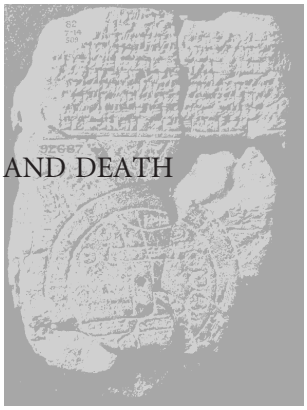
# THE DELICATE BALANCE BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

## SOME REMARKS ON THE PLACE OF MOT IN THE RELIGION OF UGARIT

KLAAS SPRONK



From December 2004 until September 2005 there was an exhibition "All about Evil" in the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. An important element in the works of art from many parts of the world and from different ages and in the accompanying publication (Faber 2004) is the balance between good and evil, life and death. It is a kind of order that people often ascribe to the gods and many put their hopes on the intervention of the gods when the balance is disturbed, although gods are sometimes also to be blamed for this threatening situation. A collection of religious stories about evil appeared in conjunction with the exhibition. To this volume I contributed an introduction to and translation of the Ugaritic myth of the struggle between Baal and Mot (Spronk 2004). Reading again this final section of the myth of Baal within the wider framework of the exhibition, it struck me that eventually the fight seems to end in a draw, Baal and Mot being equally strong. It inspired me to take a closer look at the Ugaritic god of death as not only a dreaded negative power but also as the necessary—and therefore positive—counterpart to the forces of life. I dedicate my findings in this short article to Marten Stol, who has contributed so much to our understanding of the ancient Near Eastern views on life and death, wishing him all the best for the life that begins at sixty-five.

### *The Struggle between Baal and Mot*

At the end of the myth of Baal a final showdown between Baal and Mot occurs. There had previously been two battles with Mot, each with a different outcome. First, Mot had swallowed Baal "like a lamb in his mouth," indicating that Baal had to descend into the netherworld. Then the goddess Anat, who longed for Baal "like the heart of a cow for her calf, like the heart of a ewe for her lamb," seized Mot, killed him, and cut him into pieces. Death must die, in order for life, represented by Baal as the god of fertility, to return (Watson 1972: 64). But that is not the end of the story. After seven years Mot reappears, fully alive again, complaining to Baal about the way he had been treated by Anat. He demands a substitute for Baal, since he had

left the world of the dead—a situation analogous to Mesopotamian myths about descent into and return from the netherworld.

> Give one of your brothers, that I may eat (him).
> And the anger I harbor will turn away.
> If you do not give one of your brothers,
> then, look, I will make [the dead visit the e]arth,
> I will eat [mankind],
> I will eat the multi[tudes of the earth].
> Now let one of [your br]others fall down…
>
> (KTU 1.6.V:19–26) [1]

Unfortunately the text is damaged here. However, it seems certain that Mot threatens that humankind will pay the price for Baal's escape. This would turn the world-of-the-living into the world-of-the-dead. It is reminiscent of the goddess Ishtar's words in the Epic of Gilgamesh when, in a fit of rage, Ishtar is determined to get her way: if the god Anu does not unleash the Bull of Heaven against Gilgamesh, she will break down the gates of the netherworld and "bring up the dead to consume the living" and "make the dead outnumber the living" (Gilgamesh Epic VI 97–100). The threat to raise the dead and thus disturb the balance between the living and the dead is a well-attested theme in Mesopotamian literature (Ishtar's Descent: CT 15 45, 1720, KAR 1 obv. 15'–18'; Nergal and Ereshkigal: STT 28 V 11'–12'// 26'–27'; George 2003: 474–475). Confronted with this dreadful possible outcome, one can only yield.

It is not clear what precisely happened next in the myth of Baal, because the tablet is broken at this point. Apparently Mot was misled by Baal, who succeeded in feeding Mot not one of his own brothers, but brothers of Mot. So Mot grabs Baal, but is unable to swallow him the way he had before.

