

INFLUENCE OF UGARIT ON THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

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ABSTRACT

Prior to the discovery of the Ugaritic texts at Ras Shamra in 1929, the Hebrew Bible was considered the leading authority on the Canaanite religion. An abundance of tablets were uncovered at Ras Shamra, disclosing that Ugaritic is of great significance for research on the development of the Canaanite script and literature. Although belonging to the Canaanite family, the Ugaritic cuneiform alphabetic and consonant script is closer to biblical Hebrew. Both in context and language, epics in the Ugaritic and the biblical literature have much in common. The majority of these texts are of mythological character, furnishing information on the cults of, inter alia, the deities Ba'al, El, and Asherah. The Ugaritic texts evince certain cultural similarities with early Israelite material and thus provide some background regarding the development of the Israelite religion. The aim of this article is to indicate that the Canaanite cult and the gods of the Ugaritic pantheon played a significant role in the religion of Israel. Knowledge of this role contributes to our understanding of the history of the Hebrew Bible.

INTRODUCTION

In 1929, excavations started on the remains of the ancient city of Ugarit in northern Syria, identified at Ras Shamra. A library of hundreds of tablets was discovered. These tablets contain substantial segments of legendary narratives, as well as mythological and ritual texts. Before this discovery, the Hebrew Bible was regarded as the leading authority on the Canaanite religion. Apart from the significance of this discovery for the understanding of the influence of Ugarit on the religion of the Israelites, and thus on the Hebrew Bible, these tablets are also of major importance for research on the development of the Canaanite script and literature. Similarly, epics in the Ugaritic and biblical literature have much in common, both in context and language. The majority of texts, being of mythological nature, afford information on the cult of, inter alia, the storm god Ba'al, as well as on the cults of El, the chief god of the pantheon, and the goddess Asherah. Characteristics of Ba'al, particularly as storm god, but also as warrior god, were transferred to Yahweh. Likewise, attributes of El

were associated with Yahweh; some scholars suggest that Yahweh developed from Canaanite El. The goddess Asherah, Canaanite Athirat, who might have been considered the consort of Yahweh by the Israelites, is often mentioned in the Hebrew Bible.

New theories regarding a Canaanite origin for the Israelites, based on archaeological data, indicate that it is not possible that all ancestors of Israel came from both the cities of Canaan and from Egypt. Most archaeologists agree that evidence points to a population surge in Palestine in Iron Age I, particularly in the hill country. These settlers were not foreign invaders, but emerged predominantly from Canaanite society (Dever 2003:153, 181, 194). Some scholars, however, indicate that, as Ugarit was destroyed during the twelfth century BCE and Israel as nation emerged only much later, it is unlikely that Ugarit could have played any role in the Israelite religion. The Ugaritic texts are, nonetheless, a significant source of information on the Canaanite gods, and on certain beliefs and rituals. In the light of the view of many scholars lately that the Israelites were indigenous to the land of Canaan, as well as numerous references in the Hebrew Bible to Canaanite deities, these texts from Ras Shamra are invaluable to interpret particular aspects in the Hebrew Bible.

Purpose of research

As an in-depth discussion of the mythology and religion practised at Ugarit is not possible within the extent of an article, the main concern of this article is to assess the relevance of the discovery at Ras Shamra for biblical studies. The purpose is to contemplate the influence of the Canaanite religion, culture and beliefs, and thus indirectly also that of Ugarit, on the Israelites, thereby clarifying particular aspects of the religion of the Israelites, further enhancing our understanding of the Hebrew Bible.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL YIELD AT RAS SHAMRA

Ugarit in the late second millennium BCE

As mentioned, excavations at Ras Shamra in northern Syria revealed the remains of the ancient city of Ugarit.¹ The site is situated near a small harbour on the

¹ An accidental discovery in 1928 disclosed a royal necropolis. On closer examination

Mediterranean, known as Minet el-Beida, or “White Harbour”, due to the whiteness of the rocks at the entrance to the harbour. Artefacts uncovered disclosed the cosmopolitan nature of this ancient city. Among the various objects found was a statuette of a god subsequently identified as a figure representing the Canaanite deity Ba‘al. Two years after the initial excavations at the site in 1929, the identity of the ancient city was confirmed. A tablet recovered there contains the phrase “Niqmaddu, king of Ugarit”, and as several other tablets also mention the word “Ugarit”, archaeologists concluded that Ras Shamra was the site of the ancient city of Ugarit, notably known from references in the Tell el-Amarna letters (Curtis 1985:18-20, 26).

Little is known about this Early Bronze and Middle Bronze Age city. The few architectural remains that have been uncovered cannot be safely dated due to a major earthquake, probably during the fourteenth century BCE. Fortunately, abundant Akkadian and Ugaritic tablets, all dating between the fifteenth and twelfth centuries BCE, wherein the history of the Late Bronze Age city of Ugarit has been well documented, have been discovered. Built in close proximity to the sea and harbour, the city had easy access to imported exotic and luxury goods. Ugarit became a great commercial and trading centre; huge fortunes had an effect on the technical and cultural development of the city (Negev & Gibson 2001:523). The lucrative overland and sea trade, however, became increasingly subject to robberies. Many Ugaritic texts refer to these occurrences, which the Hittite authorities relentlessly tried to contain (Singer 2011:12).

At a later stage of the excavations, historical texts were found in the royal palaces. These give exact dates and details about the last centuries of Ugarit’s history (Curtis 1985:43). Being an extensively explored city, Ras Shamra-Ugarit’s last two centuries before its downfall, specifically the last fifty years of its history, represents the best documented city of the Levant. This cosmopolitan city is mentioned in several foreign archives. King Niqmaddu II (ca. 1350-1315 BCE) was probably a contemporary of both pharaohs Akhenaten and Tutankhamun. With the weakening Egyptian influence in the Levant, Ugarit, under pressure, eventually sided with the Hittites to whom they had to pay an annual tribute comprising gold, dyed wool and garments.² During the

several stone slabs were uncovered, revealing a tomb vault containing a number of small artefacts. An initial survey of the immediate vicinity by the excavation team revealed traces of occupation from the Neolithic Period through to the Roman Period within a relatively small radius of Ras Shamra (Curtis 1985:18).

² Singer (2011:19, 21, 37, 44-45, 104). The state archives of Hattuša, the capital of the

mid-fourteenth century BCE a great disaster befell the city. According to the excavators, an earthquake and tidal wave struck the city, followed by a fire, all of which destroyed or seriously damaged buildings (Curtis 1985:43). Demanding Hittite overlords, despite their own weakening, attributed to a growing unruliness of Ugarit. This area was also subject to the widespread famine (Singer 2000:21-24). At the end of the thirteenth century BCE and the beginning of the twelfth, Ugarit was invaded by the warlike “Sea Peoples”³ responsible for the city’s destruction. Although the history of Ugarit ends in the twelfth century BCE, isolated discoveries indicate later occupations of the site (Curtis 1985:47-48).

