

An Interpretation of Ugaritic Religion
in Light of the Baal Cycle

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Introduction

Any study or attempt at explanation of the details of Ugaritic religion must begin with the recognition that the information available is limited and is under-girded by preconceptions in regard to an overall understanding of the development of religious thought and experience (both ancient and modern). Also problematic is the notion of reconstructing a religion that contains far less textual and archaeological evidence than many other better known religions of the ancient near east. Adding to this dilemma is the recognition that the “ancient Canaanites had a very vivid imagination and fine intuition and understood how to clothe the realities of their religion with dramatic myth in which explanations were given for changes in their religion.”¹ The mythological basis for expressing religious belief (while typical of many of their contemporary cultures) is far-removed from a post-modern western context and as such is another hurdle to extrapolating precisely what was believed and practiced in Ugarit.

The Baal Cycle (admittedly important to any discussion of Ugaritic religion) offers a mythological manner of expressing Ugaritic religion in general², but is inherently incapable of expressing the fuller beliefs and practices of the religion as witnessed by other texts which are more explicitly useful for understanding the ongoing practices of the wider cult. What follows is one attempt to grapple with the complexities of understanding a religious culture (with particular regard to the Baal Cycle) that passed from history over 3000 years ago.

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- 1 Ulf Oldenburg, *The Conflict Between El and Ba'al in Canaanite Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 143. His analysis of the use of 'myth' is helpful when on the same page he writes, “the ancients did not go beyond reality when they composed their myths. Mythology is no fiction; it is the groping of the human mind to find the reason for their world, religious as well as material; and the reasons, of course, were believed to lie with their gods.”
 - 2 Mark Smith in *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle Vol. 1: Introduction with Text, Translation, and Commentary of KTU 1.1-1.2* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1994, xxviii) seems to over-reach when he suggests more than this by stating, “It may be argued that the Baal cycle presents as deep and rich a religious vision of human existence as any biblical book.”

Two Interpretive Motifs Examined

There are two primary motifs that are believed to hold the key to understanding the development and practice of Ugaritic religion. I have labelled the two broad motifs “Theomachic Cosmogeny” and “Political-Historical Projections”. The first entails numerous and often only slightly differing views centred around the common motif of life amidst the struggle against disorder – primarily in relation to a struggle-victory-struggle theme. The second motif is also nuanced variously by differing scholars, but is centred within the larger framework of a natural projection of the political and/or historical setting upon the literary setting of the gods and thereby also upon the belief and practices of Ugarit.

1.0 Theomachic Cosmogeny

The broader category of *theomachic cosmogeny* is meant to entail a rather broad understanding of Ugaritic religion (and particularly the Baal Cycle) in light of the battle for order, existence and ongoing sustenance. This particular broad motif may be divided between the following two further delineated manners of interpretation here labelled “conflict and creation” and “seasonal ritual”.

1.1 Conflict (*chaoskampf*) and Creation

Mark Smith notes the cosmogenic view of reading Baal and discusses how it is divided between those who emphasis the cosmic battle motif (or *chaoskampf*) of Baal versus Yamm or Baal versus Mot and the other group emphasizing a creational motif as they understand the building of Baal's house (or temple).³ L. Fisher is one writer noted for treating the Baal Cycle as cosmogeny following a temple motif comparable in his estimation to Genesis one.⁴ Similarly,

3 Ibid., 75-87.

4 Ibid., 26.

Bernard Batto views the Mot and Yamm accounts as belonging to separate re-imaginings of the single cosmogenic conflict motif associated with Baal. He believes CTA 2-3 are separate from CTA4-6 and do not rightly belong to the same account, though through some reworking there is a recounting of the single conflict event.⁵ He further tentatively postulates that the texts were used “in temple ceremonies” and for “actual rituals.”⁶ In what fashion the Baal Cycle was used in relation to actual ritual is highly conjectural beyond the likelihood of some form of recitation, but further comments must wait until after the seasonal ritual interpretation is presented.

