

## "THE DELUGE" (*mabbûl*) IN PSALM 29:10

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It is a great pleasure for me to contribute this short article to the special issue honouring Prof. O. Loretz, who has worked on the various aspects of Psalm 29, especially the nature of its relation to Ugaritic literature. Most recently he gave a further treatment of the Ugaritic connection with v. 10 as a response to recent suggestions by J. Day, C. Kloos and J. Jeremias.<sup>1</sup> Here, without recapitulating their discussions, I will suggest a completely new interpretation of the phrase *lammabbûl*.

The verse can be analyzed with a somewhat unbalanced structure as follows:

YHWH *lammabbûl yāšāb*                    3 (7) 12  
*wayyēšeb* YHWH *melek l'ôlām*       4 (10) 16

O. Loretz<sup>2</sup> conveniently collected various interpretations of this verse. For the meaning of *lammabbûl*<sup>3</sup> there have been basically two interpretations: (1) the locative interpretation and (2) the temporal interpretation.

### III *locative interpretation*

Traditionally the phrase *lammabbûl* has been interpreted in a locative sense. For example,

"The LORD sitteth upon the flood;  
yea, the LORD sitteth King for ever." (KJV)

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<sup>1</sup> O. Loretz, "KTU 1.101:1-3a und 1.2 IV als Parallelen zu Ps 29,10", ZAW 99 (1987), 415-421.

<sup>2</sup> Loretz, *Psalm 29*, 49-51 & Ch. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Though there have been several attempts to emend the term *mabbûl*, the term is best taken as it stands and interpreted as referring to "the flood or ocean"; see most recently A. Malamat, "The Amorite Background of Psalm 29", ZAW 100 Supplement (1988), 159, n. 16. Malamat here calls to scholars' attention a Sumerian term A-KUL "much, mighty water" which is identified with Eblaite *ma-ba-lum* in MEE 4 (1982), 272; see C.H. Gordon, "Eblaïtica", *Eblaïtica* 1 (1987), 28. For a detailed discussion of *mabbûl*, see Loretz, *Psalm 29*, Ch. 9 (pp. 93-96).

In the recent years, scholars have advanced this locative interpretation in connection with the Ugaritic Baal myths. For example, according to P.C. Craigie, the phrase *lammabbûl* "over the flood" symbolizes the subjugation of chaotic forces. "The Canaanite tradition may be seen in the depiction of the enthronement of Baal over the conquered 'flood' (Ugaritic *mdb*, see RS. 24.245, 1-2), and there has already been allusion to this incident in Ps 29:3."<sup>4</sup> F.M. Cross even translates both Hebrew *mabbûl* in Ps. 29:10 and Ugaritic *mdb* in KTU 1.101 [= RS 24.245]:1-2 as "the Flood dragon".<sup>5</sup> In support of the locative interpretation, he notes the fact that "The idiom *yšb / yṯb l-*, "to sit enthroned", is typical of Canaanite diction where normally Hebrew prefers *yšb ʿl* (Albright)."<sup>6</sup> Thus, these scholars see the motif of a warrior god's being enthroned over the conquered 'flood'.

However, the Ugaritic term *mdb* "flood, ocean" (*k mdb // k ym* in KTU 1.23[52]:34,35); cf. *mdbm* 1.82[1001]:27)<sup>7</sup> is never used for describing an enemy of Baal like Yamm/Nahar who was conquered by Baal. Even in KTU 1.101[= RS 24.245]:2 it appears in a metaphor (i.e. *k mdb* "like a flood")<sup>8</sup> for a mighty power, as in KTU 1.23:34-35 where El's (sexual) power (lit. "hand" *yḏ*) is mentioned. There is thus no evidence for the theory that *mdb* refers to a conquered enemy in Ugaritic mythology. In the same manner, Hebrew *mabbûl* simply means "a flood", since it always refers to the "Deluge" elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> Like the Ugaritic *mdb*, it is never used for describing an enemy of Yahweh; it signifies simply a mighty power by which Yahweh brought about the total destruction to this world. In other words, as far as the Biblical evidence goes, Yahweh never fought against the "Deluge" (*mabbûl*); in the Flood story it was his instrument to destroy the mankind.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it is not likely that the "Deluge" (*mabbûl*) in Ps. 29:10 is the conquered enemy on which Yahweh sat enthroned.