Mythological, religious and other texts

Shortly after excavations started, the first tablets were found, written in a hitherto unknown cuneiform writing. The thirty signs were not Akkadian, but revealed an alphabetical script.⁴ A library of tablets was discovered, some of which had been used for teaching and practising, probably in a scribes’ school housed in the library (Kapelrud 1962:725-726, 729). Ugaritic is, therefore, of great significance for the research on the development of the Canaanite script and literature. Yet, although belonging to the Canaanite family, the cuneiform alphabetic and consonant script is closer to biblical Hebrew. Both in context and language epic songs that praise the deeds of gods and heroes have much in common with the biblical literature.⁵ In some

Hittites, yielded texts describing the Hittite rule of Syria. However, the Hittite administration of central and northern Syria gradually underwent some changes when the kings of Hatti became more preoccupied with internal problems. Ugarit, a Hittite vassal, was regularly reprimanded by her Hittite overlords not keeping up her vassal duties. By the end of the thirteenth century BCE these reprimands became outright threats. Urbanised societies of Late Bronze Age Syria and Palestine were also threatened by unruly elements, weakening the Hittite grip. The collapse of Late Bronze Age palace systems could have been brought about by external and internal causes. Although a severe famine ravaged the Hittite Kingdom for several decades, late thirteenth century BCE Hittite documents do not directly reveal signs of a forthcoming collapse. However, the last letters from Ugarit report dramatically on a life and death situation in this city (Singer 2011:3-14).

³ Also known as Philistines; they seemed to have travelled from the north, both by land and sea, progressing along the east Mediterranean coast (Curtis 1985:47-48). The destructive operations of the Sea Peoples are attested in a few documents, and also in the archaeological record from Ugarit (Singer 2011:116).

⁴ This Ugaritic alphabet was probably written in the fourteenth century BCE and is thus the oldest known alphabet in the world (Kapelrud 1962:728).

⁵ Negev & Gibson (2001:524). In this regard, see particularly a study of Ba’al in the Ugaritic

instances, the Ugaritic texts show particular cultural similarities with early Israelite material and also provide background, to a certain extent, regarding the development of the Israelite religion (Smith 2002:21, 27). Likewise, the yield of tablets has an enormous value for the study of the Phoenician and Canaanite religion (Kapelrud 1962:725), and consequently for our understanding of the Israelite religion. Ugaritic mythologies were either common to the cultures of Syria-Palestine, or they were imported into Ugarit from some Syro-Palestinian centre (Handy 1994:20-22, 76). The majority of Ugaritic texts are of mythological character. These texts, as well as several artefacts found at Ras Shamra, give intimations about the cult practised in Ugarit and environs (Kapelrud 1962:725-726, 729). According to historiographical material, Tyre was the major source of Canaanite religious influence on Israel (Zevit 2001:120). Various passages in the Hebrew Bible demonstrate that the Israelite prophets were well acquainted with Canaanite fertility myths and took advantage of this knowledge in their prophetic teachings.⁶ The mythological texts from Ugarit therefore furnish new information on the religion of Syria and Canaan in the first half of the second millennium BCE (Kapelrud 1962:725-726, 729) – information that is invaluable for the interpretation of particular aspects of the religion of the Israelites.

UGARITIC/CANAANITE PANTHEON

Before the discovery of the Ugaritic texts, biblical scholars who considered the Hebrew Bible as being the authority on the Canaanite religion assumed that the Israelite tribes were confronted with an alien and evil culture. Biblical narratives often refer to “foreign gods”, which Judah and Israel were not to worship (Handy 1994:37, 41). In the Hebrew Bible are numerous references to some of these Canaanite deities, particularly Ba’al and Asherah. Scholars also acknowledge that, presumably, some link existed between Canaanite El and the patriarchal god(s).

epics, in the research done by Pieter J van Zijl (1972), originally for a dissertation as partial fulfilment for the degree DLitt. Van Zijl (1972:157-242) discusses, inter alia, texts dealing with the agricultural cycle and Ba’al’s role as a god of agriculture and fertility.

⁶ The prophet Hosea is an example of speaking frequently in terms familiar to his audience; in Hosea 5:13-6:3 we have a depiction of the dying and rising god (Williams 1935:245-246).

Canaanite El

The etymology of the name or word *el* or *'il(u)*, meaning God/god, has not been determined conclusively. 'Ilu, as an appellative for deities, has been attested in some of the Ugaritic texts, such as the mythological, cultic, and epic texts. These texts furnish more than five hundred references to El, who is denoted as a distinct deity, carrying the title *mlk*, king, in the Ugaritic pantheon (Herrmann 1999b:274-275). As a proper name it occurred in the earliest stages of Semitic languages, which could indicate that this designation, alongside its use as a generic appellative, belongs to Proto-Semitic (Cross 1974:242-244). At some point in the traditions of the Syro-Palestinian religious history, Canaanite El was acknowledged as the leader of the pantheon (Handy 1994:69). Several epithets describe El, also known as father and creator; he could create by modelling from clay, by a spoken word, or even by sexual intercourse. Even so, the creation of a new human being was considered to be by way of a mental process wherein both El and Asherah participated, and not by their physical interaction (Korpel 2001:130). An important Ugaritic text, the *Hieros gamos*,⁷ recounts the birth of Shagar and Shalem,⁸ twin gods of El and his two wives (Cross 1974:246).

A well-known designation, El the Bull, is a metaphor expressing his divine dignity and strength (Herrmann 1999b:275). The occurrence of El and Shadday in parallelism⁹ reinforces the idea that Shadday is an El epithet. In Canaanite and Mesopotamian mythology the divine council consisted of high gods, each connected to a group of lesser gods. Shadday may have been the high god with whom lesser Shadday gods were linked. The latter have been associated tentatively with the biblical *šēdîm* – a term referring to a secondary or intermediary spirit or deity, which could be protective or threatening, good or bad. The name “Shadday”, and thus Shadday gods, has been found in Transjordan (Lutzky 1998:28-29, 31).

The divine council, as assembly of El, is attested in the Ugaritic myths. The

⁷ *Hieros gamos*: sacred marriage; marriage between a divine and human being (Deist 1990:114).

⁸ The names mean “Dawn” and “Dusk”, respectively (Margalith 1994:110). After their birth, according to the Ugaritic text, the twin gods left for the desert to live among the stones and trees. As the desert was not capable of sustaining life, the gods hunted on the fringe of the desert (Hadley 2000:45-46).

