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REMEMBERING UGARIT

## The Tablets From Ugarit and Their Importance for Biblical Studies

For 40 years Claude Schaeffer directed excavations at Ras Shamra in Syria. There he and his colleagues uncovered the remains of the long lost city of Ugarit, a Late Bronze Age metropolis in early Biblical times. And among the ruins of Ugarit, he found the archives of the ancient city. The clay tablets discovered in those archives have had a revolutionary impact on the study of the Hebrew Bible.

It was on May 14, 1929, as the dirt was being cleared from the floor of what had once been a building (a library as they were later to determine), that the first clay tablets were found. The tablets were provisionally dated on the basis of other objects found in the surrounding excavations. The texts, together with their written substance, appeared to come from the 14th to 13th centuries B.C.

No doubt Schaeffer was thrilled to have discovered ancient texts as well as artifacts. Yet the real significance of the texts did not become evident until the writing was examined in detail. Schaeffer himself was an archaeologist, not a linguist; he entrusted the examination of the texts to Charles Virolleaud, the local director of the Bureau of Antiquities, who was skilled in the ancient languages and scripts of the area. As Virolleaud examined the tablets, he recognized immediately that he was faced with a significant discovery. The tablets contained cuneiform writing, which was known well enough from the multitude of texts recovered from other excavations. But the writing on these texts from Ras Shamra was entirely different from any of the other forms of cuneiform Virolleaud had ever seen. Instead of the several hundred different symbols typical of the normal syllabic cuneiform script, these newly discovered tablets contained fewer than 30 distinct symbols. It appeared in other words, that the tablets contained writing in a kind of cuneiform alphabet.

*Mask-like eyes stare out of a woman's softly molded face and a single curl dangles down her forehead on this faience vase from Ugarit. Dating from Ugarit's Golden Age (14th to 13th centuries B.C.), this six-inch-high faience vase is another of the treasures from the royal tombs in the Minet el-Beida cemetery.*



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After determining the apparently alphabetic character of the writing, Virolleaud then faced the daunting task of deciphering the script. He was able to make only a little progress in the first weeks, but as a service to scholars, he published the texts, providing photographs and copies of the inscriptions for examination by his colleagues. The most remarkable part in the story of the decipherment was played by Hans Bauer, who received a copy of Virolleaud's photographs and transcriptions on April 22, 1930.

Bauer brought an extraordinary background to his role as decipherer. Then 51, he was Professor of Oriental Languages in the German University of Halle. He was multilingual, having mastered some East Asian languages in addition to the Semitic languages. But perhaps his most important skill had been honed during service in the German armed forces in World War I. He had been engaged in cryptanalysis, or code-breaking, for German intelligence. That experience had taught him the value of using a statistical method to crack codes. Five days after receiving copies of the texts, Bauer succeeded in assigning phonetic values to 20 of the cuneiform symbols, or about 80 percent of the signs used on the tablets. His work was refined and corrected in some details by others; Édouard Dhorme in Jerusalem and Virolleaud in Latakia put the finishing touches to Bauer's decipherment. From the summer of 1930, the clay tablets recovered from Ras Shamra by Schaeffer's team could be translated and read.

The excitement of the decipherment did not distract Schaeffer from pursuing his excavations; indeed, his enthusiasm only grew. Between 1929 and the outbreak of World War II, Schaeffer directed 11 campaigns at the cemetery and seaport (Minet el-Beida) and at the city (Ras Shamra/ancient Ugarit). The war disrupted the campaigns. But following the cessation of hostilities, Schaeffer renewed his work at the site. He began his 12th campaign in 1948, and he continued to be the director of the campaigns at Ras Shamra until the end of the 31st campaign in 1969. For four decades the name of Schaeffer was inextricably related to that of Ras Shamra/Ugarit. The leadership in the excavations passed to others after 1969, but Schaeffer continued to play a vital role in the study and publication of the finds from the ancient site.

Although it was the texts from Ras Shamra that caught most of the public attention, the excavations have also uncovered extensive remains of a city of the early Biblical period. Dominating the western section of the city was a massive palace whose ruins took several seasons to lay bare. It is the largest palace ever discovered in the Near East. Extending over an area of some two and a half acres, the palace served not only as a royal residence but also as an administrative complex. It had approximately 90 rooms, five large courtyards, a dozen staircases leading to upper

*Text continues on p. 69*

## Ugaritic Religion

Ugaritic religion is revealed through the architecture of the city's temples, the mythological texts on cuneiform tablets and the cult objects recovered from the excavations.

The Ugaritic pantheon included Baal, Dagon, and Astarte—all familiar names from the Bible. The ways in which the gods were worshipped are suggested by numerous stelae, cult stands, altars, and other objects, some of which are illustrated below.

