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MINISTRIES

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Peoples of the Bible: The Canaanites

The Israelites are the people most prominently featured in the Scriptures, but other peoples are mentioned as well. In this series, we examine what the Scriptures and history tell us about these other peoples. Who were they, where did they live, what was their culture like, and what did God have to say about them? In this teaching, we will focus on one particular people: the Canaanites.

Who Were The Canaanites?

The Canaanites were descended from one of the grandsons of Noah, named Canaan (Genesis 9:18, 22, 25-27; 10:6). They called themselves *Canaanites*, but they were also called *Sidonians*, *Phoenicians*, *Punics*, and later in history, *Carthaginians* (Maria Eugenia Aubet, *The Phoenicians and the West: Politics, Colonies, and Trade, Second Edition* [New York: Cambridge University Press 2001] pp. 6-13). During the time of Moses, the Canaanites occupied much of the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan river (Numbers 13:29)—the same land that God promised to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17:8). Later, after Israel moved into the promised land, the Canaanites occupied the area that we now call Lebanon (Aubet 6). The most prominent Canaanite cities were Tyre and Sidon, both of which were located on the eastern Mediterranean coast. Over time, they also founded many settlements and cities among the coastlines and islands of the Mediterranean Sea.

What Were the Canaanites Known For?

The word “Canaanite” in Hebrew is *kena’ani*, which means a *merchant* (Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, #H3669). This word is quite fitting, because the Canaanites were highly renowned merchants for hundreds of years (Strabo *The Geography* 16.2). They were well known for their ability to navigate the sea and for their massive international trading system (Strabo 16.23; Homer *Odyssey* 415-453). They built ships using wood from the famous cedars of Lebanon, and they launched those ships into the Mediterranean Sea to go on extensive trading expeditions, some of which lasted for years (Aubet 16, 191). Their ships acquired silver from Tarshish, bronze from Greece, and gold and spices

from Sheba. They also traded animals and human slaves with many nations across the Mediterranean region (see Ezekiel 27:12-22). They are also the first civilization we know of to circumnavigate the entire continent of Africa (Herodotus *Histories* 4:42).

The Canaanites were renowned for their production of blue and purple dye. They extracted this dye from the *murex trunculus* snail, which lived along the eastern Mediterranean shore. This dye was rare and considered very valuable (Aubet 17, 40; Strabo 16.23). It was coveted by and sold to wealthy people all over the world. This Canaanite dye is likely what was originally used to make the blue threads that God commanded the Israelites to put on the fringes of their garments, as we read about in Number 15:

Numbers 15:38

Speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner.

How Did the Canaanites Worship?

Like many nations, the Canaanites worshiped numerous gods, and they honored these gods by sacrificing to idols. There were three Canaanite gods that were especially prominent: one was *Ba'al Hadad*, the god of storms. Since the Canaanites depended so heavily on seafaring, it would have been important to them to appease the god who they believed could sink their ships with storms. The second prominent god was *Astarte*, the goddess of war and sex. The Hebrews referred to this goddess as *Ashtoreth* (1 Kings 11:5, 33; 2 Kings 23:13). The third prominent god was *Melqart*, the patron god of the city of Tyre. The way Melqart was worshiped was by cremating human remains at a sacred burial site called a *tophet* (Aubet 63, 65). Many *tophets* have been found both in Canaan and along the shores of the Mediterranean, and they typically have urns containing cremated human remains (Aubet 221, 230, 240, 242, 245; Claude Doumet-Serhal, “Jars From the First Millennium BC at Tell el Rachidieh (South of Tyre): Phoenician Cinerary Urns and Grave Goods” *Archaeology & History in Lebanon*, Issue 17 (Spring 2003) p. 44). These remains are mostly from infants or very young children (Aubet 222-223, 250; David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* [London: Penguin Books 2011], p. 81). Archaeologists debate whether these children died naturally or whether they were killed as part of a religious ceremony, but what is not debated is that their bodies were burned as offerings to the god Melqart. The Bible calls Melqart *Molech*, and it tells us that some Israelites who fell into idolatry also burned their children as offerings to this god. Here is one example:

2 Kings 23:10

And he defiled Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, that no one might burn his son or his daughter as an offering to Molech.

The Canaanites went on to found the city of Carthage in northern Africa. Both historical texts and archaeology attest that the Carthaginians continued this ritual of offering the cremated bodies of their children (Justinus: *Epitome of Pompeius Trogus' Philippic Histories* 18.6; Cicero, *De Re Publica* 3.15; Abulafia 81).

What Did God Say About the Canaanites?

God warned Israel about the idolatrous practices of the Canaanites (Exodus 34:11-16) and forbade them from intermarrying with them because he did not want them to worship the Canaanite gods

(Deuteronomy 7:1-5). God said that the Canaanites practiced all kinds of sexual immorality, and commanded the Israelites not to follow those practices (Leviticus 18:3, 24-28). God warned that the Canaanite religious practices were so vile that they even burned their children as sacrifices to their gods (Deuteronomy 12:29-31; Psalm 106:38), and he forbid the Israelites from engaging in any of those religious practices (Leviticus 18:21; 20:1-5). Because of the Canaanites' wickedness, God commanded the Israelites to completely eliminate the Canaanites from the promised land (Deuteronomy 20:16-18).

