

BEYOND SACRED MARRIAGE: A PROPOSED NEW READING OF
“BIRTH OF THE BEAUTIFUL AND GRACIOUS GODS” (KTU 1.23)

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I. INTRODUCTION

When a treasury of mythological and ritual texts from ancient Ugarit was discovered and translated in the 1930s, it seemed to confirm what many had already suspected—the “Canaanites” were an exceptionally debased people. William Foxwell Albright commented, “At its worst . . . the erotic aspect of their cult must have sunk to extremely sordid depths of social degradation.”¹ One text, in particular, was touted as premium evidence for sexual depravity: “The Birth of the Beautiful and Gracious Gods” (KTU 1.23). Since its publication in 1933 by French archeologist Charles Virolleaud, scholars have hailed it as key evidence for *hieros gamos*.² The propensity to see sacred marriage, or simply lewd behavior, in KTU 1.23 stems from the influential theories of Sir James Frazer, as well as dependency on the biblical text’s unilateral historical accounts of non-Israelite peoples (i.e., “the Canaanites”).³ The impact of these influences has prevented an objective reading of KTU 1.23.

Scholars have called KTU 1.23 “probably the most difficult of all mythological texts from Ugarit” and “one of the most enigmatic texts” with “many aspects uncertain, even after

¹ William Foxwell Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel: The Ayer Lectures of the Colgate-Rochester Divinity School 1941* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1942) 77.

² Mark S. Smith, “Sacred Marriage in the Ugaritic Texts? The Case of KTU/CAT 1.23 (Ritual and Myths of the Goodly Gods)” in *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity* (ed. Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008) 93.

³ This thesis will focus especially on the impact of Frazer. In regards to the biblical text, Keith W. Whitelam has demonstrated that scholars’ perceptions of ancient Near Eastern peoples have often been based on unilateral historical accounts in the biblical text (*The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* [New York: Routledge, 1996]). The biblical authors described their neighbors as depraved and this description has influenced scholars’ readings of Ugaritic texts.

respectable efforts of two generations of competent scholars.”⁴ Many Ugaritic words have no consensus on their meaning, resulting in vastly different translations. KTU 1.23 is also unique in its combination of both ritual and myth. The outcome has been a wide spectrum of interpretations involving astral worship and cosmology;⁵ disinherited and exiled offspring;⁶ a New Year festival;⁷ a burlesque play;⁸ a ceremony to ward off famine;⁹ the impotency of El;¹⁰ the virility of El;¹¹ a water-bearing festival;¹² a feast of the gods;¹³ and duality, opposition and integration.¹⁴ The challenge of translating and interpreting “The Goodly Gods” demonstrates that it cannot automatically be construed as a sacred marriage rite. There is nothing obvious about the meaning of the text. Yet, despite disparate interpretations of the text overall, scholars have consistently seen sacred marriage. Even the most notable exception, Mark Smith, who asserts “there is no evidence . . . to suggest sacred marriage in KTU/CAT 1.23:1-29,” wavers, stating, “any sacred marriage identified in the narrative of lines 30-76 plays a relatively minor role.”¹⁵

⁴ B. Cutler and J. Macdonald, “On the Origin of the Ugaritic Text KTU 1.23,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 14 (1982): 32; C.W. Foley, “Are the ‘Gracious Gods’ *Bn Srm*?” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 19 (1987): 61; Stanislav Segert, “An Ugaritic Text Related to the Fertility Cult (KTU 1.23)” in *Archaeology and Fertility Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean: Papers Presented at the First International Conference on Archaeology of the Ancient Mediterranean, the University of Malta 2-5 September 1985* (ed. by A. Bonanno; Amsterdam: Gruner, 1986) 220.

⁵ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 9; Marvin Pope, “Ups and Downs in El’s Amours,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 11 (1979): 701-708.

⁶ David J. Schloen, “The Exile of Disinherited Kin in KTU 1.12 and KTU 1.23,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 52 (1993): 209-220.

⁷ Johannes C. De Moor, *An Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit* (New York: Brill, 1987).

⁸ Theodor H. Gaster, “A Canaanite Ritual Drama: The Spring Festival at Ugarit,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 66 (1946): 49-76.

⁹ Cutler and Macdonald, “On the Origin.”

¹⁰ Pope, “Ups and Downs.”

¹¹ Theodore J. Lewis, “El’s Divine Feast” in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (ed. Simon B. Parker; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997).

¹² Eduard Lipinski, “Fertility Cult in Ancient Ugarit” in *Archaeology and Fertility Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean: Papers Presented at the First International Conference on Archaeology of the Ancient Mediterranean, the University of Malta 2-5 September 1985* (ed. by A. Bonanno; Amsterdam: Gruner, 1986) 207-216.

¹³ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*.

¹⁴ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*.

¹⁵ Smith, “Sacred Marriage,” 103, 109.

This thesis will examine weaknesses in the sacred marriage argument and propose a new reading. KTU 1.23 does not describe a sacred marriage. El's sexual activity with his wives has been misinterpreted based on the mistaken belief that any depiction of a divine espousal was ritually reenacted to facilitate fertility, as well as the erroneous assumption that all divine espousals must have "sacred" connotations. As a result few have explored alternative theories for the sex scene and its connection to the broader text. Although Smith recently demonstrated the lack of evidence for sacred marriage in "The Goodly Gods" (at least in lines 1-29),¹⁶ no satisfactory reading has been proffered that adequately accounts for the sexual content in light of the entire text. Smith dismisses El's sexual activity as merely "background information."¹⁷ This thesis proposes a reading that establishes a coherent relationship between the sexual content and the other parts of the ritual and myth. Specifically, I argue KTU 1.23 is an invocation to avert death on two levels: the holistic struggle of life against death and the specific impact of that broader phenomenon—childlessness, widowhood, and famine. Some of these ideas have been expressed by various scholars over the years, but the threads have never been woven together into the cohesive whole proposed here.

KTU 1.23 comprises two parts: the ritual (1-29) and the mythological narrative (30-76). The poetic recitations in the ritual that constitute the invocation metaphorically depict the death of Death and the birth of the Goodly Gods. Death is the presenting problem, including widowhood and childlessness. The cause of death is not explicitly stated; however, the mythological narrative suggests famine. The Goodly Gods are invoked to resolve a current crisis

¹⁶ Smith, "Sacred Marriage"; "Birth of the Beautiful and Gracious Gods" is the more well-known title. Throughout this thesis, the title will be shortened to "The Goodly Gods" per Smith's title "The Feast of the Goodly Gods." Smith convincingly argues that "gracious" has moral connotations, but the Ugaritic term indicates something that is attractive and impressive (*The Rituals and Myths of the Feasts of the Goodly Gods of KTU/CAT 1.23: Royal Constructions of Opposition, Intersection, Integration, and Domination* [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006] 33-34).

¹⁷ Smith, "Sacred Marriage," 94.

and/or avert a future catastrophe. They represent the twin elements of life and death and therefore the potential for life to overcome death. By invoking them, the Ugaritians hope to tip the scales toward life.

The mythological narrative, following the ritual, subsumes two sections (30-61a and 61b-76). The narrative answers the concerns expressed in the invocation by proposing to the imagination the triumph of life over death.¹⁸ The Ugaritians envisioned the gods' successful intervention. The first section addresses the problem of widowhood and childlessness: El marries and has children. He defeats impotency (death) to successfully impregnate his wives (life). They give birth to the Goodly Gods. The second section of the narrative recounts the Goodly Gods mission to avert death and famine. They, and their mothers, contend with death in Death's Realm to find the sown land. Their hunting expedition in the barren wilderness also symbolizes the search for food. After "seven years, eight cycles," the gods reach the land of plenty. The gods successfully respond to the Ugaritians' invocation; death is averted.

The evidence for this new reading will be demonstrated by discussing

- the history of interpretation of sacred marriage in KTU 1.23 (Part II).
- the impact of method on interpretation of myth in KTU 1.23 (Part IV).
- religious ritual in Ugarit (Part V).
- exegesis and proposed new reading of KTU 1.23 (Part VI).

The section on myth will address the adverse impact of myth-ritual theory and structuralism on the interpretation of "The Goodly Gods." These two theories will be contrasted with an eclectic approach that incorporates 1) five guiding principles for interpreting myth

¹⁸ This phrasing is borrowed from Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (vol. 2; trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985) 23; Referring to eschatological myth, Ricoeur writes of myth's proposal "to the imagination the triumph of concordance over discordance."

derived from a variety of perspectives in mythological scholarship;¹⁹ 2) aspects of Carl Jung's and Paul Ricoeur's theories on myth's origin and function; and 3) an evaluation of Ugaritian ritual practice. The five presuppositions address the comprehensibility, context, function and form of myth, as well as the Ugaritians' intellectual capacity for myth-making. Jung's theory is useful for considering the transcendent value KTU 1.23 likely had for the Ugaritians, and Ricoeur's views are helpful for articulating the importance of language in myth's proposal of transcendent possibilities. Using literary devices, the Ugaritians projected their problems into the divine realm and visualized the gods' effective intervention.

¹⁹ e.g. Willaim G. Doty, *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* (2d ed.; Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2000) ; G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970); Robert A. Segal, *Theorizing about Myth* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).

II. HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION OF SACRED MARRIAGE IN KTU 1.23

Before commencing a discussion on the history of interpretation of sacred marriage in KTU 1.23, it is pertinent to define “sacred marriage” and distinguish it from divine espousal. Some scholars define sacred marriage as a “technical term for a mythical or ritual union between a god and goddess, more generally a divine and human being, and most especially a king and a goddess.”²⁰ The problem with this broad definition is the lack of distinction between a divine marriage with special ritualistic or religious significance and a divine marriage with only narrative purpose. *Hieros gamos* has often been understood to include sexual intercourse between a king and priestess as a form of imitative magic to promote fertility. This theory was popularized by Frazer in *The Golden Bough*:

Plants reproduce their kinds through the sexual union of male and female elements, and that on the principle of homeopathic or imitative magic this reproduction is supposed to be stimulated by the real or mock marriage of men and women, who masquerade for the time being as spirits of vegetation. Such magical dramas have played a great part in the popular festivals of Europe, and based as they are on a very crude conception of natural law, it is clear that they must have been handed down from a remote antiquity.²¹

While there is evidence of symbolic sacred marriages in ancient Near Eastern texts,²² it is not clear that such unions were actually performed ritually. And there is no consensus among

²⁰ Pirjo Lapinkivi, “Sumerian Sacred Marriage and Its Aftermath in Later Sources” in *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity* (ed. by Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008) 7.

²¹ Smith, “Sacred Marriage,” 95; James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939) 140.

²² e.g. Sumer, Mesopotamia, Graeco-Roman, etc.

scholars regarding the purpose of these marriages.²³ In recent years, scholars have departed from myth-ritual theory to propose a variety of interpretations, including secular love poetry, coronation ceremonies, or metaphorical depictions of human oneness with God.²⁴ Frazer's correlation of sacred marriage with fertility has been largely rejected.²⁵ As Pirjo Lapinkivi points out, marriage texts might have used "erotic language metaphorically for 'ineffable' religious experiences."²⁶ Such spirituality is often attributed to the biblical text when sexual language is used. Hosea 2 refers to marriage between YHWH and the Israelites, yet this is not usually associated with *hieros gamos*, despite the "sign-act" of Hosea's marriage to Gomer. Nor is the eroticism in Song of Songs typically interpreted in relation to cult activity even though in the history of its interpretation this love story is often considered a Divine-human relationship (YHWH and his people).²⁷

Although scholars are beginning to redefine sacred marriage without ritualistic connotations, the term is still subject to misunderstanding. Thus, I propose a distinction between *sacred marriage* and *divine espousal*. Sacred marriage is "sexual relations between humans as a ritual imitation of sexual relations on the divine plane, designed to promote fertility, or symbolic

²³ Lapinkivi, "Sumerian Sacred Marriage," 9-10.

²⁴ Lapinkivi, "Sumerian Sacred Marriage," 9-10.

²⁵ Martti Nissinen and Uro Risto, "Sacred Marriages, or the Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor: Introducing the Project" in *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity* (ed. Martti Nissinen and Uro Risto; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008) 1.

²⁶ Lapinkivi, "Sumerian Sacred Marriage, 29, 33.

²⁷ There are a few exceptions to this. M. Pope suggests Song of Songs is related to fertility cult activity. However, this view has not been widely accepted. See Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 7C; Garden City: Doubleday, 1977) 145-153. This is not to say there are no differences in the way sexual language is used in biblical texts versus other ancient texts. The Israelites did not give YHWH a penis or vividly describe his sexual activity as the Ugaritians did for El. However, these differences do not indicate the Ugaritians used such language for ribald purposes. Nor do they imply greater sexual impropriety than the Israelites whose sacred texts depict YHWH, metaphorically, subjecting Israel to violent stripping and gang rape (Eze 16:35-42; Hos 2:3, 10). Just as the biblical authors used sexual language to make theological points, so also there is no reason to exclude other ancient Near Eastern people groups from engaging the same strategy. Much like biblical metaphor, comparative religious studies "show that the sacred marriage is often understood as a union between a human soul (=bride) and the divine bridegroom" (Lapinkivi, "The Sumerian Sacred Marriage," 29).

representation or evocation of these sexual relations.”²⁸ Divine espousal is a marriage between a god and goddess included within a narrative, but without ritual or necessarily religious importance.

Theodor Gaster is responsible for popularizing the idea of sacred marriage in “The Goodly Gods.” Since the publication of his highly influential essay, “A Canaanite Ritual Drama” published in 1946 (and based on an earlier work from 1934) few scholars have challenged him.²⁹ His views leaned heavily on Frazer; as a result “fertility cult” theory has dominated interpretation of KTU 1.23. Gaster’s early proposal for sacred marriage was appealing because it provided coherence to a notoriously difficult text, and it dovetailed with the then popular myth-ritual theory. At the time, his essay was one of the most holistic treatments to date. And unlike other scholars who hesitated to make emphatic pronouncements, Gaster promised to reveal the “true nature” of the text and sprinkled his article with reassuring phrases like “obviously,” “shows clearly,” “very neat structural arrangement,” “clearly defined,” and “readily explained.”³⁰ His confident and coherent application of myth-ritual theory to KTU 1.23 was widely accepted.

Based on an understanding of the text as myth-ritual, Gaster suggested the mythological portion was ritualistic drama in the vein of Greek theater with “elements of burlesque, farce and ribaldry.”³¹ Originally the play was reenacted at a festival of firstfruits, a celebration akin to the Israelite Feast of Weeks, with possible astral worship. Later the religious importance was lost and the drama survived “as popular entertainment, catering more and more to the ruder tastes of

²⁸ Smith, “Sacred Marriage,” 93.

²⁹ Theodor H. Gaster, “An Ancient Semitic Mystery-Play from a Cuneiform Tablet Discovered at Ras-esh Shamra.” *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* 10 (1934): 156-64. Gaster may have been the first to suggest sacred marriage. However W.F. Albright also mentions the possibility (“The North-Canaanite Poems of Al’eyan Ba’al and the ‘Gracious Gods,’” *Journal of the Palestinian Oriental Society* 14 [1934]:135). He further elucidated his views in the popular work, *Thespis: Ritual, Myth, Drama in the Ancient Near East* (New York: Gordian Press, 1975).

³⁰ Gaster, “Canaanite Ritual,” 49, 50, 51, 60, 65, 67, 68, 69.

³¹ Gaster, *Thespis*, 407.

a holiday crowd.”³² Gaster took for granted that the text described sacred marriage despite admitting, “Apart from the unmistakable indications in our present Ugaritic text, there is no certain evidence of the ‘sacred marriage’ at an early date on Syro-Palestinian soil.”³³ He relied on the belief that sacred marriage was wide-spread in the ancient Near East, pointing to Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Greek examples to bolster his argument.

Gaster’s views were well-received. In 1942, James Montgomery praised Gaster’s proposal saying it “most ingeniously presented the dramatic character of the composition.”³⁴ Montgomery considered El’s sexual activity to be the comedic “centre of the drama,” dismissing the following scene of the gods’ search for food as merely an unrelated “comical” addition.³⁵ As recently as 1982, B. Cutler and J. Macdonald found it “quite probable that [Gaster’s] thesis be accepted.”³⁶ Eduard Lipinski, citing Gaster, also sees sacred marriage in the text, including ritualistic sex performed by the king during New Year festivities or the Festival of Water-bearing.³⁷ Johannes C. de Moor, drawing on myth-ritual theory, finds sacred marriage enacted by the king, representing god, and the queen standing in for Athirat.³⁸ Theodore Lewis, commenting on KTU 1.23 in 1997, remained agnostic on the issue of *hieros gamos*, but still views sexual activity in the myth as “front and center” and interprets El’s behavior as “ribald.”³⁹ Contemporary scholar Nick Wyatt envisions *hieros gamos* with royal dimensions.⁴⁰ And most recently (2007), Richard Davidson considers KTU 1.23 to be the “most illuminating” example of

³² Gaster, *Thespis*, 407.

³³ Gaster, “Canaanite Ritual,” 73.

³⁴ James A. Montgomery, “Ras Shamra Notes. VII, the Ugaritic *Fantasia* of the Gracious and Beautiful Gods,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 62 (1942): 49.

³⁵ Montgomery, “Ras Shamra Notes,” 49, 51.

³⁶ Cutler and Macdonald, “On the Origin,” 33-34

³⁷ Lipinski, “Fertility Cult,” 207-208, 212.

³⁸ De Moor, *An Anthology*, 117.

³⁹ Lewis, “El’s Divine Feast,” 205-206.

⁴⁰ N. Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit: The Words of Ilmilku and his Colleagues* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 325.

Syro-Palestinian “sacred sex orgies” and surmises that “this lurid liturgy was reenacted by the cultic prostitutes.”⁴¹ He objects to the few “revisionist” scholars who question the presence of sacred marriage in the text, citing traditional consensus and the “biblical statements that seem to specifically describe ritual sex on the Canaanite high places.”⁴² Aside from Wyatt’s royalty theory, most of these scholars associate the hypothetical sacred marriage in KTU 1.23 with fertility rites—an association borrowed from Frazer and Gaster.

Despite the wide embrace of Gaster’s views, I argue to the contrary that the sex scene in the mythological narrative is not indicative of ritual reenactment as many once believed. Scholars have now largely rejected the myth-ritual school’s assertion that myth is only a script.⁴³ Robert Ackerman observes that Frazer’s work has been deemed too anecdotal to constitute a scientific study of myth and ritual.⁴⁴ As G. S. Kirk argues, myth cannot be reduced to ritual.⁴⁵ Often myth serves as an accompanying illustration to rites, as in the myth of El’s drunkenness attached to a prescription for a hangover, or the myth of “The Cow of Sin” placed next to a ritual concerning childbirth.⁴⁶ Similarly, the mythological narrative in KTU 1.23 is an imaginary projection. Rather than a script for ritual reenactment, it vividly illustrates the gods’ response to the Ugaritians’ invocation.

Among the handful of scholars who are skeptical of sacred marriage in “The Goodly Gods,” Smith rightly notes that there is no indication of sacred marriage rites in the ritual portion

⁴¹ Davidson, “*Flame of Yahweh*,” 94.

⁴² Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 96.

⁴³ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 129.

⁴⁴ Robert Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 45-46. Ackerman notes that over the “last fifty years one has been able to number defenders of Frazer on the fingers of one hand and still have several fingers left over” (207). Those who have pointed out the flaws in Frazer’s work include E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Bronislaw Malinowski, Richard Chase, Marvin Harris, Edmund Leach, and Andrew Lang (207). The problems with myth-ritual theory will be discussed in greater detail in section IV.

