

A Study of Ugartic Imagery in Hebrew Poetry

—centered around the study of the song of Miriam—

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1. Ras Shamra Text and Baal Myth.

Since the discovery of the Ras Shamra texts over a quarter of a century ago (1929), the comparative study of Canaanite religious elements and the OT has been considered to be very important. There are several correspondences between these two religions, but this study is concerned with the imagery in Baal cycle and its relation to Hebrew poetry.

The bulk of the Ras Shamra texts is the Baal mythology. The main part of it is the fight of Baal with Mot, which symbolizes the element of fertility cult. This image is found in Ps. 68:20-21.

But God will shatter the heads of his enemies,
The hairy crown of him who walks in his guilty ways (vs. 21).

Mowinckel comments on this verse, saying that in vs. 21 we are told in plain words that the victory of Yahweh is a victory over, and deliverance from, 'Death', by which here is not meant natural decease, but Death with a capital D, Mot, in Canaanite mythology the adversary of Baal, here of Yahweh, in the constantly repeated war between life and death, the Living God and the god of death, Mot (Mowinckel, *PIW*, p. 174).

However, the greater impact upon the Hebrew poetry came from the image of Baal's fight over the unruly waters, Yamm, and his triumph over it (cf. *The Hebrew Conception of the Kingship of God: Its Origin and Development*, by John Gray in *VT* VI, 1956, pp. 268-70). Gray says that in the myth of Baal's conflict with the Unruly Waters,.....and his victory and assumption of kingship we have a great theme which was developed in one of the main types of the Hebrew Psalms, prophets, the

Enthronement Psalm, which with variations runs through Hebrew religions in Psalms, Prophets, and Apocalyptic from the early period of the settlement in Canaan to the Christian era like main artery (*Ibid.*, p. 170). Now the scene of the fight between Baal and Yamm is rendered as follows;

The club swoops in the hand of Baal,
 (Like) an eagle between his fingers;
It strikes the pate of Prince (Yamm),
 Between the eyes of Judge Nahar.
Yamm collapses,
 He falls to the ground;
His joints bend,
 His frame breaks.
Baal would rend, would smash Yamm,
 Would annihilate Judge Nahar (From III AB A, *ANET*, p. 131).

The theme is thus the conflict of Baal with an adversary, the unruly waters, 'Prince Sea, even Judge River.' And as Gray suggests, in theme and even in certain details the myth suggests the Babylonian myth *Enuma elish*, which celebrates the conflict of Marduk and Tiamat with her allies, the chaotic powers of the deep (Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan*, p. 10). Baal, like Marduk, eventually triumphs and as champion of the gods he is established as King.

It is attested now that the Hebrews had known this mythology as the cult-legend of the Baal-shrine of Baal Saphon in the Eastern Nile Delta in the days before Moses led the 'mixed multitude' out of the land of bondage (Cf. Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan*, p. 71). And in Canaan they were exposed to it and adapted it until to the point that prophets severely protested. It is thus the purpose of this paper to try to take a brief look at an influence of this imagery upon the Hebrew people in terms of their poems.

2. Imagery in Psalms in terms of Baal Myth.

In 1936 H. L. Ginsberg drew up the conclusive evidence that Psalm 29 is an ancient Canaanite Baal hymn, only slightly modified for use in the cultus of Yahweh (Cf. Cross, Notes on a Canaanite Psalm in the OT, *BASOR*, No. 117, pp. 9-21). Mowinckel, in his chapter on enthronement

poems, recognizing the influence of Ugaritic or Near Eastern mythological imagery upon the OT poetry, picks up following poems to prove his point. They are Pss. 47; 93; 97; 98; 99 (*PIW*, p. 106). He says that the historical interpretation is as impracticable in the case of the enthronement psalms as in that of Pss. 46 and 48. They are not actual and historical, but 'mythical', unearthly events, to which the enthronement Psalms refer; when there occasionally is a reference to something 'historical' as in Pss. 99; 97 and 95 (and 81), it is a matter of happenings in the remote past (*Ibid.*, p. 110). Gray says that it is in this myth that we should find the origin of the mythological imagery in which Hebrew and later Jewish and Christian eschatology was eventually clothed, and he picks up Pss. 93; 94; 97; 98; 89; 124 (cf. Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan*, p. 29 and *VT*, VI, pp. 268-285).

