

Mythopoetic Imagery Relating to the Firstborn of Death and the King of Terrors

1 Introduction

Terror, calamity, the devouring of human flesh—these are the themes that pervade mythical literature, in which the entities performing these types of actions are figments of the author’s creative ingenuity. However, what if this imagery were to, in fact, reflect genuine personages within the cognitive environment of the writer, and not simply a figment of his imagination? What if the writer actually were to believe that such characters exist and that they carry out retribution upon the impious?

Could this have been the case of the author of Job, in which the “Firstborn of Death” and the “King of Terrors” engage in violence, contributing to the downfall of the wicked? Commentators typically note the potential vestiges of ancient Canaanite mythology in Bildad’s reference to these two creatures in Job 18:13-14. However, there is debate as to the actual identities of these creatures, as well as the specific nature of their actions as described in Bildad’s speech emphasizing just retribution theology.¹

Since these monikers would have likely been recognized in the ancient Near Eastern cognitive environment, it is important to grasp what the poet of Job may have been communicating in that context. This paper will evaluate the relationship of the mythological “Firstborn of Death” and the “King of Terrors” to the Ugaritic deity *Mot*, and consider to what extent these personages may have emerged within the ancient Israelite milieu.

¹ Complicating matters of interpretation is the fact that these names appear in the midst of two difficult verses in which the subjects of several verbs are absent and that make little sense at face value to some commentators, compelling some commentators to emend the text.

1.1 *The Firstborn of Death—v. 13*

In Job 18:11-12 (SLIDE), Bildad mentions persistent terror to suggest that the wicked regularly experience the consequences of their impiety but do not invariably perish at once. Bildad emphasizes that the journey of the wicked, regardless of duration, is calamitous and ends in their death.

Bildad continues his discourse in v. 13 by portraying grotesque corporeal affliction befalling the wicked. (SLIDE)

יֹאכֵל בְּדֵי עוֹרוֹ יֹאכֵל בְּדֵי בְּכוֹר מִוֶּת: 18:13

In v. 13a, a voracious creature attacks the wicked and consumes the limbs of his skin (יֹאכֵל בְּדֵי עוֹרוֹ). Bildad's mentioning of a skin malady brings to mind the ailments of Job's skin. Job's skin was plagued with boils (2:7), it scabbed and cracked (7:5), and became hideous to the point that Job complained of it turning black (30:28, 30). Thus, there is little doubt that Bildad's description alludes to Job's illness² and relates it to a punishment that falls upon the wicked.

This allusion to Job, however, is expressed through curious rhetoric that merits further investigation. The anomalous phrase בְּדֵי עוֹרוֹ “limbs of his skin” suggests that the line should also be understood metaphorically.³ The multiple renderings of this line in the versions (INSERT VERSIONS) show that the translators had difficulty understanding the text.

This confusion is reflected in more modern treatments of this verse as well. For example, Nahum Sarna notes that to “devour skin” is not a natural phrase. His solution to this peculiar phrase is found in a comparison with an Ugaritic passage from *The Baal Cycle* in which *Mot*

² Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 278-79. Seow notes that, “in Bildad's list of terrors, the disintegration of skin sounds like an allusion to Job.” A depiction of the suffering of the skin appears elsewhere in biblical poetry (Lam 3:4; 4:8; 5:10). Seow, *Job 1-21*, 775.

³ See Rowley, *Job*, 130.

boastfully declares, “With both my hands I shall eat them” (*pimt.bkl<a>t/ydy.ilhm.*) (SLIDE).⁴ Sarna then notes that the Ugaritic uniconsonantal *d*, “hand” is apparently fossilized in the phrase *bd*, “with/in the hand.” Based upon the rhetoric of this Ugaritic passage, and the apparent fossilization of the combined *bd*, Sarna contends that the difficult words בְּדֵי and בְּדָיו in v. 13 should be understood as meaning “with two hands” and “with his two hands,” respectively.⁵

A concern with this approach, however, is the seemingly liberal imposition of the Ugaritic-language pattern upon the Hebrew of Job. The word בַּד has intelligible Hebrew meanings which should be retained unless it is impossible to do so. The meaning of בַּד does not have to be “limb” in the strictest sense, but can also signify the part of a whole,⁶ as the limbs are an extension of the human body (i.e., Exod 30:34).

