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EL AND THE BIRTH OF THE GRACIOUS GODS

DANIEL BECERRA

The god El is the patriarch of the Canaanite pantheon. He is the father, creator and ruler of the gods.¹ Some scholars, such as Patrick Miller, have argued that the account of “The Birth of the Gracious Gods,” in which El impregnates two women who in turn give birth to the dawn and dusk, “Shachar and Shalim,” is an illustration of his “gradual decline in the face of Baal’s rise to prominence.”² They perceive the story as being an example of El’s emasculation and a pretext for his eventual replacement by Baal, who was the storm god associated with fertility.³ In the eyes of some, El is portrayed as an impotent old man.⁴ That he eventually took a secondary role to Baal is not my concern, but rather answering the question of whether this specific text illustrates his fall. Instead of comparing and contrasting the portrayals of El and Baal in the whole story, this paper will show that the account of “The Birth of The Gracious Gods” was not evidence of the El’s emasculation but an illustration of El’s virility. I will show this by focusing on two specific aspects of the text, namely fertility ritual motifs and evidences of masculinity.

Fertility Ritual Motifs

The fertility ritual motifs throughout the story are significant in that the women in the account were endeavoring to summon a god (El), who though the creator of the gods, was not specifically linked to the fertility of nature or humankind.⁵ To suplicate a god who was not specialized in the area over which

1. Patrick D. Miller, “El the Warrior,” *Harvard Theological Review* 60 (1967): 411.

2. See Miller, “El the Warrior,” 411–12.

3. See Miller, “El the Warrior,” 411–12.

4. Mark Smith et al., eds., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (SBL Writings from the Ancient World; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 206.

5. Miller, “El the Warrior,” 418. Miller states, “El was of course the creator or begetter of the gods, but in one instance where we have any description of El involved in the procreation of the gods, he does a very poor job and hardly deserves the title ‘Bull.’ And the fact

a blessing was desired is very inconsistent with ritual worship in antiquity. Gods were almost exclusively petitioned according to their specific stewardship. The ancients had numerous gods in their pantheon, each responsible for a certain aspect of their life and surroundings. Therefore, if El was known or depicted as being deficient in the field of fertility, it would make no sense to call upon him to perform an act outside his specific stewardship, which he was seemingly incapable of accomplishing. Baal, in fact, was the god associated with rain and fertility and would have been the most likely candidate for such a plea.

In the beginning of the story, El has descended from his abode and “strides along the shores of the great deep.”⁶ It appears he was summoned or had come for some specific purpose because he was so far from home. His dwelling place was “at the source of the double river, midst the upspringings of the deeps,”⁷ which were the source of water. But he encounters the two women at the sea-shore, which was seen as the end of the water. The following events ensue in lines 31–36:⁸

Ilu [spies] two females presenting (him with) an offering,
 presenting (him with) an offering from the jar,
 One gets down low, the other up high.
 One cries out: “Father, father,” the other cries: “Mother, mother.”
 “May Ilu’s hand stretch out as long as the sea, (may) Ilu’s hand (stretch out
 as long) as the flowing waters;
 Stretch out, (O) hand of Ilu, (as long) as the sea (stretch out, O) hand of
 Ilu as the flowing waters.”
 Ilu takes the two females presenting an offering, presenting an offering
 from the jar; He takes (them), estab<lish>es (them) in his house.

The first ritualistic aspect to address is the offering presented to Ilu or El. Previously in the story, there is a reference to two individuals with an offering contained in a jar. Pardee states, “the ‘jar’ can only be the jar already introduced in line 15. There we saw youths chanting about spiced milk being prepared ‘over a fire,’ ‘over a jar,’ apparently as an offering.”⁹ In the ancient Near East, milk or other dairy products, were associated with fertility rituals.¹⁰ In some ritual settings, milk was used to “promote fertility in general and sexual potency in particular.”¹¹ This would suggest that the two women perhaps were unable to conceive by normal means and needed divine intervention. Harry A. Hoffner

remains the El in the Ugaritic texts is not a fertility god. Baal is the fertility god.”

6. “The Myth,” trans. Denis Pardee (*COS* 1.87:30–31).

7. “Off He Goes,” trans. Denis Pardee (*COS* 1.86: 4–6).

8. All block quotes are taken from *COS* and translated by Denis Pardee.

9. “The Birth of the Gracious and Beautiful Gods,” trans. Denis Pardee (*COS* 1.86:32, note 45).

10. See Theodor Gaster, “A Canaanite Ritual Drama: The Spring Festival at Ugarit,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 66 (1946): 52, 61–62.

