

Jot & Tittle

A Journal Devoted to the Study of the Inspired Word of God

July 2000

Baal and Beelzebub

by Dana L. Goodnough

Ancient Baal worship was an ongoing temptation to God's people in the Old Testament era. But Baal also has a New Testament connection, one relevant to Christians even today. In order to understand this connection it is essential to review the biblical references to Baal, examine the historical data about Baal worship, and trace the name of Baal to the New Testament.

What the Bible Says about Baal

When the Israelites left Egypt and entered Canaan, they were immediately faced with the religious and cultural practices of the Canaanites. Among those practices was the worship of Baal, the chief Canaanite deity. Shortly after Joshua's conquest of Canaan, the Israelites began to fall into Baal worship. Instead of influencing the pagan society around them, God's people became the one's to be influenced by that society. Judges 2:11-13 states that the Israelites provoked God to anger by forsaking Him and serving Baal. Even after Gideon came on the scene and destroyed the altar to Baal (Judges 6:25-32) the Israelites returned to this pagan form of worship (Judges 8:33-34; 10:6).

Later, the prophet Samuel effectively moved Israel to abandon Baal worship and return to God (1 Samuel 7:3-4). But Baal

worship again reached prominence in Israel over a hundred years later when King Ahab married a pagan Phoenician princess, Jezebel (1 Kings 16:31-32). It was during Ahab's infatuation with Baal worship that Elijah challenged the 450 prophets of Baal to a contest. According to 1 Kings 18 the true God showed His power in a miraculous way, igniting the altar and silencing the prophets of Baal.

In spite of this great victory, Baal worship persisted in Israel. Some of Israel and Judah's leaders attempted to destroy Baal worship (Joram – 2 Kings 3:2; Jehu – 2 Kings 10:18; Jehoiada – 2 Kings 11:18; Josiah – 2 Kings 23:4-5), while others elevated Baal worship (Athaliah – 2 Chronicles 24:7; Ahaz – 2 Chronicles 28:2; Manasseh – 2 Chronicles 33:3). This love affair with Baal, described as spiritual adultery in the Scriptures, persisted until the time of Israel's captivity. In fact, it was one of the primary reasons God sent His people into captivity (2 Kings 17:16; Jeremiah 9:14). Three of the writing prophets accused Israel of worshipping Baal, warning about God's judgment (Jeremiah 7:9-10; Hosea 2:13; Zephaniah 1:4).

Baal in Ancient Canaanite Culture

The name "Baal" was a common name for the chief god of the Phoenicians and Canaanites. It means "lord" or "master" and referred at times to the owner of a house.ⁱ In ancient times it was not uncommon to associate a certain deity with specific towns or locations. For this reason Baal is sometimes referred to as the Baal of a certain place, such as Baal-Peor (Numbers 25:3). Often the Bible refers to Baal in the plural (Baals or Baalim), accounting for this localizing tendency of ancient people (Judges 3:7).

In ancient Canaanite culture, Baal was considered to be one of several members of a pantheon. He was the son of El and the consort of Asherah.ⁱⁱ Baal wore several hats over the centuries. In Canaan's agrarian society it makes sense that their chief deity would control the rain, the crops, and fertility. Baal was the god of these natural forces. He was also the god of thunder and lightning.ⁱⁱⁱ While Baal was often represented in human form, sometimes holding a lightning bolt, as the god of fertility he was also represented as a

bull. The idols that the Canaanites and the Israelites worshipped probably reflected this diversity in Baal's appearance.

Apart from the Bible, details of ancient Canaanite religion have come to light through the discovery of the Ras Shamra tablets at ancient Ugarit from 1928-1960. These cuneiform tablets include the epic myths of Baal and the other gods of the Canaanites.^{iv} According to these myths Baal, also known as Hadad, engages in battle with Mot, the god of death and the underworld. Mot defeats Baal, reflecting the climate patterns of Canaan that include the dry, lifeless summer months. But the myth of the Baal cycle describes the revival of Baal at the end of the dry season to again bring rain on the land.^v

Baal worship was reprehensible to God and to those who were truly God's people. Baal worship denied the fact that God is the one who brings rain and prosperity (Matthew 5:45). Furthermore, the ways in which Baal worshippers attempted to appease Baal stood in stark contrast to the way in which God's people were to worship the true and living God. "Worship of Baal was practiced with the burning of incense (2 Kings 23:5), upon occasion by the prophets' outcry and the cutting of themselves with swords and lances (1 Kings 18:26), and by the burning of children in fire as burnt offerings to Baal (Jer.19:5)."^{vi} Human sacrifice was particularly detestable to God (Jeremiah 32:35).^{vii} Obviously, any connection with Baal would be an insult to God's people.

Baal, Beelzebub, and Jesus Christ

In 2 Kings 1:1-17 Elijah condemned King Ahaziah for consulting Baal-Zebub instead of seeking the true God. The Hebrew word "zebub" refers to flies, imitating the sound a fly makes (compare our word "buzz").^{viii} Baal-Zebub, then, is the representation of Baal as the "lord of flies". As the god of nature, Baal was even able to control these persistent pests. By the time of the New Testament, Beelzebub, also called Beelzeboul, came to be considered the lord or prince of demons. Beelzebub became another name for Satan.

When Jesus ministered throughout Galilee, the Pharisees refused to account for Jesus' miraculous powers as having their origin in God. They, therefore, attributed Jesus' works to Beelzebub, a charge that Jesus quickly dismissed (Matthew 12:24-29; Mark 3:22-27; Luke 11:15-20). What an insult, to be accused of working under Satan's power or as a tool of that detestable god, Baal!

But Jesus also said His followers would suffer the same insult (Matthew 10:25). When Christians take a stand for truth, a stand for Christ, they too will be accused by the world of belonging to Beelzebub. Christians can either influence their society, at the risk of rejection and insult, or allow society to influence them, at the risk of grieving God. The choice is clear. But the decision, after all, really isn't that difficult.

ⁱ Unger, Merrill F. *Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966. pp. 112, 413.

ⁱⁱ Unger, pp. 412-413.

ⁱⁱⁱ Schoville, Keith N. "Canaanites and Amorites" in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*. Edited by Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994. pp.171-172.

^{iv} Blaiklock, E. M. and Harrison, R. K., editors. *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983. p.460.

^v Schoville, pp.172-173.

^{vi} Finegan, Jack. *Myth and Mystery: An Introduction to the Pagan Religions of the Biblical World*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989. p.133.

^{vii} Schoville, pp.170-171, cites evidence of human sacrifice as a part of Canaanite worship.

^{viii} Koehler, Ludwig and Baumgartner, Walter. *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958. p.248.