# Plaster Wall Inscription 4.2: El, Baal, and YHWH

I have dedicated significant effort to clarifying the meaning of the inscriptions invoking YHWH and his *asherah* as well as the mythological imagery on the Kuntillet ʿAjrud (KA) pithoi, but another text discovered there of great importance for the reconstruction of Israelite-Judahite religion is the plaster wall inscription 4.2 from the Western entrance of the Bench-room complex. Although the inscription is fragmentary and only partially preserved, it represents one of the few known examples of literary text recovered from Iron Age Palestine and is also the only inscription found to date that contains both the divine names El and Baal.

The recent edition by Aḥituv and Eshel (2012) has finally brought this inscription into scholarly focus by providing an improved transcription, exegetical commentary, and several high-quality black and white and color photographs (figs. 5.53-5.55b). However, a number of issues related to the epigraphic analysis and interpretation of the text remain in dispute. Among those who have examined photos of the inscription, there is lack of agreement over how to read many individual letters, leading to divergence in the identification of words and sense units (cf. McCarter 2003; Aḥituv and Eshel 2012; Naʿaman 2012; Blum 2013), while in other cases there is agreement about how to read particular letters but contrasting views about how their syntax and meaning should be evaluated, e.g. the expression *lbrk. bʿl.* (e.g.

Dobbs-Allsopp 2005; Naʿaman 2012; Blum 2013). Although many scholars have understood the divine imagery as polytheistic and even foreign in character (Weinfeld 1984; Müller 1992; Meshel 1992; Keel and Uehlinger 1992; Halpern 1993; Zevit 2001; Dijkstra 2001; Smith 2004; Dever 2012), others have favored naturalizing the text to a traditional Yahwistic setting (McCarter 2003; Dobbs-Allsopp 2005; Mastin 2009; Hutton 2010; Aḥituv and Eshel 2012: 110-114, 133; Naʿaman 2012; cf. Levine 2013). For example, Aḥituv and Eshel restore a reference to the divine name YHWH in line 2 and soften evidence for polytheism, suggesting that YHWH and El are identical and that Baal is a hypostasis of YHWH. Recently Blum (2013) has made a comprehensive study of the inscription and advanced an entirely new approach to its language, syntax, and thematic content. In contrast to previous analyses, Blum has argued that the language of the inscription is Phoenician rather than Hebrew and that the text describes a conflict between certain groups in North Syria.

In the following study I will offer a new transcription based on my own analysis of the photos that incorporates insights from Aḥituv and Eshel, Naʿaman, Blum, and others and also a translation that explains the significance of the various divine names referenced in the text. As I hope to show, the inscription when properly understood throws a unique light on the pantheons of Israel-Judah as they existed during the monarchic period.

**Transcription**

]*brʿš. wbzrḥ ʾl. br*[*??* (1)

]*r. wymsn. hrm. wydkn. pbnm*[ (2)

]*ʾrṣ. qšdš. ʿly. ʾlm. ??. kr*[ (3)

]*hkn lbrk. bʿl. bym. mlḥmt*[ (4)

. ]*lšm ʾl. bym. mlḥ*[*mt* (5)

**Translation**

"… in earthquake. And when El shined forth on…

… and the mountains were melted and the highlands crushed…

… earth, Holy One over the gods (?)…

… to prepare for the Blessed of Baal on the day of battle…

… for the Name of El on the day of battle…"

**Epigraphic Commentary**

Line 1:

Aḥituv and Eshel (2012: 110) attempt to integrate an isolated plaster fragment with a few letters on it into the top left side of the inscription, so that *šnt* is positioned as the remnant of the first and uppermost line and the partial letters below it are placed in the continuation to the next line (his line 2, my line 1). However, this proposal is extremely speculative, as the small fragment could have come from anywhere on either side of the larger plaster piece (Blum 2013: 25 n. 18). Because the relationship of the fragment to the original inscription is unclear and the few letters are insufficient to reconstruct any meaningful text, I think it best to set it aside and make Aḥituv's line 2 line 1.

The third letter presents difficulties. Aḥituv and Eshel identify it as an *ʿayin* (2012: 110), whereas Blum assumes that the preserved remains are most consistent with the shape of an *ʾalef* (2013: 25). On the one hand, the small, detached mark at the bottom of the letter is difficult to reconcile with the circular shape of an *ʿayin* and the size of the letter is larger than other examples of *ʿayin* in lines 3 and 4. On the other hand, the above-mentioned mark, which has a slight diagonal bearing, does not correspond to the broad, gently curving, downward stroke of an *ʾalef* and falls slightly outside of the letter outline drawn by Blum (cf. Tafel 1). Further

complicating matters is that the thin stroke is absent from fig. 5.53 and appears only in 5.54 and 5.55a-b, where it varies from a simple dot to a slightly longer mark. Fig. 5.53 also has a large daub of ink at the bottom of the letter that is lacking in figs. 5.54-55b. Perhaps it is safest to conclude that the available photos do not permit a definite identification of the letter. Blum's method of combining the various images into a collage, while justifiable and illuminating in some instances, is nonetheless problematical in that without access to the original plaster piece we are not in a position to accurately assess the significance of the above variations or whether some of the markings on the plaster surface are simply incidental or a result of extraneous environmental factors (cf. other small black markings on the plaster surface found unquestionably outside of distinguishable letters). If it is impossible to discern the form of the letter from the photos alone, we can note however that the *ʾalef* identification is unsatisfactory insofar that it would indicate the presence of a fairly large gap between it and the following *šin*. Further, it is difficult to imagine the free form *rʾš* "head/top" being found at the end of a clause, without a bound suffix or construct relation to specify its relation to something else. In the end, if we disregard the small dot (fig. 5.54) or black score (fig. 5.55) at the bottom of the letter and accept fig. 5.53 as the most accurate reproduction of the letter structure, a large *ʿayin* remains conceivable and would fit the space better than an *ʾalef*. The word *rʿš* "earthquake" is also semantically more acceptable to the literary context of a theophany.

The seventh letter is damaged but seems to be a *zayin*. This has long been the consensus reading based on reports of those who have examined the inscription or photos thereof (Meshel 1994; Aḥituv 1992; McCarter 2003; Aḥituv and Eshel 2012; Naʿaman 2012), stimulated at least in part by the clear theophanic imagery of the next line. By contrast, Blum believes that the size and structure of the letter remains correspond best with a *yod* and that the reading *zayin* can be excluded on the basis of the identification of another *zayin* in line 3 (2013: 25). However, without Blum's heavy handed tracing of the outline of a *yod* it is difficult to recognize anything resembling the letter. In figs. 5.55a-b the horizontal stroke distinctly crosses through the vertical stroke and there appears to be another horizontal line at the top of the letter. All together the structure is similar to the Old Phoenician/Old Hebrew *zayin*, which was shaped something like a Latin "I." Although the crossing of the bottom horizontal stroke through the vertical stroke so as to leave a small tail is atypical of Old Phoenician/Hebrew *zayin* (however, cf. Gibson 1975: table of scripts), the tail is quite small and does not have the appearance of having been created as a major stroke such as the bottom half of a *yod*. Further, the only other *zayin* attested at KA in an inscription incised on stone has this same cross between

