

CHAPTER 20

The Enemy Within: The Canaanites

BY THE time that Saul came to the throne, the Canaanites no longer posed any sort of political threat to the Israelites. They still retained independent control of a number of individual cities and enclaves within Israel's frontiers, but a generation later David captured these cities and incorporated them fully into his realm. The result was that the non-Israelite element in Palestine mingled with their conquerors, intermarried with them, and in course of time lost their separate identity. From a political point of view, therefore, the Canaanites were never a foe to Israel during the period of the monarchy. On the other hand, the Old Testament makes it clear that the prophets and the prophetic movement in Israel were convinced that the Canaanites posed a very serious and abiding threat to the true religion of Israel. From a religious point of view they were the enemy within the gates.

The Canaanite civilization was established in Palestine long before the exodus took place; indeed, it was flourishing as early as the days of Abraham. We should not think of the Canaanites as a single, uncomplicated ethnic unit; the term "Canaanite" implies residence in Canaan rather than close ties of kinship.¹ Their origins were to some extent diverse; but at least their society and culture seem to have been homogeneous. The origins of that culture go back well before 2000 B.C., when migrant peoples known to the occupants of Mesopotamia as *Amurru* ("westerners") moved into Syria and Palestine and settled there in strength. The word *Amurru* has "Amorite" as its biblical equivalent; and in the Bible the terms Canaanite and Amorite are to some extent interchangeable.²

1. Strictly speaking, by etymology and early usage, the word Canaanite is thought to have denoted a merchant who traded in purple.

2. For precise details of biblical usage, a Bible dictionary should be consulted.

The table of nations in Genesis 10 associates Canaan with Ham's descent, thus recognizing the close relationship that existed between Egypt and Canaan throughout the second millennium B.C. The Canaanites' language, however, though distantly related to the ancient Egyptian language, belonged to the Semitic linguistic family. The Hebrew language can be classified as a dialect of Canaanitic; in other words, there was no language barrier between Israelites and Canaanites. The eighth century Israelite prophet Isaiah recognized that his native tongue was "the lip of Canaan" (Isaiah 19:18).

Though their language and culture united them, the Canaanites sought no political cohesion, but were content to live in small independent city-states, each ruled by its own king. They were thus not adequately organized to resist a strong foe, and Egypt (whenever it was strong and united) was able to dominate Canaan throughout the millennium. Egyptian documents as early as the nineteenth century and as late as the fourteenth century testify to both the political fragmentation of Canaan and also to the measure of Egyptian control. Such documents offer us, for instance, the names of several kings who ruled over Jerusalem during this long era, to add to the names of Melchizedek and Adoni-zedek to whom the biblical writers introduce us.

The Canaanite population was unevenly spread, and the mountainous hinterland, lying between the coastal plains and the Jordan rift valley, was thinly populated, otherwise Abraham and the other patriarchs could not have roamed there freely with their flocks and herds. If Genesis 14 records a friendly relationship between Abraham and the king of Jerusalem, Genesis 34 indicates that a rather different situation sprang up in the Shechem area some time later. Both Shechem and Jerusalem lay in the hill-country, and some contact between their citizens and the patriarchs was perhaps inevitable; but for the most part it seems that the patriarchs endeavoured to keep away from the more populous Canaanite areas.

From 1400 B.C. onwards the Canaanite civilization was subject to new outside pressures from several quarters, including the Israelite invaders. The Amarna letters of the fourteenth century give some idea of the political upheavals in Canaan. These documents come from the Egyptian record office of the day, and consist of letters and copies of letters exchanged by the Egyptian crown and some of the Palestinian rulers;³ it is clear from them that the settled population of Canaan was being harassed continuously by raiders called "the Khabiru". It is an impossible task — and a controversial one — to unravel the whole chain of events which transformed Canaan within the next two centuries; but the sequel was that what had been a