It should be noted that Marduk also never sat enthroned over his defeated enemy, the sea-dragon *Ti'āmat*, nor did Baal, his Ugaritic counterpart, sit enthroned over the sea-dragon Yamm after his victory. Even if one should recognize in Ps. 29:10 the motif of a divine enthronement over a conquered enemy, he should compare this rather with Ea's establishment of his abode over the conquered enemy Apsû: *ukīnma eli Apsâ šubassu* "Ea established his

<sup>4</sup> P.C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (WBC 19; Waco: Word Books, 1983), 248f. See Loretz, *Psalms 29*, Ch. 12, esp. 119f.

<sup>5</sup> F.M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 147, n. 4, & 155.

<sup>6</sup> Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 155, n. 43. Note also his comment that "the idiom *yšb l (ksʿ, etc.)* of enthronement, is frequent only in early Hebrew poetry (Ps. 132:12, Judg. 5:17; Ps. 29:10) and archaizing contexts (Ps. 9:5, Isa. 47:1 [?])." (*Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 97, n. 24).

<sup>7</sup> C.H. Gordon, *UT*, 19.1425 (p. 430).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Heb. *zwb* "to flow". Note that Loretz analyzed the phrase in a totally different way: i.e. *km db* "wie ein Bär"; see Loretz, "KTU 1.101:1-3a und 1.2 IV 10 als Parallelen zu Ps 29,10", 417.

<sup>9</sup> It appears 12 times in Gen 6-11; once in Ps 29.

<sup>10</sup> Note that Heb. *šetep* "a flood" is also used metaphorically for a mighty power by which Yahweh brings about *kālāh* "complete destruction" in Nah 1:8 and that the expression *šetep mayim rabbim* "flood of mighty waters" is used for describing the psalmist's calamity in Ps. 32:6.

dwelling on Apsû" (Enuma elish I 71). In this case, however, Ea's enemy is not a "flood" but the subterranean water and it is El, rather than Baal, who corresponds to the Mesopotamian Ea, a "creator" who resides at the watery abode.<sup>11</sup>

While the Hebrew *mabbûl* corresponds neither to Tiamat, Marduk's enemy, nor to Apsû, Ea's enemy, it is certainly similar to the Akkadian *abûbu* "the Deluge", by which Marduk attacked his enemy Tiamat in Enuma elish IV 49 (cf. VI 125). Not only do both the Hebrew *mabbûl* and the Akkadian *abûbu* refer to that great Deluge, but also they are the divine instruments by which the deity brought about a total destruction, not the enemy of the deity. Deities such as Adad, Nergal, Asshur, and Marduk are described as the "holder of the lightning, lord of the Deluge" (*nāšû birqi EN abûbi*)<sup>12</sup>; the term *abûbu* appears in a title of warrior gods such as Nabû, Ninurta, Ištar and Aššur.<sup>13</sup> In a similar, but not the same, way, it may be suggested, that in Ps. 29 Yahweh is depicted as the "holder of the lightning, lord of the Deluge". If this is the case, the phrase *lammabbûl* should not be interpreted in association with the so-called *Chaoskampf* motif in which a chaotic water is treated as an enemy of a warrior god.

[II] *temporal interpretation*

(a) "from the Deluge" = "since the Deluge"

Assuming the motif of combat between a warrior deity and his enemy in the background of in Ps. 29 like many other scholars, Dahood suggested a temporal interpretation of the phrase *lammabbûl*. He takes *l* as meaning "from" in a temporal sense and comments: "The psalmist alludes not to the Flood in the days of Noah, but to the motif of the struggle between Baal, lord of the air and genius of the rain, and Yamm, master of sea and subterranean waters." As for *l* *ôlām*, he translates it as "from eternity" and interprets the term "eternity" as "primeval time, *Urzeit*".<sup>14</sup> Though this interpretation is attractive since the phrase *lammabbûl* seems to be in a direct parallelism with the other temporal phrase *l* *ôlām*, his assumption of a Baal-Yamm conflict behind v. 10 is not acceptable for the reasons noted above.

<sup>11</sup> On the similarity and difference between the Biblical Elohim, the Ugaritic El and the Mesopotamian Ea, see my monograph, *The Earth and the Waters in Gen 1 & 2* Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989.

<sup>12</sup> BMS 21 r. 80, cited in *CAD*, A/1 (1964), 80.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *AHW*, 8. Note also the phrase, "destructive weapon of the gods, Deluge in battle" (*kašûš DINGIR.MEŠ abûb tamḥāri*) in Tukulti-Ninurta I, 24 9; see A.K. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Third and Second Millennia BC (to 1115 BC)* (Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Assyrian Periods 1; Toronto: University of Toronto, 1987), 275, 9.

