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HEBREW *'šdt* AND UGARITIC *išdym*

The *hapax legomenon* *'šdt* in Dt. 33:2 is one of the most difficult cruxes in the Bible. B. MARGULIS noted that even the Masoretes "were aware of the problem when they appended an unusual diacritical mark noting *ktyb ḥd wqry tryn*."¹

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 *'šd* meaning "to pour, to stream."² His view was accepted by U. CASSUTO, who translated the word as "effulgence,"³ and I. L. SEELIGMANN, who translated it as "fiery stream."⁴

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.⁵

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: 94.⁶

A. F. L. BEESTON accepted the consonantal text *'šdt* and connected the root to the South Arabic *'sd* meaning "warrior" and the Arabic *'sd* meaning "lion." Based on the parallelism with *rbbt qdš*, he translated the term "angels" or "(divine) warriors."⁷ Beeston's suggestion is strengthened by the LXX's rendering of *'āggeloi*. (The Vulgate renders *'šdt* as *igneā lex*, and Onqelos translates it as *'yšt' '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

¹ B. MARGULIS, *VT* 19 (1969), 206.

² C. J. BALL, *PSBA* 18 (1896), 119.

³ U. CASSUTO, *RDSO* 11 (1928), 235, and the English translation by Israel Abrahams in U. CASSUTO, *Biblical and Oriental Studies* I, 1973, 50.

⁴ I. L. SEELIGMANN, *VT* 14 (1964), 77.

⁵ H. S. NYBERG, *ZDMG* 92 (1938), 335.

⁶ FRANK M. CROSS JR. and DAVID NOEL FREEDMAN, *JBL* 67 (1948), 199 note 11.

⁷ A. F. L. BEESTON, *JTS* 2 (1951), 30-31.

unsound in this case.”⁸ On the other hand, MILLER agreed with BEESTON’S connecting *’šdt* with the South Arabic-Arabic root *’sd*. MILLER also accepted part of CROSS’ and FREEDMAN’S emendation, and offered the reading *’šd ’lm*, which he translated “warriors of the gods (divine warriors).”⁹

MITCHELL DAHOOD connected the word with Ugaritic *išd* meaning “leg.” He accepted the consonantal text and vocalized the word as *’ôšēdôt*, a denominative verb translated as “marching.”¹⁰ Such denominatives are common, DAHOOD wrote, with Hebrew *rgl*, “to foot it,” and Ugaritic *tkm*, “to shoulder (= to carry),” as other examples.¹¹

Finally, G. R. DRIVER connected the root with Syriac-Aramaic *’šd* meaning “to pour, to stream” (as did BALL and CASSUTO), but he considered *’šdt* a verb, not a noun. DRIVER translated the term as “streaming along.”¹²

The statement of CROSS and FREEDMAN 30 years ago that “conjectures are almost as numerous as scholars”¹³ 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 . iṣ[ryt] ilnr*¹⁴
- (2) *spr. [] kšb’t*
- (3) *šhl*¹⁵ . *ph . tmnt*
- (4) *nbluh . 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

⁸ PATRICK D. MILLER JR., *HTR* 57 (1964), 242.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ MITCHELL J. DAHOOD, *Ugaritic-Hebrew Philology*, 1965, 52.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² G. R. DRIVER, *SVT* 16 (1967), 50–51.

¹³ CROSS and FREEDMAN, 199 note 11.

¹⁴ *UT*, 162, reads “(h/i) *lhr*”; 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 Špš. Direct evidence for this is *špš* in line 4 and line 6; *šhl*, “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, *ilnr* in line 1 is probably to be translated “god of light.”

We may now turn our attention to *išdym* in line 9. The word is problematic,¹⁶ and to attempt a definition of the word in the context of this fragmented text would be sheer conjecture. We can, however, equate *išdym* 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 Špš. In the latter, they are attributed to the Israelite god Yahweh.

A full reading of Dt. 33:2:

yhwh msyny b'
wzrh mš'yr lmw
hwfy' mhr pr'n
w'th mrbbt qdš
mymynw šdt lmw

reveals that Yahweh is depicted as “shining forth from Seir” and “glowing from Mount Paran.” A full reading of *UT* 8 reveals that Špš is likewise “glowing” and “afame.” Both literatures go on to describe the movement of the sun; Dt. 33:2 uses the root *'th* and *UT* 8 uses the root *'tr*. Immediately thereafter follow the appearances of *šdt* in the Hebrew and *išdym* 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* 8.¹⁷

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.”¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹ SEELIGMANN wrote, “The use of the verbs *zrh* and *hwfy'* in the description of the theophany may lend some support to an etymology according to which the words *mymynw 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

¹⁶ *UT*, 368.

¹⁷ Other Biblical authors also gave Yahweh solar appellations. Cf. Hab. 3:4, Ezek. 1:28, Ps. 19:6–7, 84:12. Ps. 19:6–7 recalls the *atr atrm* in *UT* 8:7–8.

¹⁸ CROSS and FREEDMAN, 192.

¹⁹ *The Interpreter’s Bible* 2, 1953, 528.

God of Light in his radiance.”²⁰ 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, *’šdt* would appear to be a feminine singular noun ²¹ or a feminine plural noun (vocalizing the end of the word as *-ôṭ*), while *išdym* is apparently a masculine plural noun. ^{22 23} The meaning of *’šdt* / *išdym* is also unresolved. Some may still wish to derive it from the Syriac-Aramaic *’šd* and translate the word “streams” or “rays.” This meaning is backed by Hab. 3:4, *wngħ k’wr thyh qrnym mydw lw*. Others may still wish to derive it from the South Arabic-Arabic *’sd* and translate “divine warriors.” This meaning is backed by the LXX *’aggeloi*. Or another cognate may be sought. Regardless, it is no longer possible to divorce *’šdt* in Dt. 33:2 from *išdym* in UT 8:9.²⁴ The ultimate solution to both should be sought together.

ADDENDUM →

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 *’āšēdôt*, “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.

²⁰ SEELIGMAN, 82. Note SEELIGMAN’S identification of Yahweh as the God of Light and the occurrence of *ilnr* in UT 8:1.

²¹ Cf. GKC, 223–224.

²² Such details need not detain us from making the equation. For example, Hebrew *’wfnym* equals Ugaritic *apnt*; Hebrew *r’šym* 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 *nšym*. To further complicate matters, Hebrew *šmš* 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 *špšyn*, apparently **špšy*, a derivative of *špš* with the suffix *-n*; cf. UT, 494. It is morphologically possible to treat *išdym* as a masculine plural gentilic, though this is problematic contextually.

²⁴ It is also worth noting that the Masoretic vocalization of *’šdt* has the *i* vowel in the first syllable. This is the same vowel which appears in the first syllable of *išdym*. This may purely be an accident since Hebrew *’š* is also vocalized with the *i* vowel. On the other hand, the *šērē* in *’šdt* may reflect an ancient tradition and it was this that precipitated the Masoretic division into *’š* and *dt*.