⁴⁵ Kirk, *Myth*, 12-13, 25, 29.

⁴⁶ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 128.

of the text (lines 1-29).⁴⁷ These lines lack explicit or implicit references to sex or romance.

Contrary to the assumption of de Moor, the presence of the king and queen is no indication of ritual sex;⁴⁸ in fact, virtually every Ugaritic cult text mentions the king, as he apparently served the function of priest.⁴⁹ The participation of the queen and other officials is not necessarily unusual. While many ritual texts only mention the king, family members are also mentioned in KTU 1.161:32-33 and KTU 1.112. And as stated above, the fact that myth describes sexual activity does not infer ritual reenactment. Stanislav Segert and David Toshio Tsumura also reject sacred marriage, citing lack of evidence.⁵⁰

Despite a few scholars' reasonable rejection of sacred marriage in KTU 1.23, little has been proffered to explain why the sex scene occurs. The most vocal dissenter, Smith, refers to the "relative unimportance of sexual relations in KTU/CAT 1.23" and dismisses it as "background information" for the main theme (a feast of the gods).⁵¹ This paper fills the remaining gap in contemporary research by proposing an explanation for El's sexual activity as it pertains to the ritual and myth holistically.

⁴⁷ Cutler Macdonald, "On the Origin," 127-143.

⁴⁸ De Moor, *An Anthology*, 115.

⁴⁹ Dennis Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit* (ed. Theodore J. Lewis; Boston: Brill, 2002) 2.

⁵⁰ Segert, "Ugaritic Text," 219-220; David Toshio Tsumura, "A Problem of Myth and Ritual Relationship—CTA 23 (UT 52): 56-57 Reconsidered," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 10 (1978): 395; Smith, "Sacred Marriage," 95.

⁵¹ Smith, "Sacred Marriage," 94, 106.

III. TRANSLATION

The following version of “The Goodly Gods” adapts Smith’s translation in *The Rituals and Myths of the Feast of the Goodly Gods of KTU/CAT 1.23*. Emendations are indicated in the footnotes with a brief explanation. The text comprises two parts that were inscribed into a single tablet: Lines 1-29 and 30-76. The first half includes ritual (and mythic allusions)⁵² and is distinguished by nine horizontal lines delineating nine sections.⁵³ The second half is myth and contains no lines. Due to damage, only about fifty percent of the lines are fully preserved, although Segert observes that “at the end probably no more than one line is missing.”⁵⁴

It remains uncertain whether the ritual and mythological portions of KTU 1.23 developed independently or were purposely created to fit together from its origin. However, it is clear from parallels in KTU 1.23 that the myth and ritual correspond to each other. The Goodly Gods’ birth is recounted in both the ritual and the myth (23, 60-61). Themes of the outback, hunting and the sown land are also alluded to in the ritual and expanded on in the narrative (4, 16, 13, 28, 64-69). But this does not mean there is always a one-to-one correlation between all aspects of the ritual and the myth.⁵⁵ Cutler and Macdonald, taking a diachronic approach, suggest that earlier editions of the “The Goodly Gods” were redacted or spliced together later.⁵⁶ If the two parts were originally independent, the Ugaritians deliberately placed them together, thereby

⁵² Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 145.

⁵³ Lipinski, “Fertility Cult,” 207.

⁵⁴ Segert, “Ugaritic Text,” 217.

⁵⁵ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 150.

⁵⁶ Cutler and Macdonald, “On the Origin,” 34, 49.

reconfiguring the ritual and myth in a manner similar to the examples of mixed genre texts cited above.

1 Let me call⁵⁷ the Goo[dly] Gods,
2 Indeed, the beautiful ones, sons of . . .
3 Those given offerings on high . . .⁵⁸
4 In the outback, on the heights . . .
5 to their heads and . . .
6 Eat of every food,
And drink of every vintage wine.
7 Peace, O King! Peace, O Queen!
O enterers and guards!⁵⁹

8 Death *wšr* sits⁶⁰
In his hand a staff of childlessness,⁶¹
8-9 In his hand a staff of widowhood.
9 The pruner prunes him (like) a vine,
10 The binder binds him (like) a vine,
10-11 He is felled to the terrace like a vine⁶²

12 Seven times it is recited over the dais (?)
And the enterers respond:

13 “And the field is the field of El⁶³
Field of Athirat *waRahm*<*ay*>”
14 On the fire seven times
The boys with a good voice:⁶⁴
Coriander⁶⁵ in milk,
Mint in curd.

⁵⁷ Smith has “invite.” This will be discussed in the analysis.

⁵⁸ Wyatt has “Let them give a feast [to those] of high rank” and others suggest “who established a city on high” or “may glory be given to the exalted ones” (*Religious Texts*, 325). The word in question is *qrt*. Wyatt goes with “feast” per the Akkadian cognate *qarītu*; “city” is derived from the Hebrew *qiryat*; and “glory” from *yqr* (326). In any case, the implication is to ascribe honor to these gods.

⁵⁹ Wyatt has “priests” and “temple victuallers” (*Religious Texts*, 326); Lewis has “ministrants and marshals” (“*El’s Divine Feast*,” 208).

⁶⁰ *šr* is not translated here due to a lack of consensus regarding the meaning of the term in this line. This will be discussed in the analysis

⁶¹ Smith has “bereavement.” However, the connotation of *tkl* is “bereaved of children.” See analysis.

⁶² Wyatt has “They let his tendril fall like a vine” (*Religious Texts*, 327). See analysis.

⁶³ Per Smith, *’ilm* “could refer to El with mimation or to gods in general . . . the pairing of El and Athirat wa-Rahmay makes excellent sense” (*Rituals and Myths*, 51).

⁶⁴ Wyatt translates *g’zrm*, “choristers” (*Religious Texts*, 327). See footnote for lines 17-18.

⁶⁵ Early interpreters, including Gaster, translated *gdy* from the Hebrew *gedī* (kid); thus, the text appeared to be offering evidence for the Israelite prohibition against boiling a kid in its mother’s milk (Gaster, “Canaanite Ritual,” 61). The parallelism indicates something akin to mint is in mind and not an animal.

- 15 And on the basin seven times:
Incense
-
- 16 “Rahmay goes hunting . . .
[and Athirat] sets out.⁶⁶
17 They are girded. . .⁶⁷”
With goodly might (?) . . .
18 And the names of the enterers
-
- 19 The divine dwellings are eight,
19-20 [. . .] seven times.
-
- 21 Blue, red,
22 Crimson of/are the singers
(or: of/are the two singers)
-
- 23 Let me call the Goodly Gods,
[Ravenous pair a day old] day-old [boys],
24 Who suck the nipple(s) of Athirat’s breast(s)
25 Shapshu nurtures their branches⁶⁸
25-26 [. . .] and grapes.
26 Peace, O enterers and guards,
27 Who process with the goodly sacrifice.
-
- 28 The field is {the field} of El,
Field of Athirat *waRahmay*
29 []
-
- 30 [El went out] to the seashore⁶⁹
And he marches to the shore of the Deep
31 El . . . the two servers (?)⁷⁰
Servers (?) from the top of the pot
32 See her, she’s low; see her, she’s high⁷¹
See her, she cries: “Daddy, Daddy!”
33 And see her, she cries: “Mommy, Mommy!”
El’s penis lengthens like the sea,
34 Indeed, El’s penis, like the ocean.⁷²

⁶⁶ Second line added here per Wyatt (*Religious Texts*, 328).

⁶⁷ Smith suggests “The handsome guys are girded . . .” or “She is/They (the goddesses) are girded with goodly might.” The Ugaritic reads: *thgrn gʒr n ʾm*. Wyatt suggests *gʒr n ʾm* goes with the following line, thus, “May the gracious chorister [] and their name let the priest e[xtalt]” (*Religious Texts*, 327). Lewis inexplicably translates “Girded with a hero’s grace” despite translating *gʒrm* as “youthful” in line 14 (“*El’s Divine Feast*,” 209). The meaning of lines 17-18 is not clear.

⁶⁸ The text is uncertain. Smith has “braids their branches.” See analysis.

⁶⁹ “El went out” added per Wyatt’s suggestion (*Religious Texts*, 330).

⁷⁰ Where Smith has “servers” others have translated “torches” or “two inflamed ones.” See analysis.

⁷¹ Or “Lo, one was lowered; lo, the other raised” (Wyatt, *Religious Texts*, 330).

El's penis lengthens like the sea,
 35 Indeed, El's penis, like the ocean.
 35b El takes the two servers (?)
 36 Servers (?) from the top of the pot.
 He takes, se<t>s (them) in his house.
 37 As for El, his staff descends (?)⁷³
 As for El, his love-shaft droops (?)
 37-38 He lifts, he shoots skyward,
 38 He shoots in the sky a bird
 38-39 He plucks, sets (it) on the coals;
 El indeed entices the two females
 39 If the two females cry:
 40 "O husband, husband!"⁷⁴
 Your staff droops,
 Your love-staff sinks
 41 Lo[o]k a bird
 You're roasting on the fire
 Browning on the coals."
 (Then) the two fe[mal]es will be wives of El
 Wives of El, and his forever.
 42-43 But if the two females cry:
 43 "O Daddy, Daddy!
 Your staff droops,
 44 Your love-staff sinks!
 Look a bird
 You're roasting on the fire,
 45 Browning on the coals."
 (Then) the two females will be daughters of El,
 45-46 Daughters of El, and his forever.
 46 And see, the two females cry:
 "O husband, husband!"
 47 Your staff droops,
 Your love-staff sinks!
 Look a bird
 48 You're roasting on the fire
 Browning on the coals."
 (So) the two females are wiv[es of El],
 49 Wives of El, and his forever.
 49b He bends down, kisses their lips,
 50 See how sweet their lips are,
 Sweet as pomegranate[s].
 51 As he kisses, there's conception,
 As he embraces, there's impregnation.⁷⁵
 51-52 The two cr[ouch and] give birth
 To Dawn and Dusk.
 52b Word to El was brought:
 52-53 "El's [two wi]ves have given birth."

⁷² Smith has "flood" which doesn't make sense of the parallel. "Ocean" is per Wyatt, Lewis and de Moor (*Religious Texts*, 330; "El's Divine Feast," 210; *An Anthology*, 123).

⁷³ Wyatt has "El lowered the staff in his right hand; El the rod in his hand" (*Religious Texts*, 331).

⁷⁴ Given the reference to wives, "husband" makes more sense than Smith's "O man, man!" The word can mean both.

⁷⁵ Smith has "passion." However, that does not adequately convey the parallelism. Kissing and embracing lead to conception/impregnation. See Wyatt, *Religious Texts*, 332. Lewis has "pregnant heat" (*El's Divine Feast*, 212). Perhaps, it refers to orgasm leading to conception?

53b “What have they borne?”
 “A newborn pair, Dawn and Dus[k]⁷⁶
 54 “Make an offering to Lady Sun,⁷⁷
 And to the stationary stars.”⁷⁸
 55 He bends down, kisses their lips,
 See how swee[t] their lips are,
 <Sweet as pomegranates.>
 56 As he kisses, there’s conception,
 As he embraces, there’s impregnation.
 56-57 He sits, counts to five
 57 Five (months) for growth⁷⁹
 Ten for the full completion.
 57-58 The two crouch and give birth,
 58 Give birth to the Goodly Gods,
 58-59 Day-old devourers, one-day-old boys,
 59 Who suck the nipple of the breast.
 59b Word to El was brought:
 60 “El’s two wives have given birth.”
 “What have they borne?”
 “Twin (?) Goodly Gods,
 61 Day-old devourers, one-day-old boys,
 Who suck the nipple of the breast.”
 61-62 They set a lip to earth,
 62 A lip to heaven.
 Then enter their mouths
 Fowl of the sky,
 And fish from the sea.
 As they move, bite upon <bite>
 63-64 They stuff—on both their right and left—
 Into their mouths, but they are unsated.
 64b “O wives I have espoused,
 65 O sons I have begotten:
 Make an offering amid holy outback,⁸⁰
 66 There sojourn mid rocks and brush.”
 66-67 For seven years complete,
 67 Eight cycles duration,
 67-68 The Goodly Gods roam about the steppe,
 68 They hunt to the edge of the outback.
 68-69 The two approach the Guard of the sown land⁸¹,
 And the two cry to the Guard of the sown land:
 69-70 “O Guard, Guard, open!”
 70 And he himself opens a breach for them.
 71 And the two enter:
 “If [there is there (?) f]ood,
 71-72 Give that we may eat!
 72 “If there is [there (?) wine . . .],
 Give that we may drink!

⁷⁶ Or Shaha and Shalem.

⁷⁷ Or Shapsh.

⁷⁸ Wyatt has “and to the stars who have been begotten” (*Religious Texts*, 333).

⁷⁹ Smith has “for . . . [. . .] the assembly sings.” See analysis.

⁸⁰ Wyatt translates this stanza as “Raise up a dais in the midst of the holy desert; you will make your dwelling . . .” (*Religious Texts*, 334). De Moor has “Establish a sanctuary” (*An Anthology*, 127). Lewis agrees with Smith and translates “Raise an offering in the holy desert” (“*El’s Divine Feast*,” 214).

⁸¹ “Land” added per Wyatt (*Religious Texts*, 335). “Sown” by itself is awkward.

73 And the Guard of the sown land answers them:
["There is food for the one who . . . (?)] . . . ,
74 There is wine for whoever enters . . . [. . .]"
75 . . . he himself approaches,
He serves a measure of his wine . . .
76 And his companion fills (it [?]) with wine . . .

IV. MYTH AND METHOD IN INTERPRETATION OF KTU 1.23

It must be acknowledged from the outset that KTU 1.23 is a challenging text to interpret. We have limited information on the *Sitz-im-Leben*, myth is a complex phenomenon that is not fully understood, and polysemy is inherent in the metaphorical nature of myth. As Cutler and Macdonald noted, “Many aspects [are] uncertain, even after respectable efforts of two generations of competent scholars.”⁸² More recently, Smith admitted, “Our ability to decode the text remains at a general level.”⁸³ Ultimately, it might be easier to demonstrate what the text does not mean—sacred marriage—than it is to elucidate what it does mean. This is not to say it is impossible to glean any meaning from KTU 1.23. With attention to what *is* known of Ugaritian religion, as well as an eclectic approach, this thesis proposes a new reading that avoids the shortcomings of previous interpretive grids.

One primary challenge of interpreting KTU 1.23 is determining the function of the mythological narrative and its relationship to the ritual. Previous approaches to “The Goodly Gods” have faltered on this point. Since its discovery, KTU 1.23 has been dominated by myth-ritual interpretation. And more recently, Smith has provided a comprehensive evaluation taking a structuralist approach. The problem with both of these schools is their “one-size-fits-all” template. Contemporary scholarship now acknowledges the short-comings inherent in these

⁸² Cutler and Macdonald, “On the Origin,” 32.

⁸³ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 113.

isolated methodologies.⁸⁴ Laurie Patton and Wendy Doniger believe the “hope for an elegant master theory has atrophied.”⁸⁵ William Doty even considers it “dangerous tyranny” to assume that “any single-approach mythography can adequately encompass the wide range of meaning experienced in any given society.”⁸⁶ And in his discussion of biblical mythology, Bernard Batto opted out of pre-determined theoretical frameworks entirely: “No one theory about myth will ever be completely satisfactory . . . the validity of myth as integral to the human experience is assumed, without attempting to specify precisely its origin(s) or to give a comprehensive account of its function(s) in society.”⁸⁷ Morton Klass proposes the methodological template adopted in this thesis: “A number of approaches, sensibly melded and even synthesized, may provide the most satisfactory explication.”⁸⁸

In addition to methodological pluralism, some scholars are gravitating toward general principles or presuppositions for interpreting myth instead of definitive theories.⁸⁹ This thesis utilizes both approaches, as I lay out in the present chapter. Aspects of Jung’s and Ricoeur’s theories and five guiding principles will inform my reading of KTU 1.23. “The Goodly Gods” is composed of both myth and ritual; as such the text cannot be interpreted without a framework for understanding each.⁹⁰ The discussion of theory in this chapter exposes the effects that inadequate methodologies, including myth-ritualism and structuralism, have had on the interpretation of “The Goodly Gods.” These theories continue to color scholars’ readings of KTU 1.23. Exposing the root problems of these theories will further elucidate the need for a new reading, which I

⁸⁴ Kirk, *Myth*, 7.

⁸⁵ Laurie L. Patton and Wendy Doniger, *Myth and Method* (ed. Laurie L. Patton and Wendy Doniger; Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996) 2.

⁸⁶ Doty, *Mythography*, 21-22.

⁸⁷ Bernard F. Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in Biblical Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 11.

⁸⁸ Cited in Doty, *Mythography*, 22.

⁸⁹ This is the case for Batto (*Slaying the Dragon*) and is also evident in Doty’s work (*Mythography*).

⁹⁰ Ritual will be discussed in detail in section V.

provide in chapter 6. This reading will also be informed by a fresh look at religious ritual at Ugarit, which I present in chapter 5.

I begin this chapter with five presuppositions for interpreting myth. A comparative discussion on the origin and function of myth follows in which myth-ritualism and structuralism are contrasted with the perspectives of Jung and Ricoeur. The five presuppositions address the comprehensibility, function, context and form of myth, as well as the Ugaritians' intellectual capacity for myth-making. Jung's and Ricoeur's views elucidate the transcendent meanings of myth. Together, the five presuppositions and the ideas of Jung and Ricoeur correct inadequacies in previous approaches to KTU 1.23.

1. *Ancient Near Eastern myths were created by people with the same capacity for abstract thinking as modern people.* Myths are not "primitive," nor replaced by advanced science.

Science and myth "are approached most fruitfully as *different* planes of thought . . . myth at the primary level is not an attempt at the sort of scientific description found in the laboratory . . . [it is] the sophisticated poetic enunciation of meaning and significance."⁹¹ The assertion that ancient myths are the product of inferior intellect or ignorance is nothing less than gross ethnocentrism. It also ignores the reality that myth is not confined to ancient cultures. Myth continues to thrive in modern, Western society. For example, Christianity's myths include the cosmic battle between good and evil and the second coming of Christ.

2. *A myth is comprehensible to its original audience.* One of the fundamental errors in interpreting myth is the assumption that current inability to decipher a myth is the fault of myth itself. That is, there is something inherent in myth that makes it obscure. Frazer attributed this

⁹¹ Doty, *Mythography*, 93-94.

obscurity to inferior intelligence. Others, like Jung and Claude Levi-Strauss, assumed myth arose from the unconscious, full of symbols or hidden meaning that needed to be decoded. However, if an ancient Near Eastern myth is difficult for moderns to interpret, it is because we are distant from the context of the myth. The myth was not incomprehensible to its original community. This phenomenon can be observed in current religions. As Martin Day notes, “Chinese intellectuals, for instance, have often felt the same about Judeo-Christian myth. Kali, the gaunt blood-stained goddess of India, is every whit as real and operative to the true Indian believer as any of the Christian supernatural Figures to a medieval European.”⁹²

3. *Myth has a variety of functions.* Myth-ritual theory and structuralism have been dismissed by many scholars today because these approaches do not acknowledge diversity in the function of myth. Every myth examined by a myth-ritualist unveils imitative magic. Every myth exegeted by a structuralist reveals unconscious efforts to reconcile dualities. However, myth has many meanings and functions. One community can have multiple myths with various functions. Some might be written to impart instruction or morality. Some wrestle with human tragedy and triumph. Others serve to meet existential needs by explaining the origin and purpose of humankind. Some myths may even be purposely crafted for destructive propaganda as seen in the nationalistic myths that led to the rise of Nazism.⁹³ Each myth must be examined individually to determine what its specific function is within a community.

