NAMTARU AND NERGAL—DOWN BUT NOT OUT: 
A REPLY TO NICOLAS WYATT

by

JOHN BARCLAY BURNS
Fairfax, Virginia

The arguments in favour of an Ugaritic background to the *bhôr māwet* in Job xviii 13 and thus to the surrounding verses advanced by N. Wyatt in response to my brief exploratory note, are compelling and deserve a careful response.¹ I wish first to consider some of the points that he has raised and then to offer further support for my original argument, indicating why I remain convinced by a Mesopotamian background to Job xviii 5-21.

Wyatt begins by asserting that adjacent cultures, especially Canaanite, particularly as enshrined in the Ugaritic texts, should have first claim in any attempt to resolve biblical problems (p. 207). This takes small account of the fact that Mesopotamian cultures, Assyrian and Babylonian, the latter at a crucial period in the formation of the literature of the Old Testament, had a heavy impact upon Israelite culture. Since most scholars date the book of Job between the 7th and 4th centuries B.C. and later rather than earlier, there exists a significant temporal gap between Job and the Ugaritic texts.² If the final form of Job is a product of exilic or post-exilic Israel, then Babylonian literary influence cannot be discounted. Further, his inclusion of Egyptian usage, hardly adjacent, is tendentious as he will have recourse to that to support his central point.

His perception that the clue to the mythology behind Job xviii lies in the identity of the *bhôr māwet*, “the first-born of death”, and the *melek ballâhôt*, “the king of terrors”, in vv. 13-14 is sound. Once


their identification is secure any remaining mythological allusions can be determined and a consistent pattern emerge. I had suggested that these are best explained by the Mesopotamian Namtaru, "fate", a demon or god of death whose weapon is fever, vizier of the underworld and first-born of Ereškigal its queen; the latter Nergal her husband and king of the underworld. In v. 13 Namtaru, plague, consumes the wicked and, torn from the security of his earthly habitation, "tent", the "terrors of Death" (14) drag him before their king, Nergal.

bekôr mâwet is intended by Wyatt (p. 208) to be understood as a construction in which bekor functions as a substantive in apposition i.e. "First-born Death" (Ugaritic Mot[u]). This is unlikely, because in other instances where bekor is used with a proper name it appears in the construct form as in "first-born (son) of PN, PN", e.g. Gen. xxv 13, bekor yišmâ'êl nêhâyot, "the first-born of Ishmael, Nebraioth". This construction also occurs with common nouns: Exod. xi 5, "first-born of PN ... first-born of N ... first-born of N". G. Lisowsky (pp. 240-1) and S. Mandelkern (pp. 199-200) cite some fifty examples, mostly with proper names. Thus the grammatical evidence weighs heavily in favour of interpreting the phrase as a simple construct.

Further, though bekor does occur in appositional phrases it normally follows the nomen regens as in the construction PN bekor + suffix: Gen. xxii 21, 'et-'âs bekorô, "Uz his first-born", or Gen. xxxviii 7, 'êr bekor yehûdâ, "Er the first-born of Judah", —the latter phrase provides an example both of apposition and of bekor used in the construct state—or in Exod. iv 23, 'et-binekd bekorèkâ, "your son, your first-born", where the appositive provides further information about the regens. Indeed, if "Death" had been the "first-born”, as Wyatt suggests, one might, on the basis of overwhelming Hebrew usage, have expected the name of the father to have been explicitly mentioned in a phrase such as "first-born of El, Mot" (bekôr PN,PN) or "Mot his first-born" (PN bekor + suffix).

However, the intent of the phrase can be discerned from Isa. xiv 30 where "the first-born of the poor”, should be taken as an elative "the very poorest”. This allows bekor mâwet to be satisfactorily understood as "the most deadly plague": mâwet in the sense of death-dealing plague is found in Job xxvii 15 and Jer. xviii 21.3 A