Baal with "lightning" strides across a white limestone stela found south of the temple of Baal. The stela, dating to the 14th to 13th centuries B.C., is almost 1.5 feet high and 20 inches wide. Baal wears a helmet with two horns in front; with his right hand he holds a club over his head; his left hand holds a lance with its point on the ground. The "branches" at the top of the lance may be intended to represent lightning. The man portrayed near Baal may have donated the stela to the temple.

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From a princess's tomb at the cemetery of Minet el-Beida near the tell of Ras Shamra/Ugarit came a gold pendant of Astarte, goddess of love and fertility. Snakes (on either side), a lion (on which she stands) and two ibexes (one in each of Astarte's hands) complete the picture.

The Louvre, Department of Oriental Antiquities





Bearded figures in Syrian garments ride in this reconstructed 14th-century B.C. votive chariot. The tableau provides a vivid portrayal of how the local upper class looked and dressed nearly 3,500 years ago. Found in the temple of Baal, the chariot, figures and horse's head are made of faience—glazed earthenware.

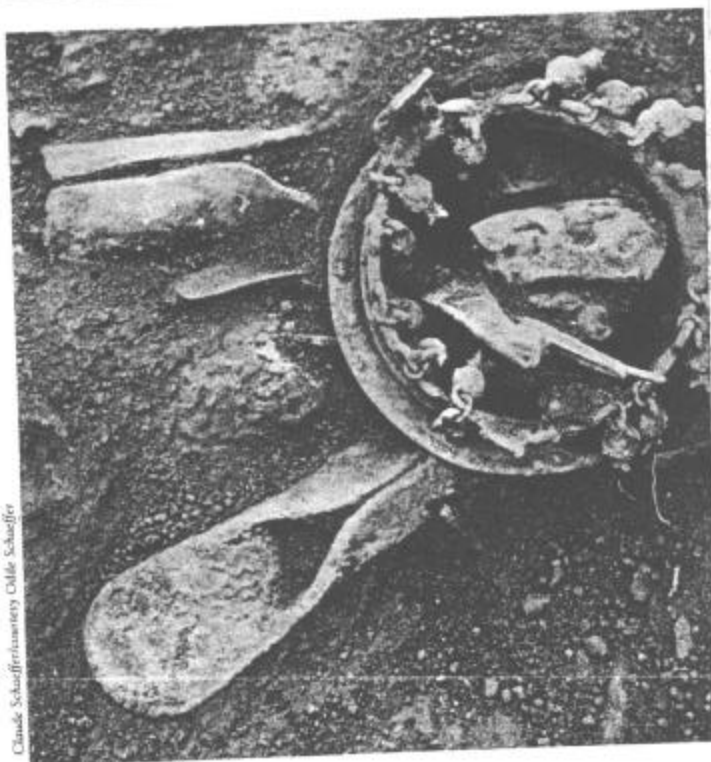
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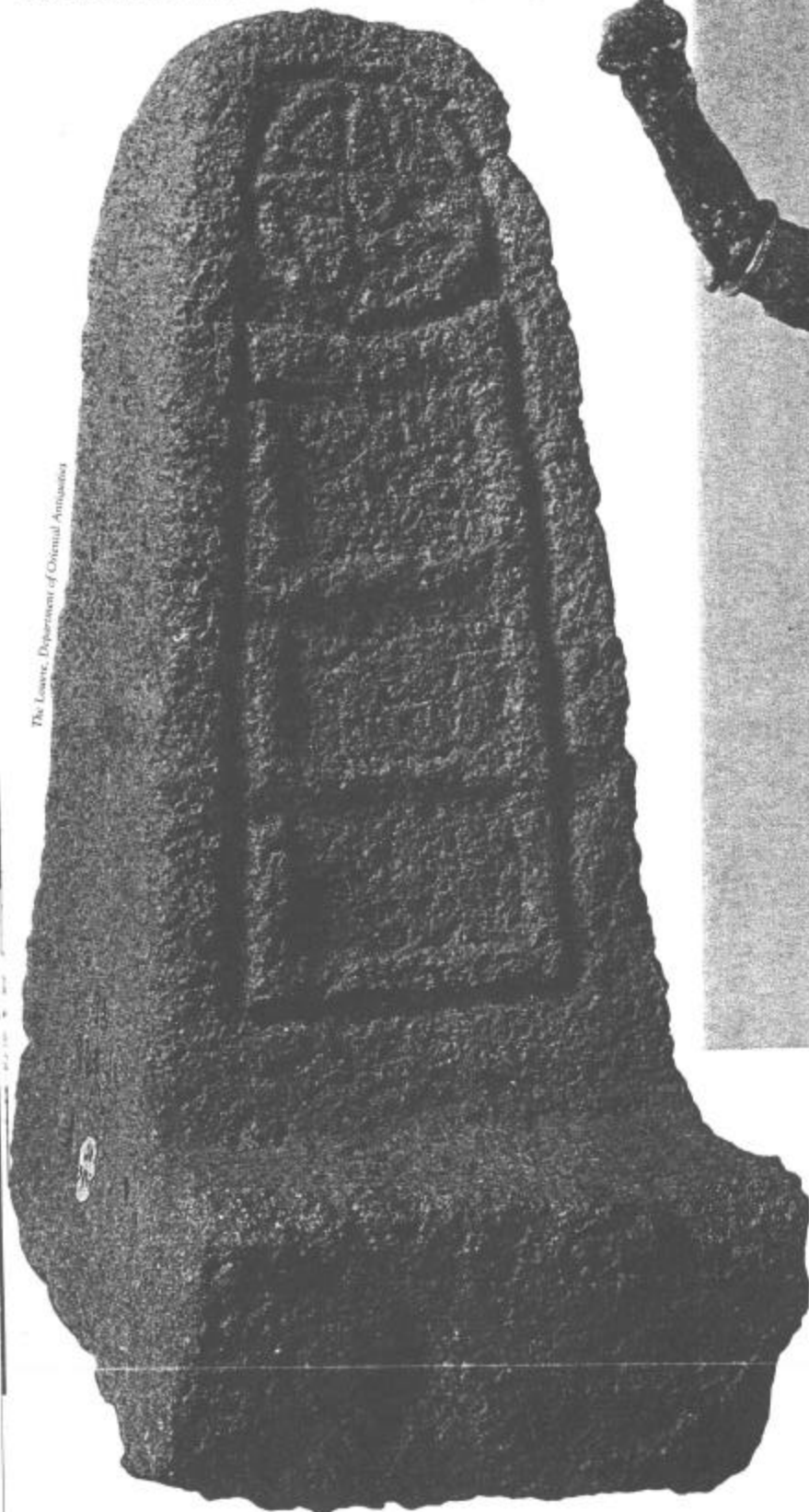
A bronze cultic stand is adorned with bells in the shape of pomegranates hanging from the rim. This remarkably preserved object, standing on its bronze tripod, was part of the bronze hoard pictured on p. 61. The photo below shows the stand as it was being excavated.