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה קַח־לְךָ סָמִים נְטָף וְשִׁחֵלָת וְהִלְבְּנָה
סָמִים וְלִבְנָה זָכָה בַּד בְּבַד יִהְיֶה:
(*there will be “an equal part,” “an equal amount.”*)

Simply recognizing this meaning of בַּד eliminates the apparent need for emendation of this phrase in that (SLIDE) בְּדֵי עוֹרוֹ in Job 18:13 could refer to “parts of his skin.” This is not only a much less ambiguous phrase, but also, it exposes the possibility that the phrase could be a synecdoche for the whole body.

An additional factor in understanding the significance of the phrase בְּדֵי עוֹרוֹ lies in identifying the entity which devours. The entity which devours is not explicitly mentioned in v.

⁴ The translation is taken from Nahum M. Sarna, “The Mythological Background of Job 18,” *JBL* 82 (1963): 317. The transliteration of this line is from Smith, “The Baal Cycle,” 142. See also “The Balu Myth,” trans. Dennis Pardee (*COS*, 1.86:265) “yes indeed, I eat by double handfuls.” Smith translates this line, “So will I truly eat with both my hands,” and understands the word *hm* “or” to be part of the next line.

⁵ Sarna, “Mythological Background,” 317. This suggestion was later accepted by Pope, *Job*, 135.

⁶ Brown, “בַּד,” *BDB* 94; Stamm, “בַּד,” *HALOT* 108-09.

13a. However, v. 13b states that the personified בְּכוֹר מָוֶת (the “Firstborn of Death”)⁷ ravages his (i.e., the wicked’s) members (יֹאכֵל בְּדָיו בְּכוֹר מָוֶת).

Several elements of v. 13, which are crucial to understanding its meaning, should be identified. This verse is situated in a context in which Bildad strives to communicate that the ultimate destiny of the wicked is a harrowing death (vv. 1-12). Bildad asserts that one of the ghastly outcomes of wickedness is that the Firstborn of Death feasts on the wicked’s members (יֹאכֵל בְּדָיו [v. 13b]). The limbs of the wicked mentioned in v. 13b distinctly parallel the parts of the skin (בְּדֵי עוֹרוֹ [13a]). However, the reference to limbs in v. 13b does not mention the skin. This parallelism suggests that בְּדֵי עוֹרוֹ and בְּדָיו should have comparable meanings, and that it might be best not to understand the phrase בְּדֵי עוֹרוֹ literally.

This suspicion is confirmed upon investigating the identity and action of the Firstborn of Death (בְּכוֹר מָוֶת), whom is depicted as consuming (יֹאכֵל)⁹ its prey. This is the only time such a character is mentioned in the Bible. Thus, it is imperative to look to the ancient Near Eastern materials to see if any information might be gleaned that could provide a landscape for understanding this character. It is important to note that no discernible character named the Firstborn of Death has been discovered elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern literature.¹⁰ Yet, since

⁷ Habel understands בְּכוֹר מָוֶת to be two nouns in apposition to one another and thus translates this phrase “Firstborn Death” and suggests that it was a title for Mot who was the firstborn of El. Habel, *The Book of Job*, 287. It seems, however, that only a circumstantial case can be made for this translation, since there is no indication from the Ugaritic materials that *Mot* was indeed considered to be first-born child of El. See, T. J. Lewis, “First-Born of Death,” *DDD*, 332-335.

