Canaan, Canaanite

Palestinian territory (the Promised Land) west of the Jordan River, settled by the Israelites at the time of Joshua's leadership. Portions of southern Syria were also frequently considered part of Canaanite territory, the northern borders of which were never clearly defined. The pre-Israelite peoples of western Palestine, excluding northern Syria and such places as Ugarit (Ras Shamra) on the Mediterranean coast of Syria, carried the broad designation of Canaanites.

Preview

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Land and People

In the “table of nations” (Ge 10:15-19), Noah's grandson Canaan was progenitor of 11 groups that lived in the area of Syria and Palestine. The first six evidently occupied territory at or south of Sidon, whereas the others lived farther north. The northerners mostly settled on the edge of the coastal plain; in the south, settlement spread eastward to the upland areas. OT references specifically placed the Canaanites in western Palestine's valleys and coastal areas; the upland country was occupied by Amorites and other peoples (Nu 13:29; Jos 5:1; 7:9; Jdg 1:27-36).

One of the earliest known references to the people of Canaan is in a tablet from Mari (15th century BC), in which a military officer reported his surveillance of “thieves and Canaanites.” The Canaanites were listed as a group on the Memphis Stele (inscribed column) of the Egyptian pharaoh Amenophis II (c. 1440 BC). The land of Canaan was mentioned in a 15th-century inscription of Idrimi, king of Aleppo (west of Ugarit), who fled to the Canaanite seaport of Ammiya and then became ruler of Alalakh (north of Ugarit). During the Amarna Age (15th-14th centuries BC), Palestine was politically dominated by Egypt, according to the Egyptian Amarna tablets.

Just as “Canaan” designated the whole western Palestinian area, so “Canaanite” described its pre-Israelite inhabitants without specifying race. Among the peoples who lived in Palestine, the Amorites first appeared in the second millennium BC as immigrants from Mesopotamia.

Several OT references seem to equate Amorite territory and the land of Canaan (Ge 12:5-6; 15:18-21; 48:22), a tradition reflected in the 18th-century BC Alalakh tablets, which depicted “Amurru” as part of Syria-Palestine. Tablets from Mari from about the same period speak of an Amorite ruler of Hazor in northern Palestine. The Tell el-Amarna texts (14th-13th centuries BC) indicate that the Amurru kingdom of the Lebanon region was monopolizing coastal trade and commerce; therefore, references to the two peoples (Amorites and Canaanites) together in Moses' time and throughout the late Bronze Age (c. 1550-1200 BC) are not surprising.
At the end of that period, the “Sea Peoples” (largely Philistines) destroyed the Hittite Empire, and in the time of Ramses III (c. 1180 BC) occupied western Palestine. The Israelite conquest of Palestine broke the power of many Canaanite and Amorite city-states, while the rise of a Philistine confederacy on the southern Palestinian coast restricted further the range of specifically Canaanite territory. From the beginning of the Iron Age the cultural heirs of the Canaanites were the Phoenicians, centered in the city-states of Tyre and Sidon, who themselves liked to be known as Canaanites (cf. Mt 15:21-22; Mk 7:24-26).

Language

The various groups that inhabited western Palestine in the pre-Israelite period probably spoke related dialects of the Northwest Semitic linguistic family. The large territory covered by those peoples and the possible influence of Amorite, Hurrian, and Ugaritic languages complicate modern theories about what is properly meant by “Canaanite” as a language.

Literature

As with language, it is difficult to be specific about Canaanite literature. One clear fact is that our own alphabet originated in middle Bronze Age Canaan. Before that time, writing was either pictographic (words or ideas represented by pictures), cuneiform (wedge-shaped impressions in soft clay representing syllables and whole words), or hieroglyphic (Egyptian pictorial writing). Alphabetical writing was passed on through the Hebrews and Phoenicians to the Greeks, who gave our present alphabet its classical form.

