Prior to the twentieth century, the Old Testament and statements from later Greek-writing authors were the main sources for studying Canaanite religion. However, the Bible takes a polemical stance against Canaanites and their religion, and the accounts in Greek are from a later time period and not always reliable. Important discoveries of texts and artifacts in the past century have produced a great deal of new information on Canaanite religion. The Ugaritic texts, in particular, have contributed much, even though Ugarit is north of the region of Canaan proper. Texts from north Syrian cities such as Ebla and Emar have also provided greater information on West Semitic religion. Unfortunately, there is still little written evidence from Canaan itself. The picture of Canaanite religion in the late-second millennium thus relies on material not specifically coming from the Canaanites, and the information from the first millennium is somewhat fragmented, because new nation-states developed national deities and differentiation in regional practices. This overview is of necessity brief and general.

The Old Testament portrays Canaanite religious practices as antithetical to prophetic teachings and hazardous to God's covenant people. Thus, the Israelites were instructed to destroy all evidence of Canaanite cultic activity so it would not spiritually destroy them. One of many biblical passages warning that religious practice influences faith is: “Take heed to thyself, lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land whither thou goest, lest it be for a snare in the midst of thee: But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and...”
Cut down their groves: For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Exod 34:12–14).

Given this depiction, it may seem odd that many scholars assert Israelite religion grew out of the roots of Canaanite religion. Rather than seeing many Israelites falling prey to aberrant Canaanite practices, they suggest Canaanite religion was early Israelite religion, and that biblical prophetic views were originally minority ones that eventually became the norm in the post-exilic period. This developmental view of Israelite religion is not in harmony with Restoration doctrine.

**MAJOR FEATURES OF CANAANITE RELIGION**

**PAN THEISM:** Like other ancient Near Eastern peoples, the Canaanites were polytheistic, believing in and worshiping a number of deities, especially ones conceived of as having power over life, fertility, rain, and warfare. The chief Canaanite deity was El. Ugaritic texts depict El as the old, wise, creator god. At Ugarit, Athirat/Asherah was the consort of El and, as such, the mother of the gods. In Canaan she was associated with lion and tree imagery. A stylized wooden tree or pole was one of her symbols in Israel. Due to these associations, the Septuagint, followed by the KJV, rendered the Hebrew noun *asherah* as “grove(s)” (e.g., Deut 7:5; Judg 6:25). The Bible and Israel-ite inscriptions indicate at least some Israelites worshipped Asherah and probably conceived of her as Jehovah’s consort.

Baal was the Canaanite storm god, associated with lightning and rain and thus with fertility. There are numerous biblical references to Israelites worshipping Baal. Other Canaanite deities include Ashtoreth/Astarte, a consort of Baal; Anat, a goddess of war; Yam, the god of the sea and chaos; Mot, god of the underworld; and Dagan, presumably a grain god, adopted by the Philistines (1 Sam 5:1–7; Hebrew *dagon*).

**RELIGIOUS PRACTICES:** Functionally similar to the Israelites in some ways, the Canaanites prayed to their gods, celebrated holy days, built temples, had priests, offered animals and agricultural sacrifices (their sacrificial terminology shares similarities with that in the Hebrew Bible), burned incense, and practiced various forms of divination to determine the will of the gods. However, biblical prophets opposed a number of Canaanite religious practices. In Canaan, the productivity of the land depended on rain, not river irrigation. Good pasturage and bountiful harvests were necessary to sustain animals and people. Life was often challenging, and the Bible reports a number of droughts and subsequent famines. This helps explain why Baal, god of storms, was so popular in Canaan.

Canaanites worshipped Baal and other deities at “high places” as well as at formal temples. A “high place” (Hebrew *bamab*) was a local, often open-air, shrine near a city; it had an altar, priests, and other cultic features, such as standing
Canaanite cultic objects from Hazor. These basalt objects include a man with an inverted crescent on his chest, seated on a chair; nine standing stones (massaebot), ranging in height from nine to twenty-five inches, the center one of which depicts two arms stretching upward toward a crescent surrounding a disk, and a stone offering table that was found lying in front of these standing stones. A lion is to the right of this photograph. The shrine in which these objects were found dates to the thirteenth century B.C. Similar masseboth have been found throughout the land of Israel. Joshua 11:19-21 recounts that the Israelites destroyed Hazor.

Used by permission, Zondervan/BibleLandPictures.com

stones and an 'asherab (a symbol of Asherah). The Israelites worshipped Jehovah at their own high places for much of their history in the land of Israel (e.g., 1 Sam 9:19, 25; 1 Kgs 3:5), but king Josiah eventually shut these down for religious and political reasons (2 Kgs 23:5-9). Thus, a high place was not inherently "bad." It depended on how it was used.

