

LAYING OG TO REST: DEUTERONOMY 3 AND THE MAKING OF A MYTH

The defeat of King Og of Bashan is recalled several times in the Hebrew Bible, usually in relation to the similarly crushing victory of the Israelites over another Amorite king, King Sihon. Initially, the defeat of the latter king is recollected in order to encourage the Israelites that a further victory against their new foe is imminent (Num 21,23-25); following this, the two figures are recalled in parallel, as enemies whose all-encompassing destruction at the hands of the Israelites reminds of past glory and military success (Deut 1,4; Deut 29,7; Josh 2,10; 9,10; Pss 135,11; 136,19-20; Neh 9,22). Deuteronomy 3 expands the original account of the military skirmish from Numbers 21, presenting a nearly verbatim description of the conquest (albeit in the first-person, as part of the speech of Moses), but goes on to add an additional detail not found elsewhere in any of the biblical traditions of Og, and which has caused much ink to be spilt in the course of the history of interpretation, both ancient and modern:

כי רק עוג מלך הבשן נשאר מיתר הרפאים הנה ערשו ערש ברזל הלא הוא ברבת בני עמון
תשע אמות ארכה וארבע אמות רחבה באמת איש

For only Og the king of Bashan was left of the remnant of the Rephaim. Behold, his bed was a bed of iron. Is it not in Rabbah of the Ammonites? Nine cubits was its length, and four cubits its breadth, according to the common cubit (Deut 3,11).

Most ancient commentators reconciled the overly large dimensions of Og's bed with the description of the king as a remnant of the Rephaim, depicted as giants elsewhere in the book of Deuteronomy (2,10-11) ¹ – and certainly this would seem to be a coherent reading of the function of the story in Deuteronomy 3, where Og is implied to be a formidable opponent and hence his defeat all the more significant ². However, most modern-day commentators have interpreted both the iron object said to reside in the Ammonite city of Rabbah following Og's death, and the role of Og himself, in far more esoteric terms. Thus, it is not a bed but a

¹ On the interpretation of King Og and his bed in rabbinic literature, see A. KOSMAN, "The Story of a Giant Story: The Winding Way of Og King of Bashan in the Jewish Haggadic Tradition", *HUCA* 73 (2002) 157-190; and Z. RON, "The Bed of Og", *JBQ* 40 (2012) 29-34. An early exception is Josephus, who seems to have been the first to have understood Og's "bed" as a grave (*Ant.* 5.125).

² Thus, the Israelites are apparently frightened when Og and his people "came out against them", hence the need for God to remind them of their former victory over Sihon.

sarcophagus or tomb which Og possessed, and Og not just a king but the ruler of the underworld. This interpretation is made possible by drawing upon extra-biblical data from diverse periods, in connection with maximal interpretations of the rather paltry biblical references to Og and his domain in Bashan. In this paper, I will explore the interpretative decisions which have led to this near consensus view ³. On the other hand, several recent commentators have argued for a return to the plain sense interpretation of Deut 3,11, once again co-opting the traditional translation of “bed” for עֶרֶשׁ. While these readings have provided ample archaeological evidence for this interpretation ⁴, as well as an explanation for the use of the image of the iron bed within the narrative context of Deuteronomy 3 ⁵, even so they have failed to deal with the chthonic connections that many scholars have understood to come along with the biblical and extra-biblical references to the Rephaim, Bashan, and the two other domains said to be connected to Og, Ashtoreth and Edrei (Deut 1,4 ⁶; Josh 12,4; 13,12; cf. 9,10; 13,31), and which led to the pervasive interpretation of Og as something like the “king of the dead” in the first place. Thus, this paper will examine the chthonic elements which have been connected to the Og story in both the biblical and extra-biblical data, before considering if this mythological framework is being recalled in Deuteronomy 3. Despite the scholarly ferment which has attempted to connect Og with the underworld, ultimately it will be shown that this connection is tenuous at best. The consensus view of Og as an underworld deity has been based upon the misunderstanding and synthesis of various traditions from the Bible and the ancient Near East, creating a tradition which would have been alien to both the scribe who wrote Deuteronomy 3, and his ancient audience. In this way, this paper is an attempt to finally lay Og to rest — not in a tomb or sarcophagus, but back into his iron bed.

I. The Mythological Interpretation: Og as King of the Dead

³ See the translations of עֶרֶשׁ as “sarcophagus” in NET and NEB; and as “coffin” in TEV and CEV.

⁴ A.R. MILLARD, “King Og’s Bed and Other Ancient Ironmongery”, *Ascribe to the Lord. Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie* (ed. L.M. ESLINGER – G.J. TAYLOR) (JSOTSup 67; Sheffield 1988) 481-492; ID., “King Og’s Iron Bed: Fact or Fancy”, *Bible Review* 6 (1990) 16-21.

⁵ M. LINDQUIST, “King Og’s Iron Bed”, *CBQ* 73 (2011) 477-493.

⁶ Deut 1,4 is unique in listing Ashtoreth as a location within Edrei; in all the other occurrences, these toponyms are clearly separate places.

The primary reason for interpreting Og in connection to the underworld is his relation to the רפאים, Rephaim, which in the Hebrew Bible have a dual referent, sometimes recalled as the giant inhabitants of pre-Israelite Canaan (Gen 14,5; 15,20; Deut 2,11, 20; 3,11; Josh 12,4; 17,15), sometimes as the inhabitants of the underworld. This latter meaning is found in Isa 12,9; 14,9; 26,19; Job 26,5; Prov 2,18; 9,18; 21,16; and in Isa 26,14 and Ps 88,11, where it parallels מותים, “the dead”. A connection to the dead is also suggested by a cognate which occurs on two Phoenician tomb-stones (KAI 13:8 and 14:8). Ugaritic also provides a cognate, and scholars have been quick to relate the biblical Rephaim to the Ugaritic *rp’um*, where the term recalls a special class of the dead, sometimes described as a cult of dead kings⁷. Since both meanings are operative in the Hebrew Bible — Rephaim as giants of a mythic past, and Rephaim as the inhabitants of the underworld — the question then becomes which value of Rephaim is presupposed by Deuteronomy 3. In connection with the giant proportions of Og’s bed, the former interpretation would seem the more obvious choice. However, as well as being the last of the Rephaim, Og reigns over various domains which some scholars have also connected to the afterlife. In the biblical account as we have it, nowhere is Bashan, or its capital cities Ashtoreth or Edrei, described as the domain of the dead — only with recourse to extra-biblical material can the connection be made. At Ugarit, Ashtoreth and Edrei are apparently connected to *rp’u mlk ‘lm*, “Rāpi’u, King of Eternity”, who *yīb b’ttrt tpt bhdr’y*, “sits enthroned in Ashtarot, judges in Hedrei”⁸. The correspondence between this image and the biblical tradition of Og has led some scholars to connect Og with the Ugaritic deity Rāpi’u, and as such to cast the character as the king of the dead (never mind that Og is described as the last of the Rephaim, rather than their king)⁹. On the other hand, Bashan is not mentioned in this context

⁷ See e.g. J. GRAY, “The Rephaim”, *PRQ* 79 (1949) 127-139; C. L’HEUREUX, “The Ugaritic and the Biblical Rephaim”, *HTR* 67 (1974) 265-274; J.C. DE MOOR, “Rāpi’ūma – Rephaim”, *ZAW* 88 (1976) 323-345; H. ROUILLARD, “Rephaim”, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. K. VAN DER TOORN – B. BECKING – P.W. VAN DER HORST) (Cambridge 1999) 692–700; and J. DAY, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (JSOTSup 265; Sheffield 2000) 217-225.

⁸ KTU 1:108:1-3.

⁹ See e.g. N. WYATT, “À la Recherche des Rephaïm Perdus”, *Le royaume d’Ougarit de la Crète à l’Euphrate* (ed. J.-M. MICHAUD) (Sherbrooke 2007) 589; K. VAN DER TOORN, “Funerary Rituals and Beatific Afterlife in Ugaritic

at Ugarit. In the Hebrew Bible, Bashan is often recalled in relation to its fertile aspect, and hence is variously linked with rams, goats, beasts, bulls, cows, and oaks (e.g. Deut 32,14; Ps 22,12; Isa 2,13; Ezek 27,6; 39,18; Zech 11,2; Amos 4,1). In Psalm 68, however, Bashan is recalled in a more mythopoeic guise: the mighty mountain which YHWH apparently covets (v. 16)¹⁰; and in parallel to the “depths of the sea”, as an abode from which God can bring deliverance (v. 23):

אמר אדני
מבשן אשיב
אשיב ממצלות ים

The Lord said,
“From Bashan I will bring them back,
I will bring them back from the depths of the sea”.

