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Ishtar and Israel

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The Bible was written within a historical and cultural framework. Therefore, we would expect the Bible to touch on aspects of that framework, and even reveal where ancient pagan culture influenced the people of God. One such cultural influence is found in the worship of the goddess Ishtar.

Ishtar's Role in the Pagan Pantheon

Ishtar was known in ancient times as a fertility goddess. Since most early cultures were agrarian in nature and depended for their very existence on the productivity of the land, it is not surprising that most ancient societies worshipped gods and goddesses that, in their way of thinking, could guarantee fruitful crops and bountiful harvests. Of course, the idea of fertility for the land also demanded human fertility as well. Agrarian societies depend on large families, so any god or goddess of fertility would become associated with human sexuality.

Ishtar became the predominant goddess in the pagan pantheon, possessing a variety of roles. Jacobsen suggests that Ishtar, or Inanna in Sumerian, was originally the goddess of the date storehouse.¹ Dates were a valuable produce, and her role as guardian of the date storehouse inferred great power and productivity. From

this early conception, Ishtar's role evolved into broader and greater powers. Because agricultural productivity depends on rain, Ishtar became identified as the goddess of thunderstorms and rain. Next came her role as the goddess of war. "In the process of humanization, gods of rain and thunderstorms tended . . . to be envisaged as warriors riding their chariots into battle."² It's not surprising that Ishtar, goddess of agricultural fertility and military might, would also become known as a goddess of sexual pleasure and power, a very popular deity! "The most popular deity of ancient Mesopotamia, Inanna/Ishtar represented the power of sexual attraction and the carnal pleasure that proceeds from it."³ As such a powerful and popular goddess in the Middle East, Ishtar would capture the attention even of the nation of Israel.

The Myth of Ishtar

As Kramer points out, "Not a few of the Sumerian myths revolve about the ambitious, aggressive, and demanding goddess of love, Inanna—the Akkadian Ishtar—and her husband, the shepherd-god, Dumuzi—the Biblical Tammuz."⁴ The most prevalent myth describes Ishtar's marriage to Dumuzi, the god of shepherds. Having married Dumuzi, Ishtar longed for greater power. She therefore descended into the underworld to take control of it from her sister, Ereshkigal. But Ishtar's efforts were thwarted and her sister killed Ishtar. Ishtar's servant, however, came to the rescue to restore Ishtar to life. Yet Ishtar wasn't allowed to leave the underworld until she secured a substitute. Cruelly, Ishtar chose her shepherd-husband Dumuzi to take her place.⁵ Ishtar was, therefore, permitted to return to the land of the living. Dumuzi "still lives on today in the Hebrew and Aramaic spelling of his name, Tammuz, the name for the Semitic lunar month that laps over July, the time when pastures wither and the god must for a time die again."⁶ Ishtar lived on as the goddess of fertility, sexuality, and war in a variety of ancient pagan cultures.

Ishtar in Ancient Pagan Cultures

Originally known as Inanna by the Sumerians, this powerful goddess was called Ishtar by the Semitic Akkadians. The Canaanites referred to her as Astarte, and the Hebrew name for Ishtar became

Ashtoreth. “In south Arabic the name is found as ‘Athtar (apparently from *‘athara, to be fertile, to irrigate*), a god identified with the planet Venus. The name is cognate with Babylonian Ishtar, the goddess of sensual love, maternity, and fertility.”⁷ Even ancient Egypt, with its own panoply of gods and goddesses, adopted Ishtar into its pantheon. Hart says, “In the Egyptian pantheon to which she was officially admitted in Dynasty XVIII her prime association is with horses and chariots.”⁸ He goes on to note, “It would be tempting to make an analogy between Ishtar and Isis or Hathor but evidence from the Egyptian sources is lacking.”⁹ Later, when the armies of Alexander the Great returned from their conquests in the east, they brought back some elements of the eastern religions including the worship of Ishtar. One of the resulting Roman mystery religions was the cult of Atargatis. “The first part of her name is related to the names of the goddess Ishtar, Astarte, or Ashtoreth, who was likewise the deity of fertility, love, and life. Her worship was accompanied by ritual prostitution and by human sacrifice until it was outlawed by Hadrian.”¹⁰ Ishtar had a long and prosperous history indeed.

Ishtar in the Bible

Because the Bible is set in a historical and cultural context, it isn’t surprising to find references to Ishtar, or Ashtoreth, in its pages. In fact, shortly after entering the land of Canaan, the Israelites rejected the Lord and worshiped idols of Ashtoreth, called Ashtoreths (Judges 2:13). Sadly, the Israelites repeatedly returned to their idolatrous worship of Ashtoreth (Judges 10:6). Eventually God raised up Samuel, who challenged the people of Israel to give up their Ashtoreths and return to a pure worship of God, a challenge to which the people responded favorably and eagerly (1 Samuel 7:3-4; 12:10). But Ashtoreth’s influence in Israel wasn’t finished. When the Philistines defeated Israel’s army and killed Israel’s king, they displayed King Saul’s armor in their temple to Ashtoreth (1 Samuel 31:10). Later, King Solomon committed a great sin by mingling his worship of the true God with the worship of Ashtoreth and other pagan deities (1 Kings 11:5). Solomon’s actions led others into idolatrous worship of Ashtoreth, bring on God’s judgment (1 Kings

11:33). Some time later, King Josiah desecrated the areas that Solomon had established as places for worshiping Ashtoreth, “the vile goddess of the Sidonians” (2 Kings 23:13). This act of reform stayed the judgment of God for a period of time, but the ancient people of God were slow to learn the lesson that idolatry and the worship of the true and living God don’t mix.

The final connection between Ishtar and the Old Testament is found in the proper name “Esther.” Following the Babylonian Captivity, a Jewish girl named Hadassah was given the name Esther, or Ishtar, by the Persians. “As to the signification of Esther, it is ‘Ishtar,’ the name of the great Babylonian goddess.”¹¹ However, the fact that Hadassah was given the name Ishtar, or Esther, in no way implies that she was a worshiper of that goddess.

The goddess Ishtar, ever-evolving in role and power, stands in stark contrast to the God of the Bible who never changes. All that Ishtar stood for—power, prestige, and pleasure—continue to attract people today. But God will have no rivals. No false god, goddess, idol, or idolatrous desire of any kind should distract us from our pure devotion to the true and living God.

¹ Jacobsen, Thorkild. *The Treasures of Darkness*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976, p. 36.

² Jacobsen, p. 137.

³ Bertman, Stephen. *Handbook to Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 120.

⁴ Kramer, Samuel Noah. *The Sumerians*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 153.

⁵ Kramer, pp. 153-160.

⁶ Bertman, p. 117.

⁷ Unger, Merrill F. *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, p. 412.

⁸ Hart, George. *A Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses*. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986, p. 35.

⁹ Hart, p. 101.

¹⁰ Tenney, Merrill C. *New Testament Times*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965, p. 120.

¹¹ Unger, p. 325.