1.2 Seasonal Ritual

The list of persons holding to a seasonal ritual interpretation of the Baal Cycle is quite extensive as cited by Smith: Virolleaud, Dussaud, Gaster, Hvidberg, Gray, de Moor, Schaeffer-Farrer and Yon.⁷

This perspective asserts that when “there is no rain in its time 'Ba'al fails' (UM I and Aqhat 43), or 'Ba'al is dead' (UM 67:VI:23), being swallowed up by Môt, the god of drought and sterility”⁸ and thus the Baal Cycle would be offered in hopes of Baal's resurrection and therefore the restoration of the land to fruitfulness via timely rains. It is believed by many that there was an Autumn festival in Ugarit comparable to Sukkoth among the Hebrews that involved such a recitation and certain rituals believed to be associated with the ongoing fertility of the land.

Jack Sasson believes that the Baal cycle along with Keret and Aqhat were “destined to function as vehicles for the propagation of cultic festivities, to explain seasonal fluctuations, or to celebrate the apotheosis of eponymous ancestors.”⁹ He notes and agrees with de Moor's

5 Bernard F. Batto, *Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition: Slaying the Dragon* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1992), 222-223fn6-8.

6 Ibid., 134.

7 Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, 60.

8 Oldenburg 75.

9 Gordon Douglas Young, ed. *Ugarit in Retrospect: Fifty Years of Ugarit and Ugaritic* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1981), 86-87.

conclusion that “Baal 'embodies an early attempt of man to give a comprehensive explanation of the mechanism of the climate in [the Ugaritians] surroundings'.”¹⁰ De Moor even goes so far as to extrapolate precise dates and connect these to (explicit, implicit or merely conjectural) festivals and other particularly important annual events in Ugarit.¹¹

1.3 Preliminary Conclusions Concerning Theomachic Cosmogony Proposals

The arguments for a conflict interpretation (while certainly a major event, book-ending the building of Baal's house) fail to deal with the full contents of the Baal Cycle. Conflict is evident throughout, but how should this conflict be viewed and what is the meaning in relation to the beliefs and practices of Ugaritic religion? Is it simply a generalized concept of struggle against nature and ultimately death? This is such a generalization that one wonders what benefit it would serve in the overall scheme of the cult. Was it intended to offer a hopeful theology for an after-life? Would this include the general population, both practitioners and non-practitioners? Would it only entail hope for the local ruler? This scheme, while somewhat helpful, as it is an attempt to deal with universals, fails at exactly its strength. There are only generalizations where there should be specifics. In fact, if Baal has been defeated once, is there any hope that he will not be defeated in the future or any hope that he will be forever victorious? One benefit of such an interpretation is the relation of the tenuousness of life in the ancient near east to the practice of religion.

In a related matter, the creational interpretation assumes that temple building is in fact a definite model for creation in the Baal Cycle.¹² While it is theoretically possible that the temple-

10 Ibid., 87fn15. In this footnote he is specifically citing de Moor “The Seasonal Pattern in the Ugaritic Myth of Ba’lu According to the Version of Ilimilku” *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 16 (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1971), 249.

11 Johannes C. de Moor *An Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 101-108.

12 G. K. Beale has written extensively in support of a general creation and temple connection in “The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God” *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 17 (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

building in the Baal Cycle may have some connection to a 'creation' there are no definite connective indicators of such in the actual text. Also, one wonders why the section dealing with the building of the temple is in fact creational if it isn't placed first in the Baal Cycle?

The seasonal ritual interpretation (while having many supporters) has been significantly critiqued by del Olmo Lete, Oldenburg, Gordon, Rendsburg and Smith. del Olmo Lete notes concerning Ugarit that we do not actually “know the...rhythm of its seasonal liturgy” but concludes it must have been of great import considering the detailed analysis of de Moor and Cohen.¹³ In his final analysis he actually thinks of the “reconstructions” of the festival (see KTU 1.40-1.41) in Ugarit thought to parallel *Sukkoth* as “extremely hypothetical” contrary to de Moor's many assertions otherwise.¹⁴

Smith, after noting the arguments of those supporting a seasonal interpretation, proceeds to discuss and challenge their argumentation at length.¹⁵ His arguments against such a reading are that there are no texts which specifically attest to an Autumnal festival, though he admits that the “natural reading” of the Baal Cycle represents in some sense a seasonal aspect as both Baal's battle with Yamm and Mot “lead up to the autumn rains.”¹⁶ Having stated such he asserts that there are numerous “difficulties in sustaining a comprehensive seasonal interpretation.”¹⁷ This is evidenced mostly by the recognition that the seven year cycle of KTU 1.6.V.7-9 contradicts a specific yearly cycle.¹⁸ Caquot and Szyner have taken a more general approach by identifying the conflicts of the Baal Cycle with an overall struggle of Baal on behalf of humanity's survival

13 Gregorio del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion According to the Liturgical Texts of Ugarit* trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1999) 25 and see especially 25fn50.

14 Ibid., 26.

15 Smith *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle* 60-75.

16 Ibid., 62-63.

17 Ibid., 66-67.

18 Ibid., 67; Cyrus H. Gordon and Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* 4th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 93.

rather than simply for an annual structure.¹⁹

Gordon and Rendsburg have noted a rejection, on their part, of prayers for rain in summer (which would be out of season) since Baal was “the god of summer dew no less than of winter rain.”²⁰ Oldenburg also mentions that rains would be unexpected (and therefore not sought) in the summer, whereas dew would be normal along with a dry season allowing for proper growth of the crops. Oldenburg (referencing another work of Gordon) notes that “no part of the year in Canaan is sterile” and he therefore believes the Baal Cycle does not represent the normal annual cycle of dry and rainy seasons, but instead it represents “a special catastrophe of drought and infertility when the rain does not come in its season.”²¹

2.0 Political-Historical Projection

The second broad motif entails an intimate connection between the immediate political and historical scene and the activities of Baal in the Cycle and has thus been labelled “projection”. The political projection interpretation asserts that the place of the king of Ugarit (and also of the sovereign empire Ugarit was responsible to at the moment) was determined as victorious through the victories and establishment of Baal. The historical projection interpretation asserts instead that the local issues of social upheaval and movement bears a direct influence upon the Baal Cycle and therefore the Cycle reflects the hopes of Ugarit in relation to the cultures being replaced and repelled.

2.1 Political Projection

The political interpretation considers the ruler (or king) as identified specifically with the death and resurrection of Baal in the Cycle. Del Olmo Lete accords the cultic texts of Ugarit with a granting to the king of Ugarit a “divine (or rather 'divinized' or immortal) character” after

19 André Caquot and Maurice Sznycer, *Ugaritic Religion* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980), 12-13.

20 Gordon and Rendsburg 39fn14; and note the “daughters” of Baal in KTU 1.3.I.23-25 and 1.4.I.15-19.

21 Oldenburg 37; Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Literature: A Comprehensive Translation of the Poetic and Prose Texts* (Roma: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1949), 4-5.

death.²² “The thesis that the Baal Cycle reflects the rise of a new dynasty at Ugarit may help to explain why Baal...is selected king of the cosmos.”²³ Sasson states that the form of literature (particularly folk narrative) involved in disseminating the beliefs of the Ugaritic religion allows “the listener, as well as the teller, to indulge in propagandistic activities, with consequences that are of benefits not only to the permanence of an established dynasty, but also to the health of the city-state.”²⁴

2.2 Historical Projection

The historical interpretation of the Baal Cycle in relation to Ugaritic religion has several variants. One such variant is the notion of naval power wielded by the ruler of Ugarit. Is it possible (even likely) that the Ugaritic myth of Baal's conquering Yamm has relation to the maritime power and importance of Ugarit at the time of composition (or redaction)? This conclusion is proposed by Elisha Linder who names Ugarit a “Canaanite Thelassocracy” describing its “significant naval power” and “sea oriented economy.”²⁵ Smith elaborates extensively upon the political-historical view noting in particular that it entails recognition of the sea peoples and their assailing arrival in the vicinity of Ugarit which is understood to have influenced the textual development within Ugaritic religion.²⁶ “The struggles of Baal mirror the struggles of humanity against the vicissitudes of a dangerous world, but his victories re-invigorate not only the world of the divine pantheon but also human society.”²⁷

Another historical interpretation entails the cosmopolitan nature of Ugarit as it stood in

22 del Olmo Lete 168.

23 Oldenburg 91.

24 Young 97.

25 Ibid., 31; see the development of this thesis on pages 31-42; also of note is his reference to 150 ships called to reinforce the current Ugaritian navy or at least the Hittite navy (UT 2062). This amounts to a rather large naval fleet and would certainly seem to offer some affirmation of Linder's thesis.