That being said, many myths usually (but not always) serve three functions: articulation of transcendence, creation of “place” in the world, and community building. Myths take the

⁹² Martin S. Day, *The Many Meanings of Myth* (New York: University Press of America, 1984) 16.

⁹³ Mark Muldoon, *On Ricoeur* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2002) 79.

listener/reader to an alternative world that is larger than life.⁹⁴ They describe the relationship between humans and the Divine. Myths also create “home.” Robert Segal, interpreting Jung, states, “The function of myth here is not explanatory but existential. Myth makes humans feel at home in the world.”⁹⁵ Myths also create community as a group reflects on the same plot and characters. Myths represent God/gods, beliefs and values held in common, providing what Doty calls “societal glue.”⁹⁶

4. *The phenomenon of myth-making is universal, but each specific myth must be understood in its cultural and religious context.*⁹⁷ Although myth-making occurs in every culture across time, the forms that these myths take are unique. The types of characters, landscapes and themes will be local. Mary Douglas asserts, “Myth cannot be interpreted without the context in which it is told. Who tells it? To whom? On what occasion? What sort of ceremonial is it used to explain?”⁹⁸ And Doty advises, “We need to be aware of our own values and beliefs, lest we simply project them onto materials of very different climates . . . Respect for the society’s own perspective is crucial and every effort must be made to listen in on the ways a mytheme is experienced at firsthand.”⁹⁹ There is a transcendent quality to most myths, but how that transcendence is incorporated into the community will vary. In other words, all myths cannot be reduced to a singular meaning even though the phenomenon of myth-making is universal.

⁹⁴ Schilbrack, *Thinking*, 1.

⁹⁵ Segal, *Theorizing*, 78. Doty also makes this point recounting a friend’s story of a man who grew up with Tewa mythology and while visiting Colorado recognized features from the myths. The emotional impact was “as if he had come home” (*Mythography*, 77).

⁹⁶ Doty, *Mythography*, 67.

⁹⁷ The question of universality will be addressed further in the theoretical discussion on origins of myth.

⁹⁸ Mary Douglas, “Children Consumed and Child Cannibals: Robertson Smith’s Attack on the Science of Mythology” in *Myth and Method* (ed. Laurie L. Patton and Wendy Doniger; Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996) 39.

⁹⁹ Doty, *Mythography*, 24, 75.

To further clarify, there are two primary ways of interpreting myth: 1) attempts to exegete the original meaning; or 2) reconfiguration of old myths through incorporation of new dimensions.¹⁰⁰ Reconfiguration appears to be a natural occurrence that allows a myth to continue to have meaning over time.¹⁰¹ Some modern interpreters engage in reconfiguration in attempts to make ancient myths relevant for contemporary discourse.¹⁰² However, if one wants to understand what the myth might have meant to its original community, it is essential to exegete the text within its *Sitz-im-Leben*. Inevitably, some level of “recreation” will occur in the process of interpretation; we cannot know for certain what an original community meant by its myth. But attending to context will provide a more accurate reading.

5. *Myth is metaphor and often conveyed in poetic and narrative form; thus, interpreters must attend to the artful use of language, symbol, and metaphor.* The plots and characters of mythological narrative convey larger than life symbolic meaning designed to make truth claims.¹⁰³ As a conscious, creative work of art myth is also typically expressed through poetry. When the Ugaritians addressed their gods or wrote about them, they switched to poetry.¹⁰⁴ Poetry stirs the emotions and senses through literary devices such as metaphor, simile, repetition and sound. In particular, metaphor humbly acknowledges the limitations of human perception to grasp the Transcendent.¹⁰⁵ Metaphor alludes to ultimate realities in symbolic language without defining what cannot be completely defined. It has “the capacity to disclose the essential features

¹⁰⁰ Batto, *Slaying the Dragon*, 12.

¹⁰¹ Segal, *Theorizing*, 90.

¹⁰² Patton and Doniger, *Myth and Method*, 6.

¹⁰³ Schilbrack, *Thinking*, 8.

¹⁰⁴ Pardee, *Ritual and Cult*, 86.

¹⁰⁵ Ellen F. Davis, “And Pharaoh Will Change His Mind . . .” (Ezekiel 32:31): Dismantling Mythical Discourse” in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs* (ed. Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Green-McCreight; Grand Rapids, MI: WB Eerdmans, 1998) 223.

of transcendent reality—even while its full dimensions remain unknown.”¹⁰⁶ Ricoeur refers to poetry’s capacity to propose an imaginary world of possibility.¹⁰⁷ The language of myth as poetry and metaphor is, therefore, integral to interpreting its tone and message. It is not merely decorative. Any successful model must seriously engage with how myth uses language. As Doty notes, “Embodying metaphoric and symbolic meanings, [myths] allow experimentation and play with images, ideas and concepts that otherwise would remain too incorporeal to be engaged.”¹⁰⁸

These guiding principles will navigate this investigation into KTU 1.23. The new reading will reflect respect for the Ugaritians as intelligent, creative people. It will also assume a comprehensible function for the ritual and myth even if some symbols or metaphors are not fully understood today. And my interpretation will reflect an evaluation of religious context as well as literary strategies.

Similarly, specific theories influence the reading of a text. In order to demonstrate the impact of theory on the interpretation of “The Goodly Gods,” I provide below a comparative analysis in two sections: the origin of myth and the function of myth. In the discussion on origin, I contrast myth-ritualism and structuralism with Jung’s perspective. In the section on function, I compare myth-ritualism and structuralism with Ricoeur’s views. I demonstrate the short-comings of myth-ritual theory and structuralism for interpretation of KTU 1.23, and I discuss the hermeneutical value of Jung’s and Ricoeur’s perspectives. Specifically, Jung and Ricoeur provide corrective theoretical frameworks that acknowledge the transcendent value of myth as well as the importance of language for articulating that transcendence.

¹⁰⁶ Davis, “Pharaoh,” 238.

¹⁰⁷ Ricoeur, Paul, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination* (ed. M. Wallace; trans. D. Pellauer; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 43.

¹⁰⁸ Doty, *Mythography*, 50.

Origin of Myth

Myth-ritual theory locates myth's origin in a response to external stimuli. Ancient people observed natural phenomena and sought to explain them.¹⁰⁹ When science provided more accurate explanations, myth was discarded. Frazer believed similarities in myth across time and culture could be explained by environmental observation; all people witness the same rising and setting of the sun and share developmental milestones (e.g., birth, death, tragedy, triumph).¹¹⁰ He rejected possible innate origins for myth, dismissing its universal appearance as a "fortuitous coincidence."¹¹¹

The consequence of this theory of origin has been not only the dismissal of myth as intellectually crude but also the denigration of the religious experience of ancient peoples whom Frazer describes as "ignorant or dull-witted" with "undeveloped mind[s]."¹¹² Per Frazer, their science and religion have now been replaced by higher forms of knowledge and spirituality. As an evolutionary anthropologist, he envisioned three progressive steps which he described as "threads": magic (black thread) would be replaced by religion (red thread) which would be triumphantly replaced by science (white thread).¹¹³ Thus, according to myth-ritual theory, KTU 1.23 can only be the product of elementary thinking and not true religion.

Structuralism, on the other hand, finds the origin of myth inside the mind of either the myth-maker or the modern interpreter (affinity in mental structure allows for either possibility).¹¹⁴ Levi-Strauss termed this reality the "architecture of the spirit," referring to the universal structure of the mind that tends to conceptualize the world in dualities.¹¹⁵ Myth-making

¹⁰⁹ Ackerman, *Myth Ritual School*, 54.

¹¹⁰ Segel, *Theorizing*, 75.

¹¹¹ Segel, *Theorizing*, 75.

¹¹² Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 12.

¹¹³ Ackerman, *Myth and Ritual School*, 46, 49.

¹¹⁴ Kirk, *Myth*, 48.

¹¹⁵ Kirk, *Myth*, 45.

is an unconscious process whereby discrete units of language form a holistic underlying structure of narrative.¹¹⁶ Levi-Strauss argued myth-making is a mechanical product of the mind devoid of intentional, creative effort.¹¹⁷

Structuralism improves on the myth-ritual approach by granting myth the dignity of logic. However, it endows the modern scholar with the power to decipher what ancient people “really meant,” while the myth-makers themselves remain ignorant; abstraction belongs to the myth and not the creator of it.¹¹⁸ Levi-Strauss looked for unconscious structural meaning in myth because he believed the surface narratives of myths are nonsensical.¹¹⁹ Structuralism gives no consideration for the plot of the story and other literary devices. It is “not concerned with the ways the myths are *voiced*, their aesthetic dimensions, or what we customarily call their content or significance to the persons articulating and preserving the myths.”¹²⁰ Structuralism renders the Ugaritians “voiceless.” It fails to recognize that KTU 1.23 was a comprehensible document to its creators; as a result, structuralism imposes an artificial interpretation.

Like structuralism, Jung discerned myth’s origin in the unconscious mind. However, his view is broader than structuralism in as much as it encompasses diverse aspects of the ego. Structuralism reduces myth to a product of rigid brain structure that is capable only of projecting dualities. Myth, according to Jung, is an internal process that reflects profound aspects of self, as well as the “collective unconscious” from which myth arises. The collective unconscious, a sort of psychic energy connecting all human beings, produces universal motifs (“archetypes”).¹²¹ Attention to the psychological nature of myth is conducive to exploring existential and

¹¹⁶ Kirk, *Myth*, 42.

¹¹⁷ Doty, *Mythography*, 275.

¹¹⁸ Kirk, *Myth*, 43-44.

¹¹⁹ Eric Csapo, *Theories of Mythology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) 219.

¹²⁰ Doty, *Mythography*, 278.

¹²¹ Doty, *Mythography*, 200.

transcendent meaning in myth. Jung's theory does fall short in his assertion that moderns are more "in tune" with the unconscious than ancient people. However, he did not consider ancient people less intelligent and he saw value in moving between fantasy thinking (less in tune with the unconscious) and directed thinking (more in tune).¹²² Although Jung's theory has its imperfections, it allows room for transcendent origin and themes.

The Jungian collective bent toward myth-making could be interpreted as a universal propensity to seek the Divine. Jung did not attribute a supernatural etiology for humankind's gravitation toward divine themes; he viewed archetypes as hereditary and the symbols that give expression to them as culturally derived.¹²³ However, he also admitted transcendent aspects of myth cannot be proved or disproved:

Why, then, should we deprive ourselves of views that prove helpful in crises and give a meaning to our existence? And how do we know that such ideas are not true? Many people will agree with me if I stated flatly that such ideas are illusions. What they fail to realize is that this denial amounts to a 'belief' and is just as impossible to prove as a religious assertion. We are entirely free to choose our standpoint; it will in any case be an arbitrary decision. There is, however, a strong empirical reason why we should hold beliefs that we know can never be proved. Man positively needs general ideas and convictions that will give meaning to his life and enable him to find a place in the universe.¹²⁴

Certain scholars object to Jung's theory of a universal (and independent) origin of myth. While most recognize the cross-cultural occurrence of myth there are those who still attribute similarities to external observation and shared experience. Alan Dundes maintains no myth's motif is universal: "So it is one thing to say that all peoples may have some myth allegedly

¹²² Segal, *Theorizing about Myth*, 83, 86-87.

¹²³ Segal, *Theorizing*, 93.

¹²⁴ C. G. Jung, *Jung on Mythology* (ed. Robert A. Segal; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) 96.

explaining how death came into the world, but *it is not the same myth . . .* The important theoretical point is that no one origin-of-death myth is found among all peoples.”¹²⁵

Dundes seems to misinterpret Jung’s theory. Jung does assert that identical motifs will occur independently around the world; however, he also indicates myths are different.¹²⁶ Universal archetypes are expressed through each culture’s uniquely contrived symbols; myth can only be understood when examined within its specific context.¹²⁷ Jung overstated his case that each specific archetype he personally constructed is identical and universal (e.g. “the Child”), and one need not accept his categories. But the concept of archetype as a general theme or idea imbedded in the collective unconscious is still plausible. Even Dundes inadvertently supports universalism by his acknowledgement of a panhuman “origin-of-death” myth.

The fact that the majority of myths gravitate toward transcendent themes is indicative of more than environmental observation or shared experience. The rising and setting of the sun could have been explained any number of ways without inventing a god. Nor does the shared experience of birth and death require a transcendent explanation. Given the great diversity in cultures across time, it seems unlikely that human beings would all develop similar interpretations of such events unless there was something innate that prompted a common response—whether that “something” is a literal collective unconscious, biological trait or spiritual influence. Likewise it seems unlikely that the existence of similarities across cultures is the result of myths spreading from one people group to another; similarities occur in vastly different geographical regions.¹²⁸ Ultimately, Kirk sums it up best: “Nothing in [Jung’s]

¹²⁵ Alan Dundes, “Madness in Method, Plus a Plea for Projective Inversion in Myth” in *Myth and Method* (ed. Laurie L. Patton and Wendy Doniger; Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996) 150.

¹²⁶ Segal, *Theorizing*, 73.

¹²⁷ Segal, *Theorizing*, 74, 93.

¹²⁸ Segal, *Theorizing*, 74.

arguments makes it probable that ideas or symbols actually are inherited; but it is important to concede that no particular reason is so far known why they should not be.”¹²⁹

In essence, Jung’s perspective provides helpful nuances for interpreting KTU 1.23 that are not found in myth-ritual theory or structuralism. Myth-ritualism’s theory of origin is blatantly ethnocentric and denigrates the value of myth for Ugaritian religious practice. And structuralism reduces myth-making to a rigid mechanical process. In contrast, Jung’s theory encompasses the complexities of the entire self and allows room for interpreting KTU 1.23 as a product of transcendent origin and therefore reflective of true spirituality.

Function of Myth

Not all theories describe an origin for myth; some only postulate function. However, in the case of myth-ritualism and structuralism the theories of origin are closely related to theories of function. For structuralism, the function of myth arises from the mind’s propensity to view the world in dualities. For myth-ritualism, the focus on external stimuli leads to a function that involves a response to external observations. Frazer interpreted the myths and rituals of ancient peoples as attempts to manipulate the external world.¹³⁰ In this view, a myth is merely a script of a pre-existing ritual intended to be reenacted.¹³¹ The practitioner performs the script believing “he can produce any effect he desires merely by [imitation].”¹³² That is, the practitioner (whom Frazer calls the “magician”) would ritually perform the outcome he wanted the gods to induce. Frazer set up an oppositional stance between magic and mature religion. He considered magic arrogant because the practitioner seemed to rely on human sovereignty rather than a higher

¹²⁹ Kirk, *Myth*, 277.

¹³⁰ “Ritualism” can also be considered an origin of myth theory, but because it also relates to function, it is discussed here (Ackerman, *Myth and Ritual School*, 53).

¹³¹ Ackerman, *Myth and Ritual School*, 54-55.

¹³² Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 11.

power for a desired outcome.¹³³ Ancient spirituality was devoid of mature religion because it did not exhibit true deference to God; mature religion is the result of an evolutionary process whereby “higher civilization” crushes magic.¹³⁴

At the same time, Frazer indicated that the ancient person believed vegetation to be animate with “souls like his own and he treats them accordingly.”¹³⁵ These vegetation spirits could be manipulated through imitative magic, including ritualistic sex, to foster the growth of plants. Such beliefs, per Frazer, are the historical background of May Day festivals and other spring celebrations where bridal themes are evident. From these wedding motifs “we can infer that our rude forefathers personified the powers of vegetation as male and female, and attempted, on the principle of homeopathic or imitative magic, to quicken the growth of trees and plants.”¹³⁶ Per myth-ritual theory, KTU 1.23 is not reflective of mature religion but an attempt to control the environment through magic. The basis for interpreting KTU 1.23 as a sacred marriage rite is founded upon Frazer’s theory of imitative magic.

An emphasis on external processes can preclude, as it does for Frazer, a thoughtful evaluation of the internal aspects of myth. Superstitious manipulation of the environment is deemed the function of myth and ritual and not rational thinking. The practitioner “never analyzes the mental processes on which his practice is based, never reflects on the abstract principles involved in his actions.”¹³⁷ Myth-ritual theory as articulated by Frazer and Gaster denies the possibility of ineffable union with the divine as possible motivation for religious practice; the gods are merely objects to manipulate. With such a shallow interpretation of myth and ritual, it is not surprising KTU 1.23 has been interpreted as burlesque and ribald.

¹³³ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 49.

¹³⁴ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 55-56.

¹³⁵ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 111.

¹³⁶ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 134-135.

¹³⁷ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 11.

Similarly to myth-ritual theory, structuralism provides a means of control, even if unconscious. The function of myth, for the structuralist, is to reconcile dualities. All myths are attempts to solve problems and create order.¹³⁸ The unconscious mind projects oppositions on three levels: material, mental and spiritual.¹³⁹ These oppositional themes generally have no obvious connection with the actual “surface” narrative of a myth. They must be decoded by an interpreter. Levi-Strauss believed the function of every myth could be elucidated purely by a mathematically precise method.¹⁴⁰ The effect of this approach is not only the devaluation of conscious, creative thought but also the reduction of myth to the sole purpose of resolving dualities. This perspective is the basis for Smith’s recent interpretation of KTU 1.23 as a text that presents a “series of cultural-religious oppositions.”¹⁴¹

In contrast to structuralism, Ricoeur emphasizes the importance of attending to language: “Whatever ultimately may be the nature of the so-called religious experience, it comes down to language, it is articulated in language, and the most appropriate place to interpret it on its own terms is to inquire into its linguistic expression.”¹⁴² Ricoeur objects to Levi-Strauss’ reduction of myth to a mathematical operation.¹⁴³ Myth’s meaning is found in the surface narrative because language is defined by its ability to say something comprehensible to another person.¹⁴⁴ Kirk agrees: “The function of language is to convey content, not to convey its own grammatical and syntactical rules . . . it is wrong to imply (as Levi-Strauss does) that the meaning of myth is conveyed by its own structure, corresponding with syntax in language.”¹⁴⁵

¹³⁸ Day, *Many Meanings*, 273-274.

¹³⁹ Day, *Many Meanings*, 271.

¹⁴⁰ Doty, *Mythography*, 274.

¹⁴¹ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 145. Smith’s views will be discussed in detail in part VI.

¹⁴² Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 35.

¹⁴³ Muldoon, *On Ricoeur*, 47.

¹⁴⁴ Muldoon, *On Ricoeur*, 47.

¹⁴⁵ Kirk, *Myth*, 43.

For Ricoeur, one of the primary functions of language, particularly metaphor and poetry (which comprises much of KTU 1.23) is its ability to envision an entirely new world. The text is the medium for creating possibilities that currently do not exist.¹⁴⁶ Through language, one can experience “redemption through imagination” because in “imagining his possibilities, man can act as a prophet of his own existence.”¹⁴⁷ Ricoeur particularly emphasizes a proposed world that evokes human potential. However, the idealized world can also pertain to broader concerns; in his discussion on eschatological myth, Ricoeur states that myth proposes “to the imagination the triumph of concordance over discordance.”¹⁴⁸ Ricoeur’s perspective is important for interpreting KTU 1.23 because it recognizes the role language plays in articulating the nature of religious experience. He asserts the value of attending to the surface narrative of text, believing the creators had conscious, existential reasons for writing what they did. KTU 1.23 provides a glimpse into the world of possibilities that the Ugaritians hoped to enter.

In summary, the five presuppositions and the perspectives of Jung and Ricoeur are more conducive to an accurate reading of KTU 1.23 than myth-ritualism or structuralism. This eclectic approach respects the Ugaritians as intelligent people capable of engaging in mature religion. It also provides a means for evaluating “The Goodly Gods” in its unique context with particular attention to the Ugaritians use of language. Myth-ritualism reflects ethnocentric attitudes and structuralism reduces myth to a mechanical process.