⁸ Chaim Cohen argues that phrase בְּדָיו could be vocalized בְּדִיו, and convincingly argues that the preposition בְּדִי, “to,” “for” originally existed in the Hebrew Bible. See Chaim Cohen, “The Hapax Legomenon דִּי (Ink) in the Context of ‘ואני כתב על הספר בדיו’ (Jeremiah 36:18): A ‘False Friend’ in Modern Hebrew Due to the Masoretes’ Misunderstanding of the Preposition בְּדִי Meaning ‘To’ or ‘For,’” *Shnaton* 24 (2016), 77-101 [Hebrew]. This meaning, however, does not fit our context in which בְּדִיו is that which is being consumed by the Firstborn of Death.

⁹ Brown, “יֹאכֵל,” *BDB* 37.

¹⁰ Sarna contends that *Mot* indeed had seven sons, which would mean that there was, in fact, a firstborn. Nahum M. Sarna, “Epic Substratum in the Prose of Job,” *JBL* 76 (1957): 21, n. 54. Clines agrees that it is not unreasonable to believe that there was indeed a being referred to as the Firstborn of Death. Clines, *Job 1-20*, 417. However, any reference to a “firstborn of *Mot*” has yet to be found.

the Firstborn of Death is personified through its eating in v. 13, it is reasonable to look into the Canaanite parallels of *Mot*, the god of the netherworld.

Sure enough, in Ugaritic texts there are references to *Mot* swallowing his victims similarly to the Firstborn of Death in Job. For example, the insatiable appetite of *Mot* is alluded to in *The Baal Cycle*:¹¹

<p><i>lyrt.bnṣš/bn.ilm.mt.</i> <i>bmhmrt/ydd.il.ḡzr...</i></p>	<p>Surely you will descend into Divine Mot's throat, Into the gullet of El's Beloved, the Hero.</p>
<p><i>ṣpt.larṣ.ṣpt.lšmm/</i> <i>lšn.lkbkbn.</i> <i>y'rb/b'l.bkbdh</i> <i>bphyrđ/kḥrr.zt.</i> <i>ybl.arṣ.wpr/'šm</i></p>	<p>Tablet V, Column I, lines 33-35</p> <p>One lip to the (Netherworld), one lip to Heaven, a tongue to the Stars. Baal will enter his innards, Into his mouth he will descend like a dried olive, Produce of the earth, and fruit of the trees.</p>
	<p>Tablet V, Column II, lines 2-6¹²</p>

In Canaanite literature, *Mot* is depicted as a ravenous consumer of gods and men with an immense mouth and appetite.¹³ This imagery of insatiable *Mot* provides an intriguing backdrop for the reference to the Firstborn of Death preying upon the wicked in Job 18:13.¹⁴ Through the analysis of this imagery, an idea emerges from within the ancient Near Eastern conceptual world

¹¹ Sarna, "Epic Substratum," 16.

¹² Translation (adopted with minor changes), transliteration and numbering taken from Smith, "The Baal Cycle," 143.

¹³ J.F. Healey, "Mot," *DDD*, 599.

¹⁴ Some commentators claim that the reference to *Mot* is a direct vestige of ancient Canaanite mythology. See Wilson, *Job*, 197, Crenshaw, *Reading Job*, 101. Nevertheless, Clines wisely cautions that "(t)he Ugaritic texts are seductive, but they do not always lead unhesitatingly to appropriate exegetical solutions." Clines, *Job 1-20*, 418. Along these lines, other commentators point out that there is no clear indication that v. 13 refers to the Canaanite deity *Mot* and that the word מָכּוֹר can indicate "firstborn" in the sense of the "superlative." Thus, the "firstborn of death" could be a phrase meaning the "deadliest thing"—perhaps the deadliest manifestation of death or a disease. Seow, *Job 1-21*, 786. See also Hakham, *Job*, 141. Rowley likewise states that this phrase, "probably means death in its most terrible form." Rowley, *Job*, 130. Arguments about the exact identity of the "Firstborn of Death" aside, the imagery related to the ravenous behavior of *Mot* provides insight into the ancient Near Eastern thought-world through which the reader is able to better understand the biblical imagery relating to death.

concerning death. Death was personified/deified and depicted as having a voracious appetite. Death was imagined to be an overindulgent devourer who transferred entities into the netherworld by ingesting them.¹⁵ By juxtaposing this image with the Firstborn of Death in v. 13b, it emerges that, not only is there a relationship in the names of these two figures, but both *Mot* and the Firstborn of Death are depicted as rapacious eaters who consume their victims.

