The Nature of the Struggle
Between the Israelite and Canaanite Religions

Bruce Satterfield
Department of Religious Education,
Brigham Young University-Idaho

One of the basic themes threaded throughout the Old Testament narrative centers around the clash between the Canaanite and Israelite religions. From the very outset, the religion of Israel was in direct opposition to that of the Canaanites. Embedded in the Mosaic laws given from Mt. Sinai and during the wanderings are several polemical statements directing the children of Israel not to bow down to the gods of the Canaanites “nor serve them, nor do after their works” after they had crossed the Jordan and entered into the land of Canaan but the children of Israel were to “utterly overthrow them, and quite break down their images” (Ex. 23:23,24; 34:11-17; Lev. 18:2-5; Num. 33:51-56; Deut. 7:1-5). The opposition to the Canaanites and their religion was not merely confined to a total rejection and destruction of the Canaanite people. Nor was this opposition confined to the era of Moses but polemical statements and actions were made both before as well as long after the Mosaic tradition began.

The central issue of this on-running theme lies in Israel’s negligence to obey the Lord’s commands regarding the Canaanites and their religion. Not only did the Israelites fail to destroy the Canaanites as a whole but there was to a large extent a wholesale adoption among the Israelites of the Canaanite ways and practices including their religion. The story of Gideon and the breaking down of the altar to Ba’al well illustrates this (see Judges 6).

Though the Old Testament prophets and historians from Abraham to Jeremiah continually reviled against the Canaanite influence upon the Israelites, nowhere in the Old Testament narrative can the Biblical reader get a clear idea of how, what and why the Canaanites worshipped the way they did or why that type of worship attracted the Israelites.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly review what has been learned from modern research about the religion of the Canaanites. Then an attempt will be made to give plausible explanations as to why this religion became so attractive to the Israelites.
upon entering the land of Canaan. “A knowledge of Canaanite religion is an
indispensable prerequisite for the proper understanding of the Old Testament”
(Gaster, 1950: p.139).

**Religious Attitudes of the Ancient Near East**

Cyril Eastwood, in writing of the origin and development of the religions of
ancient peoples, said: “There is no doubt that their occupations shaped their
religion. The hunters had their distinctive ceremonies, so had the farmers”
(Eastwood, 1964: p.7). Among no peoples could this statement be truer than that of
the Canaanites for their religion was based primarily upon agriculture and those
forces that controlled the elements essential to the productivity of the land. It is
important, then, that any study of the Canaanite religion should first begin with a
look at the agrarian world out of which it grew.

Agriculture techniques in the ancient Near East were of two types,
rain-agriculture and irrigation-agriculture. Along the Nile valley as well as along the
Tigris-Euphrates river basin, irrigation-agriculture was the rule. Those people who
lived along these rivers depended almost entirely upon the waters brought by the
rivers from the high country to water their crops. Since these were major rivers,
these people seldom experienced the fear of not having enough water. Unlike those
people who trusted the rivers to bring their water, those living along the Levant coast
(Syria-Palestine), Asia Minor and upper Mesopotamia had to depend entirely upon
the rains to bring them water for their crops. The rains in these areas are not entirely
predictable, consequently, the peoples in these areas often experienced the pangs of
famine.

Because of this dichotomy, the religion of those who lived in rain-agriculture
areas differed somewhat from those who lived along the river valleys. To those who
resided in the rain-agriculture areas, the forces that controlled the weather became
their gods, for they were utterly dependent upon those powers for their survival.
G. E. Wright has observed that these people believed that nature was

alive and full of strange forces, difficult for him to control. Basically,
therefore, his religion was a combination of faith, magic, and superstition.
Life was a desperately serious matter, and it was imperative that he develop
ways and means of controlling the forces about him. Otherwise, he could not
live, let alone prosper. His religion, accordingly, was centered around a
variety of acts, controlled and regulated by long lists of rules, and designed
to turn the attention of the gods to him that he might prosper his ways. There
was little in his religion that might make him a better man. Society had
developed its control or laws, and these were given religious sanction but the primary attention was toward these ritualistic, outward acts which would make the gods more favorable to him (Wright, 1957: p.112).

