THE RIVER ORDEAL IN ISRAELITE LITERATURE

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IN 1907, Édouard Dhorme first associated the term 'êd in Gen. 2:6 with Sumerian id, "the cosmic river."¹ This identification accords well with the presumed Mesopotamian background to the Yahwistic creation account, and so has enjoyed wide acceptance.² The term, as was quickly recognized,³ also occurs in Job 36:27 with similar force. That this name for the cosmic river was normally pronounced id in Akkadian as well as Sumerian is shown from syllabic spellings,⁴ so that the loan into Hebrew offers no linguistic difficulties. In the Mesopotamian materials, a primary function of id, the (divine) River, was, as is well known, to serve as judge in certain legal cases. Trial by river ordeal was a widespread phenomenon, in which the accused was plunged into the river, where his success in withstanding the rushing waters was supposed to determine his guilt or innocence. It is surprising, therefore, that the recognition of the term 'êd in Gen. 2:6 has never prompted a systematic search for river ordeal allusions in Israelite literature. The concern of the present study is with the explication of certain biblical passages which may be better understood against a conceptual backdrop of judgment by river ordeal. Further, it will be suggested that the term 'êd in fact occurs several times in the OT with the explicit meaning, "river ordeal."

There is in the Psalter a group of songs sharing a common motif

¹ L’arbre de vérité et l’arbre de vie, RB 4 (1907), 274.
² See in particular W. F. Albright, The Babylonian Matter in the Predeuteronomic Primeval History (JE) in Gen. 1–11, JBL 58 (1939), 102–03. The alternative identification of Hebrew 'êd with Akkadian edû, "onrush of water," maintained especially by E. A. Speiser (’ed in the Story of Creation, BASOR 140 [1955], 9–11), has remained plausible until now. Perhaps the present study will set the matter to rest.
³ E. Sachsse, Der jahwistische Schöpfungsbericht, ZAW 3/4 (1921), 281.
⁴ See the evidence cited in vol. 7 of CAD (1960), 8. Note also that the logogram id, which is masculine, is not to be read nāru, which is feminine.
which clearly presupposes a situation of judgment by water. Included in this group are, in particular, Pss. 18 (2 Sam. 22), 66, 69, 88, 124, and 144, to which should be added the psalm in Jonah 2. Each of these contains most or all of the following elements: (1) the psalmist is beset by raging waters; (2) he is surrounded by accusers; (3) he protests his innocence and reliance upon God and beseeches God to deliver him from the waters. If the psalmist is describing a past rescue from the waters, there may be another element: (4) he is drawn out of the waters and set in a safe place.

It may be useful to point out these elements in detail in Ps. 18 (2 Sam. 22), Ps. 69, and Jonah 2 — any one of which might be considered a parade example of the motif in question. In these three songs, the predicament of the psalmist is expressed in the following ways:

Ps. 69:2–3:

Save me, O God!
The waters have come up to my neck!
I have sunk in the mire of the Deep,
and there is no place to stand.
I have come into the depths of the waters,5
and the Flood has swept over me.

Ps. 18 (2 Sam. 22):5:

The breakers of Death surrounded me.
The torrents of Belial assailed me.
The cords of Sheol encompassed me.
The snares of Death confronted me.

Jonah 2:4 and 6:

You cast me into the Deep,
into the heart of the Seas.
The River encompassed me.
All your breakers and your billows
crossed over me.
The waters surrounded me up to my neck.
The Deep encompassed me.
Reeds encircled my head.

In each of these passages, the situation depicted is clear. The

5 Or more likely “the depths of the sea,” reading שָׁמִי augmented by the מ (mi/ma) particle plus ב. For the expression without the particle, see Isa. 51:10.
life of the psalmist is endangered by the onset of rushing waters. Of course, these are no ordinary waters but rather the cosmic waters, both sweet and salt. In Canaanite cosmology the cosmic waters have their confluence at the mountain of "El. At the same time they are to be located at the entrance to the watery abode of Môt (Death). The above passages suggest a similar cosmological background for these psalms. Jonah 2 goes on in vs. 7a to make this more explicit:

At the roots of the mountains,
I descended to the Underworld.
Its gates were behind me forever.

