YAHWISM AND BAALISM BEFORE THE EXILE

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THE pendulum of biblical scholarship characteristically swings to extremes on various exegetical problems. The swing is especially likely in the case of a long-cherished traditional interpretation. This paper deals with one such problem, the relationship of Yahwism and Baalism during the pre-exilic period.

If an unquestioned reading of the biblical material be accepted, a violent reaction against the Baalists was waged by the Yahwists with the Israelites accepting Yahwism to the exclusion of Baalism. W. F. Albright has stated:

> It was fortunate for the future of monotheism that the Israelites of the Conquest were a wild folk, endowed with primitive energy and ruthless will to exist, since the resulting decimation of the Canaanites prevented the complete fusion of the two kindred folk which would almost inevitably have depressed Yahwistic standards to a point where recovery was impossible. Thus the Canaanites, with their orgiastic nature-worship, their cult of fertility in the form of serpent symbols and sensuous nudity, and their gross mythology, were replaced by Israel, with its pastoral simplicity and purity of life, its lofty monotheism, and its severe code of ethics.[1]

It is not my concern to swing the exegetical pendulum to the opposite extreme and thus to maintain that the situation of the pre-exilic period was devoid of conflict. The archeological evidence which depicts the twelfth and eleventh centuries in Palestine as disturbed centuries is indisputable.[2] The point in question is the degree of syncretism and when open hostility began.

The syncretism of Yahwism and Baalism in Canaan has traditionally been understood as a movement involving only the minority of the Israelites. John Bright states:

> It was inevitable that some Israelites should view the agrarian religion as a necessary part of the agrarian life and begin to propitiate the gods of fertility. Others, no doubt, accommodated the worship of Yahweh to that of Ba'al, and even began to confuse the two.[3]

[1] W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, p. 281.
[2] John Bright, *A History of Israel*, p. 154.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 156.

It seems, however, that this syncretistic movement among the Israelites was the activity of the majority rather than of the minority. My position does not deny the necessity of a psychological tenacity among a minority band of exclusive Yahwists; indeed, this continuum was necessary if Yahwism were to be maintained. It should be realized, however, that the traditional interpretation has been strongly influenced by the deuteronomic material and by the disturbance evident in Palestine in the twelfth and eleventh centuries.

The gradual growth of religious conflict between the Yahwists and the Baalists is often ignored. It is a false sociological principle to assume that contact *per se* necessarily brings on conflict. My aim is to demonstrate that the clarification which turned the confrontation of these two ideologies into a clear religious contest was not made until the Omrid dynasty, with the two opposing proponents of Yahwism and Baalism, Elijah and Jezebel respectively. The continuum of exclusive Yahwism among the minority mentioned earlier is necessary to account for the emergence of Elijah as a zealous devotee of Yahweh during the Omrid period. If this thesis be correct, it simply affirms that the preexilic history as recorded in the Masoretic text should be viewed, to use modern parlance, as a minority report. But does the text itself support this position?

The Masoretic text gives little information concerning the relationship of Yahwism and Baalism during the preconquest period. It should be noted, however, that the biblical scholar's primary source material for an understanding of Baalism comes from this period in the form of the Ugaritic texts. The importance of this period is made the clearer when it is recognized that archeology has substantiated the social and cultural interchange between Ugarit and Egypt as early as the beginning of the second millennium B.C.[4] Various Ugaritic deities were known in Egypt at an early date — Baal perhaps by the XVIIIth and XIXth Dynasties, i. e., 1570–1202 B.C.,[5] and Anat, the biblical Anath, as early as 1700 B.C.[6] The exegete should consider carefully before he labels as anachronistic the possible evidence for a Yahweh-Baal ideological confrontation prior to the conquest. While space does not permit the ex-

[4] See C. F. A. Schaeffer, *The Cuneiform Texts of Ras Shamra-Ugarit*, pp. 1–29. The city which occupied the Ugaritic area *ca.* 2000 B.C. was the second level of Ugarit.