3. See above, p. 169.

homogeneous Canaanite country was broken up into four diverse political regions. In the south-west, the Philistines and related peoples arrived and took control. Further north too they at first mastered the Canaanite cities, but in course of time the Canaanites reasserted themselves, and by the time of the Hebrew monarchy the area was again thoroughly Canaanite (though it is convenient to refer to this region as Phoenicia, and its inhabitants as Phoenicians). In the north-east the invaders were the Aramaean tribes, who were to remain distinct from the other peoples of Syria-Palestine by the fact of their language; Aramaic was closely related to Hebrew and other Canaanite dialects, but was nevertheless a distinct language, even if the evidence suggests that Hebrew and Aramaic had common ancestry. In the south and south-east the new masters were the tribes of Israel, Edom, Moab and Ammon.

In none of the four regions, however, were the Canaanites wiped out, and in certain respects the conquered became the conquerors, as so often happens. The Canaanites had developed many of the arts of civilization, and from a cultural point of view semi-nomadic tribesmen like the Israelites were distinctly more primitive. Where architecture is concerned, for instance, it is noticeable that Canaanite cities destroyed by the Israelites were at first replaced by very inferior buildings — this fact the archaeologist's spade has often revealed. Needless to say, it did not take the Israelites long to realize how much they could learn from Canaanite craftsmen of all kinds; and in practical terms they came to owe a great debt to the previous occupants of the land.

No doubt the relative sophistication of the Canaanites made its appeal to the Israelites, and the latter fell readily into Canaanite ways of thought and behaviour. Some there were who reacted strongly against Canaanite culture; a notable example of such a group was the Rechabites, who as late as the time of Jeremiah were still clinging on to a rustic, indeed semi-nomadic, way of life.⁴ Not only were they strict teetotallers, but they went so far as to refuse to build houses and even to sow crops. But without doubt the Rechabites were the exception that proved the rule, and most of the Israelites felt few such inhibitions. The ascetic life rarely makes a wide appeal.

Probably the Israelites fell into Canaanite ways without a great deal of conscious thought, and they will often have adopted the Canaanites' religious modes and manners along with everything else; in any case, ancient man made less distinction between sacred and secular than we are prone to do. Before many generations had passed, the popular religion of Israel had become an amalgam of Israelite and Canaanite belief and practice; and to some extent at

4. See especially Jeremiah 35.

least the same is true of the official religion of Israel, for it was the prophets, not the priests, who eventually cried, "Hold!"

It must be recognized, in any case, that there were individual aspects of Canaanite religious beliefs and cultic practice which not even the prophets had any wish to contradict or battle against. Even before the Israelite conquest of Canaan, one could undoubtedly have found numerous points of contact and similarity between the two faiths. How much the Israelites actually "borrowed" from the Canaanites is open to dispute, but we may instance, at the very least, a certain amount of religious *language*. If the Canaanites proclaimed their chief god as creator and lord, could Israel call their God, Yahweh, anything less? It is of course not only possible but very likely that some such descriptions of deity arose quite independently, and it is as a rule safe to speak in terms of a common outlook rather than of specific borrowings. However, there can be little doubt that some religious language was adopted from the Canaanites. Isaiah 27:1, for instance, describes the God of Israel as about to punish "Leviathan that twisting (or primaeval) sea-serpent, that writhing serpent Leviathan". But who or what is "Leviathan"? The Old Testament nowhere offers any explanation of the term. The word itself properly belongs, as we now know, to Canaanite myths about the god Baal, for an ancient Canaanite poem found at Ras Shamra praises the Baal in the following terms: "Thou didst slay Lotan (i.e. Leviathan) the Primaeval Serpent, didst make an end of the Crooked Serpent".⁵ In Canaanite mythology, Baal had to do battle royal to assert his control over hostile deities who symbolized the forces of nature. Such a view is foreign to the Old Testament concept of Yahweh, but some of the biblical writers were willing to use the language of Baal myths to emphasize Yahweh's control over historical forces, such as Egypt and Assyria.

