

On these Names

ASHERAH In the Ugaritic texts, this Canaanite goddess appears as the wife of the chief god, El, and the mother of other gods, including Baal [*Ancient Near Eastern Texts, above; Baal, below*]. Her depiction in the OT, however, is somewhat different. Rather than Baal's mother, she stands by his side in much the same way that the goddess Ashtoreth does elsewhere [*Ashtoreth, below*]. Asherah thus serves as one of Baal's consorts (Judg. 3:7; 1 Kings 18:19; 2 Kings 23:4). In addition to naming this Canaanite goddess, the term *Asherah* appears elsewhere in the OT with reference to unspecified wooden poles that symbolize her (Judg. 6:25, 28, 30; 1 Kings 15:13; 2 Kings 21:7). These poles function as cult-objects used in worship. Because of their idolatrous character, the presence of such poles similarly symbolizes Israel's increasing unfaithfulness to the Lord. As a result, destroying the cult-objects became a sign of fidelity to God himself (Judg. 6:25–27; 2 Kings 23:6).

ASHTORETH Ashtoreth is the OT name for the Canaanite goddess known outside the Bible as Astarte or Ishtar. Many scholars think the unexpected *o-e* vowel pattern in the present form “Ashtoreth” reflects a deliberate alteration of an original *a* vowel (“Ashtart”). According to this position, the vowels *o-e* derive from the Hebrew term *boseth*, “shame.” If so, then early Hebrew scribes apparently broadcast their utter disdain for Astarte by mockingly changing her name (Day: 492)!

Appearing in many texts throughout the ancient world, Ashtoreth shows up most frequently in the OT alongside Baal himself (Judg. 2:13; 10:6; 1 Sam. 7:4; 12:10) [*Baal, below*]. She was, in other words, another one of his consorts. When written in the plural

form, *Ashtaroth* (1 Sam. 7:3, NRSV¹: *Astartes*), the term does not imply multiple goddesses. Instead, it likely alludes to and lumps together the various local expressions of Ashtoreth-worship.

BAAL In Hebrew and related languages, the term *baal* (*ba'al*) means “husband,” “lord,” or “owner.” Frequently, however, *baal* appears as a proper noun and is actually the name of a Canaanite deity. While the OT refers to the god Baal on several occasions, and repeatedly in the book of Judges, it never clearly explains who he was or what he did. Apparently, the original readers, all too familiar with Baal, needed no such information! Happily, the texts from Ugarit have filled in many of the gaps [*Ancient Near Eastern Texts, above*].

According to these texts, Baal was the second-highest ranking deity in the Canaanite pantheon, beneath only El himself. Baal was a storm-god, and his followers described him as “the Rider on the Clouds,” who was assisted by the “clouds, wind, bolts, and rains.” Baal, in other words, was a fertility god who controlled the weather. Given such status, it becomes far clearer why the Israelites continually yielded to the temptation of worshiping him. By the time of Elijah, Baal worship had even temporarily become the dominant religion in the Northern Kingdom of Israel (Hos. 2:1–8).

Living in a land void of major rivers, the Israelites depended entirely upon the rain for their sustenance. In times of drought, times when the Lord seemed quiet and distant, Baal was thought to be the right god to know. Rather than merely falling down at the feet of carved figures, then, the worship of Baal often constituted a quest for economic security and survival during times of difficulty.

1 NRSV New Revised Standard Version

Ultimately, this apparent usefulness of serving Baal led to his increasing popularity and the development of various local forms of Baal worship. The OT mentions such forms as Baal-Berith (Judg. 9:4), Baal of Peor (Num. 25:3), and Baal-Zebub (2 Kings 1:2–3). When the biblical writers at times use the plural noun “the Baals,” therefore, they do not refer to multiple gods bearing the same name. Rather, they blend together the various local forms of worshiping one god, Baal.²

2 Terry L. Brensinger, [Judges](#), Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 225–226.