Concerning the occasions of these enthronement psalms to be used, Leslie systematizes in the following: (a) There was for the occasion a preparatory night festival. In such a ceremony the night hymns (Ps. 134) had its rightful setting. (b) The festival celebrated the annual enthronement of the Lord as King over His people. The Psalms which have their setting in this feature of the celebration are Pss. 47; 68; 95; 96; 97; 98; 99. (c) It summoned the congregation to sing "new songs" for the New Year and in recognition of the newly enthroned king. Such "new songs" are pss. 33, 149 and also under (b) above pss. 96 and 98, etc (Leslie, *The Psalms*, p. 61).

Now let us try to look at some of these images of Baal mythology which are used in Psalms. "Thou didst crush Rahab like a carcass, thou didst scatter thy enemies with thy mighty arms" (Ps. 89:10), "Thou didst crush the heads of Leviathan, thou didst give him as food for the creatures of the wilderness" (Ps. 74:14), "There go the ships, and Leviathan which thou didst form to sport in it" (Ps. 104:26). To pick up other references of dragon, they are Jer. 51:34 (like dragon), Job. 41:1, 3:8, Jona 1:17-2:1 (in this case, whale), Hab. 3, Is. 51:9, 43:16-17, etc.

It should be made clear with Leslie at this point that *Tehome*, "the deep," is the Hebrew counterpart of Tiamat. The terms "the sea," "the

raging sea," "the heads of the dragon," "the heads of Leviathan," "fountain," "flood," "the roaring waves," "Rahab," "the monster," are synonyms for the abysmal chaotic deep which Tiamat with her consort and helpers represent (cf. Leslie, p. 57). Now as to these expressions, there are numerous in Psalms. "When the waters saw thee, O God, when the waters saw thee, they were afraid, yea, the deep tremble" (Ps. 78:16). They are found in Pss. 88, 69:15, 42:7, 88:6, 33:7, 86:13, 30:3, 32:6, 18:4, 29, etc. Here, waters are not mere waters, but are associated with God's enemy, the dragon and her allies.

Now concerning enthronement Psalms, they are used for the New Year Festival, celebrating the enthronement of Yahweh. Quoting Humbert, Leslie says as follows; Humbert, in a recent investigation of the relation the priestly account of creation (Gen. 1) bears to the liturgy of the Israelite New Year, has arrived at the conclusion that the liturgical form of this creation story points to its use by the Israelite priests as chant in a manner similar to what was the practice in Babylon (Leslie, P. 57). This New Year Festival is associated with Baal's New Year Festival, in which Canaanite people celebrated Baal's triumph over the unruly waters (Cf. Gray, *The Legacy*, pp. 28-29). Gray says that this theme was later historicized and the unruly waters were later described as the political enemy of Israel (*Ibid.*, p. 17.). And perhaps this thesis of Gray may be proved by Ginsberg's theory of Psalm 29, which is the Hebrew version of Baal hymn. Here, Baal myth is historicized in order to express the historical belief. And the same interpretation should be applied to other expressions as well, which are colored with mythology. For example, when the writer says that Yahweh destroyed Leviathan, we may interpret that the poet, by this expression, is not describing the historically happened event, but his belief that God is mighty, is in charge of the world order and is, therefore, sovereign.

3. The Song of Miriam.

Now if our presupposition is right, the next question is how to recognize the historical event en clothed by mythological expressions from poems which are the result of historicizing the myth. And this question is very

well applied to the song of Miriam. Is this the description of the event or historicizing? Now, in order to avoid the misunderstanding, it should be made clear at this point that this chapter is not concerned with the historicity of the Red Sea Event, but with the analysis and the interpretation of the poem only. The poem is as follows;

- “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.
2. The Lord is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him.
 3. The Lord is a man of war;
the Lord is his name.
 4. “Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the sea;
and his picked officers are sunk in the Red Sea.
 5. The floods cover them;
they went down into the depths like a stone.
 6. Thy right hand, O Lord, glorious in power,
thy right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy.
 7. In the greatness of the majesty thou overthrowest thy adversaries;
thou sendest forth thy fury, it consumes them like stubble.
 8. At the blast of thy nostrils the waters piled up,
the floods stood up in a heap;
the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.
 9. The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake,
I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them.
I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.’
 10. Thou didst blow with thy wind, the sea covered them;
they sank as lead in the mighty waters.
 11. “Who is like thee, O Lord, among the gods?
Who is like thee, majestic in holiness,
terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders?
 12. Thou didst stretch out thy right hands,
the earth swallowed them.
 13. “Thou hast led in thy steadfast love the people whom thou hast redeemed,
thou hast guided them by the strength to thy holy abode.
 14. The people have heard, they tremble;
pangs have seized on the inhabitants of Philistia.
 15. Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed;
the leaders of Moab, trembling seizes them;
all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away.
 16. Terror and dread fall upon them;