¹⁴⁶ Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 43.

¹⁴⁷ Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 7.

¹⁴⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (vol. 2; trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985) 23.

V. RELIGIOUS RITUAL IN UGARIT

Just as theory of myth affects interpretation of KTU 1.23, so also a concept of Ugaritian ritual is crucial for exegeting “The Goodly Gods.” Ritual, like myth, has been subjected to “pre-determined methodologies” that resulted in reductionistic conclusions.¹⁴⁹ Scholars have increasingly rejected such narrow approaches. For John Martin rituals are “the symbolic expression of religious attitudes.”¹⁵⁰ More specifically, Dennis Pardee defines Ugaritic ritual as “the everyday contacts between the Ugaritians and their deities.”¹⁵¹ The functions of ritual vary and must be interpreted according to local context. An adequate interpretation of KTU 1.23 requires an analysis of other extant texts to glean, as much as possible, what ritual meant for the Ugaritians.

Both myth-ritual and structuralist interpretations of “The Goodly Gods” have ignored religious context. Frazer’s study was deeply flawed because it lumped together ritual practices from a wide spectrum of places and times without attention to local milieu. Much of his data was culled from missionaries and traders¹⁵² who were prone to a common mistake in deciphering ritual: the inference of “beliefs, attitudes and motivations” based on superficial observation of

¹⁴⁹ John Hilary Martin, “Introductory Essay” in *Religious and Social Ritual: Interdisciplinary Explorations* (ed. by Michael B. Aune and Valerie DeMarinis; Albany: University of New York Press, 1996) 19.

¹⁵⁰ Martin, “Introductory,” 20.

¹⁵¹ *Ritual and Cult*, 1.

¹⁵² Ackerman, *Myth and Ritual School*, 46.

rites.¹⁵³ As a result, Frazer and those who followed him reduced ritual to imitative magic.

Scholars who approached KTU 1.23 from a myth-ritual perspective held preconceived notions of what ritual meant, thereby ensuring the “discovery” of sacred marriage in the text.

Frazer’s predecessor, William Robertson Smith, proposed ancient religion was “primarily a matter of things done, not believed, of rituals, not creed.”¹⁵⁴ Evaluating ritual apart from any insight from myth became the basis for understanding the “primitive” mind. Cognizant that animal sacrifices were a predominate ritual in the ancient Near East, Robertson Smith developed an almost Eucharistic theory: animals (or humans) believed to be divine were killed then eaten as a way to commune with a deity.¹⁵⁵ This premise became the basis for Frazer’s vegetation god who died and came alive according to agricultural cycles in response to imitative magic.¹⁵⁶ This view has overshadowed the interpretation of KTU 1.23.

Robertson Smith’s thesis minimized broader existential concerns revealed in ritual. However, his approach was an attempt to counter scholars who looked to mythology to find creeds and “concluded that no sane person could believe the sordid and contradicting accounts of these myths, and thus were reinforced in their beliefs that the primitives and ancients had nothing worth gracing with the name ‘religion’.”¹⁵⁷ By focusing on ritual, the “problem” of myth could be avoided.

More recently, M. Smith’s structuralist approach has not adequately accounted for Ugaritian motives either. He does not provide an analysis of common ritual themes in the Ugaritic corpus. Instead he approaches KTU 1.23 looking for dualities, resulting in conclusions

¹⁵³ Jorgen Podemann Sorensen, “Ritualistics: A New Discipline in the History of Religions” in *The Problem of Ritual* (ed. Tore Ahlback; Abo, Finland: The Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, 1993) 11.

¹⁵⁴ Ackerman, *Myth and Ritual School*, 41.

¹⁵⁵ Ackerman, *Myth and Ritual School*, 42.

¹⁵⁶ Ackerman, *Myth and Ritual School*, 42-43.

¹⁵⁷ Ackerman, *Myth and Ritual School*, 43.

that detour from a natural reading of ritual content. For example, he finds an “alimentary code” in the mention of both milk and meat.¹⁵⁸ The ritual refers to “coriander in milk, mint in curd” (14) as well as “Rahmay goes hunting” (16). The goddess is presumed to be hunting for game. Thus, the “food elements [express] binary oppositions that come together in a manner that is reminiscent of Claude Levi-Strauss’s binary opposition between ‘the raw and the cooked.’”¹⁵⁹ Smith believes these contrasting elements represent both destructive and beneficial deities, and more specifically life and death.¹⁶⁰ I also argue KTU 1.23 is about life and death. However, Smith’s interpretation forfeits literary and ritual context in favor of “recovering” unconscious codes, resulting in the problematic conclusion that the Ugaritians welcomed destructive forces (this will be discussed in detail later).

Any interpretation of KTU 1.23 must adequately address what we know about Ugaritian ritual practice. Granted, this information is quite limited.¹⁶¹ But some clues can be gleaned by examining Ugaritic ritual texts. I will demonstrate that ritual often pertained to the daily concerns of not only the royalty but also the public. By bringing these matters before their deities the Ugaritians exhibited faith in the gods’ intervention. This is instructive for interpreting KTU 1.23. As an invocation addressing common concerns of death, including childlessness, widowhood, and famine, “The Goodly Gods” reflects standard Ugaritian ritual practice.

Gregorio del Olmo Lete identified three types of ritual texts at Ugarit: administrative, prescriptive, and recitative.¹⁶² The administrative records are lists of specific materials used in rituals (e.g. ram, cow, oil, etc). The prescriptive texts provide minimal details such as the date

¹⁵⁸ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 153.

¹⁵⁹ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 155.

¹⁶⁰ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 158.

¹⁶¹ Pardee, *Ritual and Cult*, 1.

¹⁶² Gregorio Del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion According to the Liturgical Texts of Ugarit*. (trans. Wilfred G.E. Watson; Bethesda: CDL Press, 1999) 15-18.

(lunar calendar), type of sacrifice offered and brief directives such as “someone will pour” or “the king will sit down while still clean.” Finally, the recitative texts consist of verbal content used in rites; however, recitations are often alluded to without being included.

An analysis of terms suggests to del Olmo Lete that the Ugaritians engaged in eight primary ritual activities: bloodless offering, sacrifice, procession, enthronement, vesting, invocation/recitation, atonement, banquet and divination.¹⁶³ Sacrifice was at “the very heart of the Ugaritic cult”; no ritual was complete without it.¹⁶⁴ Worshippers also offered textiles and clothing; this evidence suggests sacrifices and libations were intended to feed the gods.¹⁶⁵ However, it will become clear from the discussion below that any feeding of the gods was not the sole objective of sacrifice at Ugarit.

The ritual texts reflect the official royal religion. The palace had its own large sanctuary, and the king served as a primary officiant.¹⁶⁶ The family of the king was also involved.¹⁶⁷ Certain rituals pertained to the installment of a new king or funerary rites for a deceased king.¹⁶⁸ Kings became divine upon death and were revered as gods dwelling in the underworld.¹⁶⁹ However, Pardee, in disagreement with del Olmo Lete, finds no evidence of a mortuary cult.¹⁷⁰ The ritual texts consist of succinct lists and brief directives; they are often devoid of detailed

¹⁶³ Del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion*, 23.

¹⁶⁴ Pardee, *Ritual and Cult*, 3.

¹⁶⁵ Pardee, *Ritual and Cult*, 226.

¹⁶⁶ Gregorio Del Olmo Lete, “Royal Aspects of the Ugaritic Cult” in *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East: proceedings of the International Conference organized by the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven from the 17th to the 20th of April 1991* (ed. J. Quaegebeur. Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters en Departement Oriëntalistiek, 1993) 51.

¹⁶⁷ Del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion*, 32; e.g. RS 24. 256.

¹⁶⁸ Del Olmo Lete, “Royal Aspects,” 56-57.

¹⁶⁹ Del Olmo Lete, “Royal Aspects,” 54.

¹⁷⁰ Pardee, *Ritual and Cult*, 3.

descriptions. This can make it difficult to envision the actual ceremony. However, some imagery can be found in the literary texts. The epic of Kirta recounts the king's offering of a sacrifice:¹⁷¹

He washes himself, and rouges too
Washes his hands to the elbow,
His fingers as far as the shoulder.
He enters a shaded pavilion.
He takes a lamb in his hands:
<A lamb of sacrifice in his right,>
A kid in them both—
All his available (?) food.
He takes a pigeon, a bird of sacrifice
Pours wine into a silver basin;
Into a gold basin, honey.
Ascends to the top of the lookout;
Mounts the city-wall's shoulder.
Raises his hands toward the sky;
Sacrifices to Bull El, his Father.

Despite emphasis in these texts on the cultic activities of the royal household, public worship is evidenced by the archaeological remains of multiple structures in the city, including two large temples dedicated to Baal and Dagon; shrines were also found among the 350 small villages in the outlying areas of the kingdom.¹⁷² Administrative texts identify at least twelve

¹⁷¹ KTU 1.14:III:52-IV:1-6. Translation by Edward Greenstein ("Kirta" in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* [ed. Simon B. Parker; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997] 18).

¹⁷² William M. Schniedewind and Joel H. Hunt, *A Primer on Ugaritic: Language, Culture and Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 19-20. We have virtually no information on popular religion in Ugarit (Del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion*, 1). It is impossible to discern how much popular religion may have varied from the official religion. However, the flexibility of polytheism already incorporated into the official religion might make the gap between popular and official religion less significant than it may have been for Israel. Myth would be ineffective if it did not have some ability to create social cohesion. Ugarit was also a prime city for scribal schools and archaeology has unearthed epics such as *Gilgamesh* and *Mesopotamian Flood Story* in the remains of these schools (*Primer*, 9). Thus, mythical material probably circulated in public domains.

priestly families.¹⁷³ Even royal worship served the public. It was the king's responsibility to seek the welfare of his people; thus, rituals pertained to the city and not only the king's household:¹⁷⁴

“[. . . well-being of Ugarit . . .]
We'll-being of the foreigner (within) the walls of Ugarit.”¹⁷⁵

“Well-being for Ugarit, well-being for her gates.”¹⁷⁶

A description of the king's responsibility to intercede for the people is also indicated in the epic of Kirta:

You don't pursue the widow's case,
You don't take up the wretched's claim.
You don't expel the poor's oppressor.
You don't feed the orphan who faces you,
Nor the widow who stands at your back.
Your sickbed is your consort,
Your infirmity, your company.
Step down—and I'll be the king!
From your rule—I'll sit on the throne!¹⁷⁷

The lack of meaningful descriptive detail in most of the texts can lead to presumptions that Ugaritian ritual was a mechanical performance; however, the texts do allude to emotive and theological components, including concepts of righteousness and sin, the gods' intervention into human affairs, and the benevolence of the gods (at least some of them). As mentioned above, an upright king is one who looks after the vulnerable and protects his city. Worshippers offered

¹⁷³ Schniedewind and Hunt, *Primer*, 19-20.

¹⁷⁴ Schniedewind and Hunt, *Primer*, 16.

¹⁷⁵ KTU 1.40:2, 18. Translated by Pardee (*Ritual and Cult*, 80-81).

¹⁷⁶ KTU 1.161:33-34.

¹⁷⁷ KTU 1.16: VI:45-54; Translated by Greenstein, “Kirta,” 41-42.

sacrifices for sins against the poor and oppressed as well as for anger and impatience.¹⁷⁸ This alone makes it clear sacrifice had deeper meaning beyond feeding the gods.

Like KTU 1.23, other texts demonstrate faith in divine involvement in human affairs. A prayer to Baal reads, “When a strong foe attacks your gate, a warrior your walls, you shall lift your eyes to Baal and say: O Baal, if you drive the strong one from our gate. . .”¹⁷⁹ Baal is not only the protector of the city, but he also defeats Mot, the one who seeks to devour people.¹⁸⁰ El and Shapshu respond to the sound of weeping prior to any initiative or sacrifice on the part of the distraught human being.¹⁸¹ El, noticing Kirta’s tears over the lack of wife and offspring, determined to act on his behalf before telling him to prepare a sacrifice.¹⁸² The purpose of the subsequent sacrifice seems to be the adoration of El and Baal. It attributed honor and power to the source of the impending intervention. By offering a sacrifice, Kirta acknowledged the gods’ role in rescuing him from his plight. In contrast, when Kirta enlisted the help of Athirat to secure a wife but failed to honor her when he was successful he suffered the consequences of his disrespect.¹⁸³ The acknowledgement of the gods’ assistance also appears in KTU 1.23:54 where El commands an offering to be given to Shapshu following the birth of Dawn and Dusk (i.e., the Goodly Gods).

Contrary to those who found theories of sacred marriage in KTU 1.23 on the idea of imitative magic, none of the ritual texts from Ugarit provide evidence of imitative magic. Rather, the Ugaritians exhibited faith in the gods’ willing intervention. Adjectives such as “generous,” “awesome,” “magnanimous,” “concerned” and “compassionate” indicate the Ugaritians believed

¹⁷⁸ KTU 1.40.

¹⁷⁹ KTU 1.119. Translated by Pardee (*Ritual and Cult*, 53).

¹⁸⁰ KTU 1.6:V:20-VI:10.

¹⁸¹ KTU 1.14:I:26-43; KTU 1.107:8-12.

¹⁸² KTU 1.14:I:37-II:26.

¹⁸³ Greenstein, “Kirta” 11; KTU 1.14:IV:34-43; 1.15:III:25-30, IV:2-5.

their gods were benevolent and powerful.¹⁸⁴ Their attitude toward the gods is not one of manipulation. Rather, recognizing their frailty, the Ugaritians sought help from forces greater than themselves. Even their incantations reflect a belief, not in the power of their own magic, but the gods' intervention. In one ritual, Shapshu is asked to carry an incantation for a snake bite up to the gods.¹⁸⁵ In this instance, the incantation is similar to a prayer. And the Ugaritians response to such help suggests they had positive regard for their deities. A song discovered in 1998 and only recently published praises the goddess, ʿAttartu, using language similar to Exodus 15:1: “May the name of ʿAttartu be sung. Let me sing the name of the lioness: by (her) name she is victorious over [. . .] She has banged shut the maw of the whelp of El. A mighty panther is ʿAttartu; a mighty panther does she pounce.”¹⁸⁶ In Exodus 15:1, the Israelites praise the Lord with singing for delivering them from the Egyptians. A similar connotation may be evident in this Ugaritic song. Furthermore, the motif of smiting a “whelp” is used in the Baal Cycle to refer to victory over enemies (KTU 1.3:III:43-47).¹⁸⁷

Overall, an analysis of themes associated with Ugaritian ritual reveals theological and emotive components. Rites reflect concern for offspring,¹⁸⁸ marriage,¹⁸⁹ the safe passage of a king into the next world,¹⁹⁰ protection from violence,¹⁹¹ praise for the gods' greatness,¹⁹²

¹⁸⁴ KTU 1.102; Translated by Pardee (*Ritual and Cult*, 21).

¹⁸⁵ KTU 1.100.

¹⁸⁶ Dennis Pardee, “Preliminary Presentation of a New Ugaritic Song to ʿAttartu (RIH 98/02)” in *Ugarit at Seventy-Five: proceedings of the Symposium ‘Ugarit at Seventy-Five’ held at Trinity International University, Deerfield, Illinois, February 18-20, 2005 under the auspices of the Middle Western Branch of the American Oriental Society and the Mid-West Region of the Society of Biblical Literature* (ed. K. Lawson Younger Jr.; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007) 30, 35.

¹⁸⁷ Pardee, “New Ugaritic Song,” 36.

¹⁸⁸ Epic of Kirta; Epic of Aqhat. Even though these are literary texts, they describe ritual in conjunction with the request for intervention.

¹⁸⁹ Epic of Kirta.

¹⁹⁰ KTU 1.161.

¹⁹¹ KTU 1.119:26-35.

¹⁹² KTU 1.102; RIH 98/02.

forgiveness of sin,¹⁹³ success and strength,¹⁹⁴ healing from illness,¹⁹⁵ and general well-being.¹⁹⁶

The Baal Cycle, though not a ritual text, indicates drought was also a potential concern.¹⁹⁷

Significantly, the epics of Kirta and Aqhat both describe ritual activity that accompanied the characters' quest for a wife and/or offspring. Thus KTU 1.23 reflects the same Ugaritian concerns for spouse and offspring expressed in other texts.

Contra Frazer and Gaster, there is no evidence of imitative magic in Ugaritian ritual. Nor were sacrifices offered only to feed the gods. The rituals reflected the "more immediate demands of the life of the faithful."¹⁹⁸ Bearing this in mind is imperative for an accurate interpretation of KTU 1.23.

¹⁹³ KTU 1.40.

¹⁹⁴ KTU 1.108.

¹⁹⁵ KTU 1.100; KTU 1.107; KTU 1.16:V:10-30.

¹⁹⁶ KTU 1.123; KTU 1.161:33-34.

¹⁹⁷ KTU 1.6:IV:1-3, 12-14.

¹⁹⁸ Del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion*, 44.

VI. EXEGESIS AND NEW READING OF KTU 1.23

KTU 1.23 invokes the gods to avert the forces of death. The “prayer” addresses two levels: the holistic struggle of life against death and the specific impact of that broader phenomenon—childlessness, widowhood, and famine.¹⁹⁹ The Goodly Gods are summoned to “tip the scales” in favor of life. Their birth introduces the twin elements of life and death (Dawn and Dusk), while their conception—made possible by El’s triumph over impotency—symbolizes the Ugaritians’ hope for offspring. The “sown land” at the end of the text represents both Death’s aversion and the projected abundance of food the Ugaritians are seeking.

As will be seen, some of these concepts have been introduced in various ways by scholars over the years, but the pieces have never been put together into the cohesive whole proposed by this thesis. This new reading strives to make sense of previous gaps. Typically, theories have proffered explanations for either El’s sexual activity *or* the Goodly God’s trip into the outback. Gaster focused primarily on the sex scene to develop an interpretation of sacred marriage. Smith provided a thorough discussion of the gods’ feast in the sown land, but minimized El’s sexual activity as “background information.”²⁰⁰ I argue that both sections of the mythological

¹⁹⁹ There is no way of knowing whether or not KTU 1.23 was a public ritual or if this text was used solely for private ceremony in the royal sanctuary. The invocation addresses concerns one would expect all Ugaritians to have. If it was not a public invocation, it can be interpreted as the king’s intercession on behalf of the kingdom of Ugarit. Certainly, any famine would have been a public matter and desire for offspring was a universal concern not confined to the royalty.

²⁰⁰ Smith, “Sacred Marriage,” 94.

narrative are equally important and dovetail with the overarching theme of the invocation: life versus death.

Smith also acknowledges the importance of life and death: “We might say that 1.23 presents the reduction of death and destruction by the overwhelming force of life.”²⁰¹ However, he approaches the matter from an entirely different angle that results in a contrary conclusion. Whereas he envisions the Ugaritians welcoming destructive forces, I propose they were seeking to repel the same. Smith views the Goodly Gods as menacing deities that are permitted into the sown land: “the *’ilm n ’mm* can be allowed to savor the plenty produced through death” because harvest “becomes the time when life can include the power of destruction (though perhaps in a weakened state).”²⁰² Additionally, Smith claims the ritual is an attempt to “overcome the duality of human experience.”²⁰³

The Ugaritians were grappling with the duality of life and death but they were not seeking to reconcile the two by merging them together during a sacred ritual moment. Rather, they were reinforcing the duality by shoving away death and pursuing life—the desired result was greater polarization. It is clear from the earliest lines in the ritual that death was something to eradicate, not something to reconcile with life: “Death . . . is felled to the terrace like a vine” (8-11). Contrary to Smith’s structuralist interpretation, the meaning of KTU 1.23 is not found in binary codes embedded unconsciously into the text. The Ugaritians were fully aware of the meaning of their ritual and myth when they skillfully created them. Attention to literary devices and religious context provides a more natural interpretation.