**The Religion of the Canaanites**

This, then, was the religious attitude of the ancient Near East. It is in this mode that we find the religion of the Canaanites. Living along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, the Canaanite farmer waited patiently for the cool winds coming off the sea to bring him the needed rains for his crops. These rains, when they came, would begin somewhere around the end of October and continued on and off until around the end of April. But as Baly points out, the rainy season, unlike summer which is “extraordinarily regular,” is by contrast “completely unpredictable. No one ever knows when it will start and end, how much rain there will be, or how it will be distributed throughout the season” (Baly, 1974: p.44,47). This type of unpredictability can be very hazardous to a farmer who depends entirely upon rains for his crops. To deal with the whims and unpredictability of the weather, the Canaanites, who, like most peoples of the ancient Near East, personified the forces of nature, built a religion around a series of mythical ritual acts by which they thought they might be able to coerce these supernatural beings or “gods” into dealing kindly with them. These ritual acts were performed in Canaanite temples and sanctuaries and were by their very nature sensual and erotic. It was to these ritual acts that the Israelite prophets hurled their blistering rebukes of condemnation. Consequently, it is to here that we must look deeper to see what it was that angered the Lord and his prophets. The Bible, however, is nearly silent on these ritual acts. We must therefore turn to other materials to find satisfactory answers to what these rituals were.

**The Discoveries of Ras Shamra: Ancient Ugarit**

Much has been learned about the Canaanite religion from the chance find of ancient Ugarit, an important Canaanite city located on the upper end of the Levantine or Syrian coast. A Syrian peasant farmer plowing his fields adjacent to the modern town of Ras Shamra struck a stone that was the shape of a tombstone. He reported the find to the archaeological authorities in Beirut. Soon the site was looked at and determined to be a site of major importance. The site was excavated in the late 1920's and early 1930's. On one end of the ancient city, the acropolis, the excavations produced two temples, one to Ba’al and one to El. In between the two temples there was discovered a rectory that contained hundreds of tablets, some of which have produced our first glimpses into the mythology surrounding the ritual acts performed in the Canaanite sanctuaries. These tablets are of
prime importance in our quest for understanding the Canaanite religion. It will be necessary then for us to focus our attention upon these tablets.

The Gods of Ugarit
From the tablets discovered at Ugarit, we get a detailed picture of the gods of the Ugaritic people. The Ugaritic texts give us a more or less complete picture of the main gods of the Ugarit including what each god represented.

The Chief Gods of the Ugaritic Pantheon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>God</th>
<th>Role</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>BA’AL</strong></td>
<td>God of Rain and Fertility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ANAT</strong></td>
<td>Goddess of War and Love (Ba’al’s Wife)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>YAM</strong></td>
<td>God of all Waters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MOT</strong></td>
<td>God of Death and Underworld Represents the Sterility of Land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ASHTORETH</strong></td>
<td>Goddess of Fertility and Productivity</td>
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**EL** The head god in the Ugaritic pantheon is El yet his role tends to be more passive in the Ugaritic mythology. He lives away from the other gods in the “farthermost reaches of the north.” Though passive role he plays, his word must be given before certain activities are upon.

**ASHERAH** She is the wife/consort of El. For reasons that are not clear she is associated with the sea and is often called “Asherah of the Sea.” In the OT we have a number of allusions to Asherah though often her name is hidden in the KJV by the translation “grove” instead of Asherah. It might be that in the mythology followed by the Canaanites in Palestine, Asherah and Anat had reversed roles. It is apparent that the Canaanite mythology was not uniform amongst each city but that different groups had their own version of approximately the same stories.

**BA’AL** Ba’al is by far the most active deity in the Ugaritic pantheon. He is known by several names in the myths: “Lord of the Earth”, “Eternal to all generations”, “Lord of Heaven”, and “Rider of the Clouds”. The last epithet, “Rider of the Clouds”, is most descriptive of Ba’al as he is the god of rain. His voice is the thunder. To the Canaanites, Ba’al was the god of fertility. Without Ba’al, the land became arid and sterile, good for nothing. At Ugarit there was found a large stela of Ba’al depicting him as the storm god. In his right hand which is held high, Ba’al
holds a thunderbolt as a spear. He stands above the water depicted by wavy lines proving his superiority over the life giving substance.