the vertical and lower horizontal strokes (Aḥituv and Eshel 2012: 75, inscription 1.1). Finally, the identity of the third letter to the end on line 3 is unclear. While the letter could possibly be a *zayin* and I am unable to offer an alternative, the character is damaged and lacks any indication of a bottom horizontal stroke. The "Z" shape of the top of the character is also uncharacteristic for *zayin* during this early period of Phoenician/Hebrew (Renz 1995; Gibson 1975). If the letter is a *zayin*, it is a unusual/damaged form and as a result it is methodologically questionable to make the identification of the seventh letter in line 1 dependent on it. It is also worth noting that scribes sometimes varied the letter shapes they used even in a single composition. Frank Cross has observed that in the Bir-Hadad stele "the scribe uses the archaic form of *zayin* in two instances (lines 1 and 4) and in two instances (lines 2 and 4) uses a *zayin* with a rudimentary tendency toward the 'Z' form" (2003: 175).

All the letters after the *bet* at the end of the line have been destroyed except for where the lower tails were sufficiently long to enter the gap between lines 1 and 2. The thirteenth letter may have been a *reš*, *waw*, *qof*, or *he* (Blum 2013: 26). Above the *nun* in line 3 may be the remains of a *nun*, *mem*, or *pe*.

Line 2:

The first letter seems to be a *reš* (Aḥituv and Eshel 2012) rather than a *dalet* (cf. Blum 2013: 26), based on the triangular-like shape of the head.

The fifteenth letter is probably a *pe*, not a *gimel* (against Aḥituv and Eshel 2012). McCarter (2003: 173 n. 2) and Blum (2013: 32) explain *pbn* as a loanword from Hurrian *pabn* "mountain," used in parallel with *hr* "mountain."

Line 3:

Line 3 is the most difficult to decipher in the entire inscription and is heavily damaged at both the beginning and end.

The first three letters are only partially preserved, but the remains are sufficiently distinctive in form to suggest an *ʾalef*, *reš*, and *ṣade* (Aḥituv and Eshel 2012: 110, 112; Blum 2013: 26).

The fourth letter is a *qof* (Aḥituv and Eshel 2012: 110, 112 n. 5; Blum 2013: 26) because of the long vertical tail (cf. fig. 5.55a-b), the large oval-like head, traces of the right half of which can be seen in fig. 5.54, and comparison with the *qof* in inscription 4.4.1.

The eleventh letter is likely an *ʾalef* (Aḥituv and Eshel 2012: 110, 112; Naʿaman 2012; Blum 2013: 26), which can be seen in the broad vertical stroke, its slightly left-leaning gradient, and traces of horizontal crossbars.

The twelfth letter has been almost completely effaced, making it susceptible to a wide variety of interpretations (cf. Aḥituv and Eshel 2012: 110, 112; Naʿaman 2012; Blum 2013: 26). Aḥituv and Eshel have identified it as a *lamed*, but against this view Blum has argued that not only does the letter lack any trace of the expected long upstroke, but traces of a long down stroke appear in the gap between lines 3 and 4. Taken with the remains of a stroke left to the *ʾalef* he suggests that the structure is most consistent with that of a *taw*. However, this proposal faces the challenge that *taws* elsewhere in the plaster wall inscriptions seem to carry a left arm (e.g. the *taw* in the small plaster fragment) and generally were allowed space before beginning the next letter. Understood as a *taw*, it and the following letter would have been bunched together so that the left arm hung over the *nun*/*mem*, which Blum avoids by cutting off the left arm of the *taw* in his outline. Further, I am less confident than Blum that the small markings below the letter were definitely the result of a long downward stroke. From fig. 5.54 it seems that at least one of these markings is part of a long horizontal crack in the plaster. We have already discussed the problem that not all dark markings in the photos can be automatically assumed to represent strokes of paint. Lastly, the letter sequence *ʾtn* does not make much sense. Blum's hypothesis that *ʾtn* and *qšdš* are North Syrian toponyms or ethnicons is overly ingenious and methodologically suspect as a means of clarifying the line's vague and difficult to comprehend letter sequences. Not only does the immediate literary context in line 2, which deals with a mythological account of a theophany, militate against this reading, but the great majority of the inscriptions found at KA generally seem to be devotional in nature and touch on themes of direct interest to Israelites.

Because a restoration of a *taw* seems less than satisfactory, I am inclined to accept Aḥituv and Eshel's restoration of a *lamed*. Although traces of the upstroke are missing or have been obliterated, the near complete effacing of a letter is not without analogies elsewhere on the plaster inscription. If the *lamed* were fairly squat in shape, the fact that it has left no trace of an upstroke would be no more problematic than that the top of the *taw* is similarly undetectable. In addition, the short width of a *lamed* would fit the space between the *ʾalef* and the following letter better than a *taw*. The daub of ink left of the *ʾalef* would also correlate well with this picture, as the beginning of the *lamed* downstroke placed near and just above the crossbars of the *ʾalef*, as in lines 1 and 5.

The thirteenth letter could either be a *nun* (Blum 2013: 26) or a *mem* (Aḥituv and Eshel 2012: 110, 112). On purely epigraphic grounds, the *nun* would perhaps be the first choice, since the head is fairly small in width (about a half a centimeter). From Blum's collage the letter also appears to have a strong upstroke on the left, which is typical of the *nun* (Tafel 1). However, on closer inspection, it seems that in the process of combining figs. 5.53 and 5.55a Blum has unintentionally extended the length of the upstroke so that it appears a fraction longer than it actually is. When the photos are examined individually, the top of the upstroke is just slightly lower than the top of the word divider to the left. In addition, the tail of the *nun* above has overlapped part of the letter, thus obscuring its shape at this point. On the whole, it is difficult to exclude the possibility that the letter is a *mem*. We have another example of a small *mem* of a half a centimeter width immediately below in the word *ym* in line 4. Furthermore, the identification of the letter as a *mem* yields a sensible reading if *qšdš* is understood as a scribal mistake for El's epithet *qdš* "Holy One" and *ʿly* as the preposition: "the Holy One over the gods" (so Aḥituv and Eshel 2012). By contrast, the *nun* does not yield a sensible reading in context.

I have been unable to identify the fourteenth and fifteenth letters and apparently Aḥituv and Eshel were at a loss as well, since their line 4 ends with *ʾlm* and makes no attempt to include the partial letters in their analysis. Blum has identified the letters as *ḥet* and *zayin* respectively (2013: 27), but the first looks nothing like the *ḥet* in line 1 and lacks clear horizontal bars and a down stroke on the right. The two daubs of ink at the bottom of the central stroke are particularly anomalous and certainly would not cohere with the structure of a *ḥet*. As was mentioned earlier, I am also uncertain whether the next letter is a *zayin*. Naʿaman (2012: 309) reads a

*samek* and *gimel*, but in my opinion the verb *swg* "move away" does not yield a satisfactory sense in context.

