

# Idolatry in the Ancient Near East<sup>1</sup>

## Ancient Near Eastern Pantheons

### Ammonite Pantheon

The chief god was Moloch/Molech/Milcom.

### Assyrian Pantheon

The chief god was Asshur.

### Babylonian Pantheon

At Lagash - Anu, the god of heaven and his wife Antu.

At Eridu - Enlil, god of earth who was later succeeded by Marduk, and his wife Damkina. Marduk was their son.

Other gods included: Sin, the moon god; Ningal, wife of Sin; Ishtar, the fertility goddess and her husband Tammuz; Allatu, goddess of the underworld ocean; Nabu, the patron of science/learning and Nusku, god of fire.

### Canaanite Pantheon

The Canaanites borrowed heavily from the Assyrians. According to Ugaritic literature, the Canaanite pantheon was headed by El, the creator god, whose wife was Asherah. Their offspring were Baal, Anath (The OT indicates that Ashtoreth, a.k.a. Ishtar, was Baal's wife), Mot & Ashtoreth. Dagon, Resheph, Shulman and Koshar were other gods of this pantheon. The cultic practices included animal sacrifices at high places; sacred groves, trees or carved wooden images of Asherah. Divination, snake worship and ritual prostitution were practiced. Sexual rites were supposed to ensure fertility of people, animals and lands.

### Edomite Pantheon

The primary Edomite deity was Qos (a.k.a. Quas). Many Edomite personal names included Qos in the suffix much like YHWH is used in Hebrew names.

### Egyptian Pantheon<sup>2</sup>

Egyptian religion was never unified. Typically deities were prominent by locale. Only priests worshipped in the temples of the great gods and only when the gods were on parade did the populace get to worship them. These 'great gods' were treated like human kings by the priesthood: awakened in the morning with song; washed and dressed the image; served breakfast, lunch and dinner. The cults of Ra and Osiris, his sister/wife Isis and son Horus<sup>3</sup> were about as close to a national religion as they had. Typically families worshipped household gods. Essentially Egyptian religion involved the worship of nature deities. Anubis was a jackal god; Sobk a crocodile god; Horus & Ra were associated with the falcon; Thoth was associated with an ibis and connected with wisdom & the moon; Ma'et (a.k.a. Maat, the daughter of Re) the goddess of truth, justice, right & cosmic order; Nut the sky goddess; Shu the god of air; Nu the god of primordial waters; Geb the god of earth; Osiris god of the realm of the dead, vegetation and thus the rise of the Nile.

Kitchen believes it's unlikely that the exodus Hebrews were focused on the Apis bull cult of Memphis or the Mnevis bull cult of Heliopolis when they charged Aaron to make them a god.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Much of this material is from A. K. Helmbold, Ph.D., *Gods-false*, In: *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia* Vol.1, Moody Press (1975).

<sup>2</sup> The Egyptian pantheon is so extensive I've listed it in a separate appendix.

<sup>3</sup> With Isis' help, Horus avenged his father Osiris' who was killed by his brother Seth by helping Osiris regain his kingship on earth.

<sup>4</sup> K. A. Kitchen, *New Bible Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, see the article, *Calf*, Golden, p. 160

Instead he believes there were bull cults associated with Horus in regions around Gomer. These cults were associated with strength and fertility. Also, he suggests that the close proximity to Caanan meant that these cults were probably similar to the Hadad (Baal) worship there, which was also associated with the bull, strength and fertility.

#### Moabite Pantheon

The chief god was Chemosh (a.k.a. Athtar).

#### Philistine Pantheon (c.f. Canaanite Pantheon)

Gaza and Ashdod - the chief god was Dagon

Ashkelon - Ashtoreth

Ekron – Baalzebub

#### Syrian Pantheon (c.f. Canaanite Pantheon)

Ben-hadad

### Alphabetic listings:

#### Anath

- Sister and wife of Baal
- Goddess of fertility and war  
“...she smote and slew from seacoast (west) to sunrise.....she waded in blood up to her knees—nay, up to her neck. ‘Her liver swelled with laughter; her heart was full of joy.’ She then washed her hands in gore and proceeded to other occupations.”<sup>5</sup>

#### Anzu

- a.k.a. Imdugud (Sumerian) called **Anzu** in the Akkadian language
- A demonic being with lion paws and face and eagle talons and wings. It was born on the mountain Hehe. Its beak is like a saw, its hide as eleven coats of mail; he’s normally depicted as a lion-headed eagle
- Ellil (aka Ea) appointed him to guard his bath chamber. He envied the Ellil-power inherent in Ellil’s Tablet of Destinies and stole it while Ellil was bathing. With the Tablet of Destinies, anything he puts into words becomes reality.
- The hero god Ningirsu defeats the monstrous bird and recovers the tablet