The major components of the ritual and myth demonstrate a progression from death to life. The primary substance of the invocation contrasts the death of Death with the birth of the

²⁰¹ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 159.

²⁰² Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 152, 159.

²⁰³ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 161.

Goodly Gods. In the first section of the myth impotency (death) gives way to conception (life). Widowhood and childlessness are replaced with betrothal and the birth of twins. In the second section of the myth, the ravenous appetite of deathly forces is sated. And famine gives way to plentitude. These contrasts do not represent reconciled dualities. They depict a linear progression of generation. For example, impotency and conception do not merge together; impotency is eradicated through healing properties.

El's sexual activity is not reflective of orgiastic rites or ribaldry. The pericope describes the struggle of life against death. Childlessness was a death sentence. Offspring allowed the family name to live on. The biblical text emphasizes this point as well in the custom of levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-6). The Ugaritians did not ritually reenact the mythological narrative in the form of imitative magic. No ritual sex was involved. Rather the myth proposes to the imagination the triumph of life over death. It was a literary projection of a world of possibility. Myths "make what is humanly speaking impossible, possible, what seems improbable, probable."²⁰⁴ The justification for this proposed new reading has been addressed in part by the discussion on ritual and approaches to myth. Further justification will now be provided through exegesis of the two main sections of the text—the invocation (1-29) and the mythological narrative (30-61). These sections will address exegetical concerns on a more minute level. However, first it will be helpful to provide an overview of the life/death theme by introducing the gods the Ugaritians selected for this ritual and myth.

Specific practical functions were distributed among the various gods.²⁰⁵ Invocations and sacrifices were directed toward specific deities that pertained to the particular occasion or need. Even though the invocation in KTU 1.23 is addressed to the Goodly Gods, there are several gods

²⁰⁴ Nketia, J.H. Kwabena. "Mythology in the World Today" in *Perspectives on Mythology* (ed. Esi Sutherland-Addy; Accra, Ghana: Woeli Publishing Services, 1999) 6.

²⁰⁵ Del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion*, 44.

who play a role in responding to the Ugaritians' petition. Many of the Ugaritic texts describe "teamwork" on the part of the pantheon. For example, in The Baal Cycle, Anat kills Mot, Shapshu brings Baal back from the grave, El grants permission for Baal's house to be built, and Baal reigns as king. In the epic of Kirta, El responds to Kirta's pleas for offspring but then commands the king to make a sacrifice to Baal. And on his way to fetch his wife, Kirta also enlists the help of Athirat. Similarly, in KTU 1.23 every god plays an integral role.

All the gods represented in the text, El, Athirat *waRahmay*,²⁰⁶ Shapshu, Dawn and Dusk (the Goodly Gods),²⁰⁷ and Mot have something to do with the activity of life, death or both. El is the "Creator of Creatures" and Athirat is the "Creator of Gods."²⁰⁸ They are the progenitors of all creation and the source of life.

Mot, the god of death, plays a minor but significant role in the text. He appears briefly in order to meet his demise. Mot was despised by the Ugaritians. The ritual texts attest that he was never offered sacrifices at any time.²⁰⁹ The Baal Cycle describes his status as "Low, the throne where he sits; Filth, the land of his heritage."²¹⁰

Shapshu, the sun-god, moves between the realms of both life and death. At dusk she travels into the underworld and at dawn she returns to the realm of the living.²¹¹ The correlation between sunset and death is brought out in the epic of Aqhat.²¹² Paghit straps on a sword and sets out to avenge her brother's death. As she does, the poem ominously reads:

As Shapshu, the gods' lamp departs,
Paghit [approached] the encampment.

²⁰⁶ With Smith, I take Athirat *waRahmay* to be one goddess, but "presented literarily in the dual" (Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 90-91). However, plurals will be used in congruence with the literary use in the text.

²⁰⁷ Dawn and Dusk are paralleled with the Goodly Gods. Literarily they are the same set of twins. This will be discussed further.

²⁰⁸ KTU 1.4:I:22; II:11.

²⁰⁹ Del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion*, 77.

²¹⁰ KTU 1.4:VIII:12-14. Translation by Smith, "The Baal Cycle," 138-139.

²¹¹ Pardee, *Ritual and Cult*, 133.

²¹² KTU 1.19:IV:34-61.

As Shapshu, the gods' lamp sets,
Paghit arrived at the tents.²¹³

In the funerary ritual, KTU 1.161, Shapshu is called upon to usher a deceased king into the underworld; and her heat seems to offer a form of consolation.²¹⁴ In The Baal Cycle, Shapshu is affiliated with Mot, not as a destructive force, but as one who enters his realm to hand over the dead: “[Will] the luminary of the gods, Shapshu [carry me off]; the burning One, Strength of Heavens into the hands of divine Mot?”²¹⁵ Shapshu is also a life-giving force. She is the one who brings Baal back up from the underworld after he has been killed by Mot.²¹⁶ Both El and Anat ask her to search for him and bring him back. She also intervenes to end the conflict between Baal and Mot, telling Mot to submit to Baal's authority.²¹⁷ Additionally, Shapshu is called upon for help when someone is deathly ill from a snake-bite.²¹⁸ And in KTU 1.23 her life giving properties are evident in the honor she is bestowed at the birth of Dawn and Dusk and her nurturance of the “branches” (the Goodly Gods).²¹⁹

Although extant texts reveal little about the identity of Dawn and Dusk and the Goodly Gods, evidence suggests the two sets are actually one pair representing the twin elements of life and death. Like Shapshu, these gods interact with both realms. The Ugaritians invoked them in order to tip the scales toward life. The correlation between Dawn and Dusk and the Goodly Gods is established by poetic parallelism in the myth's birth account. KTU 1.12 also suggests this

²¹³ Simon B. Parker ed., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997) 77-78.

²¹⁴ David Toshio Tsumura, “The Interpretation of the Ugaritic Funerary Text KTU 1.161” in *Official Cult and Popular Religion in the Ancient Near East: papers from the First Colloquium on the Ancient Near East—The City and its Life held at the Middle Easter Culture Center in Japan (Mitaka, Tokyo) March 20-22, 1992* (ed. Eiko Matsushima; Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1993) 52.

²¹⁵ KTU 1.3:V:17-18; 1.4:VIII:21-24. Translated by Wyatt, *Religious Texts*, 85.

²¹⁶ Wyatt, *Religious Texts*, 129; KTU 1.6:III:23-IV:24.

²¹⁷ Wyatt, *Religious Texts*, 129; KTU 1.6:VI:22-35.

²¹⁸ KTU 1.100; KTU 1.107.

²¹⁹ KTU 1.23: 25-26, 54.

association;²²⁰ “Dawn and East” are called the eaters (*‘qqm*) and tearers (*aklm*). KTU 1.23 refers to the Goodly Gods as ravenous devourers (*‘agzr*). The twins in both stories dwell in the outback. However, identification of Dawn and Dusk and the Goodly Gods is not without debate. Some scholars “show that these are separate groups of gods while others collapse the two into one because they feel that the repetitious nature of the poetry is . . . not meant to be understood sequentially.”²²¹

Dawn and Dusk appear to be beneficial gods who dwell in the heavens.²²² As astral deities they seem to be closely associated with Shapshu. Their names imply a contrast that is important for the discussion. I propose Dawn and Dusk represent two sides of a coin: the beginning of life and the approach of death. They mirror Shapshu’s rotation into the underworld at sunset and back into the realm of the living at sunrise. This is not to say that Dusk is death; Mot is death. Rather, Dusk symbolizes an encounter with death in as much as the god interacts with the underworld. Shapshu is also a beneficial god even though her activity involves turning over the dead to Mot. In the context of KTU 1.23, Dawn and Dusk represent the struggle between life and death—the welcoming of the rising sun and resistance to its setting.

This description dovetails with the characteristics of the Goodly Gods. One text suggests they might be messengers that interact with the underworld; Baal directs the *n m ʾilm* to take a message to Mot.²²³ This suggests they move between the realms of life and death as Shapshu does. The Goodly Gods have an appetite reminiscent of Death but also the propensity to seek life by satisfying that hunger in a non-destructive way. Instead of eating other gods or human beings

²²⁰ This association will be explored in more detail later.

²²¹ Lewis, “El’s Divine Feast,” 207.

²²² Pardee, *Ritual and Cult*, 173.

²²³ KTU 1.5:III:15. Translation from Mark S. Smith, “The Baal Cycle,” in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (ed. Simon B. Parker; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997) 145. Wyatt does not include column III saying it is indecipherable (*Religious Texts*, 122).

(as Mot does) they consume food from the sown land—the place that gives Life. That is, they receive into themselves properties of life, thereby diminishing elements of death. Mot, on the other hand, is a truly destructive force whose appetite is only satisfied by destroying life.²²⁴

In essence, the gods the Ugaritians singled out for this invocation and narrative were strategically selected for their known roles in matters pertaining to life and death. This is congruent with the Ugaritians' invocation to avert death. The details of the foregoing themes will now be discussed in detail.

The Ugaritians' Invocation (Lines 1-29)

“The Goodly Gods” is first and foremost an invocation. That might seem to state the obvious. Yet certain approaches to the text have lost sight of the implications of this fact. Much of the attention on “The Goodly Gods” has focused on El's sexual activity. Davidson called KTU 1.23 a “lurid liturgy.”²²⁵ Dominated by myth-ritual interpretation, sex took center stage. The considerable flaws in this approach have already been discussed. What is needed now is a re-centering of the text onto that crucial opening statement, “I call upon the Goodly Gods.” What did it mean for the Ugaritians to call upon these gods? What does that tell us about their intentions and even their faith? How does the invocation shape the meaning of the text? The reason the text exists at all is because of that verb *ʾiqr ʾa*.

The importance of recognizing the invocation is threefold: 1) it centers the text on the relationship between the Ugaritians and their deities; invocation by its very nature is a form of communication; 2) it demonstrates the Ugaritians belief in the gods' willingness and ability to intervene in matters beyond human capacity; 3) it guides the reading of the text in as much as the

²²⁴ KTU 1.6:V:20-VI:10.

²²⁵ Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 94.

mythological narrative can be expected to describe the *conscious* “everyday” issues for which the Ugaritians are seeking help. As already seen in the analysis of rituals, the Ugaritians often approached deities primarily to address life concerns. That is the punch-line of KTU 1.23—and not orgiastic rites. The invocation reveals the Ugaritians presenting concern (Death) and the desired solution (the birth of the Goodly Gods who will avert death).

In contrast, Frazer saw “primitive” invocation as a means to “make” the gods act: “By reciting certain prayers . . . he can, on occasion of pressing danger, arrest or reverse for a moment the action of the eternal laws of the physical world. . . God was forced to grant whatever was asked of him in this form, however rash and importunate might be the petition.”²²⁶ Similarly, Gaster minimized the invocation to get to the “main ‘business’ of the ceremony.”²²⁷ He placed the invocation in the context of a comedic drama in which the gods were invited to eat a meal; the officiant announcing the invitation was cast as a “presenter” in a “play.”²²⁸ In later writings Gaster, still proposing the burlesque theme, added the nuance of theoxenia, a feast where “members of the community recemented their ties of kinship. By proffering food and drink to their god, they likewise recemented ties with them.”²²⁹

More recently, Smith has also interpreted the invocation as an “invitation” to a feast.²³⁰ As he points out, the verb *ʿiqr ʿa* is used in the context of El inviting the dead deified kings to a feast (KTU 1.21 and 1.22). However these are mythological texts that describe El throwing a banquet. There are no human participants providing sacrifices. Pardee does not include KTU 1.21 and 1.22 in his compilation of ritual texts. Smith also refers to KTU 1.3:I (Baal eating a meal), KTU 1.4:VI:38-59 (Baal celebrating his new house with a feast), and KTU 1.14:IV:9-16

²²⁶ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 53.

²²⁷ Gaster, “Canaanite Ritual,” 50.

²²⁸ Gaster, “Canaanite Ritual,” 50, 66.

²²⁹ Gaster, *Thespis*, 418.

²³⁰ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 31.

(Kirta feeding an army). None of these have any ritual content. And the primary participants (with the exception of Kirta) are gods. In KTU 1.23, the gods do not issue an invitation; the human participants summon the gods. The only ritual texts Smith offers for evidence of an invitation to a feast are KTU 1:161:4-12 and 1.116.2. Smith cites Pardee's acceptance of "invitation" in KTU 1.161.²³¹ However, Pardee translates *ʾqra* as "call" and context indicates that in that text the gods were summoned to facilitate transferring a dead king to the underworld.²³² Similarly, the noun *qr at* in KTU 1.116.2 is translated by Pardee as "gathering" or "calling together" and not festival or feast.²³³ Content in 1.116 is too sparse to determine if any feast is indicated.

There is evidence to suggest the Ugaritians might have viewed their sacrifices as meals for the gods. However, it is also clear sacrifices typically pertained to every day life needs. The difference in context between a mythological text that portrays a god throwing a banquet and a ritual text that describes religious practice is significant. An invitation to a feast places the "plot" of the ritual/myth in the drama of the gods; by contrast, an invocation emphasizes the request of the worshippers who are summoning the gods for a particular purpose. Any interpretation that finds a summons to a feast in KTU 1.23 must account for the purpose it held for the Ugaritians. For example, were they providing a sacrifice or "feast" in order to honor the gods? If so, what was the specific attribute or action that was being praised? Or what did they hope the gods would *do* if a sacrifice was offered?

Smith proposes the invitation was a deliberate welcoming of destructive forces (the Goodly Gods).²³⁴ He envisions a "reconciliation of cosmic opposites that derived from a

²³¹ Smith, *Myths and Rituals*, 31.

²³² Pardee, *Ritual and Cult*, 86-87.

²³³ Pardee, *Ritual and Cult*, 94.

²³⁴ Smith, *Myths and Rituals*, 122.

common origin.”²³⁵ To invite the destructive Goodly Gods to a feast was an attempt to “demonstrate that death is unthreatening for a moment when overshadowed by life.” He also postulates a theory reminiscent of Frazer—a late summer harvest when Mot’s power waned.²³⁶ Nothing in the Ugaritic corpus suggests that such views were behind Ugaritian ritual. To the contrary, the very limited information we do have suggests rites pertained to “ordinary” life concerns. Fertility was certainly a concern, but there is no evidence of a dying vegetation god as proposed by Frazer (this will be discussed in detail shortly).

Smith justifies his abstract proposal of invitation of destructive forces by arguing that KTU 1.23 is a highly unusual text. He refers to the sacrifice given to “nonbeneficial deities” (the Goodly Gods) outside the temple (in the outback) as a “departure from what otherwise appears as the Ugaritic norm.”²³⁷ However, he bases his premise on three primary assumptions: the Goodly Gods were not beneficial, the ritual occurred outside the temple, and rituals outside the temple were abnormal. In fact, the Goodly Gods are not nonbeneficial deities (as will be discussed later). Nor is it plain from the text that the ritual occurred outside the temple. The depiction of sacrifice in the outback is a literary projection. As it will become apparent, the sacrifice “takes place” in Death’s Realm where human beings have no access. Finally, it appears some sacrifices did occasionally occur outside the temple and may not be abnormal.²³⁸

That being said, KTU 1.23 as a mixed genre text is unique in some respects but its uniqueness has been exaggerated. As Smith points out, the ritual appears to be a mixture of “ritual instructions (lines 12, 14-15, 29), ritual information (lines 19-20, 21-22) and ritual performance (lines 1-7, 23-27, along with ritual actions with mythic content (lines 8-11, 13, 28)

²³⁵ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 121.

²³⁶ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 149. As will be discussed later, Frazer proposed a *vegetation* god, not a god of death. His theory has been distorted.

²³⁷ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 156.

²³⁸ KTU 1.79; Pardee. *Ritual and Cult*, 119.

and recitations of mythic material (lines 16-18, 25-26).”²³⁹ However, he also admits many of these elements do appear in other ritual texts even if infrequently. The fact that so many of them are combined in KTU 1.23 is not necessarily surprising. Many of the ritual texts refer to recitations without including them;²⁴⁰ however, the recitations existed and it follows they were written down somewhere. KTU 1.23 is likely one of these texts. Additionally KTU 1.23 is not the only mixed genre text. Other Ugaritic documents are also mixed genres. One of these forms, *historiola*, combines myth and medicinal instructions.²⁴¹ I argue below that KTU 1.23:37-48 is a variation of *historiola*.

Exaggerated assessments of the uniqueness of KTU 1.23 have led to interpretations that detour widely from themes within the larger corpus. Smith’s significant departure from any connection with the normal use of ritual demonstrated in other Ugaritic texts is simply not warranted because KTU 1.23 exhibits characteristics congruent with other ritual texts. The ritual and mythological narrative work together; the invocation expresses the Ugaritians conscious “ordinary” concerns and the myth visualizes the fulfillment of that invocation. In this regard Smith is right to surmise, “Lines 30-76 evoke a narrative representation of the world invoked by the lines in 1-29.”²⁴² The mythological content projects a world of possibility where the gods successfully intervene into human affairs at the behest of the people.

To further illuminate the invocation, I will now address the details of the ritual. A scribe divided the ritual portion of the text (1-29) into nine sections. These sections include a mixture of directions and greetings in prose and recitations in poetry. The recitations form the substance of the invocation. In all, the service included invocations, greetings, several recitations/songs and a

²³⁹ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 4-5.

²⁴⁰ e.g. KTU 1.148:13-22; KTU 1.106: 16, 23, 31.

²⁴¹ Pardee, *Ritual and Cult*, 167.

²⁴² Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 165.

sacrificial procession (1, 7, 12, 14, 18, 22, 26-27). Present were the king, queen, enterers, guards, “boys with a good voice” and singers (7, 12, 14, 18, 22, 26). Whether or not other people participated is unknown. Ritual objects included a dais, fire, coriander in milk, mint in curd, a basin, incense, and blue, red and crimson artifacts—presumably the singers’ clothes (12, 14, 15, 21). Many similar elements appear in other ritual texts.²⁴³ Dairy items are not included in Del Olmo Lete’s list of ritual materials.²⁴⁴ However, W. G. Lambert lists milk as a ritual item familiar in other ancient Near Eastern sacrificial contexts.²⁴⁵ It is unknown if milk is unusual or not.

The service begins with “Let me call upon the Goodly Gods.” The individual leading the invocation is not named. The officiant lauds the gods as beautiful and worthy of offerings. The introduction ends with an invitation to the gods to consume the pending sacrifice and a formal greeting to the royalty and other officials. After the introduction follows the invocation. The liturgical prayer occurs at intervals throughout the ritual and is held together thematically with viticultural imagery. The ritual is not usually labeled as a prayer because it takes the form of poetic recitations (or songs) rather than direct address. However, the direct address occurs in the introduction and the substance of that invocation is then elucidated during the service as a whole. Two parallel sections in particular express the concerns at hand (8-13 and 23-29). These both use viticultural metaphors and the refrain: “The field is the field of El, field of Athirat *waRahmay*.” Interpreted together they reveal the presenting problem (Death) and desired solution (the birth of the Goodly Gods who will avert death):

²⁴³ e.g. KTU 1.41.

²⁴⁴ Del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion*, 41.

²⁴⁵ W. G. Lambert, “Donations of Food and Drink to the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East: proceedings of the International Conference organized by the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven from the 17th to the 20th of April 1991* (ed. J. Quaegebeur; Leuven: Peeters Press, 1993) 195.