Claude Schaeffer/University of Chicago

A bronze and gold statue of Baal, approximately 7.5 inches tall, one of many found at Ugarit, was worshipped as the deified embodiment of the earth's fertility. The weapons this statue once held are missing.

Centuries after this statue was made Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:20-40) and exhorted the Israelites, "If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21).



The Louvre, Department of Oriental Antiquities



The Louvre, Department of Oriental Antiquities

An altar with a "solar pillar" was discovered in the home of Ugarit's high priest. The 12.5-inch-tall altar dates from the 13th century B.C.

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floors, several archives, numerous wells, and an interior garden.

In the northern section of the city, there were two great temples, one devoted primarily to the worship of Baal and the other to Dagon. Between the two lay the high priest's house, which also served as a scribal school. And south of the temple area, still on the high part of the tell, other religious buildings were found, in which priest-diviners plied their trade.

Other buildings that have been excavated range from the houses of senior civil servants to the humbler dwellings of ordinary artisans. In most of the homes, tombs were discovered under the floor of the house or the courtyard, indicative of a special concern for the dead.

In the nearby port town, excavated at Minet el-Beida, evidence has survived of religious activity not associated with the great temples. Enclosed shrines, near the tombs of the necropolis, were apparently used in fertility rites.

The sheer magnitude of the excavations at Ras Shamra is staggering. They have revealed the outline of an entire ancient city with its great buildings and its private homes, its narrow lanes and its broad thoroughfares, its ramparts and its entrances. From this vast accumulation of physical evidence, a reconstruction of city life in Biblical times is gradually being assembled.

Although ancient Ugarit and its archives have had an important impact on various disciplines, none has been so profoundly affected as Biblical studies.

The archives are written in half a dozen different languages and a variety of scripts. The texts that took the limelight, however, were those in the formerly unknown alphabetic cuneiform. The language underlying this script is called Ugaritic, after the ancient city in which it was used, although the script has now been found at a number of sites as far south as Tel Aphek near Tel Aviv. Ugaritic is a Northwest Semitic language and a close linguistic relative of Biblical Hebrew. The archives of Ras Shamra have yielded several thousand tablets, including 1,400 texts in the Ugaritic language and script\*; while many are fragmentary, others have been preserved in excellent condition. Larger archives have been found, such as the 12,000-15,000 tablets recently discovered at Ebla, but the Ugarit archives are nevertheless a very significant corpus of texts. The importance of the texts for Biblical studies emerges not only from the close relationship in language but also from the substance and the literary forms common to both bodies of literature.

The Ugaritic texts are unusually diverse. Many are typi-

cal of texts found in state archives—administrative texts, census lists, economic texts, and letters.

Other tablets are even more interesting because they are poetic in form and literary in character. The splendid legends of Keret and of Aqhat reflect a panorama on life and religion in the ancient world of Syria. Mythological tablets concerning the god Baal provide new insight into the beliefs concerning this deity whose name occurs so frequently in the Hebrew Bible. There are other texts, of a more ritual character, which illuminate the daily practice of religion in ancient Ugarit.

