



Found— “Graven Images” of a Bible City in Palestine

Archæology

By Emily Davis

Astarte, the Venus of the Land of Canaan. In her name vicious rites were celebrated, much to the wrath of Israelite prophets. A figurine from Beth-Shan.

A SERPENT goddess has been dug out of the ruins of a Biblical city in Palestine. She is not like the gracefully curved marble goddesses of Greece. She stands in low relief against a flat plaque of rough limestone. Her bare feet are planted in a sidewise pose reminiscent of Egypt. Her robe falls stiffly to her ankles. And about her body coils a great snake, symbol of power, wisdom, immortality. The head of the goddess is broken, vanished. So too are the arms, which perhaps held outstretched the upper portion of the serpent's body.

Broken and marred by fire as the figure is, it is an object of rare interest, for it proves that the Canaanites of Bible history worshipped a serpent goddess. At other Canaanite cities lately excavated there have appeared altars and other clues to a serpent cult.

Here, now, is the goddess herself, revealed as one of the idols of stone supreme in the Land of Canaan before the children of Israel came to conquer their “Promised Land.” It was against the wiles of such deities as this that leaders and prophets of Israel recurrently cried their warnings.

The serpent goddess is a recent discovery from the ruins of Kirjath-Sepher, a Canaanite royal city, now being excavated by the joint efforts of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem, and the Xenia

Theological Seminary of St. Louis. Dr. W. F. Albright is director of the excavations.

The serpent goddess is one of the tangible bits of Canaanite property that makes us realize that the enemies of the children of Israel were “people.” When we read the Old Testament battle stories, we feel the reality of Joshua and his associate leader Caleb. The children of Israel are real enough with their waverings, their complaints, their ups and downs of faith. But the Canaanites, who were original holders of the Promised Land, loom in the background of the story as shadowy foes.

More than 3,000 years after the battles in the Promised Land, archaeologists are filling in the Bible picture by digging up the material evidence from mounds that represent the ancient strongholds. Kirjath-Sepher is proving particularly enlightening. This town figures in the Book of Joshua where it is written: “And Caleb said, He that smiteth Kirjath-Sepher, and taketh it, to him will I give Achsah my daughter to wife.”

In response to this challenge, Caleb's nephew Othniel attacked and took the stronghold and won the hand of his cousin. But as to what happened to the Canaanites, who were driven from their hill by flames, the Biblical story says nothing.

Archæologists who dug into the hill expected primarily to find a library

there, for Kirjath-Sepher means the Book City. The literary name is still a mystery.

Dr. Albright's excavations have shown that the mound contains the ruins of six settlements. Three of those ancient towns were swept by fire. Repeated destruction and replacement of walls and houses is what might be expected, in view of the fact that Palestine has always been a no-man's land of shifting battle lines and conquests. The strip of country desired by the Israelites was a trapped-over, fought-over highway between Egypt on the south and Assyria and Babylonia to the north and around the desert to the east.

When one of the “fenced cities” that dotted this embattled highway was razed by flame, the survivors or the conquerors generally salvaged the tumbled-down bricks and building stones and set another city on the same hill, leaving the bits of pottery, the broken weapons, the religious figurines, and the ruins of buildings, all beneath their feet.

This practice of setting one town on the ruins of the last is a great help to archaeologists. They are able to gauge the antiquity of successive towns by the depth of the buried objects, as well as by the differences in household pottery, and by the presence of bronze or iron in the different layers.

The first people who chose the steep hilltop of Kirjath-Sepher to be a lookout and refuge, came there near 2000 B. C. Few traces of their existence, except for their clay pots and pans, have been found in the deeply buried

layer that represents their community. They were early Bronze Age men and women, who no doubt made their homes in the form of wooden huts, and set up a palisade of tree trunks and earth.

The first settlement was followed by a series of cities with solid stone walls. And so we return to the serpent goddess, for it was in the third of the cities, dating from about 1700 B. C. that the unique figure was found, lying in the ruins of a building, apparently a palace.

Why was the serpent a holy creature to the Canaanites? Does the worship of an animal seem strange and incredible to you? Dr. George S. Duncan, professor of Egyptology at the American University, and author of a recent book on Biblical archaeology, points out that the serpent inspired awe in human beings very early in the history of civilization. Primitive men could recognize that some animals had strength, speed, and other abilities far beyond the physical limitations of man. And to primitive thinkers those abilities argued for superior powers hidden in animal forms.

"So," Dr. Duncan explains, "very likely, some primitive naturalists noted that the serpent sheds its skin. This suggested that the snake could go on living indefinitely, renewing its youth at will. If it had such power, it was indeed to be venerated.

"Crete had its serpent cult and its priestesses who carried snakes coiled about them, like the goddess of Kirjath-Sepher. Egypt, too, venerated the snake among other animals supposed to possess special powers."