#### Asherah

- The chief goddess of Tyre; goddess of fertility
- Wife of El and mother of 70 gods including Baal.
- In the OT, worship of Asherah is conflated with Baal worship.<sup>6</sup>
- Her cult object was the *Asherah* or *Asherah pole* which was a tree, grove or tree-like stylized pole; the pole may have been a tree trunk with branches or perhaps phallic
- She was likely borrowed from Assyria where she was the wife of the war god Asir, hence the city and people Assyria; in Assyria Ashera and Ashtoreth (an epithet of Ishtar) were the same person but these were distinguished in Caanan.

#### Ashtoreth

- a.k.a. Astarte (Greek), Inanna (Assyrian), Ishtar (Babylonian), Venus (again in Babylonia) or queen of heaven
- some identify her as a moon goddess
- some may have treated Ashtoreth and Asherah as the same deity
- derived from Babylonian religion (Ishtar); an androgynous deity but a feminine deity in Caanan.
- sister of Baal, Anath & Mot

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<sup>5</sup> G. E. Wright and F.V. Filson, *The Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible*. (London, 1945), p.36 and G.E. Wright, *The Old Testament against its Environment* (London, 1950), p.78

<sup>6</sup> Jud.3:7, 1Ki.18:19, 2Ki.23:4

- goddess of sex and war; though the war role may've been dropped by the Caananites
- associated with religious prostitution
- Chief female deity of the Phoenicians and Canaanites
- Jezebel's father was an Astarte priest

#### Baal

- lit. *master*, owner, husband;
- this may be a title rather than a proper name because it is applied as a title to Hadad, the Amorite storm god whose cult object is the bull from 3000-1500 BC; it is equated with the Egyptian god, Seth in other texts and certain of the practices associated with Molech worship<sup>7</sup> are correlated with Baal worship in the Torah (see Jer.19:5)
- he is slain by Mot and revived by Anath
- he was worshipped in the high places of Moab (Nu.22:41)
- The chief male deity of the Phoenicians and Caananites.
- A fertility cult; male and female religious prostitution and orgiastic rites<sup>8</sup>
- his altars were often juxtaposed with asherahs
- he is sometimes portrayed as in conflict with a flood monster called Rahab, Yam or Leviathan.<sup>9</sup>
- Jezebel was part of the Baal-melqart cult of which her father was a priest. Melqart (lit. king city or city king)
- He is sometimes portrayed as at odds with his mother, Asherah; at other times as in league with her through bribery (Baal and Anath bribe Asherah with gold and silver to intervene before El) and at other times she attempts to seduce her son

#### Baal Peor

- lit. *lord of the opening*
- This could be a reference to a local deity (at Mount Peor; Nu.23:28; 25:18; 31:16) but many believe it is a fertility deity with the 'opening' as an oblique reference to female genitals (Nu.25:1-3 c.f. Hosea 9:10)

#### Baal-zebul

- lit. prince or possibly *lord of the flies*
- Some think it may have been a Jewish epithet, a modification of Baal-zebul (Lord of the House) to something that connoted lord of the dung heap.
- god of the Philistine city, Ekron

#### Bel

- see Marduk
- the Babylonian sun god
- son of Ea
- in OT he is associated with Nebo (Isa.46:1; father of Nebo) and Marduk (Jer.50:2; 51:44)

#### Chemosh

- the name or title of the chief god of the Moabites (Nu.21:29/Jer.48:46)
- child sacrifice is associated with him (2Ki.3:27)
- Solomon built a sanctuary to him (2Ki.11:7)
- he is equated with Ashtar in some texts

<sup>7</sup> Child sacrifice was part of the Baal cultus (Jer.19:5) (c.f. Molech)

<sup>8</sup> J. Bright, *A History of Israel* (London) 1960, pp. 108f.; 1Ki.14:24; 2Ki.23:7

<sup>9</sup> Leviathan and Rahab are the same being; this mythical creature is identical with the Canaanite 7-headed dragon Lotan.

Waltke's summary of research in this area, *Creation and Chaos*, makes it clear that the biblical references are not granting the existence of such a creature rather they illustrate in a typical Hebrew poetry that God alone is God.

- he is equated with Molech/Milcom b/c that was the Ammonite god and yet Jephthath says Chemosh was the chief god...Molech may be a title for Chemosh rather than a proper name.

