

## The Heavenly Family of Ugarit

### *Introduction*

Next to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi codices, the Ugaritic texts are undoubtedly some of the most important texts to have come forth from out of the dust of the ancient Near East. Their importance in giving an accurate reconstruction of Canaanite religion free from the polemical bias of the biblical authors is immeasurable. The Ugaritic texts also shed further light on the development of Northwest Semitic languages including Hebrew. Without the library of Ugarit, we would be severely handicapped in our understanding of the history of Syro-Palestinian religion and culture.<sup>1</sup>

The most striking feature of the Ugaritic texts is the vivid depiction of the divine council, or the heavenly family of gods. Mark S. Smith informs us that this depiction of the heavenly assembly of gods is central to Canaanite religion, and cannot be lightly ignored.<sup>2</sup> The same is true for later Israelite religion, including the depiction of the divine council in the Hebrew Bible. Although the scope of this paper does not allow us to look at the Israelite divine council more closely, it is clear that Israelite religion drew heavily from an earlier Canaanite religious milieu.<sup>3</sup>

### *Background*

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<sup>1</sup> C. L. Seow, "Ugarit," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1993), 785–86.

<sup>2</sup> Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2001), esp. 41–66.

<sup>3</sup> See generally Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2002); Alberto R. W. Green, *The Storm-God in the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 224–280.

Before we look at the divine council in the Ugaritic texts we shall quickly overview the discovery of the library at Tel Ras Shamra, which lies today on the Northwest coast of modern Syria. Ancient Ugarit was discovered quite by accident, when in 1928 a local Arab farmer struck a stone slab while plowing his land. What he discovered was the entrance to an ancient tomb. Subsequent archaeological work by a French team under the leadership of Claude F. A. Schaeffer excavated not only the city of Ugarit itself, but also the royal library.<sup>4</sup> Over the course of several years more texts were unearthed, including, but not limited to, legal texts, administrative texts, religious texts, ritual texts, and political correspondences between Ugaritic and neighboring cities.<sup>5</sup>

It is apparent that Ugarit was “at its height . . . a thriving city” during the Middle and Late Bronze Age.<sup>6</sup> This shouldn’t come as a surprise, since its coastal location sandwiched between the Hittites in the north and the Egyptians in the south made it a lively trading hub for these and other empires. But, as would later prove true for the Israelites, this also left the city vulnerable to the militaristic aspirations of more dominant entities (in the case of Ugarit the Hittites and the marauding “Sea People”), and the city was sacked and abandoned in 1180 BCE.<sup>7</sup>

### *The Assembly of El*

The divine council of Ugarit was comprised of an assembly of divine beings called, variously, “gods”, “sons of god(s)”, “holy ones”, “stars”, etc. These gods were tiered in a

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<sup>4</sup> J. C. L. Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1977), 1–2.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the texts found at Ugarit, see D. Pardee and Pierre Bordeuil, “Ugarit, Texts and Literature,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1992), 6:706–721.

<sup>6</sup> Robert M. Good, “Ras Shamra,” in *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (San Francisco, Cali.: Harper & Row, 1985), 854.

<sup>7</sup> Marguerite Yon, trans. Stephen Rosoff, “Ugarit,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6:701.

heavenly hierarchy under the high god El,<sup>8</sup> some serving as warriors in El's army, some as messengers, and others as courtiers who praised and extolled El in his court.<sup>9</sup> As such, scholars regularly speak of the Ugaritic divine council as the Assembly of El.

The Ugaritic divine council is consistently depicted with strikingly anthropomorphic imagery. In one mythological text, called *Dawn and Dusk*, or *The Birth of the Gracious and Beautiful Gods*,<sup>10</sup> the gods of the divine council are described as gracious (line 1), beautiful (line 2), and youthful (line 17). They have heads (line 6) and hands (line 8). They eat, drink, speak (lines 6–7), and nurse (lines 23–27). They dwell in cultic huts (line 19). They have mothers, fathers, siblings, children and spouses (lines 31–36, 42–44). Finally, the gods sexually reproduce and give birth to children from wives (49–64). There is no compelling reason to assume that the ancient Canaanites didn't conceive of their gods as being anything but anthropomorphic beings. They were very human-like in how they lived and interacted with each other. In this sense, it could be said that the gods of Ugarit were much like the Greek gods of Olympus.

### *El and Asherah*

Scholars are unanimous that El was the father of the gods, and the head of the pantheon. "El . . . was the king, father, and progenitor of the gods in Canaanite mythology. As such, he

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<sup>8</sup> Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 42–44, provides a look at the epithets of the divine council, including "the assembly of the sons of El", "the circle of El", "the assembly of the stars", etc., and the various tiers of the hierarchy.

<sup>9</sup> Deity lists of the members of the Ugaritic pantheon, and their roles, can be found in Gregorio Del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion According to the Liturgical Texts of Ugarit*, trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 55–86; Dennis Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit*, ed. Theodore J. Lewis (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 11–24.

