

A Poetic Letter: The Ugaritic Tablet RS 16.265

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Abstract

This paper deals with tablet 16.265 that was found in the royal palace of Ugarit in 1952. About sixteen lines of this tablet are written in a form of a letter. Yet, an examination of the epigraphic features of the tablet and the content of the letter suggest that this tablet was used as a scribal exercise. We examine the poetic aspects of the text and suggest that this letter was written as a playful poetic letter that describes the training of the beginner royal scribe in Ugarit.

Keywords

Epigraphy, North-West Semitics, Ugarit, letter, scribes, scribal exercise, poetics.

Tablet RS 16.265

The most famous Ugaritic texts, such as the “Baal Cycle”, “Aqht”, “Krt” and others are written in a poetic style¹. This ancient culture mastered the art of poetry, and immortalized the tales of gods and men using this art in many instances. Ugaritic poetry is rich with literary devices such as word-pairs, similes, parallels, repetition and so on, and bears a great resemblance to Biblical poetry. This style of writing was not limited to the main literary tales. The example of tablet RS 16.265 shows how a scribe practiced his skill in poetry simply for the sake of practice.

Tablet RS 16.265 was found in 1952 in room 73, at the royal palace of Ugarit, and is now on display at the National Museum of Damascus². A low resolution image of the tablet can be found in *PRU* II, Pl VII, as well as a less accurate facsimile³. A better facsimile was later made by Pardee which captures all six facets of the tablet very clearly⁴. The first sixteen lines are written in the form of a letter⁵. Virolleaud regarded it as a private letter (“Lettre d’Eštl à Mnn”⁶). However, now it is generally agreed that this tablet is in fact, a scribal exercise like many others that were discovered in different

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¹ *KTU*³ 1.1-1.6; 1.10; 1.12; 1.14-1.24 and more.

² Size: 7.6 * 4.7 * 2.3 cm. According to CUNCHILLOS – VITA – ZAMORA 2003: 1716-1717.

³ SCHAEFFER – VIROLLEAUD 1957: 39-40.

⁴ PARDEE 2007.

⁵ This refers to the *recto* side of the tablet. Lines 15-16 are written on the bottom of the tablet.

⁶ See note 3, p. 39.

locations in Ras-Shamra⁷. The tablet consists of three partial Alphabetic systems written on the right, left and upper edges. The *verso* is separated into four parts by separation lines, and the words that are written in these sections are difficult to interpret. Márquez Rowe suggested a possible translation to one of these lines while referring to the tablet as “A particular heterogeneous alphabetic practice tablet or, in other words, an alphabetic notebook”⁸. In his dissertation, Hawley refers to this tablet as a scribal exercise for several reasons: 1. The presence of Alphabetic systems and word-lists on the same tablet. 2. The plausible interpretation of the “recipient” of the letter as indefinite: *l mnn*, “to whomever”. 3. The nature of the message: a request for a cup of wine. 4. Extraneous wedges, as at the end of line 6. 5. The fact that the two faces of the tablet were impressed in different orientations⁹.

Translation

Our discussion will focus mainly on the content of the practice letter in lines 1-16. Here is a possible translation of these lines:

1. [t]hm <i>ittl</i>	Message of ¹⁰ <i>Ittl</i>
2. <i>lmnn . ilm</i>	To <i>Mnn</i> ¹¹ : May the gods
3. <i>tgrk . tšlmk</i>	guard you, may they keep you well
4. <i>t'zzk . alp ymm</i>	may they strengthen you ¹² , (for) a thousand days
5. <i>wrbt . šnt</i>	and ten thousand years
6. <i>b'd 'lm</i>	for eternity
<hr/>	
7. <i>iršt . aršt</i>	A request I shall request
8. <i>lahy . lr 'y</i>	of my brother, of my friend ¹³
<hr/>	
9. <i>wytynn</i>	That he shall give
10. <i>lahh . lr 'h</i>	to his brother, to his friend
11. <i>r' 'lm .</i>	A friend for eternity:

⁷ See the discussion in CLEMENS 2001. Other examples of scribal exercises, according to the *UDB*: RS 1.016; RS 5.216; RS 8.203; RS 10.081; RS 12.019; RS 12.063; RS 12.064; RS 15.071; RS 19.031; RS 19.040; RS 19.159; RS 20.147; RS 21.069 and more. See also YOGEV – YONA 2013.

⁸ MÁRQUEZ ROWE 1996: 461.

⁹ HAWLEY 2003: 519-520, note 36. *KTU*³ also classifies this tablet (= *KTU*³ 5.9) as a scribal exercise, see DIETRICH – LORETZ – SANMARTÍN 2013: 603-604. See also DIETRICH – LORETZ 1988: 185; VITA 2012.