The unique but badly damaged carving of the Serpent Goddess of the Canaanites, found at Kirjath-Sepher. At first archaeologists thought that the serpent was coiled around a sacred tree, but on cleaning the stone, they could see the feet of the goddess, planted sideways, and her long skirt and the serpent coiling round the body up to the waist. The head of the goddess is missing. The dotted lines indicate how the complete figure may have looked.

The Israelites who were held captive in Egypt knew all about all these animal deities, Dr. Duncan continues. And Moses, who was brought up at the court of Pharaoh, perhaps knew more. When the Israelites were bitten by serpents in the wilderness, Moses drew on an Egyptian belief, half religious, half medical, which was that the bite of the serpent could be healed by looking up to it and asking for its favor. The serpent, it was argued, would attack because it was offended. It must be propitiated. Thus, Moses used a serpent of brass as a psychiatric treatment to calm the emotional and mental panic of his distressed followers.

This brazen serpent continued to play a leading role in Israelite affairs. The Bible record says no more about it until we find King Hezekiah going into the temple and smashing the image. The brief phrasing of this dramatic episode is that Hezekiah "brake in pieces the brazen serpent that Moses had made; for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it."

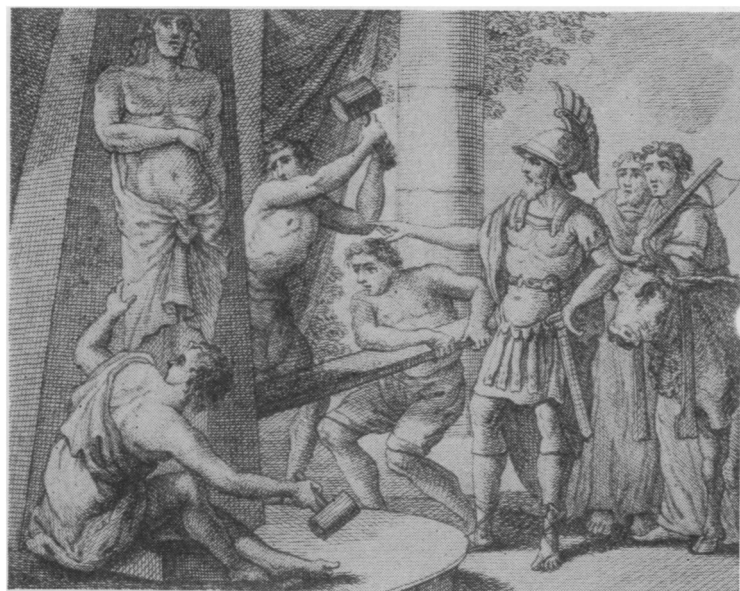
Now that we know that the serpent was an established deity in the land of Canaan, we can better understand



why that brazen serpent of the wilderness gained in mystic importance when the Israelites brought it into Canaan. King Hezekiah's wrathful destruction of the image was no hasty outburst against a statue that had become a little too much venerated as a historic relic. He was conducting a reformer's whirlwind campaign against a deep-rooted powerful cult.

In the town level of Kirjath-Sepher just above the layer that contained the serpent goddess, the archaeologists have found five figurines of another, better known Canaanite divinity, Astarte. The Israelites derisively called her Ashtoreth, from a word meaning shame. This goddess was worshipped by almost every nation of antiquity in some form or another. She was the goddess of love and of fertility. Whether you called her Venus, Aphrodite, Astarte, Ishtar, Tanit, Kadesh, or what not, depended upon the land you chanced to live in. The Canaanites kept little figurines of her as a naked maiden, with spiral curls framing her face, and with long-stemmed flowers in her hands. Her likeness with variations of detail has been unearthed in various cities of Palestine where archaeologists have been digging.

The rites of Astarte were an alternate horror and allurements to the Israelites, whose invisible Jehovah abominated such (*Turn to page 254*)



The artist called this old engraving "Gideon destroying the altar of Baal." But recent excavations show that the gods of the Land of Canaan were not like Greek statues. Nor did Gideon wear a Roman soldier's uniform.

Idols of the Bible Land—Continued

orgies. It was she against whom the prophets of the Bible most ardently raged, for her cult made its appeal through the most primitive and deep-rooted passions of the race. Women who desired children, men and maidens who would be happily wed, as well as those who were allured by the licentious rites, all craved the protection of the goddess of love.

The layer of ruins at Kirjath-Sepher which contained the five figurines of Astarte stood as a living city in the days of Joshua about 1200 B. C. This was the town that Othniel besieged to win Achsah for his wife. Deep layers of ashes tell a story of a terrible fire. From that time on, Kirjath-Sepher was no longer a Canaanite royal city, but a Hebrew provincial town.