**ANAT**  Anat was Ba’al’s consort or wife. She was a goddess of love and war. She was also a goddess of fertility much like Ashtoreth. The Bible mentions almost nothing of Anat (except in place names only) which would seem odd since she figures so highly in the Ugaritic mythology. Ashtoreth, who is seldom mentioned in the existing texts of Ugarit is mentioned quite frequently along with Ba’al. The reason for this is unclear, however, G. E. Wright gives a highly plausible explanation: “It is probable that among the Canaanites there was never unanimous agreement as to which of these goddesses was the wife of Ba’al. At Ras Shamra it was Anat. In the Old Testament, however, Ashtoreth is customarily associated with Ba’al, so we may take it that Palestinian Canaanites believed that she was Ba’al’s wife (notes Judges 2:13, 10:6; 1 Sam. 7:4, 12:10). Jezebel from Tyre, however, may have had still another idea, namely, that his wife was Asherah! At least, so we might judge from the association of the two in Jezebel’s worship (1 Kings 18:19)” (Wright, 1957: p.110).

**YAM**  Yam is the god of the waters: the seas, rivers, lakes, etc. The myths refer to him as “Lord of the Sea” and “Prince of the Stream”. As ruler of the waters, Yam is unruly and uncontrollable. He wishes control over all the land and all gods. Consequently, to the Canaanite, Yam is a threat to their crops, for too much rain and water brings floods which ruin both ground and crops. Obviously Yam is a power to be contended with.

**MOT**  Mot is the god of drought, sterility, and death. His very name means “Death.” He lives in the sun-scorched deserts or wastelands, the region of the underworld. One looks to Mot as the cause of torrid summer heat. He is the ultimate enemy of Ba’al.

**ASHTORETH**  Ashtoreth plays a minor role in the Ugaritic literature but both in Egypt and Palestine she played a major role, over-shadowing Anat. She, like Anat, is a goddess of war and sexual love. In the Old Testament she is also known by her greek name, Astarte. She has been connected with the planet Venus and consequently was probably worshipped as an astral deity in certain cults.

**MYTHS OF THE FERTILITY CULT**

Having become acquainted with the Ugaritic pantheon, let us now look into the myths which were the basis of worship in the fertility cults. By the term “myth,” I follow the definition given by John Gray who defines myth as the “spoken
counterpart of ritual actions and has the purpose of making those explicit to the participants in the rites as acts of imitative magic doubly effective” (Gray, 1957: p.20). It should be known however that there is much debate among scholars as to whether the myths of Ugarit were actually used as the “spoken counterpart of ritual actions” or whether they were used in some other fashion. At any rate, certain of the tablets make it quite clear that the myths were at least read aloud or used in some ceremonial fashion for appearing on some tablets are references given to the assembled body that certain lines and stanzas should be repeated a number of times by the “company and by the singers of the assembly” (Gray, 1957: p.102).

There were many myths discovered at Ugarit but by far the most illuminating is the so-called Ball cycle. The basis of this myth is the fertility of the land. According to Gordon, the ancient Canaanites

wanted nothing (not even blessings such as rain and crops) out of season. What they dread was the failure of rain and crops in season. They desired the harvest of barley, wheat, tree fruits, olives, and grapes, each at its normal time. Fertility of the soil is an around-the-year affair without any sterile season in Canaan. Only the component segments of Canaanite fertility (i.e., the successive harvests) are seasonal” (Gordan, 1961: p. 184).

The myth was not only used to “explain the world and how it works” as Wright suggests (Wright, 1957: p.111) but it was also used as we shall see as a means to coerce the gods personified to baring about the desired predictability of the seasons with the accompanying rains and harvest times. Consequently the Ba’al cycle is set up and ordered to show how the different seasons are brought about or how they could be brought about it the participants could coax the appropriate gods to bring it about.

