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BIB 304 HISTORY OF THE LAND OF ISRAEL NA

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# "Rituals" and "Practices" of the people of the land of Canaan in the Second Millennium B.C. adopted by "Israel"

## HISTORY

The Second Millennium B.C. is the period between the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. (2000 B.C. to 1001 B.C.) In the ancient near east, it marks the transition from the middle to the Late Bronze Age. The first half of the millennium is dominated by the Middle Kingdom of Egypt and Babylon. The alphabet develops. At the center of the millennium, a new order emerges with Mycenean Greek dominance of the Aegean and the rise of the Hittite Empire. This time frame fits authentically in asserting the existence of the people groups mentioned above since eighteenth-century texts from Chagar-bazar in Upper Mesopotamia make reference to names that are synonymous with persons of interest in the period studied (Abram). There are also Babylonian texts from the First Dynasty and possibly from the Execration Texts with names containing the same components and again from texts found at Mari (Jacob) (Bright 77). Simultaneously, their laws from the Book of the Covenant have extremely close parallels with the Mesopotamia legal tradition, which has been exemplified in the Codes of Eshnunna and Hammurabi. Thus, strengthening the possibility of their migration from Mesopotamia.

CANAAN

The geographical region of Canaan in the Second Millennium B.C. runs along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, from modern Lebanon and the Southern portion of Syria in the North to the Negev region of Modern Israel and Gaza in the South. It is bordered on the east by the Jordan River and the Dead Sea (Ras Shamras Texts). Thereby giving ease of access to all major cities and routes either by sea or through the Transjordan which made it easy to trade. But exactly who were these people or what people groups did they consist of? Based on excavations done and the findings derived f it appears that this was a mixed people that held some western attributes. Also, evidence from several cuneiform tablets unearthed in Palestine (Anbar and Naaman 1986-1987:7-11) a few names appear on an envelope from Gezer, one on a letter from Shechem, one on an account tablet from Hebron, and probably one from Hazor (Nadav 3). And although the names from seventeenth-century Palestine are too small for any definite conclusion it is clear that the majority of names were West Semitic (Amorite) (Nadav 4). A group of metal objects found and other personal names in Taanach tablets all of northern mainly Hurrain origin (Nadav 4) gives further proof. This diverse group of people spans from then-city rulers with the same family names, they are Ugaritic, Sidon, Acco, Nuhasse, Damascus, Lachish, Anurru, and Byblos all believed to be descendants from Canaan speaking a Semitic language.

The term Canaan at times has referred to a group of people believed to be traders who settled in Phoenicia. However, Lemche in the “Canaanites and their Land” (1991) suggests “that the use of the name Canaan in second millennium BCE texts was imprecise and ambiguous and may have designated anything from a vast territory that includes southeastern Anatolia to a small area in Lower Galilee, he insists that nobody in Western Asia regarded himself as Canaanite.

However, in Biblical historiography, Canaan sometimes refers to a geographical extent coterminous with the land of Israel, and Canaanites were the inhabitants of that land" (Nadav 5).

This, by all means, was his suggestion, again there is no archaeological evidence to prove or disprove such a thing. As such the Canaanites as trading people were great exporters of timber and leaders in the textile and purple-dye industry. They were in contact not only with Egypt and Mesopotamia but with the Aegean lands as well, as is evidenced particularly by a wealth of Mycenaean pottery all over Palestine and Syria in the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries… (Bright 117). This by far was not Canaan's greatest achievement as they made an impressive mark in writing which was developed by those of Byblos who developed a syllabic script modeled on the Egyptian (Bright 118).

Canaan had a deep pagan form of religion specially attributed to the fertility cult. Their chief deity was Ba'al (Lord) with their father-god El. Ba'al or Aliyan Ba'al was considered "the hero of the Canaanite pantheon at Ugarit" As his name implies Ba'al is Aliyan, "the victorious, valiant one, or conquering hero" (Habel 51). One Canaanite myth was the death and resurrection of Ba'al which corresponded to the annual death and resurrection of nature. On a lofty mountain was poised their ancient Semitic storm god Hadad who reigned as king of the gods. Asherah, Astarte, and Anat were some of their female deities. As in all religions which consisted of fertility cults there were numerous debasing practices, including sacred prostitution, homosexuality, and various orgies were prevalent (Bright 118). There were also different activities according to location and deity, which included sacrifice, consumption of solid foods, offering, display, and intentional destruction of prestige objects, divination processions, and the drainage of blood and water sacrifices (Susnow).

ABRAHAM/ISRAEL

As Canaan flourished Abram left UR of the Chaldees at the age of seventy with his father and other family members to go to the city of Haran (Canaan). After living there for five years God tells Abram to leave there and take his family to the Land of Canaan. His father is now dead so he leaves with his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot and they do as God said. At the age of ninety-nine God again appears to Abram whom he renames Abraham (which means the father of a great multitude), and Sarai to Sarah (which means princess of the multitude), then promises him that Sarai will no longer be barren, but, that they have a son whom they would call Isaac.