Since Bashan appears here in parallel to the depths of the sea, which in Ugaritic religion was the abode of the sea god Yam, Bashan here may also be linked to a divine abode. Francesca Stavrakopoulou states her interpretation of the toponym in no uncertain terms: “Bashan is the netherworld, synonymous with ‘the land of the Rephaim’”¹¹. And Og is the king of this domain: the discovery of a fifth-century Phoenician inscription from Byblos which apparently makes use of the character in the context of a funerary inscription would seem to clinch the case¹². Og is related to the underworld — and the meaning of his over-large “bed” must be similarly construed.

Indeed, the translation of ערש ברזל as “iron bed” is inherently unproblematic. ברזל is

Texts and in the Bible”, *BibOr* 48 (1991) 40-66; ROUILLARD, “Rephaim”, 697; and F. STAVRAKOPOULOU, *Land of Our Fathers*. The Roles of Ancestor Veneration in Biblical Land Claims (LHBOTS 473; London 2012) 68.

¹⁰ Although see I. KNOHL, “Psalm 68: Structure, Composition and Geography”, *JHS* 12 (2012) 1-21, who disputes any idea of coveting or rivalry between Mount Sinai and Mount Bashan.

¹¹ STAVRAKOPOULOU, *Land of Our Fathers*, 69; see also M. POPE, “The Cult of the Dead at Ugarit”, *Ugarit in Retrospect*. Fifty Years of Ugarit and Ugaritic (ed. G.D. YOUNG) (Winona Lake, IN 1981) 171; and G. DEL OLMO LETE, “Bašan o el “inferno” cananeo”, *SEL* 5 (1988) 51-60.

¹² So S. NOEGEL, “The Aegean Ogygos of Boeotia and the Biblical Og of Bashan: Reflections of the Same Myth”, *ZAW* 110 (1998) 411-426, here 417: “Og’s connection with tomb inscriptions (sic.) and the Rephaim, the deceased wanderers of the underworld, is highly suggestive”.

frequently attested with the meaning “iron” in the Hebrew Bible, while עֶרֶשׁ is found with the meaning “bed” or “couch” at Amos 3,12; 6,4; Pss 6,7; 41,3; 132,3; Job 7,13; Prov 7,16; and Song 1,16. However, if Og’s connection to the Rephaim is in their aspect as otherworldly inhabitants rather than as giants, the size of his over-large bed becomes rather awkward: what is the meaning of these unusual measurements and why have they been recorded in Deuteronomy 3? Thus the problem is not one of *translation* but *interpretation*. Given Og’s role as denizen of the underworld, could this reference to his “bed” or “couch” hide a metaphorical connection to a sarcophagus, tomb or grave? Scholars who have answered this question in the affirmative have usually done so by referring to Ps 6,7 and Amos 6,4, where עֶרֶשׁ occurs in parallel with מִטָּה, the latter lexeme which in 2 Sam 3,31 is used to refer to Abner’s funerary bier. (Although when עֶרֶשׁ is used in parallel with מִטָּה in Ps 6,7 and Amos 6,4, both terms are used with the meaning “bed” or “couch”, and never with any funerary connotations). Hence עֶרֶשׁ could be understood as referring to a “sarcophagus”¹³ or “grave”¹⁴. On the other hand, some scholars have found it problematic that this “sarcophagus” should be made of iron and not stone. Thus Timo Veijola has argued that עֶרֶשׁ בְּרִזְלָה refers to a dolmen, a funerary monument¹⁵. In this case, the size of the עֶרֶשׁ is not problematic after all, for these buildings were megalithic in structure (although why then provide the measurements at all?). Thus, according to this interpretation, Og is both the king of the underworld, and owner of large tomb or funerary monument, the latter of which continued to reside in the Ammonite capital following his defeat at the hands of the Israelites. This defeat then takes on a mythic symbolism in which the destruction of Og and his troops signifies not just the displacement of an enemy nation, but according to Stavrakopoulou, “the displacement of these underworld denizens from possession of the land”¹⁶. No less than a battle between the living and the dead is understood to stand behind the reference to Og and his bed in Deuteronomy 3.

