

RAS SHAMRA – UGARIT TABLETS

During the years 1929–1939 Schaeffer excavated at Ras Shamra on the Syrian coast about eleven kilometers north of Latakia. The site is identified with Ugarit mentioned in the el-Amarna Tablets. He unearthed clay tablets most of them written in a special alphabetic scripture. This writing called "Ugarit writing" was deciphered by the German scholar Bauer and the French scholars D'homme and Virrolleaud. These tablets were revealed to have contained fragments of religious and mythological epic poetry and literature, and their language is very similar to Hebrew.¹ According to Virrolleaud "The vocabulary of Ras Shamra is the same as that of the biblical books"². and their geographical scenery is in the south of the land of Israel, in the Negev region. According to him the ancestors of the Phoenicians lived in the Negev early in the second millenium B. C. In these tablets he found mention of the tribe of Zeboulun, Terah (the patriarch Abraham's father). Dussaud also, believes that the background for the writing of these tablets is in the south of the country of Israel therefore he concludes that the Phoenicians came from the south of Israel. He finds in the tablets also references to names such as

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- 1 Dussaud, *Yahwe Filis De El*, SY. 1957, p. 233
Dahood, *Ugaritic – Hebrew Philology*.
Albright, *The North Canaanite Poems of Al'eyan Ba'al and The Gracious Gods*, JPOS. 1934, pp. 114–115
– *A Hebrew Letter From The Twelfth Century*, BASOR. (73), 1939, pp. 10, 12.
– *Specimens of Late Ugaritic Prose*, BASOR. 1958, 150. pp. 36 – 38
D'homme, *Le Déchiffrement Des Tablettes de Ras Shamra*, JPOS. XI, 1931, p. 5.
Contenau, *La Civilisation Phénicienne*, p. 265
Kaperlud, *The Ras Shamra Discoveries and The Old Testament*, p. 15.
Driver, *Ugaritic and Hebrew Words*, *Ugaritica*, VI, pp. 181–186.
Ginzberg, *Kitvei Ugarit*, p. 14. (Hebrew)
Courtois, J. C. *The Excavations At Ugarit, 1929–1966*, Qadmoniot, Vol. II, 3 (7), 1969, (Hebrew)
Suknik, *Devices For The Death Ritual In Canaanite Ugarit and In Shomron The Israelite*, *Kedem*, 2, 1945, p. 42 (Hebrew) Let us note that the Germans Bauer, Friedrich and Goetz regard Ugarit language as an intermediate between Hebrew and Aramaic, Whereas Cantineau (*La langue de Ras Shamra*, Sy. 1932, 1940), believes it is not Canaanite neither Phoenician or Aramaic, but an unknown new language.
- 2 Virrolleaud, *Le Déchiffrement Des Tablettes Alphabetiques De Ras Shamra*, Sy, 1931, (X), p. 20

Ashdod, Kadesh–barnea, and the Red Sea³, and claims that "The language of the Ras Shamra tablets actually has a Phoenician – Hebrew vocabulary to the extent that it might well be asserted that Phoenician and Hebrew derive from this primitive Canaanite"⁴. Elsewhere when referring to the findings in Ras Shamra, he remarks: "The first levels of Ras Shamra (XVe, XIIs) revealed a civilisation that by the language, the phonetical construction of the alphabet more important even the very form of the letters, extending to ceramics and art products, show large analogies with those of Israel"⁵.

According to Montgomery and Harris "The dialect of the semitic tablets of Ras Shamra belongs to the Hebraic stock (including Phoenician) it is an early Hebrew dialect"⁶. They call the tablets "cuneiform Hebraic Texts"⁷. Gaster refers to this language as "proto Hebrew"⁸. Ginzberg remarks that; "The similarity of Ugaritic language to the Biblical language is very great"⁹. Schaeffer calls the Ugaritic language; "Language of the Canaanites that is to say archaic Hebrew or Proto Phoenician",¹⁰ and points out: "The rules of composition for these tablets are exactly those of Hebrew poetry, and even the language in certain parts of the Ras Shamra tablets are definitely biblical"¹¹.

