

THE NUMERIC PROGRESSION IN KERET I: 15-20  
YET ANOTHER SUGGESTION

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The opening lines of Keret contain more than a fair share of difficulties, not the least being the proper way of interpreting the numeric progression in lines 15-20. A recent study by David T. Tsumura is an admirable overview of the problem, and its bibliography will make it possible to burden this brief paper minimally<sup>1</sup>. I want to propose a solution which, if found convincing, may lead to a different assessment of the epic's main plot. I offer it with all due caution, since it is unlikely that any one resolution will appeal to the majority of scholars.

We recall that Keret's paternal family, with many sons, had perished (6-9) and that, according to the most likely understanding of the sequence in lines 12-14, his own dynasty is in danger of extinction ever since his legitimate wife was no longer at his side. The offsprings of one womb (*tar um.tkn lh*)<sup>2</sup> are next the focus of the poet (lines 16-21). Here the scribe exhibits due veneration to the gods placing Reshep and Yam at the beginning of successive lines, even when these accommodations interfere with parallelistic logic. For this reason, we realign the words to better suit the narrative:

*mtl<sup>o</sup>tt.ktrm.tmt*  
*mr<sup>o</sup>b t.zblrm*  
*m<sup>o</sup>lmšt.yitšp / ršp.*  
*mt<sup>o</sup>dt<sup>o</sup>t.šlm / ym.*  
*mš<sup>o</sup>b t hm.bšlh / ttp<sup>o</sup>l.*

All scholars recognize that unhappy events overtook those to whom the numeric progression refers, even if they may not fully agree on the exact nature of

these calamities. How to analyze grammatically  $m\bar{t}l\bar{t}t$ ,  $mrb^c t$ ,  $m\bar{m}\bar{s}t$ ,  $m\bar{d}t\bar{t}$  and  $m\bar{s}b^c t$ ; how to translate the sentences in which they are used; and how to reconstruct the context for Keret's march against Udm, are issues that are repeatedly featured in recent literature. These vocables have been translated as multiples, as ordinals, or as fractions.

From the early days of Keret studies the  $m\bar{q}t\bar{l}t$  forms have elicited different analyses. Grammarians have differed on their vocalization. Gordon regards them as  $maqtil(at)$  forms<sup>3</sup>. S. Segert, however, thinks of  $muqattal(at)$  forms<sup>4</sup>. As to translating the forms, Ginsberg, Gordon, Aistleitner and Driver<sup>5</sup> agree that they represent fractions. Cassuto thinks that they are ordinals referring to Keret's seven wives, a notion which does prepare us well for his trek to Udm in search of an 'ešet hayil<sup>6</sup>. Virolleaud, Pedersen and Gray regard them as multiplicatives; but the bloated number of siblings as given by the first two scholars has not been favored. Additionally, Gray's position tortures the grammar as much as the context.

More recently a variety of ingenious suggestions has become available. Badre, Bordreuil, *et al.* (cited above), criticize J. Finkel's elaborate proposal to inflate the number of Keret's children by treating our passage as a conundrum<sup>7</sup>. In turn, their own hypothesis, that the  $m\bar{q}t\bar{l}t$  forms be segmented into  $m$  plus ordinals, has been rejected by Dietrich and Loretz<sup>8</sup>. J.C. de Moor does not think it probable that a fraction series would start with "1/3"; he therefore regards the forms as multiplicative participles which refer to an act, "x" times repeated<sup>9</sup>. De Moor's translation, however, does not accord with his grammatical analysis, and he has, as others before him, Keret's wives dying seriatim<sup>10</sup>.

It may be fair to say that a major reason why scholars have resisted analyzing the  $m\bar{q}t\bar{l}t$  forms of Keret as fractions is because the sum of these fractions (1/3rd... 1/7th) amount to 153/140, that is, to more than one integer. These scholars protest that even if Keret is an epic in verse, its poet would not be so sloppy as to merely approximate a whole digit<sup>11</sup>. Hypercritical though it may be of poetic license, this objection cannot be gingerly sidestepped. I suggest that the fractions should be deciphered *in a backward sequence*. With our eye dropping to the last line in the series, we shall find that:

- 1/7th of Keret's perfect family is killed by the sword (war), leaving six children;
- of the remaining six children, 1/6th dies by flood (Yam)<sup>12</sup>, leaving five survivors;
- of these five, 1/5th is hit by the plague, leaving four;
- of the remaining four, 1/4th falls victim to disease;
- one of the last three, (1/3rd) dies an infant (or in full health).

