



Seminar

## OLA WIKANDER

Pro Futura Scientia Fellow, SCAS.  
Reader and Senior Lecturer in Old Testament Exegesis, Lund University

*El(ohim) says: May he live! -  
Northwest Semitic Poetics and Egyptian  
Influences in the Biblical Story of Joseph*

Tuesday, 20 November, 11:15 a.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall  
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala  
[www.swedishcollegium.se](http://www.swedishcollegium.se)

S W E D I S H  
C O L L E G I U M  
*for* ADVANCED STUDY

## ABOUT OLA WIKANDER

Ola Wikander (born in 1981) has a background in biblical exegesis (especially its religio-historical forms) and historical linguistics. He started learning various ancient languages at an early age and later specialized in Ugaritic, a Northwest Semitic language from Bronze Age Syria, as well as in the historical study of Hebrew. He has always been interested in the relationship between the poetic/narrative traditions of Northwest Semitic literature and those of surrounding cultures (not least, Indo-European-speaking ones). At the age of 21, he published a Swedish translation of the main Ugaritic myths, and he has since continued to publish work as an academic and as a literary writer and translator.

Wikander earned his doctorate in 2012 with the dissertation *Drought, Death and the Sun in Ugarit and Ancient Israel: A Philological and Comparative Study* (twice award winning and internationally published in 2014), in which he applies the methodology of etymologically based poetic reconstruction (inspired by Indo-Europeanist Calvert Watkins) to Hebrew and Ugaritic poetic motifs and phrases concerning destructive solar activity, drought, and the power of death. Later he has carried out research on the relevance of linguistic and exegetical scholarship for the preservation of information about nuclear waste storage and on poetic motifs borrowed from Indo-European speakers (Hittites, Luwians, and traditions from Mitanni) in Old Testament and Ugaritic writings—leading to the publication of the monograph *Unburning Fame: Horses, Dragons, Beings of Smoke, and Other Indo-European Motifs in Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible* (2017). He works with texts in many ancient languages, such as Hebrew, Ugaritic, Hittite, Luwian, and Akkadian. During his Pro Futura Fellowship, he will be working on the reconstruction of a Proto-Northwest Semitic poetic language and its phraseology.

## ABSTRACT

The story of Joseph and his brothers – and of his sojourns in Egypt – is one of the most well-known biblical tales of all. But what traditions does it represent? How does/do its author(s) deal with the intercultural literary and linguistic meeting between the Levantine Northwest-Semitic speaking culture out of which it grew, and the Egyptian setting of the story? How does it weld inherited literary phraseology with this foreign linguistic landscape?

The writings of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament grew out of a Northwest Semitic cultural and literary milieu, which provides its immediate linguistic and traditional background; the most important extra-biblical representative of this shared Northwest Semitic literary tradition is represented in the cuneiform alphabetic texts from Ugarit in Syria, written in Ugaritic, a language closely related to – though considerably more archaic than – Biblical Hebrew. The Old Testament writings and the Ugaritic poetic texts use phraseology from the same literary linguistic stratum, sometimes including verbatim similarities. Thus, it is possible to reconstruct the common poetic “meta-language” that lies behind both of these literary traditions, and to use that reconstruction as a heuristic tool using which better to understand the concrete texts that are preserved to us. The basic methodology is what Wikander refers to as “etymological poetics” – the reconstruction of concrete, poetic/literary phrases that have been linguistically inherited and thus provide evidence for earlier, non-attested stages of the linguistic-literary tradition.

This seminar is dedicated to showing one application of this methodology to a specific biblical text, viz. the famous story of Joseph and his adventures in Egypt, from the Book of Genesis. The presentation will be focused, among other things, on inherited Northwest Semitic expressions for life and death and their parallels in Ugaritic, how the text refers to deity and traditions concerning the god El, and, most specifically, on the highly sophisticated way in which the authors/redactors of the story have “reinculturated” the poetic/literary motifs that they received from their Northwest Semitic tradition into the very non-Northwest Semitic milieu in which the tale takes place: that of Pharaonic Egypt. This includes, it will be argued, actual translation of inherited Northwest Semitic material into Egyptian terminology, showing the meeting of literary and linguistic traditions in action. Thus, the use and reuse of Northwest Semitic literary material in the Joseph story represents the very old – the linguistic-poetic tradition held in common with the Ugaritic scribes – but also renews this material by adapting it to a “foreign” setting.