

Baal

Unable to control or understand nature, human beings considered the forces of nature as supernatural powers to be worshiped and feared. If rain, controlled and caused by the rain god, did not come, it was because the rain god did not send it. People made idols representing pagan gods for purposes of worship and a semblance of control as a talisman to call upon its power.

Among the many pagan gods of Canaan, the one mentioned the most in the Bible was Baal, because he proved to be one of the most seductive false religions that competed for the people of God (Jud 2:11-13; 1 Ki 16:31-33; Jer 23:26-27). From the ruins of Ugarit (nearby modern day Latakia, Syria), six large tablets were recovered from the dwelling of a high priest at Ras Shamra which revealed most, if not all, that is known about the religion of Baal.

Baal, in Ugarit cuneiform, means “lord” or “master.” In Canaanite, Baal was known as “Haddu”, which to the Amorites and Aramaeans was “Hadad”, and to the Mesopotamians was “Adad”. The Bible lists several names for Baal:

Baal – Berith (Jud 9:4): The name for Baal who was worshiped during the time of Judges.

Baal – Zebub (2 Ki 1:2-3): The name for Baal who was worshiped in the Philistine city of Ekron.

Baals (Jud 2:11; 8:33; 1 Ki 18:18; Jer 2:23): The plural form of Baal who was often seen as a god of a city or region.

Dagon, the father of Baal, was the chief god of the Philistines with famous temples in Gaza and Ashdod (Jud 16:23; 1 Sam 5:2-7; 1 Chron 10:10).

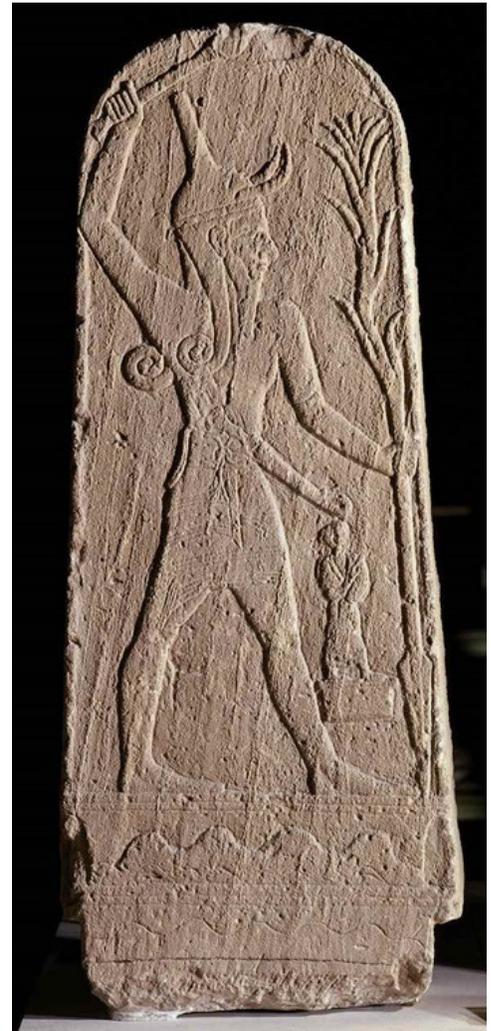
Baal was the god of storm and provided fertility for crops and livestock. Symbolic of procreation, Baal was sensuously worshiped, and the sacred men and women in Canaanite temples were prostitutes. Not only was the sexual temptation appealing, but the people of Israel, vulnerable to the weather, also wanted abundant agriculture; idolatrous worship ensnared many of Israel (Num 25:1-16).

While excavating Ras Shamra at the ancient city of Ugarit in 1932, French archaeologist Claude Schaeffer discovered the Stele of Baal of Lightning. This limestone stele, height: 1.42 m (4.66 ft) and width: 50 cm (19.69 in), was found in the sanctuary of one of the two large temples in the city.

Of the relief, Baal is seen 1) in his righthand a club prepared to release a storm, and 2) in his left hand a spear with its sharpened point down and its tail emitting lightning. This stele was dated to a range of 1500-1200 B.C.



Ras Shamra tablets



Also recovered at Ras Shamra were several small statuettes of Baal, made of stone, bronze and gold, that have the same posture as the Baal in the stele relief.

Recognizing that Baal is seen as the god of storm with the power of lightening under his control is significant to understanding the Bible's account of the prophet Elijah's challenge to the prophets of Baal (1 Ki 18:17-40).

Ahab, king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, promoted the worship of Baal (1 Ki 16:29-33; 18:18) and failed to recognize the sovereignty of God; Baal had no control over anything (1 Ki 17:1).

Experiencing the famine (1 Ki 17:1; 18:2; Jas 5:17), Israel understood that without rain for agriculture, there would be no food. The Northern Kingdom hedged their hopes for rain by worshipping both Baal and the Lord (1 Ki 18:21).

Elijah challenges 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah to see whose deity could ignite their sacrifices. Since Baal was the god of storm and lightening, he was expected to easily deliver (1 Ki 18:25-29).

In his reverence and proclamation of the Lord, Elijah exposes the religious deceit of faith in the dead god Baal with a display of fire from the living God (1 Ki 18:36-39).



The Northern Kingdom of Judah was not immune to the worship Baal. Jeremiah accused Judah as having a) prophets who prophesized by Baal (Jer 2:8), b) priests and people who make sacrifices to Baal (Jer 7:9), c) people who follow and live by Baals (Jer 9:13-14), and d) kings and people who sacrifice their children at the altar of Baal (Jer 19:3-5).

References:

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3. Craigie PC, "The Tablets from Ugarit and Their Importance for Biblical Studies" in *Biblical Archaeological Review*, vol. 9, no. 5 (Sept-Oct 1983).