SHORT NOTES

THE IDENTITY OF DEATH'S FIRST-BORN (JOB XVIII 13)

In Job xviii Bildad, one of Job's "comforters", firmly places Job in the camp of the resolutely wicked. The fate of the wicked man is portrayed in terms of darkness and death. Death and his minions set traps, snares and nets to encompass his destruction. In xviii 13 the "First-Born of Death" devours the wicked man's limbs.

The parallelism in xviii 13, in the MT as it stands, has long been recognized as unsatisfactory. The MT reads:

\[ \text{y`kl bdy `wrw} \]
\[ \text{y`kl bdwy `kwv mut} \]
(lit.) it devours the limbs of his skin;
the First-Born of Death devours his limbs.

Various commentators, following G. H. B. Wright, Job (London, 1883), have proposed the emendation ye`akel bid`way `orō, "by disease his skin is consumed" (RSV). But this variant still leaves the parallelism in an unfinished state, a niphal in the first hemistich and a qal in the second.

More recent translations, the JB and NEB, reflect the change of "the limbs" bdy to d`way, "sickness", and read "sickness devours his skin". This retains the qal and removes the b before dwy, presumably as a dittograph. The confused first half of the verse is interpreted in the light of the much clearer second. Death's First-Born consumes the skin of the wicked, then devours his limbs.

Death's First-Born has been identified with Mot, the Canaanite god of death and the underworld. In the Ugaritic texts, Mot is the "son/the darling of El", the chief god of the pantheon of Ugarit. It has been suggested that Mot, in his role of ruler of the netherworld, might legitimately assume the title "first-born" of El. However, there is no direct evidence in the Ugaritic texts to support the contention that Mot was the first-born of El. Certainly, Mot is described as the son of El, but the phrase, "darling of El", rather than suggesting primacy of birth or close affection, is a euphemism for a feared and repulsive divinity. Nor does Mot appear to leave his grim realm to range the earth in search of his victims. He lies with gaping maw ready to devour those unfortunate or foolish enough to come within his reach.

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If a Canaanite identification is to be sought, it would lie, rather, in Resheph who was a god of pestilence. Evidence for Resheph is scanty in the Ugaritic texts. He appears in the Old Testament along with dbr ‘‘plague’’ in Hab. iii 5. Resheph seems to have enjoyed more popularity at Ebla where Dabir may also be mentioned as a patron of the city.5 Certainly Resheph could be associated with a burning fever wasting the skin and devouring the limbs of a plague-stricken person.

However, I believe that it is possible to identify Death’s First-Born more closely from Mesopotamian sources. There, Namtar is the god of plague and pestilence. He is described as sukallu išiti, the ‘‘vizier of the underworld’’. He is also the ilitti d’erēškišgal the ‘‘offspring of Ereshkigal’’, who was the queen of the underworld.4 In Mesopotamian mythology the first-born, if male, was generally the vizier of his parent. Mummu was the first-born of the primordial sweet-water god, Apsû and his vizier, whom Apsû consulted about the noisy younger gods. The following exchange is indicative of great affection between the god and his son:

Then Apsû, the begetter of the great gods, called his vizier Mummu, saying to him, ‘‘Mummu, my vizier, who gladdens my heart, come let us go to Tīpāmat.’’

(Mummu then speaks and counsels Apsû)

‘‘Abolish, O my father, the disorderly ways [of the younger gods] ...’’

Apsû rejoiced in him...

he flung his arms around Mummu’s neck, was sliding onto his knees and was kissing him.5

As Namtar was both the offspring of Ereshkigal and the vizier of the underworld, he was, most probably, her first-born. The First-Born of Death is the god of plague and pestilence.

There is an Akkadian word bukru (Heb. bkwr). The word is used mainly in poetical texts and applied chiefly to the gods, only rarely to men. This is an exception as the root bkr in most other Semitic languages, including Hebrew, carries the sense of ‘‘first-born’’.6 In Akkadian, when the word bukru was used to designate the first-born as heir, it was qualified by the word rēštû, ‘‘chief, first (son)’’.7 But