

THE WORSHIP OF THE BAAL

During the Israelite period of settlement in the land of Canaan, the people worshipped among other deities those called "Baalim". The name "Baal" is encountered in Sidonian inscriptions, in the Ugarit (Ras Shamra) tablets, and in the Bible. It is the name of a deity and forms a composite in proper nouns such as: Baalia, Jerubaal, Hanibaal, Azdrubaal, etc. In many instances this name is synonymous with the word Adon (Master, Lord), and is encountered in the plural form "Baalim" as well. Accordingly the name Baal was understood as meaning Adon – Master – Lord. "Baal Isha" (Isha in Hebrew = woman) meant "master of the woman" i. e. husband. "Baal Nahala" (Nahala in Hebrew = estate) meant master of the estate". Thus the Baal deity was taken to be the Master (possessor) of a locality or district¹ e. g. Baal Zaphon or Baal Peor, Baal of Lebanon etc. The worship of these deities is depicted in the Bible as one accompanied by orgiastic rites². From certain verses in the Bible³ it would seem that the Israelites learnt how to worship the Baal deity from the Canaanites who remained in the country⁴. As pointed out, the name Baal is very common in Phoenician inscriptions. Since many scholars identify "Phoenicians" with "Canaanites", it is commonly accepted among scholars that the worship of the Baal was foreign to the Israelites and that they borrowed it from the Canaanites. Schaeffer even remarks that: "The Baal did not figure in the original Pantheon of the Semitic Canaanites. He was

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- 1 Kapelrud, *The Ras Shamra Discoveries and The O. T.*, pp. 30 – 31
Perrot –Chipiez, *History of Art In Phoenicia etc.* p. 67
Wright, *Biblical Archeology*, p. 107
Robertson Smith. *The Religion of The Semites*, pp. 93–94.
Lods, *Israel*, p. 138
Contenau, *La Civilisation Phénicienne*, p. 90.
Maspero, *The struggle of the Nations, Egypt, Syria And Assyria*, pp. 154, 167
Weill, *Phoenicia and Western Asia, etc.* pp 68–69.
Oesterley and Robinso, *Hebrew Religion*, pp. 57–58
Cassuto, *Biblical Encyclopedia*, entry Baal. (Hebrew)
Klausner, *Kitvei Kodshenu*, p. 188 in *New Investigations and OLD SOURCES*,
Massada, 1957. (heb.)
Ribichini, *Beliefs and Religious Life* p. 106 in "The Phoenicians", Bompiani,
1988.
 - 2 See Baal Peor narrative. (Nu. 25: 1–4).
 - 3 For ex. 1kng. 16: 31; Ju. 2: 11–13
 - 4 For ex. Rawlinson, *Phoenicia*, pp. 109 –113
Lods, *Les Prophètes D'israël et les Débuts Du Judaism*, p. 74

only added to it when the latter penetrated into northern Syria."⁵ According to Gray: "Hadad is of course the deity who became Baal par excellence in Canaan".⁶ Contenau notes⁷ that: "In the Tell-el-Amarna letters...there are no proper nouns compounded with Baal but a great many with Addu (a form of Hadad, the Syrian god of mountain – tops and storms who wields the lightning and rides upright on a bull). On the other hand, when we look at Phoenician inscriptions, these same names have Baal as a compound term". Hence the Baal was not an original deity of the Canaanites, but was introduced into the region known as Phoenicia only in the el – Amarna period, or immediately after it, i. e. after the conquest of the country by the Israelites.

