

Review Essay

WILFRED G. E. WATSON AND NICOLAS WYATT, eds. *Handbook of Ugaritic Studies*. Handbuch der Orientalistik, Abteilung 1, Band 39. Leiden: Brill, 1999. Pp. xiii + 892.

The size of this volume attests to the fact that Ugaritic studies is a thriving field unto itself. For much of the 20th century, Ugaritic studies served largely as the handmaid to biblical studies—and indeed it still has much to offer in that regard—but in recent decades, the study of Ras Shamra (the modern name of ancient Ugarit) and its treasures has developed into an independent field, worthy of the volume under review.

The editors inform us in the Preface that Johannes de Moor conceived the project and served as its original editor, though later he ceded the work to W. G. E. Watson and N. Wyatt. We are grateful to all three scholars for the production of this excellent and most useful work, presenting in very convenient fashion a complete survey of Ugaritic studies. Watson deserves additional credit for having translated a number of the contributions from German, Italian, and Spanish.

Readers of reviews do not always enjoy a listing of the chapters in a reference work, but a list will give an idea of the scope and breadth of the volume. The essays are as follows: Watson and Wyatt, “General Introduction”; A. Curtis, “Ras Shamra, Minet el-Beida and Ras Ibn Hani: The Material Sources”; W. van Soldt, “The Syllabic Akkadian Texts”; W. Pitard, “The Alphabetic Ugaritic Tablets”; M. Dietrich and W. Mayer, “The Hurrian and Hittite Texts”; K. Cathcart, “The Decipherment of Ugaritic”; M. Dietrich and O. Loretz, “The Ugaritic Script”; J. Tropper, “Ugaritic Grammar”; Watson, “Ugaritic Lexicography”; J. Huehnergard, “Ugaritic Words in Syllabic Texts”; M. Dijkstra, “Ugaritic Prose”; Watson, “Ugaritic Poetry”; J. Gibson, “The Mythological Texts”; B. Margalit, “The Legend of Keret”; Wyatt, “The Story of Aqhat”; Pitard, “The *Rpum* Texts”; K. Spronk, “The Incantations”; P. Merlo and P. Xella, “The Rituals”; G. del Olmo Lete, “The Offering Lists and the God Lists”; Xella, “The Omen Texts”; J.-L. Cunchillos, “The Ugaritic Letters”; Huehnergard, “The Akkadian Letters”; I. M. Rowe, “The Legal Texts from Ugarit”; M. Heltzer, “The Economy of Ugarit”; J.-P. Vita, “The Society of Ugarit”; R. Hess, “The Onomastics of Ugarit”; Wyatt, “The Religion of Ugarit: An Overview”; I. Cornelius, “The Iconography of Ugarit”; I. Singer, “A Political History of Ugarit”; T. Lewis and S. Wiggins, “The Current State of Ugaritic Studies and Technology”; Cunchillos, “Storage and Analysis of the Texts.”

Several of these essays are only five or six pages, but others are quite substantial. The longest—and indeed it could stand alone as a significant monograph by itself—is Singer’s brilliant 131-page “A Political History of Ugarit.”

As befits a work such as this, the authors generally are not dogmatic in their approach. For example, Tropper in his chapter on “Ugaritic Grammar” presents three separate views on the representation of vowelless *ʾaleph*, with bibliographic sources, and then presents his own opinion embodying a fourth view (pp. 93–94). Similarly, in his short essay on the *rpum* texts (*KTU/CAT* 1.20–22),¹ Pitard dispassionately presents the three options in interpretation, understanding the *rpum* either as spirits of the dead, as deities, or as living persons, with the sober conclusion “that these texts are exceedingly ambiguous and that great caution should be used in drawing upon them to reconstruct aspects of Ugaritic or Syro-Palestinian culture” (p. 268).

