

# Who Were the CANAANITES?

WHO WERE THE CANAANITES? This is an essential question for anyone wanting to understand the Old Testament. The Canaanites were the perennial enemies of God's people Israel. To understand Israel we must understand the allure of the Canaanites, their culture, and their religion. Three sources give us information about the Canaanites: the Bible, ancient Near Eastern inscriptions, and archaeological excavations in and around Israel.

By Trent C. Butler



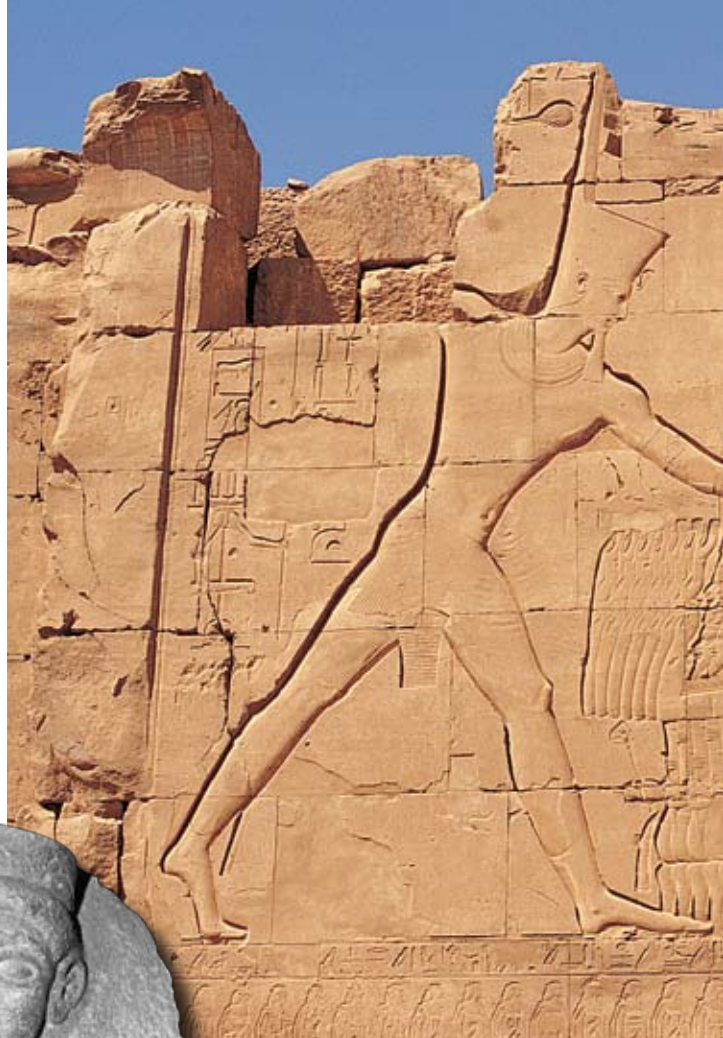


**Left:** Canaanite duck-bill axe head from the Middle to Late Bronze Age (2000–1200 B.C.), likely used as a weapon.

**Right:** Scene of Amenhotep II and his Asiatic campaign. A stele describing this campaign by Amenhotep II has the earliest Egyptian text mentioning the Canaanites.

**Below:** Sarcophagus fragment depicting a Phoenician shepherd (5th to 4th centuries B.C.)

**Page 11:** Model of an 8th cent. B.C. Phoenician warship.



## Biblical Understanding

The Bible has much to say about Canaan and the Canaanites. In the narrowest sense of the word, the “Canaanites” originally referred to the people living on the northwestern Mediterranean sea-coast of Phoenicia (Num. 13:29). Centuries later the Phoenicians came to refer to themselves as Canaanites. In a wider meaning of the term, “Canaanites” referred to the persons living in the valleys and hills throughout Canaan (14:25,45; Deut. 11:30). They were one of several ethnic groups Israel confronted in the land (Josh. 3:10; 9:1; 11:3). Apparently, Canaan proper stopped at the Jordan River. Gilead and other lands east of the Jordan River were not part of Canaan (22:9-10,32).

Canaan represented a people cursed by God for the act of their ancestor, Noah’s son Ham (Gen. 9:25-27), but also the land of promise—an occupied land of promise (11:31; 12:5-7). Neither lord nor citizen in Canaan, Abraham remained a landless alien (37:1). Struggle over control of this land began with Abraham (13:7; compare 34:30) and continued in the wilderness (Num. 14:43-45; 21:3). Israel’s claim to Canaan came through God’s covenant promise (Gen. 15:18-21).

Possession of Canaan depended on God driving the Canaanites out (Ex. 23:28; 33:2; 34:11; Josh. 3:10). God’s purpose in the exodus was to take His people back to the land of promise (Ex. 3:8), famed for its fruitfulness (v. 17), so they would obey Him and let Him be their God (Lev. 18:3; 25:38). God’s



promise and its fulfillment became a central part of Israel’s worship (Ps. 105:11; compare Acts 13:19). Canaan also became the place of innocent bloodshed as Israel sacrificed children to Canaanite gods (Ps. 106:38).