⁹ *Shadday*: the almighty. *El Shadday* (אֵל שַׁדַּי), as in Genesis 17:1; 28:3; 43:14; 48:3; Exodus 6:2.

concept of an assembly of the gods was a familiar religious theme in the cultures of Mesopotamia, Canaan, Phoenicia, Egypt, and Israel. El's dwelling-place, or tent, is reminiscent of the Israelite Tabernacle (Mullen 1980:134). Internal and external evidence, however, seems to indicate that the storm god Ba'al gradually took control of El's functions (L'Heureux 1979:3-8). Despite Ba'al's rise to a dominant position among the gods in the Ugaritic texts, the myths never lose sight of the importance of El (Mullen 1980:84, 92-93). External evidence involving the strife between El and Ba'al is based mainly on parallels in comparative mythological material.¹⁰ As a couple, El together with Asherah, held the highest authority in the Syro-Palestinian pantheon (Handy 1994:69).

Ba'al

Kapelrud (1952:17-22) mentions that the Ras Shamra texts were found mainly in the royal library of Ugarit. A school of scribes was probably attached to the library where priests and their pupils copied ancient texts. The library-school was situated in a central place between the two great temples of the city, namely the temples dedicated to the Semitic deities Ba'al and Dagan. The temple of Ba'al and the building thereof are central themes in the Ba'al epic texts. These texts were obviously recited or used for dramatic performances in the particular temple. Depictions of Ba'al from excavated objects correspond well with portrayals of him from the Ba'al-texts.

Characteristics of a storm god were repeatedly linked to Canaanite Ba'al, also known as Ba'al Hadad, who was undoubtedly the national god in Ugarit (De Moor 1977:186-187). As many deities share common attributes it is basically impossible to compartmentalise the storm, warrior and solar gods. These deities are associated with inter alia lightning, the tempest, storms, winds, thunder, rain, fire, arrows and a chariot in the clouds. Ba'al, as storm god, has a distinctive iconography and is represented with a thunderbolt and a spear touching the ground with streaks of lightning at its other end, a slightly curved dagger in his belt, wielding a mace in his right hand, bearded, and wearing a horned headdress. At times he was depicted standing on the back of a bull (Greenfield 1999:379). On both a stele and a statuette of Ba'al he wears horns, clearly made in the shape of a bull's horns; this identification with a bull is a symbol of his fertility (Kapelrud 1952:20-21). His token was an upright stone pillar,

¹⁰ For a discussion of the comparative mythological material, see L'Heureux (1979:29-49).

מַצְבָּה, probably a phallic symbol (McKenzie 1966:72). Although never characterised independently of the storm god, it is attested that lightning was deified in Mesopotamia (Barré 1999:519).

The Ba'al cycle of myths reflect his combat with Yam, the sea, his problem to acquire a palace temple, and his confrontation with Mot (Wyatt 1998:34), one of the main enemies of Ba'al and in the Ugaritic texts the personification of death (Healey 1999:599). Ba'al, in his battle with Yam, eventually achieved victory over chaos, thereafter controlling the weather and the seasonal cycle affecting the fertility of the land (Day 1992:545-547). This conflict has analogies in Hittite, Greek, Mesopotamian, and Israel-Judahite material. "As the biblical parallels show, mythic material of such ubiquity and power must have communicated complex meanings regarding cosmic management and the warding off of chaotic powers" (Wyatt 1998:35). With Ba'al being the central figure in this cycle of myths, Kapelrud (1952:27) indicates that "his life and death are the main themes around which all is centred". These texts were clearly cult texts.

The consort of Ba'al was always associated with fertility and love (De Moor 1977:186-187). Available evidence seemingly indicates that Anat, presented in the Ugaritic texts as a fertility goddess and consort of Ba'al, was originally a North-West Semitic goddess. Some scholars, however, argue that there is no clear reference in the Ugaritic texts that she had ever been a reproductive deity (Day 1999:36-37). Handy (1994:103-105), furthermore, indicates that texts allegedly signifying Anat's fertility role are so damaged that scholars are inconclusive about this function. As warrior deities, the activities of Ba'al and Anat were closely related. They were mainly in the centre of a series of battles (Miller 1973:24, 50). Day (1999:37-39) mentions that the mythological texts portray Anat as a volatile and independent warrior and hunter; she was active in male spheres of combat and hunting. In a well-known Ugaritic text her bloodthirsty nature is explicitly exhibited.¹¹

¹¹ KTU 1.3 ii:3-30 (Day 1999:37). According to this passage in the Ugaritic Ba'al myth, Anat "wreaks havoc on her enemies," being up to her knees in their blood (Day 2000:141). Stern (1994:120-124) indicates that there are striking points of contact between the "bloodbath" text and Psalm 23. The following are mentioned: the deity, Anat, arranges tables for her soldiers, while the enemy soldiers are in the house (Ps 23:5 "You [the deity Yahweh] prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies"); some of Anat's slaughter takes place in a valley (Ps 23:4 "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil"); Anat pours "oil of peace" (Ps 23:5b "you anoint my head with oil"); much of the "bloodbath" action takes place in Anat's house where the gates are closed but

The cult of Ba'al, along with other Canaanite gods, was adopted by the Egyptians during the time of the Middle Kingdom.¹² Ba'al held a special position among the Palestinians (Herrmann 1999a:138), who were dedicated to worship him. The pattern of the seasons and the regular return of fertility were experienced as a sign of Ba'al's power (Herrmann 1999a:138). As indicated in literary documents, the various Syro-Palestinian population groups each had their own Ba'al, a deity who was "of fundamental significance for the human existence" (Herrmann 1999a:133).

Asherah

The Ugaritic texts allude to El and the goddess Asherah as the owners of heaven and earth (Handy 1994:20-22, 76). Asherah, referred to as Athirat in the Ugaritic texts, frequently appears as consort of El, and is also depicted as the wife of this aged supreme deity; she is likewise seen as a kind of matriarch (Korpel 2001:131). Asherah is, at times, named 'Elat, the feminine form of El (Hestrin 1991:52). The Ugaritic word *atrt* and its Hebrew cognate *'ašērâ* were probably originally common nouns meaning "wife", "consort", literally meaning "she-who-follows-in-the-footsteps (of her husband)" (Margalit 1990:269-270, 273). Many proposals have been advanced regarding the etymology of Ugaritic Athirat and Hebrew Asherah, yet, the meaning and derivation of the terms remain uncertain. However, it is actually quite irrelevant to try to establish the "real" or "original" meaning of the name Asherah (Binger 1997:142, 146). She was evidently initially a West Semitic goddess, but, according to many recovered inscriptions and information gathered regarding ancient Near Eastern deities with cognate names who materialised in various pantheons, Canaanite Athirat appears with synonymous names in different mythologies, covering more or less the whole region of the ancient Near East.