¹⁰ Three words in the recto side read: *thm dmn littl* (IV 1-3): “A message from *Dmn* to *Ittl*”. Since this is not an actual correspondence it seems as if the student practiced standard sender-receiver formulas.

¹¹ It is possible that *mnn* is a person’s name, but we can also read it as HAWLEY suggests: “Whomever”.

¹² This special greeting has many variations in Ugaritic and Akkadian letters from Ugarit and other places. For further reading see WATSON – WYATT 1999: 363-364. The opening of this letter is somewhat similar to RS 1.018. For more on the formulaic greetings from the gods in letters see CUNCHILLOS 1984.

¹³ See Tropper’s interpretation: “Ich richte (mit diesem Brief) eine Bitte an meinen Bruder, meinen Freund”, TROPPEL 2000: 704.

12. <i>ttn . wtn</i>	May you give, and give
13. <i>wltn</i>	and please give
14. <i>waltn</i>	and indeed give ¹⁴
15. <i>tnks yn</i>	give a cup of wine
16. <i>wištn</i>	and I shall drink (it)! ¹⁵

Poetic aspects of the text

The practice letter begins with an expanded greeting between friends (lines 1-6): “A formula to which there is no corresponding Akkadian formula... The unusual greeting in UT 1019 may be due to the tablet being a scribal exercise rather than a real letter”¹⁶. The text continues in a flattering tone and makes an amusing request, not for gold or slaves, but a cup of wine (lines 7-16): “The letter RS 16.265 is not a fragment of a literary text: it rather reflects the spontaneous humor and personal ease of a scribe at the time of practicing”¹⁷. This practice letter had no formal use, and its scribe took some creative liberties in the process of writing.

In its first translation, Virolleaud noted the similarity between lines 15-16: *tn ks yn wištn* (“Give a cup of wine and I shall drink (it)”) to a verse in the “Baal cycle”, which was written in a poetic manner: *štt / p[?] btlhny . qlt / bks . ištynh* (KTU³ 1.4, III, 14-16: “I drank [?] from my table // I drank shame from my cup”)¹⁸. Hawley has pointed out the similarity between lines 10-11: *lahh . lr’h / r’ ’lm* (“To his brother // To his friend // A friend for eternity”) and a verse in the Aqht legend: *wrt . yštk . b’l . lht / w’lmh* (KTU³ 1.19, IV, 5-6: “May Baal blind you, from here to eternity”)¹⁹. Ahl compared lines 15-16 to the blessing of El in the Krt epic story: *ks . yihd / [il b]yd . krpn . bm / [ym]n* (KTU³ 1.15, II, 16: “A cup holds [El in] his hand // A goblet in his [rig]ht”)²⁰. It is not a coincidence that this scribal exercise echoes main poetic texts from Ugarit. Lines 1-16 are rich with poetic devices that are well known in Ugaritic as well as Biblical poetry:

A. Word pairs: The study of parallel word pairs in Ugaritic poetry is essential for understanding the basic building blocks of poetic verses²¹. The scribes were very familiar with dozens of word pairs and embedded them in their work²². In this text we

¹⁴ Pardee reads line 14 (*waltn*) as a rhetorical question: “and will you not certainly give?”. See note 4. See discussion on the Ugaritic word *al* in SIVAN 2001: 183-184.

¹⁵ It is important to bring Ahl’s interpretation to lines 12-16: *ttn w tn w l ttn w al ttn tn ks yn w išttn* “(If) you will give, give; And (if) you will not give, do not give; Give a cup of wine that I may drink” (= I’ll accept whatever you give, be it little or much). See AHL 1973: 427. See also Tropper’s interpretation: “Gib (mir) einen Becher Wein, damit ich fürwahr trinken kann”, TROPPEL 2000: 733.

¹⁶ KRISTENSEN 1977: 155. See also LOEWENSTAMM 1969.

¹⁷ See VITA 2012: 647. Pardee also agrees that this message was written in a playful and humoristic style, see note 4.

¹⁸ SCHAEFFER – VIROLLEAUD 1957: 40.

¹⁹ HAWLEY 2003: 607-608.

²⁰ AHL 1973: 427.

²¹ This is also true when discussing Biblical, Phoenician, Akkadian and Aramaic poetry as well.