Even the name Baal itself could appropriately be used as a title for Yahweh. In Canaanite religion too it was strictly a title, meaning "lord" or "master", the usual designation of the storm-god Hadad, though it came to be virtually a name in its own right. Was not Yahweh "lord" of his people? Saul was not worshipping Canaanite gods when he named one of his sons "Eshbaal" (1 Chronicles 8:33). It was not until the time of Hosea that it became apparent that there were dangers in adopting identical religious language for the Israelite faith (cf. Hosea 2:15 ff.); "Baal" was by now a "dirty word", and one to be avoided.

Nor were there marked, self-evident contrasts between Israelite and Canaanite worship where sacred buildings were concerned. When Solomon came to erect the temple in Jerusalem, he found himself obliged to call in Phoenician craftsmen as well as materials;

5. *DOTT*, p. 132.

and the sanctuary they put up resembles not only the blueprint of the tabernacle outlined in the Book of Exodus (explicitly stated to be God-given), but also, in varying degree, the pattern of various pagan temples as revealed by archaeological excavations. The Canaanite temple at Hazor, destroyed by Joshua and his armies (Joshua 11:10f.), is particularly similar to the Jerusalem temple in its ground-plan and structure.⁶

Other Israelite sanctuaries were in any case simply taken over from the Canaanites and used for the worship of Yahweh — a practice which King Josiah finally tried to put an end to. It must be remembered that the patriarchs had been associated with various sanctuary-towns of Palestine, such as Bethel and Beer-sheba, and it was inevitable that the patriarchs' descendants should revere the sanctuaries in question.

As regards the ritual practices which were performed at the shrines, we are much better informed about Israelite worship than about any thing comparable in the ancient world. Sacrifice itself, of course, was commonplace, but the Old Testament tells us of many different types of sacrifices and offerings. For all we know, it may be that the Canaanite sacrificial system was very different; but one suspects that there were again close similarities, in view of the fact that a number of the Old Testament technical terms have exact parallels in the Ras Shamra ritual texts. In annual feasts and fasts we can see other general points of similarity.

One can appreciate, therefore, that many an ordinary Israelite could see little harm in Canaanite religious practices, and perhaps little essential difference in them. When he did observe distinctions, moreover, he may have been tempted to think that the Canaanites had the better of it, since they were such gifted and civilized people. Was Yahweh perhaps the god of the deserts outside Palestine, with little power or influence in Canaan?

The most glaring contrasts between the two faiths lay not so much in their material fabric, as in the theology and the whole ethos of the two. We are immediately struck by the contrast between Israel's monotheism and Canaan's polytheism. For the Israelites, there was Yahweh, and Yahweh alone; whereas the Canaanites revered not only Baal but a whole pantheon. The Old Testament provides us with several names of Canaanite deities, but the Ras Shamra texts have given us much fuller information about them. The senior deity for the Canaanites was not in fact Baal, but El, who was viewed as the creator-god. Baal was the most prominent god in their thinking and ritual, however; he was pre-eminently the storm-god, the god of thunder and rain (so vital to Palestine's agricultural economy). (See plate 15 facing p. 272.) Baal's father in the pantheon was Dagan

6. Cf. Y. Yadin, *Hazor: excavation of a biblical city* (London, 1958), pp. 13-16, and fig. 20.

(Old Testament “Dagon”), the god of corn and vegetation. Other male deities included Horon, whose name survived in the place-name Bethhoron. Goddesses also figured in the pantheon; of these the Old Testament mentions Ashtoreth (the Canaanite Athtarat, the Mesopotamian Ishtar, the Greek Astarte) and Asherah (Athirat in the Ras Shamra documents), while a third, Anat, is again to be found in a place-name, Anathoth, Jeremiah’s birthplace. All three were goddesses of fertility; Asherah was El’s consort, Anat was Baal’s. A male deity, Athtar, seems to have represented the planet Venus; and the sun and moon were not forgotten, but worshipped by name (as Shepesh and Yerach respectively). A minor deity called Shalem, possibly another sky-god, also deserves mention, since his name survives to this day in the place name Jerusalem.

