

Canaan

in Patriarchal Times

BY CLAUDE MARIOTTINI

THE BOOK OF GENESIS says that after Abraham left the land of his ancestors and came to the place God promised to him as an inheritance, “the Canaanites were in the land” (Gen. 12:6, NIV). When Abraham came to Canaan, the Canaanites were a settled people with a highly advanced society. In the Old Testament, the word “Canaan” was used to designate the land west of the Jordan River, and the word “Canaanites” was the general name given to the non-Israelite inhabitants of the land. In addition, the word “Canaan” appears in several passages in the Bible and is translated in different ways: “traffickers” (Isa. 23:8, KJV; “traders,” NIV); “the merchant city” (Isa. 23:11, KJV); “merchant” (Hos. 12:7, KJV, NIV); and “merchant people” (Zeph. 1:11, KJV; “merchants,” NIV). The identification of the Canaanites as well as the meaning of the word “Canaan” has been a source of debate among scholars.

Name. The meaning of the word “Canaan” is not clear. Some scholars believe that Canaan means “lowland,” a meaning derived from an Aramaic word meaning “to be low.”¹ The appearance of the word *kinahhu* (“red purple”) in the Nuzi tablets led scholars to equate the word “Canaan” with the purple dye made by the Phoenicians and to translate “Canaan” as “purple.”² William F. Albright suggested that the word “Canaan” originally meant “a merchant” and secondarily “purple merchant.”³ The Greeks adopted the name “Canaan” for this area and called it Phoenicia, a name that has its origin in a Greek word that also means “purple.” Thus the land of Canaan was known as “the land” (Continued on p. 7)

Left: The oven area where the Ugaritic Tablets were made in Ugarit. One of the languages of the Canaanites was Ugaritic.

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Lesson Reference:
FBS: Genesis 12

(Continued from p. 3) of purple.”

Origins. According to the genealogies in Genesis, Canaan was the fourth son of Ham and the grandson of Noah (Gen. 9:18). Canaan then became the eponymous ancestor of 11 sons, who eventually became known as the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land of Canaan, the original name of Palestine: “Canaan became the father of Sidon his firstborn, and Heth and the Jebusites, the Amorites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, the Arkites, the Sinites, the Arvadites, the Zemarites, and the Hamathites” (Gen. 10:15-18, NRSV).

Sidon represents the Phoenicians; Heth was one of the Hittites who lived in the hill country during patriarchal times. The Jebusites lived in Jerusalem; the Amorites were one of the pre-Israelites inhabitants of Canaan. The word “Amorites” is used to designate the people who lived in the hill country in contrast with the Canaanites, the people who lived in cities. The Hivites probably were the Horites of the Bible (Gen. 14:6). All of the other sons of Canaan named in Genesis appear either in Old Testament lists mentioning the original

inhabitants of the land (Ex. 3:8; Deut. 7:1; Josh. 3:10; 24:11) or in extant texts of the period. Since the number of the Canaanite nations fluctuates between six (Ex. 3:8,17; Deut. 20:17; Josh. 9:1) and seven (Deut. 7:1; Josh. 3:10; 24:11), it is quite possible that the word “Canaanites” in the Old Testament designated a social group rather than an ethnic group. As Merrill said: “Inasmuch as the number seven is commonly used to speak of totality, it is possible that the people listed here [Deut. 7:1] represent all the inhabitants of the land no matter their nationality or ethnic identity.”⁴

The genealogy of the sons of Canaan in Genesis seems to indicate that these groups were subdivisions of the Canaanites according to geographical order. The relationship between the Canaanites and the Amorites is unusual. The Amorites were one of the most important Semitic groups at the beginning of the second millennium B.C. The Old Testament practically uses the terms “Canaanites” and “Amorites” as synonymous (see Gen. 15:15-16; Josh 24:15,18). According to John Bright, the

Amorites arrived in Palestine around 2300 B.C. Their conquest of the land and their amalgamation with the existing population of the land gave rise to the Canaanite culture that appeared in Palestine in the Middle Bronze Age.⁵

Geography. According to the biblical evidence, Canaan was the land west of the Jordan, in the areas known as Syria-Palestine. The Canaanites lived in the territory that extended “from Sidon toward Gerar as far as Gaza, and then toward Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, as far as Lasha” (Gen. 10:19).⁶ According to Numbers 34:2-12, the land of Canaan, “will have these boundaries” (v. 2), was from the Brook of Egypt (Wadi El Arish) to the entrance of Hamath (34:5,8). Possibly the word “Canaan” was first applied to the area known as Phoenicia. This is reflected in Isaiah 23:11, where the *New International Version* uses “Phoenicia” to translate the word “Canaan.” With the passing of time, the word was used to designate the whole territory west of the Jordan, including the Phoenician

Below: The partially reconstructed Canaanite high place and altar at Tel Dan.



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asherah was the wooden pole representing the goddess Asherah. The bull was a symbol of fertility and was used to represent both El and Baal. The worshipers of Baal wore special garments in the worship of their god. These garments identified a person as a follower of Baal (2 Kings 23:7; 2 Kings 10:22).

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had many contacts with the people who lived in the land of Canaan. They would have heard and known about El and Asherah, Baal and Anath, and the other deities that formed part of the Canaanite pantheon. They were familiar with the religious beliefs and practices of the people of the land. But in the midst of the religious fervor present in Canaanite society, the patriarchs remained firm in their faith in the one true God. Each of them had to deal with the implications of living among the Canaanites and yet not compromise their faith and commit-

ment to the true God.

God's request in Genesis 22 is to be understood in the context of commitment and compromise. The Old Testament attests that human sacrifice was practiced among the Canaanites. The sacrifice of the firstborn is attested in Canaanite religious texts. Abraham may have understood God's request in the context that child sacrifice was a popular practice among the people who lived in the land of Canaan. But the request was a test of Abraham's faith, not just a misguided response by Abraham to popular Canaanite religious practice. Contrary to the practices of the Canaanites, human sacrifice was not a possibility for the people of Israel (Deut. 12:29-31).

To the patriarchs, Canaan was the land of promise; it was "a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:8). Moses, in his farewell address to the new generation of Israelites who were about to enter the land, extolled the land of Canaan for its riches and abundance. He said: "For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land—a land with streams and

pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills" (Deut. 8:7-9). That was the land the Lord was giving the Israelite as their inheritance, the land of Canaan.

¹A. R. Millard, "The Canaanites," *Peoples of Old Testament Times*, D. J. Wiseman, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 34.

²Philip C. Schmitz, "Canaan," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1:829.

³William F. Albright, "The Role of the Canaanites in the History of Civilization," *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, G. Ernest Wright, ed. (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1961), 356, n.50.

⁴Eugene H. Merrill, "Deuteronomy" in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994), 177.

⁵John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 44.

⁶All Scripture references are taken from the *New International Version* unless noted otherwise.

⁷Claude F. Mariottini, "Ancient Walled Cities," *Biblical Illustrator* 15 (4, Summer 1989) 2-3, 7-10.

⁸R. K. Harrison, "Ugarit," *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1983), 460-61.

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Below: These twin basalt column bases and the surrounding foundations are the remains of one of four Canaanite temples excavated at Bethshean in northern Israel.

Lower right: Bull's head from a Canaanite temple in Hazor.

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