- 8 Death and *šr* sits
 In his hand a staff of childlessness,
 8-9 In his hand a staff of widowhood
 9 The pruner prunes him (like) a vine
 10 The binder binds him (like) a vine
 10-11 He is felled to the terrace like a vine
 12 *Seven times it is recited over the dais*
 And the enterers respond:
 13 And the field is the field of El
 Field of Athirat *waRahmay*
- 23 Let me call the Goodly Gods
 Ravenous pair a day-old boys
 24 Who suck the nipples of Athirat's breasts
 25 Shapshu nurtures their branches
 25-26 . . . and grapes.
 26 *Peace, O enterers and guards,*
 27 *Who process with the goodly sacrifice.*
 28 The field is the field of El
 29 Field of Athirat *waRahmay*

Before discussing how these two sections work together, it is necessary to address the textual debates surrounding them. Significant for interpreting KTU 1.23 as a whole is the translation of *mt wšr* in line 8a and *yšql šdmth* in line 10b, as well as the meaning of the vine-dresser imagery. Two primary interpretations of this passage are 1) defeat of Mot/death and 2) circumcision of El. Many scholars identify *mt wšr* as binomial for Mot, the god of death. Tsumura, Lewis, and de Moor all translate the phrase “Death and Evil” with Mot in mind.²⁴⁶ The God of death is “the symbol of the forces opposed to fertility . . . an adversary of Baal, the god of fertility.”²⁴⁷ Cutler and Macdonald reject Mot, finding it unlikely a divine pruner could kill such a significant god, a task reserved for the goddess Anat.²⁴⁸ They also contend that Mot only

²⁴⁶ *šr* following the Arabic cognate *šarā* for evil (Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 40; Lewis, “*El’s Divine Feast*,” 208; De Moor, Johannes C. *An Anthology*, 120; Tsumura, “Ugaritic God,” 409).

²⁴⁷ Tsumura, “Ugaritic God,” 407.

²⁴⁸ Cutler and Macdonald, “On the Origin,” 40.

appears in myths that include Baal. They interpret *mt* as the general phenomenon of death and *šr* as “corruption.”

Taking an entirely different view, Wyatt, following Aistleitner, identifies *mt* as El. Quite imaginatively he interprets *mt* and the accompanying staffs of bereavement as general deprivation which refer to El’s sterility.²⁴⁹ He translates the phrase “the lord and master.”²⁵⁰ But he concedes, “I recognise that there are conjectural elements in the foregoing, but I think that at least it can be said that the balance of probability lies against an identification of *mt wšr* as Mot, even if it cannot be regarded as certain he is to be identified as El.”²⁵¹ Wyatt’s proposal for El is not convincing. This would force El to be the one wielding the destructive power of childlessness and widowhood.

While *mt* is widely accepted to mean Mot or death in general, *šr* is more problematic. In addition to “evil” and “corruption,” *šr* has been translated as “dissolution,” “to contend,” “to grow angry,” “to have a bad odor” and “prince.”²⁵² Smith argues for “prince” based on the Akkadian *šarru* and the accompanying imagery of enthronement (*y**tb***) and scepters (*h**t***), resulting in “Death and Ruler.”²⁵³ At this point, there is no consensus on *šr*. A binomial for Mot is perhaps the best suggestion. Mot or death personified is the clear subject of line eight.²⁵⁴ Establishing the identification of the subject as Death supports the proposal that the Ugaritian’s invocation is principally concerned with the eradication of death.

²⁴⁹ N. Wyatt, “The Identity of *Mt wšr*,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 9 (1977): 380.

²⁵⁰ Wyatt, *Religious Texts*, 326; he translate *mt* as “lord” on the basis that *mt* can mean “man.”

²⁵¹ Wyatt, “The Identity,” 381.

²⁵² Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 40.

²⁵³ *Rituals and Myths*, 40.

²⁵⁴ The difference between Mot and death personified is negligible. However, it is likely the Ugaritians referred to the general concept of death without always intending the “character” Mot and all his accompanying dramatic history. In the current text, it is unusual that Mot does not seem to be speaking or acting. Whatever the case, death is clearly personified.

The second text critical challenge in this passage is *yšql šdmth* in line 10b. Wyatt maintains the vineyard pruning is metaphorical for El's pre-marital circumcision intended to symbolize fertility; thus, "They let his tendrils fall like a vine."²⁵⁵ He argues, per Howard Eilberg-Schwartz,²⁵⁶ that the biblical authors referred to "circumcised" or "uncircumcised" plants and trees to indicate fruitful capacity or lack thereof.²⁵⁷ Eilberg-Schwartz relates this language by analogy to Israelite motives for circumcision—preparation of the male sex organ for reproduction. Wyatt believes El is being circumcised to enhance his reproductive ability as demonstrated by his virility in the mythological narrative. He suggests "tendrils" (*šdmth*) is built on a causative form of *dm* (as in "blood of grapes"; Deut 32:14) and so, "the part of the plant which produces the juice . . . the shoot from which the bunches grow."²⁵⁸

Smith rejects Wyatt's translation because *dm* itself is metaphorical for juice (not an actual juice-producing aspect of a plant), and when it means "juice of grapes" in biblical texts *dm* is always accompanied by a noun.²⁵⁹ In agreement with most scholars Smith translates *šdmth* as "terrace" or "field" ("He is felled to the terrace like a vine"). He also sees violence in the verb *yšql* ("He/they is/are felled), a root possibly related to killing, and not a "productive" cutting of circumcision. However, he concedes, "Mot's limbs may be the image evoked, whether implicitly the limbs fall 'to the terrace' or explicitly they fell 'his tendrils' . . . 'Hand' [i.e. penis] is perhaps included in what is pruned of Mot."²⁶⁰ Gaster also suggested castration.²⁶¹ Wyatt's proposal of circumcision falters because he cannot establish that the subject is El. Context strongly suggests

²⁵⁵ Wyatt, *Religious Texts*, 327

²⁵⁶ *The Savage in Judaism: Anthropology Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism*.

²⁵⁷ N. Wyatt, "The Pruning of the Vine in KTU 1.23," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 24 (1992): 425-427; W. Watson, following Wyatt translates, "They cause his shoots to fall like a vine" ("Aspects of Style in KTU 1.23," *SEL* 11 [1994]: 4).

²⁵⁸ N. Wyatt, "A New Look at Ugaritic *šdmth*," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 37 (1992): 150-151.

²⁵⁹ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 45-47.

²⁶⁰ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 45-47.

²⁶¹ Gaster, "Canaanite Ritual," 59.

that Death is the subject in which case pre-marital circumcision is nonsensical. While castration is a possibility, this is conjecture. Nothing in the text warrants constructing the image as a sexual innuendo. What can be discerned from the text are images of bereavement and the defeat of Death.

In the second pericope describing the birth of the Goodly Gods, there is some discussion on the meaning of *msprt* in line 25: *šps̄ msprt dlthm* (“Shapshu _____ their branches”; 25). Wyatt suggests Shapshu “counts their tendrils” and others have suggested Shapshu “takes care of their weakness” or Shapshu “makes fruitful.”²⁶² Smith has “Shapshu braids their branches.”²⁶³ Lewis translates, “Shapshu shines on their branches.”²⁶⁴ H. Ginsburg suggests “Shapshu increases their branches.”²⁶⁵ The third masculine plural suffix on branches (*dlthm*) implies the Goodly Gods as the antecedent.²⁶⁶ Thus, the actions of Shapshu refer to some kind of nurturing of the newborn infants. Based on cognates of the Arabic, *dafara*, some have translated *msprt* as “nurses” or “aids.”²⁶⁷ Whereas Death is defeated in viticultural terms (lines 8-11), here the infant Goodly Gods are caused to thrive with similar metaphorical language. Whether “braiding” or “aiding,” the sun causes plants to grow. Just as the infants are fed at Athirat’s breast, so they are similarly nurtured by the rays of the sun-god.

An examination of the primary textual challenges confirms key aspects of the invocation. The subject of 8-11 is the death of Death, and 23-26 refer to the birth and nurturance of the Goodly Gods. The substance of the invocation can now be elucidated. Often lines 23-26 are logically paired with the first invocation. However, even though the second invocation recalls the

²⁶² Wyatt, *Religious Texts*, 329.

²⁶³ *Rituals and Myths*, 21.

²⁶⁴ “*El’s Divine Feast*,” 209.

²⁶⁵ “Notes on ‘The Birth of the Gracious and Beautiful Gods,’” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1 (1935): 53.

²⁶⁶ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 67.

²⁶⁷ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 66.

first one, the metaphorical vineyard imagery also connects the content to lines 8-13. Lines 23-26 are associated with both sections. The first invocation is followed by the presenting problem: Death (8-13). The second invocation names the solution: the birth of the Goodly Gods (23-29).

The first invocation is followed by a poem portraying Death sitting on a throne with a scepter of childlessness and widowhood.²⁶⁸ The imagery conveys two levels: the phenomenon of death and its specific impact—childlessness and widowhood. The Ugaritians are praying for an end to death, but more specifically, they seek intervention into the specific ways death has affected their lives. The cause of death is unknown. The ritual might have been performed for an immediate need or as a regular ceremony to ward off death. Given the importance of food in the narrative, food shortage is likely. Perhaps starvation is in view, whether a current crisis or concern for future drought. Identifying similar wording in Jeremiah 18:21, Cutler and Macdonald believe the ritual was intended to bring about famine relief.²⁶⁹

In addition to starvation, childlessness might result from sterility. The connotation of *tkl* is “bereaved of children.” Lewis suggests “sterility,” as does Wyatt.²⁷⁰ Tsumura argues that *tkl* refers to the loss of existing children in congruence with the nuance of widowhood.²⁷¹ But it does not have to be taken exclusively as such. Sterility remains a possibility and the mythological narrative strengthens that interpretation.

By its reference to childlessness and widowhood the invocation represents common fertility concerns. This does not imply a “fertility cult.”²⁷² The term “fertility” is subject to abuse and misinterpretation because it is often erroneously associated with sexual themes and

²⁶⁸ Contra Smith, poetic parallelism negates the need to envision two separate scepters (*Rituals and Myths*, 42).

²⁶⁹ . Cutler and Macdonald, “On the Origins,” 40.

²⁷⁰ “El’s Divine Feast,” 208; *Religious Texts*, 326.

²⁷¹ “Ugaritic God,” 409.

²⁷² Of note, Pardee sees no evidence of a fertility cult in the Ugaritic corpus (*Ritual and Cult*, 234).

accompanying ritual acts.²⁷³ However, it is “quite rare to find archaeological evidence” for such performances.²⁷⁴ “Fertility” merely connotes growth of food (crops and livestock) and procreation.²⁷⁵ These are universal concerns for all people throughout time that have been brought before God/gods without ritualistic sex.

The image of Death on the throne in line 8 is followed by Death refigured as a vine that is pruned, bound and felled. Death’s reign ends; he is no longer in control, but rather becomes an object handled and discarded like a withered plant. There is little argument from scholars that Death’s defeat is envisioned here. However, many have interpreted the viticultural language as indicative of fertility rites. De Moor sees a New Year festival where a “scarecrow constructed out of tendrils of picked grapes” is ritually mutilated to celebrate Mot’s death.²⁷⁶ However, as discussed below, Frazer’s theory of a dying vegetation god has been misapplied to KTU 1.23. The viticultural language is metaphorical for the death of Death, not the death of a vegetation god. The context here does not support the fertility festival theory.²⁷⁷ Childlessness and widowhood are hardly consistent with agricultural celebration.

The association of Death’s death with fertility rites results from a confusion of Frazer’s theory of the death of a *vegetation* god. His thesis was grounded in a belief that “primitive” people often killed their kings before they became old or sick in order to harness their vigor for a successor.²⁷⁸ Frazer then transferred this concept to the hypothetical vegetation spirit:

If this explanation holds good of the custom of killing divine kings and priests in general, it is still more obviously applicable to the custom of annually killing the representative of

²⁷³ Emmanuel Anati, “The Question of Fertility Cults” in *Archeology and Fertility Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean: Papers Presented at the First International Conference on Archaeology of the Ancient Mediterranean, the University of Malta September 1985* (ed. A. Bonanno; Amsterdam: Gruner, 1986) 2.

²⁷⁴ Anati, “Question,” 2.

²⁷⁵ Segert, “Ugaritic Text,” 218.

²⁷⁶ *An Anthology*, 120.

²⁷⁷ Tsumura, following Watson, believes the destruction of a hostile deity is in mind rather than “a fertility myth or a rite of desacralization of the present year’s crop” (“Ugaritic God,” 413).

²⁷⁸ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 265-266.

the tree-spirit or spirit of vegetation in spring. For the decay of plant life in winter is readily interpreted by primitive man as an enfeeblement of the spirit of vegetation; the spirit has, he thinks, grown old and weak and must therefore be renovated by being slain and brought to life in a younger and fresher form.²⁷⁹

Frazer also described rites of the death of Death. Effigies of Death were carried out of towns to symbolize the driving away of illness.²⁸⁰ Yet this rite, according to Frazer, was really a distortion of the original ritual involving the vegetation god: “It follows, therefore, that in these cases the effigy called Death must be an embodiment of the tree-spirit or spirit of vegetation.”²⁸¹ He considers the moniker “Death” for the vegetation god to be a “late and inadequate expression” since “an abstract notion like death is not primitive.”²⁸² Thus, Frazer was not speaking of the death of Death at all. He was postulating a theory that envisioned the death of the vegetation god, such that, “far from being an extinction of the divine spirit, it is only the beginning of a purer and stronger manifestation of it.”²⁸³ To apply Frazer’s theory to KTU 1.23 is to mistakenly interpret Mot as a vegetation spirit and to suggest that his death was undertaken so as to increase his power!

Gaster popularized Frazer’s theory for KTU 1.23. Finding a parallel in Greek mythology, Frazer described the god Dionysus as a vegetation spirit—the “personification of the vine and the exhilaration produced by the juice of the grape.”²⁸⁴ Following suit Gaster interpreted KTU 1.23:8-11 as a “seasonal vinedressers’ chanty in which, as in so many parts of the world, the pruned vine is personified as a kind of dionysiac spirit.”²⁸⁵ This fertility theme has haunted the interpretation of “The Goodly Gods” ever since. Most recently, Smith asserts:

²⁷⁹ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 300.

²⁸⁰ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 307, 310-311.

²⁸¹ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 315.

²⁸² Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 315.

²⁸³ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 300.

²⁸⁴ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 386.

²⁸⁵ Gaster, “Canaanite Ritual,” 59.

Following Gaster, one may see this text as a sort of firstfruits celebration of agricultural fertility . . . The section presents [the god of Death] pruned like the vegetation of the late summer crop of grapevines . . . [the] vocabulary of 1.23 in this section suggests a time when the power of Mot is waning . . . the transition in late summer/early fall from the dry season to the rainy season.²⁸⁶

Smith's reference to the "waning" of Mot reflects Frazer's theory of winter vegetation that was destroyed as it disintegrated. Smith equates Mot's waning with "the fruit [that] waxes in strength."²⁸⁷ The problem with this premise, as already stated, is that Mot is not a god of vegetation; he is the god of death. And the Ugaritians' hope is certainly not that Mot should return more fresh and powerful. Smith interprets the cutting of the vine as a type of death that provides a benefit (the fruit): "In short, life feeds on the destruction of death, if only for the moment of the harvest and its ritual celebration."²⁸⁸ This sentiment is strikingly similar to Frazer's statement: "Therefore, the being which has just been destroyed—the so-called Death—must be supposed to be endowed with a vivifying and quickening influence, which it can communicate to the vegetable and even animal world."²⁸⁹ However, Frazer goes on to explain that this "quickenning influence" betrays the reality that Death is not really the referent; rather the vegetation god, over a period of time, came to be called Death as the rites and myth became distorted.

While the Ugaritians likely had agricultural celebrations, there is no evidence of a dying vegetation god in KTU 1.23 or in any other Ugaritic text.²⁹⁰ The only other text used to support

²⁸⁶ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 15, 47-48.

²⁸⁷ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 48.

²⁸⁸ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 159.

²⁸⁹ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 313.

²⁹⁰ Paul L. Watson, "The Death of 'Death' in the Ugaritic Texts," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 92 (1972): 61.

such an argument is KTU 1.6:II:30-37. Some interpreters have erroneously concluded that this text refers to fertility rites or desacralization of crops²⁹¹:

She [Anat] seizes Mot,
With a sword she splits him,
With a sieve she winnows him.
With fire she burns him,
With millstones she grinds him.
In a field she sows him.
The birds eat his flesh,
Fowl devour his parts.

As Paul Watson argues, “Any grain that is so split, winnowed, burned, ground, and scattered cannot possibly be expected to serve as seed. Second, in point of fact Mot’s remains are eaten by the birds and are not left in the ground to germinate.”²⁹² Watson also exposes the weakness in the theory of desacralization of crops which arose from a presumed correlation with Leviticus 2:14. However, the context is devoid of any references to desacralization rites.²⁹³ As Watson points out, the narrative clearly describes vengeance. And when Mot recounts the story of his treatment, he indicates his parts were scattered on the sea, not planted.²⁹⁴ Watson proposes instead a correlation with Exodus 32:20 where the golden calf is destroyed in similar terms—burning, grinding, and scattering.²⁹⁵ Envisioned in KTU 1.6 then is the “destruction of a hostile deity.”²⁹⁶

So also in KTU 1.23 the death of Death and not a vegetation god is in mind. The viticultural imagery, overshadowed by Frazer’s influence, has prevented the metaphor from being interpreted for what it is—a metaphor for destruction. The viticultural language is borrowed from the vineyards of Ugarit. This familiar scene was used to figuratively describe the

²⁹¹ Translated by Smith, “The Baal Cycle,” 156.

²⁹² Watson, “Death of Death,” 61.

²⁹³ Watson, “Death of Death,” 62.

²⁹⁴ Watson, “Death of Death,” 64.

²⁹⁵ Watson, “Death of Death,” 63.

²⁹⁶ Watson, “Death of Death,” 60.

death of Death and the nurturance of the Goodly Gods in the field of El and Athirat *waRahmay*.

That being said, did the Ugaritians have a specific reason for choosing a vineyard to represent their presenting problem and desired solution? If the death of a vegetation god is not in view, is there another reason to image Death as a vine? Possibly, Mot is an overgrown, deadly vine that is choking life. Its destruction allows the beneficial vines (the Goodly Gods) to thrive. This is congruent with the metaphorical meaning of El's and Athirat *waRahmay*'s field—the sown land where Life is found. If life is to reign completely, death must be cut out.

Immediately after the officiants recite the poem of Death's reign and downfall, the "enterers" respond with "And the field is the field of El, the field of Athirat *waRahmay*." El and his wife own the field, and by implication the vineyard growing in it. Thus the gods *par excellence* have pruned, bound and felled Death. But Death is not the only vine in El and Athirat *waRahmay*'s field; the Goodly Gods are also metaphorically imaged as vines. In contrast to the vine (Death) that is cut down and destroyed, these vines (the Goodly Gods) are carefully tended to encourage growth. The infant gods are imaged as vineyard branches and grapes thriving under the nurturing rays of the sun-god. The refrain is then repeated: "The field is the field of El, the field of Athirat *waRahmay*."

Even though the Goodly Gods are the ones invoked, El and Athirat are the progenitors of all the gods. They plant and cultivate the "vines" in their field. The saving act starts then with them. *Athirat waRahmay*'s efficacy is also indicated, not only in giving birth and nursing the Goodly Gods, but also in one additional recitation in the invocation: "Rahmay goes hunting, and Athirat sets out; they are girded with goodly might" (16-17). This foreshadows their collaboration with the Goodly Gods' search for food in the mythological narrative. This recitation comes between the two viticultural images of Death and the Goodly Gods.

