NEW LIGHT ON THE MYTHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND
OF THE ALLUSION TO RESHEPH
IN HABAKKUK III 5

Hab. iii 3-15 depicts Yahweh's coming up from the south in a glorious theophany in a thunder-storm and engaging victoriously in conflict with the cosmic sea, which represents Yahweh's enemies on the historical plane. The background of this passage in the Canaanite myth of Baal's conflict with the sea or dragon is now generally accepted 1), a view supported by the reference in v. 8 to the enemy as "sea" (yām) and "rivers" (nāhārim) (cf. "Sea" (ym) and "Judge River (ft nhr), the names of Baal's opponent in the Ugaritic myth in CT A 2), and by the allusion to Yahweh's "seven arrows" of lightning in v. 9 (reading šib'at maṣṣōt for M.T. šib'ōt maṣṣōt) comparable to Baal's seven lightnings, a parallel first noted by the present writer in an earlier article in this journal 2).

A further indication of the Canaanite background of the imagery in Hab. iii is provided by v. 5, where we read lepānāyw yēlēk deber wēyēšē rešēp lēraglāyw, "Before him went Pestilence, and Plague went forth behind him." Pestilence (deber) and Plague (rešēp) are here clearly personified and behind the latter there certainly lies the Canaanite plague god Resheph. On the basis of this one could therefore conjecture that the god Resheph played a part in Baal's conflict with the sea or dragon in the Canaanite myth underlying Hab. iii. It is therefore surprising that, in spite of the vast amount that has been written about Resheph 3), it has hitherto remained unnoticed (so far as I am aware) that we do in fact possess a Ugaritic text alluding to

Vetus Testamentum, Vol. XXIX, Fase. 3

23
the mythology underlying Hab. iii 5 in which Resheph participates alongside Baal in the conflict with the dragon. The text in question is UT 1001 (= PRU II, 1 (RS 15.134)), lines 1-3. Unfortunately the tablet is largely fragmentary and obscure, and lines 1-3 themselves are not free of problems, but enough is clear to make it certain that the god Resheph is represented alongside Baal in his conflict with the dragon. The text reads as follows:

(1) [ ]mhs. b'l[ ]y. inn. wygl. wynsk. ‘[ ]
(2) [ ]y. Parf[ ]y. ‘alt. Pahš. ‘idy. ‘alt. ‘in ly
(3) [ ]t. b’il. bg. ršp. b-. km. yr. klylb. wlbh

(1) Baal smote ... the dragon and rejoiced and poured out . . .
(2) . . . on the earth . . . throne . . . I have no throne
(3) . . . the archer 4) Resheph . . . shot his kidneys and his heart 5).

In this Ugaritic text we have an allusion to the Canaanite mythology which was to be taken up perhaps some seven hundred years later by the Psalm of Habakkuk, in which latter, however, Resheph is demoted to the role of a sort of demon in the heavenly escort not of Baal, but of Yahweh, as he sets forth to do battle with the turbulent sea.

Durham

John Day

Postscript

The recently published volume by W. J. Fulco, The Canaanite god Reśeph (New Haven, 1976), which came to my notice only after the above article had been submitted, fails to note the parallel to which I have just drawn attention. In general, however, it is to be commended as a fine treatment of its subject.


3) S. E. Loewenstamm, “Resheph”, Encyclopaedia Biblica 7 (1976), col. 441 (in Hebrew), cites in his bibliography over thirty items relating to this god, and to this the reader is directed. Among Loewenstamm’s more important omissions one may note G. R. Driver, “Ugaritic problems”, in S. Segert (ed.), Studia Semitica philologica mecon philosophica Ioanni Bakoš dicata (Bratislava, 1965), pp. 96-8, A. van den Branden, «Rešeph» nella Bibbia”, Bibbia e Oriente 13 (1971), pp. 211-25, and M. K. Schretter, Alter Orient und Hellas; Fragen der Beeinflussung griechischen Gedankengutes aus altorientalischen Quellen, dargestellt an den Göttern Nergal, Resheph, Apollon (Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Kulturwissenschaft, Sonderheft 33, Innsbruck, 1974).