The deeper scholars delved into the material of the tablets, the more it was remarked that there are striking affinities between these fragments of literature and epic verse and between biblical passages and textual content. This similarity is not confined to context or vocabulary and grammar alone, but it was proved that there exists an exact parallelism in thought, imagery, stylistic terminology and idioms.¹² Such parallels even reach the point of

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- 3 Dussaud, Ras Shamra, AAA. 1934.
La Notion D'Âme Chez Les Israelites Et Les Phéniciens. SY. 1935, (XVI), pp. 267–277.
- 4 Dussaud, Les Découvertes de Ras Shamra et L'ancien Testament, Paris, 1937, p. 50. As cited by Schaeffer, The Cuneiform Texts of Ras Shamra, p. 57, n. 44. See also: Dussaud, Ras Shamra, AAA, p. 95.
- 5 Dussaud, Yahwe' Fils de El, SY., 1957, p. 233.
- 6 Montgomery – Harris, The Ras Shamra Mythological Texts, p. 16
- 7 Montgomery – Harris, *ibid.* p. 1.
- 8 Gaster, Ras Shamra, 1929–1939, Antiquity XIII, 1939, p. 309.
- 9 Ginzberg, *Kitvei ugarit* (Geb.) p. 14.
- 10 Schaeffer, The Cuneiform Texts of Ras Shamra – Ugarit, p. 57
- 11 Schaeffer, *ibid.* pp. 58–59.
- 12 Held, The Action Result Sequence of Identical Verbs, etc., JBL, 1965, p. 275.
Albright, New Canaanite Historical And Mythological Date, BASOR, 1936, p. 32.
The Bible And The Ancient Near East, p. 339.
Gordon, Ugarit And The Minoan Crete.
Gray, The Legacy of Canaan, VT., (V), 1957, pp. 4, 189, 208.
Oberman, Ugaritic Mythology, Preface; XV – XVI
Schaeffer, *Ibid.*, pp. 76–77
Barton, Archeology And The Bible, p. 19.
Gaster, *ibid.* pp. 315– 316.

verbal identity with the same appropriate stereotyped formulas and correlated synonyms being used for the expression of certain ideas. Composite idioms characteristic of biblical literature are found word for word in the Ugarit Tablets, and as Ginzberg points out "The Canaanite and Hebrew poets have some fixed pairs of synonymous words or phrases for certain concepts which poets have frequent occasion to express. Many such fixed pairs are common to Ugaritic and Biblical poetry...Such a pair are with apparently no exceptions in Ugaritic poetry and with very few in Hebrew – always employed in the same order and that order is also nearly always the same in both literatures common to both is the rule that it is the more usual expression that comes first. Such agreement of synonyms goes beyond agreement of form and results in considerable similarity of diction".¹³

Scholars pointed out the similarity between biblical and Ugaritic literature and most of them concluded that the Hebrews (Israelites) borrowed from the "Phoenicians–Canaanites" their culture – language, religious rituals, poetry, Literature, Way of life and so on.¹⁴ Cassuto who studied Ugaritic

Kaperlud, *ibid.*

Gazelles, *Essai Sur Le Pouvoir De La Divinité A' Ugarit et en Israel*, Ugaritica, VI, pp. 25–44

Rin, *Alilot Haelim*, p. 4 (Hebrew)

Loewenstamm, *Kitvei Ugarit Vesafrut Hamikra*, Kadmoniot, 1969, 3, (7). (Hebrew)

13 Ginzberg, *Ugaritic Studies And The Bible*, BA, 1945, p. 55 – *Kitvei Ugarit*, p. 15 (Hebrew)

14 Albright, *Recent Progress In North Canaanite Research*, BASOR, (70), 1938, p. 23.

– *A Hebrew Letter From The Twelfth Century*, BASOR, (73), 1939, pp. 9–13.

– *The Bible And The Ancient Near East*, p. 339

– *The Archaeology of Palestine*, pp. 230–237

Dussaud, *Cultes Canaanéen Aux Source Du Jourdain*, SY., XVII, 1936, pp. 283–295.

La Notion D'ame Chez Les Israelites Et Les Phéniciens, SY., (XVI), 1935, pp. 273–274.

Jahwe' Fils de El, SY. 1957, (XXXIV), p. 233

Wright, *How Did Early Israel Differ From Her Neighbours*, BA, (Vi), 1943, P. 4 and on.

Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan*, VT, 1957, pp. 4; 208.

Ginzberg, *Ugaritic Studies And The Bible*, BA, 1945, p. 55

Cullican, *The First Merchant Venturers*, 1966, pp. 121–122.

Oberman, *Ugaritic Mythology*, 1948, Preface XV.

Del Medico, *La Bible Canaanéen*, Payot, 1950, pp. 14–16.

Cross Jr., *Notes On Canaanite Psalm In The Old Testament*, BASOR, 117, 1950, pp. 19–21.

Kaperlud, *The Ras Shamra Discoveries And The Old Testament*, pp. 73; 76.

Scaeffler, *The Cuneiform Texts of Ras Shamra Ugarit*.

Contenau, *La Civilisation Phénicienne*, pp. 83; 84.

Hours – Miedan, *Carthage*, pp. 15– 16; 48– 49; 197.

Gaster, *The Ras Shamra Texts and The Old Testament*, PEQ, 1934, pp. 141–146.

Poetry, also remarked its similarity in context and language to the Bible, but concluded that there is no question of borrowing or adapting, but that there is a common origin for Ugaritic and Biblical Literatures."one of the characteristics common to Ugaritic and Hebrew Literatures was that of fixed pairs of parallel words in both hemistichs of the poetic verse. In the literary tradition a nearly constant association has been formed between a certain word and another synonymous word such as Eretz– Afar, The same words exactly appear in both languages the actual words Eretz and Afar in Ugaritic as in Hebrew".¹⁵ According to Cassuto this parallelism does not exist in word–pairs only, but also in specific uses of verbal forms: locutions and composite expressions, metaphors, ornamental phrases and nomenclatures, imagery etc. Cassuto concludes: "...It is clear that not only in certain details but in the whole range of its literary language and in all the stylistic forms used, there exists a tradition common to Ugaritic and Biblical writings and there is no doubt that from the point of view of stylistic form both Literatures are merely two different branches of one tree". Therefore, according to Cassuto "We must explain the fact that the earliest biblical literary works are already composed in perfect style as though preceded by long development... The originality of Biblical Literature is in its context and spirit. Whereas stylistically it continues in the ancient Canaanite literary tradition".¹⁶

The Ugarit Tablets were discovered as we know in an archaeological stratum ascribed to the period from about the 14th to the 12th century B. C.¹⁷ On the other hand, the el Amarna Tablets are ascribed to the period of Amenhotep III and IV, Hence the el Amarna and Ugarit Tablets refer to about the same period of time.¹⁸ This fact raises two questions:

1) The el Amarna tablets which preceded the Ugarit tablets by several

Weil, Phoenicia And Western Asia etc., p. 30.

Held, The Action Result (Factitive–Passive) Sequence of Identical Verbs In Biblical Hebrew And Ugaritic, JBL. 1965, pp. 272–282

15 Cassuto, Parallel Words In Hebrew And Ugaritic, (Heb.), Leshonenu, 15, 1947, pp. 97–102.

See also: Held, *ibid.* p. 275; Dahood, Ugaritic – Hebrew Philology, 1965, pp. 43–44.

16 . Cassuto, Tarbitz 13, 1942, pp. 197– 217; Tarbitz, 14. 1943, p. 10. ; Leshonenu, 15, 1947, p. 97. (Heb.)

