

with an important mythological literature that not only gave the names and functions of the gods but also a great deal of information on the society of the Canaanites.

W. F. Albright in chapter three of his book *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* summarized this information by noting how the Canaanite deities have two striking features:

- 1) an extraordinary fluidity of personality and function, and
- 2) etymologically transparent names and appellations. These facts, coupled with the nature of the mythology, reveal the primitive state of Canaanite religion.

The generic Canaanite word for "god" was originally *'ilum*. later *'il* or *'el*. There is no consensus as to what it basically means.⁵ The gods were called either *'elim* or *benê 'el* (lit. "sons of El") since the head of the pantheon was called El. At Ugarit El was a remote and shadowy figure who lived far away "at the source of the two rivers, midst the channels of the two deeps."⁶ El was called the "father of years," the "father of man," the "father of men and gods." El had three wives/sisters: Astarte, Asherah (Athirat, also called Elat) and Baaltis. He presided over the divine council of gods who were his children. Although he was brutal enough to slay his son he is called *Lutpan*, the Kindly One and is described as an old man with white hair and a beard.

But Baal is the central figure in the pantheon and is functionally far more important than El and acts as prime-minister for El whom Baal eventually dethroned. This great storm-god, Baal, king of the gods, dominates the Canaanite pantheon. The epithet "Baal" means simply "lord" and could be applied to different gods. To the Aramean people of north Syria their storm-god, Hadad, became the "Baal" par excellence. Hadad was considered to be the "Lord of Heaven," the "One who Prevails," the "Exalted, Lord of the Earth." He alone reigned over gods and men. His kingdom was "eternal to all generations." He was the giver of all fertility. When he died all vegetation and procreation ceased. He was the god of justice, the terror of evil-doers. Baal was called the "son of Dagon" the grain-god, the patron god of Ashdod (cf. 1 Sam 1-7). Baal's consort was identified as Anath, daughter of El (in Ugaritic and Egyptian texts), and Athirat (Asherah in the Old Testament, cf. 1 Kgs 18:19).

The Canaanites explained nature in terms of these gods. Each god represented some object or force of nature. The moon, the sun, the important stars and visible planets were each an independent god or goddess. As god of fertility Baal played the key role in the instigation of the growing season. In one story, Baal meets his arch-enemy Mot (Death) and is killed. The god of fertility is dead and the result is that all of creation is affected adversely. Nature becomes unproductive and infertile. There is an inference that for seven years Baal remains dead and for this period of time there is famine and drought. Baal's mistress, who is also his sister-consort, Anath, seeks to avenge the death of Baal. Anath searches out Mot and the scene that follows is depicted as one of the most violent in all of mythological writings. The story reads: