Brief presentation of my doctoral project ”Drought, Death and the Sun in Ugarit and Ancient Israel” and my paper for the 2009 OTSEM conference

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The basic questions underlying the dissertation are the following:
How do the concepts of drought, death and the sun relate to each other in the Ugaritic religious literature; how are these concepts used as metaphors to express basic tenets of Ugaritic myth and theology; how do these concepts and their uses survive into the literature and religion of Ancient Israel? How can the identification of these ancient reminiscences help shed light on the interpretation of various difficult passages in the Biblical text and on the relationship between Old Testament theology and that of the surrounding North West Semitic cultures?

The fact that the interplay between drought and fertility plays a large part in the preserved Ugaritic mythology has been noted from the beginning of Ugaritological scholarship. The conflict between Baal and Mot in the Ilimilku version of the so-called Baal Cycle is the most salient example of this, where the temporary defeat of the storm god Baal is heralded by drought and death of vegetation, while his return is accompanied by visions of fertility. In the texts of the Cycle, there are a number of interesting passages linking this “death of the land” through heat and drought to the natural phenomenon most closely associated with it: the sun, manifested as the Ugaritic sun goddess, Shapshu.

A similar perspective has often been seen in the two other major mythological stories from Ugarit, those concerning Kirta and Aqhat: both of these seem to include passages where the death of the hero results in a sympathetic “death” of the land, taking the form of all-encompassing drought. This phenomenon is the focus of the paper I will be presenting at the 2009 OTSEM conference.

The question of whether or not these descriptions of death and drought are to be interpreted as aetiologies for or representations of the changing seasons has been a hotly debated topic for a long time. I am of the opinion that there are definite markers of seasonal imagery in the Ugaritic religious texts that cannot be explained away (repeated references to agriculture, talk of burned olives, drought, lack of rain etc.). However, it must be realized that descriptions of natural phenomena in connection with mythological actions are not to be interpreted in an overly formalist manner. Mechanically applying a “seasonal formula” to the

Ugaritic texts is no necessary result of acknowledging the references to drought and fertility that do seem to occur in them. The classical stance, that these references (and much of the story itself) constitute an *aetiology* for the natural phenomena in question is not the only possible interpretative framework for them: just as in the case of Isaiah 40 (where noone would think of the "wilting flowers" and "parched grass" as an aetiology for the seasons), one could very possibly imagine that the author/redactor used theses themes as a way of metaphorically illustrating the life/death-struggle between Mot and Baal, rather than as a simplistic "explanation of the seasons".

Given the close relationship between the Ugaritic and early Israelite cultures, it is not surprising that a number of reminiscences of the old "drought-death"-mytheme seem to occur in the Hebrew Bible. One very salient example of this is the story of Elijah and the great drought in 1 Kings 17-18. We find other such survivals in Hosea, Mal 3 and in a number of the Psalms, all of which are subjected to thorough analysis during the course of the dissertation. A special case is found in the first chapter of 2 Sam, where a scene occurs quite reminiscent of the "dying hero"-motif found in the Ugaritic legends of Kirta and Aqhat: this is the cursing of Mount Gilboa after the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. This text is of central importance to my paper, not only because of its thematic links with the Kirta and Aqhat texts (heroes dying, causing drought) but also because of a possible direct, textual link discovered by H. L. Ginsberg in 1938 and expanded by myself.

As the paper is a chapter of a larger study, there are cases where larger discussions are only alluded to by refering to other places in the dissertation. This is the case, for example, regarding an in depth analysis of certain verbs in Ps 102. Because of the page constraints I cannot expound these ideas in full in this paper, but I will of course be happy to discuss them during the session if the need arises.

Topics I would like to discuss during the session are:

- The text-critical conundrum of 2 Sam 1:21.
- The greater literary motif of "dying heroes" in the Ancient Near East and their connections to the drought motif.
- The difference in literary and theological views in the connection between death and drought found in the Baal Cycle (the Storm God dying) and the other texts (no divinity dying; more of a metaphorical link). Differences in interpretative framework for modern scholarship (seasonality vs. literary motifs, etc.).

- The interpretation of Danel’s exlamations as curses or calls of woe.

I look forward to seeing you all and discussing the chapter!

/ Ola Wikander