Yahweh who sits on/over the Deluge (*mabbûl*) might be compared with Ninurta "who rides upon the Deluge" (*rākib abûbi*) in 1R 29 i 10 (Šamši-Adad V), cited by *CAD*, A/1 (1964), 80; *AHW*, 8. However, Yahweh's sitting here denotes his enthronement as a king, while Ninurta's riding "upon the Deluge" signifies his attack against his enemy.

<sup>14</sup> M. Dahood, *Psalms I* (AB 16; Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), 180.

(b) "before the Deluge"

However, another temporal interpretation may be suggested here without advocating any direct Ugaritic connection.

Since, as noted above, the Hebrew term *mabbûl* corresponds to Akkadian *abûbu*, both referring to the great Deluge itself as well as to the divine power of destruction, it may be profitable to note their use in temporal expressions.

In Akkadian, *abûbu* "the Deluge as cosmic event" is sometimes used as referring to a specific point in time, i.e. the Deluge.<sup>15</sup> As is well known from the Sumerian King List, the early Mesopotamian kings were grouped as those from before the Deluge and those "from after the Deluge" (*ša arki abûbi*)<sup>16</sup>, the term *abûbu* being used for a temporal description of various items. For example,

*ubla tēma ša lām<sup>17</sup> abûbi* (Gilgamesh Epic I 6)

"He brought report of before the Flood" (ANET, 73)

"Hat Kunde gebracht von vor der Sintflut" (Schott-von Soden)<sup>18</sup>

"he brought tidings from before the Deluge" (CAD, A/1, 78)

*hitāku mihišti abni ša lam abûbi* (Streck, *Assurbanipal*, 256:18)<sup>19</sup>

"I have examined the inscriptions on stone from before the Deluge"

*ša pi apkallē labiruti ša lam A.MÁ.URU<sub>5</sub>*

(R.C. Thompson, *Assyrian Medical Text*, 105:22)<sup>20</sup>

"from the mouths of the old sages from before the Deluge"<sup>21</sup>

In the light of these Akkadian expressions, the Hebrew *mabbûl* "the Deluge" might be used temporally also in Ps 29:10. In fact, in several other Biblical passages it appears in a temporal phrase, i.e. *ʾaḥar hammabbûl* "after the Deluge" in Gen 9:28, 10:1, 10:32, and 11:10. AS for the preposition *lam-*, though it is usually taken as the preposition *le-* with a definite article, it may possibly be a reflection of Akkadian *lām(a)*, "before". If Malamat's recent argument for Amorite, or an early Mesopotamian, background of the psalm<sup>22</sup> should be true, the connection between the Hebrew *lammabbûl* and the Akkadian *lam abûbi* would not be totally out of place.

<sup>15</sup> CAD, A/1 (1964), 77f.

<sup>16</sup> *annûtu LUGAL.E ša arki abûbi* "these are the kings from after the Deluge" in 5R 44 i 20, cited by CAD, A/1 (1964), 78; AHW, 8.

<sup>17</sup> For *lām(a)*, "before", see CAD, L (1973), 53; AHW, 530f. Note, for example, the phrases:

*lāma šiḫit šamšim* (ARM 3 71:7) "before sunrise"

*lām abûbi wasê* (Lambert-Millard, AH, 126 r. 4)  
"before the coming of the flood".

<sup>18</sup> A. Schott - W. von Soden, *Das Gilgamesch-Epos* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1958), 17.

<sup>19</sup> CAD, A/1 (1964), 78; AHW, 8.

<sup>20</sup> CAD, A/1 (1964), 78.

<sup>21</sup> Also [...] *a.má.uru<sub>5</sub> ba.an.ág:[...]-ru ša lam abûbi* (JRAS 1932 35:13f.), cf. CAD, A/1 (1964), 78; AHW, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Malamat, "The Amorite Background of Psalm 29", 156-160.

This interpretation may be strengthened from the parallel structure of v. 10 where the phrase *lammabbûl* corresponds to *l' ʿolām*, which might be translated as "from eternity", as suggested by Dahood. Then, *lammabbûl* is probably an idiom with a temporal meaning such as "from the time immemorial". It is interesting to note that Assurbanipal justifies his kingship by saying, "Assur and Sin have pronounced (my) name for rulership since time immemorial" (Annals I, 3-5).<sup>23</sup> It might be suggested that the psalmist in the same way expresses Yahweh's "eternal kingship" using a similar expression, "before the Deluge" (*lammabbûl*).

Our suggested translation would be:

"The Lord has sat enthroned since before the Deluge;  
the Lord has been enthroned as king from eternity."

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<sup>23</sup> H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948, 1978), 238.