#### Dagon

- a grain god
- most associated with the Philistines in the OT
- in Canaanite beliefs he was one of the offspring of El and Asherah
- References to his priests are, *those who leap over the threshold*, because that tradition followed Yahweh toppling a Philistine Dagon onto the threshold of his own temple (1Sam.4-5)(see Zeph.1:9).

#### Day Star

- lit. bright one
- could be a title for the king of Babylon
- could be Satan, based on Luke 10:18 (c.f. Isa.14:15)
- could refer to a deity (Ashtar--venus) that was supposed to occupy Baal's throne during the dry season but was too small to occupy it and had to descend.

#### El

- Father of Baal (killed by Mot & revived by Anath), Mot (killed by Anath); Anath & Ashtoreth
- Husband of Asherah

#### Hadad

- lit. thunderer
- a.k.a. Adad, Addu, Haddu, Had, Rimmon and Teshub
- Thought to be Baal's proper name at an earlier time, then subsequently came to be a separate god.
- the bull was his cultic object
- he was worshipped at Damascus under the title "Baal" (2Ki.5:18)

#### Kiyyun

- a.k.a. Kaiwan or Rompha
- See Amos 5:26
- A Babylonian deity
- Associated with the planet Saturn
- The Hebrews deliberately misspelled the names of other Gods to demean them and so it is often difficult to correlate the Hebrew use of a god's name with the name used by another culture.

#### Lilith

- lit. *night hag* or screech owl (Isa.34:14)
- associated with a child stealing witch, demon or carrion fowl

#### Marduk

- a.k.a. Bel, Merodach
- See 2Ki.25:27, Isa.39:1 and Jer. 52:31
- the chief Babylonian god
- foremost son of Ea
- victorious over flooding after the destruction of Tiamat (c.f. Baal; see Waltke's account of the Akkadian creation myth in *Creation and Chaos*)

#### Molech

- a.k.a. Milcom (2Ki.11:7, Heb.11:33, 2 Ki.23:13)

- Molech may be a title for the god Chemosh
- He may have been an astral deity (c.f. Zeph.1:5)
- His worship centered on a fire cult originating in Phoenicia (c.f. Tyre)
- Child sacrifices offered to Molech in connection with vows and solemn promises<sup>10</sup>.
- Children were thrown alive into the red hot arms of a Molech image, thus to die<sup>11</sup>.
- In the days of the divided kingdom a site for this practice was established outside Jerusalem in the Hinnom valley, called Topheth. This was destroyed by Josiah, great grandson of Manassah<sup>12</sup>
- See Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; 1Ki.11:7; 2Ki.23:10; Jer.32:35

#### Mot

- God of aridity and death
- Adversary of Baal
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#### Nebo

- The son of Bel

#### Sabeanism

- Worship of the stars as gods
- Forbidden by Moses Deut.4:19
- Widely practiced from home to home (see Jer.8:2; 19:13; 32:29; 2Ki.21:3,5; 23:5-6; Jer.7:17-18; 44:17-19,25)

#### Sikkuth

- a.k.a. Sakkuth
- See Amos 5:26
- A Babylonian astral deity
- Like Kiyun, Sikkuth is associated with Saturn in Mesopotamian texts.
- The Hebrews deliberately misspelled the names of other Gods to demean them and so it is often difficult to correlate the Hebrew use of a god's name with the name used by another culture.

#### Tammuz

- a corruption of Dumuzi, the Accadian sun-god (the Adonis of the Greeks),
- the husband of the goddess Ishtar.
- In the Chaldean calendar there was a month set apart in honor of this god, the month of June to July, the beginning of the summer solstice. At this festival, which lasted six days, the worshippers, with loud lamentations, bewailed the funeral of the god, they sat "weeping for **Tammuz**" (Ezek. 8:14).

<sup>10</sup> Sholem Asch, *The Nazarene* (London, 1939), pp. 347ff and C.F. Pfeiffer, *The Patriarchal Age* (Michigan, 1961), chapter 9.

<sup>11</sup> A temple at Amman (1400-1250 B.C.) excavated and reported upon by J.B. Hennessey, *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* (1966), p. 162, writes, "Two outstanding features associated with the use of the temple were the enormous quantities of animal, bird and human bones and the abundant evidence of fire... There can be little doubt that the temple was associated with a fire cult." In a private communication with G.J. Wenham he wrote that "At least 75% of them (the bones found) belong to children between the ages of 3 and 14, or thereabouts.

<sup>12</sup> Manassah probably did more to restore these practices than anyone after his father's death (i.e. Hezekiah) see Isa.30:33