

virginity -- "the great goddesses who conceive but do not bear." Plaques and figurines from Canaanite cities depict Anath as the naked goddess of fertility.¹⁵

The fertility cult was the most basic feature of Canaanite religion. The concentration on productive harvests and the struggle for survival led these people to worship things that they felt would benefit them materially. The worship of Baal and Anath was necessary for a productive year. If the gods and goddesses were pleased by the worship the result would be found in a plentiful harvest. Thus, proper worship was directly linked with pleasing the deities. The worship of the Canaanites centered around a central shrine or "high place." It was at this locale that the sacrifices would be offered. We have archaeological evidence that animals of all sizes were offered at great temple-shrines such as Beth-Shan.¹⁶ There is no archaeological evidence that human sacrifice was carried on at these great city shrines. This horrid practice was, no doubt, done at special shrines called *Topheths* in the Old Testament (2 Kgs 23:10; Isa 30:33; Jer 7:31, 32; 19:6, 11-14), reserved for the purpose in places like the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom (south of Jerusalem). Infant sacrifice at a dedication has been attested in Syria-Palestine but so far Carthage is the only place where child sacrifice on a grand scale is attested by archaeology.¹⁷

Since the chief aspect in the worship of the Canaanites centered on sex and fertility and the primary reason for worship was to make the gods more favorable in increasing the fertility of the worshipper's land, flocks, herds, and family. The best way to bring this about was to act out the seduction of Baal by Anath by a cultic act. So when the Israelites entered Canaan they were confronted by this religion. Numbers 25 tells how, at an early point, the temptation became too much for them. The sin of worshipping the Baal of Peor included idolatry and intermarriage with Midianites. It doubtless also meant joining cultic participation in the fertility rites which was a gross denial of Yahweh as the Lord of all the functions of nature. The basic idea that made Israel's religion so different was that Yahweh was above nature not in nature.

Israel's God was not only unique but he was invisible. The Psalmist's enemies chided "where is your god?" (Ps 42:3). Theirs were visible images. The Israelites viewed Yahweh as the Creator of, not a part of nature, whether it be the storm, the sun, the moon or stars or the bodies of created beings (cf. Ps 19 and 29). For the faithful Hebrew, Yahweh was the Creator-Sustainer of all things. He was almighty, there was no other greater or even comparable to him in power and holiness. In Isa 40:25, 26a Yahweh says:

To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? (NIV)

The Canaanites, on the other hand, by identifying their gods with the forces of nature had a pantheistic view of deity. Henri Frankfort discusses the radical break Israel made with the religious milieu of the Near East.

When we read in Psalm 19 that 'the heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth His handiwork.' we hear a voice which mocks the beliefs of Egyptians and Mesopotamians. The heavens, which were to the psalmist but a