

ISRAEL'S STRUGGLE WITH THE RELIGIONS OF CANAAN

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We can improve our focus on Old Testament faith by studying the religion of the Canaanites. The theological and religious structures of Israel were divinely inspired but God gave these to a people who lived in a totally polytheistic context. To fully appreciate Israel's monotheistic faith we must try to understand those converse religious ideologies that challenged and threatened the life and unity of God's people.

The many religions of the Ancient Near East were all interrelated and there was a great deal of syncretism commonly practiced. G. W. Ahlström in his book, *Aspects of Syncretism in Israelite Religion*¹ believes that there were many early forms of Israelite religion coming from various cult centers like Shiloh, Shechem, Mizpah, Ramah, Gibeon, Gilgal, Bethel, Dan and Ophrah. Only after the rise of the Jerusalem cult does Ahlström see a single new religion given from the Jerusalem perspective preserved by the Deuteronomist who wrote much of what we find not only in Deuteronomy but a large part of the history up through 2 Kings. This viewpoint represents a considerable departure from that, for example, of R. DeVaux who felt all Israelite groups officially rejected idolatry from the time of their first settlement in Canaan.² Ahlström maintains that this Deuteronomic history being written at the end of the pre-exilic period condemned earlier accepted cult practices and lamentably admits that this keeps us from drawing a clear picture of the religious history of Israel.³ He has, however, many conjectures about it. One need not deny that syncretism was always a factor with which Israel had to deal without agreeing to the patchwork of conjectures that Ahlström presents as proof it all began that way. It is not a conjecture that the Hebrew text maintains the Hebrew religion had an independent origin. Their God was the unique and cosmic deity who demanded exclusive allegiance. Such a concept ran against the grain of all the religions of the day.

Up until the early part of this century, most of what was known about the religion of Canaan came from the Bible. Then a limited amount of information was put together from fragmentary Phoenician sources discovered in the late 19th century and early 20th century.⁴ Earlier information had come from historians such as Herodotus who had heard about Canaanite mythology from secondary sources but they were often not very reliable. In 1928 the first Ras Shamra tablets were found. They were mostly mythological texts and contained abundant new information on the religious life of Canaan.

The discovery of these alphabetic cuneiform texts opened doors of understanding that had long been closed. The scholarly world had yearned for more information on Canaanite life. These discoveries provided them