

Rival Gods and Goddessesⁱ

Ashtoreth - Ashtoreth was a popular goddess in several cultures. Her worship attracted the Israelites shortly after their settlement in Canaan. At the heart of this pagan religion was the worship of the fertility or fecundity "forces/features" that characterized the animate aspects of the created world. Ashtoreth's popularity among the Phoenicians and other northwest Semitic peoples was long-standing.

The major confrontation between Ashtoreth and Yahweh took place during the days of Eli, Samuel, and Saul. Particularly after the defeat on Mount Gilboa, the people of Israel faced an almost imponderable theological dilemma. Instructions were sent throughout the land of the Philistines to proclaim victory over Israel and their God Yahweh. The proclamation was to be made in the temples of their idols and among the people (1 Sam 31:6-10): the Baals and Ashtoreths were mightier than the Lord! Ashtoreth's influence was finally discredited by Josiah, who "cleaned house" by destroying the shrines erected by Solomon. He made clear that Yahweh was the only and true God for the people of

Baal - Baal the most significant male deity of the Canaanites and his consort Asherah were the most alluring deities confronting Israel in the promised land following the conquest. The numerous references to Baal in the Old Testament indicate his attractiveness and influence on the Israelites. The Book of Judges chronicles the numerous times the people fell to the temptation to worship Baal. During the time of Ahab and Jezebel Baal was declared the official national deity. A temple and hundreds of officiants were established for Baal's worship in Samaria (1 Kings 16:29-34). A final chapter concerning Baal worship was written during the reigns of Jehu and Josiah, when the southern kingdom and its capital were purged of the worship of Baal (2 Kings 10; 23:1-30).

Baal's name derives from the Semitic word ba'lu, meaning "lord." He was assumed to fulfill several significant roles by the peoples who worshiped him. As god of the storm the roar of his voice in the heavens was the thunder of the sky. He was the god who both created and granted fertility. He was the deity slain by enemies who thus fell into the hands of Death. During the time that Baal was under the control of Death, the vegetation wilted or ceased and procreation stopped. He was the god of justice, feared by evildoers.

The Book of Kings recounts that Jezebel used the plan of the Baal temple in Sidon for the construction of a similar temple in Samaria. Ahab agreed with her to make Baal worship the royal religion of the northern kingdom (1 Kings 16:29-31). Baal, like Asherah, was also worshiped at high places.

The cult of Baal involved the offering of many animal sacrifices. Priests would officiate on behalf of the persons presenting sacrificial animals to the god. Some of the northern kingdom rulers even "made their sons pass through fire" offering their own sons as sacrifices to Baal. "Holy prostitutes" both male and female were available to worshipers, encouraging the fertility of both land and people.

Baal-zebul, Beel-zebul. Phoenician god worshiped at Ekron in Old Testament times (2 Kings 1:2-16). Original meaning of the name is unknown but the Old Testament form, Baal-zebul, means "Lord of the flies"; in Jesus' day this god is derisively called Beel-zebul (NIV Beelzebul), "lord of dung, " and identified with Satan, the ruler of demons (Matt 12:24). Jesus' enemies accused him of casting out demons by invoking Beel-zebul (Mark 3:22) and even of being his embodiment (Matt 10:25). Jesus, rejecting this calumny, pointed out that the expulsion of demons was Satan's defeat, heralding the arrival of God's kingdom (Luke 11:20-22).

Chemosh – Chemosh was the primary national god of the Moabites and Ammonites. The Moabites are called the "people of Chemosh" in the passage of Scripture that details the travels of the Israelites through Edom, Moab, and Ammon, (Num 21:21-32). During the reign of Solomon worship of Chemosh, along with that of other pagan gods, was established and promoted in the city of Jerusalem. Jeremiah specifically condemns the worship of Chemosh (chap. 38). The prophet focuses on the god's impotence by showing him going into captivity with his priests and people.

Dagon: Dagon was the highly venerated national deity of the Philistines. Each city of the Philistine pentapolis had its temple for the worship of this god. The temple statuary portraying Dagon was characterized by an upper human torso, with the lower torso of a fish. The major cultic rite in Dagon's worship was human sacrifice. When the Philistines captured and overcame Samson, the five Philistine cities planned a great celebration. Dagon had delivered their enemy into their hands (Judges 16:23-24)! The Philistines called for a sacrifice to their god. Presumably they intended to offer Samson as a human holocaust/offering. Dagon was, however, defeated by Yahweh.

Dagon haunted the reigns of both Saul and David. The Israelites relied on their theological understanding that Yahweh was mightier than Dagon but, unfortunately, with an inexcusable naiveté. When they brought the ark of the covenant from Shiloh and took it into battle against the Philistines, it did not result in their victory. However, the presence of the ark in Philistine hands led to the challenge to their god, Dagon, and the return of the ark to the Israelites. Throughout the narratives relating the encounters between the people of Israel and the Philistines, there persists an underlying theological dilemma.

Which deity is greater and therefore the one to worship and serve: the Lord God or Dagon?

Milcom: Milcom, called the "abomination" of the Ammonites, was apparently the chief deity of the Ammonites or Moabites. The "abomination" label seems to convey both the detestable aspect of origin and of the worship of Lot's descendants. Solomon built a worship facility for this foreign deity (see 1 Kings 11:5 1 Kings 11:7 1 Kings 11:33). Milcom is sometimes identified with Molech, but this is incorrect since the two gods were worshiped individually.

Molech. Moloch was a general name associated with a variety of Canaanite gods. It had a bull's head and human arms. It was also another "abomination" of the Ammonites. Solomon also built a high place for this god in Jerusalem. The worship of this god was particularly odious, as it required human sacrifice.

Queen of Heaven. Jeremiah was directed by God to speak out the Lord's disapproval of Israel's worship of the "Queen of Heaven" (7:18 ; 44:17-19). This female astral deity was particularly worshiped by the women in Judah and Egypt during the time of Jeremiah. Children were gathering firewood; women were busily kneading dough for cakes to be offered to this queen. The details and activity suggest that the Canaanite goddess Astarte was the deity motivating the people in Jerusalem to such frenzied worship activity.

Tammuz. Tammuz was a Syrian and Phoenician god of fertility, venerated in the worship of idols and elaborate, extreme rituals. The Greeks adopted Tammuz as one of their prominent deities, changing his name to Adonis. Ezekiel lists the worship of Tammuz as one of the abominations in God's sight (8:1-18) that was being practiced in the temple precincts in Jerusalem. The chanting of a litany of woes (or, singing a song, of lamentation see Ezek 8:14) shows that the cult of Tammuz was active in Jerusalem.

ⁱ Bakers Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology