

Hiram, YHWH and Baal:

Freemasonry and the Ancient Northwest Semitic Literary Tradition

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MANY YEARS AGO, WHEN, AS A YOUNG DOCTORAL STUDENT, I PRESENTED a paper on the Ugaritic myth of Baal's death and subsequent resurrection at a Biblical Studies conference in Göttingen, the very distinguished professor chairing the session asked me a rather unexpected question: 'Are you a Freemason?' The question startled me, and I replied in the negative, as (at the time) I was not – something that subsequently changed. When I asked him what he had meant by his comment, he replied in a fittingly vague way that there were certain motifs mentioned in my paper that had a bearing on Masonic topics. And there he left it. Now, many years later, I have come to the conclusion that he was (in a kind of roundabout way) right, and this paper will exam-

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ine some of the ways in which that fact has become manifest. I will discuss some ancient roots of Masonic imagery going back to *the mythopoetic universe of Northwest Semitic*.

The term ‘Northwest Semitic’ is primarily a linguistic one; it signifies a sub-clade of rather closely related languages at home in Syria and the Levant. Within this grouping, one finds famous entities such as Hebrew and Aramaic, their ‘wisened old uncle’ Ugaritic (which I like to describe as the ‘Old Icelandic of Hebrew’, and which will to a large extent be the focus of the present essay), the less well-known though once highly important Phoenician, as well as others. Together, these languages and their speakers comprised a common linguistic milieu in the Ancient Near East – with the majority of them being presently extinct. The Neo-Aramaic languages live on in a multitude of forms, forming a vast dialectal belt from southern Turkey all the way to Iran, and Hebrew lives on in the form of Modern Israeli Hebrew. However, the other members of the family have sadly died out. Phoenician, a Northwest Semitic language that at one time must have seemed liked one of the most important, international and viable, is today only a faded memory, being preserved almost exclusively in inscriptional material.

These languages shared more than linguistic roots and grammatical structure; they shared a poetic and mythological universe. The poetic techniques of their texts, the narrative tropes and poetic formulae – all of these commonalities point to the existence of a common narrative-mythological poetic stratum to which individual poets or authors from the respective languages and cultures could take recourse. The type of scholarship directed towards studying such a common stratum (reconstructing a mytho-poetic proto-language of a linguistic family) has previously been successfully carried out in relation to the Indo-European linguistic family.² My current scholarship is generally aimed at doing the same for Northwest Semitic, which is to reach back to that slow-moving, meandering current of poetry and mythology which grew in ancient Syria, Palestine, and the greater Levant. This common mould is the locus of the motifs that I will here attempt to follow into Masonic materials.

It is a sad fact that imagined associations with Canaanite (i.e., Northwest Semitic), Babylonian and other ancient mythologies have not seldom been used by anti-Masons vehemently to attack Freemasonry, almost always based on faulty data, bad history and a lack of knowledge of the ancient primary sources. Notwithstanding this – and, indeed, because of it – a more grounded philological approach is important for understanding

² Three illustrative works (for the Indo-European phylum) demonstrating this type of methodology are C. Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press 1995), M. L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), and D. Calin, *Dictionary of Indo-European Poetic and Religious Themes* (Les Cent Chemins, 2017). My own work in the study of the Hebrew Bible and Ugaritic has to a large extent been focused on applying this form of methodology to Northwest Semitic, which can be seen in my books *Drought, Death, and the Sun in Ugarit and Ancient Israel: A Philological and Comparative Study* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014) and *Unburning Fame: Horses, Dragons, Beings of Smoke, and Other Indo-European Motifs in Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017).

the *actual* relationships between Masonic material and ancient sources from the Ancient Near East. Freemasonry has always the Hebrew Bible as one of the most foundational bases for its mythology, and by virtue of this alone, the relationship to greater Northwest Semitic culture constitutes an important avenue of study.

The reason for this is the fact that, among historical-critical scholars of the Hebrew Bible, it is today a well-known and accepted principle that what we today know as the Hebrew Bible is part of this Northwest Semitic mythological/poetical milieu. It did not appear out of an ideological vacuum, nor were its ideas changed or 'corrupted' by foreign borrowings when parallels with other Northwest Semitic texts appear – rather, these and the Hebrew Bible itself must be regarded as different branches on the same linguistic and cultural tree. Influence from Babylonian, Assyrian, Egyptian or Hittite sources – which one does, indeed, find – are the results of borrowing, but the substantial parallels with extra-biblical Northwest Semitic literature need not be explained in this way. As I have put it on many occasions: the Hebrew Bible did not 'borrow' from Northwest Semitic culture – it *is* Northwest Semitic culture.

What all this means for the question of Masonic studies is that a new avenue of the study of its historical traditions is, in a way, opened up. It is, of course, a rather trivial point to make to state that the basis of much Masonic mythological material lies within the pages of the Hebrew Bible: that textual collection was the constant to which recourse was continuously made by early Masonic ritualists (whether writing about Noah or a certain master builder), and such has continued to be the case as rituals have continued to change, evolve and be adapted. But today, when we know that the Hebrew Bible itself grew out of a greater and more multi-faceted culture of storytelling, it is possible to view some of the Masonic retentions of similar themes and motifs in this greater, *longue-durée* like perspective. If the Hebrew Bible grew out of, added and transformed ancient Northwest Semitic tradition, there is no reason arbitrarily to draw the line and say that this tradition suddenly ended with the editing and canonization of what we know today as the Bible. Rather, that tradition can be analysed as being ongoing both before and after the texts of the Hebrew Bible. Thus, studying this tradition is not simply (or even mainly) a matter of elucidating what early and subsequent Masonic ritualists may have had in mind when constructing their initiatory stories (interesting though this is). Rather, it is a question of situating Masonic rituals as *parts* of a larger narrative tradition, that may often have been invisible and unknown to its practitioners. The interplay between this *longue-durée* reception history and the sometimes fanciful proto-religio-historical comparisons of some Masons themselves (examples such as Albert Pike come to mind) is a fascinating area for study. This is what I shall endeavour to look at in the present paper.

