

UGARITIC AND THE TRANSLATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

In Peake's Commentary on the Bible (revised edition, 1962) W. F. Albright quotes an optimist who declared 'If an inscription in unknown characters were to fall from the moon, we should be able to read it'. Certainly the deciphering of ancient scripts forms a spectacular chapter in the history of the advance of Old Testament scholarship. Ugaritic was first deciphered by two scholars who were not only cipherists but Semitists. For an introduction to the subject we commend this article 'The Archaeology of the Ancient Near East' and its bibliography, pp. 58-65. Of the materials found at Ugarit, modern Râs Shamra, Albright says: 'This entire material dates from between c. 1400 and 1200 B.C., and since the Ugaritic dialect of Canaanite differed less from contemporary South Canaanite and the most archaic Biblical Hebrew than Low German from High German or Provençal from French, it is not surprising that Biblical studies are being revolutionized by it.' In support of this statement we may cite the fact that in the Commentary from which these quotations are taken, there are 22 references in the index under Ugarit as well as a number of other references under Râs Shamra. Ed.

One of the ancestor-languages of Hebrew, viz. Ugaritic, has revolutionized our knowledge of certain phenomena in Biblical Hebrew. Since the deciphering of Ugaritic in 1930 we have a clearer understanding of the oldest Biblical Hebrew than at any time before. It is thus understandable that a revision of many passages is called for by the results obtained. The American, Mitchell Dahood, writes in his study *Ugaritic-Hebrew Philology*, 1965, that the Ugaritic discoveries can no longer be ignored in the field of Bible translating.

We heartily agree with this assertion and want to draw attention to a few of the examples of different kinds which bear on our subject.

Certain Morphological Data

In any language a certain number of particles and enclitic prefixes or suffixes occur which are difficult to translate. The use of this kind of phenomenon is more restricted in the Semitic languages than for example in Indo-Germanic languages. But still they do occur and occasionally produce severe difficulties for a translator. It is even true that some of these elements survive in older parts of the Hebrew Bible, but are unrecognized, because in later Hebrew their usage is completely dropped. One such a phenomenon is the enclitic *m*. Only since the deciphering of Ugaritic has it become clear that an enclitic *m* was abundantly used in ancient North-West Semitic. A thorough study of the oldest parts of the Old Testament in the light of this phenomenon produces results. The work especially of the American scholar

Hummel should be mentioned in this respect. It becomes clear that the Masoretes, since the enclitic *m* fell into disuse in later Hebrew and was totally unknown to them, misinterpreted this phenomenon and pointed it in some instances as a third person plural suffix. Note, for example, Ps. 29: 6 which is translated by 'He maketh *them* also to skip' (A.V., R.V.), but note the correct translation 'He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf' (R.S.V.). The word *them* in A.V. and R.V. accords with the Masoretic pointing of the Hebrew word. The supposed third person plural suffix is problematical for the interpretation and we even have a textual critical proposal that the word must be read without the suffix. This problem is solved by accepting that the final *m* of the Hebrew word is not the third person plural suffix, but a survival of the ancient North-West Semitic enclitic *m* which is usually left untranslated. Ps. 29: 6 should be translated as in the R.S.V. This view of the *m* is further substantiated by the fact that in Ps. 29 many other old forms occur in grammar as well as in vocabulary.¹

We can add another example to stress the importance of the enclitic *m*. Although Gen. 1 is placed fairly late in modern literary analysis we may presuppose an ancient background of poetic-epic style (according to the study of Albright and Freedman). It was Freedman who for the first time drew our attention to the words 'into one place' (R.S.V., and also A.V. and R.V.) in Gen. 1: 9. It is to be noted that LXX translates the Hebrew with 'one gathering' (*sunagōgē*) and some scholars regard this reading as superior to that of the Masoretic Text. Freedman reads the word as 'gathering' with an enclitic *m* which is interpreted and pointed erroneously by the Masoretes. The translation should be 'into one gathering'. The proposal is likely in the light of the translation of LXX and also the usage of the enclitic *m* in ancient North-West Semitic. These two examples may suffice to show what a thorough knowledge of Ugaritic applied with a sense of good judgment may produce for a better understanding of Old Testament Hebrew. Sense of good judgment indeed—we must not yield to the temptation to regard almost every final *m* as a possible enclitic *m*.

A Rediscovery of the Meaning of Words

We have in the Hebrew Bible a number of words and morphemes which remain obscure in spite of brilliant attempts by scholars to explain them. On the other hand, even a generally accepted meaning for a particular word may be proved wrong by new discoveries. With the deciphering of Ugaritic a fairly large number of words and their meanings are at our disposal. It is indeed true that the meanings of many Ugaritic words have been fixed with the aid of Biblical Hebrew. On the other hand, however, by invoking the help of parallel usage, the meanings of certain Ugaritic words have been fixed beyond doubt. Some few of these words do shed fresh light on the meaning of difficult Hebrew words. A comparison of Ugaritic and Hebrew roots and the fixing of their meanings has proved to be fruitful. At the same time we must be willing to move with great caution and bear in mind that

¹ Certain scholars, e.g. G. R. Driver, offer a different explanation of the final *m* in Ps. 29: 6. Ed.

the Ugaritic vocabulary existed much earlier than most of the Hebrew words. It might be contemporary with the oldest parts of the Hebrew Bible, but the greatest bulk of Hebrew literature is much later. We need to remember the fact of change in the meaning of words, developing by their usage through centuries and in different circumstances. A comparison of the meaning of the same words in modern languages which sprang from a common ancestor like the Germanic languages should make us cautious with our comparisons. We also have to bear in mind the fact that the same word may have quite another meaning in a different situation. If this is true of the use of the same word in the same language at the same time, it is even more of a problem in dealing with the same word in different languages (or dialects) at different times and even in different situations. These words of caution, though necessary, ought not to make us pessimistic regarding the fixing of meanings by parallelistic study. We have to start somewhere or else leave a word untranslated which is impossible in the case of Bible translating. In many difficult cases Ugaritic gives at least a possible or even probable new translation. A perusal of the glossary of the monumental *Ugaritic Textbook* by C. H. Gordon is sufficient to enable us to grasp the impact of Ugaritic vocabulary on Biblical Hebrew. Ugaritic material is also used by Köhler in his Hebrew lexicon which is, however, outdated in certain respects by new discoveries. The planned new issue by W. Baumgartner should alter the position.