That is, we should think that *one* child (and not a fraction that is impossible to apply to human beings) was killed in each misfortune. At the end of this series of catastrophes, there are only *two* survivors.

To buttress this unusual exegesis, I will need to tackle two other issues: 1. to explain such an unusual method of establishing a sequence and 2. to account for the two survivors.

I have not sought parallels in administrative or economic documents, for such a retrograde sequence is simply not suited to accounting and record keeping. It is otherwise in literary texts, however. Genealogies, for example, can reverse the normal father-to-son pattern when seeking to focus on a particularly prominent individual. This is the case of Saul's line in 1 Sam. 9:1-2 (for which see further the Supplement to IDB, p. 355)<sup>13</sup>. A famous non-numerical example in Canticles (7:2-10), where the eye of the beholder is forced to look at a beloved from the feet up, rather than from the head down<sup>14</sup>. This particular reversal is not in itself crucial to the progress of the erotic poem, but is given for aesthetic reasons and to demonstrate a poet's creative arsenal.

Likewise in the Keret passage, it may ultimately not matter whether the audience fully understands the esoteric technique or is in sympathy with it; the poet may deem it more important to offer the *ear* a "logical" progression, based on a rising order of full numbers - 1/3 based on 3; 1/4 on 4, etc. - even if the *mind* normally makes more sense of a progression which goes from a smaller (1/7th) to a larger (1/4th) fraction. We can thus note that even as the fractions *decrease* in actual size, the full number upon which they are based *increases* in value. Another way to observe the same effect is to consider that as Keret's hopes for his dynasty come to dim in direct proportion with the shrinking size of the fractions the poet plays counter-

point with the increasing size of absolute numbers within these fractions, and thus prepares us for better things in the protagonist's future.

The second issue - that is accounting for two survivors of the calamity - may be tackled on two separate levels. We may first offer a purely technical response: the poet chose to begin (or: "to end", if the sequence is perceived regressively) with "a third", simply because *mtl<sup>u</sup>tt* is the first fraction which is based on a named numeral (in this case "three"). Had he opted with ending on "one-half", the poet would have needed to break from that pattern, since in Ugaritic this last fraction is given either as *nsp* or possibly also *hst*.

The suggestion just offered is not likely to satisfy, for it smacks too much of the mechanical. We shall need, instead, to confront the issue of who were the two survivors of the disaster by inspecting the tale itself. To do so, however, is to open a can of worms, for it will require us to speculate on what Keret is actually about: Does the poem sing of the fulfillment of El's promise of continuity for Keret's dynasty? Or, to the contrary, does it tell us how men foolishly squander their future by making unneeded vows (e.g. Jephtah and his daughter; Saul and Jonathan)<sup>15</sup>?

As far as we can tell from the story's contents, only three of Keret's children are given names: Yaṣṣib, "Thitmanet", and Ilḥu. Now, we do know that Yaṣṣib is born out of the union between Keret and Hurriya and that, according to El's blessing, this child, nursed by the gods, is destined to replace Keret on the throne (15:II:11-28). Taking seriously the location of this prediction, Gray has suggested that eventually a woman, "Thitmanet", takes over Khubr's throne<sup>16</sup>. This thesis is not necessary; in fact, if this indeed were the poet's intimation, he would risk severely compromising thereby whatever tension he generates between Yaṣṣib and Ilḥu during the illness and recovery of Keret<sup>17</sup>. I therefore accept the general perception that Yaṣṣib is the last of the male children (whatever their number) born to Hurriya, and that he is ostensibly destined to win out over his brothers. All this is bound to happen as foretold; except for the fact that Asherah chooses to recall at this particular time Keret's unfulfilled promise and decides to teach him (and us) a lesson.