In summary, the ritual portion of KTU 1.23 is an invocation to the gods to avert death. The “prayer” is recited throughout the service, interspersed with ritual acts involving fire, a basin, herbs and milk, a sacrificial procession and singing. The presenting problem and desired solution comprise the content of the recitations in lines 1-29. These are held together with a viticultural metaphor. The invocation calls for the death of Death and the birth of the Goodly Gods who will help facilitate that mission under the watch of El and *Athirat waRahmay*. The text provides an intriguing and rare glimpse into the order of an Ugaritic service. As with all Ugaritic rituals, a sacrificial offering is presented to honor the gods and encourage a response to the petition. The detail and care taken in the ritual, along with the initiative to call upon the gods, is indicative of the people’s faith in divine intervention.

The Gods’ Response (30-76)

The mythological narrative thematically connected to the ritual consciously and creatively proposes to the imagination the triumph of life over death. The struggle between life and death is projected on two levels: 1) the forces of death are averted when the Goodly Gods resist death by searching for life in the outback, thereby tipping the scales toward Dawn; 2) the gods intervene to transform childlessness into birth and famine into plentitude. Where the invocation only briefly describes the Ugaritians’ presenting concern and desired solution, the myth vividly illustrates the gods’ response. The narrative envisions a world of possibility beyond human capacity—a world not “reducible to asking for the facts of what is empirically verifiable.”²⁹⁷

In crafting the myth the creators were not attempting to make scientific claims nor were they unconsciously encrypting coded messages, thereby obscuring the true meaning of their own

²⁹⁷ Muldoon, *On Ricoeur*, 60.

text. The creators consciously utilized metaphor and poetic devices to describe transcendent realities. Lack of attention to literary strategies has resulted in reductionistic interpretations. For example, El's sexual activity was deemed evidence for the Ugaritians' ribald tendencies. However, to read El's behavior as a script for ritualistic sex or unconscious codes projecting dualities is to miss the metaphorical meaning behind it.

The gods are described as mimicking human action, not necessarily because the Ugaritians perceived the gods as just like humans, but because language is limited in its ability to convey transcendence. How is an invisible, indescribable world described? By taking what is known about the world—its images and relationships—and projecting those onto a higher plane through metaphor. This is readily apparent in the geography of the mythological narrative. El's activity takes place at the seashore, "the shore of the Deep." The Goodly Gods' activity occurs in the outback and the sown land. These are "earthly" images. The Ugaritians lived a half mile from the beach and enjoyed fertile land.²⁹⁸ They used these tangible images to metaphorically convey transcendent reality. The sea and the outback are the edges of the earth—even the edges of Death's Realm. The Baal Cycle describes the search for slain Baal in these outer boundaries:

We went to the edge of the earth
To the limits of the waters.
We came to the pleasant land of the outback
To the beautiful field of Death's Realm.²⁹⁹

Yam's "realm is comparable and ultimately identical with Mot's."³⁰⁰ Thus two key locations of activity in the myth are in Death's Realm. The creators of KTU 1.23 envisioned the gods interacting with and averting the very force they were too weak to confront. El's sexual activity

²⁹⁸ Schniedewind and Hunt, *Primer*, 5-6.

²⁹⁹ KTU 1.5:VI:3-7.

³⁰⁰ N. Wyatt, "Sea and Desert: Symbolic Geography in West Semitic Religious Thought," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 19 (1987): 384.

leads to conception and birth on the edges of Death's Realm, symbolizing the triumph of life over death. The Goodly Gods and Athirat *waRahmay* transcend Death to find the sown land.

Without considering the deliberate literary strategies utilized to project this world of possibility, KTU 1.23 is not comprehensible. Its parts remain fragmented. Attention to the Ugaritians use of language in both the ritual and the myth allows a holistic picture to emerge. As already discussed the invocation describes in poetic metaphor the defeat of Death and the birth of the Goodly Gods under the watch of El and Athirat *waRahmay*. The Ugaritians were calling upon the gods to avert Death, including the specific manner death touched them—childlessness, widowhood and famine. The myth, divided into two parts (30-61 and 61b-75), imaginatively recounts the gods' activities to bring about that desired outcome.

Averting Widowhood and Childlessness (30-61)

The first section of the myth addresses the invocation's concern of widowhood and childlessness; El marries and has children. This portion of KTU 1.23 has received the most attention from scholars and is the source of the text's designation as "sacred marriage." The extensive description of El's penis, in particular, has earned the poem a reputation of ribaldry. However, the condition of his member corresponds to the Ugaritians' concern of childlessness. Just as the location of El's activity at the seashore metaphorically conveys Death's Realm, so also the focus on El's penis depicts the triumph of conception (life) over impotency (death).

In the past, preconceived notions regarding "the Canaanites" derived from biblical texts, as well as Frazer's and Gaster's long-standing influence, have prevented an accurate reading of El's sexual activity. Davidson maintains that "The Goodly Gods" is evidence that sacred prostitution occurred in Ugarit. In fact, he considers the text to be the "most illuminating"

example of Syro-Palestinian “sacred sex orgies.”³⁰¹ Yet, Ugaritic texts themselves argue against this. KTU 1.4 states:

For two feasts Baal hates
Three, the Cloudrider
A feast of shame, a feast of degradation,
And a feast of the lewdness of maidens.
For there shame is seen,
And there is the lewdness of maidens.

KTU 1.23 addresses the Ugaritians’ desire for family and their belief in the gods’ power to supernaturally intervene. Having children was of utmost importance in the ancient Near East. Ugaritian texts indicate both men and women strongly valued progeny. In the epic of Kirta, the king lost his authority for lack of offspring. In Aqhat, childless Dani’ilu petitions the gods for children.³⁰² The goddess Anat is also depicted as unhappy with her lack of offspring.³⁰³ Attention to literary devices in KTU 1.23, including mixed genre and macro parallelism, reveals that El’s sexual activity is not about orgies but rather offspring.

The first literary strategy is the attachment of the myth to a ritual. This is not a myth like the Baal Cycle that stands as an independent narrative. The myth, whether or not it existed in a discrete form (or forms) previously, has been recontextualized and refigured by the ritual. Furthermore, KTU 1.23 is not the only extant mixed genre text from Ugarit. Instructive is an evaluation of another mixed text, the *historiola* KTU 1.114. A *historiola* is a text that combines myth with medicinal remedies or incantations for treating illness.³⁰⁴ Out of all the Ugaritic texts, KTU 1.114 and KTU 1.23:37-48 have struck modern interpreters as unseemly depictions of the

³⁰¹ Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 94.

³⁰² Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (Boston: Brill, 2003) 208.

³⁰³ Marsman, *Women in Ugarit*, 209.

³⁰⁴ Pardee, *Ritual and Cult*, 167.

supreme god of the pantheon. Significantly, they are both mixed genre texts and they both include depictions of medicinal remedies. KTU 1.114 provides instructions for the cure of a hangover and KTU 1.23:37-48 describes a cure for impotency. I argue that KTU 1.23:37-48 is a *historiola* used to illustrate the human problem of childlessness projected onto El in the form of impotency.

There are certainly differences between these two texts—KTU 1.114 is not a ritual text and KTU 1.23 is not a “classic” (if there is one) example of *historiola*. But KTU 1.23:37-48 does appear to be a variation of a *historiola*. In KTU 1.114, El has a party at his house and becomes drunk to the point of unconsciousness. Following this description, instructions are given for treating a hangover. The purpose of the text is not to provide a theological statement about El; the story is used to illustrate a *human* problem and remedy. In other words, the next time my Ugaritian friend has too much to drink I will be sure to put the “hair of a dog” on his forehead (29). KTU 1.23 does not give instructions directly but it does describe El using a medicinal remedy for impotency. The poem spends no less than five stanzas describing the condition of El’s penis. His member is described as long like the sea (perhaps flaccid) and later drooping. Four times his penis is characterized as impotent: “Your staff droops; your love-staff sinks.” Each time this phrase occurs it is immediately followed by a description of El roasting a bird on the fire. In some ancient Near Eastern contexts birds were used for medicinal purposes. A Mesopotamian text (KUB 4.48:I:1-7) prescribes a plucked, crushed bird for impotency.³⁰⁵ The present narrative supports a similar conclusion. After four repetitions of the roasting bird El finally initiates coitus and his drooping penis is no longer mentioned.

Parallelism and repetition clearly draw attention to the condition of the penis and its relationship to the bird. In fact, this problem and its remedy (and the Goodly Gods’ birth)

³⁰⁵ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 87.

dominate the pericope. Actual sexual activity is barely mentioned and takes up only three lines (49-51). As with KTU 1.114, the objective is not to make a statement about *El's* condition.

Rather, impotency is the *human* problem. Impotency metaphorically conveys the overarching problem of childlessness. In seeking the gods' assistance the Ugaritians have projected an imaginary world where El defeats childlessness through *symbolic* use of a medicinal remedy familiar to the Ugaritians.

Before further addressing the implications of El's successful medicinal remedy, it is pertinent to discuss the debate regarding the condition of El's penis. Albright suggested the drooping "love-staff" might indicate "subsidence of the penis after intercourse."³⁰⁶ Others rejected that proposal because El's penis droops before sex occurs.³⁰⁷ Marvin Pope argued the penis that is "as long as the sea" is flaccid and indicative of El's fading status in the pantheon.³⁰⁸ Cross, Cutler and Macdonald contend for El's virility as proven by his success impregnating his two wives.³⁰⁹ Similarly Lewis remarks, "It is hard to maintain that El is impotent in view of his ribald behavior in this text and elsewhere."³¹⁰ However he offers no explanation for El's drooping penis. Smith seems uncertain but leans toward Albright's suggestion that the roasting bird represents El's excitement followed by subsidence.³¹¹

One of the primary issues arising in the debate on impotency/virility is El's status. Those who see El as old and losing power support an impotency view. Those who find impotency to be incongruent with the patriarch's position argue for virility. Scholars also discuss El's age, claiming the text must be portraying a young El due to his ability to have sex. This betrays a

³⁰⁶ Albright, "The North-Canaanite Poems," 135.

³⁰⁷ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 84

³⁰⁸ Pope, Marvin. "Ups and Downs," 705.

³⁰⁹ Pope, "Ups and Downs," 705; Cutler and Macdonald, "On the Origins," 34.

³¹⁰ Lewis, "El's Divine Feast," 206

³¹¹ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 88.

literalistic reading that fails to apprehend the metaphors inherent in myth. El is not “old” and therefore impotent or weak nor is he “young” and vigorous. His advanced “age” metaphorically represents his power as patriarch. El is almost always (if not always) in control behind the scenes. His authority is wielded with a calm that comes with complete confidence. This calm can be misinterpreted as passivity. However an examination of the literary texts quickly reveals El’s activity. In the epic of Kirta El is the first to respond to the king’s needs (KTU 1.14:I:35-41). In Aqhat Baal responds first but is forced to ask El to intervene (KTU 1.17:I:15-26). El is the god who can heal illness when no other god can (KTU 1.16:V:1-28). And in the Baal Cycle he is the one who gives or withholds authority by granting or rescinding kingship and palaces. Likewise El’s active role is evident throughout KTU 1.23. He owns the field where death is cut down (13, 28). He marches to the shore of the Deep (30), shoots, plucks and cooks a bird (37-38), entices two females (39), kisses, embraces and impregnates his wives (49-51), commands offerings to be made (54), and delegates his wives and sons to hunt in the outback (64-68). He is the most active god in the text and the one giving out instruction. In essence El “remains supreme in all the epic and mythological literature.”³¹²

The question of El’s impotency and status is resolved by recognizing that El’s own impotency is not envisioned; rather the Ugaritians in a manner similar to a *historiola* projected a world where a god’s actions illustrated and remedied a human problem. The Ugaritians did not bring their concern of childlessness to an impotent god. Precisely because El is powerful he has the ability to overcome the obstacle. His status as Creator and progenitor of all the gods make him the best candidate for resolving childlessness. In fact El is the “go-to” god for requesting children. In the epics of Kirta and Aqhat, El’s blessing confers offspring: “Bless him, Bull, El my

³¹² Del Olmo Lete, *Canaanite Religion*, 47-48.

father. Prosper him, Creator of Creatures. Let him have a son in his house, Offspring within his palace . . . El takes [a cup] in his hand. He blesses Daniel, man of Rapiu.”³¹³

Of course, El cannot resolve the condition of childlessness alone; he requires a partner. The text does not mention the circumstances for El’s single status. But given the mention of widowhood in the ritual it might be implied here. Another text that describes a man searching for a wife is Kirta. In this epic, the king mourns his widowhood (KTU 1.14:I:14-15). The narrative of El’s divine espousal and the birth of his sons is repeated twice in a common Ugaritian macro parallel. Typically the parallels provide new information in the refrain to create a more comprehensive view of the event. The present text only identifies El’s wives as “two females.”³¹⁴ However in the second description his wives are identified as the mothers of the Goodly Gods; and line 24 already identified the mother(s) of the Goodly Gods as Athirat *waRahmay*. The difference between the accounts has caused confusion regarding whether two sets of wives and sons are intended. Others recognize the poetic device and identify both sets of wives and sons as the same in each. The parallel enhances the story by providing more details about the wives. To further illuminate the purpose of parallelism it will be useful to give two examples from other Ugaritic texts before examining KTU 1.23:

³¹³ KTU 1.17:1:34-43. Translated by Parker, “Aqhat,” 52-53. See also KTU 1.15:II:16-28.

³¹⁴ These two wives appear to be introduced in lines 31-33 with the word *mšī ltm*. However, this section remains one of the most obscure in KTU 1.23. Many different suggestions have been made for the meaning of *mšī ltm*, including “torches” (Pope, “Ups and Downs”), “handsful” (Albright, “North-Canaanite Poems,” 134), “girl-acrobats” (De Moor, *An Anthology*, 123), “cult-personnel” (Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 75), “two inflamed ones” (Wyatt, *Religious Texts*, 330), and some kind of water-pouring ritual (Lipinski, “Fertility Cult,” 208-210). Smith translates it “servers,” following Pardee’s nuance of causing something to be brought up out of a pot (Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 76). Thus, two females are serving food. Despite the wide-range of interpretations, many conclude that this passage refers to the two women El subsequently marries. What exactly is occurring, however, is unclear. Particularly perplexing is the reference to mother and father and high and low. Pope provided an elaborate cosmological theory of opposition in unity (Pope, “The Ups and Downs,” 703). This has not been well-received. Perhaps Smith’s proposal that the females are pleading with their parents for permission to marry is closer to the context (*Rituals and Myths*, 78).

KTU 1.16:VI:30-36³¹⁵

In time of attack you take flight
And lie low in the mountains.
You've let your hand fall to vice.

You don't pursue the widow's case;
You don't take up the wretched's claim.

Your sickbed is your consort,
Your infirmity, your company.

KTU 1.19:II:12-17³¹⁶

Dani'ilu goes around the **brush**
Sees the **stalks** in the **brush**
Sees the **stalks** in the **thicket**
Embraces and kisses the **stalks**

Let me console the **stalks**
Let the **stalks** shoot up in the **brush**
The wild plants sprout in the **thicket**

KTU 1.23:51-54³¹⁷

As he kisses, there's conception,
As he embraces, there's impregnation.

The two crouch and give birth
To Dawn and Dusk.

Parallel lines 43-52

In time of attack you take flight
And lie low in the mountains.
You've let your hand fall to vice.

You don't pursue the widow's case;
You don't take up the wretched's claim.

**You don't expel the poor's oppressor.
You don't feed the orphan who faces you.
Nor the widow who stands at your back.**

Your sickbed is your consort,
Your infirmity, your company.

Parallel lines 19-24

Dani'ilu goes around his **cracked earth**
Sees the **ears** in the **cracked earth**
Sees the **ears** in the **dried land**
Embraces and kisses the **ears**

Let me console the **ears**,
Let the **ears** shoot up in the **cracked earth**,
The wild plants sprout in the **dried land**.

Parallel lines 56-61

As he kisses, there's conception,
As he embraces, there's impregnation.

**He sits, counts to five
Five (months) for growth
Ten for the full completion.**

The two crouch and give birth,
**Give birth to the Goodly Gods,
Day-old devourers, one-day-old boys,
Who suck the nipple of the breast.**

³¹⁵ Translated by Greenstein, "Kirta," 40-42.

³¹⁶ Translated by Greenstein, "Kirta," 69-70.

³¹⁷ Translation taken from the emended version in this thesis based on Smith's rendition (*Rituals and Myths*, 23-24).

Word to El was brought:
El's [two wi]ves have given birth."
"What have they borne?"
"A newborn pair, Dawn and Dusk

Word to El was brought:
"El's two wives have given birth."
"What have they borne?"
**"Twin Goodly Gods,
Day-old devourers, one-day-old boys,
Who suck the nipple of the breast."**

**"Make an offering to Lady Sun,
And to the stationary stars."**

Repetition is common in Ugaritic literature. Sometimes this repetition is verbatim, but often the refrain is slightly different so as to add details to the story. These parallels typically describe one event, though not necessarily one moment. The first account might be a "rehearsal." For example, in the epic of Kirta, the king dreams of El's appearance and the sacrificial offering. The parallel then repeats the story as reality. Also in the epic of Kirta, KTU 1.16 (cited above) the first account recites the words that Yassib senses in his spirit. He then delivers the words in actuality to his father. The "live" action occurs once. KTU 1.16 includes additional information in the refrain that is not merely decorative. There is a heaping on of offenses. Not only are the orphan and widow left unprotected but they are also left without food.

KTU 1.23 is slightly different from KTU 1.16 because no "rehearsal" is stated. Both birth accounts are presented as actual events. In this regard KTU 1.23 is more similar to KTU 1.19 where Dani'ilu examines his field. The parallels represent the same moment. Here the refrain provides slightly different details to create a fuller account of the same incident. In the first rendition Dani'ilu is examining the stalks of the plant, in the second he is looking at the ears of corn. The change is subtle but moves from broader to more specific. The effect of the overlay is a fuller picture than a story told only once. The same is true for KTU 1.23; these are not two

separate accounts of conception and birth. The parallel lines provide a more comprehensive view of a single event.

Even though KTU 1.16 does not record a singular moment per se, the same poetic strategy is used in KTU 1.19 and 1.23. The additional information serves to enhance. Just as the heaping on of offenses in KTU 1.16 adds dimension to the story, so also the addition of counting the months in the parallel lines of KTU 1.23 is a more complete account of the birth.³¹⁸ The nursing of the gods also punctuates the newborns' growth and vitality. Similarly, overlaying the Goodly Gods onto Dawn and Dusk provides a composite of characteristics; this gives greater dimension to the twins than if only one set was mentioned.

Conspicuously absent from the second birth account in KTU 1.23 is an offering to a god. When Dawn and Dusk are born, El commands an offering be given to Shapshu. The lack of an offering here leaves the reader/listener wondering when and if an offering will be given for the Goodly Gods' birth. Two possibilities emerge. Shapshu has already been honored for what is actually a single birth; it does not need to be mentioned again. More likely, it anticipates an unfulfilled offering. Thus it foreshadows an offering still to come. That is exactly what happens.