Ugaritic myths and rituals wherein Asherah appears denote her as a great goddess (Korpel 2001:127). The earliest known reference to Asherah is in texts from Ebla, dated ca. 2350 BCE. As Ašratum, consort of Amurru, warrior and storm god of the Amorites, she emerges in the Mesopotamian cult, thereby corroborating her West Semitic origin (Day 1986:385-386). Athirat was also venerated in Arabia, as attested

open later to receive her favoured warriors, soldiers and heroes (Ps 23:6b "and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD"). Psalm 23 clearly has a mythic background, the Anat text being "a source of poetic inspiration for a Hebrew poet" ... but, in this instance "the "bloody imagery of Yahweh" has receded into the background" (Stern 1994:123-124).

¹² 2040-1782 BCE (Clayton 1994:68).

in Arabian sources, as solar deity and consort to the moon gods 'Amm and Wadd (Day 1986:397). In a fusion with the Canaanite goddesses Astarte and Anat, Athirat, known as Qudšu in Egypt, appears on a relief from Thebes in the inscription *qdš-'strt-'nt* (Day 1986:388-389). Research on the emergence of Athirat/Asherah in all the main pantheons of the ancient Near East clearly indicates that there was interchangeability among the various nations and an acceptance of foreign deities and rituals.

According to Kapelrud (1952:75), the relationship between Athirat and Ba'al is not clear. Both Athirat/Asherah and Anat could be called the daughter of El, although Asherah is considered to have been also El's wife. However, Kapelrud (1952:75) is of the opinion that Asherah is rarely referred to as El's wife. Wyatt (1999:99) agrees that although Athirat seems to have been the consort of El, this is nowhere stated as such.

Although several passages in the Hebrew Bible refer directly to the goddess Asherah,¹³ the existence of such a goddess was debated until the discovery of the Ras Shamra texts. When these texts were deciphered, Asherah's close association with El and her importance in the Ugaritic pantheon became clear. "This information consequently began to shed some light on the ambiguous Hebrew Bible references to a cultic object that bore the same name as this goddess" (Wiggins 1991:384). At present it is generally accepted that "Asherah" in the Hebrew Bible refers to both an independent goddess and her wooden cult symbol (Day 2000:42-43).

INFLUENCE OF THE UGARITIC/CANAANITE DEITIES AND CULT ON THE RELIGION AND LIVES OF THE ISRAELITE PEOPLE

John Day (1986:385, 387) is of the opinion that "it is indisputable that the Ugaritic and other North-West Semitic texts have revolutionized our understanding of the Bible" and that the Ugaritic texts "are our most important North-West Semitic source about the goddess Asherah". Substantial segments of legendary narratives and mythological and ritual texts, compared to material in the Hebrew Bible, indicate that the Israelite people were well acquainted with the Canaanite gods and their cults. Since the discovery of the Ugaritic texts, which are unquestionably the most important source of information on the Syro-Palestinian religions and pantheons, many aspects in the Hebrew Bible have been clarified. It is therefore clear that archaeological finds that

¹³ Judges 3:7; 1 Kings 14:15; 18:19; 2 Kings 21:7; 23:4.

may be identified with data in the Hebrew Bible could enhance our understanding of the ancient Israelite religion. Since the first archaeological discoveries various sophisticated techniques have been developed during the course of the past century; these techniques assist the archaeologist in the interpretation of his data. The disclosure of the inscribed tablets from the archives of Ugarit has, therefore, unlocked a wealth of new information. Miller (2000b:46), however, is of the opinion that “any effort to describe the religion of ancient Israel” has to conclude that “there was not a single understanding or expression of what the religion was”.

Scholars generally agree that the main function of the Israelite cult was to actualise the tradition (Childs 1962:75, 77). The cult dominated the existence of the Israelite people, being also the medium to express their spiritual and cultural life. Canaanite and other foreign influences constantly threatened their religion. In expressing the theophany of Yahweh, ancient Canaanite material was used, slightly altered (Kapelrud 1977:102-103, 113, 117, 124). Internal pluralism can be observed in the Israelite religion; scholars are thus able to differentiate between the religious practices carried out by families and those performed by the state. Families were concerned with devotion to a local god, as well as veneration of the ancestors. Literary and epigraphic data reveal that the Canaanite goddess Asherah and the Queen of Heaven enjoyed particular prominence in the Israelite cult. The possibility to identify Asherah as an official consort of Yahweh is a “spectacular and new” perspective (Van der Toorn 1998:13-18).

“A goddess called Queen of Heaven appears briefly in Jeremiah 7:17-18, and then again in Jeremiah 44:15-24” (De Villiers 2002:620). Jeremiah attributes the catastrophe of the Exile to the veneration of the Queen of Heaven, while the women of Jerusalem and Judah ascribe the disaster to their lack of offerings to the Queen of Heaven. According to Jeremiah,¹⁴ while the children gathered wood and the fathers kindled fire, “the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven”. Currently the most popular scholarly view regarding the identity of the Queen of Heaven is that the designation refers to Astarte. Apart from being called “Lady of Heaven”, along with Anat, Ishtar, and Qudšu/Asherah, Astarte is the Canaanite goddess “most frequently associated with the heavens” (Day 2000:148-149). Sumerian Inanna and Akkadian Ishtar were the major Mesopotamian goddesses of love, war, and the planet Venus. Ishtar is derived from the masculine ‘attar, and is attested as the

¹⁴ Jeremiah 7:17-18.

Canaanite feminine Astarte (Abusch 1999:452-453). Iconographic representations of Ishtar frequently show her together with women, thus corroborating the role she played in the cult particularly carried out by women. Assyrian iconography substantiates the prominent role Ishtar played in both Israel and Judah (Ornan 2001:235-252). Ackerman (1992:8-10, 16) denotes that, although no consensus has been reached regarding the identity of the Queen of Heaven, indications are that she could be identified with Canaanite Astarte, the West Semitic equivalent of Ishtar.

Scholars increasingly interpret Israelite monotheism and aniconism as relatively late developments, possibly enforced only in the Second Temple Period. Lately, scholars also recognise early Israelites as Canaanites who developed a new identity; their devotion should thus be seen as a variant of the Canaanite cult (Van der Toorn 1998:24). Biblical religion, therefore, should be considered essentially as a subset of Israelite religion, and the latter as a subset of Canaanite religion. Extra-biblical evidence is thus of paramount importance for a perception of Israel's distinctive religious traits that were clearly a progression from a Canaanite matrix (Coogan 1987:115-116, 120). As established by epigraphic finds, the Israelites not only adopted the language of Canaan, but also appropriated much of the Canaanite cultic vocabulary (Obermann 1949:318-319). Although the Hebrew Bible condemns the veneration of any other deity alongside Yahweh, polemics in the Hebrew Bible and the extent of the reaction from the prophets and deuteronomists regarding the worship of other gods, signify the existence of syncretism among the Israelites (Miller 1986:239).

