

Why was the worship of Baal and Asherah a constant struggle for the Israelites?

Throughout the Old Testament, we read accounts of idol worship among the Israelites, especially the worship of Baal and Asherah, or sometimes Baal and Ashtoreth. The paganism that surrounded God's people crept in, gained a foothold, and led to much misery. It was a constant struggle to stay true to the Lord their God.

God had commanded Israel not to worship idols (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7)—indeed, they were to avoid even mentioning a false god's name (Exodus 23:13). To prevent compromise, they were warned not to intermarry with the pagan nations and to shun practices that might be construed as pagan worship rites (Leviticus 20:23; 2 Kings 17:15; Ezekiel 11:12). Israel was the nation chosen by God to one day give rise to the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ. Yet, even with their heritage and so much riding on their future, Israel was continually drawn into dalliances with Baal and Asherah.

Baal was the supreme god in ancient Canaan and Phoenicia. As the storm god, he was usually depicted holding a raised lightning bolt. His consort, Asherah, was the chief female deity and was represented by a carved pole or limbless tree trunk planted in the ground. Baal and Asherah are often mentioned together in Scripture. Sometimes Baal is mentioned with the goddess Ashtoreth who, in Canaanite mythology, was closely related to Asherah and may have been for a time considered the same goddess. All of them were fertility gods, and their worship rites involved sexual perversion.

After the death of Joshua, the worship of Baal and Asherah became a plaguing and perennial problem for Israel. It didn't take long: in the very next generation after Joshua, “The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God

and served the Baals and the Asherahs” (Judges 3:7). Later, God told the judge Gideon to clean house: “Tear down your father’s altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it” (Judges 6:25). Again, in the days of Jephthah, “the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths” (Judges 10:6).

During the monarchy, the kings got involved, forsaking the Lord and bringing the worship of Baal and Asherah into Israel. Under King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, Israel was a state sponsor of a Phoenician form of idol worship, and the prophet Elijah had to confront “four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and . . . four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table” (1 Kings 18:19). The evil King Manasseh of Judah undid all the reforms of his father Hezekiah and “erected altars to Baal and made an Asherah pole” (2 Kings 21:3). In His indictment of Israel before sending them into exile, God said, “They forsook all the commands of the Lord their God and made for themselves two idols cast in the shape of calves, and an Asherah pole. They bowed down to all the starry hosts, and they worshiped Baal” (2 Kings 17:16).

There are several reasons why the worship of Baal and Asherah was such a problem for Israel. First, the worship of Baal and Asherah held the allure of illicit sex, since the religion involved ritual prostitution. This is exactly what we see in the incident of Baal of Peor, as “the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods” (Numbers 25:1-2). During this episode an Israelite named Zimri brazenly brought a Midianite woman into the camp and went straight to his tent, where the two began having sex (verses 6-8, 14-15).

Another reason that the worship of Baal and Asherah was a perennial problem for Israel is what we could call international peer pressure. Israel wanted to be like the other

nations (see 1 Samuel 8:5, 20). The other nations worshiped Baal and Asherah, and so many Israelites felt a pull to do the same.

And, most basically, Israel worshiped Baal and Asherah because of Satan's temptations coupled with mankind's sinfulness. The enemy of our souls tempted Israel to worship idols; the sacrifices made to Baal and Asherah were really sacrifices to demons (1 Corinthians 10:20). The stubborn willfulness of humanity works in tandem with Satan's seductions, and the result is rebellion against God. Israel repeatedly forsook their covenant with God, lost God's blessings, and chased after the Baals and Asherahs to their own destruction.

The book of Hosea aptly uses adultery as a metaphor to describe Israel's idol worship. Forsaking the God of their covenant and chasing after false gods such as Baal and Asherah was akin to spiritual adultery. But God promised to restore His unfaithful people and love them forever:

"In that day," declares the Lord, . . .

"I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips;
no longer will their names be invoked. . . .

I will betroth you to me forever;
I will betroth you in righteousness and justice,
in love and compassion.

I will betroth you in faithfulness
and you will acknowledge the Lord."

(Hosea 2:16-17, 19-20)

The problem of Baal and Asherah worship was finally solved after God removed Israel from the Promised Land. Due to the Israelites' idolatry and disregard of the law, God brought the nations of Assyria and Babylon against them in an act of judgment. After the exile, Israel was restored to the land, and the people did not dally again with idols.

Christians today may be quick to judge the Israelites for their idolatry, but we should remember that idols take many forms. Idolatrous sins still tempt the modern-day believer (Romans 3:23; 1 John 1:8-10). Instead of bowing down to the ancient forms of Baal and Asherah, we today sometimes honor possessions, success, and physical pleasure to the dishonoring of God. Just as God disciplined the Israelites for their idolatry and forgave them when they repented, He graciously disciplines us and extends the offer of forgiveness in Christ (Hebrews 12:7-11; 1 John 1:9; 2 Peter 3:9).