Some Examples

We want to draw attention to a few examples: we have many instances of an emphatic usage of *l* in Ugaritic (which could be normalized or vocalized *lu* or *la*). A close study of the Hebrew negative particles (*lō* and *'al*) shows that in certain instances these particles should not be regarded as negatives, but emphatic (as is shown by the studies of Nötscher, Gordon, Rin and lately by Alberto Soggin). A good example occurs in Gen. 23: 11 where *lō* is translated by 'Nay' (A.V., R.V.) or 'No' (R.S.V.). If we accept that this word is to be regarded as the ancient emphatic *lū* as in Gen. 30: 34, it certainly makes better sense. If this is accepted we can translate 'Indeed, my lord . . .', which is preferable to the cryptic 'No'. (Cf. also *lū* in verse 13). Another example is the interesting proposal of Soggin to read *lū* in Jer. 4: 27 as emphatic and to translate it by 'The whole land shall be a desolation. I will make indeed an end (to it)' which is much better than the problem created by the negative *lō* in the second part; e.g. 'yet will I not make a full end' (R.V.).

From the occurrence of the Ugaritic prepositions *b* (in) and *l* (to) it is clear that both are used in an opposite sense 'from'. This phenomenon has shed fresh light on certain problematical passages in the Old Testament. For example we quite possibly have to translate Isa. 27: 13 as follows: 'and they shall come which are ready to perish, *from* (not *in*) the land of Assyria and they that were outcasts *from* (not *in*) the land of Egypt'; cf. A.V. and R.V., and the interesting *in* for the first *b* and *to* for the second in R.S.V. A good example of *l* in the meaning 'from' is in Ps. 60: 3b which is correctly

translated by Dahood with 'you grew angry, you turned away *from* us'. This is much better than 'thou hast been angry; oh, restore us (R.S.V. and in the same sense A.V. and R.V., verse 1 in these versions).

In the same way fresh light is shed on other problematic Hebrew words. The oldest Hebrew poetry which has profited by the study of Ugaritic is found especially in Ex. 15, Deut. 32, Judges 5, 1 Sam. 2, Ps. 29, 68, 82, 93 and Hab. 3. In Ps. 29: 2b A.V. reads 'Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness' (also R.V.) and R.S.V. 'worship the Lord in holy array'. The words 'in the beauty of holiness' or in 'holy array' can now be translated in the light of Ugaritic, 'in holy divine appearance'. Another well known example of Ugaritic aid to a better translation and interpretation of the Old Testament is attested in Ps. 68: 4. R.V. has 'Cast up a high way for him that rideth through the deserts'. Ugaritic makes it quite probable that 'deserts' should be 'clouds'. A possible translation would be 'Cast up a high way for him that drives on the clouds' (cf. already R.S.V.). It is to be noted that the translation of the Hebrew word with 'their waves' (*dokyām*) in Ps. 93: 3 in A.V. and R.V. and 'their roaring' in R.S.V. is mere guesswork. The same word occurs in Ugaritic, but there also the meaning is obscure and we still have to wait for a parallel somewhere to solve this difficult problem. It is indeed difficult to penetrate the meaning of certain words in the oldest Hebrew poetry. Ugaritic as old North-West Semitic poetry is an important aid to a better understanding of the oldest Hebrew poetry though all the problems are not yet solved.

Some other prose parts of the Hebrew Bible also profit by the study of Ugaritic. We wish to cite one example only; Ex. 23: 5b contains a vexed problem in the Hebrew which is read with a textual emendation by A.V. 'thou shalt surely help with him' (reading 'zr instead of 'zb). From Ugaritic it becomes clear that the Hebrew word 'āzab is derived from two different roots in North-West Semitic, viz. 'zb and 'db. The latter root has the meaning 'to make, to prepare, to set'. It is possible that the Hebrew is derived from the second root. A possible translation then is 'you must surely set (it) with it (the burden)'.¹

We could multiply examples of this kind which have been published since the decipherment of Ugaritic. We hope the examples given will be sufficient to illustrate the importance of Ugaritic for Bible translating.

Much Remains To Be Done

A very fruitful field of comparison between Ugaritic and the oldest Hebrew is that of syntax and stylistics. A thorough comparative syntactical study of Hebrew and Ugaritic is especially needed; e.g. the almost indiscriminate use of Perfect and Imperfect in Ugaritic epic literature in comparison with the same phenomenon in the oldest Hebrew poetry. There is still much to be done, but what has already been done warrants the close attention of any Bible translator.

¹ i.e., 'if you see the ass of one who helps you, lying under its burden . . . you must surely set the ass on its feet with the burden on its back'. Brown-Driver-Briggs suggests the translation 'thou shalt by all means free it (sc. the beast) with him, (aid him to set it free).' On the sense, cf. Deut. 22: 4. Ed.