Whilst in Canaan, God indeed fulfills his promise to Abraham and gives him a son. Abraham dies at the age of one hundred and seventy-five. His son Isaac becomes the father of Jacob and Esau, twin boys who have distinctly different desires. Jacob through his cunningness is forced to flee Esau's wrath and journeys to Egypt to Laban his mother's brother seeking refuge. Whilst on his way to Egypt he has a vision and God spoke to him about blessing and increasing him. This was confirmed twenty years later as he returned to Canaan to mend the relationship with his brother Esau who remained in Canaan. Jacob wrestled with a man for an entire night until daybreak, when the man asked him to let him go, Jacob refuses and persists in being blessed. The man says to Jacob you will no longer be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name because of your struggle with God and humans. Thus, the Tribe of Israel was birthed.

Jacob stays with Laban for twenty years during which time he had twelve children when he returned to Canaan, he did so with a total of two wives, two concubines, and twelve sons. Israel blossoms as a family but retreats once again to Egypt because of a famine in Canaan. A total of seventy persons journeyed to Egypt and despite the hardships, they faced after the death of the Pharaoh they found grace, and their population grew extensively. God intervened and assisted

Israel to leave Egypt, with the exception of Jacob who was dead already. Texts of scripture tell us that six hundred thousand people left Egypt with their then-deliverer Moses for the promised land of Canaan. There is no documentary evidence to prove that all the persons who left Egypt with Israel were direct descendants of Jacob, but when they did, they were resisted by all who knew and feared them because of the God they served. Israel spent forty years in the wilderness endeavoring to enter Canaan. By now they had received Laws from the God of their fathers which included animal sacrifices to appease their sins. They were required to observe times of harvest and to acknowledge God's faithfulness to them. Israel had cried out to God for deliverance in Egypt but held on to some of the worship the Egyptians took part in. No sooner were they left alone they demanded a God (calf) be made which they proceeded to worship.

After numerous battles with varying peoples, Israel was able to enter and subdue Canaan. However, there were many Canaanites still in the land and their religious practices were not all destroyed by the Judges of Israel, some even encouraged and entertained the practice (Bright). Yahwism was what the children of Israel adhered to, and unlike other pagan religions, it was forbidden to make any representation as Yahwism was aniconic (Bright).

RITUALS/PRACTICES

Israel did celebrate what God had done for them and continues to do this in the twenty-first century. They celebrate at least three similar feasts that have some adaptations from Canaan.

1) The Feast of Unleavened Bread. To them, this celebration represented the redemption of God in the Passover from Egypt to Canaan and the fact that unleavened bread was made in a haste. It is in fact similar to the ritual of Unleavened Bread that the Canaanites celebrated which was exclusively for Unleavened Bread. This was done as a means of celebrating Ba'al for providing

the nomadic peoples who were shepherding their flocks in the field. It was celebrated at the beginning of the barley Harvest, nothing from the old year was to be retained when the new season began. Passover seems to be the spring festival of nomadic peoples when they sacrificed one of the firstlings of the flock in a petition for an ensuing year of prosperity. Analogies for it have been pointed out among the customs of shepherd people. Eg: the bitter herbs were a natural seasoning, the unleavened bread the normal fare of nomads, and the blood upon the doorframes an apotropaic rite (Barnett 934).

2) “The feast of Tabernacles (Booths) or Sukkot is celebrated by Israel in Autumn observing seven days of the Harvest Festival. It marks the end of Harvest time and thus the end of the agricultural year in Israel. The term booths/tents originally signified the temporary leafy structure supported by branches built in the vineyard or field to accommodate the busy farmer during harvest season. This feast is said to be of Canaanite origin and celebrated at the conclusion of harvest upon adoption by the Israelites, soon transferred to local sanctuaries and ultimately Jerusalem where it became the greatest of the three pilgrimage feasts. H.J Kraus sees the origin of the feast in an ancient, nomadic “feast of tents” that celebrated a covenant renewal, this nomadic feast assimilated the indigenous Canaanite harvest feast” (Barnett 532).

3) Pentecost or the feasts of Weeks- The custom of presenting the first fruits of the harvest to a god is an ancient one among agricultural peoples. The Hebrews borrowed from the Canaanites, in whose land they settled. A feast of thanksgiving at the end of the harvest of cereal grains, unlike the feast of Unleavened Bread. On Pentecost, the use of leaven was ritually prescribed to signify a sacrifice of the ordinary food of the Palestinian peasant and to mark the close of the harvesting of cereal grains. However, Israel commemorated the Passover by joining it to the feast of Unleavened Bread in the Priestly Code, and the date for the “feasts of the first fruits” was set

seven weeks after, hence the naming feast of weeks. In the Priestly code, Israel prescribes to the offering or “waving” of the newly baked wheat loaves, the sacrifice of seven yearling male lambs, two young bullocks, and one ram, cereal offerings of flour and oil, and libation of wine and of blood from the slain animal. The liturgy would normally include processions, hymns, psalms of praise and thanksgiving, and the offering of gifts. In return, the blessing of Yahweh would be bestowed on the pilgrims through the benediction by the priest (Meyer 100).

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