ECHOES OF CANAANITE LITERATURE IN THE PSALMS

BY

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Although the influence of Canaanite literature on the Bible has been increasingly recognized, especially since the surprising discoveries of Ugarit (Ras Shamra) 1 in 1929, it is as regrettable that this light has not yet penetrated into all biblical circles 2, as it is certain that still more light can be gained from the same source. The present paper offers some instances where the Bible, and particularly passages in the Psalms, are better understood in such light.

In Ps. ix 6 we have the phrase שם מחקו עלולין ונד "their name thou hast destroyed forever and ever". This notion of destroying the name of someone, familiar to us from the Ancient Near East, really means, of course, that all memory of the proscribed person is to be eradicated, as is explicitly confirmed by Ex. xvii 14 נמחה אַּת שֵׁם הִמֹּלֶךְ (I. X X-τὸ μηνημόσυνον) as compared with Dt. xxv 19 נמחה אַת שֵׁם הִמֹּלֶךְ (LXX-Τὸ όνομα). This was most effectively achieved by destroying either the person himself, with whom the name was identified and here the texts of Dt. ix 14, xxix 19; Ex. xxxii 32 and Ps. lxix 29 are to be considered; or else their posterity, similarly identified, as confirmed by 2 Kgs. xiv 27 (LXX-τὸ στάρμα) יולא-던בר יים נמחה אַת שֵׁם. The meaning of “seed” for שֵׁם is evidently present in Ps. cix 13 3 and

1) In addition to Cl. SCHAEFFER’s Ugaritica I (Paris, 1939), Ugaritica II (Paris, 1949) and initial reports by Ch. VIROLLEAUD and Cl. SCHAEFFER in Syria since vol. x (1929), see R. DE LANGHE, Les textes de Ras Shamra-Ugarit et leurs rapports avec le milieu biblique (2 vols., Gembloux et Paris, 1945); for the grammar see C. GORDON, Ugaritic Handbook (Rome, 1947), pp. 283.

2) E. g. see ADOLPHE LODS, Histoire de la littérature hébraique et juive (Paris, 1950), pp. 1054 and Die Heilige Schrift in deutscher Übersetzung: das Alte Testament (Echter-Bibel edited in Würzburg, 1949-50), where such a lacuna is felt.

3) The second half of the verse reads “May their name be wiped out in the second generation.”
it is paralleled clearly with it in 1 Sam. xxiv 22 as may be seen from the
text: אָדוֹן שָׁם נְבִיָּם אַ-יִּוְעֵר אֲוַדֹּרְשׁ אִזְיוֹאֵר אֶהְוָרַשׁ בְּמִשְׁמֵשׁ יִבְנֵי יֵסַף אֱכֶל. Lack of posterity, being
one of the greatest calamities that could befall, is the subject of
touching recitals and the Ugaritic tales of Keret and Aqhat in some
ways are a typical counterpart to that of Abraham in Gen. xv 2-3
It is not by accident that in the institution of Levirate marriage,
whereby a man would take the wife of his deceased brother and the
son first born to them would take that deceased brother’s name, its
purpose should be expressed in the following words לאָדֹן שָׁם נְבִיָּם מִשְׁמֵשׁ יִבְנֵי יֵסַף אֱכֶל. But it is not only through children that oblivion is avoided.
Ben Sira (xl 19) tells us that children and the foundation of a city
perpetuate a name. We can feel therefore what is behind the words
of Azitawaddu, king of the late Hittite citadel (c. 725 B. C.) at Kara-
tepé in Cilicia, when he says (Portal Inscription, III, 12-4) “if (there be)
a man who is a man of note (אַ-יוֹדֶם) who should erase the name of
Aztawaddu (אַ-יוֹדֶם נְבִיָּה) from this gateway, and should put a name
(there) ... (אַ-יוֹדֶם נְבִיָּה) and (ibid. 16) should make (it) into a strange gate,
and should put his name on it; ... (18) then may Ba‘al Shamém and
El, the creator of the earth, and Shamash the eternal, and all the gods
destroy (יִוְדֶה) that royal person ... that man, who is a man of note
(אַ-יוֹדֶם נְבִיָּה) but the name of Azitawaddiya shall be forever like
the names of Shamash and Yarah”. That is, he hopes that the
city, Azitawaddiya, shall be of an everlasting dynasty in comparing
it to the sun and moon; for this compare Ps. lxxii 5, 17, lxxxix 37-8.

In the light of this great concern for having a name and a blessed
posterity, the passage in 1 Kgs. iv 7-19a has always been a source
of discomfort to commentators. It lists twelve prefects of Solomon’s
administrative districts, but five of these who are in the regions of
Mt. Ephraim, of Beth Shemesh and Aiyyalon, of Socho, of Dor and
of Ramoth Gilead, are indicated as: the son of Y, whereas the other
seven are listed by their own names, followed almost always by their
father’s respective names, thus: X son of Y. The usual explanation
of this phenomenon is given by the latest commentary on the Book
of Kings, that “an accident early befell the document, a vertical
break at the right hand of the papyrus (?) left blank the initial names

1) The Ugaritic phrase מִשְׁמֵשׁ יִבְנֵי יֵסַף, if it is not to be translated “Astarte, offspring
of Baal”, is certainly a surrogate of his in some way.