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Canaanite Religious Practices and the Challenge of Syncretism in African Christianity

Les Pratiques Religieuses Cananéennes et le Défi du Syncrétisme dans le Christianisme Africain

Julius Ndishua[1] and Nfor Derick[2]

Abstract

This article examines Canaanite religious practices in the Old Testament and draws parallels with contemporary expressions of syncretism in African Christianity. Syncretism remains one of the most persistent challenges facing African Christianity. In the Old Testament, Israel's repeated compromise with Canaanite fertility cults, idolatry, high places, and divination led to spiritual compromise despite their covenant with Yahweh. Similarly, many African Christians today retain elements of African Traditional Religion, such as ancestral veneration, divination, charms, and prosperity rituals, alongside their Christian faith and practice. This paper argues that understanding Canaanite religion provides valuable theological insights for addressing contemporary challenges of syncretism, contextualization, discipleship, and pastoral ministry in Africa. The researchers use a historical-bibliographical approach in this paper to analyze key Canaanite practices condemned in the Bible. The findings reveal that just as Yahweh demanded exclusive covenant loyalty from Israel, the African church must recover a prophetic call to holiness, discernment, and contextualized discipleship. A critical engagement with Scripture, rather than cultural accommodation, offers the way forward. The researchers recommend that the African Church must engage culture critically, affirming what is compatible with biblical faith while rejecting practices that compromise the exclusive lordship of Jesus Christ.

Keywords: Canaanite religion, syncretism, African Church.

Résumé

Cet article examine les pratiques religieuses cananéennes dans l'Ancien Testament et établit des parallèles avec les expressions contemporaines du syncrétisme au sein du christianisme africain. Le syncrétisme demeure l'un des défis les plus persistants auxquels est confronté le christianisme africain. Dans l'Ancien Testament, les compromis répétés d'Israël avec les cultes cananéens de la fertilité, l'idolâtrie, les hauts lieux et la divination ont conduit à des compromis spirituels, malgré leur alliance avec Yahvé. De même, de nombreux chrétiens africains conservent aujourd'hui certains éléments de la religion traditionnelle africaine, tels que la vénération des ancêtres, la divination, les amulettes et les rituels de prospérité, parallèlement à leur foi et à leurs pratiques chrétiennes. Cet article soutient que la compréhension de la religion cananéenne fournit des éclairages théologiques précieux pour aborder les défis contemporains liés au syncrétisme, à la contextualisation, au discipulat et au ministère

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pastoral en Afrique. Les chercheurs recourent à une approche historico-bibliographique afin d'analyser les principales pratiques cananéennes condamnées dans la Bible. Les résultats révèlent que, tout comme Yahvé exigeait d'Israël une fidélité exclusive à l'alliance, l'Église africaine doit retrouver un appel prophétique à la sainteté, au discernement et à un discipulat contextualisé. Une interaction critique avec les Écritures, plutôt qu'une accommodation à la culture, offre la voie à suivre. Les chercheurs recommandent que l'Église africaine examine la culture de manière critique, en affirmant ce qui est compatible avec la foi biblique tout en rejetant les pratiques qui compromettent la seigneurie exclusive de Jésus-Christ.

Mots-clés : Religion Cananéenne, Syncrétisme, Église Africaine.

Introduction

The religion of the Canaanites- descendants of Canaan played a significant role in the lives of the Israelites. While some similarities exist, the Israelites were easily enticed by the customs of their surrounding neighbors, inviting divine wrath. Yahweh expected them to be entirely set apart from the customs of surrounding nations, an expectation they repeatedly failed to meet. The church in Africa, in the same vein, is surrounded by customs that threaten absolute loyalty to Yahweh. In view of this, African church leaders must be conscious and approach ministry in a way that is contextually relevant and orthodox. Understanding Canaanite religion offers profound implications for the African Church, particularly in contextualizing theology, combating syncretism, and enriching pastoral approaches. Canaanite practices (e.g., Baal worship, fertility rites, ancestor veneration) mirror many *African Traditional Religions* (ATR). It becomes clear that recognizing these similarities helps African Christians grasp why biblical authors condemned such practices (1 Kgs. 18; Jer. 2). The Canaanite context reminds believers that biblical faith always engages culture, rejecting evil, redeeming good, and revealing God's supremacy. For the Church in Africa, this means cultivating a Christianity that is both authentically African and biblically orthodox. The researchers use bibliographical historical research method to examine the facts.

