

Pagan Religion In Canaan

In the land of Canaan, there were numerous so-called gods and goddesses which the pagans worshipped. The main gods were called El, Ba'al and Dagon and the main goddess was Asherah or Ashtoreth.

The word "El" means "God". "El" was the chief high god of many gods and goddesses of the Semitic peoples in Canaan. The Ugaritic myths taught that El's female consort was Asherah. In pagan myths Asherah was also Ba'al's female consort¹ or his mother.²

Dagon was god of the Philistines. Dagon was portrayed as having a human upper body and a fish lower body. The major rite of Dagon worship was human sacrifice.

Archaeological information on Ba'al

Ba'al was the most popular male god of the Canaanites. In the Ras Shamrah texts from Ugarit in North Syria in about 1380 B.C., the name Ba'al is found about 240 times. In these texts, Ba'al is called Hadad about 20 times or is used in a compound form with Hadad. Like Ba'al, Hadad was a Semitic god of storms and fertility. Throughout the Middle East, Hadad was not always equated with Ba'al but in the Ras Shamrah texts he is.

The symbol of both Ba'al and Hadad were bulls. Bulls were symbols of fertility. Ba'al and Hadad were fertility gods. The Ras Shamrah texts call Ba'al the son of the god Dagon.

The Ras Shamrah tablets and statuettes and stelae found at Ugarit provide an abundance of information about Ba'al.³ On a sculptured stele, Ba'al is grasping a thunderbolt, depicting him as the storm-god. On his helmet, he has the horns of a bull, symbolizing his role as a fertility god.

The Ras Shamrah texts exalt Ba'al as the god having power over the wind, rain, clouds and fertility. But his control of nature varies depending on whether he has victories or defeats in his battles with Mot, the pagan god of death, aridity and sterility. Whenever Mot defeats Ba'al, Ba'al's power is temporarily reduced resulting in barren unproductive fields and crops. But when Ba'al defeats Mot next time, the fields become fertile and productive.

After Mot defeats Ba'al, he commands Ba'al to descend to the underworld. But before going there, Ba'al has incestuous sex with his sister-consort named Anat in order to produce an heir which will ensure the continuing fertility of the land. Here Ba'al appears as a bull and Anat a heifer.

Anat then experiences much grief about the death of Ba'al. So she finds him and takes him back to the heights of Sapan – the supposed mountain of the gods, buries him and sacrifices seventy each of oxen, bulls, sheep, deer, wild goats and asses. She begs Mot to raise Ba'al to life, but Mot refuses. During this time, famine and drought are everywhere.

Then Anat brings vengeance on Mot. She kills him and sows his remains in the fields where these remains are eaten by birds. As a result, Ba'al is raised to life.

¹ Walter Elwell (Editor), "Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology", Baker, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1996, page 301.

² Harris, Archer and Waltke, page 81.

³ Information in the section comes from Geoffrey W. Bromiley (General Editor), "The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia", Volume One, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1979, pages 377-378.

Then to regain his throne on the mountain of the gods, Ba'al then drives Atlas, the son of Asherah from the throne and in a fierce short battle defeats Mot again. As a result, the fields become fertile and productive again.

More information on Ba'al worship

Ba'al was the most popular male god of the Canaanites. The word "Ba'al" is derived from the Semitic word "ba'lu" meaning "lord".⁴ In Hebrew, "Ba'al" means "master, possessor".⁵

The Canaanites believed that Ba'al was the god of storms, rain, wind, clouds, fertility, wine and sex. They said the thunder was his voice. They taught that Ba'al manifested himself at different locations under different names. For example, Ba'al is called Ba'al-Meon at Meon (see Numbers 32:38), Ba'al Hermon at Hermon (see Judges 3:3), Ba'al-Hazor at Hazor (see 2 Samuel 13:23) and Ba'al-Peor at Peor (see Numbers 25:3).

The worship of Ba'al could occur through animal sacrifices on altars in the open on mountains (see 1 Kings 18:20-29) or in great temples (see 1 Kings 16:32). 2 Kings 10:18-27 records that Ba'al worship in large temples may have included the following features:

- a) the attendance of male priests of Ba'al, prophets of Ba'al and all his other worshippers together (see verses 19-21),
- b) the usage of special vestments or religious clothes by the worshippers (see verse 22),
- c) the offering of sacrifices and burnt offerings (see verses 24-25),
- d) the presence of so-called sacred pillars of Ba'al in the temple (see verses 26-27).

In the time of the Judges – roughly the 14th to 11th centuries B.C. – there were "high places of Ba'al" – places of worship for Ba'al on mountaintops (see Numbers 22:41).

God warned the Israelites not to worship any of the pagan gods or goddesses of Canaan and surrounding areas. In Exodus 34:12-17, God commanded: ***"Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst. But you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars and cut down their wooden images (for you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God)", lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they play the harlot with their gods and make sacrifice to their gods, and one of them invites you and you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters play the harlot with their gods. You shall make no molded gods for yourselves."***

See also Deuteronomy 6:14, 7:4-5, 7:16, 7:25, 12:2-3 and 12:29-32.