- because of the greatness of thy arm,
 they are as still as a stone,
 till thy people, O Lord, pass by,
 till the people pass by whom thou hast purchased.
17. Thou wilt bring them in, and plant them on thy own mountain,
 the place, O Lord, which thou hast made for thy abode,
 the sanctuary, O Lord, which thy hands have established.
18. The Lord will reign for ever and ever." (Exodus 15:1 b-18).

It seems that now respectable scholars recognize the mythological coloring of this poem (Cf. Cross and Freedman, *The Song of Miriam, JNES*, xiv, 1955, pp. 237-250). But as to how much, and as to its historicity, opinions differ. Now let us try, first of all, to interpret this poem literally to see if this kind of interpretation works or not. The body proper of this poem begins apparently with verse 4, which treats the theme of Yahweh casting pharaoh's chariots and his host into the sea. Officers were sunk in the Red Sea. Verse 5 treats the same motif. They went down into the depths like a stone. (Notice! the Red Sea is equivalent to depths). But the trouble comes to this interpretation in verse 7b, in which they are described as consumed like stubble. That is, those who are described as being sunk into the depths are now described as burnt like stubble. And further, in verse 12, it is written that "the earth swallowed them." Thus according to this interpretation, poor Egyptians should die three times. They were sunk into the depth, they were burnt, and at the same time, they were swallowed down into the earth. Thus, it is clear that the literal interpretation is impossible here. This invalidness of the literal interpretation only shows that images used here are not descriptive, but symbolic.

It is more in order to interpret these images in light of the above study of images, that is, in light of mythological expressions. Verse 5 begins with flood and depth. Verse 12 uses the image of earth swallowing them. These expressions are simply mythological. To quote Anderson (*IDB IV*, p. 808), "the ancient *Weltbild*, which is taken for granted throughout the Bible, portrayed the universe as three-storied structure: heaven, earth, and underworld. According to ancient mythology, this structure arose as

a result of a primordial battle between gods who emerged from uncreated chaos. Victorious in the struggle, the hero-god split the body of the dragon of chaos and separated the two halves by a firmament. Thus the waters were not destroyed but pushed back, with the result that man's world was situated between the "waters above" and the "waters below" (the Deep)."

In the case of Ras Shamra text, as it is already seen, the sea, Yamm, who is considered to be the sea-god living in the sea (in the Deep), comes out to fight against Baal, which symbolizes the flood, namely the disorder. Baal's triumph simply means that the waters, or the flood return to their (his) own place, to the underworld, namely the order is to be resumed. So, as Leslie points out rightly, in the case of the OT, the Lord Yahweh replaces Marduk or Baal (Cf. Leslie, pp. 55-60). And perhaps Yamm is replaced by historical enemies, as Mowinckel and Gray point out (quoted above), while in other poems Yamm is still a dragon, sometimes his name being Leviathan or Rahab or Tiamat. One of the most interesting descriptions of it besides these psalms quoted above is Hab. chapter 3.

Was thy wrath against the rivers, O Lord?
Was thy anger against the rivers,
or thy indignation against the sea,
when thou didst ride upon thy horses,
upon thy chariot of victory?
Thou didst strip the sheath from the bow,
and put the arrows to the string. *Selah*
Thou didst cleave the earth with rivers.
The mountains saw thee, and writhed;
the raging waters swept on;
the deep gave forth its voice,
it lifted its hands on high.
The sun and moon stood still in their habitation
at the light of thine arrows as they sped,
at the flash of thy glittering spear.
Thou didst bestride the earth in fury,
thou didst trample the nations in anger.
Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people,
for the salvation of thy anointed.
Thou didst crush the head of the wicked,
laying him bare from thigh to neck. *Selah*

Thou didst pierce with thy shafts the head of his warriors,
who came like a whirlwind to scatter me,
rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret.
Thou didst trample the sea with thy horses,
the surging of mighty waters (Habakkuk 3; 8-15).

As to images here, it is agreed by scholars that the basic imagery is Yahweh's struggle against the sea dragon (Cf. May, *Many Waters*, in *JBL*, 1955, LXXIV, p. 9).

