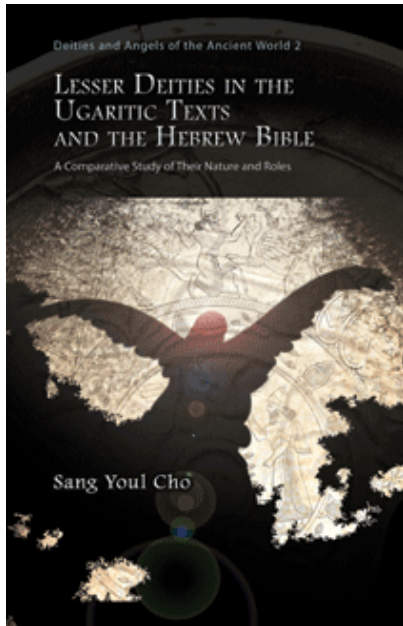


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Cho, Sang Youl

Lesser Deities in the Ugaritic Texts and the Hebrew Bible: A Comparative Study of Their Nature and Roles

Deities and Angels of the Ancient World 2

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This monograph is the revised version of the author's doctoral thesis from the University of Edinburgh, U.K. I write "monograph," although the book is probably better defined as a survey of texts with philological notes and brief exegetical discussions. As the latter, it forms a useful tool for further study. As I expected the former, however, the book left me with a mixed impression.

The book begins with a minimal discussion of the purpose of the investigation as well as some reflections on methodology. Cho sets out to investigate whether or not there is affinity between the Ugaritic texts and the Hebrew Bible pertaining to the nature and the roles of divine beings ranked as lesser deities. The Ugaritic texts form the basis for the comparisons, as they constitute the older material. Cho thus defines the roles of the lesser deities in accordance with the Ugaritic material and then explores to what degree there are similar descriptions in the biblical material. As to the methodology, Cho uses a comparative Semitic philological approach for the exegetical analysis of the Ugaritic and the Hebrew texts. Already here I am beginning to feel uneasy. There is, for example, no reference to the by-now classic book by James Barr on the dangers of comparative philology for reconstructing the original meaning of a word.

The first chapter defines the lesser deities. Cho surveys a representative selection of Ugaritic collective terms that reflect the existence of plural deities, among others the Ugaritic terms *ilm* (“gods”), *bn il* (“sons of El”), and *phr ilm* (“assembly of gods”). He looks at texts containing such terms and seeks to define them according to their tasks. He concludes that these lesser gods are all members of the divine assembly (Cho uses the terms “divine assembly,” “pantheon,” and “divine council” interchangeably to denote the plurality of deities) and that several of the major gods have lesser gods to serve them. Cho further argues that the assembly of gods consisted of four levels, each level denoting a certain rank. The lesser deities, positioned on the lowest level, include messenger deities, warrior deities, mediator deities, guardian deities, changer deities, and servant deities.

Cho translates each relevant text into English, and the translation is supported by a wealth of philological notes and references to relevant secondary literature. These notes are a delight to those interested in Ugaritic philology. At the same time, it is sometimes not clear how they contribute to the particular subject matter at hand, as they often discuss words that merely occur in the text adjacent to the relevant matter but not wholly relevant to it. In contrast, the notes accompanying the Hebrew texts are not that detailed.

Cho’s presentation of the Ugaritic material is sound and informative. I have more problems with the section looking at the comparative biblical material. Cho looks at the expressions אלהים, אלים, בני אלהים/אלים, מועד, אל, עדת אל, and so forth, that are, according to their etymology, comparable with the previously mentioned Ugaritic terms. Cho cites the passages in which they appear and discusses each passage briefly. The translations are again very well annotated, and Cho argues relatively well for his chosen translations. Notably, he makes a reasonably good case that אלהים in Gen 1:26a denotes both YHWH and the divine assembly. At the same time, there is no discussion of the theological implications of such a reading and why such a reading would be found in the P creation account. I also have a problem with the selection of the passages discussed. As Cho nowhere defines when אלהים is best read as “gods,” what the reader gets is a preselection of passages where this translation fits.