As they prepared to enter the land of Canaan, Israel had one God-given goal—to exterminate the Canaanites (Deut. 20:17). Israel carried out God’s commission (Josh. 21:43-45), but even so pockets of Canaanites remained in the land (16:10; 17:12-16; Judg. 1:3-33; 3:1-5), an ongoing source of temptation for Israel. The Israelites succumbed to the false belief that because the Canaanites dwelt in the land long before the Israelites, they must have known the secrets to its fertility and blessing—worshiping the high god Baal, the master of storms and fertility. If military success with Yahweh was good, then adding some agricultural and fertility success with Canaan’s gods could only make things better (3:6-7). Such constant temptation lasted into the post-exilic period with Ezra (Ezra 9:1).

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## WHAT ARE EXECRATION TEXTS?

“**E**XECRATION texts are pottery bowls or clay figurines on which were inscribed curses against the enemies of Egypt.... These objects were used in a magical rite in which the Egyptian Pharaoh would smash the bowl or figurines on which the enemy’s name was written. In this way it was thought that the power of the enemy would be broken and the enemy himself would come to grief.”

Source: *Wycliffe Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1973), 232.

### Ancient Near Eastern Texts

Texts from the ancient Near East give us additional information about Canaanites and Baal. Canaan appears in texts from Mari, Alalakh, Ugarit, and Amarna and in the Egyptian Merneptah Stele. These affirm that the geographical and ethnic names were known long before Joshua.

Mention of Baal goes back to Egyptian execration texts from about 1800 B.C. and back to texts from the Syrian city of Ebla after 1500 B.C. Most information comes from the texts found at Ugarit on the Syrian coast of the Mediterranean Sea. These texts and artistic renderings closely associated Baal with thunder and lightning and with battle against Yam, the god of the sea. Baal’s partner was the goddess Anath. She joined him in battle against Mot, the god of the dead. Defeat of Yam brought Baal the title, “king of the gods.” Baal’s entrance into Mot’s underworld brought temporary death for Baal and for the crops of Canaan until Anath rescued Baal, restoring fertility.

Astarte is another, infrequently mentioned consort of Baal in the Ugaritic materials. In the Bible, she appears often in the forms of Asherah, Ashtoreth, or the plural form Ashtaroth.

Canaanite worshipers believed the local king represented the major god. Sacrifices formed the

central worship rites as well as served as the means of expiating sins and provided opportunities for social gatherings. Annual agricultural festivals included sacred meals and renewal of religious and political commitments.

Politically, Egypt controlled Canaan and took advantage of its geographical location to control international trade routes. The Amarna letters indicate that local city-state kings or governors paid homage and taxes to the Egyptian pharaoh and fought among themselves for local control. From 3500 to about 2000 B.C., about 20 city-states dominated, but most had populations of less than 2,000. Megiddo, Laish (or Dan), and Ai were the largest cities in this period. Around 2300 B.C. Egypt’s Old Kingdom collapsed. So did Canaan’s cities, so that only a very small population remained.

The Middle Bronze Age (2000–1550 B.C.) brought trade growth to Phoenicia and population growth in Canaanite cities. Canaanite population thus reached about 140,000. The majority of the population were farmers living outside the major cities, providing the needed food for each family and for the king and his elite administrators. Foreign trading brought in specialty items including fine garments and pottery and metal goods. Hazor was the dominant city with a population possibly reaching 20,000. The hill country remained basically unpopulated. New siege weapons, chariots, and composite bows helped advance military technology and forced cities to build massive defensive walls. Just before 1550 B.C., various armies and causes destroyed most of these cities.

The Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 B.C.) is the apparent time of the exodus and conquest of Canaan. The region became a battlefield among the Hittites to the north, the Hurrian Mitanni to the northeast, and the Egyptians to the south.

## LESSON REFERENCE

ETB: Psalm 105



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**Left: Standing stones (or in Hebrew *masséboth*); these mark the likely site of Canaanite worship in Megiddo.**

**Right: Palace ruins at Ebla (later known as *tel Mardikh*). Ebla was the dynastic capital of the region. Excavations at Ebla uncovered thousands of cuneiform tablets dating to the**

**Middle Bronze Age (about 2000 B.C.). Several refer to names of cities and persons mentioned in the Bible. Further, many of the texts offer information about worship practices and beliefs related to the Canaanite god, Baal. The name Ebla means “white rock”—likely a reference to the limestone on which the city was built.**

Canaanites suffered as they paid taxes, were forced to join enemy military ranks, and even became slaves, particularly to the Egyptians. From about 1425 to 1350 B.C., Egypt had peace from its wars but continued to tax and enslave the people of Canaan, cutting its population in half to about 70,000. Shortly after 1300, Pharaoh Rameses II suffered

defeat by the Hittites at Kadesh and turned his ire again against the Canaanites.<sup>1</sup>

After 1300, Egyptian control tightened with more troops and more Egyptian outposts in Canaan and more taxes for the Canaanites. The hill country and the area east of the Jordan had few settlements or people.