17 Ginzberg, Ugaritic Studies And The Bible, BA. VIII, 1945. – Kitvei Ugarit, pp. 4–5; 14. (Heb.).

Gaster, Ras Shamra, 1929–39; Antiquity, 13, 1939, p. 309.

Dussaud, Ras Shamra, AAA. 1934, p. 94.

Montgomery– Haris, The Ras Shamra Mythological Texts, 1935, p. 7

d'Homme, Le Déchiffrement Des Tablettes De Ras Shamra, JPOS. 1931, p. 1

Driver, Canaanite Myths And Legends, 1956, p. 1'

Rin, Alilot Haelim, p. 5 (Hebrew)

Yeivin, On The Origin of The Alphabetetc, Leshonenu, 17, 2–3 p. 68 (Hebrew).

18 See: Hours – Miedan, Carthage, p. 15.

years, are written in Akkaddian and not in Ugaritic script, whereas from the Ugaritic Tablets it is evident that the Ugaritic alphabet was then in quite an advanced and developed stage and not at its formation stage. In other words, if the el Amarna tablets were written to the Egyptian kings not in their proper language – in hieroglyphic but in Akkaddian, why were they not written in Ugaritic – which according to Ugarit findings was much more developed and more suitable for writing?

2) If the Ugaritic writing served the Canaanite population in the region, how was it that the writing style and modes of expression in the el Amarna Tablets are not identical to those of the Ugaritic tablets, While at the same time the identity and parallelism between the Ugaritic tablets and the Bible is so astonishing?

The solution to these questions must be in that the el Amarna tablets and the Ugaritic do not belong to the same population. Scholars believe that from a political point of view there was no real change in the region following the el Amarna wars. Such an assumption is founded mostly on another assumption which is that Aziru and Abd Ashera (Asirta) which are mentioned as having conquered the region in the el Amarna period, were also Amorites – Canaanites. Autran¹⁹ relying on the verse "Neither did Asher drive out the inhabitants of Acco and the inhabitants of Sidon ..." (Ju. 1: 27 – 36), states: "The arrival of the Hebrews in Canaan did not therefore create any substantial change".

But we have seen that the Israelites invaded the country at the beginning of the 14th century, namely in the el Amarna Tablets period, and that they also conquered the region of Sidon and the northern part of the country. It is evident therefore, that with the wars of el Amarna one period comes to an end and a new period begins with a new population in the region. It must be concluded therefore that if in the period of the Ugarit tablets the region was inhabited by Israelites, why should we not see in these tablets an ancient Hebrew Literature antedating the Exile, in contrast to the Biblical literature which was crystalised after the changes brought about by Ezra? Here lies the answer to the amazing affinities and similarities between the Ugaritic tablets and the Bible, and an explanation for Cassuto's conclusion that "doubtless from the point of view of stylistic form both literatures are merely two different branches of one tree".

There remains the question as to why these tablets are written in a special cuneiform script and not in the ancient Hebrew alphabetic writing. The answer to this question may perhaps be sought in the geographical position of Ugarit: perhaps an attempt was made to form a new alphabetical notation on the basis of cuneiform writing on the one hand, and on the basis of

19 Autran, "Phéniciens", pp. 63 – 64.

"Phoenician" culture i. e. The Israelite culture on the other. Reyny²⁰ states that: "The most interesting indication of origins in ancient lands is that of the Canaanites (U. T. 311: 7) in a context which clearly shows the Canaanites considered as foreigners in Ugarit, just as with the Assyrians and Egyptians. Such an interpretation for the manner in which Canaanites are mentioned has recently been reconfirmed by Nogayroll who described an unpublished tablet concerning the payment made by the Ugarit people, of 3500 shekels to the chief of a Canaanite people...clearly a distinction is here being made between Ugarit and Canaanite citizens". Elsewhere²¹ he sums up by saying: "Ugarit cannot be called a Canaanite city. For the Ugarit people the Canaanite was a foreigner as are the Egyptian and the Assyrian". Cullican²² also concludes that "The Ugarit people did not see themselves as Canaanites", which is what can be implied from the above as well.

