

## 22. Defining the Religion of Baal (Judges 2–4, 6–8, 13–16)

Once the people of Israel inherited their Promised Land, they tended to forget their God and “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6; 21:25). As a consequence, Israel lost God’s protection and became subject to enemies. As Israel had conquered the Baal-worshipping Canaanites, so others now began to conquer them. Paradoxically, it was Israel’s emulating the religion of Baal practiced by its surrounding nations that became a root cause of their falling prey to them (Judges 2:10–23; 10:6–16). Sadly, it is similarly a root cause today of our forgetting God and falling prey to enemies as our modern religion of Baal—with its never-ending stream of images depicting violence and sex—has ingratiated itself into modern society.

Indeed, it isn’t difficult to see parallels of ancient idolatry in our society today. Our images may be more sophisticated than those of our forebears but we love them equally well. Today’s movie theaters resemble “houses of Baal,” where people worship at his shrine and lust after likenesses. TV sets parallel personal shrines at which we adore pictures of the elite of Babylonian society, images in color, of people attired in its finest fashions. Our attention easily gets distracted from the true God to such substitutes, as we worship the creature more than the Creator. The images appeal to our baser natures; the more we give them license, the more corrupt we become—like the images themselves.

The Baal-Anath Epic of Ugaritic literature depicts alternating scenes of violence and sex that were relived in real life by people who took their cue from the Baal myth. Pornographic imagery accompanied their performance. The myth so incited Israelites who exposed themselves to it that even after the wonders God had performed by releasing them from bondage in Egypt and leading them to the Promised Land they committed immoral acts with heathen nations such as the Midianites (Numbers 25:1–9). Consequently, God punished those who persisted in this corrupt cult by empowering their enemies against them.

In the Ugaritic myth, the hero-god Baal is authorized by a higher authority, El, to compel the villain-gods Yamm/Nahar (Sea/River) and Mot (Death) to comply with Baal’s rule or face him in a confrontation. Yamm/Nahar and Mot are forces of chaos who will make trouble for Baal and for the world if Baal doesn’t subdue them. They resist Baal and each fights him to the death. Various cohorts help Baal and his rivals in their life-and-death struggle. The versatile craftsman Koshar fashions the weapons Baal uses against his enemies. These weapons can kill, injure, or maim from a distance. As the central figure of this drama, Baal literally kicks up a storm, he being the god of lightning and thunder.

Still, Baal suffers setbacks. He stares death in the face and at one point appears completely overpowered. But with the timely aid of his violent consort Anath he escapes the clutches of death and wins the victory at the last. The myth credits Baal with restoring order in the world, everyone profiting from his extraordinary prowess. Sexual relations between him and Anath, hitherto hampered by adversity, now receive full expression. Explicit scenes of the violent exchanges between the hero and his rivals, and of the victor’s sexual acts, form the substance of

the narrative. Variations of the story, such as Baal-Peor, Baal-Berith, Baal-Zebub, and other Baals, existed in different regions of Canaan.

Comparing Baalism with anything in the world today, we recognize the basic plot that animates many movies in our media. Their success seems to lie in the quantities of violence and sex they portray. The hero and his helpers are authorized to kill and do as they please so long as they subdue the enemy and restore order. They do battle using weapons that kill and injure from a distance, that strike like lightning and clap aloud like thunder. In performing his bizarre task, the hero endures setbacks, has close encounters with death, yet help always arrives in the nick of time, often by a woman driven to violence. In these stories, explicit scenes of violence and sex abound as they do in the Baal myth.

The spilling over of violence and sex from fictitious dramas into real life occurs as commonly today as it did among the Canaanites. By legitimizing carnality in their culture the Canaanites marked themselves ripe for destruction. Through the media in our everyday lives, persons enter our homes and minds to perform acts we would abhor in real life. The pornographic images, the licentious manner of the characters, their distorted standard of values, and their disposition to violence—all subvert and pollute our minds. By indulging them we disdain God’s standard of “stopping [our] ears at the mention of murder and shutting [our] eyes at the sight of wickedness” (Isaiah 33:15).

(Much of this material is taken from *Isaiah Decoded*, 95–98.)