The Ba’al cycle seems to be divided into three episodes. The first episode deals with Ba’al subjugating the unruly waters. The second episode sees Ba’al constructing his own palace (temple) from which the rains come from. The third deals with Ba’al battling with Death and losing the battle thus bringing aridity and sterility upon the land. From Death Ba’al is brought back to life bringing with him the rains and fertility. The next few pages will describe this myth in detail.

**FIRST EPISODE - The Battle for Sovereignty**

The Autumn Cycle

The first episode centers around a conflict between Ba’al and Yam. The conflict arises out of the desire of both to control and possess the earth. In Palestine, towards the end of October the dry summer months give way to cool, rainy months. The first
rains are “continuous and torrential and the whole world seems blotted out in a
smashing tumult of water” (Baly, 1974: p.48). To the Canaanite mind, Yam was
gaining control over all the land and all seemed to be doomed. Because of floods
there would be no crops. No crops meant famine. However, Ba’al had the power
and ability to gain control over the waters by subduing Yam. To have Ba’al as “Lord
of the Earth” meant that there would be order and consistency in the rains and
fertility. This myth was an attempt to explain this phenomena.

In the opening scene we find all the gods gathered together at a large banquet with
El in charge. It is apparent from the texts that El “favors Prince Yam” (Pritchard,
1969: p.129) in the battle for sovereignty for El fears the power of Yam. To the
“assembled body” Yam sends two messengers, saying,

El, give up the one you are hiding,
the one the masses are hiding;
give up Ba’al and his powers,
the son of Dagon: I will assume his inheritance. (Coogan,
1978: p.86)

The gods assembled, El included, “lowered their heads to the top of
their knees, and onto their princely seats” (Coogan, 1978: p.86). Ba’al, who is
“standing by El” (Coogan, 1978: p.86) rebukes the assembly for cowardice and says,
“I’ll answer the messengers of Yam” (Pritchard, 1969: p.130). Then Ba’al openly
confronts Yam in battle. However, Ba’al does not go unprotected. With the help of
Kothar-wa-Hasis, the god of “all forms of craftsmanship, from construction through
metallurgy,” (Albright, 1968: p.135), who makes for Ba’al “two clubs,” Ba’al smites
Yam between the eyes.

Sea stumbled;
he fell to the ground;
his joints shook;
his frame collapsed. (Coogan, 1978: p.89)

Finally, Yam says, “Lo, I am as good as dead! Surely, Ba’al is King!” (Gaster, 1977:
p.171). Ba’al has conquered the unruly waters and becomes “Lord of all the Earth.”

SECOND EPISODE - A Palace is Built for Ba’al

The Winter Cycle
Now that Ba’al has gained his “eternal kingdom,” he must now have a palace of his own to abide in. With the help of Anat, Ba’al secures permission from El to build a palace to reign from. After El gives his permission, Asherah exclaims:

Now, too, the seasons of his rains
will Ba’al observe,
The seasons...with snow;
He will peal his thunder in the clouds,
Flashing his lightnings to the earth. (Pritchard: 1969, p.133)

Kothar-wa-Hasis is commissioned to build the palace. Ba’al and Kothar get together to discuss the plans for the palace, and Kothar tries to persuade Ba’al to put in a window in the palace. Ba’al at first refuses but after a large banquet and a successful military campaign, he changes his mind.

And Ba’al the Conqueror said:
“I will do it, Kothar, Sea’s Son,
Kothar, son of the Assembly:
let a window be opened in the house
a casement within the palace;
then a slit can be opened in the clouds
as Kothar said,” (Coogan, 1978: p.104-5).

