PROVIDENCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

UGARITIC PHILOLOGY

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BY
RICK WADHOLM JR.
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Introduction

Discovering three thousand year old texts nearly one hundred years ago has created numerous opportunities to develop a more cohesive picture of the ancient near east, particularly in regard to creating a better understanding of biblical Hebrew. The discovery of the Ugaritic texts has continued to help shed light on certain obscurities found in the Hebrew Bible, but it has also created questions as to a proper understanding of the exact relation between biblical Hebrew and Ugaritic. Both are west Semitic languages with many affinities in lexicography, grammar and syntax, but there are considerable differences that must be noted as well. In the quest for a better understanding of Ugaritic philology one must not allow other preconceptions about cognate philologies to overshadow the actual usage found in Ugaritic texts. What follows is a very brief examination of some of the problems of Ugaritic philology, followed by some (hopefully) helpful methods to aid one in the task of developing a proper reading, and finally some examples of how Ugaritic philology has helped in the study of biblical Hebrew.

1.0 Problems of Ugaritic Philology

H. L. Ginsburg was once noted to have said, "the only people who have never made mistakes in Ugaritic philology are those who have never engaged it."[1] Indeed his comment would seem to be correct in light of the many problems of recreating a precise Ugaritic philology. The three problems of Ugaritic philology discussed in this paper are only cursory examples and by no means exhaustive of the problems one encounters, but are overall indicative of some of the primary problems.

1.1 Consonantal Texts

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1 Mitchell Dahood, *Ugaritic-Hebrew Philology: Marginal Notes On Recent Publications* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1989), 2.

One of the first difficulties encountered in Ugaritic philology is the strictly consonantal text that was preserved. This consonantal text-type makes certainty in regard to relationships between certain terms in other cognate languages tentative at times. The difficulty arises when varying forms (e.g., *qatal* third masculine singular and the infinitive absolute are written identically with the consonantal text, though pronounced differently in the spoken form) are not differentiated by the consonantal text, but only in pronunciation which has not been preserved in many of the texts.[2]

1.2 Specificity of Ugaritic terms and text types

Another difficulty involves the specificity of Ugaritic terms and text types. While there are many similar terms used in biblical Hebrew this does not automatically mean that the semantic range as used in Ugarit is identical to the semantic range of biblical Hebrew. The same or similar consonantal terms may be used to describe something quite different in Ugarit. In this regard, the nature of the many texts of Ugarit which are liturgical and therefore very specific to the practice of the local cult creates further nuances that should not be overlooked in attempts to discern precise meaning. Caquot and Sznycer agree that "we have no evidence that the Ugaritic rites had the same function as the parallel biblical rites" concerning sacrifices or even etymology.[3]

It must also be borne in mind that "virtually all Hebrew-Ugaritic comparative studies involve the comparison of *different literary forms*."[4] The literary texts of Ugarit are preserved in a poetic form and thus are likely more problematic than if they had been preserved in a more narratival form. The semantic normal range of vocabulary is stretched by the rhetorical nature of

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2   The pronunciation has been preserved in certain Akkadian texts of Ugarit. This contributed vitally to the decipherment of the texts when there seemed to be no other ready aid in the process.

3   André Caquot and Maurice Sznycer, *Ugaritic Religion* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980), 17.

4   Gordon Douglas Young, ed. *Ugarit in Retrospect: Fifty Years of Ugarit and Ugaritic* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1981), 107 *original italics*.

the poetic formulation. This means that terms that would normally have one meaning in narratives, in fact may have a very different meaning in poems. Further, this poetic form becomes difficult when one considers the vast number of word pairs and tries to determine their exact relationship (i.e., contrasts, comparisons, merisms, etc.).

1.3 Cosmopolitan and Cross-road Influences

One other contribution to the problematic nature of Ugaritic philology is discerning the various influences upon Ugarit as a cosmopolitan center that sits at the cross-roads of several of the ancient empires (Egyptian and Hittite) and of the migration route from Mesopotamia. This meant that there were even certain Ugaritian dialects and thus the possibility of various philologies pertinent to each dialect.[5] The influences of these other cultures upon the texts of Ugarit are noted in the many borrowed terms (and even some borrowed and translated texts). The problems created by these outside influences may involve the use of a borrowed lexeme, which has been invested with either new or foreign meaning. "In a linguistically mixed community like Ugarit, where the documents span most of the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries, it is no wonder that some of the tablets are peculiar phonetically."[6]

2.0 Methods for Developing a Reliable Reading

There are no foolproof methods for obtaining a perfectly reliable reading, but there are several that will move one in the direction of a more reliable reading. The following four proposals are modestly suggestive towards this end.

