

Baal

[Editors. (Aug. 24, 2022). Baal, ancient deity. Britannica Online. Reproduced for educational purposes. Fair Use relied upon. Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Baal-ancient-deity>]



Palmyra, Syria: Baal Shamen,
Temple of

Baal, god worshipped in many ancient Middle Eastern communities, especially among the Canaanites, who apparently considered him a fertility deity and one of the most important gods in the pantheon. As a Semitic common noun *baal* (Hebrew *ba'al*) meant “owner” or “lord,” although it could be used more generally; for example, a *baal* of wings was a winged creature, and, in the plural, *baalim* of arrows indicated archers. Yet such

fluidity in the use of the term *baal* did not prevent it from being attached to a god of distinct character. As such, Baal designated the universal god of fertility, and in that capacity his title was Prince, Lord of the Earth. He was also called the Lord of Rain and Dew, the two forms of moisture that were indispensable for fertile soil in Canaan. In Ugaritic and Hebrew, Baal’s epithet as the storm god was He Who Rides on the Clouds. In Phoenician he was called Baal Shamen, Lord of the Heavens.

Knowledge of Baal’s personality and functions derives chiefly from a number of tablets uncovered from 1929 onward at Ugarit (modern Ras Shamra), in northern Syria, and dating to the middle of the 2nd millennium BCE. The tablets, although closely attached to the worship of Baal at his local temple, probably represent Canaanite belief generally. Fertility was envisaged in terms of seven-year cycles. In the mythology of Canaan, Baal, the god of life and fertility, locked in mortal combat with Mot, the god of death and sterility. If Baal triumphed, a seven-year cycle of fertility would ensue; but, if he were vanquished by Mot, seven years of drought and famine would ensue.

Ugaritic texts tell of other fertility aspects of Baal, such as his relations with Anath, his consort and sister, and also his siring a divine bull calf from a heifer. All this was part of his fertility role, which, when fulfilled, meant an abundance of crops and fertility for animals and mankind.

But Baal was not exclusively a fertility god. He was also king of the gods, and, to achieve that position, he was portrayed as seizing the divine kingship from Yamm, the sea god.

The myths also tell of Baal's struggle to obtain a palace comparable in grandeur to those of other gods. Baal persuaded Asherah to intercede with her husband El, the head of the pantheon, to authorize the construction of a palace. The god of arts and crafts, Kothar, then proceeded to build for Baal the most beautiful of palaces which spread over an area of 10,000 acres. The myth may refer in part to the construction of Baal's own temple in the city of Ugarit. Near Baal's temple was that of Dagon, given in the tablets as Baal's father.

The worship of Baal was popular in Egypt from the later New Kingdom in about 1400 BCE to its end (1075 BCE). Through the influence of the Aramaeans, who borrowed the Babylonian pronunciation Bel, the god ultimately became known as the Greek Belos, identified with Zeus.

Baal was also worshipped by various communities as a local god. The Hebrew scriptures speak frequently of the Baal of a given place or refers to Baalim in the plural, suggesting the evidence of local deities, or "lords," of various locales. It is not known to what extent the Canaanites considered those various Baalim identical, but the Baal of Ugarit does not seem to have confined his activities to one city, and doubtless other communities agreed in giving him cosmic scope.

In the formative stages of Israel's history, the presence of Baal names did not necessarily mean apostasy or even syncretism. The judge Gideon was also named Jerubbaal (Judges 6:32), and King Saul had a son named Ishbaal (I Chronicles 8:33). For those early Hebrews, "Baal" designated the Lord of Israel, just as "Baal" farther north designated the Lord of Lebanon or of Ugarit. What made the very name Baal anathema to the Israelites was the program of Jezebel, in the 9th century BCE, to introduce into Israel her Phoenician cult of Baal in opposition to the official worship of Yahweh (I Kings 18). By the time of the prophet Hosea (mid-8th century BCE) the antagonism to Baalism was so strong that the use of the term Baal was often replaced by the contemptuous *boshet* ("shame"); in compound proper names, for example, Ishbosheth replaced the earlier Ishbaal.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica This article was most recently revised and updated by Adam Augustyn.

Citation Information

Article Title: Baal

Website Name: Encyclopaedia Britannica

Publisher: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.

Date Published: 24 August 2022

URL: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Baal-ancient-deity>

Access Date: October 10, 2022