Death in Canaanite Thinking

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In the cycle of myths of which he is the chief character Baal, having won the kingship of the gods, despatches his servants to invite Ugarit's god of death, Mot, to share in his triumph.[1]

> Go down into the house of freedom in the earth,
> be counted with them that go down into the earth.
> Then of a truth do you set your faces
> <towards divine Mot>
> within his city Miry,
> where a pit is the throne on which he sits,
> filth the land of his heritage.
> But watch, lackeys of the gods,
> that you come not near to divine Mot,
> lest he make you like a lamb in his mouth,
> and you both be carried away like a kid in the breath of his windpipe.
> Shapsh the luminary of the gods is glowing hot,
> the heavens are wearied by the hand of Mot the darling of the gods.
> Traversing a thousand tracts, ten thousand spaces,
> do homage at the feet of Mot and fall down,
> prostrate yourselves and do him honour,
> and tell to divine Mot,
> repeat to the hero beloved of El
> ------- (KTU 1.4 viii 7-31)

The Sheol of the Ugaritian world is pictured as a slimy, forbidding place and the god of death as a frightening deity, a swallower who carries away his victims and has to be approached with circumspection. The reference to the sun-goddess Shapsh specifies the time as summer; Mot's dominance over her presumably alludes to the circumstance that she had to pass through the netherworld every night on her daily journey round the earth, and it was this dominance that enabled him to scorch the earth's produce and bring about the drought of summer. Note the euphemism "house of freedom" for the abode of

1. This little study is adapted with quite a few modifications from a previous article of mine, "The Last Enemy", *Scottish Journal of Theology* 32 (1979) 151-169. It is presented with best wishes to my friend, Professor del Olmo Lete, whose Spanish translation I have constantly consulted, though the quoted renderings are taken from my own *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (2nd edition, Edinburgh 1978), with the references suitably emended to accord with the standard edition of M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartín (Neukirchen-Vluyn 1976)

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the dead. It is probable that the titles "darling of the gods" and "beloved of El" are likewise ironic, though they also acknowledge Mot's status and rights in the economy of the supreme God, El.

The reply of Mot to Baal's summons is a dusty one:

So Baal has invited me with his brothers
And Hadad has called me with my kinsfolk!
But it is to eat bread with my brothers
And to drink wine with my kinsfolk!
Have you then forgotten, Baal, that I can surely transfix you
----------you
for all that you smote [Litan the slippery serpent],
the tyrant [with seven heads]?
[The heavens] will burn up [and droop helpless],
[for I myself will ---------- and forearms].
[Indeed you must come down into the throat of divine Mot],
[into the miry depths of the hero beloved of El]. (KTU 1.5 i 22-35)

Litan (Biblical Leviathan) is another name for Yam, the chaos monster, whom Baal had destroyed earlier in the cycle, or refers to one of his creatures slain along with him. By offering Mot only bread and wine instead of his wonted human flesh, Baal has insulted him and deserves punishment.

There follows Baal's abject submission, his departure to the underworld and his meeting his fate at Mot's hand, thus explaining the absence of the rains during the hot season. But Mot's turn cannot be long delayed; Anat, Baal's sister, meets him on a search for her brother, and summarily slaughters him:

She seized divine Mot,
with a sword she split him,
with a sieve she winnowed him
with fire she burnt him,
with mill-stones she ground him,
in a field she scattered him;
his flesh indeed the birds ate,
his limbs indeed the sparrows consumed.
Flesh cried out to flesh,
[limbs cried out to limbs] (KTU 1.6 ii 30-37)

This well-known passage has often been seen as a reflection of harvest customs in primitive cultures like the cutting of the last sheaf or the slaying of the corn-spirit. But such reasoning assigns to Mot here and only here a role in the growing process, and it should be abandoned. It is much simpler to understand the passage figuratively, especially since a not dissimilar series of symbolic actions occurs in Exodus 32.20 in connexion with the destruction of the Golden Calf.[2] The Mot who dies is still the causer of the drought which follows the demise of Baal. Following Mot's death, Baal is brought back to the world above, a sumptuous feast is held, and then:

Baal did sit upon the throne of his kingdom,
on the cushion on the seat of his dominion (KTU 1.6 v 5-6)

At this juncture there is what seems to be an abrupt change in the narrative, which is signalled by a brief statement about seven years elapsing (KTU 1.6 v 7-9). Another battle between Baal and Mot ensues, which can hardly be an annual, seasonal contest about the temporary failure of the rains each summer.

2. See S.E. Loewenstamm, *Orientalia* 41 (1972) 378-82; P.L. Watson, *JAOS* 92 (1972) 60-64.

Rather, in the opinion of some,[3] the gap presages the kind of recurring periods of drought and fertility which are depicted in terms of a conventional seven years in the Joseph story in Genesis (41.25 ff.). This would prolong the myth of Baal and make it more than yearly in its scope. I am not sure about this interpretation, since it would remove from the scene the well-known theories of the celebration of the return of Baal's rains in an annual New Year festival in the autumn. I would rather argue that the second contest between Baal and Mot speaks of the two deities in their primordial roles and finally solves for the people of Ugarit the dilemma of death. Mot is once more in the rudest health. He leaves his underground home for the first time in the myth and confronts Baal face to face on Baal's own mountain, Zephon. He complains bitterly of Anat's previous treatment of himself and demands to be fed, threatening that if he is not, "he will consume mankind, he will consume the multitudes on earth." (KTU 1.6 v 24-25). Baal is also recovered and dismisses Mot's challenge disdainfully. A fight follows:

