If we want to investigate a concept like bn 'mj, we either have the choice to study it only in Ugaritic (bn amt) or Biblical Hebrew (ben-'āmāh), or to study it in both languages. It is, however, amazing when one compares this concept in both languages, how conservatively it was used. It seems as if with certain concepts, especially in the legal and social fields, a tendency toward preservation of a basic meaning occurred. It does not mean, however, that a certain concept has kept its basic meaning through many centuries without any variations. By studying a concept in its grammatical context or situation important conclusions on its change of meaning, however slight it might be, can be made. Even if we have the same concept in different languages or dialects a diachronical or synchronical study can teach us much about its meaning in a certain context.

In this study we are only interested in occurrences of bn 'mh in Northwest Semitic in a period up to the Sixth Century B.C. We have three instances in Ugaritic, not without uncertainties, and six in Biblical Hebrew. The question might be asked: Is it worthwhile to investigate this expression while it is so seldom used? A close look at the occurrences of bn 'mh shows that an understanding of its meaning is basic for the interpretation of the texts in which it occurs. In a few cases it has a sphere of meaning which extends beyond the border of its original legal and social connotations. Because, to my knowledge nowhere a complete and specific study is made of this concept, it seems worthwhile to investigate it. If we only are able to clarify a few problems in connection with its sphere of meaning and may propose a different translation from the usual one, we have succeeded in our task. ¹)

From a grammatical point of view it is important to fix the meaning of the so-called status absolutus of the genitive construction, 'mb, as precisely as possible. If we can succeed in reconstructing its meaning, we are much closer to the sphere of meaning of the expression as a whole. Much work has been done on the meaning of 'mb. The common consensus of opinion is that 'mb is to be rendered by slave-woman. 1) N. AVIGAD, while studying a Hebrew tomb-inscription where it is stated that the bones of SDQ and his handmaid ('mth) must not be disturbed, comes to the conclusion that 'mh must be regarded as a second-wife. 2) It is difficult to accept that a slave-woman should have received the honour to be buried with her master. In so far as this text is concerned, it seems that the view of AVIGAD is acceptable. On the other hand, it would be a rather one-sided view to explain every occurrence of 'mb in Northwest Semitic as meaning second-wife. Only a quick glance at the available material persuades one to have another look at the social and legal position of 'mb. To start with the Ugaritic material (Accadian cuneiform as well as alphabetic cuneiform), it is obvious that 'mh is used as the female counterpart of 'bd (or Accadian ardu) slave. E.g. slaves and slave-women are counted with movable (oxen, sheep etc.) and immovable (houses, land) property. 3) A very important document from a legal point of view even mentions the release of an amtu (slave-woman) from slavery.4) It is thus obvious from the discussed examples that at Ugarit 'mh was regarded as a woman in slavery without, however, specifying the kind of slavery.5) Some important material for our investigation occurs in the Amarna-letters. Although written in Accadian, they reflect clearly a Northwest Semitic background and are an important contribution to the fixing of the sphere of meaning of 'mb. Three different types of meanings appear, viz. a) A certain woman is an amtu of a goddess.

1) Cf. e.g. W. BAUMGARTNER, HAL, 1967, 59b.
2) N. AVIGAD, IEJ III (1953) 137-152.