Line 4:

Very little remains of the first letter. The pair of stroke remains in fig. 5.53 are most suggestive of a *he* (with Aḥituv and Eshel 2012: 110, 112), but fig. 5.54 makes it difficult to exclude the possibility of a *yod* that has been largely effaced. Blum has argued that the surface area to the left and below the character appears to have been undisturbed and therefore that it cannot have been a *he*. Instead he proposes that the letter was a *yod* or *zayin* and that the small diagonal stroke to the left is a simple word divider (2013: 27). However, I do not know how he can make such a claim based on examination of the photos alone, especially since the text at the beginning of line 4 has been largely obliterated. Not only is the angle of the strokes consistent with the arms of a *he* or *yod*, but the angle of the top stroke seems too horizontal to have been intended as a word divider. Word dividers elsewhere in the composition tend to be more vertical. Finally, the assumption of a word divider at this point creates difficulties in leaving a truncated consonantal sequence (*kn*) that is not easily explicable in terms of the syntactic context. Blum's suggestion that *kn* is the Phoenician perfect verbal form (2013: 34) is controverted by the fact that the phrase *kn l-* in Phoenician was a predication formula, e.g., *bymty kn lʾrṣ ʿmq ʾdn šbʿ wmnʿm* "in my days there was for the land of the plain of Adana abundance and luxury" (KAI 26: II 15-16).

The final letter has been plausibly identified by Blum as a *taw* (2013: 27).

**The Language**

Most scholars who have examined the plaster wall inscriptions at KA have thought them to be written in Hebrew in a Phoenician or Phoenicianizing script (Meshel 1992: 107; Renz 1995: 57-58; Zevit 2001: 376-377; McCarter 2003: 173; Mastin 2009: 105-109; Aḥituv and Eshel 2012: 105-127). Features diagnostic of Hebrew

include the use of *matres lectionis*, diphthong indicators, and the apparent *waw* consecutive in inscription 4.2. B. Mastin has also noted that the manner of invoking El and Baal and the description of theophany is more obviously linked to the religious culture of Israel-Judah than Phoenicia (2009: 110-114).

Recently Ehard Blum (2013: 29-30) has argued that the language of inscription 4.2 is in fact Phoenician, which has fairly significant implications for reassessing the function of the KA complex and those who visited and used the site. The major elements he has adduced in support of this analysis include the following:

- The spelling of *ḥz* in his reconstruction of line 3 (his line 4), which he takes to reflect Phoenician orthography;
- The form *mlḥmt* in line 4 (his line 5), which shows the morphological marker of the feminine *-at* ending;
- The verbal form *kn l-* in line 4;
- The word *pbnm* is not Hebrew, but reflects an origin to the far north;
- The forms *wymsn* and *wydkn* are better understood as examples of the prefix long form of the verb in Phoenician, whereas in Hebrew the paragogic *nun* was not used for converted forms.

However, on closer examination none of these features are decisive for his argument. First, as I explained in my epigraphic commentary, the sequence of *ḥet* and *zayin* at the end of line 3 is not confirmed; the remains of the letters are very damaged and their identity is unclear. So at this point it is inadvisable to use this sequence as a basis for constructing a profile of the inscription's language. Second, while the form *mlḥmt* is indeed consistent with Phoenician morphology of the feminine singular noun, this does not preclude the use of the form in Hebrew as well. A number of scholars have theorized that Hebrew in the north retained the old feminine marker *-at* similar to Phoenician, Ammonite, and Moabite, in contrast with southern Hebrew in which *-at* became *ā* (cf. Gzella 2011: 430; Hoch 2014: 481; cf. Garr 1985: 59-60, 93-94). Third, I have already explained why I don't find the reading *kn l-* at the beginning of line 4 persuasive. The extant letter remains point to an original *he* before the *kaf* and *nun*, not a word divider. Further, interpreted as Phoenician, the clause lacks the necessary proximate predicate after the object of the *lamed*. Fourth, the use of the word *pbnm* has little bearing for identifying the language of the inscription. As the word stands, it is a loanword and reflects

Canaanite morphology (i.e. the plural marker *-im*). It is well recognized that Hebrew borrowed vocabulary from many sources throughout its history through various intermediaries (Young and Rezetko 2008: 280-311), so the presence of a Hurrian term in an Israelite composition of a literary register is fairly unremarkable.

Lastly, Blum is correct to note that there are difficulties with the common assumption that the final *nun* on *wymsn* and *wydkn* is the so-called *nun paragogicum* (cf. McCarter 2003; Mastin 2009; Aḥituv and Eshel 2012). In Northwest Semitic a final *nun* suffix was appended to the prefix long form (future/imperfect), but not to the short form (preterite/jussive). So because the converted imperfect in Hebrew stems from the historical short form or preterite, the appearance of a *nun* on these forms is unexpected. In fact, in biblical Hebrew the paragogic *nun* almost never appears on converted imperfect forms (cf. Joüon and Muraoka 2008: 126; Rhobar 2013). However, because the *nun* on *wymsn* and *wydkn* is unlikely to be paragogic in origin does not constitute grounds for analyzing the verbal forms as Phoenician future/imperfects. A rendering of the verbs as future fits poorly with the general past tense setting of the composition (*wbzrḥ*, “And when El shined forth”) and is also at variance with theophanic descriptions recorded in the Bible (see below). Further, the parallel syndetic forms are unmistakably reminiscent of the Hebrew *waw* consecutive structure. Perhaps the solution is to assume that the verbs are converted in line with the general literary context, but also that the nunation attested here reflects some morphological function unrelated to the paragogic nun. A number of years ago H. P. Müller (1992: 48 n. 142) suggested that the nunation here was energic rather than paragogic, and R. Williams (1972: 83) in a study of energic verbal forms found a number of instances where the ending was appended to the preterite in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Isaiah 41:5). Assuming this explanation is viable, the purpose of the morpheme may have been to add emphasis to the verb, which would nicely fit the context, but that this function was only partially taken up or inconsistently preserved in the scribal traditions responsible for the writing of the Hebrew Bible.

In sum, there is insufficient evidence to support the thesis that the inscription is Phoenician in origin and other linguistic, cultural, and archaeological considerations provide stronger warrant for the assessment it is Hebrew.

**Exegetical Commentary**

Using the above transcription as our starting point, the general sense of the text is mostly clear. Lines 1-2 appear to recount a theophanic manifestation of the god El that has fairly close parallels in the Bible (Müller 1992: 47; Zevit 2001: 372-373; Mastin 2009: 110-111; Aḥituv and Eshel 2012: 110-112; Levine 2013: 186-187). El is imagined as a solar deity whose appearance is so powerful that it has a cosmic effect on nature (Dt 33:2; Jdgs 5:4-5; Ps 68:7-8; 97:4; Mi 1:3-4; Hab 3:3-6). Line 3 is possibly another reference to El if *qšdš* is understood as a scribal mistake for *qdš* "Holy One." This long-lived epithet of the Canaanite high god is attested over a broad range of material, including at Ugarit (van Koppen and van der Toorn 1999: 415-418; Rahmouni 2008: 207-209), in Phoenician-Punic as applied to Baal Hamon (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995: 996), in the Hebrew Bible as applied to YHWH (e.g. Job 6:10; Hab 3:3; Isa 40:25; 57:15), and the Qur'an (e.g. 62:1). The epithet *qōdeš* even appears parallel to *ʾĕlōah*, a biform of the name El, in one of the theophanic texts mentioned above (Hab 3:3). Finally, lines 4-5 appear to contain parallel constructions alluding to one or more gods in the context of battle.