As Schaeffer and Virolleaud began to publish more and more of the discoveries at Ras Shamra in the early 1930s, others began to draw out the significance of the discoveries for the study of the Bible. J. W. Jack read a paper to a meeting of the Society for Old Testament Studies in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1934.<sup>1</sup> With due caution, he drew attention to the parallels in language and thought between the newly discovered Ugaritic texts and portions of the Hebrew Bible. René Dussaud published a monograph on the subject in 1937 in France.<sup>2</sup> Some of his observations on parallels with the Bible were hastily drawn and later rejected, but he was opening a door through which many of his successors were to pass. A new discipline had been born: Hebrew-Ugaritic Studies.

The foundational studies of the Ugaritic texts on which the new discipline developed were undertaken largely by two American scholars, Cyrus Gordon and H. L. Ginsberg. The latter produced some of the first extensive translations of the Ugaritic texts, upon which later scholars relied as they applied the new data to the study of the Bible.<sup>3</sup> And Cyrus Gordon, in addition to translating the principal Ugaritic texts, provided a scientific basis for the study of Ugaritic grammar and lexicography (see his splendid *Ugaritic Textbook* [Rome, 1965]). T. H. Gaster, in a provocative and wide-ranging book entitled *Thespis* (New York, 1950), drew heavily on both Ugaritic texts and the Hebrew Bible in his examination of myth and ritual in the ancient world. In Italy, Umberto Cassuto produced a series of detailed studies of the Ugaritic texts and their illumination of the Hebrew Bible, which to this day are a model of comparative scholarship. (His articles on Ugaritic and Hebrew Studies have been reprinted in two volumes, *Biblical and Oriental Studies* [Jerusalem, 1973 and 1975].)

As the excavations continued from one year to the next, so too did the enthusiasm with which Biblical scholars applied these new resources—the Ugaritic texts—to the study of the Bible. Perhaps none was more enthusiastic in this task than the late Mitchell Dahood in Rome. His three-volume commentary on the Psalms (in the Anchor Bible, 1966-1970) is thoroughly penetrated by Ugaritic data. His translations of the texts differ from older transla-

\*Others are in Akkadian, Sumerian, Hurrian, Hittite and Cypro-Minoan; there are also some Hittite and Egyptian hieroglyphic inscriptions.





## Cuneiform Tablets

The alphabet was one of the most important inventions in the history of mankind. It replaced unwieldy memorization of thousands of pictures or hundreds of syllabic signs with an easy-to-learn sequence of approximately 30 letters, which could be combined into thousands of words. About the middle of the 14th century B.C., scribes at Ugarit, perhaps influenced by a knowledge of the earlier Canaanite linear alphabet, invented the cuneiform alphabet. Although the Ugaritic alphabet is thus not the first, it is the oldest alphabet in which a significant number of texts are extant.

The Claremont "Marzeah" Tablet, pictured here, is inscribed with a text written in the Ugaritic alphabet. Some of the most important tablets from Ugarit, including this one, are now housed in the United States at The Institute of Antiquity and Christianity in Claremont, California. This particular tablet is called the Marzeah Tablet because it includes the word *marzeah*, a type of club or dining society known throughout the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, that, according to many scholars is referred to in Amos 6:7 and Jeremiah 16:5.































The exceptionally clear resolution of the cuneiform wedges on the surface of the tablet in this picture is the result of an improved photographic technique developed by the West Semitic Research Project under the auspices of the School of Religion at the University of Southern California. With photographs like this, many scholarly disputes regarding the contents of these texts can be resolved. Directed by Bruce Zuckerman, the Project hopes to provide scholars with sharply detailed photographs of major West Semitic texts. The "Marzeah" Tablet was the first tablet photographed by the Project.

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## The Ugaritic Alphabet and How It's Pronounced

