

UGARIT AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

BY CYRUS H. GORDON*

THE twentieth century has witnessed the discovery of many important archaeological finds in the Near East and elsewhere, but probably none has eclipsed the cuneiform tablets found at Ugarit between 1929 and 1973.¹ The material itself is impressive in quality and quantity, but its date and provenance make it particularly interesting. The tablets were for the most part inscribed from about 1400 to 1200 B.C., as the Bronze Age was closing and the Iron Age about to begin. The Amarna Period with all its internationalism produced the backdrop for the emergence of the Greeks and the Hebrews as people on the stage of history. By around 1200 B.C. the migrations of various groups, including the Sea Peoples, foreshadowed events that were to reverberate in Homer and the Bible. The Trojan War, the fall of the Hittite Empire and of Ugarit, the Hebrew Conquest of Palestine, the mass migration of Philistines from the Aegean, the appearance of the Aramean states, etc., are more or less contemporary, and can hardly be unrelated. The tablets from Ugarit illuminate the restless period that ushered in the early history of the Greeks and Hebrews.²

Being an important North Syrian coastal city, in maritime contact with the Aegean, Ugarit attests to links between the West Semitic and Aegean spheres. An Akkadian tablet is a charter for a ship trading between Ugarit and Caphtor (=Crete).³ Archaeological and artistic materials also point to close ties between Ugarit and the Aegean. The mythological tablets from Ugarit confirm this by the role of Kothar-wa-Hasis in the Ugaritic pantheon. He is the god of arts, crafts and architecture with his atelier on Caphtor. This is the way mythology states that Ugarit looked to Crete as the centre of its material culture. At that time the greatest artistic centre in the East Mediterranean was Crete.

Kothar-wa-Hasis is a compound name, all of whose elements are Semitic. We know of specific ties between Ugarit and the Aegean sphere that became Greek. For example, the solar deity at Ugarit is Špš, with the labial stop -p- instead of the labial nasal -m-, and is feminine. As Michael Astour⁴ has pointed out, Pausanias (2:25:10) records that the ancient name of a site near Epidaurus was Sapysetatōn reflecting the

* Professor Gordon addressed the Association on 24 June 1974.

¹ About seventy tablets are said to have been accidentally unearthed by the Syrian Army while seeking building materials for fortifications during the 1973 October War. What has happened to the tablets is not yet known.

² A history of Ugarit, reign by reign, is supplied by Mario Liverani, *Storia di Ugarit* (Rome, 1962).

³ Jean Nougayrol, *Le palais royal d'Ugarit III* (Paris, 1955), pp. 107-8.

⁴ Michael Astour, *Hellenosemitica* (Leiden, 1965), p. 103, n.1.

distinctively Ugaritic *špš'elt* "the goddess Špš'." While there is not yet any general agreement on the linguistic identification of Minoan Linear A, it contains so many Semitic words and grammatical elements that some scholars maintain that Minoan is Semitic.⁵ What is clear is that the non-Greek "Eteocretan" language written at Cretan sites such as Praesos, Dreros and Psychro between 600 and 300 B.C. is West Semitic with strong Aramaic affinities. There are definitely some words (e.g., *kl* "all", *u* "and") common to Minoan and Eteocretan. More revealing would be the establishment of the linguistic continuity of the formulae for dedicating engraved stones from Minoan to Eteocretan, which has been proposed⁶ but still awaits general acceptance.

Ugarit has yielded many administrative tablets dealing with guild personnel.⁷ The guilds extended not only to the practitioners of the conventional arts and crafts, but also to the categories of priests and military specialists. Presumably most if not all of the guilds were hereditary, though adoption could make it possible for an outsider to be initiated under special circumstances. The guilds were mobile because their services were in demand. Two priestly guilds were common to Ugarit and Israel: the *khnmm* and *qdšm*. At Ugarit both were eminently respectable. In Israel, the *qdšm* were officially condemned but not eliminated until the reform of Josiah.⁸ As far as we can now tell, the distinctive terminology of the priesthood in Israel was the Levitical factor.⁹ The priests specialized in techniques to win over the gods to their devotees. This did not generally involve what we would call theological beliefs. It had rather to do with knowing how to offer sacrifices properly, and how to facilitate communications between gods and men through oracles, interpretation of dreams and omens, and conveying prayers in ways acceptable to the gods. For these reasons, priests such as *khnmm* were international rather than denominational.

