HEBREW 'šdt AND UGARITIC išdym

The *hapax legomenon* 'šdt in Dt. 33:2 is one of the most difficult cruces in the Bible. B. Margulis noted that even the Masoretes “were aware of the problem when they appended an unusual diacritical mark noting ktyh ḫd wqry tyrn.”

Modern Bible critics have rightly rejected the Masoretic division into 'š and dt, but none has proposed a truly viable solution. The array of suggestions itself points to the lack of consensus in interpreting the word 'šdt. Before proposing still another solution to this crux, it will be beneficial to review the most commonly accepted suggestions.

C. J. Ball vocalized the word as 'āšēdôt, and connected the word to the Syriac root ʾṣd meaning “to pour, to stream.” His view was accepted by U. Cassuto, who translated the word as “effulgence,” and I. L. Seeligmann, who translated it as “fiery stream.”

H. S. Nyberg elected to emend the text and proposed 'āšērat, a noun “with an archaic preservation of the ending -at in the absolute state,” meaning, of course, the goddess Asherah.

Frank M. Cross and David Noel Freedman proposed a more radical emendation, reading MT 'šdt lmw as 'šr 'lm, translated “proceeded the mighty ones.” Analogous uses of this verb are to be found in Hebrew in Prov. 9:6 and in Ugaritic in Keret: 94.

A. F. L. Beeston accepted the consonantal text 'šdt and connected the root to the South Arabic ʾsd meaning “warrior” and the Arabic ʾsd meaning “lion.” Based on the parallelism with ṭbbt qds, he translated the term “angels” or “(divine) warriors.” Beeston’s suggestion is strengthened by the LXX’s rendering of ἄγγελοι. (The Vulgate renders ʾšdt as ignea lex, and Orqelos translates it as yṣṭy wryt. Both reflect the Masoretic reading of 'š dt.)

P. D. Miller sought to combine the above two views. He criticised Beeston for retaining the consonantal text, stating that “in this case the MT is so problematic that one is inclined to expect some corruption a priori. Thus a hard and fast retention of the MT is methodologically

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2 C. J. Ball, *PSBA* 18 (1896), 119.
5 H. S. Nyberg, *ZDMG* 92 (1938), 335.
unsound in this case.” On the other hand, MILLER agreed with BEESTON’S connecting ṣḏt with the South Arabic-Arabic root ṣḏ. MILLER also accepted part of CROSS and FREEDMAN’S emendation, and offered the reading ṣḏ ḥlm, which he translated “warriors of the gods (divine warriors).”

MITCHELL DAHOOD connected the word with Ugaritic išd meaning “leg.” He accepted the consonantal text and vocalized the word as ḥšḍḏt, a denominative verb translated as “marching.” Such denominatives are common, DAHOOD wrote, with Hebrew Ṳlg, “to foot it,” and Ugaritic ṭkm, “to shoulder (= to carry),” as other examples.

Finally, G. R. DRIVER connected the root with Syriac-Aramaic ṣḏ meaning “to pour, to stream” (as did BALL and CASSUTO), but he considered ṣḏt a verb, not a noun. DRIVER translated the term as “streaming along.”

The statement of CROSS and FREEDMAN 30 years ago that “conjectures are almost as numerous as scholars” is as true today as it was then. It is astonishing, however, that in their search for cognates and parallel usages, all of these scholars (except BALL and CASSUTO who are excused because they wrote before 1929) overlooked the glaring use of išdym in UT 8:9.

The entire text (UT 8) is reproduced below:

1. yn. iš[rylv] ilmr
2. spr. [ ]kšbt
3. šhl[ ] ph. tmnt
4. nblv. špš. ymp
5. hlkt. tdrš
6. špš. b’dh. t? [ ]
7. atr. atrm
8. atr. atrm
9. išdym. t
10. bk. mla š
11. udm’t. d
12. [ ] bn. [ ]
13. [ ]

Although it is badly fragmented, enough is legible to determine that the

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8 PATRICK D. MILLER JR., HTR 57 (1964), 242.
9 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 G. R. DRIVER, SVT 16 (1967), 50–51.
13 CROSS and FREEDMAN, 199 note 11.
14 UT, 162, reads “(h/i) hr”; the i is accepted here for contextual reasons.
15 UT, 162, reads “ghl,” but cf. UT, 473, where the reading šhl is proposed.
text is a mythological one dealing with the sun goddess Šps. Direct evidence for this is Šps in line 4 and line 6; śhl, “to glow,” in line 3; and nbluh, “flame,” in line 4. The words atr atrm in line 7 and line 8 are to be translated “march of marches” and may refer to the march of the sun across the sky. Given the context of UT 8, ilmr in line 1 is probably to be translated “god of light.”