The Northwest Semitic Mythological Corpora

We shall begin by situating the biblical corpus in this greater Northwest Semitic milieu that we have just been discussing. The ancient poetic and mythological traditions of the Northwest Semitic world are represented today in two main literary corpora. There may well have been more – indeed, we know that there was a substantial Phoenician religious literature, of which we possess only scraps, due to it mainly having been written on perishable materials on generally not copied for posterity.³ The first of these preserved corpora is what is currently known as the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament, a collection of sources whose influence on Masonic ritual and symbolism are second to none. The second, the Bronze Age writings from ancient Ugarit on the coast of Syria, is far less known among the general public. These texts were discovered from 1928 and onward and were recorded in the 1300s and 1200s BCE in a locally invented form of alphabetic cuneiform. They provide a direct window into the literary and religious tradition of the Northwest Semitic area – or, to be more accurate: into those parts of those traditions that did not directly end up in the Hebrew Bible. These are the stories that most directly attest to the religious, linguistic and poetic milieu sometimes vaguely defined as ‘Canaanite’.⁴ Among the most famous and most important of these is the so-called *Baal Cycle*, which chronicles the exploits of the storm god Baal and his struggles against his two cosmic enemies Yamm (‘Sea’) and Mot (‘Death’), and his quest for obtaining a palace/temple for himself, which is subsequently built with the help and assistance of the other gods of the Ugaritic pantheon.⁵

As has been well-known in biblical scholarship for nearly a century, there are irrefutable and dramatic similarities between the Ugaritic mythological writings and the poetic/mythological texts of the Hebrew Bible, including actual verbatim correspondences using

³ The one major exception to this is the Phoenician theology/theogony attributed to the priest named Sanchuniaton, subsequently quoted by Philo of Byblos and preserved in fragments quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea. Many of the motifs and stories in that material show significant overlap with the tales preserved in the Ugaritic corpus.

⁴ A highly imprecise and, in fact, more or less erroneous term, as the Canaanite languages, *sensu stricto*, are only the southern Northwest Semitic languages, such as Hebrew, Phoenician, Punic, Moabite, and Ammonite.

⁵ For good, modern English translations of the Ugaritic mythological texts, see, e.g., Simon B. Parker (ed.), *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997) and Nick Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Sheffield Press) – the latter showing some audacious reinterpretations. I also recommend the two volumes of a large-scale commentary of the *Baal Cycle* prepared by Mark S. Smith (the second in cooperation with Wayne Pitard): *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle. Volume I: Introduction with Text, Translation and Commentary of KTU 1.1–1.2* (Leiden: Brill, 1994) and Mark S. Smith and Wayne T. Pitard, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle. Volume II: Introduction with Text, Translation and Commentary of KTU/CAT 1.3–1.4* (Leiden: Brill, 2009). A third volume is eagerly awaited. I myself published a translation of the major Ugaritic myths into Swedish – Ola Wikander, *Kanaaneiska myter och legender* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 2003). The standard edition of the Ugaritic texts is Manfred Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquín Sanmartín (eds.), *Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani und anderen Orten: Dritte, erweiterte Auflage/The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places: Third, Enlarged Edition* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2013) – abbreviated KTU.

bapax legomena (words that only occur once) that could not possibly have appeared by chance.⁶ Also, the description of the young storm god Baal and his exploits show significant similarities to those from the Hebrew Bible describing YHWH as a chaos battling, cloud-riding storm god (the cosmic enemies Sea and Death appear in the Hebrew Bible as well, as enemies of YHWH). As mentioned earlier, all of this is today uncontroversial in regard to present academic studies of the Hebrew Bible; the question is how these similarities are to be explained. One alternative is to view the correspondences between the Ugaritic and Hebrew writings as being the result of borrowing. Such a model stretches credibility to an unacceptable degree, as Ugarit was destroyed shortly after 1200 BCE, long before the main periods of the writing and editing of the texts of the Hebrew Bible. My own view is that the most parsimonious explanation is rather that both Ugaritic and Israelite literature are instances of a larger Northwest Semitic mytho-poetic tradition. Again, I want to reiterate: the Hebrew Bible did not ‘borrow’ from Northwest Semitic culture – it *is* Northwest Semitic culture.⁷

In this paper, I intend to point to a number of cases in which this ancient Northwest Semitic poetic-narrative matrix has left marks on some of the most well-known stories of Masonic ritual. This will, I again hasten to add, *not* be an exercise in the type of wild, speculative comparative mythology that characterized much early Masonic-perennialist thinking (Osiris! Baldur! etc.).⁸ No, my point is another one. My perspective will be that of a scholar of Northwest Semitic mythology. That mythological tradition was expressed and transformed in the Hebrew Bible, and as the Hebrew Bible formed the main repository of legendary material to which the Masonic ritualists took recourse when constructing their degrees, it only stands to reason that there are cases in which mythopoetic motifs from the greater Northwest Semitic milieu survived all the way into Masonic ritual. The word ‘survived’ must, however, be regarded to imply ‘in a fundamentally altered’ shape. What I shall attempt to do, thus, is to examine ways in which such surviving motifs such as death-and-raising, temple-building and searching for hidden, subterranean secrets were repurposed, reshuffled and – sometimes – almost miraculously recreated under the aegis of Masonic creativity. This means that the purpose of this paper is rather the reverse

⁶ For a few of many examples of this (consensus) stance, see John Huehnergard, *An Introduction to Ugaritic* (Peabody, Mass., Hendrickson), 10–11, Marjo Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1990), 78–80, William M. Schniedewind and Joel H. Hunt, *A Primer on Ugaritic: Language, Culture, and Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 27–30, and the entirety of Frank More Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, John Day, Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000) and Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁷ I use this exact expression in Ola Wikander, ‘From Indo-European Dragon-Slaying to Isa 27.1: A Study in the Longue Durée’, Pp. 116–135 in Tommy Wasserman, Greger Andersson, and David Willgren, *Studies in Isaiah: History, Theology and Reception* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017), 120.

⁸ I am thinking of authors such as J.S.M. Ward, W.L. Wilmshurst and others (see also footnote 17).

of the pre-critical ‘parallelomaniacs’ of early Masonic proto-religio-historical comparison (and, in some cases, anti-Masons). Rather than arguing that concepts in Masonry are somehow secretly ‘the same’ as ideas known from ‘Canaanite’ religion (a charge sometimes heard from critics of Freemasonry), the present paper will look at *biblically mediated* survivals (i.e., survivals carried through time through biblical texts) of such motifs and themes, which have sometimes shown remarkable resilience in their transmission despite the time-depths involved and the many steps of reception and reinterpretation. The idea presented here is not that of some unknown, secret tradition underlying Masonic materials, making them an especially ancient or mysterious repository of ‘ancient wisdom’, but rather of Freemasonry being – as a ‘biblical tradition’ in the wide sense of the term – an interesting focal point for a number of traditions present in ancient Northwest Semitic materials that were yet again transformed and reinculturated. Comparing Masonic material with ancient mythological tales has in a way been a pastime hijacked by ideologues of various persuasions, who have vacillated between perennialist analyses and ideas of covert, historical streams. My perspective here is based in neither: the question is one of *history of traditions*, and since scholarship today knows much more of the background of certain mythological traditions present in the Hebrew Bible, one would be remiss in one’s duties if one did not factor this into the study of the history of Masonic mythology.

To be sure, some Masons themselves have historically enjoyed painting their Craft in very mystical and ‘secret stream’-like colours, themselves. The – sometimes controversial – Egyptologist Jan Assmann (well-known for his idea of the ‘Mosaic distinction’ of monotheism, with which I personally do not agree) has argued that early Masons in essence created what he refers to as a *Religio duplex*, a ‘double religion’, in which the select élite could take recourse to ancient mysteries.⁹ This is certainly a factor that was at work in how Masonic ritualists sometimes saw themselves (and in certain circles, still do). But this type of conscious imitation of a great past is only part of what I will be arguing here: the parallels I will be pointing out need not have been apparent (and in some cases, *could not have been apparent*) to the early Masonic ritualists themselves; such influences become more important when Egyptomania and similar phenomena set in.

The Baal Cycle

The main story of the Baal Cycle – which will form the centre of our discussions – can conveniently be separated into three more or less discrete parts, each taking up two Ugaritic clay tablets in the original (though there is some overlap). For the present purposes, a quick overview of the story is in order, for the arguments in this paper better to be understood.

⁹ J. Assmann, *Religio Duplex: How the Enlightenment Reinvented Egyptian Religion* (tr. by Robert Savage; Cambridge/Malden: Polity), esp. chapter 4.

The Baal Cycle begins with the struggle between the young storm god Baal and his first adversary, Yamm – the god Sea (which is literally the meaning of his name). Yamm has been named by El, the high god and nominal head of the pantheon, as the current king of the gods or ‘executive officer’. Yamm demands that the other gods give up Baal as his captive, in order that he may humble him and inherit his gold. Baal violently resists, and this part of the story ends with a dramatic battle between the two deities, wherein Baal slays Yamm and dismembers him.

The second part of the tale concerns the building of a palace or temple for Baal to rule from. This involves lengthy debates among the gods and negotiations between the different divine generations, but finally the building project is initiated under the leadership of the architect god Kothar-wa-Hasis. The latter exhorts Baal to put a window into the palace/temple, but Baal is unhappy with the idea. He finally relents, however, and Baal can now send out his life-giving rains over the world (just as YHWH is said to do in many texts in the Hebrew Bible).¹⁰ The prominence of the temple-building motif is, of course, not without interest from a Masonic point of view, and it will be further discussed later on in this paper.

The last two tablets of the Baal Cycle concern Baal’s battle with his other great enemy – the god Death, or Mot (cf. Hebrew *māwet* and Arabic *mawt*), who lives in a deep pit or cavern in the earth. This begins with Mot seemingly being angry because he has been left out of Baal’s ‘house-warming party’ following the construction of his palace. Mot reacts by challenging and threatening Baal,¹¹ who submits to his threats and descends into his ‘gullet’, i.e., descends to the netherworld. Baal is dead,¹² and a great, killing drought ensues,

¹⁰ For YHWH as rain-giver or controller of precipitation, see (among innumerable other places) Gen 2:5, Lev 26:4, Deut 11:14, 11:17, 28:12, 1 Kgs 8:35, 2 Chr 6:26, Job 5:10, 36:27, Ps 65:10, 68:10, 72:6, 147:8, Jer 14:22, Hos 6:3, Am 4:7.

¹¹ Mot’s words are:

w rd bt ḥptt arṣ

tspr by yrđm arṣ

‘And go down into the House of Isolation/Freedom, the Earth,
may you be counted among those that descend into the Earth!’ (KTU 1.4 VIII 7–9)

Note the correspondence with biblical expressions such as:

Wēhōradtīk ‘et-yōrēdē bōr

‘el-‘am ‘ōlām

wēhōšabtīk bē‘ereṣ taḥtiyyōt

I will make you descend with those who go down into the pit,

to the people of old,

and I will make you dwell in the land below...’ (Ezek 26: 20).

¹² This is expressly described in the words of mourning uttered by the high god El:

b’l . mt . my . lim .

bn dgn . my . hmlt .

aṭr b’l . ard . b arṣ .

‘Baal is dead – what of the peoples?

The son of Dagan – what of the multitudes?

After Baal, I will descend into the Earth/Netherworld.’ (KTU 1.5 VI 23–25).

destroying all nature in the absence of the rain-giver, and the sun burns hot and scorching in the sky.¹³ Baal's body is sought after by his sister, the violent goddess Anat, and the sun goddess Shapshu, who recover it and inter it on the heights of his divine mountain, where he had built his temple/palace. Following his burial rites, Baal subsequently returns to life, battles Mot and retakes his throne on the peaks of his holy mountain Sapan, and the goddess of the sun, Shapshu, pronounces him the winner. His victory is apparently a temporary one, though, as Death can never truly be defeated – a grimly on-point observation in a Bronze Age text).

The Hiramic Legend

Let us begin with the matter of the Hiramic legend, the most famous and perhaps most central Masonic story of all. Already at the outset, it is of course an appetizing point of departure to note that this story, so central (in one form or another) to all Masonry, has the idea of Northwest Semitic unity built into it from the get-go, with its (biblically based) description of the two Hiram – one of whom was the king of the Phoenician city-state of Tyrus and the other, according to the biblical source¹⁴ the son a bronze worker from the same city – cooperating with the Israelite king. This transcultural cooperation between Northwest Semitic polities in a way almost becomes illustrative of the motivational background of the Hiramic legend.¹⁵ The story is by definition a tale of intra-Northwest Semitic collaboration. It is fascinating to note that both the biblical authors and the Masonic ritualists chose to situate a main tale of Israelite religious-national identity such as the building of YHWH's Temple in a context that brought the idea of 'Northwest Semitic internationalism' to the fore (even though neither of those groups thought in those terms, of course). As a modern scholar studying the type of intra-Northwest Semitic developments sketched above, one cannot help but be impressed by the same basic intuition – that the Israelite and other Northwest Semitic cultures were intrinsically connected – seems to have been apparent to ancient authors as well, even though they were unaware of modern linguistic terminology and cladistics.

