THE RAS SHAMRA DISCOVERY

by

Wayne Jackson, M.A.

THE RAS SHAMRA DISCOVERY

by

Wayne Jackson, M.A.

INTRODUCTION: THE FIND

In the spring of 1928, Brahim, a Syrian farmer, was plowing his field when his plow struck a slab of stone. Though initially assuming it to be a flagstone, he noticed that it had square corners. Upon extracting it from the soil, Brahim discovered a huge, underground vault containing vases, jugs, tablets, gold, silver, and pieces of ivory. When this Syrian peasant began to dispose of the artifacts, word reached the local police, who notified French authorities in Beirut (Eisenberg, 1959, p. 99). Charles Virolleaud, an expert in cuneiform, was sent to explore the site but the initial investigations proved relatively fruitless.

However, while studying a map of the vault, another French archaeologist, René Dussaud, noted its similarity to the tombs of the kings of ancient Crete. Assuming that important ruins might be found nearby, he persuaded the *Academie des Belles Lettres* in Paris to sponsor an expedition. Accordingly,

> In the spring of 1929, a French archaeological expedition directed by F.A. Schaeffer of the Strasbourg Museum and his associate, George Chenet, began the systematic excavation of Ras Shamra. The work continued for a few months each year from 1929 to the outbreak of World War 2, and it was resumed in 1950. Only a small part of the ruin has been excavated, yet it ranks as one of the most significant archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century (Pfeiffer, 1962, p. 10).

Cyrus Gordon wrote: "That Ugaritic is the greatest literary discovery from antiquity since the decipherment of the Egyptian hieroglyphs and Mesopotamian cuneiform is generally recognized (1953, p. 87).

Ras Shamra ("Fennel Head") is a sixty-five foot mound located near Minet el-Beida (White Harbor) in northern Syria. It is some seven miles north of Laodicea ad Mare and approximately fifty miles east of the point of Cyprus. Ras Shamra, as it is known today, was identified as the ancient Phoenician city of Ugarit.

In his diggings, professor Schaeffer was able to distinguish five levels of occupation at Ugarit, which he classified 1 through 5 downward. At level 5, which reached bedrock, hearths were found, along with flint and bone implements. This was a "pre-pottery" culture, although these people later were joined by farmers who used both stone and pottery vessels. Level 4 contained finely made and attractively painted

Halafian ware. At level 3 (in the latter half of the third millennium B.C.), the site was occupied by those who used "the so-called Khirbet Kerak ware"; this level was devastated by fire. Level 2 revealed that Ugarit expanded into a rich commercial center with economic exchanges with the 12th Egyptian dynasty. Most of Schaeffer's work was performed on level 1 (dated from 1600-1200 B.C.), which contained fortifications, temples, and, in particular, the palace that contained numerous cuneiform documents (Cottrell, 1960, pp. 405-406).

THE TABLETS

When the French expedition commenced its diggings in April 1929, "scarcely had a month gone by before one of the most important discoveries of the century was made. This was the uncovering of a scribal school and library, adjoining a temple. Most of the tablets in the library were written in a strange new script; but they were soon deciphered by Semitic scholars, one of whom had been decorated by the French government for brilliant work on an enemy cipher in the First World War" (Wright, 1962, pp. 106-107). This strange new script soon was discovered to be Ugaritic. D.J. Wiseman, professor of Assyriology at the University of London, has explained:

> The Ugaritic alphabet employs a unique combination of wedges to form twenty-nine letters, written, like Akkadian, left to write, and must have been a local invention, since the letters peculiar to it are added at the end of the alphabet, which otherwise follows the same order as Hebrew. Two inscriptions in this script found in Palestine, on a tablet at Beth-shemesh, and on a bronze knife from near Tabor, may show that this form of writing was widely used. Within eight months of the publication of the first fifty tablets by C. Virolleaud in 1930 he had deciphered the alphabet with the help of H. Bauer and E. Dhorme, though discussion continues on the relation of the NW Semitic dialect to "Canaanite" and Hebrew. The importance of the 350 or more Ugaritic texts for biblical studies was quickly recognized, and few aspects of Old Testament studies are unaffected by these discoveries, which also give promise of further literary finds from Palestine (1974, p. 70).

When professor Wiseman suggested that few areas of Old Testament study are unaffected by the discovery of the Ras Shamra, he did not overstate the case. The Ugaritic documents have been a multiple benefactor to the serious Bible student. The balance of this paper will deal with several of these aspects.