After the window is installed,

Then Ba’al opened a slit in the clouds,
Ba’al sounded his holy voice,
Ba’al thundered from his lips...
the earth’s high palaces shook. (Coogan, 1978: p.105)

Kothar then says,

when the window is opened in the mansion,
the casement within the palace,
a rift shall (likewise) be opened in the clouds. (Gaster, 1977: p.195-6).
A way is provided through the opening of the window for rains to come upon
the earth to give the earth fertility. Ba’al has conquered the unruly waters and
become champion of the earth. But what of the other side of the coin?
“Drought, an ever-possible calamity, lurks with the coming of each new
season” (Wright, 1957: p.78). At this point, Ba’al realizes that he may have
conquered Yam becoming “Lord of the Earth,” but he is not lord of the
underworld, even Mot, Death, the bringer of drought, famine, and sterility. But
Ba’al feels that he can even win Mot in battle. In a haughty burst of words,
Ba’al exclaims,

No other king or non-king
shall set his power over the earth.
I will send no tribute to El’s son Death
no homage to El’s Darling, the Hero.
Let Death cry to himself,
let the Darling grumble in his heart;
for I alone will rule over the gods;
I alone will fatten gods and men;
I alone will satisfy earth’s masses.
(Coogan, 1978: p.105)

Ba’al seems victorious, at least for the moment. The needed rains will be
given to the earth in their proper course. Ba’al takes time for a banquet. Mot
is not invited. Ba’al sends “Vineyard and Field” (Wright, 1957: p.79), lesser
gods in the Ugaritic pantheon, to Mot with the task of banishing Mot to the
netherworlds where “there alone he may be powerful” (Wright, 1957: p. 79).
At the moment all is well.

THIRD EPISODE-The Death and Revival of Ba’al  The Summer Cycle
In this episode we see the winter coming to a close, the harvest time has
come. With the harvest time comes the dry summer months. Ba’al must be
subdued by Mot for a season.

Barred from the banquet, Mot invites Ba’al down to the netherworld to
quench Mot’s thirst caused by the summer drought where Mot was banished.

Ba’al must enter inside him;
he must go down into his mouth,
like an olive cake,
the earth’s produce,
the fruit of the trees. (Coogan, 1978, p.107)

Ba’al initially refuses the invitation but realizes that as champion of the gods he must go to the netherworld to ease the thirst of Mot. “Yet if he goes he passes into the power of drought and death” (Wright, 1957: p.79). Finally Ba’al consents to go to his fate. He takes with him the clouds, the winds the rains (Coogan, 1978: p. 108). Ba’al dies.

When El hears of the death of Ba’al,

Then El the Kind, the Compassionate,
came down from his throne,
sat on his stool,
and coming down from his stool
he sat on the ground.
He poured earth on his head as a sign of mourning,
on his skull the dust in which he rolled;
he covered his loins with sackcloth.
He cut his skin with a knife,
he made incisions with a razor;
He cut his cheeks and chin,
he raked his arms with a reed,
He plowed his chest like a garden,
he raked his back like a valley.
(Coogan, 1978: p. 109)

Anat also joins in this strange set of mourning rites. After these rites were completed, Anat made several sacrifices and oblations for Ba’al. These consisted of oxen, deer, mountain goats, etc.

At length, the question of who should take Ba’al’s place is raised. El asks Asherah to get one of her sons to take Ba’al’s place. One is suggested but El refuses him because “He can’t race with Ba’al” meaning he is to slow. Another is offered to take Ba’al’s place but is also rejected for he is not big enough to sit on Ba’al’s throne. “His feet reach not down to the footstool, nor his head reaches up to the top” (Pritchard, 1969: p.140).

Finally, El has a dream in which he sees the fertility of the land return. El sees the “heavens rained down oil, the wadies ran with honey” (Coogan, 1978:
p.113). He realizes Ba’al is really alive but only in the clutches of Mot, death himself. Anat it told of this. In a rage of fury

She seizes the God Mot;
With a blade she cleaves him;
With a shovel she winnows him;
With fire she parches him;
With a millstone she grinds him;

(Gray, 1957: p.68)

The verbs used in the last passage, “cleave,” “winnows,” parches,” and “grinds,” seem to “imply that with the death of Mot, growth and fertility returned to the land” (Bonner, 1968: p.80). Indeed, this is the case for shortly thereafter Ba’al is revived to life and the “heavens rained down oil, the wadis ran with honey.” With the return of fertility to the land, the Ba’al cycle is concluded.