But after Joshua died, many Israelites began to worship Ba'al or a mixture of Ba'al and the Lord. Here are examples:

- a) In the times of the Judges, the majority of the Israelites worshipped Ba'al (see Judges 2:11, 2:13, 3:7, 6:25, 8:33, 10:6 and 10:10).

⁴ Elwell, page 302.

⁵ W.E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger and William White Jr., "Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words", Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1985, page 12.

- b) In the time of Samuel before David became king, many Israelites worshipped the Lord, Ba'al and Ba'al's female goddess sex partner Ashtoreth (see 1 Samuel 7:4 and 12:10).
- c) After King Solomon backslid, he permitted the worship of Ba'al's female mistress Ashtoreth in Jerusalem (see 1 Kings 11:5-6).
- d) In the reign of King Rehoboam, Solomon's son, there were homosexual temple prostitutes in Judah and wooden images or "Asherim" in Hebrew. "Asherim" were images of the goddess Asherah.
- e) Israelite King Ahab and his pagan wife Jezebel promoted Ba'al worship in the kingdom of the ten northern tribes of Israel (see 1 Kings 16:31-32 and 18:18-40). 1 Kings 16:33 says Ahab made a wooden image or Asherah in Hebrew.
- f) King Ahaziah, Ahab's son, promoted Ba'al worship in Israel (see 1 Kings 22:51-53).
- g) Ba'al worship continued to be popular in the northern nation of Israel in Jehu's time (see 2 Kings 10:18-31) and continued up until the Israelites were conquered and deported by the Assyrians (see 2 Kings 17:5-23).
- h) In the southern kingdom of Judah in Queen Athaliah's time, some Jews were worshipping Ba'al (see 2 Kings 11:18).
- i) King Manasseh, Hezekiah's son popularised Ba'al worship in Judah and Jerusalem and put a carved image of Asherah in Solomon's Temple in the first part of his reign (see 2 Kings 21:3 and 7).
- j) In Zephaniah 1:1-2:3, God warned Judeans in the time of godly King Josiah to repent of their worship of Ba'al and other pagan religions, otherwise they would be severely punished in future. Zephaniah 1:4-6 states: ***"I will stretch out My hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. I will cut off every trace of Baal from this place, the names of the idolatrous priests with the pagan priests – those who worship the host of heaven on the housetops; those who worship and swear oaths by the Lord, but who also swear by Milcom; those who have turned back from following the Lord, and have not sought the Lord, nor inquired of Him."***
- k) As we see throughout the Book of Jeremiah, Ba'al worship was popular in Judah right up until God handed them over to conquest by the Babylonians (see Jeremiah 7:9, 11:13, 11:17, 19:5 and 32:29).

2 Kings 11:18 records that a temple to Ba'al had been also built in Jerusalem by some supposedly "enlightened tolerant" liberal Jews. This verse records there were images of Ba'al and altars in this temple. 2 Kings 21:3 refers to ***"altars for Ba'al."*** 2 Kings 23:4 refers to ***"articles that were made for Ba'al"*** by Jews in Jerusalem. 2 Kings 23:5 states that Ba'al worshippers also ***"burned incense to Ba'al."*** Hosea 2:8 records Israelites gave grain, new wine, oil, gold and silver to Ba'al.

The prophet Jeremiah refers to Jewish worshippers of Ba'al burning incense to Ba'al (see Jeremiah 7:9, 11:13, 11:17 and 32:29), swearing by Ba'al (see Jeremiah 12:16) and prophesying by Ba'al (see Jeremiah 2:8). 1 Kings 19:18 refers to Israelites bowing knees before Ba'al and kissing his idol.

In Jeremiah 19:5, Jeremiah records that Jewish worshippers of Ba'al offered human sacrifices on altars at high places: ***"They have also built the high places of Ba'al, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or speak, nor did it come into My mind."***

In Deuteronomy 12:31, God said that the Canaanites had previously been making human sacrifices of their sons and daughters to their pagan gods: ***“You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way; for every abomination to the Lord which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.”***

God said that human sacrifice was an abomination to Him.

Jeremiah 32:35 seems to infer that the religion of the Jews in Jeremiah’s time became so corrupt and compromising that many Jews thought God wanted them to murder their children as sacrifices to the pagan god Molech: ***“And they built the high places of Baal which are in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire to Molech, which I did not command them, nor did it come into My mind that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin.”***

After Solomon’s wives turned his heart to compromise and evil, he permitted a temple to be erected in Jerusalem for Molech worship (see 1 Kings 11:7).

The foolish Israelites felt that if they compromised by mixing Ba’al worship with the worship of the Lord, they would receive both the Lord’s and Ba’al’s promised natural and spiritual blessings. But as Hosea 13:1 says of Ephraim – the leading tribe of the 10 northern tribes of Israel: ***“When Ephraim spoke, trembling, he exalted himself in Israel; but when he offended in Baal, he died.”***

Many Israelites and Jews were attracted to the pagan religion of Ba’al and Ashtoreth because of the heavy wine drinking and sexual immorality promoted by this religion. Because Ba’al worshippers believed Ba’al was the god of wine and fertility, they said it was a religious duty to drink much wine, have sex with male homosexual and female temple prostitutes and participate in orgies. Ba’al worshippers believed that by having sex with temple prostitutes, this encouraged Ba’al to enjoy having sex with Ashtoreth or Anath, thus ensuring that fertility would come to the land.