The second element outlined above is the reference to the enemies of the psalmist. This element will be noted below in Ps. 18 (2 Sam. 22), vss. 17–19. It is quite explicit in Ps. 69:5:

More than the hairs of my head
are those who hate me without cause.
Stronger than my defensive arguments
are my perjured opponents,
from whom I did not steal.
Shall I then restore?

According to these passages, the psalmist has been confronted by enemies. The legal dimension of the terminology used in Ps. 69:5 is unmistakable. Note, in particular, hinmām, "without (just) cause"; 6 ρυμώτ, "defensive arguments"; and 𐤃𐤁𐤃, "false(ly),

In contrast to the Mesopotamian situation, the distinction between salt and sweet waters is not important in Northwest Semitic cosmologies. Hence, for example, "sea" and "river" may comprise a poetic pair.

The Ugaritic evidence is well known. For this and a general discussion of the cosmology in question, see R. J. CLIFFORD, The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament (Cambridge: Harvard, 1972), 35–57, which is based on a dissertation done under F. M. Cross and should now be seen as a corrective to the important monograph of M. H. POPE, Eli in the Ugaritic Texts (Leiden: Brill, 1955) in the appropriate sections.


Reading אֵל as. The parallelism suggests a phrase with min plus a noun, and the Syriac gives some textual support. For אֵל, "defensive arguments," see Isa. 41:21.

For hinmām, "without just or legal cause," see 1 Sam. 19:5; 25:31; 1 Kgs.
perjured.” 12 The psalmist expresses his innocence of the crime of theft (explicitly stated), but despairs of winning his case against a stronger prosecution. Thus a legal question of guilt or innocence is linked with the onrush of the cosmic waters.

In each case the recourse of the psalmist is to a plea for divine help, as illustrated in the following passages:

Ps. 18 (2 Sam. 22): 7:
In my distress I called, “Yahweh!”
To my God I cried out.13
He heard my voice from his palace.
My cry reached his ears.14

Ps. 69: 15–16:
Deliver me from the mire!
Let me not sink!
Let me be rescued from those who hate me and from the depths of the sea!
Let not the Flood of waters sweep over me!
Let not the Deep swallow me!
Let not the Pit close its mouth over me!

Jonah 2: 3:
Out of my distress I called to Yahweh, and he answered me.
From the belly of Sheol I cried out.
He heard my voice.

In these passages the imagery is renewed, and the psalmist turns to Yahweh in hope of rescue. The language continues to reflect the cosmology common to Hebrew and Canaanite descriptions of death. The psalmist’s concern is with the threat of death expressed in terms of raging waters. He claims to be legally innocent and pleads for deliverance from the waters. It is difficult not to

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12 Cf., for example, Ps. 27: 12. The term šeqar describes falseness of witness or testimony as in Deut. 19: 18 or Exod. 20: 16.
14 CROSS and FREEDMAN (ibid., 286) regard לא ראית מים אלא בים and לא יראה מים אלא בים of Ps. 18 as a conflation of the ancient variants לא ראית מים אלא בים and לא יראה יפה אלא בים. The former seems preferable for reasons given by them.
relate these accounts of water judgment to the Mesopotamian type of river ordeal in its legal and cosmological contexts.

The legal procedures in question are well known to students of Assyriology. The (divine) River (id) serves as a final litigant in certain cases, especially where normal adjudication between defendant and plaintiff is stalemated. The conceptual background against which the ordeal was understood is parallel to the cosmological picture outlined above. In the cosmology of Mesopotamian myth, the term huršānu ( < Sumerian hursag) referred at once to mountainous regions and to the river ordeal. Mythologically the huršānu functions as the place of judgment and interrogation at the entry to the Underworld. In its cosmic aspect the mountain is the place from which judgment is pronounced. At least this is true at Ugarit, where the cosmic mountain of 'El is also referred to by the borrowed term huršānu. The connection between the two meanings of huršānu is thus an obvious one, insofar as the river ordeal is understood to take place at the foot of the cosmic mountain, the source of the waters and entrance to the Underworld.

