

HIGHLIGHTS OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN BIBLE LANDS

by

Fred H. Wight

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CHAPTER SEVEN

DISCOVERIES IN SINAI PENINSULA AND SYRIA

SINAI AND SYRIA AND ANCIENT USE OF AN ALPHABET

These two lands linked together in relation to the early use of an alphabet. A new chapter in our knowledge of the ancient use of an alphabet was revealed when archaeologists, first in Sinai Peninsula and then in Syria, reported startling finds from their excavations. Views held for many years have had to be cast aside. The belief was prevalent that alphabetic writing was invented by the Phoenicians about 900 B.C. Certain Bible critics had argued that Moses couldn't have written the Pentateuch because there was no alphabet in use in his day, and yet Exodus 24:4 indicated the use of words, and therefore letters, when it says: "**Moses wrote all the words of the Lord.**" The discoveries of excavators in these two lands have forever answered this criticism of the Bible.

Discovery of Sinai alphabetic inscriptions. Serabit el-Khadim is located about two-thirds of the distance from Suez to Mount Sinai. It was explored by Flinders Petrie in 1904-1905. This site was located near turquoise mines which the Egyptians had worked from early times. On a castle hill was found what had served as a temple or shrine by a Semitic people. But the important discovery was that of inscriptions that had been made by workmen who were employed in the mines. They wrote on rocks in an alphabetic script. In 1930 Alan Gardiner headed an expedition in this region and discovered additional inscriptions. Scholars are now agreed that here we have the earliest known example of alphabetic writing dating from the end of the nineteenth or beginning of the eighteenth century B.C. or almost to Abraham's day. And these examples of writing were by workmen and not scholars. 1

Discovery of Gebal (Syria) alphabetic inscriptions. The French excavator P. Montet in the year 1922, working in the Syrian town of Byblos (ancient Gebal), found the sarcophagus of Ahiram, king of Gebal. On this sarcophagus was an inscription of five lines which was written in the Phoenician alphabet, being an early form of the Hebrew writing. It was about four hundred years older than the Moabite Stone inscription which for many years was considered the oldest example of Hebrew writing. The Gebal inscription has been dated as early as 1250 B.C. 2

Discovery of Canaanite alphabetic tablets at Ras Shamra (Syria). In the year 1928 while a peasant was working in his field at Minet-el-Beida in North Syria, which was the old port for Ras Shamra, or the ancient city of Ugarit, he discovered a wealthy tomb of the Late Bronze Age. His discovery was reported to the French government, and excavations were begun in that vicinity and especially in the mound of Ras Shamra itself. The French excavators, Schaeffer and Chenet, were in charge of the expedition. Their most valuable discovery was of a harvest of tablets uncovered in 1929. Many of these tablets, which were of a religious character, were found in the library building of Ugarit. There were altogether eight languages spoken at Ugarit, but the one that has created most interest is the local language which was written in a cuneiform Semitic alphabet with 29 letters. These tablets date back to about 1400 B.C. In other words, these people were contemporary with Moses and Joshua. 3

Evolution of the alphabet. In recent years alphabetic inscriptions have been found in various Palestinian mounds including Gezer, Bethshemesh, and Lachish, dating all the way from 1750 to 1250 B.C.4

It would seem then that the alphabet had its origin in the region of Sinai and then was developed through Palestine and northern Phoenicia or Syria. Dr. W. F. Albright has this to say about the time and manner of the invention of the alphabet:

Somewhere around 2000 B.C we may suppose, Semites in close contact with Egypt invented the alphabet by application of a simple acrophonic principle, e.g., they took the Egyptian hieroglyph for "house," simplified it, and used it to write the first consonant of the Semitic word bet "house" which continued to be employed as the name of the letter (Heb. beth, Greek beta)? 5

We may now conclude with certainty that even as early as the time of Abraham men were beginning to use alphabetic writing, and there is certainly no reason why Moses could not have written the Pentateuch in the alphabetic Hebrew language. 6

SYRIAN EXCAVATIONS REVEAL ANCIENT CANAANITE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Ras Shamra tablets and the Canaanite deities. The chief god of the Canaanites was El, called, "Father of Years." The god most frequently mentioned on the tablets is Baal, who was the weather god. The action of Elijah in declaring, "**There shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word**" (I Kings 17:1), and his calling down fire from Heaven upon the water-soaked sacrifice when the prophets of Baal could not get fire from the god (I Kings 18), can better be appreciated when it is known that Baal was supposed to be the god that caused thunder and rain. The goddess Asherah was the wife of El. In the plural form the name was Asherim and doubtless referred to wooden symbols of the goddess Asherah (cf. Exodus 34:13). 7

Similarities between Canaanite and Hebrew religious laws and ceremonies. The Canaanites had a trespass offering, a peace offering, a burnt offering, a wave offering, an oblation of the first fruits, new moon offerings, "bread of the gods," "courtyard of the tent," "the Holy Place of the Holy Places," etc.