Egyptian rule brought the Canaanites poverty and hardship. Only the Egyptian-selected rulers in the 20 or so city-states had any luxuries. People not belonging to the ruling elite in Canaan had few choices. The few talented people became artisans, creating items demanded by the elite. Otherwise, a Canaanite became a farmer on land he did not own, paying much of his crop to the aristocratic or royal property owner; or a nomadic shepherd following sheep and goats to pasture lands, occasionally settling down near or in a village.

The opening years of the Iron Age (1200–1000 B.C.) changed the situation. Egypt withdrew. The Hittite Empire collapsed. The highland or hill country population increased radically, growing, for example, from 5 sites in the tribe of Ephraim to 115 sites.<sup>2</sup> Canaanites (and Israelites) gained freedom to govern themselves. Droughts and famines set people on the move looking for better living conditions. Included were the Sea Peoples coming from Sicily, Cyprus, and Crete. One group of Sea Peoples settled on the southern Mediterranean coast. They became the Philistines, the major challengers of ancient Israel.

### Archaeological Excavations

Archaeological excavations show much about Canaanite daily life. One result surprises: “The strong continuance of Late Bronze Age material culture into Iron Age I can support Israel’s presence in the land prior to 1200 *and their acceptance of much of the material culture...* The proposition that certain traits distinguish Israelite from Canaanite

### A LASTING INFLUENCE

“**C**ANAANITES were ingenious inventors. Caught between the cumbersome writing systems of Mesopotamian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs, the Canaanites invented a simplified form of writing that was destined to become the predominant means of written communication—the alphabet.”

Source: Keith N. Schoville, “Canaanites and Amorites” in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, eds. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 178.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ GB HOWELL, JR./ LOUVRE/PARIS (85/13/83)



**Above: Phoenician cuneiform tablet with a poem detailing the myth of Baal’s death at the hands of the Canaanite god of**

**death, Mot. The tablet, from the house of the high priest at Ras Shamara, dates to 14th cent. B.C.**



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ LOUISE KOHL SMITH (33/36/12)

settlements is highly questionable”<sup>3</sup> (writer’s emphasis). Thus daily life remained much the same for Canaanites and Israelites, even down to the way they built four-room houses and made collar-rimmed jars. Archaeologists cannot distinguish between Israelite settlements and Canaanite ones.

Israel’s major distinction lay in their official religion. Yet its insistence on a centralized worship and its refusal to utilize material images of its God leave little behind for archaeologists to find. Similarly, stories such as those of Rahab (Josh. 2) and the Gibeonites (ch. 9) present only two of what probably were many cases of foreigners joining with Israel and bringing with them “Canaanite” artistry and skills.<sup>4</sup>

Excavations have shown that Canaanite religion was dynamic and varied in nature, with different types of worship structures from rural high places to urban temples to funeral sites where the Canaanites worshiped their ancestors. Standing stones or *masseboth* played an important role in many worship sites as did Egyptian obelisks. Archaeologists found that large Canaanite cities had multiple temples, and certain sites served as regional worship centers with professional staffs. The temple courtyard led to the holy of holies and had altars for burnt offerings. The courtyard often had workshops for temple metal workers and potters who produced sacred objects for use

in worship. These included ceramic vessels, small statues—especially of female figurines used in fertility and funeral practices—bronze cymbals, small stone statues of gods and goddesses, clay masks, and various types of jewelry and ornaments.<sup>5</sup>

What became of the Canaanites? History offers no solid details. Evidently they were not destroyed in war or taken captive. Many Bible scholars believe instead they eventually were assimilated into other people groups in the area. Although they ceased to exist as a separate people, their influences on religion and culture continued throughout the Old Testament Era. **B**

1. Information and population figures cited above come from K. L. Noll, *Canaan and Israel in Antiquity: An Introduction* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 83-116.

2. Israel Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1988), 186. “An influx of settlers overran the region” (187).

3. Alfred J. Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 216.

4. See Richard S. Hess, “Early Israel in Canaan: A Survey of Recent Evidence and Interpretation” in *Israel’s Past in Recent Research: Essays on Israelite Historiography*, ed. V. Philips Long. Sources for Biblical and Theological Studies 7 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 498-512. Originally published in *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 125 (1993), 125-42.

5. Beth Alpert Nakhai, “Canaanite Religion” in *Near Eastern Archaeology: A Reader*, ed. Suzanne Richard (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 343-48.

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