

Chapter II

UGARITIC LITERATURE AND ITS GRECO-HEBREW AFFINITIES

The East Mediterranean was, as we have noted, the scene of an international synthesis in the centuries when Ugarit flourished. Not only isolated cultural details, but whole cultural complexes were then being transmitted over wide areas. This process was due largely to the mobility of guildsmen, whose technical services were in demand over wide areas, transcending national, linguistic, and ethnic boundaries. While buildings were not transferred from land to land, builders were. This explains much of the spread of certain architectural features. There was no point in importing fragile ceramics for ordinary household use. It was the potters, rather than their wares, who could move without breakage.¹ Warriors, organized into guilds according to their functions, were so mobile that the same guilds were usually represented in both opposing armies. When Egypt battled against her Asiatic foes, members of the *maryannu* guild of charioteers could be found on both sides.²

Traders and even priests ranked among the mobile guildsmen and as such wandered far and wide. Thus Ugaritic text 81³ mentions traders (*mkrm* = Hebrew *môk^erîm*) and two guilds of priests:

¹ This does not mean that goods were not imported. They were—including fragile pottery. Yet at the same time we must realize that craftsmen were imported too (II Kings 24:14; *Odyssey* 17:382–386).

² War, of course, sets in motion waves of refugees who are even better carriers of culture than the troops who have caused their plight.

³ The alphabetic Ugaritic texts are available in *UT*.

khn̄m (= Hebrew *kôh^anîm*) and *qdš̄m* (= Hebrew *q^edēshîm*). Though the *q^edēshîm* were eliminated from the cult of Judah by King Josiah around 621 B.C. (II Kings 23:7), the legitimate priests of the Jews have continued to be called *kôh^anîm* throughout biblical history, and down to the present.⁴

The international spread of religious guilds helped disseminate cultic practices and religious beliefs far and wide. Since Ugarit and Israel were both in Canaan, the cultic connections between them are close. Thus the term inaccurately translated in the English Bible as "peace offering" is identical in Hebrew (*sh^elāmîm*) and Ugaritic (spelled *šlmm* consonantly). El is the head of the pantheon in Israel as well as in Ugarit. And although biblical monotheism eventually eliminated the worship of the Ugaritic-Canaanite gods, including Baal, Anath, Asherah, Astarte, Yamm, Dagon, Šaḥar, Shemesh, Yārē^aḥ,⁵ the Hebrews were not only exposed to them through their pagan neighbors, but as the Prophets tell us, frequently committed apostasy by worshiping them down to the time of the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century B.C.

The actual names of the West Semitic gods do not usually survive in Greek; "Adon-is" (from *Ādôn*, "lord," an epithet of Baal at Ugarit) is an exception. But that other West Semitic names of gods had reached Greek soil is quite clear from other evidence. Pausanias (2:25:10) records that a site near Epidauris used to be called "Sapyselaton," which is distinctively Ugaritic.⁶ "Sapys" corresponds to Ugaritic *špš̄*, the sun "goddess" (*elat*). The form of "Sapys" (with *p*, instead of the *m* that normally appears in Semitic *Shamash*) and its feminine gender (in contrast to Akkadian *Shamash*, which is masculine) link "Sapyselaton" unmistakably with the Ugaritic branch of Northwest Semitic.

⁴ This illustrates the fact the Hebrews sometimes borrowed from (as in the case of the *kôh^anîm*), and at other times reacted against (as in the case of the *q^edēshîm*), their Canaanite milieu.

⁵ A pithy description of each god is given by M. H. Pope and W. Röllig in their monograph "Syrien: Die Mythologie der Ugariter und Phönizer," appearing in *Wörterbuch der Mythologie* (edited by H. W. Haussig), Stuttgart, 1962, pp. 219–312 and plates I–VIII.

⁶ M. C. Astour makes this observation in his important book *Hellenosemitica* Leiden, 1965, p. 103, n. 1.

The widespread feature of "the mountain of the gods" is frequently mentioned in Ugaritic literature. The sacred mountain was called "Saphon," which is also attested in the Bible, where it is sometimes identified with Jerusalem.⁷ In any given culture that is spread far in time or place, the location of the sacred mountain is likely to shift. There is many a Mount Olympos in the Greek world. Moreover, the holy mountain can be transferred to a different locale with a different name. Thus Mount Ida (whether of Crete or the Troad) parallels Olympos when conditions demand. "Saphon" designated several different sacred mountains, depending on when and where the devotees lived. Moreover, the sacred mountain of Israel shifted to Mount Sinai, Mount Ebal or Mount Gerizim, Mount Zion, and so on, depending on the period and location of Yahweh's followers. In Ugaritic literature, Baal dwells on the heights of Saphon. (El, however, resides at the source of the two cosmic rivers.)