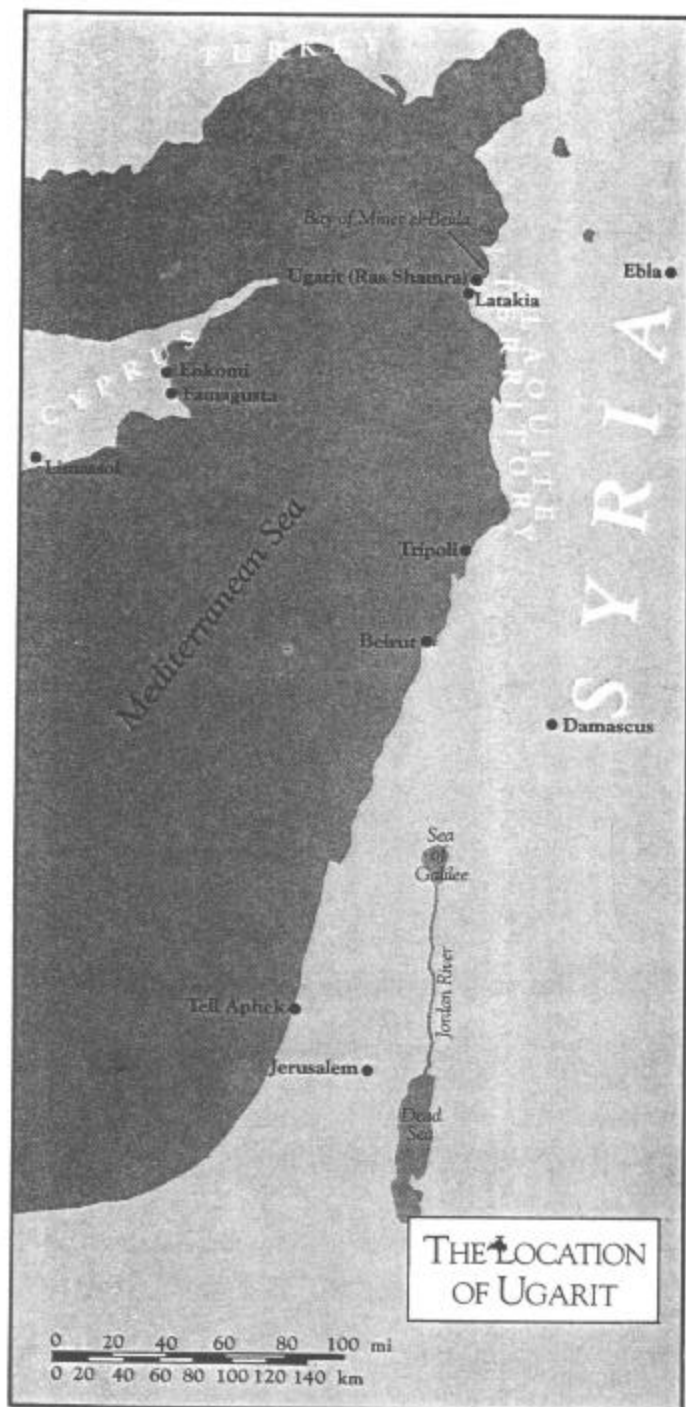
Equivalent	Cuneiform Sign	Equivalent	Cuneiform Sign
a <i>as in father</i>		zh	
b		n	
g		z	
kh		s	
d		<i>an ah sound pronounced with the tongue on the roof of the mouth</i>	
h		p	
w		ts	
z		q	
ch <i>as in Scottish loch</i>		r	
t		th <i>as in thin</i>	
y		gh	
k		t	
sh		i <i>as in machine</i>	
l		u <i>as in rude</i>	
m		sa	

tions of the Psalms; his interpretations and theological understanding depart radically from his predecessors'; and all this was a consequence of the impact of Ugaritic studies. Dahood's more cautious colleagues complained of an outbreak of "pan-Ugaritism"; nevertheless, whether Dahood was right or wrong in his findings, the study of the Psalms can never again be the same. It is imperative to come to grips not only with Ugaritic but also with the often brilliant formulations of Mitchell Dahood in all current study of the Psalms.

But while Dahood captured attention in dramatic fashion because of his utilization of Ugaritic texts, numerous other Biblical scholars have been patiently pursuing the re-examination of the Biblical text in the light of Ugaritic. The volume of material that has been devoted to this topic over half a century is immense. At Claremont, California, the "Ras Shamra Parallels Project" was established in 1965 to catalog and assess the vast production of comparative Hebrew-Ugaritic studies. So far, it has produced three large technical volumes entitled *Ras Shamra Parallels*. And in Germany, a research group at the University of Munster produced a massive four-volume bibliography, listing studies from 1928 to 1966. Since 1966, the publication of Hebrew-Ugaritic studies has continued unabated.

This vast enterprise of Hebrew-Ugaritic scholarship has also had its impact on the lay reader of the Bible. Sometimes the impact is subtle and virtually unnoticed; sometimes it is dramatic, as in the debate evoked by the publication of Dahood's commentary on the Psalms. The more subtle impact is to be seen (though frequently it passes unnoticed) in the plethora of modern translations of the Hebrew Bible. There are many words employed in the Hebrew text whose meanings are unclear and, sometimes, unknown; translators prior to the 20th century surmised, by various means, their possible meaning. But when the same words occur in the Ugaritic texts, progress is possible. The meaning of words occurring only once in the Hebrew Bible (called by scholars *hapax legomena*) but fairly frequently in Ugaritic can now be determined with reasonable certainty. The same may be true of rare grammatical forms or literary arrangements in the Hebrew texts; parallel forms and structures in the Ugaritic texts may illuminate what formerly was obscure.

