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Ugarit

Melissa Ramos

George Fox University, mramos@georgefox.edu

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UGARIT In 1928 a Syrian peasant farmer stumbled by chance onto a funerary vault of ancient provenance about half a mile from the Mediterranean coastline of Syria and about six miles north of the modern-day city of Latakia. This unforeseen discovery led to an archaeological excavation of Tell Ras Shamra (Cape Fennel) by the eminent French excavator Claude Schaeffer. What Schaeffer's team unearthed was not merely an ancient tomb, but a city complete with palaces, private homes, temples, and streets paved with stone.

Within the first year of excavation, the ruins of Ugarit yielded a cache of clay tablets bearing a cuneiform script in a language hitherto unknown. From these mysterious texts scholars deciphered an alphabetic script written in a West Semitic language related to Canaanite, Arabic, and biblical Hebrew.

THE KINGDOM OF UGARIT

The site of the ancient city of Ugarit, Tell Ras Shamra, is enclosed by two small rivers that flow westward into the Mediterranean Sea. The presence of water ensured the fertility of the surrounding plain; thus a good crop of cereals, grapes, and olives was available to supplement the fishing industry as a local supply of food. The kingdom encompassed about twelve hundred

square miles, bounded by the natural geography of the region. To the west of the site lies the Mediterranean, with a port that supplied an important route for international trade. To the south, the east, and the north are mountain ranges, including Mount Zaphon, whose majesty is recorded in Isa. 14:13. Indeed, the name "Zaphon" becomes simply a general word for "north" in biblical Hebrew.

The site of Tell Ras Shamra was occupied as far back as Neolithic times (seventh millennium BC), yet the kingdom of Ugarit properly dates to the second millennium BC. The time of Ugarit's greatest flourishing was the period just prior to its destruction: from the fourteenth to the twelfth centuries BC, during the Late Bronze Age. The prosperity of the kingdom reached its height during this period. Ugarit's coastal access and strategic location as a central hub within the matrix of Late Bronze Age superpowers made Ugarit an important focal point for international trade routes, both maritime and overland. Late Bronze Age Ugaritic society was diverse and cosmopolitan, a feature perhaps best epitomized by its scribal training center, in which tablets bearing inscriptions in several different languages have been discovered.

Around 1200 BC, in approximately the same time frame as the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt, Ugarit met an untimely demise. (Note that some biblical scholars date the exodus from Egypt during the fifteenth century BC rather than the thirteenth.) Royal documents from the Egyptian and Hittite kingdoms, as well as one from Ugarit, record a concern over a group of invaders known as the Sea Peoples. The Sea

Peoples likely originated in the northwest, leaving their mark on the coasts of Turkey, Cyprus, and the Levant. The descendants of the invading Sea Peoples remained on the coast of Palestine, and the biblical text refers to them as the Philistines. The destruction of Ugarit is attributed to these invaders from the sea. The archaeological remains of Tell Ras Shamra show that many homes were abandoned as invaders set the city on fire. Ugarit burned to the ground sometime between 1190 and 1185 BC.