The song of Miriam, it seems, is not the exception. First of all, Baal must have been replaced by Yahweh. And perhaps Yahweh's enemy was sunk deep into the depths, which is considered to be the dwelling place of Yamm, the dragon. That is, the enemy was pushed back to their own abode, to use the mythological expression. The point is that the Leviathan (or Yamm, or Tiamat, or Thannin, or Rahab) is only replaced by Egyptians and that is all. It might be also possible to say that Egyptians were inserted in Yahweh-dragon conflict image. That this is not the description of the specific battlefield or the battle is proved also by the fact that Egyptians can easily be replaced by Japanese army in the pacific ocean or the US army with little modification of the whole poem.

As to verse 8 b, it is easily to be taken as the imagery coming from the description of a dragon either walking or fighting or being in agony because of a fatal hurt. Cross and Freedman rightly say that it is a mistake to see in the phrases, "the waters are heaped up" and "the swells mount as a wall", a description of a path miraculously appearing between two walls of water (*The Song of Miriam*, p. 238). They even suggest that the prose narrative of it is the result of the misinterpretation of this imagery (*Ibid.*). Indeed, it is significant that there is no particular image of Hebrews passing the sea. Images are only concerned with the destruction of His enemy. The image of drying up the sea is not here. The image of a path is not here. The imagery "Yamm collapses,/He falls to the ground," can be rendered as "Sir Sea falls and sinks to the ground," which easily reminds of "the earth swallowed them" in the Song (Cf. Gaster; *Thespis*, p. 168).

It should further be noted that II Isaiah renders this event in mytholog-

ical expressions.

Awake, awake, put on strength,
O arm of the Lord;
Awake, as in days of old,
the generations of long ago.
Was it not thou that didst cut Rahab in pieces,
that didst pierce the dragon?
Was it not thou that didst dry up the sea,
the waters of the great deep;
that didst make the depths of the sea away
for the redeemed to pass over? (51:9-10).

That the song of Miriam is written in mythological formula is seen also by the following motif: the motif of the Temple. The Baal myth describes that Baal wanted to build the Temple after destroying or defeating his enemy in order perhaps to rule over gods with power. The building of the Temple is the symbol of establishing the power, the center of the world. In this poem, Yahweh is, after killing His enemy, associated with the Temple. And the influence of the Baal myth upon this point is recognized by Cross and Freedman (Cf. The Song of Miriam).

The words of the enemy in verse 9 are apparently the result of the Hebrew imagination, since it is impossible to hear what Egyptians were talking. If it is stormy, even more it is impossible to hear them. Descriptions in verses 14-15 of trembling of historical tribes after Yahweh's killing His enemy seem also to have the mythological prototype. They should be compared to those in the *Creation Epic*, in which after the victory of Marduk, his adversaries tremble. It is rendered as follows:

After he (Marduk) had slain Tiamat, the leader,
Her hand was shattered, her troupe broken up;
And the gods, her helpers who marched at her side,
Trembling with terror, turned their backs about,
In order to save and preserve their lives.

This 'trembling' image is also found in Psalms. And in them it is rocks and mountains which hear God's victory and tremble. For example, it is found in Ps. 114, in which the trembling of the earth, mountains and hills is described. Cf. also Hab. 3:16, in which the poet says 'I hear,

and my body trembles, my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones, my steps totter beneath me.....'.

It is to be noticed that except one or two psalms passages which mention of the destruction of Egyptians by Yahweh are in prose, excepting of course the song of Miriam. Deut. 11:4, Jos. 24:6, Nehe. 9:9-10 are in prose forms, and Psalm 136, which describes the overthrow of Egyptians by Yahweh is, perhaps, the only psalm which clearly renders the destruction of Egyptians. Other psalms use the term "enemy", which may be taken in both ways; Egyptians or the dragon (the waters).

Here certainly the problem arises. Is this the history, expressed in a mythological form, or a mythology historicized? Cross and Freedman perhaps represent the traditional view when they say that we have "history" shaped by familiar cliches, motifs and literary styles (Cf. The Song of Miriam, p. 239). But the question should be asked to these two scholars how they found out that this is a history, since there are other psalms which are the result of historicizing the mythology. Where do these scholars find out the historical battle scene or the historical scene of Egyptians' destruction? Where do they find the images of Israel's crossing the Red Sea? How do they separate the fact from the imagery? In what way is this different from enthronement Psalms? The name Pharaoh is certainly historical and the Red Sea is historical even though it is impossible now to identify it. But that is all. Even the image of chariots is found in the original myth. Let us try to see the battle scene of Marduk and Tiamat, which is as interesting as that of Baal and Yamm.