> He (Mot) returned to Baal of the heights of Sapan.
> He raised his voice and cried:
> "You have given my own brothers, Baal, to devour,
> the sons of my mother to consume!"
> They eyed each other like champions. [2]
> Mot was strong, Baal was strong.

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[1] The damaged lines 24–25 can be partly restored on the basis of the occurrence of a similar parallel word pair in KTU 1.3.III.27-28 and 1.5.II.18–19. See for the restoration of line 23 De Moor 1987: 95; the text as it reproduced in De Moor - Spronk 1987.

[2] There is some discussion among scholars about the right translation of these words. As in the following lines one would expect comparison to an animal; cf. De Moor 1987: 97: "like fighting-cocks." This is not necessary, however. More likely, it is the plural of "champion," which is a normal epithet of Baal. It underlines that in this situation Mot and Baal are equals.

They butt each other like wild bulls.
Mot was strong, Baal was strong.
They bit each other like snakes.
Mot was strong, Baal was strong.
They trampled each other like runners.
Mot fell, Baal fell. (KTU 1.6.VI:12–22)

Mot and Baal appear to be equally strong; they keep each other in balance.[3] This corresponds to humankind's experiences in life. Sometimes the god of death seems to have the upper hand, as in a time of plague: "the hand of a god is here, because death is very strong" (KTU 2.10:11–13; Pardee 1987: 66). Other times, one can pin his hopes on Baal and the gods to grant strength (KTU 1.108:18–27), as evoked in the name Azbaal, "Baal is strong" (KTU 1.102:27, also attested in Cyprus; Day 2000: 188).

The different outcomes of the two battles may have been affected by the place where they were fought. Baal had been swallowed by Mot when they met on Mot's terrain, "the field of the river of death" (KTU 1.6.II:20). Now Mot comes to Baal, who has returned from the netherworld.[4] Apparently the fight takes place on neutral terrain or, to be more precise, on the place between the netherworld and the realm of the "upper" gods, i.e., the world of humankind.

As a kind of referee the sun-goddess intervenes in the ongoing battle and makes it clear to Mot that he should accept Baal's kingship.

From above Shapash cried to Mot:
"Now listen, O son of El, Mot!
How can you fight with almighty Baal?
How can not hear you the bull, El, your father?
Surely he will pull up the foundation of your residence.
Surely he will overturn the chair of your kingship.
Surely he will break the staff of your judgment."
The son of El, Mot, feared.
The beloved of El, the hero, was frightened.
Mot was startled by her voice.
He raised his voice and cried:
"Let them place Baal on the throne of his kingship,
on the seat of the throne of his dominion." (KTU 1.6.VI:22–35)

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[3] Day 2000: 187 suggests that in the end Baal is on top: "Baal fell down on top of him." However, with most translators it is better to take the final word with the next words: "From above Shapash cried to Mot."

[4] Within this framework it is important to note that it is not explicitly stated that Mot went to the residence of Baal on mount Sapan. As can be seen in the first line of the text translated above there is no preposition before "the heights of Sapan."

In matters of life and death, the sun-goddess holds a special place (Mettinger 2001: 62–63). It is she who helps Anat lead Baal out of the netherworld (KTU 1.6.I:8–17), because Shapash knows the entrance way, since she passes through the netherworld every night. When she intervenes in the battle between Mot and Baal, Shapash reminds Mot of the orders of the supreme god El: every god must know his place and the divine powers of the netherworld are not allowed to trespass the boundaries established for them.

Mot is not "destroyed," as Anat had done before, but is now left "alive." In battle he has proven to be the equal of Baal. The balance between Baal, the god who makes life possible, and Mot, who takes away life, remains intact.

The myth of Baal ends with invoking the two gods responsible for keeping the powers of death where they belong, securing the achieved balance.

