

External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of *František Válek*

“Life, Society, and Politics in Relation to Religion at Ugarit in the Late Bronze Age”

Submitted in 2024 to the Department of Religious Studies

I. Brief summary of the dissertation

This dissertation considers various aspects of religion in the ancient city of Ugarit. It treats archaeological and textual sources using social constructivist and Actor-Network theory. It explores how religion was an aspect of living in the day-to-day world at ancient Ugarit.

II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation

This dissertation explores aspects of religion at Ugarit and attempts to consider how it was integrated with the lived experiences of the inhabitants of the city. It raises questions that might traditionally arise more commonly in religious studies than in the area-discipline of ancient Near Eastern Studies. At times, this leads to interesting perspectives on the sources. At the same time, it does at others mean that previous research on related issues may be overlooked.

III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

1. Structure of the argument

[The author clearly states his objective is to consider the ways religion was a part of lived experiences among the inhabitants of Ugarit. The author successfully signposts this idea at several points throughout the dissertation and returns to it in most of the chapters. At the same time, one weakness is that the concept of ‘religion,’ while sufficiently problematized, is never heuristically rehabilitated. It may also be that one of author’s contributions within the field of religious studies could be to provide a contextual way of thinking about religion within the context at Ugarit. For example, the author might engage with work like that of Brent Nongri (Before Religion) or, more generally, Tomoko Masuzawa (The Invention of World Religion) and see if he can provide a distinctive, situated understanding of religion as it arises from the data at Ugarit. This may also help to sharpen the method(s) used in the dissertation. On the one hand, the author draws on constructivist and Actor-Network theories of religion. On the other, the author also is interested in what might be dubbed ‘lived religion’ (e.g. McGuire, Meredith B. 2008. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press). The author might consider how religion was constructed within the lived practices at ancient Ugarit, thereby developing a grounded theory from the unique data at this ancient city.]

2. *Formal aspects of the dissertation*

In my readings, the dissertation was coherent in the use of abbreviations, syntax of bibliographical references, grammar, syntax, formatting, transcriptions of foreign terms, etc. Only a few infelicities were noted in primary languages:

p. 45 *šimge* (better than *šimgi*)

p 168 *namburbî* (for *naburbû*)

3. *Use of sources and/or material*

The author has done a nice job of interacting with key sources in Ugaritic Studies. Given the author's place within religious studies, he also exhibits facility with the Ugaritic materials. I have offered some thoughts about some of the data collection (Chapter four) below, but the author should be commended for asking interesting questions and using appropriate methodologies pursuing for answering them. At times, the author might even use his sources to explore his questions more extensively. While they are relatively few (by comparison with other data sets pertaining to religion in the contemporary world) or laconic and fragmentary, they often have more to offer than is exploited.

4. *Personal contribution to the subject*

In so far as the dissertation collects an array of religious sources for a discussion of the topic at Ugarit, it is a distinctive contribution. There is no single volume, as the author notes, that attempts to do this. At the same time, the author might have attempted to construct a novel understanding of religion as it arises from the data at Ugarit. In this way, the author would have more clearly and forcefully offered a distinctive, organically formulated contribution to the field of religious studies that would also be significant for scholars working in Ugaritology and ancient Near Eastern Studies.

IV. Questions for the author

The follow are observations and related questions listed in order of appearance within the dissertation. I include these questions for the author, not so that each should be addressed in the defense, but as food for thought beyond the defense as well.

-On page 36 you express concern about reifying a concept of 'god' (akin to your reservations about the term 'religion'). Is there some why, however, that one might ground an emic sense of 'divinity' using the materials from Ras Shamra (and other ancient Near Eastern sources)? For example, how would you critically engage with approaches like those of Michael Hundley ("Conceptions of Divinity in Ancient Mesopotamia"), which you cite earlier in the chapter (n. 140).

-On page 39 you suggest that “The question of reciting myths during rituals remains undecided.” To be sure, a lot is not known about the relationship of myth to ritual. At the same time, so-called historiola (like RS 24.244, maybe also RS 15.134: 1-7) seem to combine myth and incantation rituals. What might these contribute to the picture of ‘lived religion’ at Ugarit?

On page 42 you note some of the variations in god-lists from Ugarit. At the same time, Does it matter in any way that these lists seems to anticipate Philo of Byblos' list in later periods? Pardee, whom you cite, even suggests this indicates they are 'cosmological speculation'. What do you think?

On page 43 you turn to Weidner Gods Lists, etc. How might the recently published ‘Amorite’ god-list in George and Krebenik fit with your thinking on the nature of religious ‘translation’?

On page 56ff you discuss the Akkadian texts from Ras Shamra. First, does this include other texts like Akk letters more recently published? With unpublished Akk, I think the number is a bit higher, roughly 2500 Akk. Also, look at Van Soldt and Hueghnergard's studies of Akk at Ras Shamra, they study about 800 Akk texts, between the two of them, which they judge to be securely written at Ras Shamra. Thus, nearly 2/3 of the Akk texts may have ended up at Ugarit, but were not necessarily/likely written/produced there. Does this have implications for your study? If so, what might those be?

One page 67, the chart on the right side has the title “primary genres, right: texts “related” to religion.” The chart however records locations, not genres. Can you explain what “primary genres” are represented in this chart?

On page 134 you discuss onomastics. In my own work on Ugaritic Religion, I was struck how the different genres contain different religious data. For example, Rašpu is known widely in onomastics, but scarcely (once or twice) in literary sources. How might this information or fit into your treatment of a ‘lived religion’ at Ugarit?

On pages 153-68, 228ff you discuss divination and its place in Ugaritic society. Drawing on Pardee, you rightly note that the divinatory texts do not have easily identifiable parallels in Mesopotamian traditions. Thus, while similar in form and genre, the Ugaritic exemplars are quite different in substance. How might you explain this similarity and difference and what insights might it offer into religion at Ugarit? Similarly, you discuss the liver models that are inscribed in Ugaritic (not Akkadian, p153ff and 228ff). What might be the significance of this linguistic distribution on a traditionally Mesopotamian object (not to mention, the unusual ivory materiality of many of these models)?

V. Conclusion

The dissertation should be passed. At the same time, the author should be encouraged only to publish it as a monograph after being substantially revised in keeping with suggestion herein (and, perhaps, those of other readers).

I recommend the submitted dissertation with the tentative grade of **pass**.

6/3/24

Adam E. Miglio