But who are Ilḥu and "Thitmanet"? That they are brother and sister we know for sure, since this is the terminology that both the poet and his main character, Keret, apply to them. But we are not told that they, like Yaššib, are born to Hurriya. Scholars who think them Hurriya's children advance three arguments: 1. A reading of 15:II:24; 2. The meaning of the name "Thitmanet" and 3. The import of lines 15:21-24. I tackle these issues in sequence.

1. Gordon follows Virolleaud's allocation of the consonants of line 15:II:24-25a, finding in it "Thitmanet's" name and translating: "... the girl thou causest to enter thy court/Will bear thee seven sons/ And an eighth (daughter): Octavia"<sup>18</sup>. Most scholars, however, correctly sense the need for a verbal form to parallel *ṯld* of the previous line, and divide it to give *wṯmm ṯṯṯmm/lk*, even if it is still not easy to parse the verbal form which results thereby<sup>19</sup>.

2. Normalization of Ugaritic personal names being such a shifty business, I have followed the old convention of rendering the name *ṯṯṯmt* as "Thitmanet"; but I am not sure about the meaning of this name. Most scholars have accepted a derivation based on the number eight and often report the name in its latin equivalent, "Octavia"; but the form is very strange. If it is related to *ṯmm*, it would to my knowledge be the only noun with a *-ṯ-* infix. Were it to be a Gt verbal form, it could be a perfect (3pfs with a goddess as subject), but is not likely to be a feminine Gt participle since we would expect that form to have an *m-* prefix. In any case, neither of these constructions has turned up yet, so one has to be very cautious with these suggestions<sup>20</sup>. But even if such Gt forms were available, I would still not know what a verb *ṯmm* might mean and I have therefore no suggestion on how to translate the name of Keret's daughter. I have gone through this exercise, however, to cast a small doubt about the common assumption that she is indeed the eighth child of Keret and Hurriya.

3. Lines 20-24 of Keret have their share of lexical difficulties (see the various commentaries); but they do reflect how the calamity is perceived from the perspective of Keret whose hopes are dashed. Immediately after this perception is stated, the poet lifts the curtain to show us a lachrymose Keret about to fall asleep in his bed-chamber. El descends, and Keret is set toward his quest. But do these lines necessarily imply that Keret is bereft of children? Or, may it not mean that in Ke-

ret's mind, no *plausible* heir survived the horrors overtaking his household? This question leads me back to the question posed above: Who are "Thitmanet" and Ilḫu? I have now two different suggestions to make.

1. The first is that the survivors of the initial calamity are not necessarily children of Keret; rather, they are the remaining males in Khubr's royal line, and they include Keret and only one son, in this case Ilḫu.

2. I prefer the suggestion which I offer now. The two survivors of the catastrophic onslaught mentioned at the beginning of the tale are Ilḫu and "Thitmanet". Ilḫu would not do as heir (an Ugaritic Mephiboshet [?]; a victim of ultimogeniture [?]), and it would be futile for me to invent a good reason for it. Be that as it may, these two survivors live in the shadow of Yaṣṣib; but as the text makes amply clear, they are closer to each other than most siblings. When Keret is ill, it is these two who grieve and worry about his death. Ilḫu visits his sick father, and Keret finally rises from his torpor and seeks a solution to his condition. He sends Ilḫu to his sister, requesting that she conduct the proper ritual. Keret is restored to health and throne. Yaṣṣib is not aware of this development and wants to hurry his father's retirement from duty. He delivers an obnoxious speech before his father, leading Keret to curse this ostensibly perfect product of the marriage invented by heaven. I suggest that it is this event - the curse of Yaṣṣib -, and not Keret's sickness, that is the cruelest manifestation of Asherah's anger at Keret's memory lapse<sup>21</sup>. Ugaritic literature knows of other occasions in which the independent-minded Asherah deflects, if not stymies, the plans carefully charted by her spouse El<sup>22</sup>; but this particular manifestation of hostility barely disguised is surely only one of the many motifs in the story of Keret. The larger theme, as hinted long ago by Ginsberg, may well be that justice ultimately triumphs and Ilḫu, passed over and perhaps once despised, finds justification and ultimately becomes Keret's successor<sup>23</sup>.