Two texts from Ugarit are classified as epics, rather than myths.¹⁰ They are known as the epic of Danel (or Aqhat)¹¹ and the Epic of Kret. Danel is portrayed as a virtuous ruler, dispensing justice;¹² and Kret is repeatedly called a *mlk* "king". Both are concerned with progeny, particularly a son to carry on the royal line. This has clarified an aspect of the Patriarchal narratives in Genesis. The latter are (among other things) royal epic. Not only is there a pervasive concern with the birth of the right son to carry on the line, but Genesis 17: 6, 16 plainly states that Abraham

⁵ See my EML = *Evidence for the Minoan Language* (Ventnor, N.J., 1966). The Semitic identification of Minoan is now being actively espoused by Jan Best of the University of Amsterdam.

⁶ EML, p. 29, par. 124.

⁷ Cyrus Gordon, "Ugaritic Guilds and Homeric *Dēmioergoi*," *The Aegean and the Near East: Studies presented to Hetty Goldman* (Locust Valley, N.Y., 1966), pp. 136-43.

⁸ 2 Kings 23: 7.

⁹ Not only the Levites but also the official priests were in theory supposed to be descended from Levi. Note the terminology in Deuteronomy 17: 9, 18; Ezekiel 43: 19, 44: 15 where the legitimate priests are called "The Levitical Priests".

¹⁰ The texts are in my UT (*Ugaritic Textbook*, Rome, 1965); reissued with Supplement in 1967.

¹¹ The literary texts from Ugarit are translated in my *Ugarit and Minoan Crete* (New York, 1966); reissued in paperback, 1967.

¹² 2 Aqht:V: 4-8.

and Sarah are the progenitors of kings. Actually the narratives bring out the royal character of the Patriarchs in various ways. Genesis 14 represents Abraham as possessing his own army and heading up a coalition that defeats another coalition of kings. What has obscured the kingship of Abraham is the fact that he is on the move and not like the familiar kings of city states or of empires. He is in some ways like the kinglets who form parts of the Achaean or Trojan coalitions in the Iliad. It is interesting that his title of *nšy'* in Genesis 23 : 6 is rendered *basileus* "king" in the Septuagint. This translation is supported by the use of *nšy'* as a title of heirs to the Davidic throne from Solomon (1 Kings 11 : 34) down into post-biblical times when it is applied to exilarchs. That the Septuagint translators sensed the meaning of *nšy'* in Genesis 23 : 6 may be due to the fact that they knew not only the Bible but also Homer, and they realized that the heroic ages of the Greeks and Hebrews had something in common vis-à-vis the institutions of both peoples in subsequent eras.

The most basic level of continuity from Ugarit to all subsequent stages of Western Civilization is brought out by the order of the alphabetic letters used at Ugarit. Although the Ugaritic ABC has thirty letters, the twenty-two that constitute the Phoenician-Hebrew alphabet are already in the same sequence in the Ugaritic alphabet.¹³ It is furthermore possible that the Greek and Latin alphabets retain one feature that is present in the Ugaritic, but lost in the Phoenician-Hebrew alphabet ; namely, the letter *u* which appears after *t* in Ugaritic, Greek and Latin. There is reason to believe that *u* (unlike the subsequent letters in the conventional form of the Greek alphabet) was original, and not a late addition created for the Classical Greek alphabet.¹⁴