Until 1929 little Canaanite literature was known, but with the discoveries at Ugarit a large body of literary material came to light. The discoveries included portions of an epic poem about the god Baal and his consort Anath (possibly from c. 2000 BC), a legend about a royal personage named Aqhat (from c. 1800 BC), the legendary activities of King Keret (written c. 1500 BC), and fragmentary religious, medical, and administrative material.

History

Archaeological evidence shows that western Palestine was occupied as far back as the Old Stone Age. Mesolithic, Neolithic, and Chalcolithic deposits have also been found at several sites. It is possible that Semitic-speaking peoples inhabited places such as Jericho, Megiddo, and Byblos around 3000 BC. Discoveries at Tell Mardikh (Ebla) show that a vigorous Canaanite Empire existed in Syria about 2500 BC, and there is no doubt that both Amorite and Canaanite peoples were firmly settled in Syria and Palestine by 2000 BC. The best evidence for Canaanite occupation of western Palestine has come from the middle and late Bronze Age (c. 1950-1200 BC), when the land was dotted with Canaanite and Amorite city-states.

The Egyptians made periodic forays into Palestine during their 5th and 6th dynasties; in the 13th dynasty (second millennium BC) they controlled much of Syria-Palestine both politically and economically.
Canaanite contacts with Mesopotamia from about 2000 BC are indicated in texts discovered at Mari and Ugarit. Evidently Amorites, Hurrians, early Assyrians, and other peoples periodically migrated to Canaan, bringing with them a diversity of political and social forms. By the late 16th century BC, most of the small Canaanite kingdoms were firmly under Egyptian control. Within two centuries the most northerly ones were subject to Hittite political influence.

Canaanite history is further complicated by the activities of the Hyksos people between about 1800 and 1500 BC. Of mixed Asiatic origin, the Hyksos owed much of their political influence to their military use of iron-fitted chariots and the compound Asiatic bow. From Canaanite locations like Hazor and Jericho, they invaded Egypt and established control there from about 1776 to about 1570 BC. When they were expelled at the start of Egypt's New Kingdom (1570-1100 BC), they retreated to fortified sites in southern Canaan.

Egyptian control over western Palestine had disappeared by the time of the Israelite conquest of Canaan; Joshua met predominantly Canaanite and Amorite opposition. The Israelite occupation of Canaan was aided by the state of decay into which the small Palestinian kingdoms had fallen. With the destruction of Hittite culture by the Sea Peoples and their occupation of the northern and coastal regions, the traditional city-states collapsed. From about 1100 BC, Canaanite culture was restricted to Tyre, Sidon, and a few other places.

**Religion**

Before the Ugaritic discoveries, little was known about Canaanite religion apart from OT references to it. From what is now known of Canaanite culture, the head of the Canaanite list of gods was a shadowy personage named El, who was worshiped as the “father of man.” His consorts were Athirat, known to the Israelites as Asherah, Astarte, and Baaltis. El had a son, Baal, a fertility god described in myths as the lord of rain and storm. Baal succeeded his father as head of the pantheon (list of gods) and supposedly resided in the distant northern heavens. A monument found at Ugarit represented him carrying a thunderbolt at his left side and a mace in his right hand.

Many small terra-cotta figurines with exaggerated secondary sexual characteristics, representing one or the other of the female deities, have been recovered from middle and late Bronze Age sites in western Palestine. A center devoted to the Anath cult, excavated at Byblos in Phoenicia, was evidently notorious for religious prostitution and sexual fertility rites; many naked female figures were found there. Other Canaanite cult objects included a sacred pillar of some sort (masssebah) and a wooden image (asherah), probably of the goddess herself.

In the Amarna Age, Canaanite orgiastic religion was especially influential in the Near East; it infiltrated to some extent even the conservative religions of Egypt and Babylonia. Four principal festivals associated with agriculture seem to have been celebrated by the Canaanites, invariably occasions of revelry, drunkenness, and sexual excess. Canaanite religion was evidently the most sexually depraved of any in the ancient world.