In our modern world, where the choice seems to be between monotheism and atheism, it is very difficult for us to understand, let alone feel any sympathy for, polytheistic religions like that of Canaan. All too readily we condemn them in quite the wrong terms. One still hears sometimes debates as to whether Muslims and Christians (or even Catholics and Protestants!) worship the same God; the linguistic philosophers would tell us, and rightly so, that such arguments are not only pointless but, worse, meaningless. If one looks behind the divine names and the crude myths (as they appear to us) of their faith, we can perceive that the Canaanites were looking at the same reality as the Israelites, but observing it through different eyes. They had no conception of the unity of function and purpose in the godhead which is recognized by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. Thus they cast the attributes of deity in all-too-human terms of conflict and caprice. It will not do to say that the gods they worshipped were non-existent, for those deities were symbols of genuine reality — storms, vegetation, etc. St. Paul showed a better understanding of the nature of polytheistic worship when he told the Athenians, not that their “unknown god” was a figment of their imagination, but on the contrary, One who could be declared unto them (Acts 17:23). Nor did our Lord deny the existence and reality of Baal: the Beelzebub of the New Testament is none other than the Baal of Ekron which figures in 2 Kings 1.⁷

When Israelites turned to Canaanite worship, therefore, as did King Ahaziah, they were losing the sense of God’s unique majesty and of his systematic, orderly, purposeful intentions for his people. Canaanite thinking was above all dominated by their concern for fruitful harvests — and in these days of relative affluence, we should feel sympathy for that concern. The plight of peasant-farmers when

7. Cf. Mark 3:22-27. The name probably meant originally “lord of the high place” (strictly, *baal-zebul*), but was slightly changed in Jewish tradition to the derogatory *baal-zebul*, “lord of flies”. Other explanations of the name are also current.

Palestine was afflicted by drought and disease of crops was indeed desperate. Small wonder, then, that they isolated "corn" as one deity, "fertility" as another. In seeking to worship Dagon and the fertility goddesses, they were in effect trying to understand the forces of nature, and secondly trying to control those forces. To harness them, they felt, one must first of all get on good terms with the appropriate deities, by sacrifices, offerings and rituals, and then proceed to co-operate with those deities. The latter purpose could be achieved — as they thought — by the practice of what we now call "sympathetic" or "imitative" magic. Knowing nothing scientific about the reproduction and growth of plants, they envisaged these processes in terms of human sexual relations (as did many ancient peoples). To secure the fertility of the ground, therefore, Baal and his consort Anat were depicted as having sexual intercourse; and it is certain that in Canaanite rites the worshippers emulated the gods, believing that such conduct would promote the good harvests they so much desired. Accordingly, each Canaanite shrine had its cult-prostitutes, both male and female.

The Canaanite faith, then, can be characterized as a fertility religion. We may say that it was in its outworkings both amoral and materialistic, even though Canaanite literature here and there does betray some consciousness of sin and some interest in righteousness. By contrast, Israel's faith can be characterized as a covenant religion; Israel's religious teachers emphasized that while God did, of course, give fertility to the soil, his most important attribute was his lordship of history, in which he had acted over and over again in blessing for Israel, who had committed themselves irrevocably to him in the bonds of the covenant of Sinai. To "control" their environment, Israel's first need was to make sure that they were fulfilling the terms of that covenant, both in relation to Yahweh and to each other. For Israelites to turn to the fertility cult, therefore, was not merely to renounce morality and ethics, but to reject the covenant and all that it implied.

Hence the bitter invective of the prophets against Canaanite practices. The cultic prostitution was condemned vigorously, and was exposed as the immorality it was, while the special trappings of the fertility cult were also singled out for denunciation. Its special symbols were sacred wooden poles associated with the goddess Asherah,⁸ and stone pillars (Hebrew *matstsebot*), examples of which have been unearthed in Palestine.⁹

The fertility cult devalued and debased human beings, and its

8. These sacred poles explain the use of the Old Testament phrase "to cut down the Asherah" (e.g. Judges 6:25), which in turn led to the mistranslation of "Asherah" as "(sacred) grove" in the Septuagint and hence the AV.