¹³ For example, P.C. CRAIGIE, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI 1979) 120; and A.D.H. MAYES, *Deuteronomy* (NCB; Grand Rapids, MI 1981) 144.

¹⁴ STAVRAKOPOULOU, *Land of Our Fathers*, 69.

¹⁵ T. VEIJOLA, “King Og’s Iron Bed (Deut. 3:11): Once Again”, *Studies in the Hebrew Bible, Qumran, and the Septuagint Presented to Eugene Ulrich* (ed. P.W. FLINT et al.) (VTS 101; Leiden 2003) 60-76.

¹⁶ STAVRAKOPOULOU, *Land of Our Fathers*, 70.

II. THE PLAIN SENSE INTERPRETATION: THE DEFEAT OF A GIANT

Not all commentators have followed in this interpretation of the ערש of Og as a tomb or sarcophagus. Alan R. Millard has argued that we should return to understanding the ערש ברזל literally: as an iron bed¹⁷. In this context, he has highlighted biblical references to beds and furniture inlaid with ivory (1 Kgs 10,18; 22,39; 2 Chr 9,17; Amos 6,4), and which have been substantiated by archaeological evidence of ivory overlays on wooden furniture from the Iron Age. Since iron was a valuable commodity during the Bronze Age, when the battle with Og is set, Millard argues that the reference to iron in Deuteronomy 3 reflects its use in purposes of adornment, akin to the later use of ivory inlays in luxury furniture and goods¹⁸. Millard has been followed in this interpretation by several recent commentators on the book of Deuteronomy¹⁹. In particular, Maria Lindquist has extended this argument by considering the function of the image of the iron bed in the narrative context of Deuteronomy's conquest account. Noting that the dimensions of Og's bed correspond to the bed of Marduk, a battle trophy and symbol of power in seventh-century Mesopotamia, Lindquist argues that the author of Deuteronomy is likening Og to a god and hence further dramatizing the defeat of this superhuman at the hands of Yhwh²⁰.

Whatever one concludes about the plausibility of the connections Lindquist finds between Og's bed and the traditions of Marduk (and the size of Og's bed can perhaps be more securely related to the native Israelite tradition concerning the stature of the Rephaim), it seems

¹⁷ MILLARD, "King Og's Bed and Other Ancient Ironmongery", 481-492; ID, "King Og's Iron Bed: Fact or Fancy", 16-21, 55.

¹⁸ Although Millard argues in favour of dating Deuteronomy 3 far earlier than is usually allowed on this basis, I would prefer to understand the biblical author as having provided the detail of the iron as part of his historical fiction in couching his composition as the speech of Moses: the use of iron rather than ivory thus highlights the antiquity — and hence authority — of the tradition, rather than providing any insights into Bronze Age metallurgy.

¹⁹ See e.g. J.H. TIGAY, *Deuteronomy*. The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia, PA 1996) 35; M. WEINFELD, *Deuteronomy 1-11*. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (AB 5; New York 1991) 184; E. OTTO, *Deuteronomium 1-11* (HTKAT; Freiburg im Breisgau u.a. 2011) 469-470; and L. PERLITT, *Deuteronomium 1 – 6** (BKAT 5.1; Neukirchen-Vluyn 2013) 241.

²⁰ LINDQUIST, "King Og's Iron Bed", 480-481.

certain that the size of the object described in Deut 3,11 serves to underscore the might of Og as a warrior figure — whether giant or god — and hence the success of the Israelite military machine: and this is certainly how the Og narrative is utilized when it crops up elsewhere in biblical tradition (e.g. Deut 29,7; Josh 2,10; 9,10; Pss 135,11; 136,19-20; Neh 9,22). Moreover, Millard's reading of עַרְשׁ בְּרִזְלִי as "iron bed" would seem to be the more obvious meaning of the term, one which is backed up with archaeological data from ancient Israel: as Millard himself succinctly notes, "An "iron bed" in an ancient Near Eastern context, therefore, is surely to be understood as a bed adorned with iron"²¹. While I find Millard and Lindquist's arguments convincing with regard to their interpretation of עַרְשׁ בְּרִזְלִי, nevertheless neither scholar treats the mythological associations which gave rise to the interpretation of עַרְשׁ בְּרִזְלִי as "sarcophagus" or "grave" in the first place. Are these associations problematic for the reading of עַרְשׁ as "bed"?