The Canaanite Context

An understanding of the terms Canaan and Canaanite serve as a bridge to compare how ancient Yahwism navigated surrounding indigenous cultures with how contemporary African Christianity can interact with African Traditional Religions (ATR). Addressing Canaan helps establish the geographical and historical setting of the Old Testament narrative. The intention here is to provide a clear origin for the religious practices. Addressing Canaanite shifts the focus from the physical land to the people, their culture, and their religious system.

The word Canaan is a general term for the various tribes that occupied the land of Canaan.[3] It is a personal name applied to the youngest son of Ham (Gen 9:18); a tribal name for peoples supposedly descended from him; and a geographical name describing the territory occupied by those descendants. As a tribal name, Genesis 10:15–19 lists eleven subdivisions; Exodus 13:5 lists five; Exodus 23:23 lists six; Deuteronomy 7:1 lists seven; and Genesis 15:19–21 lists ten. As a geographical term, "Canaan is a geographical term... for the area broadly encompassing the Eastern Mediterranean lands that are to the west of the Jordan River, Phoenicia, and part of southern Syria during the second millennium BCE."[4] Canaan's major

[3] Melancthon W. Jacobus, *Standard Bible Dictionary* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 2006), 53.

[4] Eric M. Meyers, ed., "Canaan," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Oxford Reference.

towns were located for the most part in agricultural regions, especially on the fertile plains of the countryside. Canaan can refer to the fourth son of Ham (Gen. 10:6) and to the country that derived its name from the preceding. The name, as first used by the Phoenicians, denoted only the maritime plain on which Sidon was built. But in the time of Moses and Joshua, it denoted the whole country to the west of the Jordan and the Dead Sea (Deut. 11:30).[5]

"The term 'Canaanite' is used in two ways in the Old Testament: broadly, to designate the entire non-Israelite population of Western Palestine... and narrowly, to refer to a specific group within that population, usually located along the Mediterranean coast and in the major river valleys."[6] The Canaanites were known as traders, and the Phoenicians and other coastal inhabitants were known as seafarers. The word 'Canaanite' itself came to mean 'merchant' (Zech. 14:21). Nevertheless, agriculture was a vital preoccupation of Canaan. [7] This understanding of Canaan and Canaanite helps in the understanding of their religious system as will be discussed.

Polytheistic Pantheon

The Ugaritic literature has been a main source for understanding the Canaanite religion in the Bronze and Iron Ages. A standard list of deities can be compiled from two Ugaritic texts and an Akkadian list. The list begins with the three principal deities of Ugarit: El, Dagan, and Baal. Other principal deities include Anat, Athirat, Yamm, Kothar, Pidray, Ashtar, and Reshef. At the head of the Pantheon was *El*, the patron of the gods, with his wife Athirat.[8] The Canaanite Pantheon was a vast collection of gods and goddesses, each with distinct roles, attributes, and mythological significance. Central to Canaanite religion, these deities personified natural forces, fertility, and societal order, reflecting the complexity of life in the ancient Near East.[9]

The general Canaanite word for "god" probably meant "the strong, powerful one." *El* lived far away from Canaan, "at the source of the two rivers," hence in Paradise. He apparently had three wives who were also his sisters: Astarte, Athirat (Asherah, also called Elat), and Anath.[10] He presided over a divine council of gods who were his children. Although he was brutal enough to slay his own son, he was called Lutpan ("the kindly one") and was described as an old man with white hair and a beard. Baal, the great storm god and king of the gods, was the central figure in the Pantheon and functionally far more important than *El*. *Baal* acted as *El's* prime minister and eventually dethroned him. *Baal* means "lord" and could be applied to different gods. Soon, the ancient Semitic 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 all else. 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 evildoers. *Baal* was called the "son of Dagon." Dagon, meaning

[5]M.G. Easton, "Canaan," in *Easton's Bible Dictionary,* ed. M.G. Easton (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 1897.

[6] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 224.

[7]James L. Price, "Canaan," in *Harper's Bible Dictionary,* 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 152.

[8] William M. Schniedewind and Joel H. Hunt, *A Primer on Ugaritic Language, Culture, and Literature* (New York, Singapore: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 18.

[9] Douglas C. Youvan (2024), "Canaanite Polytheism: Deities, Myths, and Influence on Ancient Near Eastern Religions" (Oxford: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2024), 4.