³¹⁸ Interpreted as liturgical instructions, these lines have been used to support ritual in the mythological narrative, including sexual reenactment. The lines have been translated as "They repeat this recital five times" (Gaster, "Canaanite Ritual," 55, 68-69); or "He shall recite (this) again five times before the images, and the congregation shall sing (it)" (De Moor, *An Anthology*, 126). Lipinski comments, "The rubrical passage prescribing the five-fold recitation of the section that describes El's love-making and the songs to be sung by the assembly would seem to leave enough time . . . for the sacred marriage to be performed at this moment" ("Fertility Cult," 211). However, Tsumura has demonstrated that these lines refer to a common ancient Near Eastern refrain in birth narratives; he translates, "He sits (and) counts to five for grow[th to te]n for total completion." (Tsumura, "Problem of Myth," 387-95; Ginsburg who initially left these lines un-translated later came to a similar conclusion [391]. Wyatt also agrees with Tsumura [*Religious Texts*, 333]). Tsumura notes KTU 1.17: II: 43-44, the Babylonian Story of the Flood and certain Hittite myths all contain similar lines pertaining to birth (e.g. KTU 17:43-44 states Dani'ilu "sat [and] counted her months"). The term often translated as "assembly," implying ritual instruction, is *phr* which also means "total completion" (393). Thus, instead of an assembly oddly planted in the middle of El's love story, there is the counting of months until the completion of pregnancy.

The Goodly Gods and their mothers are commanded to give an offering in the outback to El (this will be discussed in more detail later).

Clearly, from the discussion thus far, the overwhelming emphasis of this portion of the myth pertains to offspring. The first half of the pericope focuses on a medicinal remedy for impotency and the second half describes birth. Coitus takes up only three lines and these highlight the goal of conception. The text quickly moves from coitus to focus on birth. Literarily, the repetition has an emphatic effect:

Impotency (37)
 Impotency (40)
 Impotency (43)
 Impotency (47)
 Coitus/Conception (51)
 Birth (51-52)
 Birth (52-53)
 Coitus/Conception (56)
 Months of pregnancy (56-57)
 Birth (57b-58)
 Birth (60).

Misinterpretation of this text as ribald or indicative of ritual orgies overlook the fact that sexual pleasure plays a minor role in the scene. Even the divine espousal is secondary to the drama of impotency and birth. An evaluation of the literary devices makes it clear procreation is the primary concern.

This is also true for the lines referring to coitus as evidenced by the refrain's appearance in Aqhat. These lines seem to comprise a stock reference used in contexts of childbirth:

Aqhat (KTU 1.17:I:39-40)	<i>bm nšq atth/ [bħbqh ħmħmt/</i>] In kissing his wife [conception] In embracing her, impregnation
Goodly Gods (1.23:51, 56)	<i>bm nšq whr bħbq ħ[m]ħmt</i>	In kissing, there's conception In embracing, there's impregnation

The context for sexual intercourse in Aqhat centers on Dani'ilu's pleas to the gods for children. This is instructive for interpreting the same refrain in KTU 1.23. Following this stanza in Aqhat, Dani'ilu indicates he desires a son who will "stop his abuser's spite, drive his troubles away; grasp his arm when he's drunk, support him when sated with wine . . . plaster his roof when its muddy; wash his equipment on a foul day."³¹⁹ Children and not ribaldry is behind the depiction of coitus.

Similarly, the sex scene in KTU 1.23 is about childbirth. The extensive discussion of El's penis is not vulgar but rather necessary to emphasize the problem of impotency. The purpose of the pericope is to demonstrate how the Creator god, progenitor of all life, overpowers the blight of widowhood and childlessness. There is no evidence of sacred marriage or lewdness in the text.

Averting Death and Famine (61b-76)

The second part of the mythological narrative addresses the phenomenon of Death, as well as the specific impact of that broader phenomenon—famine. The appetite of death is the primary theme. The appetite of the Ugaritians is implied; they have been left without sustenance in the wake of death's consuming hunger. The Goodly Gods are about to accomplish the mission they were invoked to do—the aversion of death. They are uniquely suited for the task because of the duality they represent. They symbolize the holistic struggle between life and death. As discussed previously, the Goodly Gods are associated with Dawn and Dusk through poetic parallelism. They may also be associated in KTU 1.12. Pardee suggests the title given to the Goodly Gods in line 23, *'agzr ym*, could meaning the "cutting" or separating of night from day.³²⁰

³¹⁹ Translation taken from both Lewis ("El's Divine Feast," 54) and De Moor (*An Anthology*, 229).

³²⁰ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 68.

As such, the Goodly Gods mirror Shapshu's rotation into the underworld at sunset and back into the realm of the living at sunrise.

The Goodly Gods' also have similarities with Mot. As Smith points out Mot has a ravenous appetite and is described with the same phrase that appears in KTU 1.23: "One lip to earth; one lip to sky."³²¹ Mot refers to his appetite as one like "the lion in the wasteland."³²² He uses both hands to gorge himself on gods and humans, including his own brothers (at Baal's trickery).³²³ Similarly, the Goodly Gods are portrayed as "devourers" who stuff "fowl of the sky and fish from the sea" into their mouths and yet remain unsated. For this reason, Smith argues the Goodly Gods are destructive forces of death. Their trip into the outback and sown land therefore represents "a theology of destruction: it comes into human and cosmic orders, not always a terrible threat, but sometimes in relative weakness when life is at its most fertile; and under these circumstances destruction too can share in the plentitude without crippling effects."³²⁴

Smith struggles to account for the Goodly Gods' participation in the ultimate blessing that concludes the text. He can do so only by creating a theology that welcomes destruction. As indicated previously in this thesis there is no evidence the Ugaritians desired to welcome death. Mot is viewed negatively and never receives offerings. Sacrifices are given to beneficial gods and Ugaritian ritual typically pertained to "ordinary" concerns such as offspring and health. This suggests that despite a connection to the forces of death the Goodly Gods are somehow beneficial. In contrast to Mot they are never described as eating people or gods or having the desire to do so. The true nature of Death is to take lives; thus the Goodly Gods have

³²¹ KTU 1.5:II:2. Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 122?

³²² KTU 1.5:I:15-10.

³²³ KTU 1.6:VI:1-15.

³²⁴ Smith, *The Rituals and Myths*, 122.

characteristics related to death's appetite but they do not actually cause death. Furthermore their opposition to Death is established in the ritual. Death is the vine destroyed and the Goodly Gods are the vines that are nurtured.

The Goodly Gods' beneficial quality seems to relate to their symbolically representing the overarching fight against death. In some sense the Goodly Gods wrestle with their own nature in the pursuit of life. In another text that may allude to the Goodly Gods, the "Eaters" are not destructive until they are cornered by Baal (KTU 1.12:35-40). Baal goes hunting for them: "Baal greatly desired to have them; the son of Dagan was eager for them. Baal approached on foot and divine Hadd on tip-toe."³²⁵ Baal seems to have no fear of them. Unlike his dread of Mot, Baal desires the Eaters. The text also suggests they might have been related to Baal ("Baal's face was on them"; 30-34).³²⁶ The rest of the text is in very poor shape, but it appears the Eaters did not appreciate being hunted and defended themselves.

The imagery of hunting and rural context suggests the Eaters are a type of wild animal. This would also indicate that rather than destructive forces of death the Goodly Gods possess a wild element that is only destructive when provoked. The wildness also symbolizes the fine line between tame and not tame; that is, the tension between life-giving impulses and destructive impulses. Mot's nature is established; no tension remains with which to wrestle. Nor do the Ugaritians seem to have any desire to negotiate with or mollify Death (if they did, they would have offered sacrifices to Mot). The Goodly Gods, on the other hand, represent the struggle between life and death and therefore the potential to tip the scales toward life.

In response to the Goodly Gods ravenous appetite El directs his sons and wives to make an offering in the outback. KTU 1.23 mentions three offerings: 1) the offering to the Goodly

³²⁵ Translated by Wyatt, *Religious Texts*, 164.

³²⁶ Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 188.

Gods in the outback mentioned in the invocation (3); 2) the offering to Shapshu following the birth of Dawn and Dusk (54); and 3) the offering El commands his wives and the Goodly Gods to give in the outback (64-65). Thus, two offerings are given in the outback. The Goodly Gods both give and receive an offering. A double entendre is evident. The command to give an offering in the outback is directed at both the human audience and the Goodly Gods (and their mothers). One offering is for the Goodly Gods and one is for an unnamed recipient. The question is to whom are the Goodly Gods and Athirat *waRahmay* giving a sacrifice? The most likely candidate appears to be El. There are no other gods left in the narrative who would receive this offering. Shapshu has already received her offering. The invocation depicts Mot's destruction, making him an unlikely candidate. The Goodly Gods (i.e. Dawn and Dusk) and Athirat *waRahmay* are the ones giving the offering. The only one not accounted for is El. The most active god in the narrative and the divine orchestrator of the response to the Ugaritian invocation emerges as the one properly honored with a sacrifice.

In Ugaritian ritual, sacrifice often precipitates divine action. The offering in the outback is not the solution to the ravenous appetite; rather the solution (sown land) follows the sacrifice. In the epic of Kirta, the king is directed to give a sacrifice to honor El and Baal. Following that offering, Kirta is empowered in his mission to obtain a wife and offspring. In the epic of Aqhat, Dani'ilu gives sacrifices to the gods for seven days before Baal and El respond to his request for offspring. The offering to the Goodly Gods is for their role in averting death. El receives an offering for his role in the birth of the Goodly Gods and his provision of the sown land. Before discussing their roles in more detail it is pertinent to evaluate the location of the offering. The location sets the stage for the Goodly Gods' heroic action.

The outback seems an unlikely place for a sacrifice. However the wilderness symbolizes the confrontation of death in Death's Realm as well as the contrast between famine and plenty (the sown land). The text refers to *mdbr qdš* and to "seven years" of hunting. Scholars are uncertain about the meaning *mdbr qdš*. Cutler and Macdonald suggest 'db is the verb for "prepare" and *qdš* the object; thus the preparation of a sacrifice.³²⁷ Pardee suggests an actual place called Qadesh and Smith views it as a "set phrase for a sanctuary space either near or in the outback as opposed to the sacred center of the shrines or temples (in cities or towns)."³²⁸ What does seem clear is that the offering is related to *qdš*. Perhaps it is not the outback itself that is holy but the offering that makes the outback holy for a ritual moment. In this way what is sacred transforms and confronts the place of death. In order to fight the forces of death it follows that death must be confronted on its own territory.

The text does not describe a dramatic fight between Baal and Mot. However the myth is attached to a ritual; as such it emphasizes the role the Ugaritians' sacrifice plays in the contest against death. Sacrifices did not "force" the gods to do anything. They acknowledged the source of power and expressed proper reverence. The Ugaritians (or at least the king and his officials) most likely offered this sacrifice in the temple and not in a rural context. The sacrifice to the Goodly Gods "occurs" in Death's Realm—a place that is not accessible to human beings. The Ugaritians offer the sacrifice in the outback in an imaginary projection.

The second element is the reference to "seven years, eight cycles" during which the Goodly Gods and Athirat *waRahmay* hunt in the outback. The number seven is generally accepted as a number for a complete period of time, while the number eight follows in a poetic

³²⁷ Cutler and Macdonald, "On the origin," 44.

³²⁸ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 117.

intensification.³²⁹ Schloen offers a creative interpretation of the gods' wilderness wandering, proposing the "exile of the disinherited kin."³³⁰ In the vein of Hagar and Ishmael's banishment by Abraham, El exiles his family. However, the text does not indicate any animosity on the part of El. In fact, his eager counting of the months of pregnancy and command to give an offering upon their birth suggests he highly prizes his sons. El sends his sons and wives into the outback for a specific purpose: "Make an offering amid holy outback."³³¹

Following the pattern of double entendre in this section of the myth, hunting seems to signify special activity in Death's Realm as well as the hunt for food in barren land. Only the Goodly Gods are described as hunting in lines 67-68. However, their mothers were sent into the outback with them, and the ritual already referred to the goddesses' participation in the hunt (16-17). Smith explains the hunt with a structuralist approach: the good goddesses go into the wilderness to find food, but the destructive Goodly Gods find food in the sown land. However, the narrative implies that the goddesses and Goodly Gods are hunting together in the wilderness. There is no indication that any of them found food in the outback. The food and wine is only in the sown land.

I propose that the hunt symbolizes activity that resists death and seeks life. Two verbs that scholars translate as "hunt" occur in KTU 1.23, *wtšd* (16) and *tšdn* (68). Other texts demonstrate that these verbs can refer to searching or hunting for people or things and not only animals. The Baal Cycle and the *historiola* KTU 1.114 (discussed previously) use these verbs in the context of rescue from Death's Realm or the search for medicine. In the Baal Cycle Anat

³²⁹ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 119.

³³⁰ Schloen, "Exile," 209-220.

³³¹ Furthermore, Schloen's proposal does not adequately incorporate the impotency/conception scene. He postulates that the two women enticed by El are actually dependent servants whom he seduces in a drunken stupor at a wine festival. Again, the theme of fertility festival is projected into the text even when such connections are clearly strained.

searches (*wṯṣd*) for Baal in Death's Realm. *Wṯṣd* is the same verb used to describe Rahmay and Athirat's activity in KTU 1.23:16. In KTU 1.114 Attartu and Anat are said to go off hunting when El "falls as though dead" (21-24). They bring back items to heal him (26-28). The word for "hunt" in the *historiola* is the same verb used to describe the Goodly Gods hunt in the outback (*tṣdn*; KTU 1.23:68). These terms can refer to hunting or searching in general. But their use elsewhere to refer to acts related to healing and rescue from Death's Realm suggests that the hunting in the outback in KTU 1.23 metaphorically represents the quest for life. Further support emerges from the context as the hunt eventually leads to Life—the sown land.

The Goodly Gods' hunt also has a secondary meaning of search for food. The failure to secure food in the outback (none is mentioned) alludes to famine. Even though food shortage is not explicitly mentioned in the ritual, something is causing childlessness and widowhood. Famine is a likely culprit. Jeremiah 18:21 refers to famine using similar language: "Therefore deliver up their children to famine . . . Let their wives become childless and widowed."³³² Cutler and Macdonald also see a famine situation. However, despite seeing a "famine ritual accompanied by myth," they, contradictorily, envision an "entirely different character and purpose" between the ritual and myth.³³³ The ritual overcomes famine, while the myth is burlesque. Subscribing to Gaster's theory, they conceptualize the love scene only as parody, such that, the myth becomes divorced from the ritual, leaving an incongruent pairing of devastating famine and carnival burlesque. Cutler and Macdonald explain this discrepancy by suggesting the burlesque aspect was added later. But this does not explain why the Ugaritians would have put them together.

³³² Cutler and Macdonald, "On the Origin," 40.

³³³ Cutler and Macdonald, "On the Origin," 41.

The devastation of famine is underscored by descriptions of the Goodly Gods appetite, the barren land, and the activity that occurs in the outback. The ravenous appetite of the Goodly Gods symbolizes both the characteristics of death and physical hunger. This restless appetite causes the Goodly Gods and their mothers to “sojourn,” “roam,” and “hunt,” for seven years as they search for life (66-68). The hunt eventually leads to the edge of the outback (68), the border between death and life. Finally, the desperate search bears fruit as the Goodly Gods cross the line into the sown land of plentitude. This represents the abundance that satisfies the ravenous appetite of the Goodly Gods and the appetite of the Ugaritians. This is the fulfillment of the invocation. Death has been averted. There is a metaphorical connection between this sown land and the field of El and Athirat *waRahmay* mentioned in the ritual. The field of El and Athirat *waRahmay* was a vineyard. So also the sown land is flowing with wine (74-76). The Guard of the sown land appears to be none other than El, the orchestrator of the entire mission. Since El was given an offering in the outback the reader/listener would be expecting to see a response to the sacrifice. No other events occur—the sown land is the grand finale; thus the Guard naturally refers to El, the supreme god of the pantheon.

The sown land is not to be confused with the sacrificial offering given to the Goodly Gods, Smith’s assertion notwithstanding.³³⁴ The invocation explicitly states the Goodly Gods are given an offering in the outback (4). Furthermore, the Goodly Gods take the initiative to search for food. When they find it, the food is locked and guarded, not placed out for them as an offering would be. They are forced to beseech the Guard (El) to open a breach. The sown land represents the fulfillment of divine intervention following the sacrifice in the outback. The offering was meant to honor the Goodly Gods as the source of help, not to satisfy their ravenous

³³⁴ Smith, *Rituals and Myths*, 157.

appetite. Rather, they eat of life-giving food in the sown land. As they consume the properties of Life, the elements of death diminish and the scales tip toward life.

In summary, the second section of the narrative averts death on two levels: the holistic struggle of life against death and the specific impact of that broader phenomenon—famine. El sends his wives and sons on a mission to contend with death in Death’s Realm. They face deprivation as they search for life and food until they reach the sown land. Life triumphs over death as the gods successfully respond to the Ugaritians’ invocation.

VII. CONCLUSION

“The Goodly Gods”—perhaps better entitled “An Invocation to the Goodly Gods”—is a glimpse into the Ugaritians’ practice of calling upon the gods for help with life concerns. It is not a script for ritual reenactment; it is a literary tool that projects a world where the humanly impossible is made possible. It is a proposal to the imagination of the triumph of life over death. This reading credits the Ugaritians with conscious, creative thinking and respects them as human beings who found transcendent meaning in their religious practice.

KTU 1.23 has suffered under a long history of interpretations influenced by Frazer’s fertility theories and stereotypes of the “Canaanites.” Attempts to exegete the text through “one-size-fits all” methodologies—especially myth-ritualism and structuralism—have also had an adverse impact. The result has been a lack of coherence in connecting the sex scene with the rest of the text and a mischaracterization of El’s sexual activity. Contrary to what many interpretations have asserted, sacred marriage or ribaldry is not evident in KTU 1.23.

Moreover, KTU 1.23 continues to be used by some scholars to denigrate non-Israelite ancient Near Eastern people to the point where even genocide is rationalized. One school of theology asserts on its website: “The Ugaritic literature has helped to reveal the depth of depravity which characterized Canaanite religion. Being a polytheism of an extremely debased type, Canaanite cultic practice was barbarous and thoroughly licentious . . . it is without sound biblical basis to question God’s justice in ordering the extermination of such a depraved

people.”³³⁵ The school cites as a source Albright who was one of the first scholars to analyze

KTU 1.23. Albright opined:

It was fortunate for the future of monotheism that the Israelites of the conquest were a wild folk, endowed with primitive energy and ruthless will to exist, since the resulting decimation of the Canaanites prevented the complete fusion of the two kindred folk which would almost inevitably have depressed Yahwistic standards to a point where recovery was impossible. Thus the Canaanites, with their orgiastic nature-worship, their cult of fertility in the form of serpent symbols and sensuous nudity, and their gross mythology, were replaced by Israel.³³⁶

Prejudices held by early interpreters such as Albright not only prevented an objective reading of KTU 1.23, but also continue to have an impact on perceptions of ancient Near Eastern peoples.

Randall Bailey observes that once a people group has been dehumanized by accusations of sexual depravity they are often subject to oppression.³³⁷ Ancient Israel’s acts of genocide continue to be rationalized on this basis. These same attitudes have the potential to influence perceptions and treatment of contemporary polytheistic people groups.

While this thesis is certainly not the last word on such an enigmatic text, it offers a possible alternative for understanding the purpose of EI’s sexual activity and how it relates to the ritual and myth as a whole. KTU 1.23 is an invocation to the gods to avert Death, and more specifically, a prayer for relief from childlessness, widowhood and famine.

³³⁵ Quartz Hill School of Theology, “The Religion of the Canaanites.” n.p. [cited 22 Mar. 2010]. Online: www.theology.edu/canaan.htm.

³³⁶ Cited in Allen Ross, “The Curse of Canaan,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (1980): 234.

³³⁷ Randall C. Bailey, “They’re Nothing but Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in Hebrew Canon Narratives” in *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (vol. I; ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 124, 132, 137.

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