[5] John Gray, "Baal," *IDB*, 1, p. 329. J. A. Wilson, "Egypt," *IDB*, 2, pp. 47, 51, dates the XVIIIth Dynasty 1570–1305 B.C. and the XIXth Dynasty 1303–1202 B.C. Assuming the dating of the exodus suggested by W. F. Albright (1290 B.C.; *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, p. 13), a sufficient period is allowed for an awareness of the Baal cult by the Hebrews while in Egypt.

[6] Anat was introduced into Egypt by the Hyksos. See John Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan*, p. 128, n. 1; and M. J. Dahood, "Ancient Semitic Deities in Syria and Palestine," in *Le Antiche Divinità Semitiche*, ed. by Sabatino Moscati, p. 80.

pansion of this idea, it should be noted that certain preconquest events such as the encounter at the Sea of Reeds[7] and the "wilderness calf" should be investigated to determine if there is a possible relationship to or influence by Baalism.

The early period of conquest, as depicted in the book of Joshua, is related in accord with the deuteronomic understanding. The Israelites are represented as having marched triumphantly into Canaan and as having conquered the land in three brief but successful campaigns (Josh 2–11). Most commentators agree, however, that the settlement was not fully accomplished until the time of David. Norman Gottwald observes that the first step in understanding the Joshua narrative

> ... is to replace the common term Conquest with Settlement .... To speak of Conquest fails to do justice to the many ways in which the Canaanites culturally conquered the Hebrews. It ignores the gradual merging of the two peoples so that the Canaanites became Israelites under the kingdom of David. It underplays the nonmilitary factors involved in the entrance of the Hebrews ....[8]

This does not mean that the movement of the Israelites into Canaan can be conceived apart from an active struggle. The conflict, however, was not understood as a collision of Yahwism and Baalism.

The encounter that did take place is much better described as a *Kulturkampf*. The Israelites were making a transition from a nomadic to an agricultural society. This transition forced a re-evaluation of Yahweh, for Yahweh had not proved himself as an agrarian deity.[9] The basic conflict between the Israelites and the Canaanites, therefore, was one which arose out of differing mores attached on the one hand to the desert, seminomadic existence, and on the other hand to the settled, agricultural society.[10] It had not been clarified that the actual antipathy was between Yahweh and Baal. The fact that one of these peoples worshiped Yahweh while the other worshiped Baal is not to be denied, although it is valid to question whether this was exclusive worship on either side. At this juncture, however, the alignment of worship was not the basic issue; for the relationship between Canaanite culture and Baal worship was not fully understood. Only when this clarification was made did the issue move from the question of culture to that of allegiance to deity. The basic issue during the settlement was the

[7] Especially noteworthy are two aspects of this event: (1) the fact that the Hebrews last stopped at Baal-zephon (Exod 14 2) before confronting the water, and (2) the close analogy between the biblical division of the Sea of Reeds (יַם־סוּף) and the Baal myth wherein Baal divided Yam to make of Yam a helpful rather than a destructive force.

[8] N. K. Gottwald, *A Light to the Nations*, p. 160.

[9] See Millar Burrows, "Syncretism in the Old Testament," *JBR*, 9 (1941), p. 11.

[10] W. F. Albright, *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra* (rev. ed., 1963), p. 35.

Kulturkampf — two essentially differing cultures attempting to dominate each other.

The narratives recording the activities of the various judges or deliverers are acknowledged by almost all as deuteronomic material. When the exploits of the individual deliverers are examined, it is immediately recognized that only Deborah (Barak) is represented as having fought against the Canaanites. As early as 1932, T. H. Robinson wrote: "It is true that the military prowess of Israel was a prominent factor in achieving the final result, but the book of Judges makes it clear that it was not by defeating the Canaanites, but by defending them, that Israel attained a dominant position in Palestine."[11] Had the Israelites been concerned primarily with eliminating Baalism, the deliverers would necessarily have viewed the defeat of the Baalistic Canaanites as their primary task. This obviously was not the case.