2.1 Context

The key to any successful communication is determining and understanding context.

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5   Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook: Grammar, Texts in Transliteration, Cuneiform Selections,Glossary, Indices* (Analecta Orientalia 38, Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1965), 26.
6   Ibid., 25-26.

Understanding such things as the genre context, cultural-historical context, or immediate syntactical context is imperative. One of the problems of context for Ugaritic philology is the vast gap between the modern context and the context of millennia-old Ugarit. Can (or should) one assume that the context of other nearby locales in the same time period provide the best context for understanding Ugaritic? Perhaps, but this must be only tentative. The two pitfalls of either noting a too strict contrast or comparison should be avoided in any consideration of context.[7]

The often fragmentary remains of many of the texts of Ugarit fail to provide a fuller textual context; not only the fragmentary nature of the texts themselves, but also the differing understandings of how certain of the major texts should be pieced together (or even if they should be pieced together). Also, how does one precisely determine the context of a fragment of a 'list'? Was it a ritual text, a part of a larger literary text, or a student's text for practicing writing? In a similar way, the context of a given form of a particular lexeme is often defined only by the immediate context. Determining the precise context is fraught with many difficulties, but it must be the priority any reader wanting to do justice to the text they are trying to understand.

2.2 Recognize Ambiguity and Be Flexible Yet Strict

Another method involves the recognition of a certain level of ambiguity in any philological work, particularly with regard to a written language such as Ugaritic. Precise definitions seem to only fit some of the time and in certain contexts. One must recognize that certain 'established' rules for understanding Ugaritic may need to be readjusted many times in

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7   Especially giving emphasis to the former as a noticeable problem in the early years of Ugaritic studies is an
    article by Mark S. Smith entitled "Ugaritic Studies and Israelite Religion: A Retrospective View." *Near Eastern*
    Archeology (65:1; 2002), 17-29.

order to better convey the wider evaluation of the context. Related to the sense of ambiguity and concomitant flexibility is the necessity of strict adherence to the textual evidence in particular. There is at times, in such fields of precision, a propensity to look for a 'new' interpretation that treats the possibilities of the text with a loose regard. The text and context ought to be strictly adhered to for determining function and meaning without simply jumping into excessive speculations. The 'rules' of Ugaritic philology which have been presented over the years should serve as helpful guards against wild speculation, however they are only aids in the study and not actually set 'rules' that are inviolable against the actual evidence of the Ugaritic text and context.

2.3 Investigate Possible (or Likely) Cognate Linguistic Relations

Any philological work in Ugaritic needs to pursue the possible (or even likely) cognate linguistic relations. This means that one is not at leisure to simply approach Ugaritic apart from cognate languages (and cultures), but a thoroughly comparative study must be carried out. This should be done on the grounds of determining the possible (or likely) function and meaning within the cognate language and then comparing and contrasting this with the Ugaritic text and context. It is also important to recognize that apparent etymological relations between cognates are in fact only apparent unless demonstrated otherwise. del Olmo Lete offered a word of caution concerning etymological derivations when he wrote, "Etymology is the last and almost desperate resort for semantic definition, of little use unless assisted and supplemented by checking to see how the lexeme is used in similar contexts in other religions."[8]

2.4 Engage in Interdisciplinary Studies

The final methodological aid offered in creating a more reliable reading is to engage in interdisciplinary studies. This means that one cannot simply study linguistics in order to develop

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8   Gregorio del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion According to the Liturgical Texts of Ugarit* Trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1999), 9.

a proper philology of Ugaritic, but should also engage in such fields as history, religion, archeology, social science, etc.[9] Philology, after all, does not simply pertain to the notion of words, but to ideas as represented through the use of words. A holistic approach is necessary in order to better consider the evidence. In this age of increasing specialization, one must not only specialize, but also engage various other fields of study in order to develop a proper understanding of any culture, especially one so far removed from the modern context.