[10] M. G. Easton, "Canaan," in the *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, ed. Walter A. Elwell and Philip W. Comfort. (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 255.

"fish," was the chief god of Ashdod (1 Sam. 5:1–7).[11] Each god in Canaan represented some force of nature. The moon, sun, important stars, and visible planets were each considered a god or goddess.

Baal, seen as the god of thunderstorms, personified the power of all nature. The Canaanites' personification of the forces of nature accounted for the succession of the seasons. The dry period from April to the end of October represented the duration of Baal's death after his unsuccessful battle each spring with Mot. Revival of the rain-and-vegetation deity Baal toward the end of October signaled the commencement of the autumn rains, which continued intermittently until the following April. The Canaanites believed that the land regained its fertility because of the annual mating of Baal and Anath.[12] Other gods were Dagon, the grain god; Resheph, god of plagues; Shulman, god of healing; Koshar, the inventor god; and Mot, the god of death. The Old Testament presents a slightly different picture of the Pantheon, with Ashtoreth (Ishtar) being the wife of *Baal*. Such variations from region to region are common in the ancient Near East.[13] In the Old Testament, Yahweh is frequently called *El*. It is interesting that the Old Testament has no qualms in equating Yahweh with *El*, something which stands in marked contrast to its vehement opposition to *Baal*, let alone the equation of Yahweh with *Baal*. [14] As already mentioned, the Canaanites had an extensive pantheon, headed by *El*. More prominent in practice were *Baal*, the storm-god, and Dagon, with temples in Ugarit and elsewhere. The goddesses Asherah, Astarte (Ashtaroth), and Anath, like Baal, had multi-coloured personalities and violent characters; they were goddesses of sex and war. Kothar-and-Hasis was an artificer-god, and other and lesser deities abounded.[15] It is asserted that it was *El*, creator of earth and man, who was the chief god, and the begetter of the gods (70 in number). He bore the title "Father of Years" and was described as wise and kind, with grey hair.[16]

It is striking that Canaanite religion seems to have emphasized fertility in the natural world. Sexuality in the cult, a feature of Canaanite religion despised by Israel, may have been linked to the task of maintaining plant and animal fecundity. The gods of the Canaanites were in various ways involved in the life cycles of nature. The powerful storm god *Baal* was a giver of rain. His adversary, Mot, was a god of death and sterility. The ability of gods and goddesses to mate and their whereabouts in the cosmos were tied directly to the fate of human beings and their crops and animals. Palestinian agriculture relied on rain, and so the quality of autumn and winter rains was a central religious concern of the Canaanites.[17]

Canaanite religion, known largely from the literary and historical texts discovered at Ugarit and the Amarna Letters, acknowledged a great variety of deities, chief of whom was El; various local forms of this deity may be reflected in the names *El Shadday* ("God Almighty"; e.g., Gen. 17:1; 28:3), *El Elyon* ("Most High"; Gen. 14:18–21), *El Olam* ("Everlasting God"; Gen. 21:33), and *El Bethel* ("God of Bethel"; Gen. 31:13). Most prominent in the Ugaritic texts and the Old Testament is the storm and rain god Baal ("lord, master"), also known in numerous local manifestations (e.g., Baal-Peor, Baal-Lebanon; Baal-berith, "lord of the covenant," Judg. 9:4). It is confirmed that other members of the Canaanite Pantheon, many of whom have counterparts in Assyrian and Babylonian gods, include Dagon, god of corn; Hadad, the thunder

[11] Walter A. Elwell and Philip W. Comfort, 255.

[12]Walter A. Elwell and Philip W. Comfort (eds.), 255.

[13]John D. Hannah, "Canaanite," in *The Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia,* ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer and others, vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 89.

[14] John Day**,** "Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan" *Journal for the study of the Old Testament Supplement* series 265 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 14.

[15]S. Solle, "Canaan," in *New Bible Dictionary,* eds. D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall (Leicester, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 164.

[16] Aaron Greener, "Archaeology and Religion in Late Bronze Age Canaan" (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2026), 4.