> Shapash, you rule the Rephaim.
> Shapash, you rule the divine ones.
> In your company are the gods.
> Look, the dead are in your company.
> Kothar is your companion
> and Chasis your intimate.
> In the sea are Arish and Tannin.
> Kothar and Chasis, drive (them) out!
> Drive (them) away, Kothar and Chasis! (KTU 1.6.VI:45–53)

In this context the Rephaim have to be regarded as benign chthonic powers, among whom should be reckoned the deified spirits of royal dead (Spronk 1986: 161–196; Day 2000: 217–225). Shapash can function as a mediator between them and the living, as witnessed in the cultic text KTU 1.161. The Rephaim are contrasted to Arish and Tannin, who are hostile primordial powers constantly threatening the world-of-the-living. The fact that these different kinds of powers from netherworld are juxtaposed indicates that not everything associated with death is to be regarded as negative. This may hold true also in regard to the god of death—as long as he keeps within his boundaries.

*Lovable Mot and Dreadful Baal?*

In the ancient Near East one may note a tendency to represent the god of death with some sympathy (De Moor 1990). In Ugarit the god Mot is portrayed as a voracious monster with a great appetite for live prey, yet he is regularly called "beloved of El." This positive view may be expressed also in KTU 1.4.VIII.7, where the world-of-the-dead is called the "house of freedom." Of course, irony is at play here—the world of the dead gives its inhabitants no possibility of leaving and Mot is far from lovable (Gibson 1979: 157). However, one does not have to be lovable to be loved. The love of El for Mot has to be understood in light of El, father of the gods and

"father of humankind," being the god responsible for maintaining the stability of the cosmos. This status of El is illustrated by his residence being "at the source of the two rivers, in the middle of the bedding of the two floods" (KTU 1.2.III:4 par.). The two floods here allude to the commonly held belief that the creation of the world resulted from subduing the primordial flood and splitting it into the waters above and below the dry land, the world-of-the-living. El's living at this central location indicates that he is guarding the fundaments of the cosmos, keeping heaven, the world-of-the-dead, and the world-of-the-living apart. And Mot, in turn, is integral to preserving this cosmic order by maintaining the balance between the living and the dead, by keeping the dead in the netherworld.

The harmony between the gods, the living, and the dead is fragile. Most cultic and magical practices are meant to restore the broken harmony. This means that humans sometimes, in certain rituals, need to cross the fearful boundary between life and death, which necessitates looking for allies in the netherworld. The spirits of the netherworld may perform opposing roles. For such an undertaking it is natural to seek the assistance of the spirits of deceased relatives, to offer protection from malevolent spirits of the dead. The same holds true for infernal deities. This ambivalent role of underworld beings is typified in an Ugaritic incantation by Horon, who, on the one hand, is a threat to the living, while, on the other, can be invoked by the living to help against demonic powers (Spronk 1999: 279). The biblical reference to "a covenant with death' (Isa 28:15,18) may refer to a similar concept.

Next to this relatively positive aspect of Mot there also seems to have been a negative, or to be more precise, chthonic aspect of Baal. This tentative suggestion is based on the reference to a god Malik in KTU 1.100 and 1.107, where he is clearly related to the netherworld and the cult of the dead (Heider 1985: 113–148; Day 2000: 214). This Malik also seems to have been mentioned in the (unfortunately broken) text KTU 1.108:12 as another name of Rapiu, that is Baal, and may also be related to biblical Molek (Heider 1985: 401; Spronk 1986: 187–188, 232–233). In Jer 32:35 and probably also in Zeph 1:4–6 the cult of Molek is related to the cult of Baal. Jer 19:5 connects child sacrifices, which are usually brought to Molek, to Baal. All this can be explained as indications that Baal was also venerated as Malik or Molek, a god of the netherworld. This must be seen then against the background of the myth of Baal associating the period of drought with Baal's stay in the netherworld. The offerings to Baal continued in this period and may in desperate situations have taken special, dreadful forms.

In conclusion, we may note that accepting the concept of a delicate balance between life and death may aid in understanding ancient Near Eastern perceptions of their gods with their concomitant cults and magic rituals.

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