El, the head of the pantheon, is also called Thôr, "the Bull." El is identified with the God of Israel, and it is interesting that in Judges 6:25 he is mentioned as *hash-Shôr*, "the Bull." Inasmuch as this word for "bull" occurs in all the ancient Semitic languages with the regular sound shifts proper to original Semitic words, it cannot easily be regarded as a borrowing from elsewhere. In Arabic it is *thawr*-, in Hebrew and Akkadian it is *shôr*-, in Aramaic it is *tôr*-; it cannot be separated from Greek and Latin *taur*-. The simplest explanation is that it entered the Aegean through Semitic channels, and fanned out in the Indo-European world with the spread of the Minoans and their cultural heirs. Verbal similarity is not the only basis for this view. The role of the bull in religion and sport⁸ is strikingly similar in both the Semitic and Indo-European segments of Mediterranean civilization, especially in the Minoan-Mycenaean sphere.

El is the principal figure in a religious drama (text 52) telling how the Great God sired progeny from two human wives. First they

⁷ E.g., Psalm 48:3 (48:2 in the King James Bible). In Isaiah 14:13, however, Saphon is some distant and inaccessible Olympos.

⁸ See *The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations*, pp. 51-52, 70, 275-276.

bore him Dawn and Dusk; later they bore him the Seven Good Gods of fertility, who symbolize a seven-year cycle of plenty. This text is important for many reasons. It is a milestone in the evolution of the drama, for it is equipped with stage directions and is definitely a production of myth and ritual in dramatic form. It also shows that the sabbatical cycle of the Old Testament is a religious and agricultural institution taken over by the Hebrews from the older, native population of Canaan. It anticipates the biblical books of Hosea and Ezekiel (23:1 ff.) in attributing fertility⁹ to the conjugal relationship of God¹⁰ or his prophet¹¹ with two women. The biblical prophets could hardly have intended this theme to be taken literally. The Ugaritic text rather suggests that Hosea and Ezekiel were drawing on an old literary theme for poetic imagery much as we draw on Greco-Roman mythology today.

In other Ugaritic texts concerning El, Asherah appears as his consort who bore him "the seventy" gods. In popular religion, Asherah persisted as El's consort in Judah until the purifying effect of the Exile. The account of Josiah's reform suggests that the women dedicated to the cult of Asherah in the Jerusalem Temple (II Kings 23:7)¹² were considered to be in the service of Yahweh's wife. Needless to say, Josiah put a stop to it.

It often happens in the history of pantheons that younger gods eclipse the older ones as objects of adoration. As Zeus eclipses his father Cronus and grandfather Uranus, Baal and Anath are young gods who outshine the older El and Asherah in the mythological texts. Baal and Anath are the main deities (in role, though not in rank) in the bulk of the myths.

Several themes are woven into the Baal and Anath Cycle. The wars of Baal and Anath are prominent. Anath nearly annihilates mankind before she is sated with slaughter and spares the survivors. On another occasion she boasts of aiding Baal against many a foe,

⁹ Quite clearly in Hosea (4:3; 6:3; 9:16; and others); by implication in Ezekiel.

¹⁰ So in Ezekiel 23.

¹¹ The Prophet Hosea marries the women, but they stand for Israel and Judah, who figure as the wives, so to speak, of God.

¹² However garbled this may be in the Bible translations, this is crystal-clear in the original Hebrew.

including the monster of evil, Leviathan. The slaying of the seven-headed Leviathan by the god(s) of goodness, shows that the dualistic conflict between good and evil entered the biblical tradition with the absorption of the pre-Hebraic heritage of Canaan. Psalm 74:14 attributes the victory over the many-headed Leviathan to Yahweh. The terminology (not only "Leviathan," but also his epithets, such as "the evil serpent," "the crooked serpent," and "Tannin," as in Isaiah 27:1) leaves no doubt, for it is verbally identical in Ugaritic and Hebrew. We are dealing with a specific borrowing, not with the reappearance of a universal theme.

Baal's kingship has to be won and defended by battle. With the help of two magic clubs given to him by the god of craftsmanship (Kothar-and-Ḥasis), Baal vanquishes the sea god Yamm ("Sea") and wrests the kingship from him. Baal also has to contend periodically with Mot, the god of death and sterility. Since the periodicity of the struggles between Baal and Mot is given as seven years, the struggles must be associated with the sabbatical cycle,¹³ whereby years of plenty, or of famine, were grouped in sevens in the minds of the people.

After Baal achieves kingship, he needs a palace. The palace is to be of huge dimensions, built of gold, silver, and lapis lazuli, and supported by columns made from the cedars of Lebanon. The architect is none other than Kothar-and-Ḥasis, who proposes that a window be included. Baal for a while resists, but at last agrees to this recommendation.¹⁴ But through the window comes misfortune, probably in the person of Mot, whose lethal housebreaking through a window reverberates in Jeremiah (9:20; 9:21 in the King James Bible). The mythological erection of Baal's palace is to be compared

¹³ The annual death and resurrection of Baal (and for that matter also of Tammuz and Osiris) must not be read from Frazer's *Golden Bough* into the ancient texts. I demonstrated that we are dealing not with annual but with sabbatical cyclicity, back in 1949 (*Ugaritic Literature*, Rome, 1949, pp. 3-5), and this view has gradually been gaining acceptance; note Pope and Röllig, pp. 263-264.

