Sonderdruck aus:

UGARIT-FORSCHUNGEN

Internationales Jahrbuch
für die
Altertumskunde Syrien-Palästinas

Herausgegeben von
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Band 38
2006

Ugarit-Verlag Münster
2007
Anschriften der Herausgeber:
M. Dietrich - O. Loretz, Schlaunstr. 2, 48143 Münster
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Herstellung: Druckhaus Folberth, Pfungstadt
Printed in Germany

ISBN 978-3-934628-97-7
Printed on acid-free paper
One of the most enigmatic aspects of the story of El’s feast occurs just before El’s inebriation overcomes him and he descends into his defecation and urine. Just at the moment when El staggers home, we are told the following:

\[
\begin{align*}
y’msn \cdot mn \ tkmn & \quad \text{‘Thukamuna and Shunama carry him,} \\
wšnm \cdot wngšnn \cdot hby & \quad \text{Habayu then berates him,} \\
b’l \cdot qrmn \cdot wdnh & \quad \text{He of two horns and a tail.”}
\end{align*}
\]

(CAT 1.114, r. 18-20)

The appearance of the word hby in this passage has provoked a good deal of discussion, but it is fair to say that most scholars have treated it as a demonic figure who accosts El as he succumbs to his drunkenness.\(^1\) To my knowledge, the first to suggest this reading was C. H. Gordon, who offered it in the supplement to his Ugaritic Textbook in 1967, and who later expanded upon this by suggesting that the same demon appears in an incantation from Ebla (ARET V) and in two biblical passages (Isa 26:20, Hab 3:4).\(^2\) Though this view has received acceptance by a number of exegetes, it poses fundamental problems in that a) it does not accord with what we know of demonic possession in antiquity, and b) it make little sense given the widespread ritual use of intoxicants in the ancient Near East. Indeed, as I explain below, a demonic attack upon the inebriated would be unprecedented. Consequently, this brief note challenges the interpretation of hby as a demon in the Ugaritic passage and argues instead that the term in question is an epithet for El.

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I begin with the problem posed by the passage's interpretation as a demonic attack. As a wealth of comparative evidence from Mesopotamia illustrates, though some symptoms of chronic alcoholism, such as ataxia, ophthalmoplegia, nystagmus, and delirium tremens, were believed to be the work of an unhappy ghost, simple inebriation was not. Indeed, seizures caused by alcohol withdrawal were believed to be caused by the moon God Sin. Moreover, that medical professionals offered different treatments for afflictions caused by ghosts and demons demonstrates that they did not fall into the same category. Indeed, I am unable to locate a single reference to a demon attacking someone who is inebriated in all of the texts available in Sumerian, Akkadian, Greek, or Coptic. This is likely because the cause of drunkenness was well-known. Charges of demonic possession, on the other hand, usually occurred when the cause of an ailment was unknown.

Moreover, heavy drinking was considered a tool for accessing the divine. In Mesopotamia there was even a deity associated with the brewing of beer (Akk. *sirāṣ*) whose very name was Siraṣ “Beer” (Sum. *SIM*). Ugaritic texts (e.g., CAT 1.39:16, 1.102:9) similarly attest to a deity named *Trṯ* “Wine” (= Heb. *חרב*). Such references could be multiplied, but suffice it to say that the abundant comparative data makes it highly unlikely that inebriation would have been considered a liminal opportunity for demons to attack.

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4 JoAnn Scurlock, “Some Mesopotamian Medicine for a Greek Headache,” forthcoming. I thank Dr. Scurlock for sharing an advance draft of her paper with me.


6 This reasoning was suggested to me by Dr. Christopher Faraone via email, January 13, 2007.


8 See *CAD S* 306, s. v. *siraṣ*.

With this in mind, I turn to a philological consideration. The etymology of the Ugaritic term *hby is unknown.\(^{10}\) However, given the well-known correlation between geminate and final weak verbs in Semitic,\(^{11}\) it is possible to relate the term *hby to the onomatopoeic root *hbh “murmur, babble.” The root appears in Akkadian as *hbh (\(h\) here represents the Semitic phoneme /h/\(^{12}\)), where it is used in reference to the indistinct sounds of water, people, and animals.\(^{13}\) See, for example, the following apposite citation.\(^{14}\)


11 One can cite many examples of geminate and final weak verbs that share the same meaning. See, e.g., *hsw and *hsw “cover,” *hwd and *hwd “be hot, burn,” *hsh and *hsh “melt, dissolve,” *hsw and *hsw “cut off,” as well as *hs and *hs “go astray,” to list a few from biblical Hebrew.