The religion of Ugarit was similar in many ways to the Canaanite system that the prophets of God consistently denounced. The chief god was El, who was believed to be the father of seventy gods and goddesses that comprised the Ugaritic pantheon. El was "a shadowy figure who apparently takes little part in the affairs of men" (Wright, 1962, pp. 106-107). El's wife, the mother of the pantheon's gods and god-

desses, was Athirat or Elat. Her name appears in the form "Asherah" in the Old Testament (rendered "groves" in the KJV; cf. Judges 3:7). Of El's sons and daughters, Baal was the most popular. He was the storm god who brought rain and fertility, and who frequently was in conflict with Mot, the god of death.

El appears to have been a schizophrenic sort of character who at times was "of mild character, good humored," never refusing what was asked of him, yet at other times, he might kill his father, or his son, or cut off the head of his daughter (Wright, 1962, p. 107). Though Baal was the offspring of El and Asherah, Ugaritic texts indicate that eventually Baal drove El from the leading place and took both his position and his wife (Kapelrud, 1952, pp. 77-78). Significantly, the Bible represents Baal and Asherah as counterparts (cf. 1 Kings 18:19). Accordingly, the Asherim (plural of Asherah) of the Bible were the female cult objects that corresponded to the male objects of the Baal cult (Wright, 1962, pp. 29-32).

Though there was some similarity in the sacrifices offered in the Canaanite system (both in the names and kinds of animals offered) to that of the Israelites, the former was highly polytheistic, extremely sensuous, and not infrequently violent. Thompson observed: "In the temples of the Canaanites there were male and female prostitutes ('sacred' men and women) and all sorts of sexual excesses were practiced. It was believed that in some way these rites caused the crops and the herds to prosper" (1975, p. 84). Also, "from numerous biblical and Roman allusions we know that child sacrifice was occasionally practiced, the story of the Moabite king, Mesha (2 Kings 3:27) immediately coming to mind" (Wright, 1962, p. 112) "Funerary jars have been found with the bodies of young children distorted by suffocation as they struggled for life after having been buried alive as a sacrifice to Canaanite gods" (Wilson, 1973, p. 85).

Though there were some vague similarities between the Israelitish and Canaanitish religions, the differences were far greater. In an excellent article that originally appeared in *The Biblical Archaeologist* (1943, 6:1), G. Ernest Wright called attention to some of these. First, Israel's official religion was strictly monotheistic. Israel, for example, did not personify elements of nature; rather, all things were created by Jehovah. Second, Yah-Wah of Israel is not shrouded in mythology. He does not war, love, etc., with other gods. He does not die, rise, etc. Third, Israel's God was a God of history Who moved among the people. And although anthropomorphic language was used of Him to accommodate their limited understanding,

yet, He was vastly superior to man. Fourth, the God of the Old Testament was alone. He had no female counterpart; in fact, biblical Hebrew has no word for "goddess." Fifth, Israel made no images of Jehovah. Not a single example of a male figurine of Yah-Wah has been found in the ruins of Israel. Sixth, there is a complete absence of morality in the gods of Canaan. And seventh, the concept of a God who has entered into a "covenant" with His people is unique to Israel (Wright, 1974, 3[4]:97-108). In view of the corruptness of the Canaanite religion, it is not difficult to understand why the Lord demanded their extermination by the Israelites upon the latter's entrance into the "Promised Land." Their "cup of iniquity" was full indeed (Genesis 15:16).

THE LANGAUGE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Prior to 1925, the student of Hebrew was primarily trained in classical Arabic. Though this is still important, today's student is given a more basic training in NW Semitic languages, especially Ugaritic. Because of the discovery at Ras Shamra, the evolution of the Hebrew script now can be traced with considerable accuracy from about 1500 B.C. to modern times (Wright, 1962, p. 215). Moreover, as Kelso noted: "The Ugaritic texts, for example, have given us new grammar, vocabulary and syntax, which have enabled us to translate passages easily, which once were an enigma" (1966, p. 160).

The Ugaritic texts included a variety of scripts: Sumero-Akkadian syllabic cuneiform, the native alphabetic cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Hittite hieroglyphs, and the Agean syllabary. An even larger variety of languages is represented: Sumerans, Akkadian, Hurrian, Hittite, Egyptian, Ugaritic, and whatever language(s) turn out to be involved in Agean syllabary (Gordon, 1966, pp. 13-14).