They eyed each other like burning coals;
Mot was strong, Baal was strong.
They gored like wild oxen;
Mot was strong, Baal was strong.
They bit like serpents;
Mot was strong, Baal was strong.
They tugged like greyhounds;
Mot fell down, Baal fell down on top of him. (KTU 1.6 vi 16-22)

The phrase "Mot was strong" probably finds a distant echo in the powerful but peculiar image of Song of Songs 8.6 "love strong as death." The result of this encounter on any unbiased reading of the passage would appear to be a draw; neither antagonist surrenders, they collapse together in a heap, and it takes outside intervention, that of none other than the supreme God El, to resolve the quarrel in Baal's favour. El sends Shapsh as an emissary and Mot, at last afraid, admits Baal's right to be king, after which comes the concluding colophon. The cycle closes with Mot undestroyed. The chief enemy at its end as at its beginning is primordial. The death which the Canaanites of Ugarit most feared is not the death which is the subject of the preceding columns, that of the rains, however anxious they have been that these might not return, each year or at occasional dangerous times, but the death which no man could avoid and which neither Baal nor even El, alone above him in divinity, could finally conquer but only hold uneasily in check.

This picture is filled out with several passages from other texts from Ugarit. There is the passage in the Aqhat tale in which the goddess Anat offers the young man immortality and a renewal of life like the weather god Baal's, if only he will give her his splendid bow and arrows which had attracted her envy; she receives a sour reply:

Do not lie, o virgin;
for to a hero your lying is unseemly.
As his ultimate fate what does a man get?
What does a man get as his final lot?
Glaze will be poured on my head,
Quicklime on my crown;
and the death of all men I shall die,
even I indeed shall die (KTU 1.17 vi 34-38)

3. Notably C.H. Gordon, *Orientalia* 22 (1953) 79-81, and G.R. Driver, in the 1st edition of Canaanite Myths and Legends.

The glaze and quicklime referred to here are probably metaphors for the white hair of old age rather than allusions to peculiar burial customs. This passage simply acknowledges the fact and inevitability of death and does not speculate about its origin or the human hubris which presumably led to it. More importantly, it makes it clear that deity has no real power over death. So also according to the Old Testament. Wherever death or its impending approach is talked about, as in Ps 88.11ff., it is explicitly admitted that Yahweh's saving help is not available to the dead. They are beyond his concern.

This view of death shared by Canaanites and Israelites was not affected by the evidence of the Keret epic that the king in Ugarit was regarded as divine and to that extent immortal. Thus when king Keret was seriously ill and thought to be dying, one of his sons expresses his distress:

> Shall you then die, father, as men,
> or shall your chamber be made over to an old man's mourning,
> to a woman's chanting, my glorious father? ----------
> Is then Keret the son of El,
> the progeny of the Compassionate one and the Holy one? ------
> We rejoiced in your life, our father,
> we exulted in your immortality ---------
> How can it be said that Keret is a son of El,
> the progeny of the Compassionate one and the Holy one?
> Or shall gods die?
> Shall the progeny of the Compassionate one not live? (KTU 1.16 i 3-23)

The Compassionate one and the Holy one are epithets of El and of his consort Athirat. This likening of Keret to Baal is not a real belief about death and immortality but draws on the immoderate language of a court ideology. We may compare the equally extravagant language of the biblical Psalms, e.g. 2.7; 72.5. More apposite to common experience is the indirect proof the Keret text gives that the people of Ugarit saw illness – and not just a king's illness – as a kind of death in the midst of life, and recovery as a divinely ordained escape from death; for later in the story Keret is in fact miraculously cured by a demon fashioned by El. It is in this sense of restored health or delivery from danger that the frequent references in the Psalms to Yahweh saving from death or Sheol are to be understood, and not as affirmations of life beyond the grave, e.g. 16.10; 30.4; 116.8. Deity both in Canaan and Israel could, it appears, delay death by its healing power but was helpless once it had come.

At Ugarit as in Israel a man's only hope of immortality lay in his living on in his descendants, and we find in both the Keret and Aqhat texts[4] the same overwhelming desire to have a son and heir as provides a central motif in the stories of Abraham and the other patriarchs. King Keret has to mount a huge campaign to win a neighbour's daughter and achieve progeny by her; and Aqhat prays for a son, who will look after his father in old age, maintain family worship and preserve his good name when he is gone

If we set aside the mythological background with its squabbling deities, the thinking of the people of Ugarit on death is very similar to that of the Old Testament before it developed a belief in immortality. We have to pay full attention to the naturalistic element in Ugaritic thinking, the role assigned to Mot, the god of death, in causing drought, whether that drought is considered as annual or as more occasional, and the victory of Baal over him, which enables his rains to return to fructify the earth. Mot's defeat, however, is only a partial one, and he remains ensconced in his underworld home to wreck his depredations again in the future. But more of concern to the people of Ugarit was Mot's role in bringing about the death of all mankind at any time. Death was inevitable and illness its harbinger. Death could be kept at bay by

4. Keret KTU 1.14 iii 38-49; Aqhat KTU 1.17 ii 12-23.

recovery from illness, but it could not be finally conquered. Immortality belonged to divinity alone and was not attainable by human beings. Their only prospect was to live on in their descendants.