A few tablets from Ugarit (e.g. texts 57 and 74) are written from right to left (like Hebrew) in a shorter form of the Ugaritic ABC. In this shorter alphabet, *h* falls together with *h*, and *t* with *š*, as in Hebrew. The short ABC approximated, if it did not indeed agree with, the Hebrew in number and order of the letters. Tablets in this shorter alphabet have been found at sites to the south in Phoenicia (Sarepta)¹⁵, and Israel (Mount Tabor, Taanach and Beth-Shemesh),¹⁶ strongly suggesting a tie-in between Ugaritic and Phoenician-Hebrew literacy. That the relationship was not limited to the ABC but extended to the spread of a literature, is indicated by a number of factors. For example, the name of Danel's son Aqhat appears in the biblical genealogies as Qht, the son of Levi. The popularity of the Epic of Danel is borne out by the mention of Danel by the exilic prophet Ezekiel (14 : 14, 16), who lists Danel with Noah and Job as virtuous men of old who came through catastrophe with their children. The epilogue of Job tells us that Job came through his ordeals with his children.¹⁷ That Noah survived the Deluge with his children is familiar from

¹³ UT, p. 12, par. 3.2.

¹⁴ EML, p. 17, par. 54.

¹⁵ Found, but not yet published by J. B. Pritchard. I know of this tablet through information kindly supplied by David Owen.

¹⁶ One was also excavated at Tell Soukas, in Syria, south of Ugarit.

¹⁷ His seven sons and three daughters mentioned before the catastrophe (Job 1:2) are restored (i.e., brought back to life) in the epilogue (42:13).

Genesis. The extant portions of the Ugaritic Epic of Danel imply that Danel came through his trials with Aqhat brought back to life. The Epic of Danel was apparently known to the Hebrews in both the Patriarchal and exilic periods.

The linguistic proximity of Ugaritic and Hebrew is so close that the languages share not only many individual words but pairs of synonyms, conventionally used to parallel each other in the stichs that constitute the verses. The following are examples of the many pairs of words used to parallel each other in both literatures:¹⁸

'*hlym* "tents" || *mšknwt* "tabernacles"
 'yb "enemy" || *šr* "foe"
 'lp "1000" || *rbbh* "10,000"
 'rš "earth" || *ʿpr* "dust"
 byt "house" || *hšr* "court"
 hlb "milk" || *hm'h* "butter, cream"
 yd^c "know" || *byn* "perceive"
 kšp "silver" || *hrwš* "gold"
 'wlm "eternity" || *dr dr* "everlastingness"
 'nh "answer" || *šwb* "reply"

So close are the two branches of West Semitic that parallel pairs of two-word phrases can be shared by Ugaritic and Hebrew:

tl (*h*)*šmym* "dew of (the) heavens" || *šmny* (*h*)*rš* "fat of (the) earth".

Perhaps the most pervasive contribution of Ugaritic to Hebrew linguistics has to do with the prepositions *b* and *l*, both of which have the meaning "from" in addition to their familiar uses.¹⁹ Since *mi(n)* "from" is virtually absent from Ugaritic, *b* "from" and *l* "from" are common. But in Hebrew where *mi(n)* normally expresses "from", there are nevertheless many survivals of *b* "from" and *l* "from" that remained misunderstood until the impact of Ugaritic was felt. Thus the Masoretes emend *b* "from" to *m* in the *qre* in *hrh^cq m'd b'dm* (*qre*: *m'dm*) *h'yr* "very distant from the city Adam" and in *wy^csrhw* — — — *bmlk* (*qre*: *mmlk*) (2 Kings 23:33) "he stopped him from ruling". Of the many examples of *l* "from" we single out one historically significant illustration: 2 Kings 14:28 relates that Jeroboam II restored Damascus and Hamath *lyhw^cdh* "from Judah" into Israel. Obviously the northern Kingdom of Israel could not be restoring still more northerly areas of Syria to, for or from the southern Kingdom of Judah. At that period there was a powerful Kingdom of Judah whose capital was not Jerusalem but Sam'al (now Zinjirli) in the northwestern corner of Canaan.²⁰ 2 Kings 14:28 informs us that the biblical author was excerpting the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel. In the northern Kingdom of Israel, it was then well known that Sam'alian (not Jerusalemite) Judah had dominated Damascus and Hamath, and that Jeroboam II had recovered those areas from

¹⁸ For simplicity sake only the Hebrew forms are cited here; see UT, p. 145, par. 14.3, for the Ugaritic alongside the Hebrew. For further examples, see the detailed opus edited by Loren R. Fisher, *Ras Shamra Parallels I* (Rome, 1972).