There are two primary problems in the book of Judges to be faced if this thesis is to be maintained: (1) the recurring introductory formula — "And the people of Israel (again) did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh";[12] and (2) the Gideon narrative, which upon initial examination appears to present the clearest evidence for a conflict between the devotees of Yahwism and Baalism during this period. The introductory formula is no obstacle, however, since this formula is recognized almost unanimously by scholars as part of the deuteronomic framework.[13]

The Gideon narrative is more complex, but it is clear that there are two compositions in Judg 6 11–32 which have been woven together. The account in 6 11–24 describes Gideon as a deliverer in the usual understanding of the word, one who delivers his people from a foreign oppressor, the Midianites. The narrative of 6 25–32 is very different, however, and shows Gideon struggling openly against the Baalists. C. A. Simpson, in his excellent study of the book of Judges, does not regard this second account as a continuation of the original 6 11–24 passage.[14] Aage Bentzen states that "a section like 6, 25–34 (*sic*) clearly points to a period, characterized by an especially acute contest with Baal-worship, presumably the time of Elijah."[15]

I am not suggesting that no conflict existed during the period of the deliverers, but rather that this encounter is still to be viewed as a *Kulturkampf*. Only later — after the cultural struggle had been illuminated;

[11] T. H. Robinson and W. O. E. Oesterley, *A History of Israel*, I, p. 140.

[12] See Judg 3 7, 12; 4 1; 6 1; 10 6; and 13 1.

[13] C. A. Simpson, in *Composition of the Book of Judges*, adequately treats this problem.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[15] Aage Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, II, p. 91.

particularly under the influence of the deuteronomic historians — the Baalistic controversy was heightened and portrayed in such a way that the relationship between Yahwism and Baalism was presented as a principal problem even during the period of the deliverers.

During the early years of the monarchy, the Yahwistic and Baalistic ideologies continued to exist side by side in apparent harmony. In one account of Saul's anointment (I Sam 9 12 ff.), the narrative necessarily includes frequent mention of the "high place"; and this in spite of the fact that the "high place" is generally recognized as a Canaanite accretion to Israelite worship and was usually denounced by the deuteronomic historian.[16] Saul's kingship was marked by constant warfare (I Sam 14 47 ff.), but never with the purpose of exterminating Baalism. One of the more telling indications of Saul's relationship with Baalism is the name of one of his sons, Ishbaal (or Eshbaal, I Chron 8 33), designated as Ishbosheth (II Sam 2 8) by the pious redactor. Saul obviously displayed no antipathy toward Baalism.

David's relationship to Baalism does not differ significantly from that of Saul. David's reign was also marked by warfare, but his purpose was the expansion and consolidation of his kingdom. There is a conspicuous absence of any hostility directed toward Baalism, which is particularly significant since there is no indication in the biblical material that a battle between the devotees of Yahwism and Baalism had been fought prior to David's reign in which the Yahwists were the decisive victors. If Baalism had presented the problem which the book of Judges indicates, however, would it not be expected that a zealous Yahwist such as David would raise the banner of war against Baalism? The answer is affirmative *if* David understood at this point the exclusive demands of Yahwism and the dangers of syncretism. On the contrary, as with Saul, I Chron 14 7 reveals that David named one of his sons Beeliada, a name meaning "Baal knows," designated by the deuteronomic editor as Eliada (II Sam 5 16), i. e., "El knows." David was primarily concerned to amalgamate the differing factions in his kingdom rather than to abolish any given faction.

What David began, Solomon carried to completion — here is the Israelite syncretist *par excellence*. Even Solomon's crowning achievement, the Jerusalem temple, was designed by Canaanite architects.[17] This does not necessarily mean that Baal received veneration in the Solomonic temple. This architectural similarity does mean, however, that worship could be easily confused — both as to ritual practice and as to the object of veneration. The declaration of Hosea approximately

[16] See G. Henton Davies, "High Place, Sanctuary," *IDB*, 2, p. 602.

