Hebrew ʾšdt and Ugaritic išdym

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The *hapax legomenon* 'sdt in Dt. 33:2 is one of the most difficult cruces in the Bible. B. Margulis noted that even the Masoretes "were aware of the problem when they appended an unusual diacritical mark noting ktyb ḫd wqry tryn."¹

Modern Bible critics have rightly rejected the Masoretic division into 's and dt, but none has proposed a truly viable solution. The array of suggestions itself points to the lack of consensus in interpreting the word 'sdt. Before proposing still another solution to this crux, it will be beneficial to review the most commonly accepted suggestions.

C. J. Ball vocalized the word as 'āšedōt, and connected the word to the Syriac root 'sd meaning "to pour, to stream."² His view was accepted by U. Cassuto, who translated the word as "effulgence,"³ and I. L. Seeligmann, who translated it as "fiery stream."⁴

H. S. Nyberg elected to emend the text and proposed 'āšērat, a noun "with an archaic preservation of the ending -at in the absolute state," meaning, of course, the goddess Asherah.⁵

Frank M. Cross and David Noel Freedman proposed a more radical emendation, reading MT 'sdt ḫmw as 'sr ʿlm, translated "proceeded the mighty ones." Analogous uses of this verb are to be found in Hebrew in Prov. 9:6 and in Ugaritic in Keret: 94.⁶

A. F. L. Beeston accepted the consonantal text 'sdt and connected the root to the South Arabic 'sd meaning "warrior" and the Arabic 'sd meaning "lion." Based on the parallelism with ḫbht qds, he translated the term "angels" or "(divine) warriors."⁷ Beeston’s suggestion is strengthened by the LXX’s rendering of ūggelot. (The Vulgate renders 'sdt as ignea lex, and Onqelos translates it as 'yṣṭ 'wrjt. Both reflect the Masoretic reading of 's dt.)

P. D. Miller sought to combine the above two views. He criticised Beeston for retaining the consonantal text, stating that "in this case the MT is so problematic that one is inclined to expect some corruption a priori. Thus a hard and fast retention of the MT is methodologically

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² C. J. Ball, *PSBA* 18 (1896), 119.
⁵ H. S. Nyberg, *ZDMG* 92 (1938), 335.
unsound in this case." On the other hand, MILLER agreed with BEESTON'S connecting šdt with the South Arabic-Arabic root ‘sd. MILLER also accepted part of CROSS' and FREEDMAN'S emendation, and offered the reading šd ‘hm, which he translated "warriors of the gods (divine warriors)."

MITCHELL DAHOOD connected the word with Ugaritic isd meaning "leg." He accepted the consonantal text and vocalized the word as 'ōšēdōt, a denominative verb translated as "marching." Such denominatives are common, DAHOOD wrote, with Hebrew rgl, "to foot it," and Ugaritic tłm, "to shoulder (= to carry)," as other examples.

Finally, G. R. DRIVER connected the root with Syriac-Aramaic šd meaning "to pour, to stream" (as did BALL and CASSUTO), but he considered šdt a verb, not a noun. DRIVER translated the term as "streaming along."

The statement of CROSS and FREEDMAN 30 years ago that "conjectures are almost as numerous as scholars" is as true today as it was then.

It is astonishing, however, that in their search for cognates and parallel usages, all of these scholars (except BALL and CASSUTO who are excused because they wrote before 1929) overlooked the glaring use of išdym in UT 8:9.

The entire text (UT 8) is reproduced below:

(1) yn . iš[rýt] ilnr
(2) spr. [ ]kšb’t
(3) šhl[ ] . ph . tmnt
(4) nbluh . šps . ymp
(5) hlkt . tdrš [ ]
(6) šps . b’dh . t? [ ]
(7) aɪr . aɪrm [ ]
(8) aɪr . aɪrm [ ]
(9) išdym . t [ ]
(10) bk . mla š [ ]
(11) udm’t . d [ ]
(12) [ ] . bn . [ ]
(13) [ ]

Although it is badly fragmented, enough is legible to determine that the

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8 PATRICK D. MILLER JR., HTR 57 (1964), 242.
9 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 G. R. DRIVER, SVT 16 (1967), 50–51.
13 CROSS AND FREEDMAN, 199 note 11.
14 UT, 162, reads "(h/i) hr’; the i is accepted here for contextual reasons.
15 UT, 162, reads "ghl," but cf. UT, 473, where the reading šhl is proposed.
text is a mythological one dealing with the sun goddess Sps. Direct evidence for this is Sps in line 4 and line 6; shl, "to glow," in line 3; and nbluh, "flame," in line 4. The words atr atrm in line 7 and line 8 are to be translated "march of marches" and may refer to the march of the sun across the sky. Given the context of UT 8, ilhr in line 1 is probably to be translated "god of light."

