UGARIT - RAS SHAMRA.

RAS SHAMRA TABLETS - The excavation of Ras Shamra, ancient Ugarit, which was occupied from the Neolithic Age (before c 3500 BC) to the end of the Bronze Age (c 1200 BC), certainly inaugurated a new epoch in OT research. This nexus of trade routes near the North Syrian coast about 12 miles N. of Latakia abounded in texts in several scripts, including Egyptian hieroglyphic inscriptions, business documents and political and legal texts in Akkadian syllabic cuneiform, alphabetic texts in the language of the non-Semitic Hurrians (possibly Biblical Horites) of the Anatolian foothills, Sumerian-Akkadian and Sumerian-Akkadian-Hurrian vocabularies, and texts in the linear Cypriot script, and also Hittite elements even in Semitic texts. More directly relevant to the OT are a large number of official documents from the palace archives and myths and sagas in alphabetic cuneiform from the Late Bronze Age stratum (c 1400 BC) of the library of the temple of Baal. The former are vital for the study of Canaanite society and institutions; the latter, of epic style and often of epic proportions, comprise a substantial torso of the literature of Canaan on the eve of the Hebrew settlement.

The administrative and legal documents indicate that the subjects were listed for military service or for provision of arms, and that taxes were levied in silver, produce, or labour, recalling Solomon's levies in Israel (1 K.5.13ff, 9.15ff, 11.25). A fact that further suggests Solomon's administration (1 K.4.7-19) is that, though there are traces of a social order based on families, the population was organized by districts, guilds, and classes, the chief class being the mariannu, known already from contemporary Egyptian records as equestrian feudatories, who specialized in chariot warfare. The conception of a professional military class owing their status and property solely to the king was adopted by Israel in the early monarchy (1 S.14.52, 18.13, 22.7).

The themes of the myths are:

1. Baal's triumph over Chaos.
2. Baal's struggle with Death.
3. The Birth of Dawn and Evening (star).
4. The Marriage of Nikal (moon-goddess).

Three fragmentary texts describe how Order in Nature is menaced by the insolence of 'Prince Sea, yea Judge River,' against whom the 'divine assembly' is apparently impotent. Baal, however, undertakes to engage the unruly waters, and eventually prevails, and so gains 'his eternal kingship.' This is obviously the local variant of the myth of the conflict of Cosmos and Chaos, best known in the Babylonian New Year myth Enuma Elish, the leading motifs of which it exhibits. The theme and the imagery recur in the OT in passages in the Prophets relating to God's kingship and judgment, and in the 'Enthronement' Psalms, notably Ps 93. In the Ras Shamra texts, however, there is no extension, as in the OT, of the Reign of God into the field of history or the moral order. The various indications of the association of such passages in the OT with the autumnal new year suggest a similar association of the Canaanite myth, though of this there is no conclusive proof.
The rest of the Baal-mythology reflects the tension between fertility and sterility in the Canaanite peasant's year. The chief themes are the death of Baal, the vengeance of his sister Anath, his resurrection, the building of his 'house,' his final victory over death. Baal here is the vegetation-god, the local variation of Mesopotamian Tammuz, Egyptian Osiris, and the Greek Dionysus, and there are certain features in the myth which suggests its relation to seasonal rituals. Anath's mourning for the dead Baal suggests the weeping for Tammuz by the women of Jerusalem, presumably in the sixth month (Ezk 8.14); her vengeance on Death, cutting him with a sickle, winnowing him, parching him with fire, grinding him, etc., obviously suggests the Hebrew rite of the first sheaf (Lv 2.14); the building of the 'house' of Baal in the season of heavy rains suggests an analogy with the dedication of Solomon's Temple in the seventh month, Ethanim, the 'Regular Rains' (1 K.8.2). This was also the season of the Feast of Tabernacles, and the 'house' of Baal may well be the prototype of the booths, or bivouacs, which the Hebrews seem to have taken over from the Canaanites. Though we do not doubt that these myths were related to rites of imitative magic, which they were designed to make doubly effective, they have undergone a long process of elaboration and have an intrinsic literary value.

The sagas or legends concern two ancient kings Keret and Dan'el, and they also have a direct bearing on OT study. Both kings are without prospect of heir, and both probably, and certainly Dan'el, go into ritual incubation (cf Solomon at Gibeon, 1 K.3.5), and in dreams receive assurance of issue. In the case of Dan'el the son is described with relation to his social and religious duties - an invaluable passage for the study of Canaanite society - and Keret is given instructions and assurance in his task of finding a new wife - again an important text for sociological study. The Keret text continues in mutilated form, describing domestic history. The text, on three tablets, is but the torso of a much fuller text, and its undoubted value is to be realized by detailed study. The Dan'el text suffered also, but the story is much more intelligible. Dan'el's son Aqhat receives a bow from the divine craftsman, which, intended for gods, not men, incites the desire of the goddess Anath, who uses her allurements to procure it. Aqhat repulses her with scorn, and is in consequence struck down. Blood violently shed and uncovered by the earth occasions sterility (cf Gn.4.11-12, Nu.35.33), so, to maintain congruity with this disaster, Dan'el puts a ban upon the winter and later summer rain-clouds, the summer dew, and the subterranean water (cf David's curse on the mountains of Gilboa, 2 S.1.21). We note the close association of the primitive king with the fertility of nature, of which we find indications also in the Keret text. Dan'el then performs rites designed to transmit fertility through the season of drought and dearth to a new phase of fertility, when he anticipates his son Aqhat performing the rite of the ingathering, an instance of dramatic irony. Subsequently Dan'el learns that the slain man is his own son. He recovers his remains, and mourns and buries him. The coincidence of Aqhat's death with harvest is noteworthy, and it is suggested that in Aqhat we have the personification of the genius of the corn, which was symbolically killed to make the new crop available for public use; cf the death and dismemberment of Death in the Baal-myth. Thus the Dan'el text, in spite of its human protagonists, was probably a composite work, where an originally historical theme had already passed into a myth, incorporating a variety of seasonal themes.

The study of these texts in detail in the original reveals many more points of contact with the OT, the language of which they largely employ. Their value for the study of the OT is manifold. They document very fully the Canaanite fertility-cult, by which the Hebrews were influenced and against the grosser aspects of which their leaders reacted. The legends directly document the institution of kingship. These texts and the many anthropomorphisms in the myths give insight into social practices and values in the Canaanite environment of Israel, and the administrative and legal texts from the palace give a clue to the structure of society. The language and imagery of the texts enhances the appreciation of many nuances in the OT, notably in Prophets, Psalms, and the Book of Job, and indicates the extent to which the Hebrews knew and used the mythology of Canaan. The Ras Shamra texts are of great value for textual criticism of the OT. Many a word in the OT, suspect and rejected as a hapax legomenon, has
been found in several contexts in the Ras Shamra texts, the rather rigid parallelism fixing the meaning of the word beyond all doubt, so that the Massoretic Text is often supported. The Canaanite prototype of certain passages in the OT, however, occasionally suggests emendation. Such cases are notably fewer than those where the standard Hebrew text is corroborated. [Article: Dictionary of the Bible, J.Hastings, 2nd Ed., T&T.Clark, 1963 - J.Gr.]