9. See BA 35 (1972), pp. 34-63 for illustrations of *matstsebot*.

pervasive influence throughout Palestine was of special concern to the Old Testament prophets. When they accused fellow-Israelites of "playing the harlot" with foreign deities the metaphor was extremely well-chosen — more literal than metaphorical, in fact. Another, fortunately rarer, feature of Canaanite religion was one which put even less value on the individual human being's life and dignity; this was human sacrifice, a practice which the prophets repudiated with horror, as well they might. It is not certain how widespread this practice was, but the two centres with which it was associated in the Old Testament records were Moab, in Trans-jordan, and the environs of Jerusalem itself. The deity in whose honour the rite of child sacrifice was carried out seems to have borne several names or titles, including Chemosh, Athtar, Shalem, and Milcom or Melek¹⁰ ("the king").¹¹

The Jerusalem shrine (no doubt an open air one, like most of the "high places" as opposed to temples) to this deity lay in the valley of Hinnom, just east of the city, at a place called Topheth. Here even royal children were at times sacrificed as burnt offerings (cf. 2 Chronicles 28:3, 33:6). King Josiah, during his religious reform programme, desecrated Topheth (2 Kings 23:10), and the prophet Jeremiah predicted that the idolatrous Jerusalem would lose so many people in the disasters soon to fall upon her, that Topheth would perforce be turned into a cemetery (Jeremiah 7:31ff.). The very name of Jerusalem commemorates this Canaanite deity, for it means "Founded by Shalem"; at few times in its history was the "holy city" a city of peace ruled by a king of righteousness, as God intended it to be (cf. Hebrews 7:1f.). Even Solomon gave sanction to this unpleasant cult, in order to please his pagan wives, according to 1 Kings 11:7.

The social pattern of the Canaanites cannot be entirely divorced from their religious beliefs. The king was not only the absolute monarch of his people, but also considered to be the channel of divine blessing to them. The Ras Shamra literature includes legends about two ancient kings named Keret and Danel which help us to understand the Canaanite conception of kingship. The Canaanites did not deify their kings, but they called them "sons" of the supreme god El, and Danel is specifically described as "the dispenser of fertility"; it was even believed that royal illness must result in bad harvests. The king was also the channel of divine revelation. His person, therefore, must have been sacrosanct. Below him stood a whole feudal system; on the bottom rung of the social ladder stood the serfs, completely at the mercy of their rulers. At the top, the king

10. In the Hebrew Bible the spelling is "molek", a hybrid form which invited the pious Jewish reader to pronounce the word as "boshet" ("shame") instead of "melek" ("king").

11. See J. Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan*² (VTS 5: Leiden, 1965), pp. 169-174.

had absolute rights over property, taxes, commerce, and direction of labour.

It is true that there was something of a social conscience among the Canaanites, and also that by time-honoured convention the king was largely bound to observe duties of justice and charity.¹² But the general truth stands that absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely; and when one observes that Solomon's unpopularity, and the subsequent division of the Hebrew kingdom, arose precisely because he exercised the Canaanite king's privileges regarding taxes and direction of labour, one can appreciate why the prophets felt an increasing dislike of Canaanite ways. It was perhaps inevitable that the simple tribal society of early Israel, in which each man was keenly aware of his duties towards (and equality with) his fellow, should break down as time passed, and all the more rapidly once non-Israelites were incorporated into the polity of Israel; but human nature being what it is, we can be sure that many of the richer and more influential members of Israelite society will have seen the advantages for their own pockets of a feudal system.

Insidiously, therefore, Israel and Judah came more and more under the influence of Canaanite thought, practices and religion. As the period of the Hebrew monarchy ended in disaster, the prophet Ezekiel in a chapter of mordant reproach taunted Jerusalem thus: "Canaan is the land of your ancestry . . .; an Amorite was your father and a Hittite your mother" (Ezekiel 16:3). It remained for the exiles in Babylon and later Jewish generations to root out from their midst the legacy of Canaan.

12. Cf. J. Gray, *The Canaanites* (London, 1964), p. 118.