<sup>10</sup> A translation can be found in Denis Pardee, trans., "Dawn and Dusk," in *The Context of Scripture: Volume 1, Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), 276–283. Pardee notes the twofold importance of this text: "(1) it deals with the origin and characteristics of deities . . . (2) the text . . . contains . . . indications . . . reflection a cultic usage of the text." See Pardee, *Ibid.*, 274.

stood at the head of the pantheon,” writes E. Theodore Mullen. “El must . . . be pictured as the aged judge who . . . sat at the head of the assembly, surrounded by the other gods.”<sup>11</sup> Ulf Oldenburg speaks of El as “a god of extraordinary position, high above any other gods in the Ugaritic pantheon.”<sup>12</sup> El was the great creator and ruler of the cosmos, a characteristic which appears later in the Hebrew Bible. He is both the “father of the gods” as well as “the ‘Father of Mankind’”, the great sustainer of life, humanity and the cosmos. He was the ultimate Cosmocrator in Canaanite religion.<sup>13</sup>

El is given a number of epithets in the Ugaritic texts, including “creator”, “father of the gods”, “king”, “the Father of Years”, “Father of the Earth”, etc.<sup>14</sup> His most ubiquitous epithet is “Bull”, which probably meant to designate El’s sexual virility. Hence the beginning of the *Baal Epic* (which we will look at more carefully later): “Message of the Bull, your Father ‘Illu [El], word of the Gracious One, your sire” (CTA 1 ii.17).<sup>15</sup> Throughout this myth El is called a “Bull” and depicted as the father of the gods.<sup>16</sup> He is essentially the Canaanite version of Zeus.

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<sup>11</sup> E. Theodore Mullen Jr., *The Assembly of the Gods: The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature*, Harvard Semitic Monographs no. 24 (Chico, CA: Scholar’s Press, 1980), 120.

<sup>12</sup> Ulf Oldenburg, *The Conflict Between El and Baal in Canaanite Religion* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> For a fuller list of El’s epithets, see Mullen, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature*, 12–22; Oldenburg, *The Conflict Between El and Baal in Canaanite Religion*, 16–22.

<sup>15</sup> Dennis Pardee, trans., “The Ba’lu Myth,” in *The Context of Scripture: Volume I, Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997). All subsequently citations of the *Baal Epic* come from this translation.

<sup>16</sup> Pardee notes that “Bull” is El’s principle epithet in this myth, and that “the title of ‘Bull’ . . . is usually linked explicitly with the concept of fatherhood.” See Pardee, “The Ba’lu Myth,” 243, n. 13. See also Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 83–86.

Next to El sat his faithful and beautiful wife Asherah (or Astarte). She was a fertility goddesses and the mother of the gods (70 to be precise).<sup>17</sup> Asherah would appear later in biblical history as a cult fetish amongst the Canaanites, the wife of Baal and the object of severe prophetic condemnation.<sup>18</sup> In Ugarit, however, Asherah is given universal adoration and praise. She is hailed as “Elat” (Goddess), “Qudshu” (Holy), “Progenitress of the Gods”, and “Lady Asherah of the Sea”, the last epithet making her the Canaanite counterpart to the Greek goddess Aphrodite.<sup>19</sup>

Somewhat counterintuitively, El and Asherah, the head god and his wife, actually play only a minimal role in the mythology of Ugarit. Besides their important roles as the parents of the gods in the *Dawn and Dusk* theogony myth, El and Asherah seem to appear as just supporting actors in the grander primeval *Götterdämmerung* between Baal, Yamm and Mot. This primordial theomachy in the divine council, called variously the *Baal Myth*, the *Baal Cycle*, or the *Baal Epic*, is perhaps the most important mythological tale of the Canaanites, since it accounts for the triumph of Baal over his rivals Yamm (Sea) and Mot (Death).

*Baal, Yamm, and Mot in the Baal Epic*

One is tempted to call the divine council of Ugarit a sort of “dysfunctional family”, since the younger children of El are routinely depicted as rivalrous and vindictive over who will emerge pre-eminent in the divine council. The sons of El who make their most dramatic mark in

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<sup>17</sup> At an inaugural banquet in the heavenly assembly, after the construction of his palace, Baal is said to “invit[e] the seventy sons of Atiratu [Asherah/Astarte]: He provides the gods with rams and wine” (CTA 4 vi.42–43).

<sup>18</sup> On Asherah in the Bible as the wife of Baal, and even in some instances Yahweh, see Susan Ackerman, “Asherah,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 62; Robert M. Good, “Asherah,” in *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, 74–75; William Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, Minn.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> See Good, “Asherah,” 74; Oldenburg, *The Conflict Between El and Baal in Canaanite Religion*, 28–31.

Canaanite religion are Baal (or the “Son of Dagan”),<sup>20</sup> the lightning and fertility god, Yamm (or Yamm-Nahar),<sup>21</sup> the god of the sea, and Mot, the god of death and the underworld.<sup>22</sup> Their vicissitudes are chronicled in the *Baal Epic*, a complex myth that is, in the words of Pardee, “the most important literary work preserved . . . by the West Semitic peoples in the second millennium BCE.”<sup>23</sup> The *Baal Epic* can rightly be called an epic poem that can proudly take a place next to anything written by the greats such as Homer, Milton or Goethe.