¹⁹ See UT, pp. 92-3, par. 10.1.

²⁰ Cyrus Gordon, *The Ancient Near East* (New York, 1965), p. 219.

Sam'alian Judah. For two and a half millennia the readers of the biblical books of Kings, with their Jerusalemite Judean orientation, did not understand the passage, and no sense could be made of it without changing the text and thereby losing the intended meaning. The Assyrian annals and the inscriptions of Sam'al have provided us historical background concerning northern Judah, and Ugarit has enabled us to understand the prepositions so that we can translate the passage correctly, exactly as it stands in the Masoretic text. Jeroboam II recovered from Sam'alian Judah, territory that had once belonged to David and Solomon.

Ugaritic and Hebrew literatures are not only close to each other linguistically, but also in prosody. The same poetic structures are frequently shared by both.²¹ A familiar parallel is:

(Ugaritic text 68 : 8) *ht · ibk* (9) *b'lm* " now, thine enemies, O Baal,
ht · ibk tmhs · now thine enemies shalt thou smite,
ht · tsmt sr̄tk now shalt thou destroy thy foes "
 with which Psalm 92 : 10 may be compared stylistically :
ky hnh 'ybyk yhw̄h " for lo thine enemies, O Yahweh,
ky-hnh 'ybyk y'bdw for lo thine enemies shall perish,
ytprdw kl-p'ly 'wn all doers of iniquity will be scattered ".

In both of these tristichs, note that in the first stich, the divine name is lacking, but the verb is there. In both versions the same noun for " foes " is used and repeated in the first two stichs. In the final stich of both versions, a different verb and a synonym for " foes " appear.

The late Professor Cassuto felicitously described the Hebrew Bible as new wine in old bottles. The language and literary devices were old ; Israel adopted them after the Conquest and during the Settlement, and proceeded to use them as the medium for expressing the new messages of the Bible.

Nowhere is the content of the Bible more distinctive than when it consciously opposes the values of Canaan as expressed in the religious texts from Ugarit. In the Baal Cycle, Baal mates with a heifer and sires a bull calf.²² Variations of this pagan cult reverberate as the Golden Calf in Sinai, and as the Golden Calves worshipped at Dan and Bethel. That it went with bestiality in the fertility cult is natural enough. In any case, Leviticus 18 : 23 prohibits copulation with animals precisely because it was an abomination wherewith the older inhabitants of the Promised Land had defiled themselves and the Land (verses 24-25). The Bible clearly expresses its opposition to the old values that are now recorded from the Canaanite point of view in the Ugaritic tablets.

The biblical prohibition against transvestism can now be explained as opposition to what was sacred in Canaan. In the Epic of Danel, the murder of Aqhat is avenged by his sister Pughat, who wears a man's garb and wields a man's sword.²³ It is

²¹ Hebrew prosody should be restudied comprehensively against the background of Ugaritic prosody.

²² 67 : V : 17-22 ; 76 : III : 33-37.

²³ I Aqht : 206-7.

interesting to note that Deuteronomy 22 : 5 not only outlaws transvestism, but also the bearing of men's weapons by women. Again Ugarit provides the background against which Israel reacted.

More significant is the origin of the Tenth Commandment against coveting. Since coveting cannot be treated as a legal offence (and there is no punishment for it in the Bible or in any other code of laws), its inclusion in the Ten Commandments used to pose a problem. However there is now an explanation, for in the Ugaritic tablets the god Baal is repeatedly described as a coveting god. The same word (*hmd* "covet") is applied to him in texts 75 and 2001, where he covets land and animals, as in the Tenth Commandment. One of the main episodes in the Baal Cycle concerns his craving a house because the other gods have houses.²⁴ He wants and gets one bigger and better than theirs. The Canaanites admired gods and men who were able to take what they coveted. Anath covets the wondrous bow which Aqhat refuses to sell her. Accordingly she has him murdered so that she can filch the bow.²⁵ When Ahab could not prevail upon Naboth to sell him his vineyard, Ahab as a Hebrew could do nothing but drop the matter. But Jezebel approached things differently.²⁶ Like her goddess Anath, Jezebel had Naboth murdered and then proceeded to confiscate his property for her husband Ahab. Jezebel's conduct was heinous from the standpoint of Hebrew values, but not from the Canaanite viewpoint. If we say that Ahab felt the sentiments of the Tenth Commandment, we should also perceive that Jezebel was as good a Canaanite as Ahab was a Hebrew. She did what was expected of the powerful vis-à-vis the weak who had the temerity to resist, and her deed can be described as *imitatio deorum*; she did what her goddess Anath had done according to the sacred Canaanite texts from Ugarit. The tragedy of the union between Ahab and Jezebel was not that a good man had the misfortune to be wed to a bad woman, but rather that husband and wife adhered to opposing value systems. Ahab's religious values had developed in conscious opposition to Jezebel's religious heritage.

