

witness of God's greatness, were to the Mesopotamians the very majesty of the divine mother through whom man was reborn. In Egypt and Mesopotamia the divine was comprehended as imminent: the gods were in nature. The Egyptians saw in the sun all that a man may know of the creator; the Mesopotamians viewed the sun as the god Shamash, the guarantor of justice. But to the psalmist the sun was God's devoted servant who 'is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race.' The God of the psalmist and the prophets was not in nature. He transcended nature -- and transcended, likewise, the realm of mythopoeic thought. It would seem that the Hebrews, no less than the Greeks, broke with the mode of speculation which had prevailed up to their time.^18

Israel, indeed, broke with the customs of their day but from the biblical perspective it was the Canaanites who had broken away from God's original revelation of his true nature. By the time of Abraham, the father of the Hebrew nation, all mankind worshipped gods as did even Abraham's ancestors (Josh 24:2).

Abraham received a call to a different way, to a covenant with God which involved a recognition of Yahweh's authority and power as the only true God, the Creator, and Sovereign Lord. Curiously then, the Israelites had no pantheon and great stress was put on the singularity of God (Deut 6:4). There was not even a word in the Hebrew language to designate a female deity. The Canaanites had the word *'ilat* for "goddess" but the Hebrews could only refer to them by their proper names (Asherah, etc.).

But this is not the whole story for the Hebrews, even while in conflict with Canaanite religion, did share a common linguistic heritage which included an overlapping of religious expressions. There was nothing inherently evil in this. The very idea of the personality of deity is a common feature of both religions. All the functions of the separate Canaanite deities are performed by one personal Lord, Yahweh. He is indeed so much a person that the Old Testament frequently anthropomorphized, that is, speaks of him as if he had human form:

Smoke rose from his nostrils, consuming
fire came from his mouth ...
He parted the heavens and came down,
dark clouds were under his feet.
He mounted the cherubim and flew, he
soared on the wings of the wind.^19

This disturbed some of the Jews of post-biblical times but it did not mean the Hebrews who wrote lines like that confused God and the gods. They were doing what every language does to enrich its expression -- using figures of speech already inherent in the language. For example, we do not believe the sun actually rises and sets when we constantly use that ancient phenomenological expression. Likewise, many expressions (e.g. epithets of deity) were imbedded in northwest semitic languages before the Hebrews became a people. One Ugaritic text reads:

Did I not tell thee, O Prince Baal ...
Nor declare, O Rider of the Clouds?
Lo, thine enemies, O Baal,