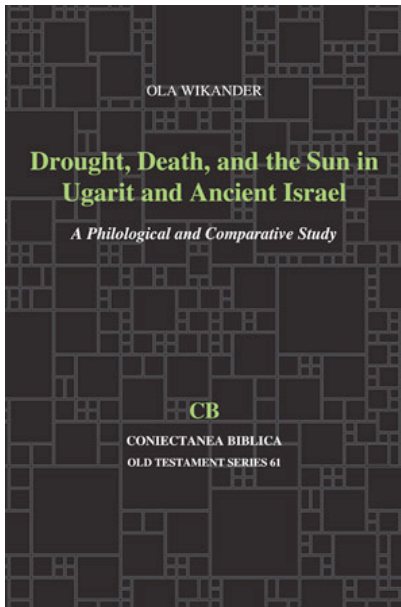


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Ola Wikander

Drought, Death, and the Sun in Ugarit and Ancient Israel: A Philological and Comparative Study

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In *Drought, Death, and the Sun in Ugarit and Ancient Israel: A Philological and Comparative Study*, initially completed as a doctoral dissertation at Lund University under Professor Sten Hidal in 2012, Ola Wikander provides a great wealth of insights into the Ugaritic and Israelite conceptions of death, seen through the lens of his new interpretation of the Ugaritic solar deity Shapshu as a liminal figure who could be associated with both life, via her association with fertility, and death, due to her association with drought. Chapter 1, the introduction, sets out the basic questions that underlie Wikander's study, as well as the methodological underpinnings prerequisite to his religio-historical comparisons approach. Wikander starts by asking how the concepts of drought, death, and the sun relate to each other in Ugaritic religious literature, before considering how this might have been reflected in the literature and religion of ancient Israel: "How can the identification of these ancient reminiscences of a shared Northwest Semitic religious background contribute to the interpretation of various difficult passages in the biblical text and to our understanding of the relationship between Old Testament theology and that of the surrounding Northwest Semitic cultures?" (1). In this, Wikander is careful to stress his focus upon the "shared northwest Semitic background" of both the Ugaritic and biblical literary traditions rather than to posit a direct linear descent between the Bronze Age Ugaritic tablets with the Iron Age, multilayered biblical texts. Thus both

traditions “can be seen as branches of a common tree of mythemes and narrative structures” (3), although since his focus is primarily upon Ugaritic samples drawn from the Baal Cycle and epics of Aqhat and Kirta, products of the singular hand of the scribe Ilimilku, discussion of how far these textual witnesses really reflect a “common tree” of material would have been welcome at this juncture. Wikander’s primary means of establishing that the traditions in question both be regarded as separate expressions of a shared Northwest Semitic cultural background, and hence of the methodological congruency of his comparison, is via what in this study is termed “etymological poetics” (also called “comparative linguistic poetics”): “using comparative linguistics as a source not only of the meaning of individual words and roots but possibly also of shared poetic significance” (14). While nevertheless wary of what he calls the “hyper-emendatory” tendencies of biblical scholars concerned with etymology (e.g., Mitchell Dahood), Wikander points out that this method has been frequently and fruitfully employed in the study of the Indo-European family of languages and as such may yet yield interesting results when applied in Old Testament or Ugaritic studies. Thus Wikander determines his study as a search for possibly inherited poetic and narrative themes and motifs, transmitted through the medium of etymological cognates, with a focus upon the dual themes of death and drought.

For Wikander these themes coalesce at Ugarit under the figure of the divine sun, the goddess Shapshu. Chapter 2, “Ugaritic Focus,” surveys the role that this goddess has in different texts from Ugarit. Unlike previous studies, which have tended to emphasize the life-giving role of the goddess due to her associations with fertility, Wikander provides a more nuanced depiction of Shapshu as both positive goddess of fertility and dispenser of judicial and royal power, but also as a character with more negative associations, as a chthonic deity who at night descends to the underworld, a link back to her judicial role, since this descent tasks her with judging the dead. This dual role is best illustrated by a phrase that Wikander terms the “Refrain of the Burning Sun” that appears three times in the Baal Cycle (CAT 1.3 V 17–18; 1.4 VIII 21–24; 1.6 II 24–25): *nrt ilm špš šhrrt // la šmm byd bn ilm mt* “Shapshu the luminary of the gods did glow hot // the heavens were wearied by the hands of divine Mot.” The three occurrences of this phrase seem to have an important bearing on the narrative of the Baal Cycle, by merit of their placement in the texts: when the protagonists are trying to procure a house for Baal; when Baal’s conflict with the god of death is about to begin; and when Anat confronts Mot and (partially) defeats him. He explains: “It appears to describe what happens if (or when) the life-giving storm deity Baal is absent or dead, when his power is not at its optimal operational level, so to speak” (24). In this way Wikander is able to place the solar deity in connection with death, or near death, in the cycle, and the effect of Baal’s absence is

drought: *pl 'nt šdm y špš // pl 'nt šdm il* “Parched are the furrows of the field, O Shapshu // parched are the furrows of the field of El” (CAT 1.6 IV 1–3).