We may now turn our attention to isdym in line 9. The word is problematic, and to attempt a definition of the word in the context of this fragmented text would be sheer conjecture. We can, however, equate isdym with šdt in Dt. 33:2. Both UT 8 and Dt. 33:2 describe the activities of the sun. In the former, these attributes are attributed to the Ugaritic goddess Sps. In the latter, they are attributed to the Israelite god Yahweh.

A full reading of Dt. 33:2:

\[\text{yhw}_b \text{msny}_b \text{wrz}_b \text{m}_b \text{yr}_b \text{lmw}_b \text{hwfy}'_b \text{mhr}_b \text{pr}'_b \text{w}_b \text{th}_b \text{mrbbt}_b \text{qds}_b \text{mymynw}_b \text{šdt}_b \text{lmw}_b\]

reveals that Yahweh is depicted as "shining forth from Seir" and "glowing from Mount Paran." A full reading of UT 8 reveals that Sps is likewise "glowing" and aflame." Both literatures go on to describe the movement of the sun; Dt. 33:2 uses the root 'th and UT 8 uses the root tr. Immediately thereafter follow the appearances of šdt in the Hebrew and isdym in the Ugaritic. These affinities are too close to be accidental. Dt. 33:2 must be an Israelite adaptation of a Canaanite sun cult text, perhaps even UT 8.17

Oddly enough, previous writers have recognized the Canaanite influence on Dt. 33:2. Speaking of the entire chapter, CROSS and FREEDMAN wrote that "the ode which frames the blessings, and some of the blessings themselves, have strong affinities with the Canaanite literature which influenced Israel's early poetic genius." 18 Writing in The Interpreter's Bible, G. ERNEST WRIGHT noted that Dt. 33:1–3 "depicts God as the rising sun, shining upon Israel from Sinai and the wilderness." 19 SEELIGMANN wrote, "The use of the verbs zrh and hwfy' in the description of the theophany may lend some support to an etymology according to which the words mymynw šdt hw would be a torso of what was to describe the radiant splendour in which the Lord reveals Himself to His people. If this reconstruction is correct the text would seem to describe the revelation of a

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16 UT, 368.
18 CROSS and FREEDMAN, 192.
19 The Interpreter's Bible 2, 1953, 528.
God of Light in his radiance." But none of these scholars made
the connection between Dt. 33:2 and UT 8.

There are obviously still problems in this identification. As to morpho-
logy, 'sdt would appear to be a feminine singular noun 21 or a feminine
plural noun (vocalizing the end of the word as -ōt), while išdym is
apparently a masculine plural noun. 22 23 The meaning of 'sdt / išdym is also
unresolved. Some may still wish to derive it from the Syriac-Aramaic 'sd
and translate the word "streams" or "rays." This meaning is backed by
Hab. 3:4, wngk kwr thym qrnym mydw lw. Others may still wish to derive it
from the South Arabic-Arabic 'sd and translate "divine warriors." This
meaning is backed by the LXX ἀγγελοί. Or another cognate may be sought.
Regardless, it is no longer possible to divorce 'sdt in Dt. 33:2 from išdym in
UT 8:9. 24 The ultimate solution to both should be sought together.

The availability of space at the end of this article allows me to note that
most recently DAVID NOEL FREEDMAN proposed reading our Hebrew
crus as 'āšēdōt, "mountain-slopes" (cf. Dt. 3:17, 4:49, Josh. 12:3, 13:20).
Thus he apparently retreats from his and CROSS' emendation of the
consonantal text noted above. FREEDMAN now states that it is "in fact
obligatory to struggle with the . . . difficult reading of MT," an approach
with which I am totally sympathetic. See FREEDMAN'S article "The Poetic
Structure of the Framework of Deuteronomy 33," in GARY RENDSBERG
et al., eds., The Bible World: Essays in Honor of Cyrus H. Gordon, 1980,
39–41.

20 SEELIGMAN, 82. Note SEELIGMAN'S identification of Yahweh as the God of Light and the
occurrence of ibhr in UT 8:1.
21 Cf. GKC, 223–224.
22 Such details need not detain us from making the equation. For example, Hebrew 'wfrnym
equals Ugaritic qnm; Hebrew ršym appears in Ugaritic as rašm or rašî; and Hebrew grnwt
appears in Ugaritic as grn or grnt. Plural suffixes tell us very little if anything about the
gender of nouns, viz., bwt and nšym. To further complicate matters, Hebrew šmd is both
masculine and feminine.
23 *āšd̄ may be a derivative of āšd which would then be made plural by the suffix -m. For a
similar form, note the personal name špšyn, apparently *špšîy, a derivative of špš with the suffix
-n; cf. UT, 494. It is morphologically possible to treat išdym as a masculine plural gentilic,
though this is problematic contextually.
24 It is also worth noting that the Masoretic vocalization of 'sdt has the i vowel in the first
syllable. This is the same vowel which appears in the first syllable of išdym. This may purely be
an accident since Hebrew 's is also vocalized with the i vowel. On the other hand, the sērē in
'sdt may reflect an ancient tradition and it was this that precipitated the Masoretic division
into 's and dt.