When the victorious Israelites took possession, Othniel, the conqueror, rebuilt the city and became the first of the judges of Israel. From the state of the ruins, archaeologists conclude that Othniel built hastily. The walls show signs of rapid, none too expert, workmanship. Othniel's followers were not the experienced builders of fortresses that the Canaanites were. The men that he set to work as brick-makers, masons, and carpenters had been wandering in the wilderness. The knowledge of building that the Israelites acquired in the land of the Pharaohs had become almost tradition.

These Israelites came into Canaan just about the time when iron was introduced there. Contrasting the last of the Canaanite cities at Kirjath-Sepher with the city built by Othniel, Dr. M. G. Kyle, president of Xenia Theological Seminary, stated:

"Below this layer of ashes a careful examination of the pieces of pottery showed that it was all Canaanite. Likewise the implements and the weapons were Canaanite and made of bronze. No iron whatever appeared. Evidently up to that layer of ashes the Canaanites occupied the city and as yet did not use iron, at least extensively, if at all.

"Above the layer of ashes a very different state of things was revealed; every bit of pottery was Israelite!—unmistakably Israelite. Besides, all the weapons and the tools were also Israelite, and made of iron. The more beautiful and costly bronze had disappeared. Never again did we find

a piece of bronze in the city, except one arrowhead. This was almost certainly shot into the city by an enemy from without, and so did not represent Israelite weapons."

The Israelites got their iron, it is believed, from the Philistines, who immigrated into Canaan from across the Mediterranean, and probably brought knowledge of iron into the land for the first time. For a while, the Philistines controlled the iron trade. But, Dr. Kyle explains, "when smelting furnaces made iron abundant and cheap, it quickly drove out the expensive bronze as the automobile drove out the horse from our civilization within twenty-five years." This happened about the thirteenth century B.C., just the age of the Israelite conquest.

This fifth edition of Kirjath-Sepher, like the others before it, was eventually laid in ruins, and for the last time a town rose on the top of the heap. This was a crowded, busy little community, as the closely built houses show. It had some 5,000 inhabitants and was a center of a dyeing and weaving industry. Four dye plants with stone vats are among its ruins. This last Kirjath-Sepher belonged to the days of the divided Israelites, when the south of Palestine was the Kingdom of Judah, and the north was the Kingdom of Israel. From the tenth century B. C. to the sixth, Kirjath-Sepher flourished, and then was suddenly demolished forever by the Chaldean army of Nebuchadnezzar which swept the Israelites down to Babylon, to captivity.

Out of the debris of this last of the hilltop towns, archaeologists have taken a variety of everyday objects used by the Hebrews of the period of the Kings of Israel and Judah. There are the iron tools of laborers, the household pottery, and the toys, rattles, and whistles of the children. The whistles were promptly blown by the excavators who found them, and the little clay toys sent out the same shrill pipe that amused the children of the city in Biblical times.

Out of this layer, too, were taken cosmetic palettes of the women's dressing rooms, with traces of green and black pigments for lining the eyes, still clinging to stone containers. And again, the figures of the popular and persistent goddess Astarte, bobbed-haired and boldly unclad. These figurines—idols the prophets called them

—were symbols of divinity about the time that Isaiah and Jeremiah so bitterly lamented that their people's vision of an unseen Almighty had become so dim.

The names of a Biblical king and his servant have been preserved in this city. The handle of a broken jar lay among the ruins, and on the handle was impressed a seal inscribed: "Belonging to Eliakim, servant of Joiakin."

This Joiakin, or Jehoiachin, was the boy king who reigned in Jerusalem for only a few months, and was overthrown by Nebuchadnezzar, all in the year 597 B. C. The jar handle must have been stamped with its proud seal of ownership in that year. This means that Kirjath-Sepher was then in existence. Whether it fell before the Chaldeans then, or whether it stood until about ten years later when the Hebrews were swept away into captivity, is yet to be learned. Nor is it yet discovered why that sixth city on the hill was the last of Kirjath-Sepher.

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Physiology—Continued

although it might reduce the average weight, Dr. Jackson explained.

The average stature increased one-tenth of an inch during this period, but the average weight not including clothing showed a corresponding increase of about two and one-half pounds.

However, measurements at Hollins College in Virginia during the period from 1920 to 1927 showed about half an inch increase in the average stature with a decrease of about three and one-half pounds in the average weight. These figures give a large proportion of apparent underweights.

That a general improvement in average stature began at a still earlier period is indicated by the combined data, totalling 21,383 women, for Stanford University and Smith and Vassar Colleges. These figures showed a progressive increase in stature amounting to about one and two-tenths inches during the thirty years from 1890 to 1920. The Vassar data show also a corresponding gain of 7 or 8 pounds in weight, although there was little change in weight during the last ten years of the period.

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