

## BAAL WORSHIP

### Judges

Dale Ralph Davis

First, our passage underscores the continuing emergency of our faith (2:6-13). In order to understand this emergency we must try to understand a bit about Baal worship.

Many readers of Genesis 1 are unaware that they hold in their hands a piece of revolutionary propaganda. It propounds the novel idea that sex is a human activity. This God of Israel is strange. Yahweh has no wife, no consort. Biblical religion holds that you will find Yahweh acting in history (creation, flood, call and preservation of the patriarchs, deliverance from Egypt, cutting off of the Jordan), not pulsating in nature (though nature, too, is under his sway). Yahweh sits on a throne, high and lifted up, from which he rules, creates, preserves, and redeems; he does not lounge in some celestial bedroom, copulating with his feminine divine counterpart. It has become so difficult for us to grasp how different, how holy, the God of the Bible is!

But the Canaanites were not so - neither was Baal their god. Baal was the god of storm and fertility, and, for the Canaanites, of course, fertility was the name of the game - fertility of crops and livestock and family. Baal, nature god that he was, naturally had his female consort, Ashtoreth or Ashtart.

In Canaanite theology (and agriculture) the fertility of the land depended upon the sexual relationship between Baal and his consort. The revival of nature was due to sexual intercourse between Baal and his partner. But the Canaanite faithful didn't simply sit back and say, "Let Baal do it." There was no "let-go- and-let-Baal" thinking among them. Instead their watchword was, "Serve Baal with gladness, all ye glands." Hence, the Canaanites "sacred" practiced as a part of their worship. A Canaanite man, for instance, would go to a Baal shrine and have intercourse with one of the sacred prostitutes serving there. The man would fulfill Baal's role and the woman Ashtart's. The idea was that the copulating of the worshiper and of the holy whore would encourage the divine couple (Mr. and Mrs./Ms. Baal) to do their thing and thus the rain, grain, wine, and oil would flow again. Through sacred prostitution it was possible to assist, to encourage, and bring on the great orgasm of Baal in the sky; thus Baal would make "all things new." However, nothing would happen unless the fertility powers were properly worshiped. (Here, incidentally, is the great divide between paganism and biblical faith; in paganism the gods must be coerced rather than trusted; see Matt. 6:7-8.)

If we turn on our imagination lights we can readily understand how Israelites would be lured toward Baal worship by the Canaanites they had allowed to remain in the land. One can almost hear a helpful Canaanite trying to talk a little religion - and sense - to his Israelite neighbor, "O yes, having Yahweh who brings you out of Egypt, who makes Pharaoh cry 'Uncle' who divides the Jordan - all that is fine; and I've got nothing against this Yahweh, mind you; but here in Canaan it's not always the big bang that matters but getting into the rhythms of nature, I mean trying to manage the day-to-day situation with crops and flocks and so forth. Naturally, I might be able to help you know some of our secrets. Maybe you and your son would like to come with me to the high place for our midweek service?"