26 Smith *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle* 87-96.

27 Ibid., xxv.

the crossroad between empires and kingdoms of the ancient near east. There were many migrations (particularly from the region of Mesopotamia) that are thought to have influenced the composition of the Baal Cycle. In regard to this, Oldenburg describes the worshippers of Baal as “Amorites” who began heavy immigration west into Syria about 2000 B.C. and thus believes this is the reason for the distinction and battles between the gods El and Baal.²⁸ He relies on the work of R. De Vaux who believed Dagan's family to be Mesopotamian and that this family replaced the earlier Canaanite pantheon of El.²⁹ Del Olmo Lete goes so far as to claim, “There can be no doubt that the equation of *Ilu* and *Dagānu* expresses the process of cultural and cultic identification of two (Canaanite and Amorite) pantheons.”³⁰

2.3 Preliminary Conclusions Concerning the Political-Historical Projection Proposals

Certainly the understanding of del Olmo Lete who attributes the cultic and mythic texts of the religion of Ugarit as largely owing to “a coastal location, a dependence on rain, and the monarchic and feudal organization of the state” has much merit.³¹ The weakness of such an interpretation is that it fails to grapple with any divine prerogative in the recording of the literature necessary for the practice of the Ugaritic cult. It assumes that natural influences were entirely determinative in the recording of the texts and rituals and excludes (as does the other major proposal) divine or supernatural realities which were assumed in the days of Ugarit. If, in our modern naturalistic culture, there seems to be a correct interpretation it would seem more likely that the political-historical projection model offers a more cohesive interpretation of the Baal Cycle than the theomachic cosmogeny. However, how far one ought to divorce the political-historical projection proposal from the aforementioned theomachic cosmogenic

28 Oldenburg 153.

29 Ibid., 150-151.

30 del Olmo Lete 74.

31 Ibid., 53-54.

proposals remains to be seen.

Conclusion

Rather than thinking only in terms of one motif or the other perhaps an eclectic proposal would be most fitting in regard to the political and historical context as well as the agricultural and conflictual contexts (if it in fact is concluded that the culture projected its experience and needs upon the Baal Cycle and thereby upon the religion). However, it is also possible that all of the forgoing schemes are nothing more than an attempt to explain religious texts only in relation to natural phenomena and do not pertain to any notion of divine revelation in regard to the recording of the Cycle. Such readings seem almost anachronistic when one considers the unity of divine-human elements considered to be present everywhere in the life of the ancient near eastern world.

Questions which persist, in light of the multitude of modern interpretations that are all extrapolated through the same common rubric, must be answered. The common rubric is a naturalistic explanation leading to the development of the texts and religious expression. In some sense therefore all of the modern interpretations are in fact understood as Ugaritian projections upon the deities – a projecting of the natural into the super-natural. It seems an unquestioned assumption of modern interpreters that the texts and religion developed from the natural experiences of Ugarit, but perhaps this is not always a helpful way of pursuing a right interpretation especially given our modern penchant for demythologizing religious texts and expression.

What role does (or should) authorial intent play in interpretation of the texts of Ugarit and thereby the religious expression? Has authorial intent been fully examined in light of the Ugaritic corpus? While the natural phenomena as explicative of the divine drama seems

acceptable by modern standards, in what sense has it missed the mark in understanding the original authorial intent? Can original intent finally be realized or will it always only be interpretive conjecture that finds what it wants to find? Sasson seems to understand the traditional pre-suppositions and anachronistic interpretations of Ugaritic religion when he states

It cannot be reasonably maintained that mythological and literary imageries have a basis in empirical reality as long as that reality is itself often reconstructed on the authority of the literary texts. Another way of airing this criticism is to say that the texts questioned by the functionalists always confirm the explanations they offer, for the simple reason that there is usually nothing in those explanations which was not derived, to begin with, from the texts themselves.³²

In what sense might the texts of Ugarit possibly have been determinative of the political and historical context instead of the other way around? What practices and expectations were birthed as a result of the texts themselves? Was the Baal Cycle passed on as a mythologizing of the experiences of the practitioners or was it a myth considered normative in determining what practices were acceptable?

32 Young 83.

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