11. Harry A. Hoffner, “Symbols for Masculinity and Femininity: Their Use in Ancient Near Eastern Sympathetic Magic Rituals,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966): 328.

wrote, “an impotent man or a barren woman might engage a professional sorcerer to perform upon him a ritual to restore the ability to reproduce.”¹² The milk seems to be part of the means by which the women summoned El to the seashore; it was most likely the prescribed offering required to win his favor to receive the desired blessing.

After presenting the offering, the women do some ritualistic movements or dance, also not out of place in the ritual setting. Denis Pardee suggests, “We may surmise that the women were engaging in the activity with the express purpose of catching a male.”¹³ The vocative titles the women call out, “Father” and “Mother,” are perhaps an allusion to the creative powers of El and his parental role among the gods. Therefore, we thus far see two women engaging in activities typical of a fertility ritual and calling upon the god El for a blessing. It is obvious that the women do not view El as an impotent old man but believe in his procreative capabilities.

What, then, does the text tell us about why El was summoned by the two women? The purpose for which he was called upon by the women was to impregnate them. The consensus among scholars is that the word “hand” is a euphemism for phallus.¹⁴ The women try to entice El to engage in sexual relations first, the request is construed in a jussive form, “May Ilu’s hand stretch out” and the second, an imperative, “Stretch out (O) hand of Ilu.”¹⁵ Furthermore, Gaster notes that “in Semitic idiom, ‘to have a far-reaching hand’ means ‘to be powerful, vigorous,’” which also attests to the masculinity of El.¹⁶ This block of text (found on page 2–3) is also organized somewhat chiastically, flanked by two parallel clauses and with the focus containing the chants of the women, “May Ilu’s hand stretch out . . . Stretch out (O) hand of Ilu.” This structure suggests that, “Stretch thy hand” is the main idea of the ritual which itself attests to the virility of the god El. One might interpret this phrase as a cry for El to accomplish what he is unable to do, but judging from the result it is clear that this is not the case.

In the following lines, El raises up and lowers his staff and rod, which, within the sexual metaphor can be symbolic of life and death and is also consistent with the fertility ritual motif.¹⁷ Finally, El takes the two women and “establishes them into his house.” In ancient Near Eastern culture, the word “house,” or *byt*, can refer to a dwelling habitation or members of a family or dynasty.¹⁸ Therefore, by receiving the two women into his house he makes them his wives. This entrance into his “house” in the literal sense is also significant in that in some Semitic cultures a woman would not become a man’s wife until she

12. Hoffner, “Symbols for Masculinity and Femininity,” 327.

13. “Ilu Handpicks Two Women,” trans. Denis Pardee (*COS* 1.86:33).

14. “Ilu Handpicks Two Women,” 1.86:33–35.

15. “Ilu Handpicks Two Women,” 1.86:33–35, note 48.

16. Gaster, “A Canaanite Ritual Drama,” 53.

17. T. Worden, “The Literary Influence of the Ugaritic Fertility Myth on the Old Testament,” *Vetus Testamentum* 3 (1953): 286.

18. See Gen 7:1; 18:19 and Deut 6:22.

crossed the threshold of his abode. This final act of El taking the two women as his wives and eventually impregnating them seems to be the purpose of the ritual and is somewhat reminiscent of the *hieros gamos* ritual common in early Near Eastern religions.¹⁹

Evidences of El's Masculinity

The next part of the encounter is as follows and comprises lines 37–39:

Ilu (first) lowers his staff, (then) Ilu grasps his rod in his right hand.
He raises (it), casts (it) into the sky, casts (it at) a bird in the sky.
He plucks (the bird), puts (it) on the coals,
(then) Ilu sets about enticing the women.

Hoffner explains in “Symbols for Masculinity and Femininity” that “the masculinity of the ancient was measured by two criteria: his prowess in battle and his ability to sire children.”²⁰ In lines 37–39, El is portrayed as demonstrating his ability to hunt rather than his prowess in battle, but the metaphor is clear. He does this to show the women that he is able to perform the desired task. Pardee argues that this translation also suggests that El used an arrow to shoot down the bird.²¹ This is very significant for a sensible interpretation of the text in that the bow and arrow are symbols for virile manhood and sexual potency.²² Therefore, El here is portrayed as showing the women his capability as a man in terms which were common to them and that they would have very easily understood. He demonstrated that he was very much able to do anything and everything a man should be able to do. Also, rather than showing El's impotence, the author continues with the phallic imagery, alluding to the fact that El is capable of lowering and raising his staff and rod at will.

Within this sexual metaphor, his shooting down of the bird represents his ability to impregnate the women. In Pardee's words, “Ilu's shooting apparatus is in working order.”²³ Likewise, in Ugaritic literature El's nickname is “The Bull,” which was a symbol for fertility and strength.²⁴ The two women reply to this display of manliness by saying, “O man, man, you who prepare your staff, who grasp you rod in you right hand, you roast a bird on the fire, roast (it) on the coals. (Then) the two women (become) the wives of Ilu.”²⁵ Judging from their reactions, it is obvious that they are impressed.

