Bordreuil, Pierre, and Dennis Pardee

A Manual of Ugaritic

Linguistic Studies in Ancient West Semitic 3


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This volume represents an updated English version of the two authors’ Manuel d’ougaritique published in 2004. The foreword states clearly both the aims of the two authors and the limitations of their intentions: “The object of this Manual is to put into the hands of persons who wish to learn the Ugaritic language a tool enabling them to acquire the rudiments of every aspect of the study of Ugaritic texts” (x). In this they have been very successful.

The balance of the book shows that the focus of the Manual is on the practical experience of reading the Ugaritic texts themselves. The “Historical Introduction and Grammar” covers pages 1–82, of which roughly twenty pages are historical introduction and the rest cover those subjects that might be expected to be found in a grammar book, from writing system and phonology to morphology and syntax. Of special interest is the segment on what the authors call the “Particularities of Poetic Texts” (79–82), an impressively brief presentation of key elements of parallelism, with illustrations from passages presented in the text section. The bibliography, while quite substantial (84–96), does not claim to be all-encompassing but rather to cover the works cited both in the grammar and in the introductions to each of the texts. Almost all of the rest of the book (97–285) is devoted to the texts. These are presented in hand-drawn copies (97–156), and in the following
section, there are suggested readings, with translations and transliterations of each text, the latter mostly then presented in vocalized versions. For each text there follow generally brief notes about aspects of the text—orthography, syntax, meaning, and so forth.

A particularly welcome section is the “Concordance of Text Numbers” (286–91), since the range and variation in the identification of texts can be a source of bewilderment. The Ras Shamra numbers have been chosen as the primary identifiers, with the CTA and KTU/CAT systems linked to the RS and RIH lists. Inversions of these lists are then given. Since discovery of texts continues with almost every new season, this approach allows the placement of new finds in the context of the material in the book. The use of season numbers/years may clarify why some texts have different interpretations in the light of later discoveries.

While the book in itself presents a valuable resource, the full richness is found in the CD included. This contains not only the text of the entire work but also photos in color of all tablets and other written sources presented. The quality of these photos, and the care with which they have been presented, allowing a clear view of all segments of texts whether on the faces or on the edges, contributes a wider dimension to the work. There is a striking generosity of attitude about the material: the introductory note asks that users “not distribute the files in ways that would violate copyright,” while granting permission to download the material to a personal computer.

The final section of the work consists of a forty-page “Glossary of Terms” (293–355) presented in the order of the Ugaritic alphabet. Although unfamiliar at first, the order will quickly become known to users of the Manual, itself a useful pedagogical outcome. The ordering of the entries presents a further indication of the authors’ views of Ugaritic as an independent discipline (as André Caquot mentions in the preface). This may also explain their decision not to include in the bibliography an entry for A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition by Gregorio del Olmo Lete and Joaquín Sanmartín (translated by Wilfred Watson).

There are many aspects of this volume to praise other than those already noted. The historical introduction and grammar are detailed and informative despite the limited format. The authors are experts in the field, and hence their discussions reflect the current state of the art in Ugaritology. For example, they note that they have changed their opinion, since the first edition, on the (non)use of the yaqtul preterite in Ugaritic poetry in response to recent work by E. Greenstein (46). Overall, this section represents a brief but very useful review of Ugaritic grammar that even advanced scholars can read with profit. The points in the grammar are illustrated by copious examples from the Ugaritic texts, usually the texts presented in this volume. A useful feature of the CD version of the
book is that the reader may click on the text reference in the grammar and be taken directly to the transcription of the text in question. This text is then linked in to both the hand copy and photographic versions, so that one can check readings directly on the original. It must be admitted that many of the discussions in the grammar are rather complicated for beginners. However, the authors do state: “It appears obvious to us that a preliminary knowledge of another Semitic language and study under the direction of a capable professor or instructor who can explain the difficult aspects of the texts assigned here will facilitate the use of this Manual” (x). Furthermore, as stated, the focus of the volume is on reading the texts, not on learning the grammar first.

Fifty-five texts are offered in “hand copies,” printed with clarity. The presentation of text 2 on the page may appear too condensed, in the light of the significance of the text itself (part of the Ba’al and ‘Anat myth). With this Manual, however, there is no problem, since, as we have mentioned, users have access to the pages on the CD-Rom and can enlarge the hand copy as needed. Texts cover eight different fields, and there will possibly be little common agreement about the range and length of texts chosen within the groupings. For example, only seven excerpts from mythological texts are included (though all of these are lengthy). While the group of epistolary texts is more extensive in number, the volume of material is less. Given the aim of the Manual, however, there is a clear intention to make scholars and students aware of the range of material and thus allow them to place texts in a fuller “local” context.

The order of the different fields is unexpected, as some of the most complex and lengthy tablets are presented before the simpler ones, such as the abecedaries, some of the lists, and a number of letters. One might perhaps have thought that some initial work with the abecedaries might have eased students into using the glossary, which, as we have noted, is organized according to the Ugaritic alphabet’s order. Similarly, beginning with simpler texts may help students to build confidence with the basic aspects of the script and language before moving on to complex, poetic texts. The texts are evidently intended to be studied in the order in which they are presented, since the notes on the texts “diminish in the course of the Manual because we offer such remarks only for the first attestation of a word or form” (xi). That said, the notes are superb and extremely helpful, representing one of the real strengths of this volume, at the beginning of the first text virtually explaining every word.

The transliterations of the texts are presented with great care, although with the first groups, there may be some question about the decision to disregard the line numbering. This is based on division of the text into literary units, particularly looking at parallelism. While this may seem clear to those who know the Ugaritic material, it may be somewhat bewildering to learners in the early stages.
Issues of correction of texts and restorations are briefly discussed in the foreword (xi), and in the case of some texts such aspects appear not so much in the transliteration as in the translations and vocalizations. There are in some cases references to both practices in the notes—text 4 (176) is a case in point.

The vocalization of texts has always been a moot point, and the authors are clearly aware of this, stating that it “reflects our conception of Ugaritic grammar,” viewing it as “an exercise in phonetic reconstruction” (xi). Pardee’s work has always included this dimension, and students have indicated to us that they welcome it, as it makes the word units pronounceable. While some scholars might hesitate to make such a plain statement of their views on issues about which so much is uncertain, we applaud the decision to make the authors’ understanding of the texts so transparent.

A brief familiarity with this work makes us aware of its richness, its usefulness, and its accessibility. One can only congratulate the authors and hope that Pardee and Bordeuil decide to produce a work of this range for the remainder of the Ugaritic corpus.