In 1933 Grant discovered a clay tablet at Beth Shemesh in Israel, which was written in a script recognised by Albright as Ugaritic script except that it was inversed.²³ Other tablets written in Ugarit script were found in Israel, at Taanach in 1963 and also at Nahal Ḥabor (Wadi Bireh),²⁴ Yeivin points out to the discovery of a metal knife with an Ugarit inscription found near Kaukab el Hawa²⁵.

Let us add here that the prophet Isaiah prophesies on Tyre²⁶: "...Whose merchants are princes whose traffickers are the honourable of the earth". The Hebrew verse reads Kinaaneaha ("כנעניה") translated – Traffickers. Some scholars read Knaaneaha instead of Kinaaneaha. In Hebrew Knaaneaha means "its Canaanites" and this was explained and regarded as proof that the population of Tyre was Canaanite.²⁷ Also if we accept "Kinaaneaha" to be read "Knaaneaha"(its Canaanites), then from the very emphasis that "its Canaanites" are the honourable of the earth, it must be deduced that all the rest of the population are not Canaanites. For the verse must be interpreted that in a population of non–Canaanites the Canaanites became conspicuous as being the honorable of the earth and therefore such an interpretation does not necessarily indicate Tyre as a Canaanite city.

20 Rayni, A Social structure of Ugarit, pp. 7 – 8 (Hebrew)

21 *ibid.* p. 109.

22 Cullican, *ibid.* p. 52.

23 Albright, A Cuneiform Tablet From Beth Shemesh, *BASOR*, 53, 1934, pp. 18–19. See also Gaster, *ibid.* p. 310.

24 Rayni, A Clay Tablet From Taanach, (Heb.). *Kadmoniot*, 1965, (7) 3. pp. 89–90.

25 Yeivin, Ugaritic Inscription From Israel, (Heb.). *Kedem*, 1945, pp. 32; 41

26 *Is.* 23: 8

27 For example see: Aharoni ; *Eretz Israel In Bible Period*, p. 20 (Hebrew). Mazar, *The Phoenicians on The Eastern Shore of The Mediterranean Sea*, p. 8. in the book ;

Western Galilee And The Coast of Galilee. (Heb.).

Maisler, *Canaan And Canaanites*, *BASOR*, 102, 1946, pp. 9–10

In the light of the above the following verses on Tyre²⁸ Become clearer: "Thou shalt die the death of the UNCIRCUMCISED by the hand of strangers; . . . Thou wast the ANOINTED CHERUB that covereth: and I set thee, so that THOU WAST UPON THE HOLY MOUNTAIN OF GOD; thou hast walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire. THOU WAST PERFECT IN THY WAYS FROM THE DAY THAT THOU WAST CREATED, till unrighteousness was found in thee. By the abundance of thy traffic they filled the midst of thee with violence, AND THOU HAST SINNED: therefore have I CAST THEE as PROFANE OUT OF THE MOUNTAIN OF GOD; and I have destroyed thee, O covering cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire...By the multitude of thine iniquities, in the unrighteousness of thy traffic, thou HAST PROFANED THY SANCTUARIES; therefore have I brought forth a fire from the midst of thee; it hath devoured thee..." (emphasis – N. G.). If Tyre is a Canaanite city what does, uncircumcised, being perfect in the ways...; Sin, profaning of Sanctuaries and casting out of the Holy mountain of God, have to do with a profane Canaanite town?

28 Ezk. 28: 10 ; 28: 14 – 19.

Let us note here that the Hebrew verses are throughout in the past tense. However, in some versions they are translated in the future tense (see: King James' A. V.), and so rendering a different meaning to the context. The English version cited above is from American Revised Standard Edition 1901. The French translation by Louis Segond reads also in the past tense.