A specific detail in Hebrew ritual is of interest in this connection. Leviticus 2 : 11 forbids the use of honey as a burnt offering. Inasmuch as honey is not forbidden by Hebrew rules of ritual purity, it is curious that it is banned ceremonially in Leviticus 2 : 11. Ugaritic provides an explanation, for honey is specified as an offering in the Epic of Kret : 165. The sacrificial use of honey in Canaanite ritual would be enough to justify banning it in Israel.

The chronology of the Patriarchal Period is still subject to wide disagreement. Some prefer a Middle Bronze date, while others favour a Late Bronze chronology. This is not the place to align all the opposing arguments. "Logical" reconstructions, by drawing on what supports them and disregarding everything else, often look better than they really are. But this much may be said in favour of a late date for the Patriarchs : in the ancient literatures the closest parallels to the institutions of

²⁴ 51 : IV : 50-VII : 27.

²⁵ 2 Aqht : VI : 16-47 ; 3 Aqht : obv. and rev.

²⁶ I Kings 21.

the Patriarchs come from the Amarna Age and slightly later. For instance the Nuzi tablets of the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries provide the closest set of parallels to the laws and customs of the Patriarchs.²⁷ The Ugaritic tablets provide the same emphasis as the Patriarchal narratives on the theme of securing divine aid for the birth of the right son to carry on the royal line.²⁸ We also have from Ugarit, Akkadian tablets to the Ugaritic King Niqmepa^c (ca. 1336–1265) from the Hittite Emperor Hattusilis III (ca. 1282–50) regulating the activities of his merchants from the city of Ur(ra) who were operating in Ugarit.²⁹

The mercantile interests of the Patriarchs are reflected in Genesis. We need not stress the statement that Abraham pays Ephron the Hittite 400 shekels of silver "current for the merchant" in Genesis 23 : 16 because the text does not explicitly say that Abraham was a merchant. Two other passages definitely imply that the Patriarchal family had mercantile interests. When the Shechemites want to induce Jacob's family to settle with them, mercantile privileges are offered (Genesis 34 : 10, 21). Later, Joseph, before revealing his identity to his brothers, tells them that if they can establish their reputation for honesty, they can trade throughout Egypt (Genesis 42 : 34). This implies that trading was known to be one of their main interests. Their possession of cattle does not contradict their mercantile activities; Harry Hoffner has called attention to a Hittite text in which merchants have with them cattle as well as precious stones and metals.³⁰ Merchants could trade in cattle, as well as use them for transportation and as a source of means of subsistence.

In the reign of King Niqmepa^c of Ugarit there were complaints against the merchants of Ur(ra) who were operating under the aegis of Hattusilis III. The Hittite monarch accordingly sent a tablet regulating his merchants' activities in three ways. First, they were to ply their trade and collect what was owed to them. Second, they were not to stay in Ugarit throughout the year. After the harvest season they were to move on for the winter. Thus permanent residence was forbidden. Third, the merchants of Ur(ra) were not to acquire real-estate in Ugarit. Accordingly, they were to (1) transact their trade, but they were prevented from unduly exploiting the community by being obliged to forgo (2) permanent residence and (3) owning real estate.³¹ It is striking that when the Shechemites want to induce the family of Jacob to join them, they offer precisely the three items (Genesis 34 : 10, 21) spelled out by Hattusilis concerning his merchants of Ur(ra); trading rights without which they could not function economically, and two privileges normally denied such foreign merchants: permanent residence and purchasing real-estate. It may be added that Abraham's buying real-estate in Genesis 23 is stressed partly because foreigners were not ordinarily allowed to acquire it.