[17]James L. Price, 152.

god; and Anat, Astarte, and Athirat (Asherah), variant forms of the goddess of love and the mother goddess.[18]

Ritual Practices

Canaanite cultic practices centered on elaborate rites of sacrifice of cattle, rams, ewes, lambs, wild animals, birds, and doves. Altars were erected at high places; there were sacred groves, trees, or carved wooden images of Asherah. Canaanite temples had a "holy of holies" with an idol enshrined, an altar of incense before its entrance, libation bowls and small lamps. Divination, snake worship and sacred prostitution were practiced.[19]

Actual temples in Palestine include remains at Beth-shan, Megiddo, Lachish, Shechem and especially Hazor, besides those in Syria at Qatna, *Alalaḫ* or Ugarit. The Ugaritic texts mention a variety of animals sacrificed to the gods: cattle, sheep (rams and lambs) and birds (including doves) alongside libations. Animal bones excavated in several Palestinian sites support this picture.[20]

Canaanite religion in all its manifestations was always polytheistic. Many of the Ugaritic deities are in the Ugaritic pantheon list, which is attested in both Ugaritic and Akkadian versions. Presumably, *El* was also the creator of the whole universe, though we lack a creation account. He was an aged deity, called "father of years," with grey hair, and, in keeping with this, he was noted for his wisdom. Kindness and benignity are also mentioned among his attributes. *El's* dwelling place was "at the source of the rivers, amid the springs of the two oceans." *El's* consort was the goddess Athirat. Athirat was the mother of the gods. Although *El* is the chief god in the Canaanite Pantheon, as attested at Ugarit, Baal is clearly the most active. He is the bringer of the rain, on which the fertility of the soil depends. He is called "the rider of the clouds" in Ugaritic and is responsible for the thunder and lightning, which herald the coming of the rain.

In the Ugaritic texts, the Baal cycle consists of three main parts: (1) his conflict with the god of the sea, Yam, (2) the subsequent building of *Baal's* palace/temple, and (3) *Baal's* conflict with Mot ("Death"), in the course of which *Baal* dies and rises again. There is debate about how far the Baal myth should be interpreted in seasonal terms. Anat is constantly by Baal's side and is devoted to him. She cuts up Mot like corn, is said to have defeated the dragon (i.e., Leviathan), and in one particularly gruesome scene is depicted wading through blood. *Baal's* father is usually represented as Dagon. Although Dagon is frequently mentioned as the father of *Baal* and he appears in several sacrificial lists, he does not figure in any mythological texts from Ugarit. His name suggests that he was a corn god. This deity is already attested at Ebla and was prominent among the Amorites at Mari; the Old Testament also indicates that the Philistines worshipped him.

At Ugarit, the sun was worshipped as the goddess Shapash. Her epithet is "luminary of the gods." She scorches the earth during Baal's stay in the underworld, but tells Mot to stop struggling with *Baal* when the time is up. Her nocturnal trip to the underworld is reflected at the end of the Baal myth, where she is found amid the shades of the underworld. The moon does not appear to have played a particularly prominent role in Canaanite mythology. However, its name is preserved in such place names in Palestine as Beth-yeraḥ and Jericho. From Ugarit, we possess a text which celebrates the marriage of the moon god, Yarikh, and the goddess Nikkal. Two other deities associated with the sky in some way are Shaḥar and Shalem, whose names mean respectively "Dawn" and "Dusk." Sometimes it has been supposed that Shaḥar

[18] Allen C. Myers ed., "Canaan," in *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987), 187.

[19]Charles F. Pfeiffer and others, *The Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia* (Moody Bible Institute: Moody Press, 2005), 97.

[20]S. Solle, 164.

and Shalem represent, respectively, Venus as the morning and the evening star. However, the equivalence of Astarte with Ishtar, as well as later with Aphrodite, makes it virtually certain that she herself was equated with Venus. In the *Baal* myth, Athtar is appointed to rule in Baal's stead when Baal is in the underworld, but he is said to be too small to fill the throne and so has to step down, though he still becomes king over the earth. It has often been supposed that at this point Athtar represents the waters of artificial irrigation.

Although Mot is the primary deity associated with the underworld at Ugarit, he is not the only one. Another is the god Resheph, appearing already as Rasap at Ebla. At Ugarit, his underworld character is indicated by his equation with Nergal, the Mesopotamian underworld god, and this is fully borne out by other Ugaritic evidence. Thus, he is referred to as the sun goddess's porter at the time of her setting. Several Canaanite deities were worshipped in Egypt, especially during the New Kingdom.[21]