Further, to the scholars' great amazement, it was discovered that the sequence of the Ugaritic alphabet was the same as modern Hebrew, revealing that the Hebrew alphabet goes back at least 3,500 years. Cyrus Gordon, an expert in the field, commented:

> Even the simplest school texts are of extraordinary interest: they consist of the letters of the alphabet already in the fixed traditional order: a b g ḫ d h w z ḫ t y k l m z^ n ṣ s ' p ṣ q r s^ g$ t e u sə. This embodies the same alphabetic tradition that has come down to us through the Phoenicians/Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans. To be sure, changes have occurred during the long chain of transmission, but a b-d---h--k l m n -pqr-t in our English ABC appear in the same sequence as in the Ugaritic alphabet, not by accident, but for clear historic reasons. The Hebrew sequence of a b g d h w z ḫ t y k l m n s ' p ṣ q r sə t agrees

even more strikingly with the Ugaritic for the simple reason that they were used for ^{closely related Se-}mitic languages in the vicinity of Phoenicia. This alphabet is the most important and useful single invention of civilized man (1966, p. 15).

The importance of the above is two-fold: First, "these discoveries have fully refuted the argument of higher critics that the lack of an alphabetic script in the second millennium B.C. was proof enough that the patriarchal stories could not have been written at that time" (Horn, 1963, p. 19). Second, these linguistical discoveries have been a great boon to Old Testament exegesis.

UGARIT AND EXEGESIS

Study of the Ras Shamra texts has thrown a floodlight on numerous passages of Old Testament scripture. Many verses that formerly were unclear have been illustrated by these remarkable documents.

(1) For years scholars were puzzled by the Mosaic prohibition: "Thou shalt not boil a kid in its mother's milk" (Exodus 23:19; cf. 34:26; Deuteronomy 14:21). Adam Clarke felt that the design of the commandment was basically to prevent blunting moral sensitivity and developing hardness of heart (n.d., 1:422). It now is known, however, that boiling a kid in milk to appease certain deities was a common Canaanite ritual. A Ugaritic text says: "Over the fire seven times the sacrificers cook a kid in milk..." (Driver, 1956, p. 121). The Mosaic regulation, therefore, was to prevent mimicry of heathenism.

(2) In Deuteronomy 23:17-18 Moses declared:

There shall be no prostitute of the daughters of Israel, neither shall there be a sodomite of the sons of Israel. Thou shalt not bring the hire of a harlot, or the wages of a dog, into the house of Jehovah thy God for any vow: for even both these are an abomination unto Jehovah thy God.

Again, Moses was attempting to inoculate the children of Israel against the immoral practices of paganism. From Ras Shamra it was discovered that "sacred prostitution, both male and female, was exceedingly common, practiced in the name of religion at the various centers of worship. Fertility as a goddess actually became a sacred prostitute, who, curiously enough, was called 'the Holy One'" (Wright, 1962, p. 113).

(3) The great confrontation between Elijah and the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah (1 Kings 18) takes on great meaning in light of the information from Ugarit. Elijah's challenge was clear. Let a sacrifice be prepared and laid on an altar. These cultists then were to call upon Baal to ignite the offering. Pre-

sumably this should have been an easy task for "the storm god." A limestone stele from Ugarit shows Baal in his most characteristic role as "the thunderer who mounts the clouds" (Frank, 1975, p. 52). He is pictured with a lightening bolt in his hand. Baal, however, could not avail; it was Elijah's God who consumed the sacrifice! Moreover, when Elijah prayed that all rain and dew cease (1 Kings 17:1), and such did for three years and six months (1 Kings 18:1; James 5:17), he literally cut off Baal's water, for this god was a deity of rain and fertility.

(4) Too, it is possible that the frequent emphasis in the Old Testament on Jehovah as "the living God" may have been a prophetical reaction to the Canaanite belief in the repetitious dying-rising of Baal.

(5) "A study of legal Ugaritic documents written in a dialect of Canaanite has helped S.A. Lowenstamm to correct a crucial mistranslation of a well-known verse in Habakkuk (2:3), namely that the word '✶d (the adverb 'yet' or 'still') should be read as '⬢d (the noun for 'testimony'). The line should therefore read 'For the vision is a testimony of the appointed time.' This explains the reason for the instruction in the preceding verse: 'Yahweh answered me: Write the vision, make it plain upon the tablets….' It proclaims God's will that **prophecy should be recorded**; and when it is fulfilled, the written record will prove that the 'word of God' has actualized itself in history" (Cornfeld, 1976, p. 138).