Role of Canaanite El in the Israelite religion

El, as god of the patriarchs

The relationship between the God of Israel (Elohim) and the Canaanite god El is to a great extent centred upon the religion of the patriarchs (L'Heureux 1979:49). In an essay¹⁵ published in 1929 Albrecht Alt initiated the modern discussion of the religion of the patriarchs. He isolated a group of "epithets in which the god is identified by the name of the patriarch" (Cross 1962:226) and is called "the god(s) of the fathers". This theory was expanded by Frank Moore Cross (1962:225, 227-228, 231-232), who indicated that, although these gods were originally distinct deities, they were, in the development of Israel's traditions, coalesced into a single family god by artificially

¹⁵ Alt (1929:12).

linking them genealogically to the “fathers”. L’Heureux (1979:49, 51-52) denotes that the religious traditions in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis distinguish two types of references to the deity. “God of the fathers” linked the god to an ancestor, where the ancestor, in some instances, is unnamed, while in other texts the name of the ancestor is given. The second type of reference gives the full formula, “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob”. These formulas indicate that the deity was worshipped by the family or clan of the person whose name was used to identify the god. In a reconstruction widely accepted by scholars, it is postulated that the deity established a relationship with the ancestor and, through him, with the clan; he was thus regarded the patron of the clan. These deities were later identified as God Almighty, El Shadday. The Hebrew Bible attests that the patriarchs called their god El, albeit under different titles. A series of names or appellatives beginning with the element El, appear in the patriarchal narratives in Genesis.¹⁶

According to Cross (1962:227-228, 231-232), the particular traits of the patriarchal gods anticipate some characteristics of the cult of Yahweh, which provides continuity between the old religious forms and the new emergent Yahwism. The divine El names in Genesis point to the worship of the Canaanite high god El in the patriarchal religion. These names are various liturgical or cultic titles for Canaanite El. The attributes of this Canaanite deity made the identification with the patriarchal gods natural; the god of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, might have been Amorite El. MacLaurin (1962:460) is of the opinion that the Hebrew slaves in Egypt probably worshipped El, who, in the hypostasis of El Shadday, was venerated in Canaan as the god of the fathers. In the salvation history of Israel, Yahweh revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but not under his real name; he revealed himself as El Shadday.¹⁷

Yahweh developed from an El-figure

Some scholars argue that, despite many attributes of Yahweh, which are normally ascribed to Ba’al, Yahweh was originally more like Canaanite El than like Ba’al. El-names in the patriarchal narratives in Genesis are frequently used as epithets of

¹⁶ Titles, such as El ‘Elyôn, אֵל עֲלִיּוֹן (Gn 14:18, 22); El Rōi, אֵל רֹאִי (Gn16:13-14); El Shadday, אֵל שַׁדַּי (Gn 17:11; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3); El Bethel, אֵל בֵּתֵל (Gn 35:7); El ‘Ōlām, אֵל עֹלָם (Gn 21:33).

¹⁷ Genesis 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; Exodus 6:3.

Yahweh.¹⁸ These scholars, therefore, surmise that Yahweh and El were associated at an early stage, and explain this connection by assuming that Yahweh was originally an El-figure. In this regard Cross (1962:257) denotes that “the popularity of the cult of ‘El in the Semitic community in Sinai, Egypt, and Seir, gives some plausibility to the notion that Yahweh was an ‘El figure’”.

Cross’ hypothesis is based on careful analysis of different kinds of data; he reaches the conclusion that Yahweh was originally a cultic name of El. Yahweh could also have been an epithet of El as a patron deity of the Midianites or Kenites. He, furthermore, postulates that when El was eventually ousted by Ba’al from his place in the divine council,¹⁹ the god Yahweh would have split off from El, thus suggesting that Yahweh was in origin an El-figure. Throughout the history of Israel’s religion the various

El names continued to be acceptable titles for Yahweh (Miller 2000a:379-381). Cross (1974:255-256, 258) indicates that, according to two traditions in Exodus,²⁰ the religion of the “fathers”, and the later Yahwistic faith of Israel, belonged to two stages in an historical development. He, furthermore, denotes that “El in biblical tradition is often used simply as an alternate name of Yahweh”, and that “the wide overlap in attributes, epithets, and names of Yahweh with El suggests that Yahweh originated as an El figure, splitting apart from the old god as the cult of Israel separated and diverged from its polytheistic context” (Cross 1974:260).

However, these speculations regarding the identification of Yahweh with Canaanite El should be examined critically (Van der Toorn 1999:916-917). Van Seters (1980:222, 224, 229-230) argues that the term ‘el is ambiguous therein that it could be the name of the god El, or a generic appellative for “deity”. In some instances in the Hebrew Bible it is apparent that El is a proper name synonymous with Yahweh. The question arises what this usage is, particularly in Genesis, and whether it indicates “that the Israelite god Yahweh is being identified with a quite distinct deity El who is

¹⁸ Names, such as “Everlasting God” – אֵל עוֹלָם (Gn 21:33); “God Almighty” – אֵל שַׁדַּי (Gn 17:11; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3); “God Most High” – אֵל עֲלִיּוֹן (Gn 14:18, 22).

¹⁹ Psalm 82. In the earliest traditions of Israel, many characteristics and functions of El are similar to those of Yahweh. In Psalm 82 Yahweh acts as judge in the court of El, and the Psalm portrays a general picture of Yahweh as head of the Divine Council. The early cultic establishment of Yahweh, the Tabernacle and its appurtenances, all reflect Canaanite models, particularly the Tent of El (Cross 1973:72).

²⁰ Exodus 3:14-15; 6:2-3.

known to us from the mythological texts of ancient Ugarit” (Van Seters 1980:222). In this connection De Moor’s (1997:191) thesis is “that YHWH was a manifestation of El and that early Israel worshipped El as the highest God who had dwarfed all other deities including Baal”.