But it is at this point that difficult questions start to rise. Do the parallel constructions in lines 4-5 refer to the same god? How do we understand the syntax of the expression *lbrk. bʿl* in connection with *lšmʾl*? What is the relationship between Baal and the Name of El and how do both of these relate to the El mentioned at the beginning of the inscription? Further, and more to the point, how do all of these deities/epithets relate to YHWH?

Most scholars, including Aḥituv and Eshel, have tended to read *lbrk* as an infinitive with *bʿl* as the object, so that the line is understood, "to bless Baal on the day of battle." But this interpretation is problematic for several reasons. First, the language and syntactic structure of lines 4 and 5 is virtually identical apart from the sequences *brk. bʿl* and *šmʾl* (*l-... bym. mlḥmt*), so it seems questionable that the *lamed*-object phrases would have been composed to function in such a non-parallel fashion, with the first *lamed* introducing an infinitival expression and the second a nominal predicate. Because *šmʾl* is clearly a nominal construct chain functioning as an epithet of a deity we would expect the *lamed* prior to *lbrk. bʿl* to be adnominal as well. Second, as my epigraphic analysis has shown, the phrase *lbrk. bʿl bym. mlḥmt* is preceded by the verbal form *hkn*, which further militates against reading *lbrk* as

infinitival. Although Aḥituv and Eshel's understanding of *hkn* as the Niphal imperative is grammatically possible, this rendering fits the context poorly. Not only is the notion "to prepare (yourself) to bless" nonsensical, but it lacks the explicit specification of subject expected for this type of construction (e.g. Amos 4:12; Ez 38:7). A more plausible reading is that *hkn* is a defectively spelled Hiphil (infinitive?) and that the subject of the verb had occurred in the part of the text that was destroyed, as this would allow the text to remain in third person narration. Following this analysis, the use of an infinitive after the Hiphil of KWN would be awkward and uncharacteristic of Hebrew, we would rather expect a direct object or *lamed* of interest (e.g. Ps 7:14; 57:7). Lastly, the notion that someone or some deity could bless a high god such as Baal is anomalous from a religio-historical perspective (Naʿaman 2012: 309). As the attested use of the verb BRK in inscriptions shows, blessing was typically conveyed to people from deities, not to them. Blum has noted that the use of the verb BRK in the praise of deity seems to be a late development and first occurs outside the Bible in Hellenistic-Roman times (2013: 35; cf. Mitchell 1987).

Following Dobbs-Allsopp (2005: 289) and Naʿaman (2012: 309-310), the most satisfactory reading of *brk. bʿl* in the syntactic context is to take *brk* as the passive participle in a construct chain with *bʿl* as the nomen rectum: "the Blessed of Baal." A comparable expression, *hbrk bʿl*, occurs in the Karatepe inscription with reference to Azitawadda (KAI 26), and *brk bʿl* without the article appears on a Hebrew seal (Avigad and Sass 1997: 268). This reading not only obtains a perfect syntactic parallel with the epithet *šmʾl* in the following line so that both consist of construct chains ("Blessed of Baal"//"Name of El") and tallies with the sense of the expression *hkn l-* immediately before, but it is also consistent with the nature of poetic parallelism to vary divine appellatives: "he prepared for the Blessed of Baal on the day of battle//… for the Name of El on the day of battle." Furthermore, it is probable that the expressions *brk. bʿl* and *šmʾl* may have had similar semantic resonances. Dobbs-Allsopp has noted that "Azatiwadda, who is called *hbrk bʿl*, is not the king himself but only a representative of the king, a stand-in" and that the epithet *šm bʿl* "Name of Baal" used for Astarte at Ugarit similarly indicates she is a warrior representative of Baal (2005: 289).

Accepting the validity of the above translation, the inscription contains information of far-reaching religio-historical implications, which we will explore and draw attention to in the remainder of this study. The first and most startling discovery is

that the divine name Baal appears to be used parallel with the name El. Because *brk. bʿl* and *šm ʾl* are simple construct chains that serve to highlight a bound relationship between *brk* and *bʿl* on the one hand and *šm* and *ʾl* on the other, the parallel nature of the constructions indicate not only a divine identity between the god denominated *brk* and *šm*, but also between *bʿl* and *ʾl*! Second, in line with the first, the composition of the divine epithets *brk. bʿl* and *šm ʾl* point to the existence of some kind of pantheon structure underlying the literary presentation of the plaster wall inscription. The deity referenced as *brk. bʿl* and *šm ʾl* is obviously distinct from the god El mentioned at the beginning of the inscription, and yet he appears to be closely related to or dependent on El. His divine epithets, which are simply generic titles ("blessed one", "name"), allow him to be identified and distinguished from other deities merely by virtue of his relationship to the high god. The name *šm ʾl* even lacks a word divider between the two elements, suggesting that the epithet had become so conventional it was used as a proper name in itself. As we will see below, the use of such bound constructions to denominate deities that were closely linked and subordinated to pantheon chiefs is attested in the larger Syro-Palestinian area (e.g. Ashtar-Kemosh, Anat-Bethel).

**Baal=El?**

Although a number of scholars have recognized the possibility that Baal and El are equated in the inscriptions (e.g. Halpern 1993; Smith 2004; Dobbs-Allsopp 2005), few have spent much time exploring the implications of this identification and most have assumed that Baal and El are being used as generic epithets of YHWH. So what is the historical basis of this identification?

Against the view that Baal and El are generic epithets of YHWH, the names appear to be used at KA as regular proper names, that is, to designate a singular coherent figure. As with other common nouns treated as proper names, *bʿl* and *ʾl* refer to the one Baal ("the lord" or "Lord") and the one El ("the god" or "God"); in the context of the inscriptions it simply would not make sense to translate *bʿl* and *ʾl* as common nouns. In addition, the manner in which YHWH and Baal/El are invoked in the inscriptions at KA suggests that a clear distinction obtained between them. When the god YHWH is referenced, he is consistently denominated by the simple form

YHWH/YHW, with no extra identifying epithet. YHWH and Baal/El are not mentioned in proximity to one another and neither are they placed in poetic parallelism. There is no example of YHWH and Baal/El combined into a double divine name, such as we find elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean and in the Bible. Rather, only Baal and El are placed parallel and when the deity identified as *brk* and *šm* is related to another deity in construct relation, it is to Baal/El, not YHWH. The name Baal also occurs in another inscriptional fragment at KA, where it again appears to function as a regular proper name. Thus primafacie, if we assume that Israelites were responsible for the construction of the several plaster display inscriptions at KA, which based on the personal names attested there we have little reason to doubt, it seems that the high god or pantheon head recognized by Israel at the time was not YHWH but El, who was also identified as Baal.