²⁷ See my "Biblical Customs and the Nuzi Tablets" in *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader II*, edited by E. F. Campbell and D. N. Freedman (Garden City, N. Y., 1964).

²⁸ It pervades the epics of both Danel and Kret.

²⁹ Published by Jean Nougayrol, *Palais royal d'Ugarit IV* (Paris, 1956), pp. 103–5.

³⁰ The cuneiform tablet is known to Hittitologists as KBO XII : 4 = ABoT 49.

³¹ For further details, see my "Abraham of Ur", in *Hebrew and Semitic Studies (presented to Godfrey Rolles Driver)*, edited by D. W. Thomas and W. D. McHardy (Oxford, 1963), pp. 77–84.

The phonetic identification of Ur=Ur(ra) is of more than passing interest. Urfa in southern Turkey is according to tradition the Ur where Abraham was born. The Syriac name of the city was Orrhai, which is close to the Akkadian spelling *Ur-ra*.³² It would be going too far to insist that Orrhai/Urfa is the very Ur(ra) whence Hattusilis' merchants came. There were many Ur(ra)s named after Sumerian Ur, probably because they had been founded as commercial colonies of that city in its heyday around 2000 B.C. Other Urs are mentioned in the Nuzi and Alalah tablets. The location of Orrhai is suitable for a site in the realm of Hattusilis. Moreover, the strong connection between Orrhai and Aramaism is interesting because the language (Genesis 31 : 47) and homeland (Genesis 24 : 10 ; 25 : 20) of the Patriarchs are Aramean.

While the tablet of Hattusilis does not throw light on Abraham personally, it does place him in a historic context, among the royal merchants of Ur(ra) operating on mobile missions in Canaan.

The date of the Hattusilis tablet (first half of the thirteenth century B.C.) does not prove that Abraham is to be dated that late, for (as mentioned above) the mercantile colonies of Ur must have begun at the dawn of the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2000 B.C.). However, the fact that Abraham is not a Sumerian or Babylonian but an Aramean (cf. also Deuteronomy 26 : 5) from Ur of the Chaldees does suggest a late date. Moreover, the respect shown to Abraham in Genesis 23 by a Hittite enclave suggests that Ephron and Abraham both owed allegiance to the Hittites. Otherwise it is hard to understand why the Hittites of Hebron tell Abraham " thou art an exalted prince in our midst " (Genesis 23 : 6).

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the Ugaritic tablets is the light they cast on the Greeks and the Hebrews as they were emerging as ethnic factors of consequence in the East Mediterranean. The most striking evidence of this is in the epics of Homer, Ugarit and Genesis that are rooted in the closing part of the Late Bronze Age. All three sets of texts deal with royal epic. Moreover all three have built into them what we may call the Helen of Troy motif : the theme of a beautiful bride that the king must retrieve from a foreign court. Helen is recovered by her husband King Menelaus of Sparta from the court of Priam of Troy. King Kret marches with a great army to retrieve ³³ his wife Hurrai from King Pbl's court in distant Udum. Abraham must recover the beautiful Sarah from the courts of Pharaoh and of King Abimelech of Gerar.

That Ugarit has radically changed the nature of Old Testament studies is generally recognized. That it sheds important light on the Mycenaean Greeks and therefore on the earliest cultural history of Europe is becoming increasingly evident.

³² Variant spellings include *Ū-ra*, *Ū-ri*, *Ū-ri-e* and *Ū-ur-ri* ; see my " Abraham of Ur ", p. 83, nn. 1, 2, and 3.

³³ The text (Krt:14) states that Kret's wife had departed (*tb^ct*). Some authors interpret this to mean that a first wife had died, and that Hurrai was therefore a different woman. However, the verb *tb^c* is elsewhere always used in the literal sense of " to depart " and is never a euphemism for " to die ".