3.0 Contributions of Ugaritic for the Study of Biblical Hebrew

Ugaritic and biblical Hebrew offer, by far, the largest distribution of texts preserved among West Semitic languages and as such, are mutually helpful (though also at times detrimental) for a wider understanding of each language. There may be a tendency to collapse proposals from one of them into the other without carefully analyzing all of the textual data. The two areas of particular emphasis in this paper where Ugaritic philological studies have benefited biblical Hebrew studies are lexical development and the borrowing of concepts and themes. Again, these are offered only as a two of the many contributions, but possibly two of the more significant.

3.1 Lexical development

The discoveries of Ugarit have demonstrated that the language of the Hebrews was not original with them, but involved considerable overlap and sharing of the "language of Canaan."[10] As far as chronology is concerned "the Ugaritic texts always have chronological priority over the

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9   "The traditional divide between archeology and philology needs to be bridged in the interests of better understanding of the symbolism of the ancient world" – del Olmo Lete, 11.

10 See Isaiah 19:18; The "language of Canaan" is being used in the context of the surrounding nations of the West Semites, but also includes biblical Hebrew as belonging to that milieu. Mark Smith ("Ugaritic Studies" 21-22) has helpfully written on the use of "Canaanite" concerning both its divisiveness and its historical retention as still representative, provided one recognize both the linguistic and religious connections of the context in which it is used.

Hebrew texts in comparative studies."[11] The Ugaritic texts have provided considerable evidence

of earlier developments in the *lingua franca* of the western Semites that eventuated in

influencing the Hebrew texts. This influence upon the development of the Hebrew texts may be

only incidental and there is very little that can definitively be determined in the influence of

Ugaritic upon Hebrew other than that Ugaritic represents an earlier text and form of Canaanite

than does biblical Hebrew.[12] P. C. Craigie notes that "it is by no means certain that we are in a

position to come to a firm evaluation of the interrelationship of Ugaritic and Hebrew literary

texts."[13]

Two examples might be helpful at the preceding point. The first is from Prov 26:23 and

involves the words כֶּסֶף סִיגִים "silver dross". In fact, it was conjectured based upon the

Ugaritic find of the word *spsg* "glaze" (and another cognate in Hittite *zapzaga[y]a*) that the

vowel-pointing (as well as the *matres lectiones* yods) and spacing of the Massoretes was

inaccurate and should be altered to read כספסגם "like glaze". The *kaph* was then understood

to be a preposition and the *mem* an enclitic (NIV, NRSV and NLT have followed this reading).[14]

Another example comes from Prov 8:22 where קָנָנִי "(he) possessed me" (KJV, NAS)

was recognized to likely have the meaning "(he) created me" (NET, NRS and similarly NIV,

NLT) based upon the cognate Ugaritic *qny* "to bring forth, create" (as well as the testimony of

the LXX translation as ἔκτισέν).[15] This is also thought to be a possible definition in other

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11 Young, *Ugarit*, 106.

12 Although according to many historical-critical studies there are at least some representative early texts and forms found integrated into the canonical Hebrew Bible.

13 Ibid., 99; note especially his concerns about a 'pan-ugarism' in the field of ANE comparative studies. He goes on to carefully note, "However one defines the linguistic relationship of Hebrew and Ugaritic, it is at least clear at the outset that they share a high proportion of lexical stock; therefore, *a priori*, it is to be expected that they will share a large number of *cognate* parallel word pairs. Thus, while the possibility of a common 'Canaanite thesaurus' remains, the probability of the independent origination of Ugaritic and Hebrew parallel word pairs is quite strong" 106 *original italics*.

14 It would appear that the Massoretes were drawing upon the clearer reading of Ezek 23:18 כֶּסֶף סִגִים "silver dross" in order to interpret the more ambiguous form in Prov 26:23.

15 Note the discussion about the six times where קָנָה seems to have the meaning "to create, produce" in Leonard J.

passages (Gen 4:1; 14:19, 22; Exod 15:16; Deut 32:6; Ps 78:52; 139:13) though it was rejected

by certain translations on theological grounds in this passage. However, the cumulative evidence

seems strongly in favor of reading "(he) created me" rather than "(he) possessed me".