Fertility Cults in the Canaanite Religion

The relation of the fertility cults to the myths of the Canaanites is not at all clear. As brought out before, there is much debate concerning just how the myths were used in Canaanite worship. What is wanting from the excavations of Ugarit is some text describing the exact ritual procedures exercised there. So at this point we can still only make some educated guesses as to the exact nature of the fertility cults with relation to the mythology.

What is certain is that at Ugarit, as in most places of the ancient Near East, the forces of nature were associated with the divine. “The association of the divine with the natural is, by definition, magic” (Healey, 1992: p. 792). Magic is defined as the use of charms, spells, and rituals in seeking or pretending to cause or control events, or govern certain natural or supernatural forces” (Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1972) “And so, the earliest religions and rituals exhibit the qualities of magic with a strong belief in the effectiveness of symbols, either acts or words, to make things happen” (Healey, 1992: p. 792).

The place to perform magic associated with fertility to the land was in the fertility cult. “A characteristic feature of the fertility cult was sacral sexual intercourse by priests and priestesses and other specifically consecrated persons, sacred prostitutes of both sexes, intended to emulate and stimulate the deities who bestowed fertility” (Pope, 1962, p. 265). Many scholars have noted that in many cultures and societies that have existed throughout world history
there seems to be a relationship between woman, agriculture and sexuality, (see for example Eliade, 1958: p.331-336 and Gaster, 1977: p.41-43). They note that women are often associated with the land because of the fertility and they believe that their fertility can have a powerful influence upon the productivity of the earth. “Clearly, if women can have such influence upon the plant world, ritual marriage and even collective orgy will, a fortiori, have the most excellent effects upon the fertility of the crops” (Eliade, 1958: p.333). After citing a few examples of the preceding statement, Mircea Eliade, a well known and respected scholar on comparative religions, states:

These few examples, drawn from an extraordinarily rich collection, make clear the ritual nature of the work of agriculture. Women, fertility, sexuality, and nudity are so many centers of sacred power, so many starting-points for ceremonial drama (Eliade, 1958: p.334).

He further states that:

What we can be fairly clear about is the basic outline of the drama. Thus we can perceive that the endless variety of agricultural rites and beliefs all involve the recognition of a force manifested in the harvest. This ‘force’ may be conceived as impersonal, like the ‘power’ of so many things and actions, again it may be represented in mythical forms, or concentrated in certain animals or certain human beings. The rituals, whether simple or elaborated into complicated dramas, are intended to establish favorable relations between man and these ‘powers’, and to ensure that the powers will continue to be regenerated from time to time (Eliade, 1958: p.335).

All this seems to ring true with regards to the ritual dramas discovered at Ugarit. At several points during these ritual dramas the gods have sexual intercourse with each other and even with animals. Following a similar line of thinking as Eliade’s, Bernhard Anderson, an Old Testament scholar, makes this commentary on Canaanite mythology and its role in ritualistic worship:

The ground, it was said, is the sphere of divine powers. The Ba’al of a religion is the ‘lord’ or ‘owner’ of the ground; its fertility is dependent upon sexual relations between him and his consort. When the rains came and the earth and water mingled, the mysterious powers of fertility stirred
again. New life was resurrected after the barrenness of winter. This astonishing revival of nature, men believed was due to sexual intercourse between Ba’al and his partner . . . Furthermore, man was not a mere spectator of the sacred marriage. It was believed that magical power—the fertility to reach consummation, and thereby insure the welfare and prosperity of the land . . . Besides the rehearsal of this mythology, a prominent feature of the Canaanite cult was sacred prostitution. In the act of temple prostitution the man identified himself with Ba’al, the woman with Ashtart. It was believed that human pairs, by imitating the action of Ba’al and his partner, could bring the divine pair together in fertilizing union . . . Through sexual ceremonies farmers could swing into rhythms of the agricultural world, and even keep those rhythms going . . . (Anderson, 1966: pp. 103-104).

Whether Anderson’s view is accurate or not waits to be seen. But what can be certain is that some sort of sacred prostitution seemed to be prevalent among the fertility cults of the Canaanites whatever the reason might have been.

**Works Cited**


