

Canaanite Religion as a Background for Patriarchal and Early Israelite Religion

The Ras Shamra texts (site of ancient Ugarit) dating from 1500-1200 B.C.E.) provide important information about Canaanite religion. Ugarit is representative of a larger cultural continuum that included 2nd-1st millennium Syria-Palestine and formed the background for the formation of the tribes of Israel. These texts attest to aspects of Canaanite culture and mythology that the ancient Israelites alternately shared, adopted, modified and rejected.

The Ugaritic gods and goddesses

1. El. Literally, "god" but also the personal name for the head of the Canaanite pantheon and council of the gods until overthrown by Baal. He is also called: King, Creator of All, Father of years, Kind, Compassionate. He is represented as a patriarchal god who dwells in a tent. El appears throughout Semitic cultures as Allah (=El) in Arabic religion and *El/Elohim* in the Hebrew Bible.

2. Baal. Literally "master" but also "husband." Son of the grain god Dagan, Baal was a storm god. By 1000 B.C.E. he had become the chief deity and head of the Canaanite pantheon. He is featured in a fertility myth in which he is killed by Mot, the god of death, and then restored to life (a Canaanite version of the myth of a dying and rising god that is linked to the cycle of nature and agriculture). Another story tells of a battle between Baal the storm god and the chaotic watery demon Yamm (reminiscent of the battle between Marduk and Tiamat in Mesopotamian myth and reflected in Israel's demythologized version of creation in which God's wind moves over the watery deep, and in God's parting the Reed Sea by a blast from his nostrils. In the Bible, Baal appears frequently as Yahweh's rival.

3. Asherah. Wife of El, but in the Hebrew Bible the consort of Baal, evidence of Baal's . usurpation of El's position. In the Hebrew Bible the term asherah (plural asherim) refers to a sacred tree or pole associated with the cultic worship of a goddess. But Asherah is mentioned by name in I and II Kings.

4. Anat. Baal's wife and sister. A fertility goddess, and goddess of both love and war. Anat is violent and bloodthirsty. She is later supplanted by or merged with Astarte (= the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar from which the Hebrew name Esther derives) and appears as such in the Bible in I and II Kings.

Titles of the God of Israel

1. E1 Shadday. Literally, "EI, the one of the mountain" but the common translation is "God Almighty." In Canaanite myth, EI is said to live on a mountain. EI Shadday occurs in Gen 17:1,28:3,35:11,43:14,48:3,49:25; Ex 6:3.
2. EI Elyon. Literally, "God most High." Mentioned only in Gen 14:18-22 and Ps 78:35, but Elyon alone occurs frequently.
3. EI Olam. "The Everlasting God." Gen 21:33. This title can be compared to the Ugaritic titles for EI as "E1,the Eternal One." .
4. EI Ro'i. "A God of Seeing." Gen 16:13.
5. E1 Bethel. "The God of the House of God" Gen 31:13, 35:7.
6. The Fear of Isaac. Gen 31:42, 53.
7. The Bull of Jacob. Or "the mighty one of Jacob." Gen 49:24; Ps 132:2, 5; Isa 49:26; 60:16.
8. EI, the god of: Abraham/Isaac/Israel/my father Abraham, etc. Gen 26:24,28: 13,32:9, 33:20,43:23,46:1,3; Ex 3:15.

Yahweh as "Baal"

Although identified explicitly as EI (e.g., in Ex 6:3), Yahweh also has a number of traits in common with Baal. Like Baal he is called "rider on the clouds" (Ps 68:4) and there are allusions to a battle with sea/river in Ex 15, Ps 114 and Isa 51:9-11. Thus Yahweh is a composite of features of EI and Baal. This new deity required a new name and it was fitting that the new God be introduced at the time of the Exodus, which sees the formation of a new people about to make the transition from the semi-nomadic tent-dwelling existence of the patriarchs (whose God EI also dwelled in a tent) to the settled urban way of life in Canaan (the Canaanite Baal lived in a house).

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