This consumption is what clarifies the two usages of the word *בַּדַּי עוֹרוֹ* in v. 13. Because of the absence of any explicit mention of the Firstborn of Death in the Bible and other ancient Near Eastern literature, it is best to understand this figure in light of imagery relating to *Mot*. Thus, just as *Mot* utterly consumes his victims,¹⁶ so the Firstborn of Death is depicted as devouring his victims. Those consumed by the Firstborn of Death are the wicked, who meet their ultimate fate in being devoured. Drawing upon the Canaanite imagery of *Mot* assists in revealing that *בַּדַּי עוֹרוֹ* does not simply refer to a type of skin ailment or a portion of the skin, but rather, an entire being. This phrase is a synecdoche for the whole body.

The imagery related to *Mot* in Ugaritic literature provides a glimpse into the world in which the poet of Job wrote the book. Whereas Ugaritic literature has not yet presented an unequivocal answer to the difficult phrase *בַּדַּי עוֹרוֹ*, or the identity of the Firstborn of Death, a look into the imagery of *Mot's* consumption of beings provides insight into the potential cognitive domain of the readers of Job and other ancient Near Eastern literature. Likewise, the genius of the author is further revealed through the reference to the skin. In Bildad's rebuke, the author reminds the reader of the skin ailments that fell upon Job, while the mentioning of the

¹⁵ "Descent into the gullet of Mot is the equivalent of descent into the underworld." Healy, "Mot," *DDD*, 599.

¹⁶ There are several other verses in the Hebrew Bible which reflect the image of death and Sheol possessing a voracious appetite. See for example, Hab 2:5 (וְהוּא כַּמֶּנֶת וְלֹא יִשְׁבַּע), Isa 5:14 (לָכֵן הִרְחִיבָה שְׂאוֹל נִפְשָׁה וּפְעֻרָה פִּיהָ לְבָלִי-חֵק), and Ps 141:7 (נִפְזָרוּ עֲצָמַיִנוּ לְפִי שְׂאוֹל).

consumption of the “limbs of the skin” alludes to one of the main themes of retribution literature—the inevitable death of the wicked.

1.2 *The King of Terrors—v. 14*

As though utterly infatuated with the advent of justice through the death of the wicked, Bildad continues pronouncing this destiny in the presence of his grieving companion. In doing so, Bildad alludes to a point that he’s already made in a previous speech concerning the futility of trusting in one’s house.¹⁷ (SLIDE)

יִשְׁעֵן עַל-בֵּיתוֹ וְלֹא יַעֲמֵד יַחֲזִיק בּוֹ וְלֹא יִקּוּם: 8:15

In the context of chapter 18, the allusion expands in order to communicate that the wicked are devoid of any secure dwelling place (v. 14a). (SLIDE)

יִנָּתֵק מֵאֶהָלוֹ מְבֹטָחוֹ

In fact, the tent of the wicked is already dark (18:5-6 [SLIDE]),¹⁸ symbolizing the wicked’s eventual demise. Still, according to Bildad, the wicked¹⁹ are cut off from their tent, which serves as their security. The wicked are torn from the center of their preservation and protection and exposed to experience the harm they deserve.²⁰

As in v. 13a, the agent executing the retribution upon the wicked is not immediately identified in v. 14a. Yet in v. 14b, the wicked person is led off to the ominous King of Terrors by an unnamed subject. (SLIDE)

¹⁷ See discussion on 8:15 in chapter 2 for the conclusions there concerning the various meanings of the “house.”

¹⁸ Seow, *Job 1-21*, 776.