THE TEXTS OF UGARIT

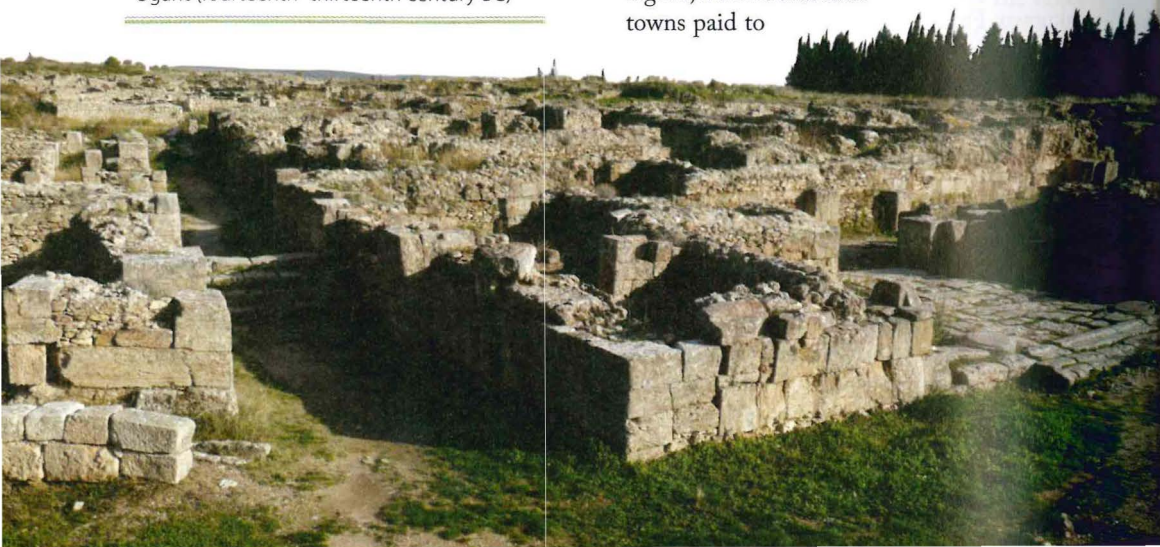
More than fifteen hundred Ugaritic texts have been discovered since excavations began at Tell Ras Shamra. The texts are written on tablets with wedgelike markings impressed into the clay by scribes using a triangular-shaped reed stylus. The majority of the texts of Ugarit were found in and around the remains of the royal palace grounds and temples, but some were found in the homes of high-ranking palace administrators and businessmen. The subject matter of these texts is diverse, and the various genres of written material from Ugarit include official letters, administrative and economic texts, scribal training texts, and religious and literary texts. The cosmopolitan character of Ugarit is also reflected in its texts. Among the various tablets discovered, many were written in Akkadian, which was the lingua franca of the Late Bronze

Age in this region. Still other texts were written in various ancient Near Eastern languages; Hittite, Hurrian, Hittite, and Cypro-Minoan, and Egyptian hieroglyphs were found inscribed into some artifacts, as well as upon cylinder seals.

Letters. The letter documents of Ugarit are formal in style with scripted introductions and closings, like most royal letters from the ancient Near East. Two notable examples may be pointed out. The first is a letter from the king of Tyre in Phoenicia (for Iron Age references to the city of Tyre, see Josh. 19:29; 2 Sam. 5:11; Ezek. 28) to the king of Ugarit. The occasion of the letter is the shipwreck of a Ugaritic trade vessel bound for Egypt that crashed on the coastline of Phoenicia after a violent storm. The king of Tyre writes that none of the ship's crew survived, and its cargo was lost at sea. A second epistolary example is a letter written by the king of Carchemish in the Hittite Empire (see Isa. 10:9; Jer. 46:2) to the last king of Ugarit, Ammurapi. The occasion of this epistle is the Hittite king's perceived mistreatment of his daughter who was married to Ammurapi. The letter suggests an impending divorce between the royal couple, detailing the division of their joint property.

Administrative and economic texts. The royal palace and temples provided the driving engine of Ugarit's economy. Many discovered texts shed light upon the kinds of goods and activities that comprised local and international trade. Examples of administrative texts include lists of various towns within the kingdom of Ugarit, tributes that such towns paid to

Archaeological remains of the palace at Ugarit (fourteenth–thirteenth century BC)



the king in the form of goods or labor service, lists of temple personnel with accompanying salaries, and details of distributed goods to those in royal service. Examples of economic texts include purchase receipts and bills of lading from maritime trade for products such as wool, grains, olives, milk, and metal ore.