3.2 Borrowing of Concepts and Themes

It is accepted that there are certain passages and phrases within the Hebrew Bible that

have been borrowed from Ugarit (or at the very least from the common traditions shared among

the west Semites of which Ugaritians have among the best preserved textual witnesses).[16] A

common theme of the Hebrew Bible that bears special mention because of its commonality with

the Ugaritic texts is the "divine council/assembly" (e.g., Deut 32:8; 1 Ki 22:19-23; Ps 29, 82).

This notion of the chief deity sitting enthroned in the midst of other deities and lesser beings is a

feature considered antithetical to the later notions of strict monotheism. However, it is a constant

feature in the Hebrew Bible obviously owing to the influence of the Canaanite religions and such

traditions and texts as those of Ugarit.[17] While it may be confessed that "Biblical scholarship has

reached a consensus with respect to the presence of a divine assembly of gods in Israel's faith,"

this does not inherently mean that the ontological status of the divine assembly is simply carried

over into the Hebrew bible without qualification.[18]

Coppes, "קָנָה," TWOT 2:803-4. Exodus 15:16 is not discussed in the preceding article, though it is listed in William Lee Holladay, "קנה,"*A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Based upon the Lexical Work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 320.

16 It is assumed for the sake of this paper that the texts of Ugarit are highly representative of considerable commonality among the west Semites and therefore it will be assumed that "Ugaritic" will be representative of whatever text or tradition lies behind the Hebrew text without assuming that "Ugaritic" refers only to the text and traditions of Ugarit.

17 For discussion of the manner in which certain Hebrew biblical texts have specifically borrowed and reworked Canaanite texts, see Jeremy M. Hutton, "Isaiah 51:9-11 and the Rhetorical Appropriation and Subversion of Hostile Theologies" *JBL* 126, no. 2 (2007): 271-303; for some of the specifics of the notion of the "heavenly council," see Min Suc Kee, "The Heavenly Council and its Type-scene" *JSOT* vol. 31.3 (2007): 259-273; and for an extensive argument for a late strand of this motif within certain strands of Judaism into the second century (but also including examinations of key texts belonging to an ealier era in the Hebrew Bible's development), see Michael S. Heiser, "The Divine Council in Late Canonical and Non-Canonical Second Temple Jewish Literature" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004).

18 Heiser, "The Divine Council," abstract. Heiser proposes (contrary to my own conclusions) that there is a direct correlation, rather than an indefinite one that involves more of a borrowed motif rather than an adopted

One other illustration from the Hebrew Bible concerns the regular motifs and appelatives of Ugarit applied to Baal. One of Baal's regular epithet's is *rkb 'rpt* "rider on the clouds" (KTU 1.2.IV.29; 1.3.III.38, IV.4, 6; 1.4.V.60) which finds a similar title applied to Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible (Ps 68:4; 68:5 MT) סֹ֥לּוּ לָרֹכֵ֗ב בָּעֲרָבוֹת "to the one riding upon the clouds" (cf. Deut 33:26; Ps 18:11 MT; 68:34 MT; 104:3; Isa 19:1). Some of the translations have followed the normal understanding of בָּעֲרָבוֹת as "on the deserts" (cf. ESV, KJV, NAS), but given the cognate parallels *'rpt* in Ugaritic (and *urpatu* in Akkadian) it seems far more likely that the correct translation should read "to the rider on the clouds"(cf. NIV, NET, NLT, NRS).

<u>Conclusion</u>

The forgoing discussion of Ugaritic philology has proposed several problems and aids for developing a more reliable reading, as well as a few illustrative contributions of how Ugaritic has aided in the study of the Hebrew Bible. This has been offered as only an introduction to some of the issues involved and as such it is hoped that the proposals here will spur further reflections. One cannot be content to understand the Hebrew Bible as in a cultural, linguistic, or religious vacuum. It was produced within the milieu of a common western Semitic culture of which Ugarit offers a significant glimpse. Ugaritic studies (not least of which is philological) will need to further apply every tool available to the wider context and the extant texts, in order to come to a still better understanding of Ugarit and its influence (and representation) among the surrounding western Semites.

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ontological interpretation of the pertinent Hebrew texts.

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