¹⁴ The excavated buildings at Ugarit suggest that windows were not part of the old local tradition. Baal therefore wanted no windows in his palace. The architecture of Crete, however, called for windows, which is why Kothar-and-Ḥasis, whose atelier was on Caphtor (Crete), insisted on them. Thus Ugaritic literature reflects the introduction of windowed palaces from Crete.

with the historic building of Solomon's Temple. In both cases, the edifice was required because the god had grown in stature and needed an impressive home. In both cases we are dealing with Phoenician craftsmanship, imported from the artistic center of the Phoenician world. The cedars of Lebanon in both cases were used as material. Solomon got Hiram of Tyre to provide the best Phoenician materials and workmanship. The Ugaritic texts, however, hark back to conditions around the middle of the second millennium, when Phoenician civilization was centered on Minoan Crete. Kothar-and-Ḥasis is represented as coming to Baal from Caphtor (Crete); his name is pure Semitic. All this can only mean that Crete was part of the same Northwest Semitic sphere as Ugarit, culturally, religiously, and linguistically. As Solomon (in the tenth century B.C.) turned to Phoenicia, so Ugarit (around the middle of the second millennium B.C.) looked to Crete, for the best art in the contemporary West Semitic sphere.

Baal and Mot, being opposites, are natural enemies. On one occasion when Baal is summoned to face Mot in the underworld, Baal mates with a heifer, who in time bears him a bull calf as a son.¹⁵

¹⁵ We should distinguish between the cult of the old bull (identified with El) and the cult of the young bull calf. The calf born to Baal is called *mt* (pronounced something like *moshe*), a name of Egyptian derivation; cf. the many *-mose* names, such as Thut-mose, "Thoth is born." Moses ("Mose-s," *Moshe* in Hebrew) is apparently named after the calf born to the Canaanite Baal, because true Egyptians never used *Mose* without another element, such as *Thut-* (Thutmose), *Ra°-* (Ramose), *Ah-* (Ahmose), and the like. That the family of Moses was devoted to the cult of the calf is supported by the fact that it was his brother Aaron who presided over the setting up of the Golden Calf while Moses was getting the Law on Sinai. I Kings 12:28-29 tells of the Golden Calves worshiped by Israel in the shrines at Bethel and Dan, where they were regarded as the gods who had brought Israel out of Egypt. It is interesting to note that the consonantal text of Judges 18:30 attributes the cult at Dan to Jonathan, son of Gershom, son of Moses. A raised letter has been inserted scribally to alter "Moses" into "Manasseh," so as to whitewash the descendants of Moses. But the text is clear, and scholars are generally agreed that Jonathan is the grandson of the Lawgiver Moses. The agony of Moses is apparent once we realize that he had not only to elevate a nation from idolatry to monotheism, but also to contend with the opposition of his own family. His failure with his own descendants is all too apparent. The historic triumph of the Lawgiver is darkened by the personal tragedy of a great man who shapes the future of mankind but cannot impart his message to his own family. There is a good reason why the descendants of Moses have no place in the mainstream of Judaism.

Copulation between man and beast thus found a place in Canaanite religion. In all probability, this rite was acted out by a priest and a heifer in the course of a cultic drama, because the whole religion hinged on the fertility cult reflected in the mythological texts. The sharp Hebrew reaction to this bestiality is expressed in Scripture, which clearly states that such abominations had defiled the inhabitants of Canaan (Leviticus 18:23-24). Much of Hebrew religion and morality is the Israelite reaction to Canaanite practices.

While we do not have abundant textual material bearing on Dagon, we may conclude that he was quite important, since his temple has been unearthed at Ugarit, and sometimes Baal is called Dagon's Son. In the Old Testament, Dagon is the chief god of the Philistines. The name "Dag-on" seems to be formed from *dāg*, "fish," plus the suffix *-ôn*, an appropriate name for the god of a sea people such as the Philistines, who came from Crete. The occurrence of the name spelled syllabically *Da-gu-na* in the Minoan tablets from Hagia Triada is not surprising.

One of the Ugaritic texts (no. 77) belongs to the moon cult, and describes the wedding between the Canaanite moon god Yariḥ and the Sumero-Akkadian moon goddess Nikkal. The tablet is of interest because it reflects the human institution of marriage and contains a description of the ceremony, with references to bride-price, dowry, and other payments. The purpose of the mythological wedding is fertility in keeping with the lunar agricultural calendar. It is predicted, through an annunciation formula anticipating the Bible, that the union will be fertile and produce offspring. The text states that "the virgin will give birth" and "lo the maid will bear a son"—a formula that reverberates in the famous Immanuel prophecy in Isaiah 7:14.

The occurrence in a Ugaritic text of *Yw-il* as El's son has stirred up some understandable controversy. But the text is clear and the reading makes sense. The form *Yaw-* or *Yô* occurs early for "Yahweh."¹⁶ With *-il* added, it is exactly the Hebrew name *Yô-ēl*, "Joel."

¹⁶ It is embedded in the name of Moses' mother, "Jochebed" (written *Yw-kbd* in Hebrew), and must therefore be pre-Mosaic in Israel.