The idea of descending into the gullet of the netherworld also occurs in Isaiah 5: 14, showing the commonality of the motif:

Lākēn hirḥībā šē'ōl napšāh [...] wēyārad hādārāh wēhāmōnāh ūšē'ōnāh [...]

'Therefore, the Netherworld widens its gullet [...] and her [Jerusalem's] glory and multitude and its noise shall descend into it [...]

¹³ This latter motif (and its survival into the literature of the Hebrew Bible) is the main focus of my own volume *Drought, Death, and the Sun*.

¹⁴ 1 Kgs. 7:13-14

¹⁵ One can note that possible Phoenician influences on Masonic tradition are argued even in a classic such as Runkel's *Geschichte der Freimaurerei* – see F. Runkel, *Geschichte der Freimaurerei in Deutschland: erster Band* (Berlin: R. Hobbing, 1932; reprint Lempertz 2006), 43–45.

Already in the perennialist enthusiasm of the 19th century, associating the story of the (mis)adventures of Hiram the Architect with the idea of a ‘dying and rising god’¹⁶ of the Ancient Near East was commonplace.¹⁷ There is no end to authors associating the story of the main character of the Hiram legend with Levantine or other Ancient Near Eastern deities. Of course, the idea that the story of Hiram would be directly descended from the narratives concerning the death of Baal (or even Osiris or other ancient deities such as Mithra!) is fanciful. This type of thinking is rightly relegated to the annals of 19th- and early 20th century pseudo-religio-historical speculation – although it is highly interesting to note that this type of proto-scholarly comparison has on a number of occasions been imported back into some Masonic ritual workings themselves, spelling out the equations in the degree ceremony.¹⁸

What I will suggest, however, is that even though these speculative ‘pan-Hiramistic’ interpretations of yesteryear are mostly of historical interest today, their originators may have pointed to something important without really realizing it. As Masonic ritual grew out of the Hebrew Bible canon – reinterpreted and repurposed – it could not help reflecting the cultural ideas that underlies that canon. Thus, it cannot be denied that the main patterning of descent, death and ascent has great parallels in the Northwest Semitic literatures of which the Baal Cycle was a part. One immediate influence on the mytheme is probably the Christian story of Jesus of Nazareth, combined with Old Testament stories like the one about the murder of the tax collector Adoram/Adoniram (with whom Hiram the Architect was famously conflated). Thus, and this is the main point: these cannot be viewed in cultural isolation, but are themselves outgrowths of a larger Northwest Semitic poetic background. These stories of killing, descent and (sometimes) some form of ‘raising’ are certainly not the same in any meaningful way, but they carry on a motif or mytheme that is deeply ingrained in the Northwest Semitic milieu out of

¹⁶ This concept was later subjected to scathing criticism; a modern, level-headed, and well-regarded appraisal of how it can actually be used as a religio-historical analytical category (as well as an overview of the *Forschungsgeschichte* on the question) can be found in T. Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection: Dying and Rising Gods in the Ancient Near East* (Leiden: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2001).

¹⁷ Examples are legion; just to quote a well-known instance, one may mention A. Pike, *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry* (Southern Jurisdiction of the United States, 1871), 78–80. Pike mentions several Ancient Near Eastern deities, such as Horus and Osiris, Melqart (the Tyrian Baal, who seems to have been thought of as dying and rising – see Mettinger, *Riddle of Resurrection*, chapter 3), and others. One notes with some interest that Pike describes ‘Bal’ (sic!) as an ‘Evil God’ (p. 80). A similar, more veiled reference can be found in Runkel, *Geschichte der Freimaurerei*, 41, which talks of how ‘[a]lle Mysteriegemeinschaften der verschiedenen Völker und Jahrtausende behandeln das Rätsel des Todes und der Auferstehung [...]’.

¹⁸ For a truly staggering example of this, one can look at the so-called *Rituale Italico* (highly non-standard but still interesting as an example of a genre, used by the *Gran Loggia Tradizionale d’Italia*), which refers not only to a ‘Hiramitic’ but also to an ‘Osiridic’ and a ‘Mithraic’ raising (*elevazione*). See Akira and Purusha, *Rituale Italico: Gradi simbolici* (Roma: Atanòr, 2012).

which they grew. They are certainly not ‘the same’ as the story of Baal’s death and return, but they partake in the same cultural nexus.¹⁹

Thus, I will argue here that the central Masonic legend is, in a way perhaps somewhat different from the way popularly imagined in some ‘creatively minded’ Masonic circles, a type of reminiscence of ancient Near Eastern (and specifically Northwest Semitic) mythological material. It represents, I propose, a type of *longue durée* reinterpretation and reception of ideas and poetic material going farther back than the Hebrew Bible, viz., to the poetic/narrative tradition common to that immensely important textual collection and the earlier, Late Bronze Age literary culture known from Ugarit, in what is today Syria. Stories such as that of Baal’s descent and return, as well as similar ones about Melqart (the Tyrian god, himself sometimes referred to with the epithet *ba'al*), Adonis, and other gods, point to a general mytheme well at home in the Northwest Semitic matrix, one which was open to reinculturation and reinterpretation. This does, of course, in no way imply that the stories are one and the same, so to speak. The central Christian descent-and-return story is, for example, quite unique in many of its aspects,²⁰ but the idea of defeating death through descent is quite at home in the Northwest Semitic sphere of motifs. My contention is that the Masonic story of Hiram represents a faraway instance of this mytheme.

This is made even more probable given the juxtaposition of motifs. Death and ascent are put in the context of temple building, just as it follows upon temple building in the Ugaritic story. To be sure, one should always remember that the Hiram story is not literally a resurrection in most versions of the story; there are, however, versions (like the Scottish Rectified Rite) that describe Hiram’s spirit as rising and ascendant (and some that literally make the connection with resurrection in a sort of pseudo-religio-historical way – see for example footnote 18, above), but this is, of course, a subsequent development. But the idea of a killing, a descent and raising from the grave (in some sense) is there quite early. Also, I would like to point out that a modern scholar, Alexander Piatigorsky, argues for a type of resurrection ritual being central to the Hiram legend and degree (even referring to it as a ‘necromantic myth’, and incidentally also pointing out the motion from an improper to a proper burial, which also appears in the Baal Cycle).²¹

Just as the Masonic story situates the death-and-ascent motif in the context of temple building, making the opposition between the successful construction of an Ancient Near Eastern temple and the death of the protagonist of the story an ironic and illustrative piece of moral imagery, the Baal Cycle has its protagonist succumb to the power of death

¹⁹ An interesting recent study, widening the perspective to the entire Mediterranean, is J. G. Cook, *Empty Tomb, Resurrection, Apotheosis* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

²⁰ As well underscored in Mettinger, *Riddle of Resurrection*, 220–222.