She (Tiamat) has set up the Viper, the Dragon and the *Sphinx*,
The Great-Lion, the Mad-Dog, and the Scorpion-Man,
Mighty lion-demons, the Dragon-Fly, the Centaur.....
Bearing weapons that spare not, fearless in battle.
Firm are her decrees, past withstanding are they.
Withal eleven of this kind she has brought forth.
From among the gods, her first-born, who formed (her Assembly),
She has elevated Kingu, has made (his) chief among them (From *The Creation Epic*, Tablet II, 30-38, *ANET*, p. 64).

It can be pointed out that in the Song of Miriam Tiamat is the Pha-

raoh, while his host and his officers are compared with gods set up by Tiamat. Now the scene little before the battle gives the description of Marduk as follows;

Then he (Marduk) sent forth the winds he had brought forth, the seven of them.

To stir up the inside of Tiamat they rose up behind him.

Then the lord raised up the flood-storm, his mighty weapon.

He mounted the storm-chariot irresistible (and) terrifying (*Ibid.*, p. 66).

Here the chariot is used by Marduk. The same image is seen in Hab. 3:15, in which God is described to have trampled the sea with his horses, the surging of mighty waters. So the image that the chariot is associated with waters is found in the mythology, though in the Song of Miriam it is the chariot which was sunk.

Concerning "two walls of water" in Exodus 14:29, we may perhaps trace its origin back to the image of Marduk splitting Tiamat. After Marduk subdued his adversaries, he turned back to Tiamat whom he had bound and killed. He split her into two. It is as follows:

He (Marduk) split her (Tiamat) like a shellfish into two parts;

Half of her he set up and ceiled it as sky,

Pulled down the bar and posted guards (from *the Creation Epic*, cf. *ANET* p. 67).

Assuming that this is the poem which is the product of historicizing of the myth, let us try to follow the writer's method, as we did it a little already. First of all, as it was suggested before, he must have changed Baal (Marduk) into Yahweh and lifted Him up. At the same time he must have changed Yamm (or Tiamat) into Israel's historical army (in this case Egyptian Pharaoh), and broke the myth. By lifting up Yahweh, the writer put waters under Him as His means. In order to historicize more, he attached the Red Sea. He inserted the conversations of Egyptians in it, which is the product of his imagination or the legend. He changed the image of trembling gods into historical tribes. The same kind of processes are seen in Pss. 46 and 48, which, to quote Mowinckel again, are quasi-historical. Events like those described the nations' attack on Jerusalem, and their rout and destruction here never happened in actual

history (cf. *PIW*, p. 110). (Incidentally, "consuming like stubble" fits very well with Baal myth, since Baal is a god of thunder as well).

Indeed, thus the historicization was completed, but the fundamental problem remained. Though he tried to break the myth and to historicize it, he could not do it completely. There was a certain limitation. As long as they (or he) were using Baal-mythological expressions, as long as they were using its images and language, they could not perfectly get out of this mythological formula. People think and believe by symbols; by words and images. Thus, they were quite often thinking within that mythological framework. It is impossible to break the myth completely. If the myth is broken perfectly, it is no myth any more. And this limitation is to be best found in the expression of the nature of God: monotheism. In Baal myth, Baal fights with Yamm, his opponent, so Yahweh fights against His enemy, too. Yahweh cannot be the perfect creator, nor the ruler, nor the one of sovereignty, simply because of this Baal image. There is found here the dualism which is the remnant of the Baal image. This dualism precludes the concept that Yahweh is the lord of all creatures. That is why Yahweh is quite often described as killing His enemy. Yahweh is described as destroying and fighting, just as (and just because) Baal fights against his enemy. And it is significant to notice that this fighting figure of Yahweh most often appears when Israel is in conflict with other nations. People in Israel could not perfectly understand Yahweh in spite of His special revelation.

It has been noticed that in the Song of Miriam the sole actor and the decisive is Yahweh, and it is no wonder, because men cannot fight against a mythological dragon with a sword. But whenever there is a fight on a historical level, they never fail to participate in it under the name of Yahweh. Indeed, "It is remarkable that ancient Israel, in spite of her consciousness of election and destiny in history, never quite divested herself of this ancient Near Eastern ideology (conflict of god with his opponent)" (Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan*, p. 29).

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