12 The Akkadian use of \(h\) for a Semitic cognate containing the phoneme /h/ should not deter us since the expected /e/ vowel in Akkadian for cognates containing \(h\) (e.g., Hebr. hgr “gird” = Akk. egeru), does not always occur. Indeed, there are many examples of this. See, e.g., Hebr. *hh, Tigr. hâhôt “thorn” = Akk. hâhu, Hebr. and Ug. *hs “urge on” = Akk. hiâšu, Hebr. and Ug. *hxm “wise” = Akk. hakâmû, Hebr. *bb and Arab. habl “rope” = Akk. nahbalu, Hebr. *halîl Syr. *hlîl “flute” = Akk. halhallatu, Hebr. *hls and Syr. *hlîṣ “strip, take off” = Akk. halâṣu, etc. Of course, this is also the way Akkadian typically renders Ugaritic words containing *h. See, e.g., Akk. *hu-du-rû = Ug. *hbr “room” and Akk. *hu-ul-ma-tu = Ug. *hlm “strength, potency,” in John Huchnergard, Ugaritic Vocabulary in Syllabic Transcription (HSS 32; Atlanta, GA.: Scholars Press, 1987), pp. 123, 125. Indeed there are many more such correspondence between Akkadian *h and West Semitic *h. See J. Huchnergard, “Akkadian *h and West Semitic *h,” in Leonid Kogan, Studia Semitica Papers of the Oriental Institute 3; Moscow: Russian State University for the Humanities, 2003), pp. 112–119, who posits the existence of a hitherto unrecognized Proto-Semitic phoneme *x, i.e., in addition to *h and *h, to account for the correspondence.

13 For the Akkadian references, see AHw, 301, CAD H 2, s. v. *habābu A “to murmur (said of water), to hum, low, chirp”; AHw, 305, CAD H 16, s. v. *habību “mankind (lit. ‘noisemaker’).”

Though the root $hbb$ is not attested in Ugaritic (with one possible exception),\(^1\) it does occur in an Aramaic letter from Hermopolis in reference to a river (i.e., a “babbling brook”),\(^1\) and possibly in Arabic.\(^1\) A correlate final weak form ($\text{ba}·\text{AB}·\text{BI}·\text{BU}$) meaning “lower one’s voice” also appears on an incantation bowl written in Babylonian Aramaic.\(^1\) Thus, the comparative linguistic evidence demonstrates that the semantic range of $hbb/\text{hby}$ suggests indistinct vocal or natural sounds.

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\(^{15}\) The word $\text{ba}·\text{AB}·\text{BI}·\text{BU}$ occurs in an Ugaritic text transcribed into Akkadian, but it is of uncertain derivation. See Huehnergard, *Ugaritic Vocabulary in Syllabic Transcription*, p. 190. Since in that text the word appears in reference to a topographical feature in a field, could it too refer to a “babbling” river? If so, the Aramaic term $hbb$ would be cognate (on this see n. 16).


\(^{17}\) This root is perhaps reflected in the Arabic $\text{hub}âb$ (or $\text{hibb}$) “serpent, certain black aquatic insect, or small animal,” probably because of the sound these creatures make (cf., the Akk. “the Gods of Uruk turned into flies buzzing [$\text{i-hab-bu-bu}$] in the squares,” cited in CAD H 2, s. v. $habû$, and Akk. $habûtu$ “bee,” CAD H 22, s. v. $habûtu$), and the Arabic word $hû$ or $\text{haub}âb$ “the name and sound of a camel.” See Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*. Part 2 (Beirut: Librarie du Liban, 1968), pp. 497, 662, respectively.

If this etymology is accepted, we may treat the term $hby$ in the Ugaritic passage as an epithet meaning “the Babbler” (based on a construction similar to the epithet יָשׁ “Almighty,” which is derived from the root יָשׁ, and other like ap­pellative constructions). Such an epithet fits well the context of the passage which tells of El slipping into a drunken stupor.