III. THE MAKING OF A MYTH: UNPACKING THE DATA

Given all of the extra-biblical data which scholars have utilized in their interpretations of Og and his bed, it is not easy to clarify what exactly is understood by the reference to the character in Deuteronomy 3. Did the author wish to oppose Moses to death itself, as suggested by Stavrakopoulou²²? In our review of the evidence which gave rise to this interpretation, three key interpretative strategies were noted: the connection between Og and the Rephaim, which in some biblical texts can be taken to mean the inhabitants of the underworld; the links between Bashan, Ashtoreth and Hedrei with Rāpi'u and the domain of the dead in the Ugaritic material and in Psalm 68; and the apparent reference to Og in a funerary inscription from Byblos. Yet when subjected to scrutiny, each of these items of evidence falls down.

Reading the text in Deuteronomy 3 itself, nothing would suggest any connection between Og and the underworld, save for the reference to the Rephaim — and elsewhere in Deuteronomy, the Rephaim are recalled in their connection to the giants who inhabited Canaan prior to the Israelite conquest (Deut 2,10-11). What does the author of Deuteronomy 3 understand by the term? The dual meaning of Rephaim in the Hebrew Bible may be reconciled

²¹ MILLARD, "King Og's Bed and Other Ancient Ironmongery", 485.

²² See also NOEGEL, "The Aegean Ogygos of Boeotia and the Biblical Og of Bashan", 424: "when Moses slayed him [sc. Og], to some extent, he put down the chaotic forces of death".

by noting the temporal relationship between an author's reference to the Rephaim, and his own epoch: when recalling the mythic past, the Rephaim are assumed to have been the giant inhabitants of Canaan before the arrival of the Israelites (the Bronze Age megalithic structures which survived the Bronze Age Collapse may have given rise to this belief). Their large stature presents these figures in royal terms (cf. 1 Sam 9,2). But in their own time, the biblical writers understand the Rephaim as a special kingly class of underworld inhabitants: thus, the Rephaim were once figures that lived long ago, but are now dead²³. In the case of Deuteronomy 3, it is exactly this mythic past which is being recalled. The description of Og as the last of the Rephaim, then, has a temporal effect, placing the characters in a distant past²⁴. This is perfectly appropriate for the re-narration of the Numbers 21 story in the mouth of Moses, in a segment of the text which has largely been understood akin to the historical prologue found in the contemporary Neo-Assyrian treaties²⁵. In Deuteronomy 3, Og is the last of the giant inhabitants of Canaan, and not a denizen of the dead.

What of the links between the domains of Og in Bashan, Ashtoreth, and Edrei, and their associations to the underworld? While Og himself may be a giant, did this giant rule over netherworldly locations? Yet the interpretation of the Ugaritic text which has been frequently cited in the literature as connecting “Rāpi’u, King of Eternity” with Ashtoreth and Edrei, and hence these locations with the underworld, is not as straightforward as many of the commentators seem to have supposed. The issue relates to the interpretation and vocalization

²³ M.J. SURIANO, *The Politics of Dead Kings*. Dynastic Ancestors in the Book of Kings and Ancient Israel (FAT 2.48; Tübingen 2010) 155, has shown that this is also the case of the *rp’um* at Ugarit: “The epic literature typically portrays the Rephaim in an active manner relative to the contemporary (living) characters of the storyline, be they gods or heroes [...]. The concept of ancestry at work in the epic literature relates directly to one of mythic time, a period in the distant past when the long dead once lived. Thus, the Rephaim played a role as temporal fixtures of Ugarit’s mythic history”.

²⁴ SURIANO, *The Politics of Dead Kings*, 159. So also ROUILLARD, “Rephaim”, 695-697.