There are also two major prophecies about Canaanite cities. One is in Isaiah 23, in which God said that Tyre and Sidon would be conquered by Assyria, but would regain their independence and economic power after seventy years. This is likely referring to the relationship the Canaanites had with the Assyrians through the 8th and 7th centuries B.C., in which Tyre and Sidon paid tribute to the Assyrians. The other major prophecy is in Ezekiel 27, in which God said that Tyre would be destroyed and never rebuilt. This prophecy came to pass in 332 B.C., when Alexander the Great destroyed Tyre's walls and burned the city to the ground after a long siege (Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander* 2.22-24).

How Did the Canaanites Affect God's People?

The Israelites did not drive out the Canaanites as they were commanded to (Judges 1:27-33; 2:1-3), and just as God had warned, they fell into idolatry with the Canaanite gods. King Solomon married a Sidonian wife, and she turned him toward the worship of Ashtoreth (1 Kings 11:1, 4-5). King Ahab married a Sidonian wife as well, the infamous queen Jezebel, and she turned him toward the worship of Baal (1 Kings 16:31; Aube 47). The Israelites even built a tophet where they burned their children (Jeremiah 7:31). Because of their corruption and idolatry (Deuteronomy 4:25-27; Ezekiel 6:3-6), God eventually drove the Israelites out of the land just as he had commanded them to drive out the Canaanites (Jeremiah 27:10, 15).

The Canaanites' behavior also affected who the patriarchs ended up marrying. Before there was a nation of Israel, Abraham insisted that his son Isaac should not marry a Canaanite woman (Genesis 24:3), so he sent his servant to Aram-Naharaim, where he found Rebekah. Isaac and Rebekah likewise did not want their son Jacob to marry a Canaanite (Genesis 28:1), and so they sent Jacob to Paddan-Aram where he married Leah and Rachel. If the Canaanites' behavior was not so reprehensible, then Isaac and Jacob may well have married Canaanite women who lived nearby rather than traveling to distant lands to find their wives.

Who Were Some Significant Canaanites in the Bible?

There are many significant Canaanites in the Bible. We already mentioned Jezebel, the Sidonian princess who turned king Ahab to the worship of Baal and persecuted the prophet Elijah. Another significant figure was king Hiram of Tyre, who made an alliance with king Solomon and supplied him with the materials for building the first temple (1 Kings 5:1-12). Another was Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho who helped the Israelite spies who were scouting out her city before it was besieged (Joshua 2). Rahab became a sojourner with Israel (Joshua 6:25), and was renowned for her courage and faith (Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25). Still another was a woman whose name we are not given, but to whom Yeshua ascribed great faith. In Matthew 15, this Canaanite woman approached Yeshua and asked him to heal her daughter of a demonic oppression. Yeshua refused at first, saying that the children's bread should not be thrown to the dogs. She responded by saying that even the dogs get to eat the crumbs that drop from their master's table. After that, Yeshua commended her for her faith and healed her daughter.

as she had asked (Matthew 15:21-28).

How Did the Canaanites Influence History?

The Canaanites spoke a language that we now call *Phoenician*. The Phoenician language was very similar to both Hebrew and Aramaic—it used the same alphabet, and also had very similar vocabulary and grammar. The Greeks got their alphabet from these semitic alphabets, and many scholars believe that they got it directly from the Canaanites, because the Greeks and Canaanites traded with each other. The same holds true of the Latin alphabet, which is what is used in many modern languages, including English. So, it's likely that the reason we have the alphabet we are familiar with today is because of the influence of the Canaanites.

As we mentioned earlier, the Canaanites founded the city of Carthage and became known as the Carthaginians. These Carthaginians waged numerous wars with Rome, called the Punic Wars, that lasted for over a hundred years. These wars featured the famous general Hannibal, one of the most difficult enemies Rome ever faced, and he was a Canaanite. In the end, Rome prevailed; in 146 B.C., at the end of the third Punic War, Rome invaded the capital city of Carthage itself (Aubet 163). They sold the entire population into slavery, burned the city to the ground, and ordered that it should never be inhabited again (Appian, *The Punic Wars* 27.133-135). With the Carthaginians out of the way, Rome became the dominant force on the Mediterranean Sea, and soon afterward, the most powerful nation in the world. But for several hundred years before that, the Canaanites prevented the Romans from taking their place as the world's greatest empire.

What Can We Learn From the Canaanites?

One thing we can learn from the story of the Canaanites is that we should pay attention when God warns us about corruption. The Israelites did not obey God when he warned them about the corruption of the Canaanites, and future generations paid the price for their lack of attention. God warns us about corruption today too, and we need to pay attention for the sake of our future generations. For example, Peter warned his readers about false prophets who were greedy and blasphemous and followed sensuality (2 Peter 2:1-3). He also warned of those who would take the letters of Paul and twist them to present a message of lawlessness (2 Peter 3:15-17). Today, we should be mindful of these warnings and not allow those who teach this kind of corruption to poison our relationship with God. We should keep ourselves separate from the corruption and unrestrained indulgence that some people teach and practice, so that we will not find ourselves in the same situation as the apostate Israelites who followed the Canaanite religion and lifestyle.

Another thing we learn from the story of the Canaanites is that God's plan of salvation is for everyone who has faith. The Canaanites were a terribly wicked people who committed horrific evils in service of their gods. God commanded the Israelites to wipe them out and not to intermarry with them. But the examples of Rahab and the Canaanite woman from Matthew 15 show that even people from wicked and condemned nations can become God's children through faith. As the apostle Peter said:

Acts 10:34-35

...Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

We should always remember that everyone, no matter their ancestry, and no matter their past, can turn to God and be saved.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

EMAIL: Info@119ministries.com

FACEBOOK: www.facebook.com/119Ministries

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