Understood against this background, the imagery of the psalms in question becomes clear. The threat of death is associated with the raging cosmic waters, which in Israel are understood to be under Yahweh’s control. The appeal of the victim is thus to Yahweh as judge. As might be expected in an Israelite adaptation of this cosmology, there is no question of the River’s functioning

15 This is conceded by both of the major Akkadian lexical projects: AHW, 359–60; CAD 6 (1956), 253–55.
16 Thus, for example, a Neo-Assyrian text published by E. Ebeling (Keilschrifttexte aus Assur Religiösen Inhalts 143:6–7) is cited in CAD 6 (1956), 254–55 as follows: ana ḫur-sa-an šû ʾillak [. . . ša] ᵑllakûni ḫ šû ina UGU šapte ša ḫur-sa-an ina ḫibbi išaʾulušu “he (Bel) goes to the ḫ . . , the . . . to which he goes, that house (or temple) is on the bank of the place of the ḫ . . -ordeal, in it they will question him.”
17 Ewice, in CT A 1.2.23 and 1.3.22 (UT "nt ix:II:23, III:22).
18 Cf., however, the suggestion of Thorkild Jacobsen to R. J. Clifford (The Cosmic Mountain, 24) that the huršānu, as the “rocky substratum” of the north, forces river waters into narrow, fast-running passages — hence the meaning “place of the river ordeal.” In either case, whether by this naturalistic explanation or the cosmological association suggested above, the two meanings are to be seen as related.
19 For this aspect and the cosmic waters in the OT in general, see the familiar and important study of H. G. May, Some Cosmic Connotations of mayim rabbim, “Many Waters,” JBL 74 (1955), 9–21.
independently. Nevertheless the psalmist clearly conceives of himself as beset by the waters of the ordeal in the place of judgment and interrogation.\textsuperscript{20} This interpretation may be supported, moreover, by proceeding to the rescue account in vss. 17–21 of Ps. 18 (2 Sam. 22):

He reached from on high and took me.  
He delivered me out of the Many Waters.  
He delivered me from my strong enemies,  
from those who hate me, who were stronger than I.  
They had confronted me on the day of my ordeal,  
but Yahweh was my support.\textsuperscript{21}  
He set me forth to a broad place.\textsuperscript{22}  
He rescued me because he delighted in me.  
Yahweh rewarded me according to my innocence.  
According to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me.

Yahweh has rescued the psalmist from his ordeal. In the expression \textit{b‘yōm ‘ēdī}, “on the day of my (river) ordeal,” is the term \textit{‘ēd}, discussed above as “the (cosmic) River” but now used in its other sense as “the river ordeal.” The expression occurs here at the time of the deliverance of the psalmist from the raging waters and from his accusers. The legal language is clear in vs. 21, where the juridical connotation of \textit{šidqī}, “my innocence,” is assured by the chiastic parallelism.

\textsuperscript{20} Indeed \textit{š’āl} may have meant something like “place of interrogation” originally, as suggested by the root \textit{šl}, “to ask.” In Akkadian sources, the verb \textit{ša‘ālu} is used of the interrogation of prisoners about to undergo the river ordeal. It is also used of the interrogation at the entrance to the Underworld (see note 16 above). The possibility of associating \textit{š’āl} with a root meaning “to ask” was already considered years ago in the controversy over the dubious Akkadian word \textit{šu‘ālu}, which some had equated with Hebrew \textit{š’ēl}. For a summary of that discussion, see M. JASTROW, The Babylonian Term \textit{šu‘ālu}, \textit{AJSL} 14 (1898), 165–70. For the reasons stated above, the interpretation of \textit{š’āl} as “place of interrogation” is perhaps preferable to \textit{Ort der Ein[for]derung} (A. JEREMIAS, \textit{Die babylonisch-assyrischen Vorstellungen vom Leben nach dem Tode} [Leipzig, 1887], 109) or the more plausible “place of (religious) inquiry,” i.e., where an oracle may be obtained (JASTROW). For modern etymological study of \textit{š’ēl}, see W. BAUMGARTNER, \textit{Zur Etymologie von sch‘ēl}, \textit{ThZ} 2 (1946), 233.

\textsuperscript{21} Reading \textit{17 me‘ār} with 2 Sam. 22. See CROSS and FREEDMAN, \textit{Ancient Yahwistic Poetry}, 296–97.