²⁵ Contra A. ROFÉ, *La composizione del Pentateuco*. Un’introduzione (Studi biblici 35; Bologna 1999) 128-129, who argues that the account in Deuteronomy is the original version of the tale and the Numbers version dependent upon it, as Marc Zvi Brettler has pointed out, the version in Numbers lacks Deuteronomic phraseology, “which would be expected if it originated from Deuteronomy”: M.Z. BRETTLER, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (New York 1995) 75.

of the consonantal Ugaritic script: there are actually two ways of reading the text in question (KTU 1:108:1-3). B. Margulis was the first to suggest connecting *ʿttrt* and *hḏr ʿy* from this text with the Og story, and hence interpreting these lexemes as the toponyms Ashtoreth and (H)edrei known from the Hebrew Bible²⁶ — and this interpretation has been jumped upon by those scholars who wish to interpret Og as a chthonic deity, a rather circular argument, given that it was the Og story which gave rise to Margulis’s interpretation in the first place. But subsequent Ugaritologists have rejected this reading²⁷: the translation preferred by the majority of Ugaritologists reads these lexemes not as toponyms, but as divine names, Aṭtartu and Haddu²⁸. In this case, KTU 1:108:1-3 provides additional information concerning the god Rāpi’u which exactly fits with other traditions known from ancient Canaan: thus, Rāpi’u is the god who *yṯb b ʿttrt*, “thrones with Aṭtartu”, the latter being a perfect partner in judgment because she was thought to execute divine revenge²⁹. Rāpi’u also *ṯpṯ bḥd r ʿy*, “judges with Haddu, the shepherd”, the latter being a well attested epithet for Adad³⁰, who in both Akkadian and Ugaritic sources is frequently depicted as a judge³¹. Indeed, there is an additional problem with reading the lexemes according to the biblical toponyms. While initial [h] can certainly occur as [ʿ] in Ugaritic³², the fact that this reading would see Edrei begin with [ʿ] but *hḏr ʿy* with [h] is problematic³³. To read KTU 1:108:1-3 as connecting Rāpi’u with the biblical toponyms Ashtoreth and Edrei is to read the text against the weight of the evidence, and against the majority of the commentators of the text. Nevertheless, Margulis’s original reading persists

²⁶ B. MARGULIS, “A Ugaritic Psalm (RŠ 24.252)”, *JBL* 89 (1970) 292-304; followed by ROUILLARD, “Rephaim”, 694.

²⁷ See the objections raised by P.J. VAN ZIJL, *Baal. A Study of Texts in Connection with Baal in the Ugaritic Epics* (AOAT 10; Neukirchen-Vluyn 1972) 363; A.J. FERRARA – S.B. PARKER, “Seating Arrangements at Divine Banquets”, *UF* 4 (1972) 37-39; and M. GÖRG, “Noch einmal: ederi in Ugarit?”, *UF* 6 (1974) 474-475.

²⁸ See e.g. DE MOOR, “Rāpi’ūma – Rephaim”, 326-327.

²⁹ J.C. DE MOOR, *New Year with Canaanites and Israelites* (Kampen 1972) II:25, n. 106.

³⁰ J.J. STAMM, *Die akkadische Namengebung* (MVAeG 44; Leipzig 1939), 214.

³¹ DE MOOR, “Rāpi’ūma – Rephaim”, 327.

³² See E.L. GREENSTEIN, “Another Attestation of Initial *h* > ’ in West Semitic”, *JANES* 5 (1973) 162, n. 31.

³³ J. DAY, *God’s Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea. Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge 1985) 163.

in biblical scholarship, precisely because it has allowed the Og story to be connected with weighty mythological symbolism.

The same is true for Psalm 68, which has also confounded scholarly interpretation. Even the reference made to Bashan by the Psalm has been disputed, with some commentators connecting the lexeme בָּשָׁן in v. 23 not to the toponym, but as a reference to a snake or viper. In this case, the lexeme in question must be interpreted as a cognate to Ugaritic *bṯn*, “snake” (proto-Semitic /t/ being represented in Hebrew script by the letter [š]), and v. 22 subsequently translated: “From the hole of the snake, I will bring you back // I will bring you back from the depths of the sea”³⁴. Certainly, this interpretation is somewhat fanciful: the Psalm refers to Bashan twice more in v. 16, and here the interpretation of the geographic location is necessary, given that the “mountains” of Bashan are referred to. Indeed, John Day has made the case that Bashan may well be connected to the mountain of the gods in Ps 68,16.23. Nevertheless, he still concludes that despite this mythological coloring, Bashan is never attributed a netherworldly locale either in biblical or extra-biblical literature³⁵. While Bashan may be the land of Og — and even the mountain of the gods in some traditions — it is not the location of the underworld in any of the extant textual sources.