Theological Contrasts with Christianity

The distinctiveness of Israel's conception of God, society, and time is most clearly seen against the backdrop of the Canaanite culture in which they shared.[22] Polytheism, in contrast, is represented by many different bodies of texts from ancient Mesopotamian cities such as Assur and Babylon; from many sites in Syria, including the Bronze Age cities of Ebla, Ugarit, Mari, and Emar; and, finally, from early Israel itself as well as its Iron Age neighbours.[23] Israelite morality, as defined by the covenant laws of Mt Sinai, was very different from the cultic traditions of Canaanite life. Hebrew ethical monotheism was in many ways opposite to the depraved polytheistic nature worship of the Canaanite religion. It was clear that the two systems could not coexist. The law contained strict instructions that the Canaanites and their ways were to be eliminated from the Promised Land (Ex. 23:24; 34:13–16; Deut. 7:1–5) and that the Hebrews were to remain separate from Canaanite religion in loyalty to God's covenant.[24]

Contact among the many religions of the ancient Near East produced tension and much syncretism or borrowing of concepts and practices. The Arameans and Philistines who settled in Canaan adopted Canaanite practices; similarly, the Amorites accepted much of the Sumerian religion as their own when they moved into Mesopotamia. [25] The God of the Hebrews was the unique and cosmic deity who demanded exclusive allegiance.

Redemptive Narrative

The Hebrew Bible frames Canaanite practices as antithetical to covenant faithfulness, yet Christ's universal redemption offers a paradigm for engaging African traditional religions. Canaanite high places (*bamot*) were repurposed for Yahweh worship (2 Kgs. 23:15–20). Similarly, African churches can contextualize rituals (e.g., harvest festivals) into Christ-centered celebrations, rejecting harmful elements while honoring communal roots.

Some Biblical Passages against Aspects of Canaanite Religion

Ancient Israel was repeatedly commanded to resist the religious practices of its neighbors in order to maintain its unique covenant loyalty to God. The Old Testament contains legal prohibitions and sharp prophetic critiques designed to deconstruct Canaanite religious practices. These scriptural prohibitions critiqued the worship of fertility deities like Baal and

[21]David Noel Freedman, "Canaan," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 831.

[22]Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 590.

[23] Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 10.

[24]Walter A. Elwell and Philip W. Comfort (eds.), 254.

[25]Walter A. Elwell and Philip W. Comfort (eds.), 254.

Asherah, at the same time warning against Canaanite rituals and ancestral necromancy. A careful look at these aspects of syncretism reveal that these passages are not simply historical facts; they serve as a significant theological boundary. A critical examination of these biblical texts enables believers to better understand the absolute nature of Yahwistic monotheism, drawing critical parallels to the contemporary pressure points where biblical doctrines collide with African Traditional Religions.

The prohibition against abominable practices (Deut. 12:29-31)

This passage explicitly forbids adopting Canaanite worship methods, specifically condemning child sacrifice as an abomination. Here, the injunction is aimed against the syncretistic admixture of heathen rites with the service of Jehovah, which unspiritual Israelites were especially prone to. [26]

Forbidden Occult Practices (Deut. 18:9-12)

This passage lists specific Canaanite religious practices considered abhorrent: child sacrifice, various forms of divination, sorcery, and necromancy. In Canaan,

> Children were sometimes made to "pass through the fire" to determine the course of events. The use of children in this way is "an abomination to the LORD which He hates" (Deut. 12:31). Seventeen times the Bible mentions the word "witchcraft," usually in a negative sense. These references can be grouped into four basic teachings. 1) Witchcraft is rebellion against God (1 Sam. 15:23). 2) Witchcraft is a work of the flesh (Gal. 5:19–21). 3) Witches' powers are strong but limited (Acts 13:6–11). 4) Witches are to be dealt with harshly (Deut. 18:10). Soothsayers attempted to control circumstances or people through power given by evil spirits. Omen interpretation was the telling of the future based on signs such as fire, rain, or the movement of birds. Sorcerers practiced magic by incantations. Such detestable practices were one of the reasons God used Israel to destroy the Canaanites (vv. 12, 14). By avoiding these pagan customs, the Israelites would "be blameless before the LORD your God" (v. 13). Participation in these pagan practices will bring down God's judgment on the offenders.[27]

Cycle of Apostasy - Baal & Asherah (Judges 2:11-13)

This passage illustrates the recurring pattern of Israel turning away from Yahweh to worship the primary Canaanite deities: Baal (storm/fertility god) and the Ashtoreths/Ashtaroth (a plural form referring to the goddess Asherah/Astarte, associated with fertility). We see here that,

> Israel's apostasy consisted of the worship of other gods. People worshipped only the old deities of the native population. The guilt of the apostasy was aggravated by the character of the worship into which the people fell. This was 1) false, the worship of supposed gods which possessed no Divine power; 2) materialistic, the worship of idols in place of the unseen spiritual God; and 3) immoral, the worship of impure deities with impure rites.[28]

Confrontation on Mount Carmel - Baal vs. Yahweh (1 Kings 18:19-40)

[26]S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*. 3rd ed., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902, 150.