(6) The description of Moses that "his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated" (Deuteronomy 34:7) was rather enigmatic for years. Since the word for "natural force" [l⬤a✚] is similar to the Hebrew term for "jaw," [l^e ✚✚y] Jerome (in his Latin Vulgate) assumed it was a reference to the great prophet's teeth. In the Ras Shamra tablets, though, the word was used twice of manly vigor (Free, 1960, p. 62). The point is: Moses' death was due to his former disobedience, not to physical degeneracy.

Other examples of how the Ugaritic literature assists in Old Testament interpretation can be found in chapter 8 of Charles Pfeiffer's book, *Ras Shamra and the Bible*.

RAS SHAMRA AND HIGHER CRITICISM

The expression "higher criticism" has to do with the study of sources, times, and authorship of ancient literary documents. Most of the higher critics, influenced by German rationalism, have been destructive in their approach to Bible study. Their investigations have proceeded along lines buttressed with set

presuppositions. First, there is a denial of the miraculous (e.g.: predictive prophecy); so, messages containing vivid prophecy are assigned dates contemporary with the events described and thus are viewed merely as history. Second, it is assumed that the biblical narratives developed along evolutionary lines; hence, material that appears technical must be assigned late dating, even if a great variety of evidence argues for a much earlier period. Third, based upon alleged literary strata or sources, critics, through "comparative literary studies," have dissected certain Old Testament documents according to authors, times, etc. And not infrequently—based upon a sheer lack of knowledge—critics have been inclined to charge the Bible with error.

The finds at Ras Shamra, however, have rendered some mortal blows to the theories of destructive higher criticism.

(1) The Graf-Wellhausen theory, which divides the Pentateuch into JEPD sources, is well known. This school of criticism not only has attempted to dissect the five books of Moses on the basis of various names of God, e.g.: "Jehovah," "Elohim," etc., but the claim also is made that multiple authorships can be determined by peculiar use of words, expressions, diction, etc. For example, the critics base one of their arguments on the usage of two Hebrew pronouns, *'ani* and *'ānōk*. Documentarians assign *'ānōk* to JE and *'ani* to P. Harold G. Stigers has shown, however, that there are contextual considerations (involving different emphases) that relate to the use of these pronouns. Additionally, he observed:

> It is to be observed that no documentary usage regarding language as is alleged by the documentarians can be supported by a study of other languages. In fact, Ugaritic usage shows the contrary and supports the view presented herein. The *Ugaritic Handbook* shows that both forms, *'ank* and *'an* (*'ānōk* and *'ani*) are present in Ugaritic and **frequently enough in the same text**....The fact that it is now recognized that Ugaritic stands quite close to Canaanite ($\cong$ Hebrew) is a witness that the view presented by this writer [the unity of the Pentateuch—WJ] is closer to fact than that of the documentarians and is to be preferred (1976, p. 23, emp. in orig.).

(2) Wellhausen also argued that some of the technical terms of sacrifice (in the so-called P document) obviously were related to the period of the Exile. However, it now is known that many of the sacrificial words were in use in Canaan at the time of Moses e.g.: *'ishsheh* (offering by fire), *sh^elōmm*

(peace offerings), etc. Gleason Archer wrote: "It is hard to avoid the conclusion that these terms were already current in Palestine at the time of Moses and the Conquest, and that the whole line of reasoning which made out the terminology of the Levitical cultus to be late is devoid of function" (1964, pp. 149-150).

(3) The devotees of the documentary hypothesis also have argued that the presence of Aramaic words in a biblical text indicates a post-Exilic origin. Again, though, the discovery of numerous Aramaisms from the Ugaritic literature (admittedly contemporary with Moses) have exploded this baseless view (Archer, 1964, pp. 127-128).

(4) Wellhausen also contended that the "tabernacle" of the wilderness was nothing more than an idealized view of the temple. Thus, the narratives describing it were historical fictions and the work of a post-Exilic, priestly compiler. Archaeological studies reveal, however, the use of portable tent shrines in several ancient cultures. Such objects existed in Egypt more than 2,000 years before Christ, and "recent studies have pointed to the fact that at Ugarit the Canaanite deity El may have had some such portable shrine as a regular feature of his cult in the Amarna age" (Davis, 1971, p. 242).