In Hebrew, the male homosexual temple prostitutes are called “qadesh”⁶ referring to “holy” prostitutes and are mentioned in Deuteronomy 23:17, 1 Kings 14:24, 15:12, 22:46, 2 Kings 23:7 and Job 36:14. Deuteronomy 23:17 distinguishes between female and male temple prostitutes: ***“There shall be no ritual harlot of the daughters of Israel, or a perverted one of the sons of Israel.”***

Similarly in later centuries, many Greeks were attracted to the immoral worship of Dionysius, their god of wine and fertility. After initially rejecting the worship of Dionysius who was called Bacchus in Latin, many later Romans were attracted to this religion’s drunken orgies.

As 1 Kings 18:28-29 reveals, the prophets of Ba’al believed they could manipulate Ba’al into answering them by cutting themselves, crying aloud and prophesying what they wanted to occur.

Judges 2:13, 10:6, 1 Samuel 7:3, 7:4 and 12:10 pair the worship of Ba’al with the worship of the goddess Ashtoreth.

2 Kings 17:10 and 16 reveal that two of the reasons God punished the 10 northern tribes of Israel by permitting the Assyrians to conquer them, were most Israelites worshipped Ba’al and made for themselves wooden images: ***“They set up for themselves sacred pillars and wooden images on every high hill and under every green tree...So they left all the commandments of the Lord their God, made for themselves a molded image and two calves,***

⁶ Harris, Archer and Archer, page 788.

made a wooden image and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal.” In Hebrew, the phrase “*wooden images*” here is Asherim, referring to images of the goddess Asherah.

Ashtoreth

In ancient Babylon, Ishtar was the goddess of erotic love and fertility.⁷ Her chief seat of worship was at Urek (Erech) where prostitution was practiced in her name and men and women participated in sexually immoral rites as a part of serving her.⁸

The goddess Ashtoreth or in Greek Astarte is either the equivalent of the Babylonian goddess Ishtar or is a modified version of her. Similarly, the Greek goddess Aphrodite and the Roman goddess Venus are either equivalents or modifications of Ishtar, Ashtoreth or Astarte.⁹

In the late Bronze Age, some Egyptians worshipped Ashtoreth or Astarte.⁹ Archaeological excavations in 1935 at ancient Mizpah or Tell-en Nasbeh found a temple dedicated to Asthoreth.¹⁰ In his “Histories” (i, 105) the ancient Greek historian Herodotus said that Ashtoreth’s most ancient temple was at Ashkelon in Palestine.¹¹ Here she was worshipped under the name Atargatis, as a woman with a tail like a fish.¹² 1 Samuel 31:10 refers to the Philistines having their “*temple of the Ashtoreths.*”

Ashtoreth took on modified forms under the same name in different locations. This may be why the Old Testament refers to plural Ashtoreths with plural Ba’al’s (see Judges 2:13, 10:6, 1 Samuel 7:4 and 12:10).

The Ras Shamrah tablets mention Ashtoreth seldomly and do not say she was Ba’al’s mistress. Instead these texts identify Anat as Ba’al’s mistress. Because the Ras Shamrah texts come from Ugarit in North Syria and not Palestine, it is possible that the more northern people at Ugarit identified Ba’al and Anat as sex partners and the people in Canaan believed Ba’al and Ashtoreth were lovers. Or possibly Ashtoreth and Anat were two names for the same goddess in some or many or all areas.

The Bible does not refer to the goddess “Anat”. So we have no Biblical evidence to determine the relationship between Ashtoreth and Anat.

Similarly, the goddess Asherah may have been an equivalent or modified version of the goddess Ashtoreth. The expression “Ba’als and Ashtoreths” in Judges 2:13 seems to be the equivalent of “Ba’als and Asherah” in Judges 3:7. Judges 6:25 refers to an altar of Ba’al which has a wooden image or Asherah idol beside it among the Israelites in Gideon’s time.

Deuteronomy 16:21 commands the Israelites to never make a wooden image for themselves: “*You shall not plant for yourself any tree, as a wooden image, near the altar which you build for yourself to the Lord your God.*” In Hebrew, the phrase “*wooden image*” here is “Asherah”, referring to an image of the goddess Asherah.

In Exodus 34:13, God commanded the Israelites to destroy all of the wooden images or Asherim idols: “*But you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images.*”

⁷ Bromiley, page 320.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Ashtoreth was usually depicted nude with horns on her head. The horns symbolised fertility.

A modified modern version of the ancient Ba'al and Asherah myth is the myth of macroevolution. In the Ba'al and Asherah myth, acts of creation were a result of the union of Ba'al and Asherah. In the macroevolution myth, creation was supposedly a result of the union of the god called spontaneous generation and goddess called chance.