[27]John C. Maxwell and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, "Deuteronomy," in *The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 5* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1987), 215.

[28] H. D. M. Spence-Jones, "Judges," in *The Pulpit Commentary* (London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 2004), 23.

This passage depicts the dramatic showdown between Elijah (prophet of Yahweh) and the prophets of Baal (and, by implication, Asherah, supported by Queen Jezebel). It demonstrates the conflict between exclusive Yahwism and Canaanite polytheism, culminating in Yahweh's decisive victory. Note should be taken that,

> The king and queen had different religious establishments; the king and his servants worshipped Baal, the supreme lord and master of the world, the sun. For this establishment, four hundred and fifty priests were maintained. The queen and her women worshipped Asherah, Astarte, or Venus, and for this establishment, four hundred priests were maintained. It appears that those eight hundred and fifty priests were the domestic chaplains of the king and queen, and yet from the following verse, we learn that Ahab had sent to all the children of Israel to collect these prophets; but Jezebel had certainly four hundred of them in her own house who were not at the assembly mentioned here.[29]

Josiah's Reforms - Removing Idolatry (2 Kgs. 23:4-14)

This section details King Josiah's systematic campaign to eradicate Canaanite religious elements from Judah, specifically targeting worship of Baal, Asherah (including her image/pole), astral worship ("host of heaven"), cultic prostitution, and the Topheth (site of child sacrifice to Molech). We observe that though Baal was certainly the sun, yet here they are distinguished; Baal being worshipped under different forms and attributes, Baal-peor, Baal-zephon, Baal-zebub, etc.[30]

Jeremiah 7:17-18 highlights the Condemnation of Queen of Heaven Worship

The prophet condemns a popular syncretistic practice, likely directed at Asherah/Astarte (or Ishtar), identified as the Queen of Heaven. Jeremiah 7:17–19 is Yahweh's justification for the prohibition of the conduct of the people. This justification of the prohibition, addressed to Jeremiah, is at the same time an accusation against the people.[31] The people are accused of going after other gods.

Warning against Covenants & Idolatry (Ex. 34:12-16)

Here we have an early warning against assimilation, specifically mentioning breaking down Canaanite altars, pillars, and Asherah poles, and the danger of intermarriage leading to idolatry.

> The people have already demonstrated their vulnerability to the temptations of idolatry in the golden calf incident (Ex. 32:1–6). Now the impending occupation of the Promised Land will confront them with new and even greater temptations of this sort (Ex. 34:12b). Israel has already been instructed and warned (Ex. 23:20–33), but that warning is now intensified. A covenant with the people of the land will lead to friendly association, then to an invitation to participate in a sacrificial meal, then to intermarriage, and finally and inevitably to idolatrous worship of their gods (Ex. 34:15–16). To avoid this, Israel must immediately and thoroughly eradicate the symbols and practices of Canaanite religion (Ex. 34:12–13).[32]

The Prohibition of Molech Worship (Leviticus 18:21; 20:1-5)

These passages highlight explicit, severe prohibitions against the Canaanite practice of child sacrifice to the underworld deity Molech. In the ritual of the Canaanites, children were

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[29]Adam Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary: 1 Kings*, in the Holy Bible with a Commentary and Critical Notes, Vol. 2 (New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh, 1831), 1 Kings 18:19.

[30]Adam Clarke, 2 Kings 23:5.

[31]William Lee Holladay and Paul D. Hanson, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 1-25* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 251.

[32]Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus* (Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 2000), 404.

sacrificed by being made to pass through fire. This practice was condemned (Lev. 20:2–5; Deut. 21:31; 18.10). Nevertheless, it was adopted by some Israelites (2 Kings 16:3; 21.6; 23.10; Jer. 7:31; 32.35; Ezek. 16:21).[33]

The Condemnation of Topheth and Child Sacrifice (Jeremiah 19:4-5)

This passage directly links the location (Topheth in Hinnom Valley) with the practice of burning children as sacrifices to Baal, emphasizing God's absolute rejection of it.