²² For further reading see AITKEN 1989; AVISHUR 1984; BERLIN 1983; SEGERT 1983; WATSON 1984b.

can find four of them within small parallel structures: 1. *šlm* // 'z (“Peace” // “Strength”: *tšlmk* // *t'zzk*, lines 3-4): The use of the word *t'zzk* as a part of a standard opening formula has only one possible similarity in another letter (RS 1.018)²³. 2. *alp* // *rbt* (“Thousand” // “Ten thousand”, lines 4-5): A very common word pair both in Ugaritic and Biblical literature²⁴. 3. *ym* // *šnt* (“A day” // “A year”, lines 4-5): A known word pair in Ugaritic, Hebrew and Phoenician. This and the previous word pair create a small internal parallelism: *alp ymm* / *wrbt . šnt*²⁵: “A thousand days // and ten thousand years”, a clear sign of poetic knowledge from the scribe²⁶. 4. *aḥ* // *r'* (“A brother” // “A friend”, lines 8 and 10): Although it appears twice here, this word pair is rare in Ugaritic literature. A more common word pair in Ugaritic literature is *aḥ* // *ary*²⁷. The word pair *aḥ* // *r'* does exist in Biblical poetry²⁸.

B. Concatenation: This poetic structure demonstrates similarities between the end of one half-line and the beginning of the next. It is common in Ugaritic Poetry²⁹. Here is an example from the Ugaritic “Baal cycle” (*KTU*³ 1.2, IV, 11-13):

<i>šmkat</i> / <i>ygrš</i> .	Your name is <i>ygrš</i>
<i>ygrš</i> . <i>grš ym</i>	<i>ygrš</i> , eliminate <i>Yammu</i>
<i>grš ym</i> . <i>lksih</i>	eliminate <i>Yammu</i> from his chair

Another example from Ugaritic poetry (*KTU*³ 1.10, II, 14-15)³⁰:

<i>wyšu</i> . 'nh . <i>wy'n</i>	And he lifted his eyes <i>and saw</i>
<i>wy'n</i> . <i>btl</i> . 'nt	<i>and saw</i> the virgin <i>Anattu</i>

In tablet 16.265 we find a concatenation twice; in lines 10-11 and 14-15:

²³ This word pair can be found in Biblical poetry. For example see Ps 29:11: “The LORD will give strength unto His people; the LORD will bless his people with peace”. (In Heb. *רָעַע* // *לְשׁוֹן*). Another possible appearance is found in Isa 27:5. This word pair exists in Phoenician as well, see AVISHUR 1975. For further reading see BOTTERWECK – RINGGREN – FABRY 2006: 25.

²⁴ In Ugaritic poetry see: *KTU*³ 1.3, IV, 38; 1.4, I, 27-28; 1.14, II, 39-40; 1.17, V, 9-10; and more. In Biblical poetry, see: Deut 32:30; Judg 20:10; 1 Sam 18:7; Mic 6:7; Ps 91:7 and more.

²⁵ According to Hawley, this parallel as an addition to an opening formula of letters is unique to this tablet, HAWLEY 2003: 552. For further reading on half-line internal parallelism in Biblical and Ugaritic poetry, see WATSON 1986; WATSON 1994; 104-181.

²⁶ This word pair is more common in Biblical than in Ugaritic poetry. Examples: *KTU*³ 1.19, IV, 13-14, and in Biblical poetry see Isa 34:8; 61:2; 63:4; Job 32:7. See AVISHUR 1975.

²⁷ See examples in *KTU*³ 1.17, I, 19; 1.4, V, 28-29. *bn* // *ary* is also a known pair, see *KTU*³ 1.6, I, 39-41. The origin of the word *ary* is still unclear. It is possible that this word has an Egyptian origin, see SZEMERÉNYI 1977: 146-149. Another suggestion is that this word should be understood as “lion”, with a symbolic connection to “brother”. See RUMMEL 1981: 15-16.

²⁸ “For my brothers and companions’ sakes, I will now say: ‘Peace be within thee.’” (Ps 122:8, in Heb.: *לְמַעַן אֶחָיו וְרֵעֵי אֶדְבָרָהּ נָא שְׁלוֹם בְּךָ*). It also appears in the Song of Songs as a joined word pair: “Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled” (5:2, and in Heb.: *פִּתְחֵי לִי אֶחָתִי רֵעֵתִי יוֹנָתִי תַמְתִּי*).

²⁹ In Biblical poetry see Song 2:15: “Take us the *foxes* // the little *foxes* that spoil the *vineyards* // for our *vineyards* are in blossom”. See other examples in Song 2: 1-2; Ps 97:11-12; Ps 121:1-2.

³⁰ A Concatenation also appears in lines 22-23 and 27-28 in the same column.

<i>lahh . lr' h</i>	To his brother, to his <i>friend</i>
<i>r' 'lm .</i>	A <i>friend</i> for eternity
<i>waltn</i>	And indeed <i>give</i>
<i>tnks yn</i>	<i>give</i> a cup of wine

In both cases we see that the repeating element is the one that the scribe chose to emphasize, whether it is his “friend” or the verb “to give”. The double appearance of this poetic structure reinforces the idea that we are dealing with a poem in the form of a letter.