Of course, it is well known that the divine name Baal had a long history in the cultures of the Southern Levant and that it appears frequently in the toponyms and personal names of Iron Age Israel-Judah (Naʿaman 1999; Zevit 2001). Baal is also presented in the Bible as an indigenous Canaanite deity that was popularly worshipped by Israelites-Judahites from the period of the settlement until the destruction and exile of the kingdoms (cf. Herrmann 1999).

But who was this Baal? Some scholars have hypothesized that Baal is to be identified with Baal Haddu as known from Ugarit (Day 2000; 2010), whereas others have argued that the Baal adopted in the Northern Kingdom was Phoenician Melqart (Ribichini 1999; Römer 2015) or Baal Šamem (Smith 2002; Niehr 1994; 2003). Still others have suggested that Baal is simply a title of an older version of YHWH (Keel and Uehlinger 1992; Jeremias 1994) or that behind the Baalim stood many local gods (Dearman 1993; 2001).

Each of these proposals face challenges:

*Baal Haddu*

Apart from being associated with weather and fertility, the Baal described in biblical literature bears little resemblance to Baal Haddu of Ugarit. As we will see below, the

profile of Israelite Baal is that of a pantheon chief, not a young warrior struggling for a place in the divine household. Further, the name *bʿl* "lord/master" was a generic title and appears to have been used to designate local patron deities and national high gods throughout Syria-Palestine (cf. Müller 2005; Schwemer 2008: 8-9; Smith 2012: 220-243; Allen 2015: 215-236). At Ebla and Emar the Baal epithet was early associated with Dagan (Healey 1999: 216; Fleming 1993), who in the Upper Euphrates was "lord" of multiple cult centers (Feliu 2003). In the Phoenician and Punic realm a number of different Baal gods were distinguished from one another, including Baal Šamem (KAI 4:3), Baal Sidon (KAI 14:18), Baal Lebanon (KAI 31:1), and Baal Ḥammon (KAI 78:3). An inscription from Tel Miqne reads "to Baal and [king] Padi," in which Baal is apparently a reference to Dagon or the local patron deity (Gitin 2003: 288). In Ammon *bʿl* was an epithet of the high god El-Milcom (Aufrecht 2003: 140; Burnett 2009) and we can assume that the same was the case with national patron gods in Moab and Edom (Heltzer 1999; Bartlett 1989: 194, 196, 211, 218). In view of this widespread usage, it seems problematic to try to homogenize individual Baals into a mythological typology imported from Syrian Ugarit. Standing behind this multitude of "lords" can only have been significant local diversity (cf. Dearman 2001; Engelken 1996).

*Baal Melqart/Šamem*

In the Bible Baal is consistently portrayed as an outsider and is implicated as having a Phoenician origin (1 Kgs 16:31-32), especially in the Elijah narrative where the conflict between Baal and YHWH occurs at Mount Carmel on the boundary between Israel and Phoenicia (1 Kgs 18). However, the attempt by biblical authors to associate Baal with Phoenicia and paint him as foreign is almost certainly late Dtr religious propaganda with very little connection to historical reality. As shown by the occurrence of Baal in personal names and toponyms, the Baal of the northern and southern kingdoms was a native Israelite-Judahite deity, as was Asherah. Especially revealing is the fact that in contrast to Astarte, Kemosh, and Milcom (1 Kgs 11:7, 33; 2 Kgs 23:13), Baal worship is never explicitly ascribed a foreign origin, but is rather associated with the religious practices of the indigenous Canaanite peoples (e.g. 2 Kgs 21:2, 11). Throughout the southern Levant national tutelary deities tended as a rule to be identical to those worshipped on a personal and familial level (Burnett 2009; cf. Albertz 2012), so it is doubtful that the Omrides would have been so reckless as to adopt a non-native deity for this role (Day 2000: 76). In addition, the use of the Elijah and Elisha narratives as historical sources

reflecting on events during the Omride era is problematic. Marc Brettler (2007) and others have argued that these stories were not composed with historical interests in mind, but actually function more as complex allegories that comment intertextually on earlier biblical tradition. The lateness of these stories is also suggested by the fact that they seem to have been inserted into the books of Kings at a late stage in its development (McKenzie 1991).

*Baal YHWH*

The Baal depicted in the Bible is certainly comparable to biblical YHWH and competes with the latter insofar that he is a god of weather and fulfills the same general fertility roles (cf. Hosea 2). Once YHWH is even identified with a local Baal, the Baal Perazim (2 Sam 5:20). But at the same time Baal appears to have originated as a separate deity from YHWH and was regarded as such by the biblical authors. Whereas Baal and his female counterpart Baalat/Baalah occur in Israelite toponyms, the divine name YHWH does not (Naʿaman 1999: 140; Zevit 2001: 595; Römer 2015: 86). In addition, the biblical authors treat the name Baal (or "the Baal") as a simple proper name, sufficient in itself to call to mind a particular deity, and not once is Baal explicitly linked with YHWH, such as in an expanded or compound name. The name Baal frequently attracts the scribal dysphemistic alteration to *bōšet*, suggesting it was recognized to be a divine name in the same way as Astarte or Molek (cf. Herrmann 1999: 137; Galter 1999: 164; Day 2000: 81-83; Smith 2002: 46; Steiner 2009: 511). If Baal had once been a name of YHWH, we would expect there to be more explicit negotiation and clarification in biblical tradition about the relationship between the two names, not simply vilification of the one. The personal name Bealiah (1 Chr 12:6) and the above passage about YHWH at Baal Perazim do not show that YHWH had been equated with Baal. The element *bʿl* in the name Bealiah is most reasonably explained as a common appellative with Yah as the theophoric, "Yah is lord," not "Yah is Baal" (cf. Herrmann 1999: 136), in line with the pattern of theophoric personal names more generally. On the other hand, the passage about YHWH at Baal Perazim is of a literary character. YHWH is associated with Baal Perazim in 2 Sam 5:20 not because the author accepted the identification with Baal, but because in this instance *bʿl* could be understood in its common appellative sense appropriate for the scribal wordplay: YHWH is a "lord of breaches" (cf. Naʿaman 1999). See also 1 Chron 14:11, where the Chronicler replaces YHWH in this episode with *hʾlhym* "the God."

*Many local Baals*

While the historical origin and relationship of the many local Baal cults in the hill country of the southern Levant is unclear and it is reasonable to assume that they reflect some aboriginal diversity, at least for the monarchic period within Israel-Judah the name Baal seems to have represented a single unitary figure. As was mentioned above, in personal names from inscriptions and the Bible the *bʿl* theophoric is used as a regular proper name, the same as YHWH. So in the immediate context of Israel-Judah apparently there was no need to clarify the identity of Baal for those who bore and used the names. Similarly, the biblical authors do not vary in the way they refer to Baal in the northern or southern kingdoms, he is simply and always *hbʿl* "the Baal," the attachment of the article again signaling the unitary nature of the deity. Oftentimes, the singular and plural of *bʿl* (or other metaphorical descriptors, e.g. "lovers") are interchanged in the same literary context (e.g., Jer 2:8, 23; 7:9; 9:14; 11:13; Hos 2), thus making clear that the latter were understood to be manifestations of the former (so Day 2010: 206).