Similarly, the Israelites were commanded to destroy Canaanite "standing stones" or "pillars" (Hebrew massaebot; KJV often translates this as "images"); e.g., Deut 12:3; 2 Kgs 17:10). But the Bible reports Israelite ancestors had utilized such stones in worshipping Jehovah (Gen 35:15; Exod 24:4). It was thus the function of the object and to whom it was dedicated, not the object itself, that was objectionable. Also, massaebot were used to commemorate vows or religious experiences, not just to represent deities.

The use of idols and figurines to represent deities was common throughout the world of the Old Testament, including Canaan. Visual depictions of El, Baal, Asherah, and other Canaanite deities have been discovered. The presence of female figurines at Israelite sites is usually considered evidence for the Israelite worship of Asherah, although a few scholars view these as "prayers in clay," a female figure symbolizing the desire for fertility and lactation (and thus a type of sympathetic magic), but not representing a deity.

One Canaanite practice routinely sensationalized in sacred or cultic prostitution. Some scholars question the existence of this practice because the West Semitic evidence for it is limited and inconclusive. There is no real evidence of cultic prostitution in the Ugaritic texts. The Hebrew word qedeshah, which occurs in only three biblical passages (Gen 38:21-22; Deut 23:17 [Heb 23:18]; Hos 4:14), seems to derive from the lexical root q-d-sh, "holy," and is now often translated "temple prostitute" (KJV renders it as "harlot/whore"). Scholars who accept the historicity of cultic prostitution explain that such women were devoted, giving themselves to men and for the worship of a female deity, and that cultic prostitution was primarily to raise money for a temple, but not religiously symbolic. There is still much uncertainty about this practice, but the oft-repeated view that men had intercourse with temple prostitutes to encourage the gods to guarantee fertility on earth no longer seems credible. The accuracy of later claims by Herodotus and other Greek authors of temple prostitution in Mesopotamia and in Phoenicia and its Mediterranean colonies is much debated.

Another practice at odds with prophetic teaching was the practice of human sacrifice. We do not know how often or under what circumstances humans were sacrificed by Canaanites or Israelites, although passages such as 2 Kings 3:26-27 suggest it did occur in times of extreme stress. Deuteronomy 18:10 states, "There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire" (see also Lev 18:21). This practice seems to have involved burning children.
bodies in sacrifice (not just dedicating them to God, as some have claimed) and was particularly associated with the Valley of Hinnom, southwest of Jerusalem (e.g., 2 Kgs 16:3; 21:6). The Lord claimed, “They [Judahites] have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my heart” (Jer 7:31).

Although the Israelites show strong connections with family heritage and honoring their dead, many ancient Near Eastern peoples, including the people at Ugarit, gave food and other offerings to or for their deceased loved ones and sometimes invoked their help in divining the future. This activity not only memorialized but somehow provided for the spirits of the dead and encouraged them to be helpful, not harmful, to their mortal posterity. Such cults of the dead were not within the parameters of biblical religion.

**Terra-cotta cultic stand from Taanach, Israel.** This hollow cult stand, about twenty-one inches tall, provided support for a bowl utilized to receive offerings. The lowest tier of the front of this stand portrays a female deity (Astarte?) holding the heads of lions. The next tier up has an empty space (intentional) between two cherubim with female heads. The third tier up depicts two ibex nibbling on a tree (a common symbol of the fertility goddess Asherah), flanked by two lions. The fourth, and top, tier depicts a young bull (or horse?) under a sun disk, with voluted columns flanking the scene. Many such Canaanite and Israelite cult stands have been found, but the rich iconography on this one has produced much debate, especially about what is intended by the second and fourth tiers (counting from the bottom). Another important question is whether this specific cult stand is Canaanite or Israelite. It dates to the tenth century, the time of the Israelite united monarchy. Some scholars think tiers two (empty) and four (young bull) were intended to represent Yahweh / Jehovah.

Used by permission, Zev Radovan/BibleLandPictures.com

**Female terra-cotta pillar-based figures from Judah.** With their plain, pillarred bodies, large breasts, and separately molded heads, these three figurines are typical of hundreds found in ancient Judah, dating from the eighth to early-sixth centuries B.C. Thought by most scholars to represent the fertility goddess Asherah, other scholars view these figurines as amulets that represented women’s desire for fertility and lactation.

Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Used by permission, Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY