CANAAN [KANE un] (land of purple) — the name of a man and a land or region in the Old Testament:

1. The fourth son of Ham and the grandson of Noah (Ge 9:18-27; Ge 10:6, Ge 15). Ham's descendants were dispersed into several distinctive tribes, such as the Jebusites and the Zemarites. These people became known collectively in later years as the CANAANITES, pagan inhabitants of the land that God promised to Abraham and his descendants. Under the leadership of Joshua, the people of Israel occupied the land of Canaan and divided it among the twelve tribes.

2. The region along the Mediterranean Sea (see Map 1, C-2) occupied by the Canaanites before it was taken and settled by the Israelite people (Ge 11:31; Jos 5:12). The land of Canaan stretched from the Jordan River on the east to the Mediterranean Sea on the west. From south to north, it covered the territory between the Sinai Peninsula and the ancient coastal nation of Phoenicia. Much of this territory was dry, mountainous, and rocky, unfit for cultivation. But it also contained many fertile farmlands, particularly in the river valleys and the coastal plains along the sea. While leading the people of Israel toward the land of Canaan, Moses sent scouts, or spies, into the territory on a factfinding mission. They returned with grapes, pomegranates, and figs to verify the fertility of the land (Nu 13:2, Nu 17, Nu 23).

The land of Canaan was ideally situated on the trade routes that stretched from Egypt in the south to Syria and Phoenicia in the north and the ancient Babylonian Empire to the east. This location gave the small region a strategic position in the ancient world. After the Israelites captured the land of Canaan, they developed a thriving commercial system by trading goods with other nations along these routes. The finest royal purple dye was manufactured in Canaan, giving the territory its name.

CANAANITES [KANE un ites] — an ancient tribe that lived in the land of Canaan before they were displaced by the nation of Israel. The Canaanites, along with the Amorites, settled the land well before 2000 B.C. Archaeological exploration of their native land and adjacent territories has provided information on many aspects of their culture. Among the numerous sites excavated in ancient Canaan, or the present-day Holy Land, are Hazor, Megiddo, Beth Shan, Jericho, Jebus (Jerusalem), Debir, Lachish, and Arad. Sites in the northern part of ancient Canaan include Byblos and Ras Shamra (Ugarit) along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and Hamath on the Orontes River.

Although both Canaanites and Amorites were established in Canaan before 2000 B.C., the Canaanites established their civilization as dominant during the Middle Bronze age (about 2100 to 1550 B.C.). Their society had several classes, ranging from the ruling nobility to the peasants. The northern Canaanites used a particular CUNEIFORM script, featuring a wedge-shaped alphabet. Their land was also dotted with walled cities. Several of these served as the centers of city-states, each having its own king, or mayor, and army.

The Canaanites, therefore, were a highly civilized people in many ways when Joshua led the Israelites across the Jordan River to conquer the people and settle the land. Canaanite history
ended with the Israelite conquest. But certain segments of Canaanite culture remained to make both positive and negative impacts on the life of God's Covenant People.

A statue of Baal, a prominent pagan god of the ancient Canaanites.

Photo by Gustav Jeeninga

Canaanite Language and Literature. Knowledge of Canaanite language and literature was enhanced by the discovery of the Ugaritic texts at Ras Shamra (ancient Ugarit), a site on the Mediterranean coast in modern Syria. Accidental discovery of a vaulted room by a farmer while plowing his field on the top of Ras Shamra led to several full-scale excavations by Claude F. A. Schaeffer, the first in 1929. These excavations resulted in the recovery of a store of religious texts and other documents on clay tablets. These writings have yielded a great deal of knowledge about Canaanite life, particularly their form of religion.

The Canaanite language in written form, as revealed by the Ugaritic texts of Ras Shamra, is an alphabetic cuneiform (wedge-shaped) type of writing. This form contrasts markedly with the syllabic cuneiform of the ancient Babylonian and Assyrian languages. It does have many similarities to other ancient languages of the Middle Eastern world during this period, but it also has many significant differences. These differences are so significant that archaeologists can say with certainty that the Canaanites developed a language all their own.