**Influence on Israel**
Israelite morality, as defined by the covenant laws of Mt Sinai, was very different from the cultic traditions of Canaanite life. Hebrew ethical monotheism was in many ways opposite to the depraved polytheistic nature worship of Canaanite religion. It was clear that the two systems could not coexist. Hence the law contained strict instructions that the Canaanites and their ways were to be eliminated from the Promised Land (Ex 23:24; 34:13-16; Dt 7:1-5) and that the Hebrews were to remain separate from Canaanite religion in loyalty to God's covenant. That was far from easy, if only because both peoples spoke closely related dialects and therefore used similar expressions of speech. Further, the invading Israelites under Joshua found that the Canaanites were superior to them in building stone structures and in making metal tools, implements, and weapons. The Hebrews, at a disadvantage, must have faced the prospect of requiring technical help from the Canaanites. In the time of King Solomon, Canaanites from Phoenicia were enlisted to design and construct the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. A superficial resemblance between some aspects of Canaanite and Hebrew religion, such as peace offerings and certain divine titles, also made it difficult to maintain Israel's cultural distinctiveness.

Except for the “ban” imposed at Jericho, the Israelites were able to use Canaanite equipment captured in battle. Hence their determination to destroy all traces of the Canaanites, including their corrupt religion, was gradually weakened. By the time of King Ahab, when the worship of the Tyrian Baal was firmly entrenched in the northern kingdom of Israel, the Hebrews were in serious danger of losing their spiritual and theological distinctiveness. Their priests, who should have played a major part in maintaining the uniqueness of the covenant faith, often lapsed into Canaanite ways, emulating the immorality of their pagan neighbors and encouraging the Israelite people to do likewise (cf. 1Sa 2:22).

As a result, Hebrew prophets proclaimed that their nation, which had almost completely succumbed to Canaanite blandishments, would have to be purified by exile before a renewed faith could become a possibility for Israel.

See also Canaanite Deities and Religion; Israel, History of; Palestine.

**Canaanite Deities and Religion**

Study of the polytheistic religion of the Canaanites has contributed much to our understanding of the religion of ancient Israel. The Hebrew theological and religious structures were given by God to a people who were influenced and affected by other religions. To appreciate the Israelites' monotheistic faith fully, one must understand the polytheistic setting that challenged their life and unity as a nation.

Contact among the many religions of the ancient Near East produced not only tension but also much syncretism or borrowing of concepts and practices. The Arameans and Philistines who settled in Canaan adopted the practices of the Canaanites; similarly the Amorites accepted much of the Sumerian religion as their own when they moved into Mesopotamia. Among all those peoples, however, the Hebrews took an independent course. Their God was the unique and cosmic deity who demanded exclusive allegiance. Such a concept ran against the grain of all the religions of the day.
Until the early part of the 20th century, most of what was known about Canaanite religion came from the Bible. In 1928 many clay tablets were found at a site called Ras Shamra, which was the ancient Syrian city of Ugarit. They contained abundant new information about the religious life of Canaan. Most of them were in a cuneiform alphabet and written in a previously unknown Northwest Semitic language quite similar to Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic. The documents are often called the Ugaritic texts or the Ras Shamra tablets.

Discovery of these texts opened doors of understanding that had long been closed. The texts provided scholars with an important mythological literature that gave not only the names and functions of the gods but also much information on Canaanite society.

Canaanite deities had two striking features: an extraordinary fluidity of personality and function, and names whose meanings and sources could be easily traced. These facts, coupled with the nature of the mythology, mark Canaanite religion as relatively primitive.

The general Canaanite word for “god” probably meant “the strong, powerful one.” The head of the pantheon, or array of gods, was called El (“the mighty one”). El, a remote and shadowy figure, lived far away from Canaan “at the source of the two rivers,” hence in paradise. He apparently had three wives who were also his sisters: Astarte, Athirat (Asherah, also called Elat), and Anath. He presided over a divine council of gods who were his children. Although he was brutal enough to slay his own son, he was called Lutpan (“the kindly one”) and was described as an old man with white hair and a beard.