[17] See I Kings 5; 7 13; and G. Ernest Wright, "Solomon's Temple Resurrected," *BA*, 4 (1941), pp. 17–31.

two centuries later supports this point: "And in that day, says Yahweh, you will call me 'My husband' (אִישִׁי), and no longer will you call me 'My Baal' (בַּעְלִי)" (Hos 2 16). During the reign of Solomon, however, the biblical record indicates no conflict between Yahwism and Baalism.

In general, therefore, both Saul and David assimilated Canaanite culture quite unconsciously. Solomon, on the contrary, was a conscious syncretist, the clearest indication of this being the Solomonic temple. Where such amalgamation takes place, whether consciously or unconsciously, a religious contest is not likely to develop. It seems markedly clear that the period of the united monarchy was characterized by an absence of hostility between Yahwism and Baalism.

Following the death of Solomon and the dissolution of his empire, Jeroboam I set up little bulls (I Kings 12 28 ff.) at Dan and Bethel that his subjects might not be tempted to worship at Jerusalem. Several interpretations have been offered as to the intended symbolism of the bulls. While space does not warrant repeating these various explanations, it should be noted that it is possible to associate these "little bulls" in some fashion with Baalism.[18] It is noteworthy, therefore, that no condemnation of the bull images was made during the reign of Jeroboam I.[19] Even Elijah, the fervent proponent of Yahwism and critic of Baalism, raised no question concerning the bull images during the reign of Ahab. Jehu, Elijah's successor in the purge of Baalism, also displayed no unfavorable reaction toward Jeroboam's shrines. This absence of opposition probably indicates that these "little bulls" were originally related in some fashion to Yahwism, either to represent the deity[20] or as pedestals upon which the invisible deity was thought to stand.[21] The conflict between Yahwism and Baalism had not been sharply drawn during the reign of Jeroboam I, for surely the inherent danger of bull symbolism would have been soundly denounced if the danger had been recognized.

The interaction of Yahwism and Baalism is self-evident, but no large-scale conflict existed until the Omrid dynasty. In order for un-

[18] See Gunnar Östborn, "Yahweh and Baal," *Lunds Universitets Årsskrift*, 51, p. 23; and John Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan*, p. 150.

[19] Most scholars agree that the prophetic condemnations of Jeroboam I by the unnamed man of God in I Kings 13 and by Ahijah in I Kings 14 1–16 are to be assigned to a later period. See Immanuel Benzinger, "Die Bücher der Könige" (*Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum AT*, ed. by Karl Marti, IX), pp. 90 ff.; and N. H. Snaith, "Kings," *IB*, 3, p. 120.

[20] See Jacob Hoschander, *The Priests and Prophets*, pp. 12–13.

[21] W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, p. 299. Albright acknowledges his dependency on H. Th. Obbink, "Jahwebilder," *ZAW*, 47 (1929), pp. 264–74, who advocated "in 1929 that the 'golden calf' must have been the visible pedestal on which the invisible Yahweh stood."

mistakable collision to occur, it was necessary for a spokesman for the ancient, nomadic tradition to indicate clearly for the people that Yahwism and Baalism could not co-exist — that the worship of Yahweh was an either/or and not a both/and proposition. Such a spokesman for Yahwism was Elijah.

Elijah stands as a Yahwist without peer in his own age. He, by his clarification of the decisive danger confronting Yahwism, performed an invaluable and indispensable service for the preservation of Yahwism. From this point onward,[22] the fundamental incompatibility of Yahwism and Baalism was more readily recognized.