Cho concludes that the Ugaritic conception of lesser deities as members of the divine council is found also in the Hebrew Bible. Cho mentions the likelihood that later biblical authors sought to establish the norms of monotheism. In these cases, the divine beings other than YHWH “become lesser deities in a lower rank, sc. his servant deities” (77). This, however, is not a definition of monotheism with which I am either familiar or comfortable, and I am surprised that Cho does not discuss the issue further. In addition, Cho’s definition of lesser deities as deities belonging to the lowest class of the divine assembly is not without difficulty. In particular, this definition becomes problematic in his discussion of the seraphim and the cherubim on pages 288–89. On the one hand, Cho

argues that these two types of lesser deities are not part of the divine council. On the other hand, by merely incorporating them into his study and discussing their roles, Cho clearly treats them as such.

The following three chapters proceed in a similar fashion. The first of these chapters looks at texts referring to ties of kinship between the chief deity and the lesser deities. Cho illustrates well that both sets of texts describe lesser deities in service of a particular deity as his or her children. He also points out the differences. In particular, while Ugaritic texts describe such deities as being horned and winged, the comparable biblical material envisions their appearance as anthropomorphic.

The following chapter explores messenger deities, and Cho discusses the various Ugaritic terms used to denote lesser deities in their roles as the main gods' messengers. In addition, Cho discusses the procedure consisting of five stages, found in Ugaritic literature, for the dispatch of a message by a messenger deity. In contrast, the Hebrew texts employ the single term מלאך to indicate the hierarchically lesser rank of messenger deities. The מלאך is God's agent who conveys his decrees. At the same time, Cho emphasizes the descriptions of messenger deities that are shared by both the Ugaritic and the biblical texts. Notably, both literary corpora envision such messenger deities as accompanied by lights and fire.

The next chapter investigates warrior deities. Cho argues that both Ugaritic and biblical texts contain related description of lesser deities as warriors. Again, Cho regards the term מלאך, together with ממתים (Job 33:22), משחית (Exod 12:23), and the like as denoting lesser deities. In particular, he argues that the description of the archangel Michael has the (named) Ugaritic warrior or messenger deities as its prototype.

The final chapter is devoted to "other lesser deities," that is, lesser deities with less commonly attested roles, such as mediator, guardians, singers, maidservants, and so forth. Notably, Cho argues that the cherubim in the Hebrew Bible correspond to the Ugaritic guardian deities.

This book is a straight comparison of texts: this is what we have in the Ugaritic texts, and this is what we have in the biblical texts. While this seems straight-forward enough, I am unsure as to the methodology involved. First and foremost, we are not comparing texts belonging to the same category. The Ugaritic texts, although possibly the result of oral and/or written development, are nevertheless not comparable with the biblical material that often forms the end result of a long redaction history. More specifically, while the Ugaritic texts reflect the polytheism of the people of Ugarit at the time of their composition, the terms denoting other deities than YHWH in the biblical material must

be treated in a more careful manner. Even though these terms may originally have denoted lesser deities, these texts are now part of the Hebrew Bible. We must thus take into account the likelihood that many of the Israelite authors might have transformed these originally polytheistic terms to fit their own more monolatrous worldview. As an example, Cho, in his discussion of the roles and functions of the מלאך, a term that he translates as “messenger,” appears to argue that the biblical authors regarded the מלאכים as lesser deities. It may, of course, merely be a matter of definition, as it is possible that Cho simply equates “deity” with “heavenly being.” Cho acknowledges that “early Hebrew conceptions may have been dimmed later by the light of the monotheism in the Hebrew tradition,” but he nonetheless states that what remains shows the interrelation between Ugaritic and Hebrew religious traditions (294). While the last statement is undoubtedly true, a book like this would have benefited from a solid introductory discussion of recent research pertaining to the move toward monotheism in ancient Israel in order to enable the reader to evaluate the results of the comparisons.

Second, Cho’s discussion lacks a sense of chronological development. As the book stands, materials from Judges, the Psalter, Job, and Daniel are placed side by side. Surely the material in Daniel pertaining to angels is better seen against the preceding Hebrew tradition than against the myths from Ugarit.

Third, some texts that I consider key in understanding the way in which the ancient Israelites understood the heavenly council are never discussed. Notably, Zech 3 is only mentioned twice, and both in passing. Likewise, the role of the accuser (השטן) (Job 1–2; Zech 3) is brushed aside as irrelevant as Cho argues that the accuser is not a regular member of the heavenly council (121 n. 224).

All in all, this is a useful book in that it surveys the material pertaining to lesser deities in Ugarit and it further highlights the variety of heavenly beings referred to in the Hebrew Bible. This study is therefore well-suited for providing the basis for further studies.