²¹ Alexander Piatigorsky, *Freemasonry: A Study of a Phenomenon* (London: Harvill Press, 1997), 300–302 as well as 129 (on the Holy Royal Arch). See also Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press), 130–131, discussing these matters in the context of Masonic references in Hegel.

and descending into the ‘earth’ (*ars*, i.e., netherworld) directly after his majestic building project. The ironic juxtaposition of building a magnificent temple to a Northwest Semitic storm deity (YHWH and Baal, respectively) and then dying and being, literally, put in the ground – and then being raised – is quite similar.

Repurposing the ancient Northwest Semitic descent-and-ascent myth in this way may seem like a stretch or a speculative proposal, but the fact is that there are much earlier instances of this very process within the pages of the Old Testament itself. One such example is the biblical story of Joseph, who gets thrown into the *bôr* (‘the pit’) not once but twice, in a way that clearly associates it with the realm of death in Northwest Semitic narrative/poetic tradition. He is subsequently raised to the highest of heights by the Pharaoh and even given an Egyptian name which can be shown on etymological grounds to allude to the high god El celebrating Baal’s return to life in the Ugaritic Baal Cycle.²² Here, no god dies and rises, but the motifs inherited from that story are repurposed by the author. A similar process is what I am arguing in the case of the Hiram legend. No god is involved there, and in most versions of the story, there is no literal resurrection, but the basic pattern is similar in a way reminiscent of the inner-biblical reworking in the Joseph narrative.

Were the Masonic ritualists ‘aware’ that the story they were telling about a Phoenician artisan or architect and his interactions with the Israelite monarchy seem to echo ideas from the extra-biblical Northwest Semitic milieu of which Phoenicia was a part? In all probability not, and this is not what I am arguing. Rather, we can explain the correspondence in one of two ways: either it is simply a matter of ‘coincidence’ (which is of course possible, but does not carry much explanatory power or parsimony given that the producers of Masonic ritual were parts of an explicitly biblically-infused culture and were both informed by and aiming at a repurposing and revivification of narrative spaces at home in the Hebrew Bible, especially when viewed in combinations with the additional similar examples that I will come to soon), or the explanation is another one: that of the persistence of ideas throughout and despite cultural transformation. This is something we know from many sources: in Indo-European mythology, the idea of dragon slaying persisted for thousands of years in different sub-cultures of the phylum. The stories themselves changed beyond recognizability, but still kept the same central etymological expression. Different Indo-European cultures kept alive the idea of horse sacrifice but

²² Specifically, Joseph’s Egyptian name Zaphenath-Paneah (*šāpēnat-pa nēah*), which probably represents a transcription of the Egyptian phrase *dd p ntr jw.f nh* (‘The God says: may he live!’), an interpretation going back all the way to Georg Steindorff, ‘Der Name Josephs Saphenat-Pa’neach: Genesis Kapitel 41, 45’, *Zeitschrift der Ägyptischen Sprache* 27 [1889], 41–42). I argue in a chapter in my forthcoming monograph on Northwest Semitic poetic survivals that this is a transformation and conscious translation into Egyptian of a phrase involving the name of the god El and the verb *hyh*, ‘to live’, which would then echo a Ugaritic section of the Baal Cycle in which El proclaims that ‘Victorious Baal lives’ (*hy aliyn b’l*).

attached wildly different ideologies to it. The old Northwest Semitic idea of a storm god destroying a great serpent was reinterpreted in the Hebrew Bible and subsequently in Christianity. In a similar way, ancient Northwest Semitic ideas about killing drought were repurposed by Israelite and Judahite writers. They even ended up in Swedish psalmody, when the still highly popular Swedish 19th century hymn *Sommarpsalm* by Carl David af Wirsén contains the words *allt kött är hö och blomstren dö, och tiden allt fördriver / blott Herrens ord förbliver* ('all meat is hay, and flowers day, and time expels all / only the word of the Lord persists'), a paraphrase of Isa 40: 7-8, which itself derives its drought/death symbolism from the common Northwest Semitic literary background out of which it grew (note the scorching heat when Death rules in the Baal Cycle, the imagery of the wilting/burnt flowers, etc.). Interestingly, the Swedish hymn has the meaning almost reversed, as the dry period was regarded as the 'dead' one in the ancient Levant, whereas summer was seen as the time of rebirth in the Swedish text – a fitting illustration of how poetic motifs can persist even if the meaning accorded to them has fundamentally changed.²³

It is *this* type of survival I am suggesting for the story of Hiram. It was influenced by the Hebrew Bible, which itself is a carrier of the mythopoetic inheritance of Proto-Northwest Semitic. There is no methodological reason to draw a line here between the Hebrew Bible and its reception. Just as Calvert Watkins counted the story of Beowulf and the Dragon and Sigurd as late instances of a Proto-Indo-European tale,²⁴ so we may see Masonic legend as a part of a vast river of mythological narrative that has its roots in the Hebrew Bible and the Northwest Semitic milieu out of which it grew.

The ideas (temple building, dying-and-returning, connections to the non-Israelite Northwest Semitic-speaking world) would have been, so to speak, floating around in the cultural consciousness that led to the creation of the Hiramic legend in the 18th century – mediated, of course, by the texts of the Bible. They were abstract building blocks which could be put together in different orders and different settings – but these were building blocks that go back to the early stage of Northwest Semitic literary tradition. It is, in a way, rather astonishing to see how the Masonic ritualists used them to put together a story about temple building, killing, burial, and 'raising' that is thematically rather similar to the Baal Cycle, a story preserved in alphabetic cuneiform from the 1300s or 1200s BCE – a story that some of the biblical authors would certainly have regarded with scorn, had they known it.²⁵

²³ A point I have also made in *Drought, Death, and the Sun*, 253–254.

²⁴ Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, 79, 325, etc.

