

...Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2018.06.19

Aaron Tugendhaft, *Baal and the Politics of Poetry. The Ancient Word 1*. London; New York: Routledge, 2017. Pp. 166. ISBN 9781138063624. \$140.00.

Reviewed by Aren M. Wilson-Wright, Universität Zürich (aren.wilson-wright@uzh.ch)

Preview

Baal and the Politics of Poetry is a revised version of Aaron Tugendhaft's 2012 New York University dissertation. In it, Tugendhaft argues that the Baal Cycle—an epic poem from Ugarit depicting Baal's struggle for political dominance against Yamm (sea) and Mot (death)—represents a meditation on kingship and its limitations, rather than an unabashed celebration of royal power as usually assumed. Tugendhaft develops this argument over the course of six chapters as well as the introduction and conclusion.

The first chapter highlights and critiques the scholarly tendency to study the Baal Cycle apart from its historical and political context. As Tugendhaft notes, biblical scholars are primarily interested in the mythological texts from Ugarit and, as a result, have studied the Baal Cycle in isolation from contemporary administrative and ritual texts. Similarly, scholars of myth often see myth as a timeless statement of mythopoeic ideals unconnected to the vagaries of history. Tugendhaft, by contrast, rightly emphasizes that the Baal Cycle is the product of a specific time and place, namely a Late Bronze Age kingdom dependent on the Hittite empire.

In the second chapter, Tugendhaft makes the case that Ilimilku, the scribe who copied the Baal Cycle, was also its author. He further argues that Ilimilku was an elder statesman at this time. Although Tugendhaft concedes that this point is not crucial to his larger argument, he maintains it throughout the book.

The third chapter takes the reader on a detour to the Old Babylonian city of Mari, located on the middle Euphrates. A prophecy found at this site alludes to the battle between the storm god and the sea god and this text has often served as a touchstone for interpreting the Baal Cycle. In the prophecy, Adad of Yamḥad—the patron deity of a neighboring polity—offers the king of Mari the weapon(s) with which he defeated the sea as a symbol of royal authority. Many scholars extrapolate from this text that the Baal Cycle also served to shore up kingly power. Tugendhaft, however, argues that the text from Mari reflects a specific historical situation—i.e., Yamḥad's claim to political dominance over Mari—and cannot be used uncritically to interpret the Baal Cycle. He concludes that the poets of Ugarit had the freedom to adapt received mythic motifs as they saw fit.

Chapter four challenges the widely held assumption that the Baal Cycle represents a Ugaritic counterpart to Enuma Elish, the Babylonian creation epic.

While both poems feature a battle between a storm god and a sea god as their central motif, Tugendhaft argues that they differ in several critical ways. In *Enuma Elish*, the storm god Marduk assumes kingship, defeats his great great grandmother Tiamat, and creates the cosmos out of her corpse. In the Baal cycle, by contrast, Baal and his watery antagonist Yamm belong to the same generation and their battle takes place within the current era. Baal's victory does not herald the advent of a new cosmos. Rather, the Baal cycle emphasizes that political regimes arise violently in time and at the expense of earlier rulers; they are not established during the primordial era.

In the fifth chapter, Tugendhaft argues that the Baal cycle depicts political rank as inherently unstable and ambiguous. As part of this claim, he proposes a new arrangement of the tablets that comprise the Baal Cycle on the basis of tablet morphology and layout. In this new arrangement, the battle between Baal and Yamm precedes the envoy scene in KTU 1.2.1:13–19, where Yamm petitions the divine council for Baal's extradition. As a result, Baal appears as a rebel vassal seeking refuge from his overlord and this unflattering portrait of Baal renders suspect the principles upon which political order is founded. Over the course of the Baal Cycle, Baal goes from rebel vassal to king in his own right.

The sixth chapter examines the use of kinship language in the Baal cycle against the background of the Amarna correspondence. In particular, Tugendhaft notes several striking parallels between Baal and Adad-Nirari I, an Assyrian king who sought membership in the "brotherhood" of great powers following his victory over Mittanni. Although the other great kings initially rebuff Adad-Nirari I, claiming that brotherhood is inherited not won, they eventually admit him into their ranks in the face of his growing military power. Similarly, Baal only achieves the recognition of his fellow kings through repeated demonstrations of his martial prowess. In this way, the Baal Cycle shows that political power is contingent on force of arms.

For the most part, *Baal and the Politics of Poetry* offers a persuasive and nuanced interpretation of the Baal Cycle. Tugendhaft does an excellent job of re-embedding the Baal Cycle in its historical context with his frequent and illuminating references to administrative and diplomatic texts from the Late Bronze Age. He also makes a strong case that the depiction of kingship and international politics in the Baal Cycle reflects the breakdown of traditional norms during the twilight of the Late Bronze Age. But it is unclear to me whether the Baal Cycle represents an outright critique of Late Bronze Age politics as Tugendhaft claims or simply reflects the political environment in which it was composed and recited. Seeing the Baal Cycle as the Ugaritic equivalent of *The Prince* relies on problematic notions of authorial intent: we must assume that the author had a larger goal in mind than verisimilitude in depicting political power as contingent and ambiguous. Tugendhaft's biography of Ilmilku makes this assumption more plausible, but it cannot overcome it entirely.

Two minor criticisms are also in order. First, Tugendhaft adopts the traditional vocalization of Mot's kinsman ltn as lōtan, and does not engage with J. A. Emerton's proposal in "Leviathan and ltn: The Vocalization of the Ugaritic Word

for the Dragon,” *Vetus Testamentum* 32 (1982): 327–331, to read this name as litan. Second, he says that in the ancient Near East the battle between the storm god and death is found only in the Baal Cycle, but the Hebrew Bible preserves refractions of this motif in Isaiah 25:7 and Songs of Songs 8:6–7. These critiques aside, Tugendhaft is to be congratulated for significantly advancing the scholarship on the Baal Cycle.