

Who was Baal?

Baal was the name of the supreme god worshiped in ancient Canaan and Phoenicia. The practice of Baal worship infiltrated Jewish religious life during the time of the Judges (Judges 3:7), became widespread in Israel during the reign of Ahab (1 Kings 16:31-33) and also affected Judah (2 Chronicles 28:1-2). The word baal means “lord”; the plural is baalim. In general, Baal was a fertility god who was believed to enable the earth to produce crops and people to produce children. Different regions worshiped Baal in different ways, and Baal proved to be a highly adaptable god. Various locales emphasized one or another of his attributes and developed special “denominations” of Baalism. Baal of Peor (Numbers 25:3) and Baal-Berith (Judges 8:33) are two examples of such localized deities.

According to some versions of Canaanite mythology, Baal was the son of Dagon; other accounts make him out to be a son of El, the chief god, and Asherah, the goddess of the sea. Baal was considered the most powerful of all gods, eclipsing El, who was seen as rather weak and ineffective. In various battles Baal defeated Yamm, the god of the sea, and Mot, the god of death and the underworld. Baal’s sisters/consorts were Ashtoreth, a fertility goddess associated with the stars, and Anath, a goddess of love and war. The Canaanites worshiped Baal as the sun god and as the storm god—he is usually depicted holding a lightning bolt—who defeated enemies and produced crops. They also worshiped him as a fertility god who provided children. Baal worship was rooted in sensuality and involved ritualistic prostitution in the temples. At times, appeasing Baal required human sacrifice, usually the firstborn of the one making the sacrifice (Jeremiah 19:5). The priests of Baal appealed to their god in rites of wild abandon which included loud, ecstatic cries and self-inflicted injury (1 Kings 18:28).

Before the Hebrews entered the Promised Land, the Lord God warned against worshiping Canaan's gods (Deuteronomy 6:14-15), but Israel turned to idolatry anyway. During the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, at the height of Baal worship in Israel, God directly confronted the paganism through His prophet Elijah. First, God showed that He, not Baal, controlled the rain by sending a drought lasting three-and-one-half years (1 Kings 17:1). Then Elijah called for a showdown on Mt. Carmel to prove once and for all who the true God was. All day long, 450 prophets of Baal called on their god to send fire from heaven—surely an easy task for a god associated with lightning bolts—but “there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention” (1 Kings 18:29). After Baal’s prophets gave up, Elijah prayed a simple prayer, and God answered immediately with fire from heaven. The evidence was overwhelming, and the people “fell prostrate and cried, ‘The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!’” (verse 39).

In Matthew 12:27, Jesus calls Satan “Beelzebub,” linking the devil to Baal-Zebub, a Philistine deity (2 Kings 1:2). The Baalim of the Old Testament were nothing more than demons masquerading as gods, and all idolatry is ultimately devil-worship (1 Corinthians 10:20).