We may now turn our attention to īṣdym in line 9. The word is problematic, and to attempt a definition of the word in the context of this fragmented text would be sheer conjecture. We can, however, equate īṣdym with šdt in Dt. 33:2. Both UT 8 and Dt. 33:2 describe the activities of the sun. In the former, these attributes are attributed to the Ugaritic goddess Šps. In the latter, they are attributed to the Israelite god Yahweh.

A full reading of Dt. 33:2:

\[\begin{align*}
yh\, msny\, b' \\
wzrh\, m\, yr\, lmw \\
h\, mhr\, pr'n \\
wt\, m\, qd\, \\
ymnym\, šdt\, lmw
\end{align*}\]

reveals that Yahweh is depicted as “shining forth from Seir” and “glowing from Mount Paran.” A full reading of UT 8 reveals that Šps is likewise “glowing” and “flame.” Both literatures go on to describe the movement of the sun; Dt. 33:2 uses the root šth and UT 8 uses the root štr. Immediately thereafter follow the appearances of šdt in the Hebrew and īṣdym in the Ugaritic. These affinities are too close to be accidental. Dt. 33:2 must be an Israelite adaptation of a Canaanite sun cult text, perhaps even UT 8.

Oddly enough, previous writers have recognized the Canaanite influence on Dt. 33:2. Speaking of the entire chapter, CROSS and FREEDMAN wrote that “the ode which frames the blessings, and some of the blessings themselves, have strong affinities with the Canaanite literature which influenced Israel’s early poetic genius.” Writing in The Interpreter’s Bible, G. ERNEST WRIGHT noted that Dt. 33:1—3 “depicts God as the rising sun, shining upon Israel from Sinai and the wilderness.” SEELIGMANN wrote, “The use of the verbs wzrh and hw\, śśty in the description of the theophany may lend some support to an etymology according to which the words ynymn\, šdt lw would be a torso of what was to describe the radiant splendour in which the Lord reveals Himself to His people. If this reconstruction is correct the text would seem to describe the revelation of a

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16 UT, 368.
18 CROSS and FREEDMAN, 192.
19 The Interpreter’s Bible 2, 1953, 528.
God of Light in his radiance." But none of these scholars made the connection between Dt. 33:2 and UT 8.

There are obviously still problems in this identification. As to morphology, 'ṣdt would appear to be a feminine singular noun or a feminine plural noun (vocalizing the end of the word as -ōt), while išdyum is apparently a masculine plural noun. The meaning of 'ṣdt / išdyum is also unresolved. Some may still wish to derive it from the Syriac-Aramaic 'ṣd and translate the word "streams" or "rays." This meaning is backed by Hab. 3:4, wnhk kwr thyh qrnym mydw lw. Others may still wish to derive it from the South Arabic-Arabic 'ṣd and translate "divine warriors." This meaning is backed by the LXX ággeloi. Or another cognate may be sought. Regardless, it is no longer possible to divorce 'ṣdt in Dt. 33:2 from išdyum in UT 8:9. The ultimate solution to both should be sought together.

The availability of space at the end of this article allows me to note that most recently DAVID NOEL FREEDMAN proposed reading our Hebrew crux as 'ášēdōt, "mountain-slopes" (cf. Dt. 3:17, 4:49, Josh. 12:3, 13:20). Thus he apparently retreats from his and CROSS' emendation of the consonantal text noted above. FREEDMAN now states that it is "in fact obligatory to struggle with the . . . difficult reading of MT," an approach with which I am totally sympathetic. See FREEDMAN'S article "The Poetic Structure of the Framework of Deuteronomy 33," in GARY RENDSBURG et al., eds., The Bible World: Essays in Honor of Cyrus H. Gordon, 1980, 39–41.

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20 seeiligman, 82. Note seeiligman's identification of Yahweh as the God of Light and the occurrence of ilhr in UT 8:1.
21 Cf. GKC, 223–224.
22 Such details need not detain us from making the equation. For example, Hebrew 'wynm equals Ugaritic aprt; Hebrew r̄ṣym appears in Ugaritic as rašm or rašt; and Hebrew grnwt appears in Ugaritic as grnm or grnt. Plural suffixes tell us very little if anything about the gender of nouns, viz., 'bwt and n̄sym. To further complicate matters, Hebrew šms is both masculine and feminine.
23 *išdy may be a derivative of išd which would then be made plural by the suffix -m. For a similar form, note the personal name špyyn, apparently *śpšy, a derivative of śpš with the suffix -n; cf. UT, 494. It is morphologically possible to treat išdyum as a masculine plural gentilic, though this is problematic contextually.
24 It is also worth noting that the Masoretic vocalization of 'ṣdt has the i vowel in the first syllable. This is the same vowel which appears in the first syllable of išdyum. This may purely be an accident since Hebrew iš is also vocalized with the i vowel. On the other hand, the šere in 'ṣdt may reflect an ancient tradition and it was this that precipitated the Masoretic division into 'š and dt.