*Baal-El*

In view of the fact that Baal seems to have been an indigenous Israelite-Judahite deity and yet was distinct from YHWH, a more plausible explanation is that Baal is simply another name for El, the original head of the Israelite pantheon, in line with plaster wall inscription 4.2 at KA. After all, there is abundant evidence in the Bible for the worship of El in Israel-Judah (Smith 2002: 135-148; Römer 2015: 72-82, 127-128; Herrmann 1999: 274-280). The god El appears in an inscriptions from Khirbet el-Qom and possibly Jerusalem (Mastin 2009: 112; Miller 1980: 43-46), while in personal names El theophorics were second most common after YHWH theoporics and were continually used from the Late Iron Age into the Persian period (Albertz 2012: 354-356; cf. Tigay 1986: 12; Fowler 1988: 38-44; de Moor 1990: 10-41; Binger 1997: 30-34; Norin 2013).

I am aware of no contemporary biblical scholar that has seriously considered the possibility that behind Israelite Baal stands El tout court (cf. Oden 1977; Wyatt

2014; Herrmann 1999: 138), which is probably to be attributed to the powerful influence that the Ugaritic mythological literature has had in shaping the parameters of current discussion of Israelite religion. But this oversight is nevertheless surprising in view of the substantial lines of evidence that can be brought in its support and how critical the question of identifying Baal is to correctly understanding the history of Israelite-Judahite religion and the nature of the biblical literature.

We can begin by noting that if we examine Hebrew personal names from inscriptions and the Bible, the names with a Baal theophoric have close analogues in names with an El theophoric, whether in Hebrew or the larger West Semitic epigraphic corpus (cf. Albertz 2012: 534-601; Fowler 1988: 333-364). Inscriptional *bʿlšmʿ* "Baal heard," *bʿlzkr* "Baal remembered," *bʿrʿ* "Baal is exalted," *ʾbbʿl* "my father is Baal," *bʿlntn* "Baal gave," *mrbʿl* "Baal blessed," and *ʿnybʿl* "Baal answered" have their counterparts in *ʾlšmʿ* "El heard" (E Heb 37; B Heb 6), *ʾlzkr* "El remembered" (E Heb 4; cf. *zkrʾl* Am), *ʾlrm* "El is exalted" (E Heb 5; cf. *ʾlrm* Am), *ʾbyʾl* "my father is El" (B Heb 2; cf. *ʾbymlk*, *ʾbymʾl*, *ʾlʾb*), *mrʾl* "El blessed" (Am), and *ʿnʾl* "El answered" (Am), and biblical *bʿlydʿ* "Baal has taken notice," *ʾyšbʿl* "man of Baal," and *bʿlḥnn* "Baal was gracious" correspond to *ʾlydʿ* "El has taken notice" (B Heb 3), *ʾšʾl* "man of El" (Phoen; cf *ʾšʾdr*, *ʾštnt*), and *ʾlḥnn* "El was gracious" (E Heb 1; B Heb 1; cf *ʾlḥnn* Am). The use of the same predicative element in both cases suggests a conceptual affinity between Baal and El. To be sure, YHWH is attested in personal names with many of the same verbal or nominal elements (*yhwyšmʿ*, *šmʿyhw*, *zkryhw*, *yhwrm*, *ʾbyhw*, *yhwntn*, *mryhw*, *ʿnyhw*, *ydʿyw*, *yhwḥnn*). But this comparison at least shows a compatibility between Baal and El names and in some cases the structural parallels are closer than with YHWH names. For example, *ʾlšmʿ*, *ʾlzkr*, and *ʾlydʿ* carry the theophoric in initial position, whereas the YHWH names carry the theophoric in final position or reflect a different verbal form.

The divine names Baal and El share an affinity in another respect, as they are both title-names and closely correspond at a semantic and cultural level. From a lexical-semantic perspective, the names Baal and El are functionally equivalent. Both are common nouns used as proper names: Baal is "the *baʿal*" (identity understood) and El is "the *ʾel*" (identity understood), or in other words, the ultimate prototype of each category recognized in the worshipping community. At a cultural level, both names point to the singular authority of the deity they represent. If El were the historical pantheon head of Israel-Judah during the monarchic period, then what

better epithet to identify his role in the social and political lives of his worshippers than Baal? David Schloen (2001: 349-357) and Mark Smith (2002: 54-61) have convincingly argued that the Canaanite/Israelite pantheons were conceptualized on the model of the royal patriarchal household, and as the foundation of the household was the patrimonial *baʿal*, it seems obvious that the epithet should apply to El in his position as divine father and supreme master. Another ancient epithet of El was *qnh ʾrṣ* "possessor/owner of the land," which echoes the usage of *bʿl* compounded with toponyms in the sense of "master/lord" of a particular place.

Of course, the use of the name Baal at Ugarit seems to conflict with the notion of *bʿl* as a title of El, since it appears to have been reserved exclusively for Baal Haddu and is never applied to El (who is however referred to as *ʾdn* "lord"). But it is doubtful that this assignment of the name should be seen as archetypal for the southern Levant more generally, as the relationship between Baal Haddu and El at Ugarit is fraught with tension (cf. also the epithet *ʿly* "Most High," which in Israel-Judah is connected to El). In many respects Baal Haddu is portrayed as an outsider who has partially displaced the authority of El, a theme that takes center stage in the Baal cycle (Smith 1994: 87-96; 2002: 61-66). So the use of the title Baal as the proper name of this deity may reflect the peculiar social and political circumstances of Ugarit and a theological agenda to advance him to a higher position in the cult. Further, in ritual and cultic texts the identity of the deities lying behind Baal epithets is much more ambiguous and a variety of data suggest that in an earlier period before Haddu's ascendance at Ugarit El had been the original Baal of Mount Zaphon. Mark Smith has noted that the Baal of Zaphon seems to be independent of the Baal of Ugarit and to precede him (Smith 2012: 230-231), and several lists and miscellaneous texts associate El as pantheon head with Zaphon (e.g., KTU 1.47; 1.65). Biblical tradition also links El to Zaphon as the primordial deity who defeated Yam, established his home on the mountain above the deep, and released fresh water over the land (Wyatt 2014: 104-117).

