the above treatment.
- * The historical situation (background context) is not only the 'background' decor without which the 'text' could do. It forms part of the 'ground' to fully grasp the impact of the text, it 'co'-creates meaning.
- * It also has become clear that sociological insights used (Geertz and Brueggemann) are question or area specific (cf Gous 1993:72). This instrument could only answer the broad meaning of religion in a society, not much more than that. Any other social-scientific model applied to the *ma^{calôt}* collection will of course yield another answer. The limited use of a model does not only concern the sociological approach, but it applies to historical-critical and literary approaches as well. No universal method exists (Gottwald 1985:6-34).
- * Geertz' views on world view and ethos are not new, and he readily admits it, but they most certainly give an apt explanation for the functioning of religion in a society. In the case of the *ma^{calôt}* collection new revolutionary results have not been achieved. Nevertheless it confirmed valuable insights of older studies and refuted some others.
- * Social-scientific models as the one applied could not do without socio-historic data. Therefore Deist (1987a:25; 1987b:43) is correct that such models need an arsenal of societal information on antiquity, not only on politics and cult but especially on ground level which we do not have. Likewise you don't know a modern city today by reading a few novels and two or three newspapers from it (De Moor 1993). Good historical research and sociological studies should therefore continue alongside each other.

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