19. Gaster, “A Canaanite Ritual Drama,” 73. Some examples include the festival of the goddess Bau and the marriage between the god Horus and the goddess Hathor.

20. Hoffner, “Symbols for Masculinity and Femininity,” 327.

21. “Ilu Tries His Hand at Shooting Birds,” 1.87:37, note 51.

22. Hoffner, “Symbols for Masculinity and Femininity,” 329.

23. “Ilu Tries His Hand at Shooting Birds,” 1.87:37, note 51.

24. Mark Smith, “Ugaritic Studies and Israelite Religion: A Retrospective View,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 65 (2002): 21; see also Miller, “El the Warrior,” 423.

25. “Ilu Comes Up with a Handy Test to the Women's Maturity,” trans. Denis Pardee (*COS* 1.87:46–8).

The last line reads that “Ilu sets about enticing the women.” The word here translated as “entice” comes from the root *pt(y)*²⁶ and is cognate with the Hebrew *pth*,²⁷ which can mean “seduce.”²⁸ In light of the latter word usage, it can be said that El’s desire in showing off his skill was to persuade the women that he has sufficient sexual abilities. If this is not the case, the word rendered as “entice,” which has a milder connotation, portrays El as demonstrating his ability to perform that which they have summoned him to do. This is more likely, for El did not summon the women in an effort to seduce them, but rather came to their call and in essence showed that he was the man fit for the job.

The last section before conception reads:

“If,” (says he,) “The two women cry out:

‘O man, man, you who prepare your staff, who grasp your rod in your right hand, You roast a bird on the fire, roast (it) on the coals,’

(then) the two women (will become) the wives of Ilu,

Ilu’s wives forever.

But if the two women cry out:

‘O father, father, you who prepare your staff, who grasp your rod in your right hand, You roast a bird on the fire, roast (it) on the coals,’

(Then) the two daughters (will become) the daughters of Ilu,

Ilu’s daughters forever.”

The two women do (in fact) cry out:

“O man, man, you who prepare your staff, who grasp you rod in you right hand, you roast a bird on the bird on the fire, roast (it) on the coals.’

(Then) the two women (become) the wives [of Ilu]

Ilu’s wives forever.

Here it appears that there are two different relationships the women might have with El. He gives them the choice of being daughters or wives. Perhaps presenting the women with these two options is El’s way of making sure why it is exactly he was called there. It has already been established that the events and imagery are not uncommon with fertility rituals and that such rituals could have been performed for personal or agricultural blessing. The women have already acknowledged El’s powers of procreation and fertility; therefore, it is possible that this is his way of asking whether they would have his powers utilized in a different setting (perhaps that of ensuring a bountiful harvest), or in a more personal manner (his fathering their children). Hoffner states, “One of the principle tasks which the Near Easterner entrusted to his religion was securing the favor of the gods, so that they would either grant fertility or sustain it.”²⁹ El gives the two women the option of remaining in the father-daughter relationship and perhaps answering their prayer in a harvest setting, or

26. Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Handbook* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1947), 144.

27. “Ilu Comes Up with a Handy Test to the Women’s Maturity,” 1.87:39, note 52.

28. See “*pth*,” in Brown, F., S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 834.

29. Hoffner, “Symbols for Masculinity and Femininity,” 326.

becoming his wives and bearing children. They choose the latter, further indicating their faith in El's abilities. The conclusion of the story has El kissing the two women's lips and embracing them. The text states, "When he embraces there is pregnancy."³⁰ They then give birth to the dawn and the dusk.

Conclusion

The argument that the god El was an old man who was hardly capable of performing sexually does not seem relevant when taken in light of the texts. The story of "The Birth of the Gracious Gods" has two women summoning El to a place far from his home in the context of a fertility ritual that was performed with the intent that the two might bear offspring. Because Baal, and not El, is the god traditionally associated with fertility, and considering some scholar's perception of El, this passage must be given more attention to be fully understood. Rather than an impotent old man, El is portrayed as strong and sexually capable god. He demonstrates his masculinity by his hunting prowess and skill with a bow and entices or "seduces" the women to the point where they choose to be his wives. The author uses primarily phallic sexual imagery to paint the picture of a god who is in full control and willing to grant the two women their desire. He is acknowledged to be a father figure and a spouse. Through the use of fertility ritual motifs, sexual imagery, and symbols of masculinity, the god El was very much in his prime and able to carry out all the functions that were required of him.

30. "The Birth of Sahru-wa-Salimu," trans. Denis Pardee (*COS* 1.87:50).