

Pagan Gods

BAAL

Baal (Baalim in the plural) was a widely worshiped pagan god of fertility. He was the principal male god of the Phoenicians and Canaanites. The wicked King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, promoted Baal worship in Israel. The Book of Hosea describes the conflict between worship of the true God and this false god.



Baal worshipers believed he had power over wind, rain, and clouds. When crops were abundant, they worshiped him as the sun-god to give thanks. In times of drought, storms, or other crop devastation, they worshiped him as the storm-god to appease his wrath. The fact that his prophets could not end the three-year drought Elijah had proclaimed illustrated his lack of power, and the supremacy of the God of Israel.

Baal worship involved extremely immoral practices including illicit sex and human sacrifice, usually by burning alive a worshiper's firstborn. Baal is also identified with **Molech** (another pagan deity), the worship of which also included wicked sacrifice rituals such as temple prostitution or human sacrifice, often involving children.



Various locations also had local Baalim. For example, **Baal-peor** was a Moabite god, named so because his obscene rites were performed at Mount Peor. Sometimes compound forms of the word were used

to name locations where he was worshiped, such as **Baal-gad** and **Baal-hermon**.

ASHTORETH

Elijah requested that four hundred “prophets of the groves” attend the showdown recorded in 1 Kings chapter 18. These individuals led the Israelites’ worship of the pagan goddess **Ashtoreth** (Ashtaroth or Astaroth in the plural). The Greek form of her name is **Astarte**. The Hebrew name, **Asherah** (Asherim in the plural), referenced both the goddess and the

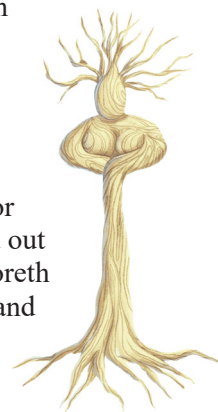


idols used in her worship. The King James Version of the Bible translated this simply as “groves.”

Ashtoreth was widely considered a goddess of love (fertility) and war, and also identified by some worshipers as a “moon goddess,” the “goddess of the morning and evening star,” or the “goddess of the sea.” Her common names included, “Queen of Heaven,” “Mistress of Heaven,” “Lady of Heaven,” and “Lady Asherah of the Sea.”

Ashtoreth was often connected closely to Baal; many myths said she was his wife or mistress. Another tradition called her “the mother goddess,” saying that she had seventy children and that Baal was one of them. The Mesopotamian version of this goddess was called **Ishtar** (or Ashtar) and they said Tammuz, the god of vegetation, was her husband (Ezekiel 8:14). The Moabites called her the spouse of Chemosh, their national god. Later, Ashtoreth was identified with the Greek goddess **Aphrodite** and the Roman **Venus**.

An idol of Ashtoreth was possibly the stem of a tree without branches shaped into an image and planted in the ground (Deuteronomy 16:21) or a similar looking object carved out of wood, silver, or stone. Ashtoreth worship glorified sex and war and included temple prostitution.



DELIBERATE MISSPELLINGS

Scholars suggest that some of the variety in translation and resulting ambiguity in the names of these pagan gods comes from deliberate mispronunciations and misspellings. Biblical writers expressed contempt for pagan gods in this way. For example, the word *Molech* is a combination of the Hebrew words for “ruler” and “shame.” Despite various titles, it is clear that all of these terms (Baal, Molech, Ashtoreth, Astarte, Ishtar, etc.) are used to reference the pagan worship detested by the God of Israel.

Compiled from:

“Gods, Pagan,” “Baal,” “Baal-Peor,” “Molech,” “Asherah,” “Ashtaroth,” and “Ishtar” in *Holman Bible Dictionary*, © 1991 Holman Bible Publishers.

Matthew George Easton, “Baal,” “Ashtoreth,” and “Asherah” in *Easton’s 1897 Bible Dictionary*, Thomas Nelson.

“1 Kings 11:5-8,” “1 Kings 23:4-8,” and “1 Kings 23:6” in *Life Application Study Bible*, © 1988, 1989 Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.