

WORSHIPPING THE BAALS AND ASHTOROTHS

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Israel's apostasy may be explored first by examining the new objects of devotion and then the actions of devotion.

The generation of Israelites that forgot Yahweh and his miraculous actions on their behalf not only abandoned ('*āzab*) Yahweh; they committed themselves to other gods, here referred to as the *ba'ālîm* and the '*aštārôt*. The first expression derives from the word *ba'al*, which in its basic sense is a secular term meaning simply "lord, master, owner", and in a first level of derived sense, "husband." When applied to a god, it functions as a title, "divine lord, master" rather than a personal name and is used as an appellative for many gods in the ancient world. Baal occurs as a divine title more than seventy times in the Old Testament. Usually it refers to the storm/weather god, who in the Canaanite mythological literature goes by the name Hadad and several other titles: '*al'iyin b'l*, "the victor Baal"; *rkb 'rpt*, "Rider of the Clouds"; *bn dgn*, "son of Dagon"; *zbl b'l 'rs*, "the prince lord of the earth"; *b'l spn*, "Baal of Zaphon." In Canaanite mythology Baal was one of the seventy offspring of El and Asherah, along with his opposite, Mot, the god of death and the netherworld, and Yam, the god of the sea. When the plural form *ba'ālîm* occurs, the reference is not to a multiplicity of gods but to numerous manifestations of the one weather god, on whose blessing the fertility of the land was thought to depend.

Hebrew '*aštārôt* represents a plural form of '*aštart*, commonly known as Astarte, who was worshiped widely as the goddess of love and war. In the Canaanite literature Anath usually functions as Baal's consort. Astarte also appears as Baal's spouse, however, which agrees with the broader ancient Near Eastern world reflected in the Old Testament. Like *ba'ālîm*, the present plural form refers to the local manifestations of the deity. In the fertility cult of Canaan, Baal was represented by an upright stone (*massēbâ*); Astarte was portrayed by carved female figurines, with exaggerated breasts and prominent genitals. Together these two gods formed a powerful force in ancient Near Eastern spirituality. Israel's abandonment of Yahweh may be attributable to an inability to conceive of Yahweh as the God of this land where Baal and Astarte ruled with apparent effectiveness. The newcomers had experienced Yahweh's power in Egypt, at Mount Sinai, and in the desert; but once they crossed the Jordan, they found it easier to change allegiance to the gods of this land than to transfer to Yahweh the fertility functions of a territorial god.

The verbs used to describe their commitment to the gods of this land are instructive. First, whereas during the tenure of Joshua they had served ('*ābad*) Yahweh (v. 7), now they directed the same activity toward the Baals and the Astartes. Second, if the negative aspect of their change of allegiance is described as abandoning Yahweh, the counterpart is "walking after other gods." The expression *hālak 'ahādrê 'elōhîm 'āhērîm*, "walking after other gods," derives fundamentally from the context of cultic processions in which devotees of divinity would follow the image of a deity carried by



priests to and from places of religious celebration. Here it is used more generally of any expression of spiritual commitment. Third, they paid homage to the other gods. In popular thinking and practice today worship is often (if not generally) confused with exaltation, as in standing before God with hands raised in praise. However, the biblical notion of "worship" is quite the opposite. The verb *hištahāwâ*, from the root *khwh/khyh*, represents court language, denoting fundamentally the physical gesture of prostration before a superior. The gesture has been interpreted as a nonverbal equivalent to the declaration "May X live!" In this instance the posture of the Israelites, bowing down before foreign gods, expresses their subjection to them. Instead of being servants of Yahweh, like Joshua had been, they have become servants of these gods.

It is no wonder that Yahweh is outraged. In direct opposition to Joshua's charge and in betrayal of their covenant renewal commitment at Shechem (Josh 24:14-24), Israel had switched its spiritual allegiance. The unimaginable described in Jer 2:9-13 had happened: this nation had exchanged Yahweh, its patron God, for worthless idols—gods that were not gods at all. In the mind of the author this is the essence of Israel's Canaanization. For the moment "the gods of the peoples around them" appear to have won in the contest with "the God of the fathers." According to the covenant (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28), this abandonment of Yahweh not only absolves him of responsibility for them; it also renders them his enemy.