We have already seen that in the Iron Age southern Levant *bʿl* seems to have been a standard epithet of national patron deities, so it would be surprising if this was not the case in Israel-Judah as well. This includes El-Milcom, Kemosh, Dagon, and Baal Šamem, all deities comparable in function and status to the Israelite national high god El. Furthermore, we have several established examples from the broader eastern Mediterranean where El carries the moniker of Baal or its equivalent:

1. Bethel is widely recognized as a late Aramaean form of El (van der Toorn 1992: 85; Röllig 1999: 173-174; cf. Smith 2001: 137; 2002: 183; Barré 1983: 48-49). His name means "house of El" and replaces El in Aramaic personal names. Biblical tradition closely associates the god of Jacob (i.e. Israelite El) and the god of Laban (i.e. Bethel) and the origin of the sanctuary at Bethel where the god El was worshipped is tied to Jacob's journey to Aram (Gen 28:10-22; 31:53; 35:3). In Amherst Papyrus 63 (Steiner 2003: 309-327), Bethel is repeatedly described with attributes evocative of the Canaanite version of El: He is a father, husband, and vigorous Bull; he is a judge and king; he is the lord of heaven, with astral associations; he is a creator god who controls the sea and waters and makes harvest time possible. In this same text, Bethel is typically referred to as *mar* "Lord," the Aramaic equivalent of *bʿl*.

2. Baal Hamon is another version of El that came to prominence in the late Punic world (Smith 2001: 138-139; Olyan 1988: 52-53; Cross 1973: 24-28; Teixidor 1979: 12). In the Zingirli dynastic inscriptions Baal Hamon is interchanged with El (KAI 24; 214; 215) and in Punic inscriptions we find El Hamon as a variant of Baal Hamon (e.g. KAI 19). Baal Hamon is identified with Greek Kronos and Latin Saturnus, the interpretatio graeca and romana of El in the late period, and in iconography he typically is portrayed sitting on a throne (Niehr 2008). He carries some of the standard epithets of El, including *ʾdn* "Lord" and *qdš* "Holy One," and consistent with the religion of Canaanite El in the motherland receives child sacrifice. In personal names Baal Hamon is named simply Baal.

3. The Baal Lebanon mentioned in inscriptions from Cyprus (e.g. KAI 31) likely refers to an ancient form of El. The Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon have strong links to the mythology of El (Lipinski 1971; Naccache 1996). In the Epic of Gilgamesh it is the legendary dwelling place of the gods and other texts spread over two millennia similarly portray it as a mountain of divine council (Smith 2012). In KTU 1.22 I 17-20 El and his garden are associated with the Lebanon, and like Zaphon the mountain range has a tradition of primordial conflict (KTU 1.83). In later Phoenician religion, the mountain is associated with Adonis, a reflection of the myth of El's beloved son (Levenson 1993: 25-35). Tinnit, who is elsewhere paired with Baal Hamon, is associated with the Lebanon (KAI 81). In Amherst Papyrus 63 the beams of Bethel's temple are said to come from the Lebanon (Steiner 2003). Ps 29 equates the god of the

Lebanon with YHWH and describes him as an El-like character; he is a king (v. 10) with a divine assembly (v. 1) and sits enthroned over the deep (v. 10). Recently, R. Steiner has identified the Baal of the Bekaa Valley in the Lebanon as El, who was worshipped as *Connaros*, i.e. *qn ʾrṣ* "possessor of the land" into Roman times (2009: 507-525).

A number of onomastic, comparative, and theoretical considerations are thus suggestive for identifying Israelite Baal with Canaanite El. Beyond this rather circumstantial argument, however, direct support for the equivalency of Baal and El can be found in the Bible itself:

1. The only divine name explicitly interchanged with Baal is El. In the story about Abimelech the Baal at Shechem is twice called *bʿl bryt* "Baal of the covenant" (Jdgs 8:33; 9:4) and then *ʾl bryt* "El of the covenant" (Jdgs 9:46), a deity that can be identified with Israelite El on other grounds (Lewis 1996: 415-16). One of David's sons born in Jerusalem is named *ʾlydʿ* "El has taken notice" (2 Sam 5:16; 1 Chron 3:8) and then later *bʿlydʿ* "Baal has taken notice" (1 Chron 14:7).

2. Baal is repeatedly paired with Asherah as a divine couple (Jdgs 3:7; 6:25-30; 1 Kgs 18:19; 2 Kgs 17:16; 21:3, 7; 23:4-7), which makes complete sense if Baal is El. In the past this pairing has often been seen as a problem since Baal Haddu is not elsewhere paired with Asherah (cf. Olyan 1988: 38-61; Smith 2002: 116), but if Baal is El then the problem goes away.

3. Baal has an astral family and is associated with astral religion (2 Kgs 17:16; 21:3; 23:4-5; Zeph 1:4-5). The description of "Baal, Asherah, and all the host of heaven" as objects of worship is indicative of a pantheon structure, with father, mother, and second-tier children (cf. 2 Kgs 23:5). A variety of comparative data shows that Canaanite El and Asherah had an astral family (Smith 2001: 61-66; 2010: 187-206; Cooley 2011: 281-287).

4. Baal worship is frequently associated with local *bmwt* sanctuaries or non-centralized cult in the countryside (2 Kgs 17: 9-10; 21:3; 23; Jer 2:20-24; 11:13;

19:5; 32:35; Num 22:41). In Hosea the *bmwt* are linked directly to El: "The *bmwt* of Aven, the sin of Israel, shall be destroyed. Thorn and thistle shall grow up on their altars" (10:8). As generally recognized, the word "Aven" in Hosea is a scribal dysphemism for El (Steiner 2009: 511; Andersen and Freedman 1980: 372).

5. Baal is often associated with child sacrifice (2 Kgs 21:6; 23:10; Jer 3:24-25; 19:5-6; 32:35). In the Canaanite realm the patron god of child sacrifice was El (Ackerman 1992: 155-159; Levenson 1993: 25-35; Stavrakopoulou 2004: 261-299). Child sacrifice is also associated with *bmwt* sanctuaries (2 Kgs 16:3-4; Jer 7:31; 19:5; Ezek 16:20; Hos 4:5), which points back to El.

6. Baal is linked to divinatory practices (2 Kgs 17:17; Hos 3:4; 4:12) and has prophets and priests in his cult (2 Kgs 10:19; Jer 2:8, 26; 23:13; Hos 4:6). Because prophecy and divination in the Levant tended to be the domain of the chief god and goddess in individual pantheons (cf. Dagan and Išḫara, Baal Šamem, and Baal-Milcom), the fact that Baal has prophets (along with Asherah) implies that he was a pantheon chief (cf. Stökl 2012: 87, 146-148, 220-221). There are also many clues that El in particular was conceived as a god of prophecy and divination, including divinatory practices and oracular language connected to El at Ugarit (Wyatt 2007), the description of El in Num 24:16 and his association with the prophet Balaam at Deir 'Alla (Seow 2003), the repeated visions of El by the patriarchs/matriarchs (e.g. Gen 16:13; 17:1; 26:23; 28:12-17), and the use of the title איש אל/איש אלהים "Man of God/El" as a synonym for prophet.

7. Baal is a god of grain and wine (Hos 2:5, 8; 7:14; 9:1-2), agricultural festivals (Hos 2:11-13), kingship (1 Kgs 16:31; 2 Kgs 21:3; Hos 3:4; 7:5, 7; Jer 2:26), and human fertility (Hos 9:11-12). All these elements were basic to the profile of Canaanite El (e.g., Gen 27:28; 28:3; 49:25-26; Jdgs 9:27; KTU 1.4 IV 24; 1.15 II 13-28; 1.17 I 23-26, 36-43; 1.22 I 19-20).