It would be sheer speculation to consider the future of Yahwism had not a zealous Yahwist such as Elijah spoken. It is probable, however, that both Yahwism and Baalism would have continued to exist, each absorbing attributes of the other. Eventually, perhaps, neither a Yahwism nor a Baalism would have remained, but rather a mixture of the two. It is apparent, however, that Baal definitely had an advantage over Yahweh in this confrontation: Baal was the indigenous deity of the Canaanites who exercised control over the realm of nature, always an area of primary concern in an agrarian culture; and Baal had the additional attraction of being worshiped with sensual ritualism. In short, Baal would more likely have been victorious in this gradual amalgamation than Yahweh.

It is quite possible that the devotees of Yahweh realized the disharmoniousness of Yahwism and Baalism long before the Omrid period; certainly this is true of the exclusive line out of which Elijah emerged, and perhaps for a larger portion of the Israelites. It must be admitted, however, that the Israelites in the main ignored this awareness. Elijah declared the distinctiveness of Yahwism: either Yahweh or Baal! Elijah began the open struggle against Baalism; and this was continued by Jehu, the pre-exilic prophets, Hezekiah and Josiah, and the deuteronomic historians.

The deuteronomic material, with its central concern for the elimination of Baalism, was in essence a literary attack which followed at a distance the verbal attack upon Baalism waged by Elijah. During the Babylonian exile, when the final edition of the deuteronomic history was completed, the one thing of which the Israelites were certain was that constant apostasy to Baalism had been a major factor leading to

[22] This reference is especially to the pre-exilic period. By the time of the Babylonian exile, the struggle against Baalism was not nearly so acute, although the deuteronomic historians were active throughout the exilic period. Theirs, however, was a retrospective activity aimed at interpreting an earlier historical period. This was a means to discern the meaning of Israel's catastrophic history and to provide safeguards which would prevent its repetition in the future.

their present predicament. With this understanding in mind, a fervent literary attack was made upon Baalism. If they were returned to their native land, this assuredly was one place where they would not falter. When a final analysis is made, therefore, H. H. Rowley was perhaps not too extravagant when he said: "Without Moses the religion of Yahwism as it figured in the Old Testament would never have been born. Without Elijah it would have died."[23]

Having surveyed briefly the text for support of the thesis of this paper, perhaps it will be helpful to reiterate the primary conclusions which have been suggested:

1. A continuum of exclusive Yahwistic thought was preserved throughout the pre-exilic period by the minority of Yahwists who cherished the exclusive, nomadic ideal.

2. Elijah was the first of this minority group to issue a dogmatic religiously oriented either/or ultimatum. This does not mean that there had never been any conflict between the Canaanites and the Israelites prior to this point, nor does this suggestion mean that the problem of Yahweh-Baal syncretism was solved by Elijah's activity. Elijah's service lay in the fact that he clarified the distinctiveness of Yahwism and thereby prevented the gradual extinction of Yahwism through absorption into Baalism.

3. It was normative practice in the Ancient Near East for a migrating people to embrace the deity exercising primary authority in their adopted land. Especially since Yahweh had not proved himself as an agrarian deity, it is probable that many Israelites accepted the worship of Baal in conjunction with the worship of Yahweh.

4. In the main, therefore, the antipathy between the Canaanites and the Israelites prior to the Omrid dynasty was a conflict between persons of differing cultures — the *Kulturkampf* of the seminomad and of the settled farmer. When the seminomad was accepted into a settled area, as was evidently the case at Shechem (Josh 24), there was no apparent hostility between the two cultural groups. This was true at Shechem even though Shechem was a center of Baal worship (Judg 9 4). Joshua's ceremony for the renewal of the covenant gives no evidence of an ultimatum like that of Elijah (I Kings 18 21, 24), for Joshua issued a choice rather than an ultimatum (Josh 24 15). It is notable that Joshua 24 gives no evidence of hostile action by the devotees of Yahweh against the devotees of Baal- or El-berith.

[23] H. H. Rowley, "Elijah on Mount Carmel," *BJRL*, 43 (1960), p. 219.