In other cases, the light from the Ugaritic texts may be more pertinent to a general interpretation of the Biblical narrative. The god Baal is often referred to in the Bible; the Biblical writers were not objective historians of religion but were concerned more with the dangers of a foreign religion undermining the integrity of the Hebrew faith. And so, not unnaturally, the Biblical writers condemn the faith of Baal. But how did the Canaanites conceive Baal? What was the nature of their faith? How did they worship and integrate



their faith into their daily existence? From the Ugaritic texts we understand Baal worship from the point of view of his own followers.

Six large tablets recovered in the ruins of the high priest's house at Ras Shamra dramatically pull back the curtain on belief in Baal. From them we can grasp something of the faith of the followers of Baal and thus under-

stand something of the seductive allure of false faith in ancient Israel.

The mythology concerning Baal was the substance of faith for many in ancient Ugarit; as one scholar has put it, the Baal tablets constitute the "Canaanite Bible." Fundamental to this faith was Baal's role in nature; through rain and storm, he made provision for fertile ground which produced the crops and fed the cattle upon which human life depended. But this faith also recognized the vulnerability of human life in a changing world. If the rains did not come, if the soils did not produce their crops, human life could fail. In mythological language, if the gods of chaos reasserted themselves and if the god Baal lost his preeminence, all human existence was threatened. And thus the goal of Baal's religion was to secure his supremacy; only while he remained supreme, so his worshippers believed, would the crops and cattle so essential to human survival continue.

The first three chapters of the book of Hosea provide an example of the new light Ugarit sheds on the Bible. The book of Hosea begins by recounting the prophet's marriage, divorce, and remarriage. The prophet's tragic experience is an allegory telling of God's relationship with Israel. Lying behind these chapters is the religion of Baal, to which many of Hosea's contemporaries had turned. Though the interpretation of these chapters has not been the subject of serious doubt, the nature of Baal's religion, to which these chapters are a reaction, has remained obscure. Why did people turn from the traditional faith to the practice of a foreign religion? Where did it find its appeal? The Ugaritic texts make it clear that the religion of Baal had to do with necessities of life, the crops and food on which survival depended. Moreover, that fundamental appeal may have been bolstered by a further attraction: There is debate among scholars as to the role of sexual activity in the Ugaritic worship of Baal; in the mythology, the appetites of Baal for sex and violence are considerable. Sexual activity in the worship of Baal may have been one of the cruder attractions in this alien faith, exemplified in Hosea by the apostate Israel in the form of Gomer, Hosea's wife. What the Ugaritic texts provide, in this instance, is a fuller insight into the religion of Baal with which Israel had become entangled. And that insight, in turn, illuminates both the tragic allegory that was Hosea's life and something of the foreign faith to which Israel had been drawn.

Another example: Amos is called a "shepherd" (Amos 1:1). But why is the Hebrew word *noqed* used, rather than the common Hebrew word *ro'eh*? *Noqed* is used in only one other text in the Hebrew Bible to describe Mesha, King of Moab (2 Kings 3:4). In the Ugaritic texts, the cognate word *nqd* is used approximately ten times. It designates not a simple shepherd but somebody in the sheep business; the

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## Remembering Ugarit

These pictures will be found in full color on pp. 54 and 55.

**Gold plate or patera.** One of the most beautiful artifacts discovered at Ugarit is this gold plate, or patera, which depicts a royal hunt. In addition to the hunter with a bow and arrow in a chariot drawn by two stallions, we see an ibex and two wild bulls, a cow and its calf and the hunter's dog, all on the outer circle of this 14th-century B.C. plate. The inner circle contains four ibexes, whose horns surround a solar disk. Measuring 7.5 inches in diameter, the plate was found near Ugarit's temple of Baal.


**Claude F.A. Schaeffer.** This photograph shows him a few years before his death.

**Fragment of Ugaritic alphabet tablet.** During the first weeks of his excavation, Schaeffer discovered clay tablets written in a cuneiform alphabet. Not until after World War II, however, did he unearth the first of several abecedary (alphabet) tablets. A fragment of one of these alphabet tablets is pictured here. By comparing this photo to the chart of the Ugaritic alphabet on p. 71, one can identify many of the letters on the tablet.

selling wool or mutton, took him from his native Tekoa, in Judah, to the northern market places of Israel where he became involved in his prophetic ministry. Amos thus becomes not only a more human figure but also a more challenging figure to us in the 20th century, in the light of Ugaritic.

Psalms 29 provides our final example of the potential of the Ugaritic texts for illuminating the Bible. The psalmist praises God in powerful language, evocative of a thunderstorm; thunder, described as God's voice, is referred to seven times. In 1935, H. L. Ginsberg proposed that Psalm 29 was originally a Phoenician hymn which had found its way into the Psalter.<sup>4</sup> In support of his hypothesis, he noted several aspects of the psalm which suggested to him that it had been composed initially in honor of the storm god, Baal; he drew upon the Ugaritic texts to substantiate his hypothesis. Theodor Gaster took the hypothesis further in a study published in the *Jewish Quarterly Review* in 1947.<sup>5</sup> Drawing again on the evidence of the Ugaritic texts, he proposed that the psalm was originally Canaanite; it had been modified for inclusion in Israel's hymnbook simply by the replacement of the name Baal with the personal name of Israel's God.