\textsuperscript{22} That is, to a place safe from the rushing waters of the narrows. TROMP (\textit{Primitive Conceptions}, 47) argues for \textit{merhab}, “the Broad Domain, Underworld.” Hence one might read instead, “He set me forth from the Broad Place”; but the present rendering is surely more natural.
The term 'êd traditionally has been rendered “calamity, distress.”23 In the MT it is distinguished from 'êd, “(cosmic) River,” only by its spelling with yod mater. This, of course, provides no orthographic barrier to an association of the words. The proposed derivation from a root 'wd, “be curved, bent” (and transitively, by extension, “burden”), which finds a reflex only in Arabic, has never been satisfactory.24 Instead the term must be identified with 'êd, “(cosmic) River,” but now with the particular meaning “river ordeal.” Understood thus, the extension to the more general meaning, “ordeal, distress,” is straightforward. Most frequently, however, the term retains its original specific association with the river ordeal, as the evidence cited below will show.

As might be expected, it is the poet of Job who knows the river ordeal most explicitly. The recognition of this fact clarifies many obscure passages in that book, but the present discussion must be confined to a few specific occurrences of the term 'êd. In certain passages, Job challenges the conventional confidence in the justice of the ordeal as expressed, for example, in Ps. 32:6:

Wherefore let every righteous man offer prayer to you in his time of going forth without cause to the overflowing of the Many Waters. They shall not overcome him!

Job counters this point of view in 21:30, where the text may be read:

כִּי לַוָּס אִדְרִי חֶשְׁךְ רֵעִי
לִוָיָם לַעֲבֵרֵתָו לָכֶל
On the day of the ordeal the wicked is spared;
On the day of its overflowing they are led along.

Here again we have the expression yôm 'êd, “the day of the river ordeal.” Job is complaining that the evil are spared, and thus

23 So BDB 15; KB 36.
24 BDB list רָד, “be curved, bent,” and thus רַד, “distress, calamity (under wh. one bends).” The connection with רַד, “mist,” is listed as doubtful. The extension of “be bent” to “calamity” is not impossible, but the present proposal brings these terms together much more easily.
25 Reading רְאֵג for MT רק.
26 LXX has δργής ανήριο for the problematic MT לַעֲבֵרֵתָו.
that justice is not done. He echoes the same sentiment with a rhetorical question in 21:17:

כמם דר ר בריא ים
וייכ עליום אדמ
ה늘ים והלך באף

How often is the property of the wicked confiscated? 27
And their ordeal goes over them?
(How often) does he distribute lots in his anger?

In Mesopotamian sources, the unsuccessful victim of the river ordeal is liable to having his property confiscated.28 The same result is reflected here. The distribution of lots in the third part of the tricolon (if indeed this is the correct reading) 29 may refer to the assignment by the angry, swollen River of just destinies to the wicked. In any case, this is another example of the term '€d in the sense of “the River of ordeal.”

A third occurrence of the term is to be found in ch. 31, where Job is protesting his own innocence. He says in vs. 23 that if what he claims is not true:

בַּא פַּדְתָּל יָדָא אֶל
וְמָשָׂאֲהוּ לָא אֲוֻלָּה

Then let the River of 'El be a fearful thing to me,
and let me not be stronger than its rising up.

Job here calls the River of ordeal the '€d 'el. This is consistent with the imagery noted above in the psalms, where the location of the waters of judgment is “at the sources of the sea” (Ps. 18 [2 Sam. 22]:16) and “the roots of the mountains” (Jonah 2:7), in short, at the foot of the mountain of 'El/Yahweh. In the present passage, Job is expressing the certainty of his own innocence with reference to the judgment of the River.