²⁵ Although, as we have seen, the actual relationship between Israelite narrative culture and the one reflected at Ugarit was one of 'uneasy relatives' rather than one of real difference and separation. These were two parallel Northwest Semitic literary traditions, not inimical ideologies continuously at war with one another (even though parts of the Hebrew Bible want to make it look that way).

The Holy Royal Arch – and Temple Building

Another oft-quoted hypothetical connection between Masonic ritual and Northwest Semitic mythological material can be found in the ‘classical’ (and, sadly, much-maligned) version of the Royal Arch word (HRA word). In both pro- and anti-Masonic literature, there is almost no end to the sources trying to connect the middle part of this word with the name of the Northwest Semitic deity Baal – in some versions of the word, the middle part has even been actually been changed outright to Baal (a word which, in itself, simply means ‘lord’, ‘master’, or ‘husband’), in order to fit with the implied connection.²⁶ As shown many times, this connection is in itself spurious and secondary; a much more probable origin of the HRA word (also literally present in some early manuscripts, such as the so-called Rite de Bouillon) is the single and non-tripartite word *Zabulon*, which would obviate any connection to Baal-esque sources.²⁷ However, the plot thickens.

Even though the original *Zabulon* has no immediate connection to the mythological universe known from Ugarit on the face of it, the situation changes if one looks at the background of that expression itself. Its etymology actually carries with it more *real* links to the religious/mythological universe reflected in, e.g., Ugaritic literature. The word is based on the Hebrew three-letter root *zbl*, which has to do with princeliness, lordliness, and similar concepts. It famously occurs in Solomon’s installation speech for the dedication of the Ark in the Jerusalem temple in 1 Kings 8, in which he says:

*YHWH ’āmar liškōn ba ’ārāfel
bānōh bānītī bēt zēbūl lāk
mākōn lēšibtekā ’ōlāmim*

YHWH has said that [he wants] to dwell in darkness;
I have truly built you a lordly house (*bēt zēbūl*),
a place for your eternal dwelling.
(1 Kgs. 8:12b–13, according to the Masoretic Text)

²⁶ An overview of various versions, allegations, and variants can be found in Arturo de Hoyos, ‘The Mystery of the Royal Arch Word’, pp. 209–230 in A. de Hoyos and S. B. Morris (eds.), *Freemasonry in Context: History, Ritual, Controversy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 214–215. The word has appeared in many different versions and permutations in various different rituals and workings; some of the examples in de Hoyos’s article actually outright make the second syllable of the word into ‘Baal’, as mentioned in the main text. My own experience of the Royal Arch degree is from the so-called ‘Sydney Ritual’ under Le Droit Humain; I can obviously not comment on whether any version of the word occurs in that ritual today. One may note with some interest that R. A. Wells, *Some Royal Arch Terms Examined* (Lewis Masonic, 1988), 59, outright invokes the ‘Baal’ association (in the sense of ‘Lord’), but not in reference to the Royal Arch Word itself but to certain other letters occurring in close association with it in certain versions of the Royal Arch ritual (though these letters do not really spell the Hebrew word *ba’al*).

²⁷ For the original or at least early form *Zabulon*, see N. B. Cryer, *The Royal Arch Journey* (Lewis Masonic, 2009), 70–71.

Here, the *zbl* root is used to signify the eternal, princely home of the Deity, the temple itself. This association with lofty dwellings is probably what caused it to be imported into an early Masonic ritual.

But the plot thickens even more. If we move backwards in time into the realm of earlier Northwest Semitic poetry, we come upon the root again – in the title of the Ugaritic storm god Baal, one of whose main titles is, in fact, *zbl b 'l 'arš*, which was vocalized / *zabulu ba 'lu 'arši* / and meant, 'Baal, Prince/Lord of the Earth'.²⁸ And just as 1 Kings 8 describes the building of a 'princely' temple of YHWH, so the middle third of the Baal Cycle is focused around the construction of a temple for 'Prince Baal' (/ *zabulu ba 'lu* /). Indeed, the temple-building motif is a central one in much Ancient Near Eastern literature, appearing, for example, in the Babylonian national epic *Enūma eliš*, in which the central temple Esagila is erected in the honour of Marduk, the Babylonian national deity. What this means is that, even though the attacks on the HRA Word on the basis of its alleged Baalist content are historically speaking complete nonsense, there is a *totally different* link back to the Northwest Semitic world here: the 'princely' titulature of victorious storm deities like YHWH and Baal and their majestic, princely homes – their temples.

Also, the use of the *zbl* root to describe the Jerusalem Temple is, in itself, a tell-tale sign of the background of the biblical passage in older Northwest Semitic literary tradition. The same root that was used in the Baal Cycle to describe the storm god supreme, the one who builds his temple/palace upon Mount Sapan, is here applied to the 'princely' or 'lordly' House of YHWH. As another interesting point, the Hebrew cognate of the Ugaritic name of the mountain, *šāfôn*, is used in a number of places in the Hebrew Bible to refer to the divine mountain of YHWH (even though it also becomes a general word meaning 'north').

The combination of the descent-resurrection motif, the reinterpretations of the Royal Arch Word and the background of *Zabulon* means that modern Masonry has after a fashion provided a locus for the reintegration and renewal of ancient Northwest Semitic poetic motifs. A number of ideas and terms that *did* once occur together or in close connection with one another in the traditions of the Northwest Semitic-speaking Levant were subsequently 'separated', so to speak, both in time and ideological distance. They were, however, *reintegrated* into a combined metaphorical narrative by means of Masonic creativity. Freemasonry has thus become a focal point for the reinculturation and reception of Northwest Semitic literary motifs, and even words. The most extreme example of this is perhaps the various allegations and reinterpretation connected with the Holy Royal Arch word. It certainly did not *originally* include any reference to the stories or charac-

²⁸ It is this title that, in a consciously debased and derogatory form, appeared in Hebrew as *ba 'al zēbūb*, 'Lord of the Flies, Baal of the Flies' (2 Kgs. 1; itself later appearing as Beelzebub). The more original form *Beelzebul* occurs at a number of places in the New Testament (Mark 3:22; Matt. 10: 25, 12: 24, 27; Luke 11: 15, 18–19).

ters now known from Ugarit, but ‘creative misconstrual’ provided a link back to a three millennia old tradition. The ancient formula concerning *zabulu ba ‘lu ‘arši* once again became an etymological unity. Just as in the case of story of Hiram (with its Northwest Semitic ‘internationalism’ and Phoenician contacts), the reinvention of Baal in the interpretation of the Royal Arch word almost eerily serves to resituate the tradition into the milieu from which it once partly stemmed, albeit in a way that some modern readers associate more with terrible spiritual villainy than with a rather benevolent storm deity fighting the powers of chaos. Thus, Freemasonry forms part of the resilient yet constantly transforming chain of reception of Northwest Semitic myth, carrying its ideas and words into the future in yet another form.