Evaluation of hypotheses

Certain aspects of the theory of Alt, later developed by Cross, regarding El and the patriarchs, have merits for the reconstruction of the origin of Yahwism. The suggestion that particular traits of the patriarchal gods anticipate some characteristics of the cult of Yahweh is conceivable. Likewise, in the light of similarities between El and Yahweh, it is credible that Yahweh was actually the deity that was worshipped from the beginning. However, despite the merits of the hypothesis of Cross and other scholars, this theory does not really indicate where Yahweh actually came from. It should also be kept in mind that the role of El, as Canaanite high god, became largely insignificant at the beginning of the Iron Age. This diminished role probably explains why there are no traces in the Hebrew Bible of polemics against El. Notwithstanding the support by a number of scholars concerning the position of El in the cult of the patriarchs, and the suggestion that Yahweh developed from an El-figure, other scholars argue in support of the Kenite hypothesis.²¹ A strong point in favour of this theory is the recurring biblical tradition of Yahweh’s geographical link with the South. Various biblical texts²² describing Yahweh’s “march” from the South, as well as Egyptian records connecting Yahu to Seir and Edom, suggest early knowledge of Yahweh in these regions. Therefore, Yahweh “from the South” probably did not originate from an El-figure, but El might have been an epithet or cultic name of Yahweh.

²¹ The Kenite hypothesis was advanced in 1872 by the Dutch historian of religion, Cornelius P Tiele, who identified Yahweh as the god of the desert, whom the Kenites and related groups venerated before the Israelites worshipped Yahweh. Karl Budde later developed the classic formulation of this theory. According to this hypothesis, a Moses-type figure gained knowledge about and was initiated into the cult of Yahweh by his father-in-law, Jethro, a Midianite priest, also referred to as a Kenite. For a detailed discussion of the Kenite hypothesis and related aspects, see Mondriaan (2010:307-405).

²² Deuteronomy 33:2; Judges 5:4; Psalm 68:8; Habakkuk 3:3.

Characteristics of Canaanite El transferred to biblical Elohim and to Yahweh

The occurrence of shifted boundaries and migrating peoples had the implication that deities, originally designated to a certain nation or a specific territory, appeared in various pantheons, albeit with different, but often with similar or even same names. Consistent therewith, more than one attribute seems to have merged in particular deities. The extent of contact between the diverse tribal groups, which later integrated to become the Israelite nation, and the various neighbouring peoples, had the result that all the attributes of the numerous ancient Near Eastern deities were later conferred upon the Hebrew God.

It is therefore notable that both biblical Elohim and Yahweh share qualities and epithets with Canaanite El. Features of biblical Elohim that could possibly have been derived from Canaanite El, are such as Creator, King, Father, and Judge. Likewise, attributes of Yahweh shared with Canaanite El, are Creator and Father, old age and wisdom, patience and mercy, eternal kingship. A well-known designation, El the Bull, is a metaphor expressing his divine dignity and strength (Herrmann 1999b:275). The bull was accepted by the Northern Israel tribes as symbol of Yahweh, as illustrated by Jeroboam's "golden calves" at Dan and Bethel (Negev & Gibson 2001:94).²³

Importance of Ba'al in the Israelite religion

The entire area inhabited by Canaanites was dedicated to the worship of Ba'al. Although Yahweh, according to the Hebrew Bible, was the God acting predominantly in the sphere of history, "Ba'al held a unique position among the inhabitants of Palestine" (Herrmann 1999a:138). As a divine name Ba'al appears seventy-six times in the Hebrew Bible. Authors and redactors of the Masoretic Text "were inclined to speak of Baal and his worship in pejorative terms" (Mulder 1977:193). Rituals and customs of the Ba'al religion were condemned by the prophets; Israelites and Judeans were strictly forbidden to take part in any facet of this religion (Mulder 1977:200). On account of the similarity between Yahweh and Ba'al, "many of the traits ascribed to Yahweh inform us on the character of the Palestinian Baal" (Herrmann 1999a:138). Yahweh's sphere of influence in the Israelite religion "gradually widened to eventually include what had once been the domain of Baal as well" (Herrmann 1999a:138); this was only possible "through the incorporation of traits that had

²³ See 1 Kings 12:25-33.

formerly been characteristic of Ba'al only" (Herrmann 1999a:138). Notwithstanding the absorption of Ba'al features by Yahweh, all indications are that the Judeans carried on with syncretistic religious practices, probably worshipping Yahweh alongside Ba'al (Herrmann 1999a:138). Some of the older Israelite poems "juxtapose imagery associated with El and Baal in the Ugaritic texts and apply this juxtaposition of attributes to Yahweh" (Smith 1990:21, 49). A conflict was prevalent between Yahweh and Ba'al even before the Israelite settlement in Canaan.²⁴

Lightning was associated with Ba'al as his symbol as storm god; it also functioned as a weapon of Yahweh in his portrayal as Storm God or Warrior God. Poetic texts in the Hebrew Bible refer to Yahweh's "arrows", and the lightning-bolt is called a "spear".²⁵ Lightning is likewise identified with the theophany of Yahweh, often in combination with thunder, cloud and an earthquake (Barré 1999:519). In this regard, Yahweh's manifestations during the exodus and in Sinai, as illustrated in the book of Exodus, are good examples. Descriptions in various North-West Semitic texts accentuate Ba'al's theophany in the storm, or his character as a warrior. Biblical material, however, attributes Yahweh with power over the storm²⁶ and presents Yahweh as the Divine Warrior.²⁷ Yahweh appears in the storm, he rides on the storm and he reveals himself in the storm, in fire, smoke and cloud (Budde 1899:27-28). The designation "Rider-of-the Clouds" was applied to Ba'al long before it became an appellative of Yahweh. When driving in his chariot, Ba'al goes out to distribute rain, but at the same time it sets Ba'al in the position of a warrior god (Obermann 1949:319).²⁸

Habakkuk 3:3-15 emphasises the mythological conflict between Yahweh and the chaos forces of the sea and death. Throughout the ancient Near East the myth of the divine warrior's successful battle against the chaos monster was well known. The Ugaritic Ba'al and Yam myth recounts the conflict between the storm god Ba'al and the sea god Yam. Psalm 74 alludes to the Creator God's battle with the sea. Lang (2002:61) indicates that "the chaos-battle mythology reveals much of the worldview of

²⁴ Numbers 25:1-5.

²⁵ Habakkuk 3:11.

²⁶ Yahweh presented as the Storm God is elucidated in, inter alia, 1 Samuel 12:18; Psalm 29; Jeremiah 10:11-16; 14:22; Amos 4:7; 5:8; 9:6.

²⁷ A number of texts that exhibit Divine Warrior traits are Psalms 50:1-3; 97:1-6; 104:1-4; Habakkuk 3:8-15.

²⁸ Compare Psalm 68:33.

the ancient warrior societies.”