Baal, the great storm god, king of the gods, was the central figure in the pantheon and was functionally far more important than El. Baal acted as El's prime minister and eventually dethroned him. “Baal” means simply “lord” and could be applied to different gods. Soon, however, the ancient Semitic storm god Hadad became the “Baal” par excellence. Hadad was considered to be the “lord of heaven,” the “one who prevails,” the “exalted, lord of the earth.” He alone reigned over all else. His kingdom was “eternal to all generations.” He was the giver of all fertility. When he died, all vegetation and procreation ceased. He was the god of justice, the terror of evildoers. Baal was called the “son of Dagon.” Dagon, meaning “fish,” was the chief god of Ashdod (cf. 1Sa 5:1-7).

The Canaanites explained nature by reference to their gods. Each god represented some force of nature. The moon, sun, important stars, and visible planets were each considered a god or goddess. Baal, seen as god of the thunderstorm, personified the power of all nature.

The Canaanites' personification of the forces of nature accounted for the succession of the seasons. The dry period from April to the end of October represented the duration of Baal's death after his unsuccessful battle each spring with Mot (or with “the devourers,” who at Ras Shamra performed the same general function as Mot). Revival of the rain-and-vegetation deity Baal toward the end of October signaled commencement of the autumn rains, which continued intermittently until the following April. The Canaanites believed that the land regained its fertility because of the annual mating of Baal and Anath. What better form could their own religious activities take than that of imitating the sexual behavior of their chief deities? Hence there was always a pronounced orgiastic element in Canaanite religion.
The three goddesses—Athtarat (Astarte or Ashtaroth in the OT, Dt 1:4, KJV “Astaroth”; Jdg 2:13), Anath (appearing in the OT in the name of the town Anathoth and as Shamgar’s progenitor), and Athirat (Asherah in the OT)—presented an intricate set of relationships. Astarte was the same as Ashtar or Venus, the evening star. Anath’s original character is uncertain. Athirat was primarily goddess of the sea and the wife of El. She was also called Elat, the feminine form of El. All three goddesses were concerned mainly with sex and war. Their primary function was to have sexual relations with Baal on a continual yearly cycle, yet they never lost their “virginity”; they were “the great goddesses who conceive but do not bear.”

Ironically, the goddesses were considered sacred prostitutes and as such were called the “holy ones.” Idols representing the goddesses were often nude and sometimes had exaggerated sexual features. In what circumstances early cultic prostitution was practiced is a matter of some debate, but there is no doubt that both male and female temple prostitutes were used in the cult of Canaanite religion.

The fertility deities were also goddesses of war. In the Baal Epic of Ugarit, Anath has a gory thirst for blood. In New Kingdom Egyptian sources, Astarte appears as a nude and ferocious cavalry warrior, sporting shield and lance.

In the KJV the name Asherah was translated “grove,” following the Septuagint (third-century BC Greek translation of the OT). She seems to have been represented by some kind of wooden cult object set up in “high places” beside incense altars and stone pillars.

Continual struggle for survival no doubt led the Canaanites to worship things that they felt would benefit them materially. If the gods and goddesses were pleased by the worship, the result would be a plentiful harvest. Canaanite worship centered on a cultic shrine or “high place” where sacrifices were offered. Archaeological evidence indicates that animals of all sizes were offered at great temple-shrines such as Beth-shan. The city received its name from the temple located there: *beth* means “temple,” and Shan was patron deity of the city.

As noted, human sacrifice became a part of religious practice in Canaan. 2Ki 3:27 mentions Mesha, king of Moab, who, after defeat at the hands of a confederation of kings, offered up his son as a burnt offering to his god Chemosh.

*See also* Canaan, Canaanite; Gods and Goddesses; Idols, Idolatry.