The final puzzle piece utilized in the characterization of Og as a chthonic deity relates to the occurrence of the character in a Phoenician tomb inscription from fifth-century Byblos. According to the interpretation of Gregorio del Olmo Lete, Og occurs in this inscription as a Phoenician deity, the protector of tombs³⁶. Del Olmo Lete based this statement on the interpretation of Marvin Pope³⁷, which was in turn based on the text and discussion of the inscription provided by Wolfgang Röllig³⁸. Subsequently, this interpretation of Pope and del

³⁴ F.C. FENSHAM, “Ps. 68:23 in Light of the Recently Discovered Ugaritic Tablets”, *JNES* 19 (1960) 292-293.

³⁵ DAY, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, 113-119.

³⁶ G. DEL OLMO LETE, “Og”, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. K. VAN DER TOORN – B. BECKING – P.W. VAN DER HORST) (Cambridge 1999) 638.

³⁷ POPE, “The Cult of the Dead at Ugarit”.

³⁸ W. RÖLLIG, “Eine neue phönizische Inschrift aus Byblos”, *Neue Ephemeris für Semitische Epigraphik* (eds. R. DEGEN – W.W. MÜLLER – W. RÖLLIG) (Wiesbaden 1972) II:2-4; cf. J. STARCKY, “Une inscription phénicienne de Byblos”, *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 45 (1969) 259-273, pl. 1. See now also KAI 280:2, where Röllig has completely revised his original interpretation.

Olmo Lete has become something of a truism in the literature, and Og's appearance in this inscription has been frequently referenced in connection to his chthonic aspect³⁹. Scott Noegel even writes of "tomb inscriptions" in the plural which apparently refer to Og, although he can only reference the same (singular) inscription listed by the other scholars⁴⁰. However, like the Ugaritic material which was employed in order to relate Ashtoreth and Edrei to Rāpi'u, this interpretative strategy rests on similarly shaky philological grounds⁴¹. Though unacknowledged in the subsequent literature, already in 1979 Frank Moore Cross disputed the reading of the inscriptional evidence, denying the reference to Og at all⁴². Indeed, even in the initial publications of the inscription by Jean Starcky and later by Röllig, there was a dispute concerning the reading of the relevant lines, with Starcky providing the initial transcription and translation: *lpth 'lt 'rn zn wlrz 'šmy h'g ytbqšn h'dr wbkl d...*, "...pour ouvrir] ce saccophage et pour troubler mes os, le 'Og me cherchera, le Puissant, et dans tout..."⁴³ Yet as noted by Röllig, the syntax of the article *h'g* would be odd in Phoenician if *'g* be understood as a personal name⁴⁴. Cross raised further problems: *ybtqš* does not exist in Canaanite – and even if it did, it would be reflexive and intransitive, making the suffix *-n* a further anomaly. *h'dr*, on the other hand, is better understood as a shortened form of Ba'1 'Addīr, elsewhere found in precisely the

³⁹ See e.g. G.C. HEIDER, *The Cult of Molek. A Reassessment* (JSOTSup 43; Sheffield 1985) 396; K. SPRONK, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and the Ancient Near East* (AOAT 219; Neukirchen-Vluyn 1986) 210-211; S. BØE, *Gog and Magog. Ezekiel 38-39 as Pre-Text for Revelation 19,17-21 and 20,7-10* (WUNT II.135; Tübingen 2001) 60; J.R. LUNDBOM, *Deuteronomy. A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI 2013) 201; and T.B. DOZEMAN, *Joshua 1-12. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AYB 6B; New Haven, CT 2015) 498.

⁴⁰ NOEGEL, "The Aegean Ogygos of Boeotia and the Biblical Og of Bashan", 417.

⁴¹ See the comments made by J. HOFTIJZER – K. JONGELING, *Dictionary of North-West Semitic Inscriptions* (Leiden 1995) 824.

⁴² F.M. CROSS, "A Recently Published Phoenician Inscription of the Persian Period from Byblos", *IEJ* 29 (1979) 40-44; reprinted with an addendum in ID., *Leaves from an Epigrapher's Notebook. Collected Papers in Hebrew and West Semitic Palaeography and Epigraphy* (HSS 51; Winona Lake, IN 2003) 282-285.

⁴³ STARCKY, "Une inscription phénicienne de Byblos", 262.