Israel's concept of Asherah as goddess, cult symbol and consort

Role of Asherah in the lives of the Israelites

Canaanite Athirat (Asherah) was also known by the name Athiratu or Athirtu. Before the discovery of the Ugaritic texts, scholars erroneously equated Asherah with Astarte. Her image is reflected in a number of prominent ancient Near Eastern goddesses. Evidence indicates the presence of Asherah in early Israelite religion. As goddess, Asherah was worshipped in Palestine at the time when the Israelites established themselves there. Through the centuries she was popular among the Northern Israelites and the Judeans alike, even being venerated by kings and queens (Lipiński 1972:112). Dependent on different perceptions of the biblical Asherah, she could be explained as “a phenomenon of official religion, a forbidden non-conformist cult, a house-cult or part of popular religion” (Kletter 2001:199). As an undeniable component of the official cult of Judah, she was introduced into the Jerusalem Temple by the Judean kings.²⁹ Some scholars maintain that Asherah was not the name of a deity but of a cult object. Although many debates evolve around the problematic word *'ašērâ* in the Masoretic Text, it seems to indicate a wooden cult object, a pole, a tree or a stone that can “stand”,³⁰ be “made”,³¹ be “set up”,³² be “planted”,³³ “cut down”,³⁴ “uprooted”,³⁵ “burned”,³⁶ “brought out”,³⁷ “destroyed”,³⁸ “made into dust”,³⁹ “taken away”,⁴⁰ and “broken into pieces”.⁴¹ However, the word *'ašērâ* does occasionally

²⁹ Deuteronomy 16:21; 1 Kings 15:13; 2 Kings 21:7; 23:4, 7; 2 Chronicles 33:3-5, 19. *Asherah* was also closely associated with the “host of heaven”(2 Ki 17:16; 21:3; 23:4).

³⁰ Isaiah 27:9.

³¹ 1 Kings 14:15; 16:33; 2 Kings 17:16; 21:3; 2 Chronicles 33:3; Isaiah 17:8.

³² 2 Kings 17:10; 2 Chronicles 33:19.

³³ Deuteronomy 16:21.

³⁴ Exodus 34:13; Deuteronomy 7:5; Judges 6:25-26, 28, 30; 2 Kings 23:14; 2 Chronicles 14:2; 31:1.

³⁵ Micah 5:13.

³⁶ Deuteronomy 12:3; 2 Kings 23:6, 15.

³⁷ 2 Kings 23:6.

³⁸ 2 Chronicles 19:3.

³⁹ 2 Kings 23:6; 2 Chronicles 34:4, 7.

⁴⁰ 2 Chronicles 17:6.

⁴¹ 2 Chronicles 34:4.

denote the name of a goddess.⁴² The view of the Dutch scholar Kuenen (1882:88-93), who argued that Asherah signified both a goddess and a cult object symbolising her, is widely accepted today and consistent with the interpretation of biblical data and ancient Near Eastern archaeological evidence.

Despite the fact that the queen mother held no official office within the Judean and Israelite monarchies, she had an official status. Susan Ackerman (1993:388) proposes that the Israelite and Judean queen mothers had the official responsibility in the king's court to dedicate themselves to the cult of Asherah, the mother goddess. It seems that Asherah and her cult symbol had a decided position in the Israelite religion, not only being legitimate in popular Yahwism, but in the official cult as well – maybe even in very conservative circles (Olyan 1988:74). The most explicit link for a queen mother with any cultic activity is expressed in 1 Kings 15:13 when king Asa removed his mother Maacah as “she had made an abominable image for Asherah”. To understand the role of the queen mother in the South, Ackerman (1993:400-401) proposes that “if the Judean royal ideology holds that Yahweh is the adopted father of the king, then is it not possible that the adopted mother of the king is understood to be Asherah as seen by many as the consort of Yahweh?” Yahweh was thus perceived as surrogate father of the king and Yahweh's female consort, Asherah, as surrogate mother. Should this be true, the implication is that the Judean queen mother was seen as the earthly counterpart of Asherah, the king's heavenly mother, and, therefore, was depicted as patron of Asherah.

Multiple texts suggest that it was the norm in Judah during the ninth to seventh centuries BCE to worship both Yahweh and Asherah in the Jerusalem Temple. “The explicit prohibition against planting a sacred pole or tree beside an altar of YHWH in Dt 16:21 shows that this actually did happen” (Vriezen 2001:73). From a very early period the tradition of a sacred tree symbol formed part of most ancient Near Eastern cultures. King Josiah's⁴³ reform is also a clear indication of the veneration of Asherah, particularly by the Israelite women, as stated in 2 Kings 23:7, “And he broke down the houses of the male cult prostitutes who were in the house of the LORD, where the women wove hangings for the Asherah.” Further references in 2 Kings 23 of Josiah's

⁴² An “image” of Asherah (1 Ki 15:13; 2 Ki 21:7), “prophets” of Asherah (1 Ki 18:19), “vessels” for Asherah (2 Ki 23:4) and “hangings” [woven garments] for Asherah (2 Ki 23:7).

⁴³ Josiah reigned in Judah ca. 640/39-609 BCE (Kitchen & Mitchell 1982:197).

actions of reform signify Canaanite cultic practices by the Israelites.⁴⁴

Asherah as consort of Yahweh

The discovery of the inscriptions and drawings at Kuntillet 'Ajrud, a site in the north-eastern region of Sinai, brought to the fore the significance of a consort for deities in the ancient Near East, and in particular for Yahweh. A similar inscription was found in a burial cave close to Khirbet 'el Qom. In both instances the inscriptions, which are dated to the eighth century BCE, refer to "Yahweh and his Asherah".⁴⁵ The implication of a consort for Yahweh caused quite a stir in scholarly circles, and the particular phrase "... yhwh ... w'srth, with its tantalizing implications of a Yahwistic polytheism" has caused a surge of publications in scholarly journals (Margalit 1990:274). According to Taylor (1994:53), the inscriptions seem "to suggest quite explicitly that Yahweh did have a consort". He is also of the opinion that a substantial number of Israelites believed that Yahweh had a partner or spouse. Many scholars agree that these epigraphic finds, as well as other supporting discoveries, such as the Taanach cult stands, endorse the view "that the goddess Asherah was worshipped as the consort of Yahweh in both Israel and Judah during the period of the Israelite monarchy" (Hadley 1997:169). The mythological role of the Ugaritic goddess Athirat, Israel's Asherah, was to be the consort of the supreme Canaanite god El. Therefore the

⁴⁴ "All the host of heaven" (2 Ki 23:4-5); "high places round about Jerusalem" (2 Ki 23:5); "burning incense to Ba'al" (2 Ki 23:5); "chariots of the sun" and "horses dedicated to the sun" (2 Ki 23:11). The reference in 2 Kings 23:11 to "horses and chariots of the sun" is clearly an allusion to solar and astral worship, most likely with a Canaanite origin in the Late Bronze Age, or even with a Phoenician or Neo-Assyrian root.