The Holy Royal Arch degree in itself represents a sort of transformation of a motif quite prominent in parts of the Hebrew Bible (and obviously in later Jewish thinking): that of the actual presence of YHWH in his sanctuary. This was an early view of the divine presence (in later, Jewish terms, the *Šēkīnā*) and its relation to the temple – a quite physicalist view of the godhead literally ‘living’ in the temple (thus would also have been the view of Baal at Ugarit).

Later, after the destruction of the Temple at the hands of the Babylonians in 587 BCE, other strands of theological thinking started making themselves heard in order to solve the conundrum of how the home of YHWH himself could be destroyed. This consisted in arguing that what could be found in the Temple was actually only God’s *kābôd* (a hard-to-translate word meaning something like ‘glory’ or, when applied to God, ‘glorious shining presence’) or *šēm* (his ‘name’), whereas God himself was elsewhere.²⁹ The above-mentioned text 1 Kgs 8 is a classic example of these ideas, mentioning that this preternatural presence was strong enough for the inner sanctum not being enterable due its being filled to the brim with it, but also saying that God himself dwells ‘in heaven’, and consistently talking not of building a Temple to YHWH himself but to his ‘name’. Thus, that text, though including the ancient *zbl* terminology, has updated the idea for a time after the Temple had been destroyed (the parts of the text referring to the ‘name’ and God actually dwelling in heaven was without doubt written many centuries after the time of Solomon).

These two strands – the idea of a concrete presence of the divinity in the Temple and of the Temple itself still being perishable – are woven together in the one form of the story of the Holy Royal Arch, and the ideas of death and architectural destruction are artfully woven together. The protagonist of the Hiramic legend descends and is raised, and the Temple is razed to the ground, yet the inner presence is still there. Both the importance of the Temple as a dwelling place and that of overcoming death are important parts of

²⁹ See the defining study of T. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Šem and Kabod Theologies* (tr. by Frederick H. Cryer; Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1982).

the Northwest Semitic background of which the Hebrew Bible was a part, and both are reunited in Freemasonry.

Another biblical passage, itself carrying on Northwest Semitic poetic tradition, that may have been of importance for the conceptual creation of the Holy Royal Arch, is Job 28. This chapter, which is fraught with many linguistic conundra, presents an extensive parable for the search of wisdom – and the center of that parable is the imagery of mining, deep in the earth. Only by metaphorical digging in the ground, the text says, can wisdom be found. The possible relevance of this simile to the ‘digging in the earth’ story of the Holy Royal Arch should be quite apparent. The point here is not that the early Masonic ritualists were necessarily thinking of this passage (although the possibility should not be *a priori* discounted), but that it shows that the idea of subterranean wisdom was part of the story package that they received, so to speak. The concept of some sort of wisdom being hidden in deep caverns forms an earlier tradition and can be found in sources much earlier than Freemasonry, both Christian and Jewish (as discussed by Arturo de Hoyos).³⁰ It is this larger tradition that Job 28 serves to illustrate and which may be important for the history of the various Masonic degrees focused on searching for hidden wisdom in subterranean caverns. Especially given the idea – ubiquitous in the Ancient Near Eastern word – of the realm of death being situated under the ground, this is an interesting juxtaposition (especially given the motif of the ruined – i.e., metaphorically dead – Temple).

In the New Revised Standard Version translation, the passage begins:

Surely there is a mine for silver,
and a place for gold to be refined.
Iron is taken out of the earth,
and copper is smelted from ore.
Miners put an end to darkness,
and search out to the farthest bound
the ore in gloom and deep darkness. [NRSV]

The text later continues, with its parable of wisdom:

But where shall wisdom be found?
And where is the place of understanding?
Mortals do not know the way to it,
and it is not found in the land of the living.
The deep says, ‘It is not in me,’
and the sea says, ‘It is not with me.’
It cannot be gotten for gold,
and silver cannot be weighed out as its price. [NRSV]

³⁰ de Hoyos, ‘The Mystery of the Royal Arch Word’, 211–212.

And then, later on, the connection to the old Northwest Semitic underworld dwelling boogie-man Mot (Death) is stated outright:

Abaddon and Death say,
 ‘We have heard a rumor of it with our ears.’ [NRSV]

The reader is finally told that God knows the way to that netherworldly wisdom.

The ‘subterranean wisdom’ narrative of Job 28, which is one of the clearest exponents of this motif in the Hebrew Bible, has earlier antecedents from the greater biblical world (both inside the Northwest Semitic linguistic ambit and further afield). An immediately obvious association is the idea of the subterranean ‘Sea of Wisdom’, the *Apsû*, that is a central religious concept in ancient Mesopotamian religion (being referenced, for example, in the Epic of Gilgamesh). But a perhaps even more salient piece of poetic inheritance may be in evidence in an etymological connection. I am referring to the Semitic verbal root appearing in Hebrew as *mq*, which in various Semitic languages has connotations of either ‘being deep’ or ‘being wise.’³¹ If these two meanings of the root are indeed connected, then the relationship between ‘depth’ and ‘wisdom’ may be thought of as being encoded at the poetic-linguistic level of Semitic epic-literary tradition itself. One illustrative example of using this root to signify wisdom can be found in Akkadian (the East Semitic language of Assyria and Babylonia), in which the common word for ‘wisdom’ or ‘cunning’ is *nēmequ(m)*, derived from the above-mentioned root. A similar play in the meaning of the root may perhaps be found in the name of the Lurianic Jewish mystical text *‘ēmeq hammelekh* by Naphtali ben Jacob Bacharach (published in 1648), which literally means ‘Valley of the King’ but which has been explained as carrying a deeper (!) meaning of ‘The Mystical Depths of the King’ or similar.³²

Edward Greenstein has especially argued the relevance of the ‘deep/wisdom’ root for the understanding of Job 28.³³ He compares, among other things, with parallel passages like this one, from Psalm 92:6:

Mah-gādēlū ma ‘āsēkā YHWH
mē’ōd ‘āmēqū maḥšēbōtēkā

How great are your deeds, O YHWH,
 [how] very deep are your thoughts!