It may be assumed that the origin of the name Baal (בעל) is not derived from the name of a deity but from the combination of the adjectival term "Baal Isha" (בעל אשה) above mentioned. The term derives from two Hebrew words "Ba – Al Isha" (in Hebrew Ba-al – בא-על means to "come over" "Isha" = woman) which is a primitively picturesque way of describing the act of coupling.⁸ In time these two words combined together to form an adjective Baal (באעל) Because of the juxtaposition of two guttural sounds the weaker one (Alephא) fell, and the adjective remained in its present form Baal (בעל). The verb Ba – El (בא אל) is encountered in the Bible in connection with the act of coupling. Jacob for example, says to Laban: "...give me my wife...that I may go in unto her"⁹ (In the Hebrew text "vehavoha eleha" וַהֲבוּאָהָ אֵלַיהָ – future tense of Ba el); "...he took Leha his daughter, and brought her to him; and he went in unto her"¹⁰ (in the Hebrew text "va-yavo eleha" וַיָּבֹא אֵלַיהָ – future tense of Ba – el). The verb Ba El (בא אל) in the sense of coupling recurs often in the Bible¹¹. The interchange of EL with AL is quite common in the Bible.¹²: "And Hezekiah sent TO all Israel... TO Ephraim..."¹³; "unto the people of Jerusalem...against the God of Jerusalem" (2Chr. 32: 18–20). (In the Hebrew text, the words "to" are alternatively El and Al). We may therefore assume that the verb Ba – El which means coupling was originally Ba– Al. The verb Ba – Al in the sense of coupling can be found in the Bible,

5 Schaeffer, The Cuneiform Texts of Ras Shamra, p. 8

6 Gray, The Legacy of Canaan, VT, 1957, p. 114

7 Contenau, Ibid., p. 97

8 Compare with the description in Job. (31: 9–10) If mine heart have been deceived by a woman...Then let my wife grind unto another and let others bow down upon her.

9 Gen. 29: 21.

10 Gen. 29: 23.

11 Gen. 29: 30 ; Gen. 30: 3 ; Gen. 16: 2; Jer. 1: 7 and more.

12 See (the Hebrew text) also: Is. 36: 7; 2Kn. 22: 8 ; Job. 1: 6 In 1962, in a booklet entitled "who were the Phoenicians". I have already discussed the interchange of El with Al.

13 2Chr. 30: 1.

although more rarely. For example, in the story of Lot's daughters: "...our father is old and there is not a man in the earth to come in unto us (in Hebrew "lavo alenu ... לבא עלינו future from the verb Ba- Al. N. G.) after the manner of all earth; Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him."¹⁴ Another instance is: "her husband's brother shall go unto her"¹⁵ (in Hebrew uba Aleah – וּבֵא עֲלֶיהָ – and He will come on her from the verb Ba – Al).

The following verses in the book of Deuteronomy clears up the doubt over the meaning of the name "Baal" and the verbs "Ba Al" and "Ba – El": "When a man hath taken a wife, and married her (the Hebrew text reads Ube'ala – (וּבְעָלָהּ) and it come to pass that she find no favor in his eyes..."¹⁶ The second verse reads: "If any man take a wife and go in unto her (Hebrew text – uva eleha – (וּבֵא אֵלֶיהָ) and hate her..."¹⁷

These two verses are identical and their context is the same, but they vary in style: in the first we read ube'ala וּבְעָלָהּ – and he will husband her, and in the second uva–eleha וּבֵא אֵלֶיהָ – and he will come to her

We may therefore conclude without hesitation that Be'ala (בְּעָלָהּ) is identical with Ba–eleha (בֵּא אֵלֶיהָ) which in turn can be equated as shown above, with Ba – aleha (בֵּא עֲלֶיהָ) and with Ba–ala (בְּעָלָהּ). This brings us back to the point of departure with the adjective "Baal" being derived from the two words Ba Al meaning "comes over" which is a primitive description of the sexual act of coupling. The verb Ba–al did not remain in the language except in isolated cases in the Bible¹⁸. most probably because of its primitive form. However, Ba–el, Ba–Al, and Baal are one and the same in meaning. The adjective Baal was at first the term used for a man coupling with a woman, i. e. the man who came over (in Hebrew – Ba – Al) the woman was her "Baal". Eventually, this word acquired a wider significance. In ancient primitive times man was the dominant partner of the two and master of the woman so that this term became synonymous with Master (in Hebrew – Adon). In time, this name was ascribed to deities and it meant a deity who was considered master of a certain locality such as Baal–Peor, Baal Zaphon, Baal Sidon etc. Later on the term was used more generally to signify anyone who held or was master of something: the master of the estate, the master of the household, the master of the cart were called Baal of the estate, Baal of the house, Baal of the cart etc. In Hosea we read:¹⁹ "And it shall be that day, saith the Lord, that thou shalt call me Ishi; and shalt call me no more Baali".