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1) *The Problem of Childlessness in the Royal Epic of Ugarit - An Analysis of KRT*

[KTU 1.14:1]: 1-25, in T.Mikasa (ed.), *Monarchies and Socio-Religious Traditions in the Ancient Near East*, Wiesbaden 1984, 11-20. Other studies which can be helpful in this particular problem are: MLC, 245-50; 289-90 and L.Badre, P.Bordreuil et al., *Notes ougaritiques, I. Keret: Syria*, 53 (1976), 87-103.

- 2) For the various opinions on how to read, let alone interpret, this line, see Tsumura, *ibid.*, 15-16.
- 3) UT, pp.49-50 (§§ 7.55-7.62).
- 4) BGUL, 54 (§ 53.5). I might add here that two cases other than the Keret examples wherein *mqlt* forms are found in Ugaritic, 1 Aqht:82 and the fragmentary RS 24.229 (U7, p.68):3, do not preclude translating by means of fraction.
- 5) In CML, 29; but not in *Studia Semitica*, 95.
- 6) BASOR, 119 (1950), 19.
- 7) HUCA, 26 (1955), 109-49.
- 8) UF, 12 (1980), 185.
- 9) UF, 11 (1979), 643-44.
- 10) For de Moor's highly imaginative reconstruction of Keret's woe, see further UF, 14 (1982), 155-56.
- 11) Tsumura, *cit.*, 15-16 gives an overview of these objections.
- 12) Death by flooding may seem quaint, but it is precisely what king Arkhalbu wishes on anyone (other than his brother) who seeks to marry his own widow (PRU3, p.76).
- 13) Note how the Assyrian King List has a retrograde listing of "10 kings who are ancestors" sandwiched within lists which follow a "normal" pattern; see W.W. Hallo: JNES, 18 (1958), 220-25 (reference courtesy W.W.Hallo) and R.R.Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*, New Haven 1977, 86-100.
- 14) See also the letter which Zimri-Lim of Mari sent to his wife (ARM X:126), instructing her on how to select women suited for the royal corps de ballet:

I am now sending you female weavers, among which there are priestesses. Select the priestesses and assign (the rest) to weaving establishments. Choose from among the weavers thirty - or as many as are worth selection - handsome ones, who have no blemishes from toes to the hair of their head, and assign these to Warad-ilishu. Have Warad-ilishu teach them Subarean dances; but their figures (?) are not to be changed. Be careful with their ration so that their looks won't change.

Let Warad-ilishu be there when you make selections, but Mukannishum ought not alter the appearance of the weavers who remain.

For line 9, see J.-M.Durand, ARMT XXI, p.425).

- 15) See N. Wyatt's recent remarks in *Cosmic Entropy in Ugaritic Religious Thought*: UF, 17 (1986), 383-86.
- 16) J. Gray, *The KRT Text in the Literature of Ras Shamra*, Leiden 1964<sup>2</sup>, 4. Others have expressed similar opinions, although not as categorically stated, see S. Parker, *The Historical Composition of KRT and the Cult of El*: ZAW, 89 (1977), 169 n.39. While I think that Parker finds it too easy to label as "secondary" certain lines that embarrass his thesis (e.g. 15:III:16; 16:VI:35-36=50-52), his notions regarding the "original" shape of Keret and its growth through accretions is a stimulating contribution to Keret studies. To deal with Keret as literature, however, we can be concerned only with the poem in the proportions which have come down to us.
- 17) See also the criticism of Wyatt, *op.cit.*, 384.
- 18) *Berytus*, 25 (1977), 48.
- 19) See de Moor: UF, 14 (1982), 175.
- 20) The Gt forms that are known have been interpreted either as imperfects (and? /or) infinitives; see the grammars.
- 21) De Moor: UF, 14 (1982), 176, arrives at a similar conclusion, albeit for different reasons.
- 22) See A. Caquot and M. Sznycer, *Ugaritic Religion* (Iconography of Religions, XV/8), Leiden 1980, 14.
- 23) "... and one wonders whether [the Keret epic] was not intended... to justify the succession of Keret's younger, but dutiful, son Elḥau in preference to his firstborn, but insolent, son Yaṣṣib; H.L. Ginsberg, *The Legend of King Keret*, New Haven 1946, 8. I would only suggest that Ilḥu is actually older than Yaṣṣib.