¹⁹ The subject of v. 14 is not explicitly mentioned but the antecedent continues to be the masculine singular collective for the wicked that is referred to from v. 5b onwards.

²⁰ Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 279.

וְתִצְעָדָהּ לְמֶלֶךְ בְּלֵהוֹת

The fact that there is no immediate antecedent to the feminine singular תִּצְעָדָהּ has caused interpreters difficulty, resulting in various approaches to explaining the text. Sarna proposes that תִּצְעָדָהּ should be understood as a rare masculine form with a *t-* prefix. Sarna cites Job 20:9 as another example of this phenomenon, where an anomalous *t-* prefix appears twice (תְּשׁוּרְנוּ, תוֹסִיף) [SLIDE]. He also claims that the preterite and present third person masculine singular forms appear with a *t-* prefix in the Amarna letters.²¹ Nevertheless, C.-L. Seow is doubtful of this suggestion and appeals to *GKC* §144.b, which indicates that the third person feminine singular can be used impersonally. Thus, Seow understands תִּצְעָדָהּ to mean an unnamed terror alluded to by the word בְּלֵהוֹת. One of these terrors (בְּלֵהוֹת) leads the wicked away to his death.²²

Amos Hakham strives to find an antecedent in the preceding text and suggests that the feminine imperfect form (תִּצְעָדָהּ) actually refers to the wicked man's wife. This is because Hakham understands the word צלע of v. 12 to refer to the wife of the wicked.

יְהִי־רַעַב אָנוּ וְאִיד נָכוֹן לְצַלְעוֹ 18:12

I suggest it is preferable to understand צלע in this context as a derivative of the word צָלַע “limping, stumbling.”²³ However, what is helpful about Hakham's approach is the pursuit of an antecedent within the preceding verses. Ibn Ezra suggests that the subject of תִּצְעָדָהּ is the feminine singular noun עֲצָתוֹ “his counsel” of v. 7b.²⁴

יִצְרוּ צַעְדֵי אֹנוּ וְתִשְׁלִיכֶהוּ עֲצָתוֹ: 18:7

²¹ Sarna, "Mythological Background," 317-18.

²² Seow, *Job 1-21*, 787. Seow understands the phrase “the king of terrors” to refer to death.

²³ CHECK CHAPTER 4 FOR REASON.

²⁴ Gómez Aranda, “*Libro de Job*,” 144.

This suggestion is particularly compelling because it emphasizes a consistent theme from v. 7 onward—namely, that the wicked suffer the consequences of their own counsel.²⁵ The downfall of the wicked is a result of their confidence in their own acumen instead of God’s wisdom. Accordingly, this option provides a clear and sensible antecedent without textual emendation, and it fits into the literary context in a way that reinforces the doctrine of just retribution that Bildad desperately strives to communicate.²⁶

The grim allusion to the personified King of Terrors concerning the punishment of the wicked, in close proximity to the mention of the Firstborn of Death, also provokes an inquiry into Canaanite imagery that might clarify the identity of this peculiar being. The insight concerning the identity of the Firstborn of Death as understood through the depiction of the Canaanite deity *Mot* in v. 13 spurs an appeal to this same imagery to decipher who (or what) is being referred to as the “King of Terrors.”

Similar to the analysis of the Firstborn of Death, the traditional conclusion that stems from this methodology results in likening the King of Terrors to the Canaanite deity *Mot*.²⁷ This inference is apparently supported by the fact that Death was perceived as a monarch who reigned over the underworld in various ancient cultures.²⁸ The king of the netherworld in Babylonia, for example, was Nergal,²⁹ and among the Greeks, Pluto was infernal king.³⁰ Considering the

²⁵ Cf. Eliphaz in 5:13.

²⁶ Some commentators have resorted to emendation of תִּצְעֲדָהּ; see Pope, *Job*, 136; Rowley, *Job*, 131. However, emendation seems unnecessary in that there are several viable options to maintain the current text.