8. Baal's association with agricultural fertility implies that he is a weather god (Hos 2:5, 21-23; 4:3; Jer 3:3; 5:24; 14:22). Canaanite El also seems to have been a god of sky and storm (cf. KTU 1.14 II 22-24), based on his astral

connections and association with high mountains, although this role has been obscured at Ugarit, where control of weather is under the exclusive authority of Baal Haddu. The original role of El as a weather god is preserved in Amherst Papyrus 63 and in a number of biblical texts that reflect knowledge of the mythology of El (Ps 29:3; 68:7-10; 104:3-9; Jer 10:12-13), especially the book of Job (26:7-14; 28:25-26; 37:2-5, 9, 21-23; 38:1, 25-27, 34-35; 40:6, 9).

9. In the broader context of perennial worship of Baal, Israel is said to have venerated calf idols (1 Kgs 12:28-32; 2 Kgs 17:16; Hos 8:5-6; 10:5; 13:2). El was symbolized as a bull, so the appearance of bovine icons in connection with Baal worship is understandable.

In numerous respects the description of Baal in the Bible matches the profile of El. He is in fact an Israelite version of El, the original pantheon head of the tribes of the central hill country. Virtually all of the motifs associated with Baal and the cultic functions ascribed to him cohere under the assumption that he is El.

This conclusion of course has important implications for understanding and explaining the anti-Baal rhetoric in biblical tradition. The consistency in the representation of Baal cult across many different texts shows that the polemic was not some vague condemnation of syncretistic Canaanite fertility gods, but actually was directed at a very specific cultic reality in Israel-Judah. If we set aside the few Baals identified as foreign or non-Israelite in the literary context who are occasionally said to have been worshipped by Israelites-Judahites, including the Baals and the Astartes of the premonarchic era (Jdgs 2:13: 10:6, 10; 1 Sam 7:3-4; 12:10), the Baal of the Elijah narrative (1 Kgs 18:18-19:18), and Baal-zebub of Ekron (2 Kgs 1:2-16), all the rest of the Baals described in biblical literature seem to have been indigenous to Israel-Judah. Not only are these Baals or Baal never explicitly specified as foreign, but their continual worship by Israelites-Judahites and association with one or more of the Baal-El features described above bind them together and identify them as representing a unitary Israelite divinity. In fact, in the Dtr history from the point Ahab supposedly institutes Baal worship, outside of the Elijah narrative, Baal is consistently referenced in the singular.

Further, the depiction of Baal in this literature is highly retrospective and ideological. It is probably no coincidence that anti-Baal rhetoric is confined to the Deuteronomistic history and prophetic texts closely related to the Deuteronomistic scribal milieu (Jeremiah and Hosea), while El theology is much more favorably invoked in other biblical traditions (e.g. the Priestly source, Second Isaiah). If Baal-El cult is not expressly identified as foreign, it is continually insinuated to have a foreign, non-Israelite-Judahite origin and portrayed as a cultic accretion or intrusion into correct Israelite-Judahite worship: the Baals and the Asherahs of premonarchic times are associated with the foreign Baals and Astartes (cf. Jdgs 2:13; 3:7; 6:25-32; 10:6, 10 etc); the Baal of Ahab is associated with Phoenica through his marriage to Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal (1 Kgs 16:31-32); the Baal of Ahaziah is associated with the Baal zebub of Ekron (cf. 1 Kgs 22:53; 2 Kgs 2:2-16); the Baal of Athaliah is implied to have been introduced from the northern kingdom (2 Kgs 8:26-27; 11:18-20); and Baal worship more generally is linked to the customs of pre-Israelite Canaanite peoples (2 Kgs 17:7-8; 21:2, 9). Accepting the identification of Baal and El, this simply could not have been the case. Many lines of evidence confirm that Baal-El had been the original ancestral god of Israel-Judah. The anti-Baal narrative tradition of the Bible is therefore an example of the "invention of tradition." The biblical authors acknowledge that Baal-El had been a prominent feature of Israelite-Judahite worship from premonarchic times, but they construct a period prior to settlement in the land of Canaan when YHWH worship was instituted in order to show that YHWH cult was primary and to distinguish it from the traditional Baal religion of Israel-Judah. In this way, Baal worship is portrayed as a deviation, a corruption mediated by Canaanite peoples of an earlier pristine devotion to YHWH alone. However, the notion that the people of Israel-Judah and their cult had originated outside the land is ideological fiction. The Israelites were Canaanites and their religion a local variant of Canaanite religion (Niehr 2010: 27). Throughout most if not all of Israel-Judah's history, Baal-El worship had been traditional and entirely normative. This is shown particularly by the fact that the majority of Israel and Judah's kings are reported to have sponsored and practiced the cult.

As a consequence, we should not take the depiction of Baal in the Bible as an accurate reflection of the origin and development of Baal worship in Iron Age Israel-Judah, or that there had been in fact a conflict of alternating loyalties to YHWH and Baal experienced in the cult. Rather, the biblical authors have projected their own cultic norms and realities into the past and constructed narratives to delegitimize the cult of El in favor of the cult of YHWH. Whereas the Baal cult is iconolatrous, the YHWH cult is strictly aniconic. Whereas the Baal cult is distributed to multiple

sanctuaries, the YHWH cult is centralized to Jerusalem. Whereas Baal cult is polytheistic and involves the worship of a hierarchical pantheon, the YHWH cult is singular in focus. In other words, the conflict between YHWH and Baal-El is a literary fiction. Israel did not in reality have two pantheon heads (who are both like El!) competing for worshippers among the same people during the Iron Age. As his name suggests, in the context of Israel-Judah Baal-El was the de facto and undisputed king. It was only at some later point when the cult of Jerusalem had become isolated from the traditional Baal-El cult of the surrounding country and there was opportunity for a reorganization of the pantheon that YHWH supplanted Baal-El as national patron deity. This role of YHWH as chief ancestral and royal deity was then read back into the premonarchic and monarchic history of Israel-Judah by the community responsible for writing the Bible.

Baal worship was treated as a threat by the biblical authors because at the time of their writing, it actually was. People do not tend to give up ancestral gods or traditional religious practices very lightly. We can assume that innovation in the cult of Jerusalem would have been fairly limited in influence and that in the regional cult of the surrounding hill country things would have mostly gone on as before, with the worship of Baal, Asherah, and their astral children and use of cult icons of one form or another.

In sum, the Bible is an invaluable resource for clarifying the identity of Baal, since it contains many clues about his role and nature as national patron god of Israel-Judah. But it is also a curated and partisan presentation that reflects significant cultural changes that occurred in the wake of the destruction of the Israelite and Judahite monarchies, including a reorganization of the pantheon itself. The information about Baal must therefore be evaluated critically and carefully.

In the next installment, I will take a closer look at the other two figures mentioned in the plaster wall inscription, the *brk. bʿl* “Blessed of Baal” and *šm ʾl* “Name of El.”

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