Today, although debate continues on the details of the hypothesis, almost all scholars agree that Psalm 29's background is Baal worship, as portrayed in the tablets from Ugarit. The psalm in its present form has a powerful effect; the power of nature and of the storm are not exclusively the domain of Baal; all power, including that of storm and thunder, is the prerogative of Israel's God. Yet the Ugaritic background of the psalm reveals its sources.

Though Schaeffer has died, the excavations continue. In 1978, Marguerite Yon of the University of Lyons, France, was appointed director. After half a century of excavation, only a third of the ancient city has been uncovered. But today one can walk through the ruins, stand on the floors of once splendid palaces and temples, explore the streets of suburban Ugarit, and reflect on the glory of a city long since dead. More than any other, Claude Schaeffer brought this fragment of our human past back to life. 

<sup>1</sup>*The Ras Shamra Tablets: Their Bearing on the Old Testament* (T. and T. Clark: Edinburgh, 1935).

<sup>2</sup>*Les Découvertes de Ras Shamra (Ugarit) et L'Ancien Testament* (Paris, 1937).

<sup>3</sup>J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1950).

<sup>4</sup>"A Phoenician Hymn in the Psalter," *XIX Congresso Internazionale degli Orientalisti* (Rome, 1935), pp. 472-76.

<sup>5</sup>Theodor H. Gaster, "Psalm 29," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 37 (1946-1947), pp. 55-65.

*nqd* was responsible for vast herds of sheep; he was a significant person in society, a member of the business elite. Amos, then, was probably not a simple shepherd. We are told that he was also involved with cattle and fruit farming (Amos 7:14-15). In light of the insight derived from the Ugaritic word *nqd*, we can conclude that Amos was engaged in agribusiness on a fairly large scale. Perhaps his business,



***Drought, Famine,  
Earthquakes and,  
Ultimately Fire Ended  
Civilization at Ugarit***  
By  
**Claude F.A. Schaeffer**

Among the ancient cities destroyed at the end of the Late Bronze Age was Ugarit. For a time, Claude Schaeffer, the excavator of Ugarit, thought the city might have been destroyed by an invasion of the Sea Peoples who were related to the Philistines. Letters in the Ugaritic archives indicate that the Sea Peoples may indeed have invaded Anatolia. As the following excerpt indicates, however, toward the end of his life, Schaeffer abandoned this theory. This excerpt originally appeared in *Ugaritica V*, published in 1968. The translation from the French is by Michael David Coogan, who teaches Old Testament and Archaeology at Harvard University and is the author of *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (see p. 86). This translation is published with permission of the *Imprimerie Nationale*, Paris, France, and of Mme. Claude Schaeffer.—Ed.

Under the layer of dusty, yellowish soil of the late 13th to early 12th centuries, were strata containing the remains of buildings and tombs of the beginning of the Late Bronze Age (15th to 14th centuries) and of the end of the Middle Bronze Age (17th century). The color and non-powdery composition of these

The severity of the final destruction and most of the damage shown by the cities were never again. The ruins shows clearly that the cities were struck

earlier strata also indicate a rainier climate than that of Ugarit's last days.

Thus, at Ras Shamra the thick blanket of dusty soil, white or pale yellow in color, in which the latest ruins of Ugarit are embedded indicates an extremely dry climate. This blanket is sandwiched between two levels of non-dusty soil of normal composition—the late Middle Bronze and early Late Bronze below and the Iron Age and later above—which attest a rainier climate.

The stratigraphic evidence at Ras Shamra of a long period of extreme aridity and heat during the city's last years agrees with the frequent references to famine among Ugarit's neighbors, and doubtless at Ugarit itself, [as reflected] in the texts [found at Ugarit].

There is another characteristic of the remains of Ugarit at the end of the Late Bronze Age: we can now identify at least two periods of severe earthquakes. The first phase of seismic activity, without doubt accompanied by a tidal wave, occurred in the mid-14th century, during the reign of Amenophis IV, according to the report given to the Pharaoh by Abimilki, king of Tyre [as recorded in the famous Amarna letters found in Egypt]. Traces of this earthquake are still apparent on some excavated buildings at Ras Shamra, although most of them had been repaired.