There are occasional departures from this norm, however, as when Margalit engages in polemics with his statement, “This view of the *Keret* poem as a work of royal propaganda—by implication if not explicitly, by the ruling house of the kingdom of Ugarit whose dynasty Keret is presumed to have founded—is very widespread in contemporary Ugaritic scholarship; and it is hugely mistaken” (pp. 207–208). Margalit may be correct in his views that the story would have evoked “gales of laughter” from the ancient audience (p. 208) and that “there is altogether too much comedy and parody in *Keret* for it ever to have served as propaganda for anything” (p. 209), but one is struck by the means with which he treats the opposing (and standard) view (the above quotation is representative of other such statements), in contrast to the other contributors to this volume.

The sheer quantity of material presented in this volume may be comprehended by the following personal statement. I have read, studied, and taught Ugaritic texts for a quarter of a century, yet my experience has been limited almost exclusively to the literary texts. This is probably the case with the majority of scholars who approach the subject, especially (as in my own case) if the Bible is the point of departure and the focus for comparison. Accordingly, as I read through the pages of this book, time and again I learned new information or gained new perspectives on issues that I simply had never encountered in a major way (cult, society, economy, administration, etc.). Obviously, I was familiar with the seminal works in these areas (by

¹ *KTU* = M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartín, *Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1976). A second, enlarged edition of *KTU* appeared in 1995, now with an English title: *CAT* = M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartín, *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places* (Münster, 1995), though this work is sometimes cited as *KTU*². The numeration of the texts is the same in both editions, though of course *CAT* includes new texts unearthed or published since 1976.

Heltzer, Xella, et al.) but had not digested them fully nor obtained a thorough understanding of these importance aspects of Ugaritic studies. This *Handbook* provides the scholar—and I suspect that there are many like me in this regard—with an entrée to a wealth of material in a very accessible way. Of the many articles that I could single out in this regard, I want to mention specifically del Olmo Lete's thorough presentation of "The Offering Lists and the God Lists," a 48-page essay packed with important information and of great relevance to biblical studies as well.

The following comments largely reflect my own interests in both Ugaritic literature and language.

Pp. 81–90: In their treatment of "The Ugaritic Script," especially with their emphasis on how the Ugaritic alphabet relates to other alphabets in the region, I would have expected Dietrich and Loretz to refer in some manner to R. R. Stieglitz, "The Ugaritic Cuneiform and Canaanite Linear Alphabets," *JNES* 30 (1971) 135–139.

P. 105: Tropper states that the 3rd masc. pl. preformative for the prefix conjugation is *t-*, with the variant *y-* "probably attested in only two cases. . . . The variant is no (longer) productive and only attested in grammatical parallelism with the 'normal' *t*-prefix form" (p. 105 n. 28). I agree wholeheartedly with this statement. For an alternative view, see D. Sivan, *A Grammar of the Ugaritic Language* (Leiden, 1997), p. 112, with the claim that *t-* and *y-* are free variants of each other.

P. 124: Watson includes *ḡprt* in his list of words which "are difficult or obscure, or have uncertain etymologies." The word has been discussed in detail by J. C. Greenfield, "Ugaritic Lexicographical Notes," *JCS* 21 (1967) 89–93, in particular pp. 90–91, with the conclusion, correct in my opinion, that *ḡprt* is related to Mishnaic Hebrew מַעְפֹּרֶת, Jewish Palestinian Aramaic מַעְפֹּרָא, Syriac עַפְרָא, all meaning "cloak, wrap."

