Ola Wikander

*Unburning Fame: Horses, Dragons, Beings of Smoke, and Other Indo-European Motifs in Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible*

Coniectanea Biblica: Old Testament Series 62


Joanna Töyräänvuori

University of Helsinki

Ola Wikander’s *Unburning Fame: Horses, Dragons, Beings of Smoke, and Other Indo-European Motifs in Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible* promises to deliver a study of the Indo-European influences in the literatures of the Hebrew Bible and in Ugaritic texts by tracing select “poetic motifs and other concepts” that Wikander claims originate in the “Indo-European linguistic milieux.” The book contains a brief introduction that lays out the core concepts to be discussed and a short preamble on the two “language families” whose early interactions and subsequent borrowing into the Hebrew Bible Wikander intends to study. This is followed by a chapter introducing select case studies of more established points of contact between the vocabularies of early Indo-Europeans and Hebrews, containing the words for “horse” and “plough.” From chapter 4 onward follows the main contents of the monograph, an attempt to establish a connection between certain concepts found in ancient texts from the Syro-Anatolian area and the Hebrew Bible: chaos dragons, living breath, the god Dagan, the elusive Habiru and drought motifs. The final parts of the book contain an attempt to establish the book’s method, etymological poetics being the explanation of words by their older semantic correspondents in etymologically reconstructed lexemes, and some final words on the afterlife of the concepts discussed in the book.
The monograph belongs to a long tradition of scholarly works concerned with the inheritance and borrowing of traditions. Works written on the literary influences of the Hebrew Bible go back to the very discovery of cuneiform literature by A. H. Layard and H. Rawlinson at Iraqi Kuyunjik at the end of the nineteenth century. While the materials available for comparison have multiplied and influences even outside of Mesopotamia have been sought in the past decades, much of the methodology and especially the intent of the comparisons has remained the same: to map out the degree of originality and innovation in the texts of the Hebrew Bible. What is rather original in Wikander’s book is the choice of text corpora under comparison. While Ugaritic and biblical texts have a long history of comparative studies that began at the very outset of the decipherment of the Ugaritic script in the late 1920s, Hittite and Vedic literatures have so far had only a supplementary role in discussions of borrowing in the Hebrew Bible, for reasons of geography and dating. Hittite and Vedic texts have been discussed in the context of Ugaritic and biblical materials before, for example, in N. Wyatt’s 1989 *Near Eastern Echoes of Aryan Tradition*, but few studies have sought for direct precedents to biblical texts and concepts in these literatures, opting for much more general illustrations of shared cultural spheres and traveling mythemes.

The beginning of the book lays out the theoretical groundwork for the series of loosely connected studies within it, in which Wikander attempts to justify his choice of comparing biblical and Ugaritic texts to Hittite and Vedic texts and occasionally mere lexemes from the Indo-European language family rather than the Persian and Greek textual worlds that he admits are much closer in age to the biblical texts. No methodological reflection is given to the comparison of biblical and Ugaritic texts other than that they form one “Northwest Semitic” literature, the established nature of Ugaritic-biblical comparisons likely suggesting that no such reflection is required, but from which many of the comparisons in the monograph might have benefited.

A quote serves to illustrate the kind of argumentation one can expect to find in the book:

If, indeed, the Ugaritic term epithet *aliyn* which is applied to Baal represents a kind of loan-translation from some form of the Anatolian words mentioned earlier [*tarḫu-, tūrvant-*] (51)), and the Northwest Semitic tales of a storm deity slaying a serpent monster [no such tale survives] also include elements borrowed from Indo-Iranian sources, then the use of the term “mighty/conqueror” in Ugaritic could in a strange way represent a kind of confluence of material from two Indo-European branches using an etymologically identical expression for talking poetically about the victorious storm god. The non-Indo-European, Ugaritic language becomes an apex at which the Indo-Aryan and Anatolian legs in the triangle can meet. (52)
The argument is logically sound but is drawn from faulty premises, and such questionable propositions are piled up one after the other.

While the book is filled to the brim with expert minutiae on linguistics and phonetics, Wikander paints with a large brush in order to force similarities between the traditions, and it does not always do them justice. The examples discussed became more convincing the less I had previous knowledge of the topics but conversely seemed less convincing the closer they were to my area of expertise. One sincerely hopes this is not the case with all readers. Wikander’s discussion on beings of smoke in chapter 5 serves as an example: Wikander “identifies” the Ugaritic word *npš* (which he translates as “vital power/soul”) with *qtr* (“smoke”) in a tricolon of the Aqhat text (KTU 1.18 IV 24–26), 72. In the regular poetic parallelism of the tricolon, however, *qtr* is paralleled by *rh* and *īl*, whereas *npš* is paralleled by *brlt* and *ap* (with which *qtr* is paired in the line), the latter three words referring to the physical apparatus of breathing in the esophagus/throat, gullet, and nostrils and the first three to the substance that comes out of them in a living being: wind (breath), spittle, and smoke (or, better, vapor). There is no grammatical or etymological justification for his identification of *npš* and *qtr* in the tricolon outside of the larger case that he wishes to make (that human beings were understood as beings filled with smoke in both the Indo-European and ancient North West Semitic ambit), and the identification seems to be based on later developments in the meaning of the word *npš* in Semitic languages. An association of *qtr* with *rh* would actually have made Wikander’s case incrementally stronger.

The final chapter of the book discusses a phenomenon that Wikander has dubbed as “the pizza effect,” being the cultural reabsorption of concepts that have originated in a culture but been subsequently borrowed and changed by another culture in the interim. While it is easy to understand his intention and while his enthusiasm regarding the concept is laudable, the suggestion that the writers of the Hebrew Bible adopted Indo-European concepts from the ancestors of modern Europeans could cause offense to many readers.

The premise of the monograph—the attempt to establish the direction of the borrowing of motifs while claiming to conceptually “tear down unnecessary walls” (139)—feels quaint and antiquated, even if it is dressed up in the guise of a new method such as etymological poetics, the usefulness of which will be determined by future scholarship. The reader may wonder whether the premise of the book is the result of marrying off Wikander’s two darling fields of interest rather than from any organic connection between the textual corpora under discussion.

Rather than attempting to find survivals of Hittite and Vedic words and concepts in the Hebrew Bible, Wikander would have fared better by limiting his discussion to the Ugarit...
and Hittite literatures, which did exist in the same sociopolitical compass for decades if not centuries, with varying levels of interaction. In fact, it is in the comparison of Hittite and Ugaritic words where Wikander comes up with his most interesting insights, for example in interpreting the obscure Ugaritic word ztr of KTU 1.17 I 27 as referring to the funerary context (75), translating the phrase qdš ztr as “mortuary sanctuary” based on a hypothetical Luwian lexeme.

The monograph is, as stated in the preface, clearly a labor of love and will have no trouble finding an audience. With its bouts of humor and clever turns of phrase, it is also easy to read and concise in size, which is why it can be recommended for anyone interested in the latest and occasionally the quirkiest views on some of the most fascinating but largely unanswerable questions of interpretation of terms and concepts found within the Hebrew Bible.