The second series of earthquakes was apparently more severe, and caused the total destruction of the palace and as much of the city as our excavations have cleared. This catastrophe can be dated exactly to the beginning of the 12th century. The palace walls, which were constructed of heavy dressed stone blocks, collapsed and crushed a kiln in which a hundred tablets were being fired. One of these is a translation into Ugaritic alphabetic cuneiform of a letter from the Hittite king, probably Suppiluliumas II. He urgently requests from Hammurapi, the king of Ugarit, provisions to relieve a famine and weapons to resist an enemy who is unidentified, in accordance with normal epistolary style. Quite possibly the enemy should be identified as Northerners and Sea Peoples who were then passing through the coastal provinces of northern Anatolia, hitherto under Hittite control. In the last batch in the kiln, there was another letter which dealt with a request for provisions to relieve a famine in a nearby country ruled by a certain Pgn.

The severity of the earthquake that caused the final destruction of the palace of Ugarit and most of the city's other buildings, is shown by the condition of the ruins, which were never again rebuilt. The condition of the ruins shows clearly that the palace and the city were struck suddenly by a series of violent

tremors which caused even the most solidly built walls to collapse. In the huge palace, swarming with officials and servants, and in the districts where private houses and workshops were located, life was brutally and instantaneously halted.

While the earthquakes were leveling the city, conflagrations of exceptional violence broke out. Ash layers up to half a meter thick lay on the floors of rooms and on the flagstones of the palace courtyard. The fire's heat was so intense that in several places the dressed limestone blocks of the walls were melted into pure lime, which rainwater or seepage converted into calcium hydroxide after the catastrophe. Here and there streams of lime solidified into large boulders and stalactites that formed a hard, brittle matrix around such objects as tablets. Some masses of this igneous concrete were more than a meter wide and blocked some of the palace doors or accumulated at the bases of walls; we had to dislodge them with heavy picks that had to be resharpened frequently and with mining spikes wielded by Turkish workers from the mountain quarries north of Ugarit.


The facades south of the palace and the interiors of the northern walls were most affected by the conflagration. Here, even the thick horizontal beams between the third and fourth lowest courses, which had been put there to strengthen the walls against earthquakes, caught fire; traces of black smoke can still be seen on the stones. During the conflagration, the wind must have blown from the south and southeast, from the deserts of the Arabian peninsula. This wind is still dreaded in Syria, since it brings with it storms of locusts, the curse of drought years.\*

At Ras Shamra, the tops of most of the burned walls collapsed and, despite the solid foundations and dressed stone construction, especially in the palace, entire facades slumped severely. This proves that the earthquakes and fire occurred simultaneously, making any attempts at salvage impossible.

Despite the extent and the violence of the seismic catastrophe and the accompanying conflagration which destroyed the city, it must be noted that during our many years of excavation we did not find a single human

victim or skeleton apart from those which had been properly interred during Ugarit's final phase in the burial chambers in the basements of the palace and the private houses. It seems, therefore, that the population had been warned by the kinds of signs which frequently precede such events, warnings whose significance they must have understood,\* or that they had already deserted the city because of the drought and famine which prevailed elsewhere in Syria and in nearby countries at that time, as our texts illustrate.

Furthermore, there was not a single trace of a conquering army or a foreign invasion, nor of the victims their presence would have caused.

Thus, after 29 seasons of excavations which yielded an archaeological and epigraphic trove among the richest ever found at a single site, we have had to abandon the hypothesis that Ugarit was destroyed by an invasion of Northerners and Sea Peoples. This capital city, with its palaces and temples and its many spacious private dwellings, all of which contained diplomatic, economic, and administrative archives and ample and varied scribal libraries in several languages, with its industrial quarters consisting of the workshops of artisans of all crafts and occupations and of large commercial houses some of whose stores were still crammed with merchandise—all were victims of a natural disaster. This disaster included a prolonged drought which caused the famines mentioned in the texts from Ugarit's final phase, and quakes and conflagrations whose severity is clearly indicated by the condition of the ruins. The population must have abandoned this center of commercial and literary activity, never to return, leaving behind many precious objects cached under the floors or in the walls of their houses. 

\*During my many visits and trips to countries which are still frequently subject to earthquakes, especially Anatolia, I have seen how aware the populace is of the danger of seismic tremors. One night while I was at the French Institute of Archaeology in Istanbul, after 1946, I felt the building shake slightly; the next day I learned that the residents in the neighborhood had left their houses and camped in the streets and yards until the minor quake had stopped. Once in Ankara, after my excavations at Arslan Tepe-Malatya, I gave a lunch for the Turkish archaeological officials, with the French ambassador, M. Maugras, present. During the meal I noticed the proprietor of the restaurant come into the dining room and discreetly watch the chandelier, which was swaying slightly. My Turkish guests did the same, without revealing their concern. Afterwards the proprietor explained to me that if the swaying had intensified we would have had to leave the room.

\*On two occasions during our excavations before 1939, we had to release our workers, who had been called [back to their villages] to dig ditches [to capture the locusts] in the fields in the vicinity of Ras Shamra. Millions of young locusts crawled on the ground [into the ditches where they were then burned]. The mature insects flew over Minet el-Beida and Ras Shamra in thick clouds which darkened the sky.