P. 131: Watson uses the term "homonyms" for forms such as *bt* "house" and *bt* "daughter." To be more exact, these forms should be called "homographs," since they clearly were pronounced differently, a point which Watson well recognizes.²

Pp. 165–192: Watson's essay on "Ugaritic Poetry" is a model of clarity and may be recommended to all beginning (and advanced!) students of Ugaritic. Much of the information conveyed in this article has appeared elsewhere, though scattered throughout literally dozens of articles; thus it is most convenient to have Watson's concise overview of Ugaritic poetic devices, replete with many examples. He deserves special praise for stating in very plain terms and most emphatically, "It is now generally accepted that *Ugaritic verse is not metrical*" (p. 168; emphasis his). I take the opportunity

² See S. Chalker and E. Weiner, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 187–188.

to quote *in extenso* from the conclusion to this essay (pp. 191–192), which I endorse fully:

As in some other ancient Near Eastern verse traditions, perhaps the most salient feature of Ugaritic poetry is its *unpredictability*, a feature which runs right across the board from prosodic structure to complete compositions. This means in effect that, with a few exceptions, length of line, whether two lines will be parallel or not and if so, the type of parallelism adopted, whether a speech will or will not have an introduction and whether the introduction will comprise one line or several, sequences of bicola, tricola, and so on, how many lines are in a ‘strophe’ or ‘stanza’, etc., are all completely variable.

In light of what Watson writes here, it is therefore a bit surprising to read that the line *yblk udr ilqsm* “let the splendor of gems be brought to you” (translation mine; Watson’s is a bit different), which appears in *KTU/CAT* 1.4 V 17 and 1.4 V 40, but which is lacking in 1.4 V 33 “was probably left out unintentionally” (p. 181) at this point in the poem. Is this not another instance of the very unpredictability so lucidly described by Watson?

P. 285: Spronk refers to the demon *ḥby* attested in *KTU/CAT* 1.114 19, but he does not cite the treatment of C. H. Gordon, “ḤBY, Possessor of Horns and Tail,” *UF* 18 (1987) 129–132, nor does he refer the reader to the two biblical passages in which this figure appears, Isa 26:20 and Hab 3:4 (*pace* Gordon).

Pp. 368–374: Cunchillos gives us a preview of his *PMD = Palabras en Morfología Desplegada* (described in greater detail on pp. 749–750). This database allows Cunchillos to present Ugaritic words which are attested exclusively in a single literary genre, in this case the letters. However, all we get here is a list of individual *forms* occurring only in the letters. A huge number of these are from roots used throughout the Ugaritic corpus. Hopefully, the database will allow a more sophisticated analysis to take us one step further. Of what use is it, for example, to learn that *ilḥmn* occurs only in the letters, when of course the root *lhm* “eat” and “fight” is very common throughout Ugaritic? On a more positive note, see my additional comment below.

Pp. 529–585: Wyatt’s essay “The Religion of Ugarit: An Overview” is another of the major contributions to this volume. While perforce most of his information derives from the textual evidence, Wyatt also incorporates the archaeological data (e.g., on tomb construction, p. 577), thus providing the reader with as complete a picture as possible. Wyatt’s work is always original—sometimes too original in this reviewer’s estimation—and the present essay is no exception. For example, the next two points:

Pp. 533–534: El’s home “at the source of the rivers, amidst the springs of the two deeps” (*KTU/CAT* 1.2 III 4 etc.; translation his) leads Wyatt to a discussion of the Garden of Eden imagery with its mention of the Gihon, at

once the main spring in Jerusalem and a river which flows in “Cush Ethiopia = Abyssinia ‘land of the abyss’).” The term Abyssinia does not derive from Greek ἄβυσσος, but rather from *ḥbšt*, one of the two South Arabian tribes which comprised the kingdom of Aksum. See, for example, A. Jamme, *Sabaeen and Hasaeen Inscriptions from Saudi Arabia* (Rome, 1966), pp. 40–41, text Ja 1028, line 8, with mention of “an attack by sea from Ḥabašat” against King Yusuf ᵑAsᵑar Yaᵑar “king of all the tribes” (i.e., Sabaᵑ and its neighbors). In fact, the term Abyssinia does not appear in ancient Greek sources.³