The Ugaritic texts from Ras Shamra are by far the most significant literary sources of the Canaanite language in the alphabetic cuneiform script. These texts go back to the 14th century B.C. or earlier. Most of them are of a religious nature, providing valuable details on both the
literature and the religion of the Canaanites. These texts have also given Bible scholars a better understanding of Old Testament writings and background.

The texts of greatest importance for giving details on Canaanite religion are three mythologies: (1) The Baal Epic, an account of the activities of Baal, including his building of a temple; (2) the Legend of Aqhat, the only son of an ancient Canaanite king; and (3) the Legend of King Keret of Hubur, who suffered the loss of his family and who later obtained another wife by conquest. In doing so, however, he displeased the gods.

Comparative studies between these texts and Old Testament writings, particularly early Hebrew poems and the Psalms, show how the Old Testament has been influenced by its ancient setting. But they also show that the Israelites' faith in their one Redeemer God was a dramatic contrast to the pagan religion of the Canaanites.

Excavation of a temple of the Canaanites at Beth Shan from the 14th century B.C.

_Canaanite Religion._ The Canaanite religion featured many gods. These gods were worshiped with elaborate ritual. Various kinds of cultic personnel, or priests, officiated at these pagan ceremonies. Their religious system also featured many different places of worship, varying from simple outdoor altars to massive stone temples.

The Old Testament refers frequently to Baal (Nu 22:41), Baals (Ho 2:13, Ho 17), or a Baal of a particular place, such as Baal of Peor (Nu 25:3, Nu 5). The Old Testament also refers to Asherah (1Ki 18:19), Ashtoreth (1Ki 11:5, 1Ki 33), and the Ashtoreths (Jdg 2:13). References to these Canaanite gods and goddesses always carry strong denunciations by the biblical writers. But these names mentioned in the Old Testament are only a few of the many additional names for Canaanite gods that appear in the Ugaritic texts.
The highest of all the Canaanite gods was El, as shown clearly by the Ugaritic texts. But El chose to remain in the background, conferring power and authority upon his brood of gods and goddesses. The main goddess by whom El fathered children was Asherah. She and El were the parents of more than 70 other deities. The Baal mentioned frequently in the Old Testament was lord among the gods because of authority granted by El. Baal was known chiefly as the god of fertility and as god of the storm. Temples were built in his name at a number of sites, including one at Ugarit.

Three Canaanite goddesses mentioned frequently in the Ugaritic texts are Anath (Jdg 3:31), Asherah, and Astarte (Ashtoreth of the Old Testament). Among the many other deities of the Canaanites were Resheph, god of pestilence, and Mot, god of drought and death.

Canaanite religion had a number of features that were similar to certain practices of the religious system of the Israelites. Like the Israelites, the Canaanites offered various kinds of offerings to their gods. Animals offered included sheep, cattle, and certain wild animals. A high priest among the Canaanites served as the head of 12 priestly families. Other important worship leaders who served in the Canaanite temples included singers, who used liturgy or a form of psalmody; consecrated persons—in effect, male and female prostitutes; vestment makers and sculptors; and priest-scribes, who were responsible for preserving important literary traditions. Like the Hebrew feasts and festivals, the celebrations of the Canaanites also paralleled the seasons or cycles of the agricultural year.

But in other important ways, Canaanite and Hebrew religion were poles apart. The religion of these pagan people was basically a fertility cult. At temples scattered throughout their land, Canaanite worshipers actually participated in lewd, immoral acts with “sacred” prostitutes. Theirs was a depraved form of worship that appealed to the base instincts of sinful human nature. They also practiced human sacrifice, and their religion sanctioned unbelievable cruelty in warfare. In contrast, the Hebrews worshiped a holy God who insisted on purity and righteousness among His people.

Although the Israelites were called to a high ethical plane in their worship, at times the sensual appeal of the Canaanite cults enticed them into sin and idolatry. This explains the strong appeal Joshua made to the people of Israel in his farewell speech. Joshua had led them to take the land, but many of the Canaanites still remained. The aging warrior knew their form of pagan worship would be a strong temptation to the people. Thus he declared, “Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD God of Israel” (Jos 24:23).