(5) For years critics asserted that most of the psalms were composed after the Exile. Julius Wellhausen declared: "The question is not whether the Psalter contains any post-Exilic psalms, but whether it contains any which are pre-Exilic" (see Smith, 1975, pp. 1424-1425). But

> close affinity of many of the psalms with the style, forms and expressions in the Ras Shamra epic poetry from ancient Ugarit, dating from the fourteenth century B.C., demonstrates the antiquity of many of these odes.... Unless one's thinking is distorted by the unsound presuppositions of the Wellhausen school, it is reasonable to view the bulk of the psalms as pre-Exilic, some dating even from before the Davidic-Solomonic era (Unger, 1974, p. 899).

(6) Because of theological bias against predictive prophecy, some scholars in relatively recent times have contended that Isaiah 7:14 is not primarily a Messianic passage and that *almah* ("virgin" KJV, ASV) should be, in fact, merely "young woman" (RSV). Professor William S. Beck wrote: "On the Syrian coast of Ras Shamra a tablet was unearthed, which is almost seven hundred years older than Isaiah 7:14. It contains an account of the celebration of two deities, Nikkal and Yareh. Nikkal is the GLMT (ALMAH). Be-

fore the marriage takes place, it is announced that the girl will have a son: 'A BETHULAH will bear—behold! an ALMAH will bear a son.' Both words refer to the same unmarried goddess. This virgin gives birth to a child who is the child of a god" (1967, p. 6). Edward J. Young said:

> There has been much insistence, lately, that the famous passage Isaiah 7:14 is not a direct prophecy of the virgin birth of Christ, and that the word *almah,* which it contains, should be translated merely as "young woman." If, in reply to this assertion, the evangelical were simply to rely upon the arguments which were employed by the scholars of the last century, his case would greatly lose force. Now, however, he may appeal to the usage made upon the remarkable texts found in 1929 at Ras Shamra. There he discovers an employment of the word similar to that of Isaiah's. He discovers that in these texts the word is used of an unmarried woman. He also discovers that on certain Aramaic incantation bowls, the corresponding form of the Hebrew word *bethulah* is used of a married woman. Thus, he has reassurance that the traditional translation "virgin" is to be preferred over "young woman" (1968, p. 38).

CONCLUSION

We may be thankful indeed for the careful work of archaeologists whose work at places like Ugarit appear to have come "for such a time as this."

REFERENCES

Archer, Gleason (1964), *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago, IL: Moody).

Beck, William F. (1967), "What Does *Almah* Mean?," *The Lutheran News*, April 3.

Clarke, Adam (no date) *Clarke's Commentary* (New York: Abingdon), 1:422.

Cottrell, Leonard, editor (1960), *The Concise Encyclopedia of Archaeology* (New York: Hawthorn).

Cornfeld, Gaalyah (1976), *Archaeology of the Bible: Book by Book* (New York: Harper & Row).

Davis, John J. (1971), *Moses and the Gods of Egypt* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker).

Driver, G.R. (1956), *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark).

Eisenberg, Azriel (1959), *Voices from the Past* (London: Abelard-Schuman).

Frank, Harry Thomas (1975), *Discovering the Biblical World* (Maplewood, NJ: Harper & Row).

Free, Joseph (1960), "Archaeology," *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker).

Gordon, Cyrus H. (1953), *Introduction to Old Testament Times* (Venton, NJ: Venton).

Gordon, Cyrus H. (1966), *Ugarit and Minoan Crete* (New York: W.W. Norton).

Horn, Siegfried H. (1963) *Records of the Past Illuminate the Bible* (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald).

Kapelrud, Arvid S. (1952), *Baal in the Ras Shamra Texts* (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gadd).

Kelso, James (1966), *Archaeology and Our Old Testament Contemporaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan).

Pfeiffer, Charles F. (1962), *Ras Shamra and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker).

Smith, R.L. (1975), "Book of Psalms," *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Charles Pfeiffer and Howard Vos (Chicago, IL: Moody).

Stigers, Harold G. (1976), *A Commentary on Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan).

Thompson, J.A. (1975) *The Bible and Archaeology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans).

Unger, Merrill F. (1974), *Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago, IL: Moody).

Wilson, Clifford (1973), *That Incredible Book—The Bible* (Melbourne, Australia: Word of Truth).

Wiseman, D.J. (1974) "Archaeology," *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J.D. Douglas (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans).

Wright, Ernest G. (1943), *The Biblical Archaeologist*, February.

Wright, G. Ernest (1962), *Biblical Archaeology* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster).

Wright, G. Ernest (1974), "How Did Israel Differ From Her Neighbors?," *Bible and Spade*.

Young, Edward J. (1968), *Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, ed. Carl F.H. Henry (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker).