

Four Differences Between Canaanite Religion and Israel's Faith

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by John Drane

1. Yahweh, Israel's God was a God who acted in history. He was not a God of nature who was revealed only in the yearly cycles of summer and winter. He was a personal God who had disclosed his character in personal ways, through encounters with Abraham and Moses.
2. The Canaanite rituals were first and foremost magical rites. They were designed to bully the gods into making the earth fertile year by year. This was the whole reasoning behind the sexual intercourse which a farmer would have with a temple prostitute. For it was hoped that the farmer's activities would induce the gods to do the same, and thus produce more fruitful crops. By contrast, the God of Israel could not be bullied by magic. He had not been forced to call Abraham, or to deliver the slaves from Egypt: all that he did arose from his own spontaneous love and care for his people.
3. The Canaanite view encouraged the assumption that religion had nothing to do with the behaviour in normal life, but only with the special ritual that was performed in the shrines. This notion is still widely held today. But it runs completely contrary to the Old Testament's understanding of God. The God of Israel was not most concerned with the empty performance of hollow rituals, but with the way people behave in everyday life. This lesson was hammered home over and over again by the prophets, as they declared that Israel's religious duty was not something that took place in a shrine, but in the market place: "to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God" (Micah 6:8)
4. Israel's God demanded exclusive worship. The gods and goddesses of Canaan were always tolerant of other gods – they were in a sense, their own relatives! But the God of Israel had demanded the exclusive obedience of his people (Ex. 20:1-3). Now that we can understand the nature of Baal worship, it is not difficult to see why the writers of the Old Testament were so adamant in emphasizing this (the exclusive worship of Yahweh).