There are other occurrences of the term '€d outside of Job and Ps. 18 (2 Sam. 22) which should be mentioned here. Especially

27 For nir, “(landed) property,” see PAUL D. HANSON, The Song of Heshbon and David's nir, HTR 61 (1968), 297–320.
28 See, for example, the second “law” of the Code of Hammurabi.
29 LXX reads ὧδεινε ἔτι αὐτῶν ἐξουσίαν ἀπό ὄργης reflecting a Hebrew reading: הכּלֶּים וּהוֹיִם בָּאָה, “(How often) do cords seize them angrily?” Either reading is compatible with the present interpretation.
notable is a judgment speech spoken by Yahweh in the great rib of Deut. 32. Vss. 34–36a may be read:

Is this not stored up with me,
sealed up in my storehouses
for the day of vindication and requital,
for the time when their foot will slip?
Surely the day of their ordeal draws near,
and destiny rushes towards them.
Surely Yahweh judges his people,
and he metes out justice to his servants.

Yahweh’s storehouses are full and ready for judgment. These are the storehouses of the elements (Jer. 10:13, etc.) and especially of the waters (Ps. 33:7). All of this is ready for wrongdoers, for the day of their river ordeal (yôm ‘êdâm), when their foot will slip. A question of cosmic judgment is clearly involved here.

Ps. 124:2–5 must suffice as a final example. These verses may be read as follows:

Had it not been Yahweh who was on our side when mankind arose against us, then the Living Waters would have swallowed us in the heat of their anger against us.
Then the waters would have flowed over us.
The torrent would have crossed over us.
Then the raging waters would have crossed over us.

50 The common emendation of kâmûs to kânûs here is unnecessary. There are no orthographic or palaeographic reasons for a textual error to have occurred here. Moreover, there is a well attested Semitic root kms, “to store up,” which finds a good reflex in the common Akkadian verb kamûsû. It is not surprising to find a hapax legomenon in this old (ninth century) psalm.

51 Reading שומ in preference to MT שים.

52 The usual translation, “then they would have swallowed us up alive” (RSV), is incorrect. Here hayyim means “the Living (Waters).” The complete expression mayim hayyim refers to the cosmic waters that issue from the mountain of Yahweh (Zech. 14:8). Thus Yahweh is הָעַיִם (mayim hayyim), “the fountain of Living Waters,” to which compare stand נֵיטָרִים (arûrîm) in Ps. 36:10. As noted above, these same waters are the waters of judgment. This use of hayyim in the context of water ordeal finds good support in Ps. 66:9–10, describing a time when God has tested his people:

He set us in the Living Waters,
but he did not let our foot slip.
You tested us, O God.
You tried us as silver is tried.
Here again the psalmist and his companions are in conflict with mankind. This passage makes it quite clear again that it is Yahweh who is responsible for the deliverance from the waters. Again the cosmic river ordeal stands behind the poetry.

Further examples could be multiplied, but perhaps the evidence cited above is sufficient to show that Israel shared with Mesopotamia a concept of judgment by river ordeal. It might be argued that only in Job must the references be to an actual legal procedure rather than to a general mythological backdrop, and that the allusions of Job are often remote and peripheral to the mainstream of Israelite culture. Indeed the legal material of the OT provides no evidence for a river ordeal in Israelite law. But the existence of the legal institution in Israel need not be assumed. The river ordeal material in Hebrew literature alludes rather to a mythological background sharing certain concepts with Mesopotamia and probably Canaan. In Mesopotamia this mythology was related to actual legal processes. In Israel its reflection seems always once removed from such practices. Whether Israel had any historical memory of an actual legal institution of river ordeal, or to what extent the procedures of the ordeal were practiced anywhere in Canaan remains a matter of speculation.

Nevertheless, as the above discussion has attempted to show, the allusions to the ordeal in the OT are so specific as to be distinguished clearly among the general associations of water and death in which they participate. To the Israelite poet the cosmic river ordeal at least was a very viable image. The importance of this motif in biblical literature must be assessed by further investigation of its place in Canaanite cosmology, of its peculiar terminology, and of the development of Israel’s acquaintance with it. In OT religion, judgment is so pervasive a factor, deliverance from waters or by crossing waters is such a central theme, that future study of the subject promises to be both complex and exciting.

The place of the river ordeal in Canaanite myth as reflected outside of the OT cannot be investigated here. That much of biblical cosmology is in fact Canaanite is well known, and further parallels are to be expected in the present case. Certainly the alternative epithet at Ugarit of Prince Sea (zubīlu yammu), namely, “Judge River” (tāpišu naharu), is suggestive and invites further study.