SOME CANAANITE-PHŒNICIAN SOURCES OF
HEBREW WISDOM

BY

W. F. ALBRIGHT

Baltimore

In recent years the importance of Canaanite and Phoenician civilization for proper understanding of the culture of Israel has been increasingly recognized 1). Occasional denials may generally be credited to a reluctance to abandon cherished positions of the recent past. After all, it was not until 1932 that the flow of Ugaritic illustrations of biblical literature began, carrying with it completely new insights into the already known Canaanite and Phoenician data. Published and unpublished data are already so extensive as to dwarf the significance of most other cultures of the Near and Middle East, in so far as direct service to biblical scholarship is concerned. Of course, nothing can change the overwhelming importance of Egyptology and Assyriology (sensu stricto) for our general knowledge of ancient Eastern civilization, and I am the last to deny that these two subjects remain more important in the last analysis for biblical scholarship.

There has been much misunderstanding of the nature of Canaanite-Phœnician culture 2). It must be emphasized that this was a relatively homogeneous civilization from the Middle Bronze Age down to the beginning of the Achaemenian period, after which it was swallowed

---


up in large part by much more extensive cultures. Chronologically speaking, it is certain that “Phoenician” is simply the Iron-Age equivalent of Bronze-Age “Canaanite” ¹. Recent numismatic discoveries prove that the Phoenician script and language were still used on coins as late as the reign of Gordian (A.D. 238-244) ², a fact which indicates that Phoenician culture did not finally expire until the triumph of Christianity in the fourth century. From the geographical standpoint, there was a homogeneous civilization which extended in the Bronze Age from Mount Casius, north of Ugarit, to the Negeb of Palestine, and in the Iron Age from north of Arvad (at least) to the extreme south of Palestine ³. This civilization shared a common material culture (including architecture, pottery, etc.) through the entire period, and we now know that language ⁴, literature ⁵, art, and religion ⁶ were substantially the same in the Bronze Age. From the twelfth century on we find increasing divergence in higher culture, but material culture remained practically the same in all parts of the area. The differences (except in the case of

¹) Cf. B. MAISLER (MAZAR), BASOR 102, p. 7-12.
³) How far some scholars are from appreciating this fact might be illustrated by many citations from centres of learning in both Europe and America. In 1951 an eminent American biblical scholar declared at a public meeting which I attended that there was no more relation between Ugaritic and Hebrew culture and literature than there was between the cultures of the Plains Indians and the Aztecs!
⁵) There can be little doubt any longer that the Ugaritic epics were all composed in Phoenicia proper and its hinterland, from which they were transmitted orally to all parts of the Canaanite continuum, including Ugarit in the north and Palestine in the south; for evidence see particularly my remarks in HUCA XXIII (1950/51), p. 3, n. 3, and BASOR 130, p. 26 f. Additional material for this localization may be found in published and unpublished papers by various scholars; e.g., M. H. POPE has shown that the home of the god El in the Baal Epic was primarily in the underworld near the famous sources of Afaq above Byblos. Any scholar who remains sceptical has only to recall the similar situation in the early Hellenic world, where the Homeric epics were diffused through areas occupied by speakers of many different dialects (and were sometimes modified dialectically in the process).
⁶) See especially ARI, ch. III. Note that there was a temple of Anath at Gaza (B. GRSZELLOFF, Les débuts du culte de Rechef en Égypte, Cairo, 1942, p. 35 ff., dealing with an ostraca from the end of the 13th century B.C.), temples of Dagon at Ashdod and Gaza, and a temple of Hauron at Jamnia—all in the extreme south of the coastal region of Canaan, later occupied by the Philistines.