The *Baal Epic* begins with the gods sending envoys and messengers back and forth from one another, sending dire threats and stroking their egos in anticipation for the theomachy (CTA 1–CTA 2 i.11–19). “Give (up), O gods, the one whom you obey . . . Give (up) Ba’lu . . . that I might take possession of his gold,” orders Yamm at the beginning of the battle (CTA i.18–19). Baal is outraged at this threat, and responds with violence. “Then Prince Ba’lu is sick (with rage), [moreover he takes] in his hand a striking weapon, in his right hand a smiting weapon” (CTA 2 i.38). Thus begins the fight, with different gods taking sides and assisting in the fight. The craftsman god Kotaru fashions weapons (CTA 2 iv.11–27) while El approves of Yamm building a palace (CTA 2 iii.6–11) and Attartu extols Baal as a cosmic warrior (CTA 2 iv. 28–30). Ultimately Baal is victorious in destroying Yamm (CTA 2 iv.32) and throws a lavish feast with spectacularly anthropomorphic depictions of the food, drink and entertainment of the gods (CTA 3.i).

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<sup>20</sup> On this curious epithet for Baal, see Pardee, “The Ba’lu Myth,” 245, n. 32.

<sup>21</sup> See Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, 4–8; Oldenburg, *The Conflict Between El and Baal in Canaanite Religion*, 32–34. “Yamm” and “Nahar” are related Semitic words, meaning “sea” and “river”, respectively. The double epithet is thus appropriate for this deity.

<sup>22</sup> See Oldenburg, *The Conflict Between El and Baal in Canaanite Religion*, 34–39.

<sup>23</sup> Pardee, “The Ba’lu Myth,” 241.

Baal's supremacy is later challenged by Mot. "I am the only one who rules over the gods, who fattens gods and men, who satiates the hordes of the earth," boasts Mot (CTA 4 vii.51). The pattern is repeated again, with Baal and Mot sending messengers back and forth before the battle commences. This time, however, in a shocking twist Mot is victorious in dispatching an arrogant Baal, who had underestimated the unstoppable power of death, which Mot controls. The gods mourn and bury Baal (CTA 5 vi–CTA 6 i.32), with Anat, Baal's faithful wife, crying: "Ba'lu is dead, what (is to become of) the people, the Son of Dagan (is dead), what is to become of the hordes of the earth?" (CTA 6 i.4).

The myth concludes with the miraculous revival of Baal and the capitulation of Mot (CTA 6 iii.1–21; vi.10–30). Although death proved temporarily victorious, and will still prey upon mortals (CTA 6 v), in the end it is Baal who secures his dominion over the divine council and ultimately the cosmos through his control of the regenerative properties of rain and animal and plant reproduction.

The epic nature of this myth, as well as its repetitive theomachy, immediately calls to mind the *Enuma Elish*, or the myth of the exaltation of Marduk, chief god of the Babylonians.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, it would seem appropriate to identify this myth as the exaltation of Baal, since its ultimate purpose is to explain how reproduction and fertility (Baal) is superior to chaos (Yamm) and death (Mot). This myth further provides a glimpse into the mindset of the ancient Semitic peoples who would serve as the cultural and religious forebears of the Israelites. With perceived cosmological chaos and the threat of death by drought or infertility looming over them constantly, this myth shows the ultimately hopeful nature of Canaanite religion, which expected

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<sup>24</sup> See generally W. G. Lambert, "Enuma Elish," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 2:526-28.

Baal to continue to hold chaos and death at bay through his renewing of the rains and fertility. Even when Baal is defeated, temporarily, it is expected that he will ultimately triumph and provide for his worshipers.<sup>25</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Space and time does not permit us to more fully explore the heavenly family of Ugarit. Our brief investigation, however, does yield the following discoveries:

1. The Canaanites (and later Israelites) undeniably believed in the existence of a divine pantheon of multiple deities.<sup>26</sup>
2. These deities are straightforwardly depicted in the strongest of anthropomorphic language. They are human-like in every quality, including the ability to die.
3. A complex mythology was generated to account for the role these deities played in the cosmos, and how they related to their earthly worshippers.

When we look at Canaanite religion on its own terms we see a vivid drama. We see a heavenly family of gods involved in strifes, vicissitudes, battles, plots, triumphs and downfalls as they clash for control of the cosmos. As mythology the story of this divine family is riveting, compelling and just as worthy of our attention as any of the celebrated Greek or Norse tales of yore.

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<sup>25</sup> For more on the religious ideology behind belief in a storm god, including among the ancient Israelites, see generally Green, *The Storm-God in the Ancient Near East*.

<sup>26</sup> On the Israelite divine council, see generally Gerald Cooke, "The Sons of (the) God(s)," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 35, no. 1 (1964): 22–47; Michael S. Heiser, "Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 18, no. 1 (2008): 1–30; Mullen, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature*, *passim*.; Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, esp. 135–193.



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