This conceptual association between death, drought, and the sun is then employed to explicate certain biblical texts in chapter 3, “Biblical Focus.” It is not, Wikander states, the aim of his study to produce a digest of all places in which mention of drought or death is made by the Old Testament writers but rather to highlight “a number of instances in which the connections between sun, drought, netherworld and death seem to play a part or be in the forefront” (9). In this context, Wikander treats the story of Elijah and the great drought in 1 Kgs 17-18, as well as passages from the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Joel, Malachi, Psalms, and Job. Selections from the deuterocanonical literature are also reviewed, namely, from Wisdom of Solomon and Ben Sira. The wealth of insights that Wikander adduces are too numerous to recount here, but suffice it to say this chapter makes for extremely interesting reading.

Nevertheless, “while the motifs of death and drought have very much survived from the earlier Northwest Semitic faiths into the religion of Ancient Israel as it is preserved to us in the canonical texts, the figure of the sun is not as conspicuous, or has at least changed in character” (222). Chapter four, “Religio-Historical Trajectories of Drought, Death and the Sun,” along with chapter 5, “Conclusions,” sums up Wikander’s findings: solar imagery, when applied to Yahweh in the Old Testament, has more in common with Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Hittite conceptions than with the Ugaritic depiction, concerned especially with Baal. An appendix, “Sun in Darkness and ‘Son of Darkness’? CAT 1.3 VI 5-12/1.4 VII 52-57 and the Deir Alla Inscription,” deals with further texts that do not directly concern the drought/death motif but that may affect the general view of these concepts in the Baal Cycle.

It is a shame that Wikander does not share his criteria for selecting his biblical passages beyond those that relate “sun, drought, netherworld and death,” since certainly there are other passages that exhibit such connections and would surely have provided further interesting possibilities for analysis. A case in point is Isa 14:12–15: *'êk nāpattā miššāmayim hēlēl ben-šahar nigda'tā lā'āreš ḥôlēš 'al-gôyim // w'e'attā 'āmartā bilbābekā haššāmayim 'e'elē mimma'al l'kôk'ebē-'el 'ārīm kis'i w'ešēb b'har-mô'ēd b'yark'tē šāpôn // 'e'elē 'al-bāmūtē 'āb 'eddammē l'elyôn // 'ak 'el-š'ôl tūrād 'el-yark'tē-bôr* “How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! // You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon. // I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High.’ // But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit” (NRSV). None of the case studies Wikander offers provide any trace of the sun in connection with the netherworld,

but here in Isa 14:12–15 we have a unique case of a celestial object¹ descending into the netherworld, in exact approximation of Shapshu at Ugarit. Whether we have here a reversal of the Ugaritic tradition—a star, as the Vulgate-inspired translations attest, descending into the netherworld in place of the Ugaritic deity—or whether *hēlél ben-šaḥar* may actually hide a veiled reference to the sun itself, surely this enigmatic passage provides a relevant parallel to Wikander’s study. One wonders by what criteria Wikander demarcated the texts chosen for inclusion.

The study is written in a lively and engaging style, although there are a number of typographical and stylistic errors in the text. On page 26, the plural noun “Staubfarben,” literally “dust-colors,” is incorrectly termed a “color adjective,” and hence appears without capitalization throughout; the adjective would be “staubfarbig.” These small infelicities do not take away from what is overall a well-written, scholarly, and above all thoroughly thought-provoking study.

1. The translation of *hēlél ben-šaḥar*, “the shining one, son of dawn,” is not straightforward, and most translations follow the Vulgate *lucifer*, “morning star,” i.e. Venus. Of course, the KJV literally renders the Vulgate, giving “Lucifer,” i.e. the devil, probably following Luke 10:18; Rev. 9:1, etc. However, this meaning is by no means certain, and tellingly in MH it is the noun *nôgah* (BH: “brightness”) that comes to mean “morning star.”