Scribal training texts. Among the rich archives of texts at Ugarit, more than one hundred tablets bear witness to scribal training activities scattered throughout the city grounds. Scribes were universally employed by royal empires during the Late Bronze Age, but the sheer number of texts (thousands) found at Ugarit is unusual for a relatively small excavation site. Archives of texts were found in groups throughout the city, and in many of these archives excavators found tablets of special interest, called “abecedaries.” An abecedarium is a tablet on which the cuneiform alphabet is written. The Ugaritic alphabet contained thirty signs in roughly the same order as the Hebrew alphabet, largely the same in content as the English alphabet. In addition to Ugaritic abecedaries, a Ugaritic-Akkadian abecedarium was found in which equivalent phonetic values are given from the Ugaritic alphabet into Akkadian signs. Lexicons, or word lists, also were discovered, listing words from various ancient Near Eastern languages. Indeed, some of the tablets found in the archives are clearly practice tablets used to train scribes: these tablets display clear signs written by a scribal teacher at the top of the tablet, with the less skilled markings of the apprentice scribe written below. Thus, it is likely that Ugarit served as a training center for scribes from all over the ancient Near East, as well as its own.

Religious texts. Two large temples dominate the northern acropolis region of Ugarit: the temple of Baal, the god of fertility, and the temple of Dagon, the god of grain. Mythology was the vehicle of religious expression in the ancient Near East. Stories about the gods communicated something of the gods’ purposes and realms of authority. In the mythological literature of Ugarit, the pantheon of gods dwelt on Mount Zaphon, and from the dwelling place of El, the high god, rivers of life-giving water

flowed. The name “El” was shared among Semitic languages and religions throughout the ancient Near East, including the OT. The name “El” in the Bible can refer either to a foreign god (e.g., Deut. 3:24: “What god [ʔ] is there in heaven or on earth who can do the deeds and mighty works you do?”) or to the God of Israel (e.g., Gen. 49:25; Deut. 7:9; Ps. 68:19–20). In the pantheon of Ugarit, El’s female consort was the goddess Asherah (1 Kings 18:19; Judg. 3:7).

El, however, was a more distant god in the religion of Ugarit, and the city’s patron god was Baal, the storm god. Baal was associated with fertile fields, abundant crops, and the birth of sons and daughters. The goddess Anat is sometimes described as Baal’s consort, and at other times as Baal’s sister. Anat is the goddess of war, and the epic mythological literature of Ugarit portrays her warfare in rather graphic and gruesome detail. Some scholars claim that Prov. 7:22–23 alludes to Anat’s warfare in the portrayal of the adulterous woman.

Some of the same epithets and accomplishments of Baal found in the religious texts of Ugarit are also attributed to Yahweh in the OT. For example, Baal is called the “Rider of the Clouds” in Ugaritic literature, and a similar description of Yahweh is found in Pss. 68:4 (“Extol him who rides on the clouds”) and 104:3 (“He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind”). This likely reflects a common ancient Near Eastern concern over the regularity of rain for producing crops, as well as a biblical assertion that Yahweh is superior to Canaanite deities, such as Baal, who claim authority over the forces of nature. Indeed, the OT mocks the impotence of the Canaanite deity Baal to wield power over the forces of nature in narratives such as Elijah versus the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:16–45).

Baal is also portrayed in the religious literature of Ugarit as the god who conquered the rival gods Sea (Yam) and Death (Motu). The OT gives similar portrayals of Israel’s God in texts such as Gen. 1:2; Isa. 25:7–8. In Gen. 1:2 God’s Spirit “was hovering over the waters,” “the deep,” or the primordial waters from which God brings to life the created world and all of

nature (cf. Job 38:8–11). In Isa. 25:7–8 Yahweh is portrayed as more powerful than death in a text of praise that extols his power by saying that “he will swallow up death forever.” Again the biblical texts rely upon a stock set of religious symbols, language, and imagery common to ancient Near Eastern peoples to portray Yahweh, the all-powerful, one God of Israel.

CONCLUSION

The discovery of Ugarit was an earthshaking event for biblical studies. Scholars have only begun to garner the gems of knowledge hidden within the remains of this lost civilization. The study of the Ugaritic language is invaluable for better understanding biblical Hebrew. Ugaritic sheds light particularly upon rare words and phrases used in the biblical text, as well as upon literary devices and poetic structure, such as parallelism and meter. Furthermore, the study of Ugarit’s religion illuminates the backdrop of Canaanite worship, against which is set the worship of Yahweh in the OT. Ugarit provides for us a snapshot of Late Bronze Age Canaan, the crucible of ancient Near Eastern culture from which the Hebrew Bible was birthed.