14 Gen. 19: 31.

15 Deut. 25: 5.

16 Deut. 24: 1.

17 Deut. 22: 13.

18 Shulhan 'Arukh (Heb.), ch. 4 (19) "A heathen and a slave if they 'came over' an Israelite girl..."

19 Hosea, 2: 16 (in the Hebrew text – 2: 18).

This verse is explained as meaning: "You will call me Ishi and not Baali (my Baal – N. G.) as you called the Baalim you worshipped."²⁰. However, in the light of our interpretation of the name "Baal" we can understand the verse otherwise: " You will call me Ishi (the Hebrew term means "my man" – husband) and you will not call me Ba–Alai (coming over me) any longer.". Hosea portrays the nation as a prostitute and he marries a prostitute to give more validity to this simile, with the above verse as a continuance of the image: the nation of Israel will cease to act like a prostitute and will not refer to the Lord as Ba–al namely, as to a lover who comes to couple from time to time, but the relationship between Israel and the Lord will be much more constant and intimate. The new tie will be expressed by addressing the Lord as Ishi and not simply as Ba – Alai. Such an explanation ties in very well with the next verse: "And I will betroth thee unto me for ever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness..."²¹.

The Bible relates that during the period in the wilderness an event occurs which brings war among brothers: the golden calf episode. In the Book of Exodus this is depicted in full: "...And Aaron made proclamation, and said, Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord. And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings, and the people sat down to eat and to drink and rose up to play."²² (the Hebrew text reads: Lezakhek–לצחק.) What is the meaning of "lezakhek"? As we see above, the English translation is "to play" and this is the meaning given the word today. In the Book of Genesis²³ we read: "And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, MOCKING (the Hebrew text reads: metzakhek – מצחק) Wherefore she said unto Abraham, cast out this bondswoman and her son And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son". In this verse too, the verb "letzakhek" was read as meaning "play" (the English translation reads "mocking"). Abraham casts his son out with his mother, and all because a thirteen year old boy was supposedly "playing" (or mocking). What was so horrifying in this act of playing as to merit such punishment? . Elsewhere in the Book of Genesis²⁴ we read: "And it came to pass...that Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out at a window, and saw, and, behold Isaac Was sporting (the Hebrew text reads: mezakhek–מצחק – "playing") with Rebekah his wife: And Abimelech called Isaac and said, Behold of a surety she is thy wife: and how saidst thou, She is my sister? ...one of the people might lightly have lien with thy wife, ..." We meet with the verb "lezakhek" – to play, again in the narrative about

20 For example see different translations to the Bible.

21 Hosea, 2: 19 (in the Hebrew text –2: 21).

22 Ex. 32: 4–6.

23 Gen. 21: 9–17

24 Gen. 26: 8–11.

Potiphar's wife:²⁵ "The Hebrew servant ...came in unto me to mock me" (the Hebrew text reads: lezakhek – לצחק – to play). Abimelech understands that Rebekah is Isaac's wife for he sees him "playing" with her. Potiphar gets angry at Joseph, to the extent of imprisoning him because Joseph had supposedly "played" with his wife. From the above verses it is obvious that to play – "lezakhek" – means "love-play", i. e. to flirt, and not simply playing. Sarah sees Ishmael "play" i. e. to masturbate, which explains why Abraham was so grieved over his son. Also the description of the golden calf episode "and they sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play" (in Hebrew lezakhek) we now understand that they aroused themselves with "love play" i. e. the orgiastic rites which accompanied the worship of the Baal.

Thus the term Baal is derived from a Hebrew root,²⁶ and the orgiastic rites in the worship of the Baal were not foreign to the Israelites even before they entered Canaan. We may then regard the names such as Hanibal, Jerubaal, and Others composed with the adjective "Baal" as Hebrew names.

25 Gen. 39: 17.

26 Indeed, names as Baal Peor, Baal Zephon and alike are referred in the Bible to non Israelite sites, but this must be regarded as the use of an Hebrew adjective to designate a non Israelite deity.