C. A repeated extended phrase and a metaphor: The concatenation in lines 10-11 contains other important poetic elements, one of which is the repeated extended phrase. This means that in the first half-line a word appears, and then the same word is used as a part of status constructus in the next half-line³¹. In tablet 16.265 we find: *lahh . lr' h / r' 'lm*: “To his brother, to his *friend*, a *friend for eternity*”. The scribe took the word *r' 'lm* in the first half-line and extended it into a status constructus, and also a metaphor: *r' 'lm* (“A friend for eternity”)³².

D. Gradation and word play, anaphoric and epiphoric repetition, and alliteration: The repetition and word play of verbs (\sqrt{ytn}) in lines 9-15 is organized in the form of a trapeze structure that leads the reader to the amusing surprise climax at the end of the message³³. The scribe begins his request by the word *ttn* and gradually adds small syntactic elements to the imperative *tn*. This leads to a gradation that creates anticipation in the listener; “what does he want to receive?”. The climax is characterized by a concatenation, and so the answer is revealed: he wishes for a cup of wine, and he wishes to drink it!³⁴:

<i>ttn</i>	May you give
<i>w tn</i>	And give
<i>w l ttn</i>	And please give
<i>w al ttn</i>	And indeed give?
<i>tn ks yn</i>	Give a cup of wine
<i>w ištn</i>	And I shall drink (it)!

³¹ This also has many parallels in Biblical poetry, for example: “The voice of the LORD breaks the *cedars*, the LORD breaks in pieces the *cedars of Lebanon*... The voice of the LORD shakes the *desert*; the LORD shakes the *desert of Kadesh*” (Ps 29:5;8). The second appearance usually explains the first. For further reading see YONA 2003; YONA 2007; YONA 2013.

³² Hawley found parallels to this metaphor in other Akkadian letters from Ugarit. See note 8, p. 552-553, and also HAWLEY 2010. This metaphor also has parallels in Biblical poetry, for example: “The LORD is King for ever and ever...” (Ps 10:16, in Heb.: וְיְהוָה מֶלֶךְ עוֹלָם וָעֶד); “...The ancient mountains crumbled and the age-old hills collapsed” (Hab 3:6, in Heb.: וַיִּתְפַּצְצוּ הַרְרֵי עֵד שְׁחוּ גְבְעוֹת עוֹלָם).

³³ For further reading of “trapeze structure” in Biblical and Talmudic poetry, see YONA 2006.

³⁴ For further reading on rhetorical climax and closure of poetic structures see AVISHUR 1979: 22-23; FREEDMAN 1986: 45; GORDIS 1945: 136-159; GREENSTEIN 1983; HERRNSTEIN-SMITH 1968: 53; RICHARDS 1963: 163-176; WATSON 1984a: 179, note 43; WATSON 1988.

The coordinating conjunction *w* represents an anaphoric emphasis of the text³⁵ while the word *tn* represents an epiphoric emphasis. The consonant *n* is a repeated alliteration at the end of each part of this trapeze poetic structure³⁶.

Conclusion

Tablet 16.265 is indeed a very curious one. It is obviously a scribal exercise that was used by a trainee to master the scribes' art of writing. This tablet is also a window into an ancient "classroom" in the royal palace of Ugarit; a student writing a casual message to a friend in his notebook in favor of wine drinking³⁷. This informal text shows us a student that was already familiar with poetic texts, and was influenced by them. This may reinforce previous suggestions about the curriculum in ancient Ugarit, as well as in other parts of Mesopotamia: "One can only say that the whole curriculum, including the religious and literary texts, can probably be regarded as part of the basic scribal training, for a higher level"³⁸. This may imply that even royal scribes who dealt with formal writing, needed to study poetic texts and to master the art of poetry writing.

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³⁵ For further reading on Anaphora see EHLICH 1982: 315-338; FARNSWORTH 2010: 16; FOKKELMAN 2001: 255; HANKAMER – SAG 1976; WATSON 1994: 89; YOGEV – YONA 2015. For examples of an Anaphora in Biblical prose and poetry, see: Isa 11:2; Hos 2:21-22; Ps 148:2-4; Ps 119:41-48; Neh 5:2-4.

³⁶ See YONA 2001: 234-244.

³⁷ For further reading about wine drinking in ancient Israel and Ugarit see: AVIGAD 1972; BACCHIOCCHI 1989; BROSHI 1984; CHOWDOWSKI 1920; HELTZER 1990; HELTZER 1999; JASTROW 1913; MILLARD 1962; TSUMURA 1980.

³⁸ VAN SOLDT 1995. See also FINCKE 2012; HAWLEY 2008.

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