Of course, the proposed reading also requires that we rethink the rendering of the verb $ngsîm$ in l. 19. Typically has been understood to have $hby$ as its subject. However, it is equally possible to read it as a 3. m. dual referring to Thukamuna and Shunama, with a 3. m. s. anticipatory pronominal accusative suffix (referring to El). I thus propose that we translate CAT 1.114, r. 18–20 as follows:

“Thukamuna and Shunama carry him,
They berate him, the Babbler,
He of two horns and a tail.”

Elsewhere in the Ugaritic corpus we learn that one of the filial duties of a son was to help his father when he became inebriated (CAT 1.17 II, 19–20). As sons of El, it is understandable that Thukamuna and Shunama would be embarrassed by their father’s behavior and berate him. Moreover, the proposed reading of the passage fits the well-known iconographic and literary images of El as

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19 See similarly the name of the prophet יִבְשָׁל (from the root יָשׁ) and the name יַשֵּׁע, e. g., in 1 Chron 5:1 (from the root יָשׁ). The Ugaritic epithet יָשׁ would represent a doubling of the second radical (akin to the $dagesh$ in the Hebrew examples), but this would not be reflected in Ugaritic.

20 Concerning Gordon’s Eblaite term, see the criticisms raised by P. Xella, “Un antecedente eblaico del ‘demone’ ugaritico $HBY$?,” SEL 3(1986), 17–25. Xella also notes, in “Haby יִבְשָׁל,” DDD, p. 377, that the term that Gordon considers to be a demon’s name (i. e., $ha$-$ba$-$ha$-$bi$) “deals rather with part of the door or a tool.” I note that it likely relates to the Akk. $happu$ “part of the door,” CAD $H$ 84, s. v., $happu$. Concerning the biblical parallels that Gordon suggested, I note that forms are not identical in the biblical passages (Isa 26:20 has יִבְשָׁל and Hab 3:4 has יִבְשָׁל [the Eblaite term would be yet a third form]). I also aver that the biblical texts are simply employing the verb “hide, conceal,” as the common translations suggest. Thus JPS translates Isa 26:20: לָךְ יִבְשָׁל בַּל הַחֲלִילֵי: “Go, my people, enter your chambers, and lock your door behind you. Hide but a little moment, until the indignation passes”; and the difficult passage in Hab 3:4: יִבְשָׁל בַּל הָעָנִיָּה הָזְהָא יִבְשָׁל יִבְשָׁל יִבְשָׁל יִבְשָׁל יִבְשָׁל: “It is a brilliant light which gives off rays on every side—and therein his glory is enveloped.” However, I concur with David Tsumura (who is cited by Gordon, “$HBY$, Possevor of Horns and Tail,” 131), that the term יִבְשָׁל “horns” in this passage constitutes a Janus Parallel. As “power” it faces ahead to יִבְשָׁל and as “light” it faces back to יִבְשָׁל. In neither of its meanings must we understand יִבְשָׁל literally.

a bull (hence his epithet tr ʾil “Bull, El”). If we also consider the aforecited Akkadian text in which the root ḫbb (Akk. ḫbb) is used for the lowing of bulls, then the portrait of the drunken Bull El, lowing as he descends into his own mire, becomes all the more vivid.

See W. Herrmann, “El ḫbb,” DDD, pp. 274–280; “Baal ḫbb,” DDD, pp. 132–139; N. Wyatt, “Calf ḫbb,” DDD, pp. 180–182. Baal too possesses horns, as the god El makes clear in his words to Tulish, the maiden of Yarikh (CAT 1.12 I 30-33): ḥbm . qrm ʾkm . trm . ṭbd ʾkm . ʾbrm ʾwbhm . pn . hʾl, “They will have horns like bulls, bulk like that of bullocks; they will have the face of Baal” (cf. CAT 1.12 II 53–55). Baal also copulates with a heifer in CAT 1.5,18–22. Xella, “Ḥabʾy ḫbb,” DDD, p. 377, also sees the two horns and tail in our passage as a bovine image, but suggests they might belong to an infernal god. For El as a bull in ancient Israel see Num 23:22, 24:8 and see the discussion in Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel. Trans. Thomas Trapp (Minneapolis, MN.: Fortress, 1998), pp. 118–120.
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