⁴⁵ The inscriptions at Kuntillet 'Ajrud read:

"may you be blessed by Yahweh
of Shomron [Samaria] and his Asherah"
and

"Amaryo said: Tell my lord, may you be well
and be blessed by Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah.
May he bless and keep you and be with you" (Scheffler 2000:102, 105).

The inscription at Khirbet 'el Qom reads:

"For 'Uriyahu the governor (or the rich), his inscription.

Blessed is 'Uriyahu by Yahweh.

From his enemies he has been saved

By his a/Asherah.

(Written) by 'Oniyahu" (Dever 2005:131-132).

See (Mondriaan 2010:49-52, 271-280) for a discussion of these inscriptions, and accompanying drawings.

phrase, “Yahweh and his Asherah”, could literally mean Yahweh and his consort (Margalit 1990:284). The drawings, also discovered at the sites, seemingly suggest male and female figures. Scholars have, as yet, disparate views on the interpretation of these drawings.

Two terracotta cult stands have been excavated at Taanach, a large tell on the southern periphery of the Jezreel Valley, a site possibly earlier inhabited by the Israelites. The stands have a quadrangular shape, hollow on the inside and decorated with figures on the front and sides. The second stand, excavated several decades after the discovery of the first stand, is unique for its elaborate iconography and is almost completely preserved (Hestrin 1987:61). On the bottom tier of the second stand is a nude female figure flanked by two lions. Her large head with distinctive hairdo makes her taller and creates the impression that she is more important. This nude female between two lions is most likely a portrayal of Asherah, known as the “Lion Lady”⁴⁶ in West Semitic mythology. Her other major symbol, the sacred tree, is also depicted on the stand (Ackerman 1992:190-191). A vacant space in the centre of the stand is flanked by two sphinxes. If these stands could be linked to the Israelites, the question arises whether the open space could represent Yahweh, the “invisible” deity, posed between two cherubim. According to the Decalogue commandment (Exodus 20:4), the Israelite worship had to be exclusively aniconic. The vacant space on the cult stand may thus symbolise “sacred emptiness” or “empty-space aniconism” (Mettinger 1997:219-221). An association between Yahweh and Asherah on the stand could, therefore, signify a connection between Yahweh and Asherah.

CONCLUSION

An abundance of tablets, which have been uncovered during excavations at Ras Shamra, the site of the ancient Late Bronze Age city of Ugarit, contain mythological, religious and other texts. These texts afford significant and relevant information on the Canaanite culture, cult, and beliefs. An assessment thereof clearly indicates that the contents of the Ugaritic tablets is a valuable aid for the research on the Israelite

⁴⁶ Wiggins (1991:383-392) indicates that, according to the myth of Asherah, she is identified as a Lion Lady, and as such associated with Qedesht. As serpent goddess she has connections with Qedesht, Eve and Tanit. She is furthermore presented as a tree goddess connected with the oak, tamarisk, date palm, sycamore, and some other species.

religion and thus, consequently, for a better perception of the development of this religion, as well as the influence of Canaan and Ugarit on the Israelites. The texts are, furthermore, invaluable for the interpretation of particular aspects in the Hebrew Bible. Epics in the Ugaritic and the biblical literature have much in common, both in context and language. Although belonging to the Canaanite family, an alphabetic and consonant script found at Ugarit, is closer to biblical Hebrew. The main purpose of this article is, therefore, to indicate the relevance of the discovery at Ras Shamra for biblical studies, and the significant role the deities of the Ugaritic pantheon played in the religion and lives of the Israelite people. However, although the Ugaritic deities and mythologies are an important aspect of this article, it is not possible for an in-depth discussion thereof within the extent of an article.

Before the discovery of the Ugaritic texts, biblical scholars who considered the Hebrew Bible as being the authority on the Canaanite religion assumed that the Israelite tribes were confronted with an evil and alien culture. However, segments of legendary narratives, as well as mythological and ritual texts found at Ugarit, compared with material in the Hebrew Bible, indicate that the Israelite people were well acquainted with the Canaanite gods and their cults. Since the discovery of the Ugaritic texts many aspects in the Hebrew Bible have been clarified. A Canaanite origin for the Israelites is lately generally accepted by many scholars. Early Israelites are therefore recognised as Canaanites who developed a new identity; their devotion could thus be seen as a variant of the Canaanite cult. The majority of Ugaritic texts are of mythological nature providing information on the cults of, inter alia, El, the chief god of the Ugaritic pantheon, the storm god Ba'al, and the goddess Asherah, who is also considered the consort of El.

In the Hebrew Bible there are several references to the Canaanite deities, Ba'al and Asherah. Although the Hebrew Bible condemns the veneration of any other deity alongside Yahweh, the extent of reaction from the prophets and deuteronomists on this aspect suggests the existence of syncretism among the Israelites. It has also become clear that the Israelite cult made far more allowances in religious beliefs and practices than admitted by the exilic and post-exilic editors of the Masoretic Text. The Israelite people were evidently well acquainted with the Canaanite gods and their cults. While scholars generally identify Canaanite El with the patriarchal god(s), some scholars also suggest that Yahweh originated from an El-figure. It is notable that both Elohim and Yahweh share qualities and epithets with Canaanite El. Similarly, the different

attributes of the deity Ba'al are ascribed to Yahweh, particularly in Yahweh's capacity as Storm God and Warrior God. Rituals and customs of the Ba'al religion were condemned by the prophets; Israelites and Judeans were forbidden to take part in any facet of this religion. Despite the absorption of Ba'al features by Yahweh, all indications are that the Judeans carried on with syncretistic religious practices; they probably venerated Yahweh alongside Ba'al. Evidence indicates the presence of Asherah in early Israelite religion. She was worshipped in Palestine at the time when the Israelites established themselves there, and was popular through the centuries among the Northern Israelites and Judeans alike. Scholars generally agree that in the Israelite cult Asherah signified both a goddess and a cult object symbolising her. The discovery of inscriptions referring to "Yahweh and his Asherah" has the implication that, in the Israelites' minds, Canaanite Asherah was the consort of Yahweh.

In conclusion, a fair estimate indicates that, since the discovery of mythological and other texts at Ras Shamra, knowledge acquired from this Ugaritic library has enabled biblical scholars to clarify many aspects in the Hebrew Bible relating to the religion of the Israelites. Information on the Canaanite deities, as well as on various aspects of their religion, is essential as comparative and informative material for biblical research. It is therefore apparent that data acquired from Ugarit is of indispensable value for the understanding of the Hebrew Bible and the religious practices of the Israelites.

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