What is the explanation of these similarities to the Hebrew laws? Some Bible critics would have us believe that Israel derived her ritual from the Canaanites. Rather, it is far more reasonable to believe that since the Ugarites and the Israelites were both Semitic peoples that God had given their ancestors many of these laws and ceremonies in purity, but the Canaanites had corrupted their practices to a degrading polytheistic religion, whereas, the ceremonies of the Israelites were what God gave to Moses, many of which laws were duplicates of those previously given to an earlier Semitic people. 8

Now these similarities between Judaism and the Canaanitish religion serve a useful purpose to the lover of God's Word. Certain higher critics of the Pentateuch have long argued that the Levitical Code which they have designated under the initial "P," and which has so much to do with the Book of Leviticus, was the work of an Exilic or post-Exilic scribe and was written about the fifth century B.C. They have maintained that the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament were produced later than the writings of the Hebrew prophets. But absolute proof that such a view is wrong is found in the ritual of the Hebrews which we find duplicated in the Ras Shamra tablets of the Canaanites that are dated about 1400 B.C, or near the time of Moses' death. 9

One university professor made the statement that as a result of the discovery of the Ras Shamra tablets, the date of the Book of Leviticus would doubtless be considered to be one thousand years earlier than many critics formerly allowed. 10

The Canaanite Cult of Fertility and its immoral influence upon Israel. Although it is impossible to believe that Israel derived her religion from the Canaanites, it is well for us to remember that certain parts of the Canaanites' religion did have an influence for evil upon Israel. The purpose of the observances connected with this cult, as well as the belief of its adherents, was that good crops would be guaranteed to those farmers who trusted therein. And at the very heart of this cult was the practice of "sacred prostitution," or "religious harlotry." Many Hebrew farmers were induced to take up the practices of this Fertility Cult for economic reasons, thinking they might thereby secure a better crop.

The prophet Hosea, no doubt, had this cult in mind when he spoke God's Word to Israel in his prophecy: "**I will go after my lovers, that give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, mine oil and my drink . . . For she did not know that I gave her corn, and wine, and oil, and multiplied her silver and gold, which they prepared for Baal**" (2:5, 8). 11

In the Mosaic Law the Israelites are thrice commanded: "**Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother's milk**" (Exodus 23:19; 34:26; Deuteronomy 14:21). The significance of this is found in the Ras Shamra tablets where the Canaanites are commanded exactly the opposite, "**Thou shalt boil a kid in its mother's milk.**" This rite of the Canaanites was part of the practice of the Fertility Cult which was so immoral in its influence.

In these commands of Moses and in the teachings of the later prophets, Israel was warned against the corrupting belief and practice of this Canaanite cult. 12

Hebrew monotheism versus Canaanite polytheism. Destructive critics of the Hebrew Scriptures have declared their belief that the Hebrew religion came about by a process of evolution rather than through revelation from God. They have taught that it began in animism and grew into fetish worship, then to polytheism, then to monolatry and monotheism. But the belief and practice of the Canaanites cannot be the environment from which the Hebrew religion evolved, but rather it was the arena in which was fought the battle to maintain the purity of its monotheism.

There is a clear-cut difference between the polytheism of the Canaanites and the monotheism of the Hebrews. The Canaanite gods are thought of in terms of human beings, in fact, their moral standards are below the average of human beings. On the other hand, the God of Israel stands apart or alone, with no other person on the same level as He. The high moral standard of the God of Israel is in striking contrast to the corrupt standards of the Canaanite deities. 13

1. George L. Robinson, *The Bearing of Archaeology on the Old Testament*, pp. 130-133; J. McKee Adams, *Ancient Records and the Bible*, pp. 51-54; Frederic Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology*, pp. 201-203.
2. Kenyon, *ibid.*, 166; Adams, *ibid.*, pp. 93, 94.
3. W. F. Albright, "New Light on Early Canaanite Language and Literature," *Bulletin of American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 46, Apr. 1932, pp. 15, 16; Adams, *op. tit.*, pp. 91-93; Robinson, *op. tit.*, pp. 145, 146; T. Miller Neatby, *Confirming the Scriptures*, pp. 103, 104.
4. W. F. Albright, "The Early Evolution of the Hebrew Alphabet," *Bulletin of American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 63, Oct. 1936, pp. 8-12.
5. W. F. Albright, "Recent Discoveries in Bible Lands," supplement, *Analytical Concordance to the Bible*, by Robert Young (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 20th ed. 1936), p. 8.
6. Cf. Charles Marston, *The Bible Comes Alive*, pp. 165-180. Also Chester C. McCown, *The Ladder of Progress in Palestine*, pp. 100-117.
7. J. Philip Hyatt, "Canaanite Ugarit—Modern Ras Shamra," *The Biblical Archaeologist*, II, No. 1, Feb. 1939, pp. 6, 7; Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 151.
8. T. Miller Neatby, *Confirming the Scriptures*, p. 106f.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 107-109.
10. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 159.
11. Millar Burrows, *What Mean These Stones?*, pp. 236, 237; Oswald T. Allis, *The Five Books of Moses*, pp. 157, 158.
12. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 154.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 152f.; Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 283; G. Ernest Wright, "How Did Israel Differ from Her Neighbors?" *The Biblical Archaeologist*, VI, No. 1, Feb. 1943, pp. 10, 16.

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