⁴⁴ RÖLLIG, "Eine neue phönizische Inschrift aus Byblos". Röllig's translation of the slightly emended text reads: "[...zu öffnen ü[ber diesem Sarkophag und zu stören meine Gebeine, der mächtige Og wird mich rächen und unter allen Geschl[echtern...]"

same contexts, where the article is used as a vocative participle (KAI 9 B:5). Thus Cross proposed a new reading for the inscription, reading ‘šmy (feminine plural with suffix) followed by h’gzt, with no space following the gimel⁴⁵, and hence entirely removing any reference to Og: w’m kl ’dm ybqš lptḥ ʾlt ’rn zn wlrgez ‘šmy h’gzt bqšn h’dṛ wḅkl dr [bn ’lm, “[...and if anyone seeks to open] this sarcophagus or to disturb my moldering bones, seek him out O (Ba’l) Addīr and with all the assembly [of the gods [...]]”⁴⁶. This reading is to be preferred since it alleviates the syntactical difficulty of the proposed reading h’g (the Og?), and moreover parallels Phoenician funerary texts from similar contexts, such as Shipitbaal (KAI 9), Tabnit (KAI 13), and Eshmunazor (KAI 14), which provide standard formulae concerning the opening of a sarcophagus and disturbing the bones. Indeed, Wolfgang Röllig, whom Marivn Pope drew upon in his original statement of the connection between Og and this inscription, has recently revised his original opinion, removing any reference to Og in fifth edition of his influential *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*⁴⁷. Yet the commentators we have explored above have failed to acknowledge Cross’s re-reading of the inscription, or even to note the problems with the initial reading as discussed in the early transcriptions and commentaries of Starcky and Röllig. Instead, Og’s appearance on the tombstone has been taken for granted, and used in order to further relate the character to a funerary context.

At some point in the history of scholarship, it became a commonplace to link King Og of Bashan to the underworld, and hence to understand the king as no less than a chthonic deity, akin to the Ugaritic Rāpi’u; his country Bashan as the “Canaanite Hell, or more exactly, the Elysian Fields”⁴⁸; and his iron bed as a “sarcophagus” or “coffin”. And this is in spite of the biblical evidence itself: neither Og nor Bashan are ever connected to a netherworldly context in the Hebrew Bible, nor does the reference to his עֶרֶשׁ בְּרִזְלִים require any special philological attention, given the well attested uses of these terms to mean “bed” and “iron” in the biblical text. Instead, scholars have had to make recourse to data from diverse geographical and temporal locations, encompassing Ugaritic and Phoenician material in order to connect King Og to the chthonic domain. Yet as we have seen, frequently this has been done without full

⁴⁵ The inscription is damaged at this point, while the spacing is uneven; see the description in CROSS, “A Recently Published Phoenician Inscription”, 42.

⁴⁶ CROSS, “A Recently Published Phoenician Inscription”, 41.

⁴⁷ KAI 280.

⁴⁸ DEL OLMO LETE, “Og”, 639.

understanding of the inscriptional evidence and its philological and interpretative problems. When subjected to scrutiny, each of the evidences used to connect either Og or his homelands in Bashan, Ashtoreth and Edrei to the afterlife falls down. Instead, Deuteronomy 3 recalls the tradition of Og in order to underscore the military power of the Israelite army. Both the size of his bed and its overlay with precious metal, as well as the description of Og as the last of the Rephaim, serve to heighten this dramatic narrative: Og and his bed are part of the mythic past, a mighty foe, one of the giants of old, whom Israel was nevertheless able to defeat. The depiction of this battle as a defeat of death itself is a modern myth, a construct of scholarship. The author of Deuteronomy 3 and his ancient audience would not have recognized the chthonic king or his symbolic tomb so often reconstructed by modern commentators: these scholarly excesses must finally be laid to rest, and with them Og, into his iron bed.

Department of Religion
1879 Hall
Washington Road
Princeton
NJ 08544
United States of America

Laura QUICK

SUMMARY

This paper explores the interpretative decisions which have allowed commentators to connect King Og and his iron bed in Deuteronomy 3 to the underworld, and hence to interpret Og as an underworld deity and his iron bed as a sarcophagus or tomb. Ultimately, it is shown that this interpretation rests on an insufficient understanding of the extra-biblical sources, while the Bible itself never connects Og to a chthonic context. The interpretation of Og as an underworld deity is thus a scholarly construct which must be laid to rest, and with it Og, into his iron bed.