

Ancient Near Eastern Deities and the Bible

Asherah

Canaanite female deity identified as the consort of the chief Canaanite god, El, and as the mother of the gods. Mentioned frequently in the Old Testament in parallel with worship of Baal. The Asherah pole was a wooden device associated with worship of Asherah. The Israelites were to remove them from the land but instead added to their number by building their own (Exod. 34:13; 2 Kings 17:10).

Ashtoreth (Astarte, Ishtar)

The chief female deity of Tyre and Sidon, the beautiful daughter of the chief Canaanite deity, El, and the sensual, female consort of Baal. Thought to influence a variety of dimensions of life, including sexuality, fertility, weather, and war. Israelite affection for this deity came with Solomon's alliance with Phoenicia—one of the abuses that precipitated the division of his kingdom (1 Kings 11:33).

Baal

Male deity worshiped throughout the biblical region under a variety of subregional names including Baal-Berith, Baal Peor, Baal Zaphon, and Hadad. Expressed himself in the thunder, lightning, rain, and dewfall that made agriculture and pastoralism possible in Canaan. Baal is mentioned more often than any other deity in the Old Testament, and the Israelites learned to worship him as they learned how to farm the land from their Canaanite neighbors. Because both the Lord and Baal claimed to control the rain and dew, conflict between the two naturally followed (e.g., Deut. 11:10–17; Judg. 6:36–40; 1 Kings 18:16–46).

Chemosh (Kemosh)

The national god of Moab thought to control its well-being and destiny, particularly in war (Judg. 11:24; Jer. 48:46). Solomon built a high place for Chemosh on the Mount of Olives just east of the Lord's temple, an act that precipitated the division of his kingdom (1 Kings 11:1, 33).

Molek (Molech)

National deity of Ammon. Child sacrifice influenced this deity's disposition and action, a detestable practice mentioned repeatedly with the deity's name (Lev. 18:21; 20:2–4). Solomon built a sanctuary of Molek on the Mount of Olives just east of the Lord's temple, an act that precipitated the division of his kingdom (1 Kings 11:5, 7, 33).

Dagon (Dagan)

National deity of the Philistines adopted upon their arrival in Canaan. Thought to influence the health of the grain harvest in the prime grain-growing land of the Philistine plain. Perceived to have bested the Lord when Samson was enslaved (Judg. 16:23) and when the Philistines put the captured ark of the covenant in the temple of Dagon (1 Sam. 5:2), notions quickly dispelled.

Marduk (Bel)

As the creator god, Marduk was identified as the chief god of the Babylonian pantheon. While the Israelite exile to Babylon made Marduk appear superior to the Lord, Jeremiah announced that Babylon's destruction would reveal Bel's true worth (Jer. 50:2).

Nebo

Son of the chief Babylonian god, Marduk. Thought to influence wisdom and writing. Mentioned once by name (Isa. 46:1) as Isaiah describes the fall of Babylon; this deity would be as humbled as his adherents.

Tammuz

Sumerian deity associated with fertility. The death of this deity is associated with the infertility of the land that mourns his passing. His restoration is associated with the return of fertility. Adherents practice ritual weeping to encourage his return (Ezek. 8:14).