³¹ Some of my arguments concerning the *mq* root and its relation to Job 28 and ‘wisdom’ have also been presented in popular form in Swedish in O. Wikander, *Ett hav i mäktig rörelse: om de semitiska språken* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2019), 164–166, without, however, making any references to Masonic themes.

³² Thus G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1941), 258.

³³ E. Greenstein, ‘The Poem on Wisdom in Job 28 in its Conceptual and Literary Contexts’, in E. van Wolde (ed.), *Job 28: Cognition in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 253–280.

In this text, the one hidden in the deep appears to be YHWH himself. The connection between divine wisdom and 'the depths' are encoded within the Northwest Semitic linguistic heritage itself.

As mentioned earlier, the descent motif is quite central to the narrative of the Baal Cycle. When Baal descends into the netherworld, it is, to be sure, not by his own volition, but he reappears a much stronger and capable figure than he was before. And there is another Ugaritic text that perhaps shows an even more interesting aspect of the traversing of the boundary of the earth and what lies under it from the perspective of the Royal Arch Mason. This is KTU 1.161, which appears to describe a ritual contacting of the shades of the netherworld, either for a royal funeral or an enthronement. Here, the wisdom of the netherworld and its divinized, dead denizens is necessary for the royal institution to work. And, interestingly, the being that mediates between the realms of the living and the dead is the goddess of the Sun, who was thought to descend beneath the horizon every evening and also was the one through whom the supreme 'basement-dweller', Mot himself, manifested his drought.

The parables of wisdom hiding deep within the earth, within the confines of the realm of personified Death himself – the very Death/Mot whom Baal battles and conquers after his descent and rise – may well have informed the traditions of the Royal Arch and various 'Scottish Master' type degrees that arose early in the history of Freemasonry. The ideas of temple building (from the craft degrees) and the need for excavation and subterranean searching were artfully blended, with true wisdom only being found in the deepest, darkest caverns. As mentioned above, there are earlier Jewish and Christian sources attesting to the idea of legendary wisdom being hidden under the earth. And this idea, too, has its root in the world of Northwest Semitic poetry.

Conclusion

Having looked at these various though interconnected examples, it must be reiterated that the point of this paper is not that there is a direct line between, say, the Ugaritic writings and the early Masonic ritualists – such an idea would be ludicrous indeed. Rather, my contention is that the ancient, common Northwest Semitic mythopoetic language and universe that the Ugaritic texts shared with those of the Hebrew Bible were imparted through the latter into Masonic sources. The Hebrew Bible cannot be separated from the poetic and linguistic milieu out of which its texts and ideas grew, and neither can those textual entities that grew out of it. The central images of the Hiramite/Royal Arch legend cycle – death and rebirth, descent into the darkest caverns in search of wisdom, with subsequent rise and illumination – all of these have biblical antecedents, which themselves build upon yet earlier Northwest Semitic poetic motifs. The fact that later, more speculative (in the everyday sense) Masonic writers explicitly associated the stories with

figures like Baal (and the religio-historically rather less relevant Osiris) actually serves, in a sort of roundabout way, as a kind of ‘redetermination’ of a heritage that was already there – in the deepest recesses of Masonic and religious history.

The relationships that I have argued here between greater Northwest Semitic poetic tradition and the Masonic *Legendarium* is quite reminiscent of what one of today’s preeminent scholars both of the Hebrew Bible and the Ugaritic writings, Mark S. Smith, once wrote about the reminiscences that can be found even in overtly Christian writings such as the Apocalypse of John from that pre-Christian and pre-Jewish tradition:

The closing chapters of the Revelation provide a glimpse of the future that recalls the three major themes of the Baal Cycle: Baal’s defeat of Yamm, the building of Baal’s heavenly palace, and his conflict with Mot. Revelation 21 mentions the death of Sea, the descent of the heavenly city (akin to Baal’s palace) and the final destruction of Death [...]. In sum, the early forms of many formative religious concepts of Western civilization may be found in the Baal Cycle.³⁴

The same, I argue, is the case for Masonic ritual. The point is not that Ugaritic, or other early Northwest Semitic, literature somehow ‘magically’ influenced Masonic ritualists: that would be the speculative and, by modern standards, almost laughable position of pre-critical scholarship. No, my point is another one, viz. that the early narrative traditions of the Northwest Semitic world, carried through the Hebrew Bible, have never ceased to influence the thinkers and writers who have received it. In *that sense*, my senior colleague at the conference was, in a way quite correct in his assessment: Freemasonry *is* a repository of Northwest Semitic mythology – with death, rebirth, princely dwellings, and wisdom hidden in the depths. Given how much speculative and not seldom uninformed ink has been spilled on spurious and uncritical parallels between Masonry and Ancient Near Eastern religion, I believe that uncovering the *actual* connections between the Northwest Semitic background of the biblical world and the Masonry of the last centuries is a real *desideratum*. Where speculation and wild guessing once held sway, we can now find root for real, historical analysis. Whereas more fanciful comparisons with ancient religious literatures have been made by some creative Masonic minds of yesteryear, the actual connections may sometimes have been buried in the mire, as it were. Even though these ‘wild comparativists’ did not really know what they were comparing with what and how to establish actual historical links, they were themselves influencing the chain of transmission from ancient to modern that they wanted to study. As mentioned by Assmann (see above), this tendency appears from an early point in Masonic thinking, yet it was as much ideology as actual study of the traditions that Masonry received, transformed and carried on. Thus, there has been a continuous dialectic going on between the *actual* inheritance that Masonic mythology received from Northwest Semitic liter-

³⁴ M. S. Smith, ‘The Baal Cycle’ (introduction), in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 81–86.

ary tradition and the *projections* of Masons (and anti-Masons!) who – in rather a hit-and-miss fashion – attempted to find such ancient traditions within Masonry itself, for various purposes. The influence *is* there in the traditions about death and rising, temple building and searching for hidden treasures (and possibly other cases), but these have sometimes been buttressed by conscious but not always well-informed attempts to read such associations into Masonic material.

Like the ‘depths’ of Ugaritic and biblical poetry, a larger narrative tradition underlies the origin of Masonic thought. And like those depths, that origin needs to be excavated with diligence, persistence – and light.