The vision of Tammuz weeping and sun worship (Ezekiel 8:14-16) describes syncretistic practices within the Jerusalem Temple itself: women mourning for the dying-and-rising Mesopotamian god Tammuz (adopted into Canaanite practice), and men performing sun worship – both considered major abominations. Jeremiah 19:4-5 contains justification for the coming punishment. The people had forsaken the Lord and had made Judah like a foreign land by worshiping their foreign gods there. They were sacrificing to gods that neither their ancestors nor their kings had worshipped.[34]

These passages consistently portray Canaanite religion as fundamentally opposed to the worship of Yahweh, emphasizing practices like idolatry (especially Baal, Asherah, Molech), child sacrifice, divination, and cultic prostitution as particularly abhorrent (*to'evah*). The Bible presents the presence of these religions in the land as a constant temptation and threat to Israel's covenant relationship with God.

Implications for the African Church

An examination of the biblical prohibitions of Canaanite religious practices provides a significant theological framework for traversing the complex spiritual landscape of contemporary Africa. Looking at the Church in Africa, it is observed that the ancient struggle against syncretism is not a historical narrative, but a contemporary pastoral reality. As Christians traverse the intersections between Christianity and Traditional African Religions, the biblical prohibitions against compromise remain unaltered. This section highlights how the lessons of exclusivity to Yahweh calls on the contemporary African Church to address issues of double allegiance, redefine cultural contextualization, and enhance a deeply rooted, genuine Christian identity.

Syncretistic Risks

Like ancient Israel's struggle with Canaanite influence, African churches face challenges integrating indigenous beliefs (e.g., ancestor veneration, spirit appeasement) without compromising core biblical doctrines. Like ancient Israel's struggle with *Baal* worship, African churches face syncretism-mixing Christianity with ATR (e.g., consulting witch doctors during crises). Studying Canaanite apostasy offers cautionary templates for discipleship.

Contextual Theology

Worthy of note is the fact that Canaanite practices (e.g., Baal worship, fertility rites, ancestor veneration) mirror many African Traditional Religions (ATR). Recognizing these similarities helps African Christians grasp why biblical authors condemned such practices (1 Kgs. 18; Jer. 2). Also, the Old Testament's emphasis on Yahweh's supremacy over Canaanite gods (e.g., Psa. 82) equips African churches to address lingering ATR influences, affirming Christ's uniqueness without dismissing cultural identity. Scholars like John Mbiti argue for

[33]Péter-Contesse René and Ellington, *A Handbook on Leviticus* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 278.

[34]F.B. Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 187.

inculturation-adapting Christian teachings to African worldviews while rejecting practices incompatible with Scripture (e.g., witchcraft).

Missiological Opportunities

Missiological opportunities will include: 1) reinterpreting symbols**:** Canaanite *Baal* worship involved fertility rites; African churches might reclaim agricultural festivals (e.g., harvest thanksgiving) for Christian witness. 2) Liberation Themes**:** Canaanite oppression narratives (e.g., Exodus) resonate with postcolonial African struggles, offering a theological lens for justice and identity. 3) Worldview Engagement: Canaanite religion's focus on land fertility and ancestral spirits resonates with African cosmological concerns. Pastors can use this insight to address fears (e.g., crop failure, curses) with biblical hope (Romans 8:19–22). 4) Ethical Boundaries: Ugaritic texts reveal Canaanite child sacrifice and temple prostitution (Leviticus 18:21). This underscores the need for clear ethical teaching against practices like ritual killings or gender-based violence in African communities.

Pastoral Challenges

Some challenges associated with cultural contextualization include: 1) Some African churches label traditional practices as demonic (akin to Old Testament polemics against Baal), risking alienation. Others advocate for discernment (Acts 17:22–28). 2) Urban African youth may view Canaanite parallels as archaic; the church must articulate relevance (e.g., idolatry of materialism with Baal worship).

Theological Education

Seminaries need to teach Canaanite history to help leaders discern parallels in African Traditional Religion. For example, Baal's association with rain can illuminate sermons on God's sovereignty over creation (Hos. 2:8). African theologians advocate the use of indigenous frameworks to interpret Scripture. Canaanite studies validate this approach, showing how biblical faith confronts and transforms local cosmologies.

Contemporary Challenges

Some challenges include: 1) urban versus rural dynamics. In cosmopolitan African cities, Canaanite parallels may seem distant, but rural churches still grapple with ATR syncretism. