

# Jot & Tittle

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## The Gods and Goddesses of Canaan

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As the Israelites were anticipating their entrance into the Promised Land, God carefully warned them not to fall prey to the worship of the Canaanite deities (Exodus 21:23-24). In addition to the Old Testament, ancient records have preserved some of the names and characteristics of these pagan gods and goddesses. Their immoral nature, reflected in the lives of their worshipers, proved to be a worthy motivation for the elimination of such worship. Unfortunately, the Israelites at times turned to idolatry and brought on themselves God's judgment. Who were these ancient gods and goddesses of the Canaanites, and what does the Bible say about them?

### *The Canaanite Pantheon*

The discovery of inscribed tablets at the city of Ras Shamra, ancient Ugarit, north of Israel shed a great deal of light on ancient Canaanite religion. The Canaanite pantheon included gods like El, Baal, and Mot as well as the goddesses Anath, Astarte, and Asherah. "Canaanite deities, on the one hand, present remarkable fluidity of personality and function, so that it is often extremely difficult to fix the particular domain of different gods or to define their kinship to

one another."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, scholars have been able to identify many of the relationships and traits of these deities.

El was the primary god of the Canaanite pantheon. ". . . as known throughout the religious texts of Ugarit, El is the first of the major gods and the head of the pantheon. In the epithets that are applied to him, he is seen as the father of the gods and human beings, and as the creator of heaven and earth."<sup>2</sup>

El's wife in the Canaanite pantheon was Asherah. "In Ugarit she was regarded as the wife of El, the chief god. The name 'lady Asherah of the sea' was give to her in a number of documents. . . . Apparently her domain proper was the sea, just as that of her husband El was the heavens."<sup>3</sup>

The children of El and Asherah included Baal, Anath, and Mot.<sup>4</sup> "Their offspring was the fertility deity Baal, sometimes known as Haddu (Hadad), the god of rain and storm. He succeeded El as the reigning king of the Canaanite pantheon, and lived in the lofty mountainous regions of the remote northern heavens."<sup>5</sup>

Anath became the wife of Baal even though she was his sister. "She, like Asherah and Astarte (Ashtaroth), was a goddess of sex and of war. . . . Besides the concepts of fertility associated with this goddess was that of her extreme brutality."<sup>6</sup>

Mot, whose name means death, was the god of the underworld.<sup>7</sup> He engaged in an attempted takeover of Baal's supreme authority, resulting in a family feud between Mot, Baal, and Anath (Anat).

The theme of the Baal and Anat cycle was that of his struggle with Mot, the deity of misfortune, who had challenged the kingship of Baal . . . . The latter descended to the Underworld realm of Mot, and there was slain. When his death was followed by a seven-year cycle of famine, Anat, the consort of Baal, revenged herself by killing Mot, after which she planted his body in the ground. Aliyn Baal then recovered, and a seven-year period of prosperity ensued, followed once more by the resurgence of Mot.<sup>8</sup>

Astarte appears to have been another goddess of fertility and war. "The Hebrew name *Ashtoreth* (plural, Ashtaroth) is rendered as Astarte ('Αστάρτη) in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (e.g., 1 Kings 11:5), and the goddess so named appears to be the

same as the Akkadian Ishtar and the Sumerian Inanna and like them to have aspects of fertility, love, and war.”<sup>9</sup>

### ***The Corrupt Practices of Canaanite Worship***

The Canaanite pantheon was noted for its immorality. “The brutality, lust and abandon of Canaanite mythology is far worse than elsewhere in the Near East at the time. And the astounding characteristic of Canaanite deities, that they had no moral character whatever, must have brought out the worst traits in their devotees and entailed many of the most demoralizing practices of the time, such as sacred prostitution, child sacrifice and snake worship.”<sup>10</sup>

For example, El was a tyrant who shed the blood of his enemies, had multiple wives, seduced women, and killed his own son.<sup>11</sup> Baal worship included child sacrifice (Jeremiah 19:5). Astarte, Asherah, and Anath were each noted for the sexual prowess. In addition, Anath was a violent goddess. “For some unexplained reason she engages in a fierce battle in a plain where she wades in the blood of her enemies up to her knees and thighs.”<sup>12</sup> It’s no wonder that the true and living God warned His people against worshipping the false gods and goddesses of the Canaanites.

### ***Canaanite Gods and Goddess in the Old Testament***

Of these Canaanite gods and goddesses, most prominent in the Old Testament were Baal and Asherah. God warned against the worship of Baal on a number of occasions. He instructed Gideon to tear down an altar to Baal (Judges 6:25). When King Ahab set up an altar and temple to Baal, God sent Elijah to confront Baal worship in Israel (1 Kings 16:30-33; 18:21). King Jehu eliminated Baal worship in Israel in his time (2 Kings 10:28).

Asherah is sometimes mentioned with Baal in the Old Testament (Judges 3:7; 1 Kings 18:19). God instructed His people to destroy her symbols of worship, called “Asherah poles” (Exodus 34:13). King Jehoshaphat did just this during his reign in Judah (2 Chronicles 19:3). The prophet Micah warned that God would judge His people and destroy their Asherah poles (Micah 5:14).

The Old Testament also refers to the goddess Astarte (Ashtoreth). The Israelites’ engagement in the worship of Astarte angered God enough to turn His people over to their enemies (Judges 2:12-14; 10:6-7). Samuel convinced the Israelites to abandon Astarte (1 Samuel 7:3-4). Later, King Solomon reintroduced Astarte worship in Israel (1 Kings 11:5, 33). King Josiah eventually destroyed Solomon’s idols of Astarte (2 Kings 23:13).

The seduction of false worship carries through to our day. Someone has stated that we become like the gods we worship. The ancient Canaanites worshipped immoral gods and goddesses, and themselves became immoral, worthy of divine judgment. Those who worship the true and holy God of the Bible will become more like Him, people who love truth and live holy lives for Him.

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<sup>1</sup> Unger, Merrill F. *Archaeology and the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954, p. 169.

<sup>2</sup> Finegan, Jack. *Myth and Mystery: An Introduction to the Pagan Religions of the Biblical World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989, p. 138.

<sup>3</sup> Davis, John J. “Asherah” in *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*. E. M. Blaiklock and R. K. Harrison, Eds. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983, p. 74.

<sup>4</sup> Davis, p. 75.

<sup>5</sup> Harrison, R. K. *Old Testament Times*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970, p. 167.

<sup>6</sup> Davis, John J. “Anath (Anat)” in *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*. E. M. Blaiklock and R. K. Harrison, Eds. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983, pp. 27-28.

<sup>7</sup> Finegan, p. 144.

<sup>8</sup> Harrison, p. 167.

<sup>9</sup> Finegan, p. 133.

<sup>10</sup> Unger, p. 175.

<sup>11</sup> Unger, p. 171.

<sup>12</sup> Finegan, p. 141.