P. 543: Wyatt writes: “It appears that Asherah in Judah at least had such a symbolic [i.e., sexual—G.A.R.] dimension, whatever is to be made of it, since she is both the deity’s daughter, and his wife, and is described as ‘the work of his hand . . . fingers’ (Ps. 19), where both phrases have undoubted phallic overtones.” Obviously, the Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet ᵑAjrud inscriptions indicate that some portion of the population of Judah and Israel believed that Asherah served as the consort of Yahweh. But what is the evidence for Asherah’s role as the daughter of Yahweh? Furthermore, in what way does Ps 19:2 מַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיו “the work of his hands” refer to Asherah, especially since she is not mentioned in this poem? How can יָדָיו “his hands” bear a phallic overtone when it is in the dual? And where does “fingers” come from since אֶצְבָּעוֹת does not appear in this psalm? Wyatt adds that “this is admittedly all circumstantial” (pp. 543–544), but the entire argument should be dropped.⁴

Pp. 747–752: Cunchillos’s brief description of current computer-based projects relevant to the Ugaritic corpus whets our appetite for the exciting times that lie ahead in this dynamic field of study.

I must report one annoying feature of this volume. *KTU/CAT* has become the international standard for citing Ugaritic texts. Why, therefore, is every *KTU* number followed by the equal sign and the corresponding RS (= Ras Shamra excavation) number? A glance at the footnotes on pp. 425–428 will give the reader an idea what I am talking about. Would not the *KTU/CAT* number be sufficient, especially since the volume is extremely well indexed, allowing any user to find the corresponding RS number if necessary.

Although the volume is massive, I find one discussion lacking. I would have enjoyed a survey essay on the classification of Ugaritic within Semitic.

³ It is not listed in the standard reference work: W. Pape and G. Benseler, *Wörterbuch der griechischen Eigennamen*, 3rd ed. (Braunschweig, 1875). My thanks to Saul Levin of the State University of New York at Binghamton for this reference and for the information.

⁴ One more item requires comment. A few paragraphs later, Wyatt refers to Israel and Judah as “the Palestinian kingdoms” (p. 544). Even if one sides with the revisionist position that now dominates much of the field of Israelite history, one should refrain from using this term in place of “the Israelite kingdoms.” After all, “Israel” is a term attested in the Iron Age, whereas “Palestine” is not.

Tropper has a very brief discussion at the beginning of his chapter on “Ugaritic Grammar” (p. 91), but an extended treatment would have been helpful. This is especially so given the recent article of A. S. Kaye, “Does Ugaritic Go with Arabic in Semitic Genealogical Sub-Classification?” *Folia Orientalia* 28 (1991) 115–128. I do not agree with Kaye’s conclusion that Arabic, Ugaritic, and Northwest Semitic comprise three different groups within Central Semitic (rather, I follow H. L. Ginsberg in grouping Ugaritic and Phoenician together as a subgroup within Canaanite⁵), but his article is stimulating nonetheless.

The volume concludes with a comprehensive 62-page “Bibliography of Works Cited” (pp. 762–823) and a 66-page Index (pp. 827–892), divided into ten categories (topics, names, words, texts, etc.). These items make this excellent volume all the more useful.

Finally, on a personal level I am most gratified that the editors have chosen to dedicate this work to my teacher Cyrus H. Gordon, whose involvement in Ugaritic studies spans the full seventy years covered in this book.

All scholars of matters Ugaritic (and this should include all biblical scholars) owe a major debt of gratitude to Watson, Wyatt, and de Moor, as well as to the collaborators, for producing such an outstanding volume. They have provided us with copious *ʔl šmm* “dew of heaven,” abundant *šmn arš* “oil of earth,” and plentiful *rbb rkb ʕrpt* “raindrops of the Rider of the Clouds” to satisfy our needs for years to come.

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⁵H. L. Ginsberg, “The Northwest Semitic Languages,” in *Patriarchs*, ed. B. Mazar (New Brunswick, NJ, 1970), pp. 102–124, 293.