²⁷ See Sarna, "Mythological Background," 316; Pope, *Job*, 136; Habel, *The Book of Job*, 288.

²⁸ Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 279.

²⁹ Sarna posits that the King of Terrors in v. 14 corresponds to Death in v. 13, which [he claims](#) is a direct reference to the Canaanite deity *Mot*. This suggests that the Firstborn of Death would occupy the same position in Canaan as did Namtar son of Nergal and Ereshkigal in Babylonian mythology. Sarna, "Mythological Background," 316; see also, Dhorme, *A Commentary on the Book of Job*, 265. The major problem with this approach is that *Mot* is nowhere described as having children. T.J. Lewis notes, that “(t)he weakness of this view is the lack of attestation of Namtar bearing the explicit epithet 'first Born of Death'. If this epithet was so well known that the author of Job borrowed it, should not one expect to find at least a single example of the epithet in the extant Akkadian corpus?” “*Mot*,” *DDD*, quote from p. 334, but see also U. Rüterswörden, “King of Terrors,” *DDD*, 487.

mythopoetic images stemming from ancient cultures, as well as the context of Bildad's retributive claim, a direct correspondence has been proposed between the King of Terrors and the Canaanite deity *Mot*.

2 Conclusion

Nevertheless, David Clines wisely cautions that **(SLIDE)** “(t)he Ugaritic texts are seductive, but they do not always lead unhesitatingly to appropriate exegetical solutions.”³¹ It is important to be careful not to presume beyond what can reasonably be demonstrated through the ancient Near Eastern materials with regard to the text at hand. There is, at this point, no evidence that the poet of Job was doing anything but utilizing recognizable and understandable terminology of his time. The existence of a king of the underworld in other literatures does not necessarily indicate that this figure must have been derived from a single source—whether this be the Ugaritic *Mot* or any other comparable figure. The Israelites—and thereby, the poet of Job—were part of the ancient Near Eastern thought world in which Death was personified, considered to be a voracious entity, and in which there was a ruler over the netherworld. Thus, personified Death in Job, though admittedly could have been derived from the Ugaritic deity *Mot*, could have also quite naturally emerged within the ancient Israelite milieu.

Consequently, there seems to be a clear personification of Death in Job 18, but there is no certain evidence that the personages “Firstborn of Death” and “King of Terrors” were borrowed from the Canaanites or represent any specific Ugaritic deities.³² Since the apparent epithets “King of Terrors” and “Firstborn of Death” have yet to be found in the Ugarit corpus of literature, a direct alignment with *Mot* is uncertain, though possible.

³⁰ See Pope, *Job*, 136; Clines, *Job 1-20*, 419; Seow, *Job 1-21*, 787.

³¹ Clines, *Job 1-20*, 418.

³² *Mot* is never called king either.

It is safe to say, however, that the “King of Terrors” is at least a reference to Death personified, as is Death in the epithet “Firstborn of Death.” It may be that the author personifies Death as the King of Terrors, and the Firstborn of Death functions as Death’s agent in transferring entities into the netherworld through consumption. Amos Hakham suggests that the Firstborn of Death may in fact be, “הראשון והעליון שבמלאכי מוות.”³³ This understanding accommodates the personification of Death by carefully examining Bildad’s comments alongside the ancient Near Eastern imagery. It also harmonizes with Bildad’s repeated insinuations regarding the fate of the wicked in chapter 18—namely, that the wicked will suffer a harrowing death.

Whether or not these characters of personified death came from the same source of cultural consciousness, we see that one can gain a better understanding of the text of Job through study of similar ancient Near Eastern entities. The author of Job was operating well within the common understanding of his cognitive environment when he warned (through Bildad) of these terrors and calamities that would befall the impious. If the author of Job believed that horrific beings such as the Firstborn of Death and the King of Terrors truly existed, it is easy to understand why he would include these characters in a speech urging someone to turn from wickedness.

³³ “The first and the highest of the angels of death.” Hakham, *Job*, 141.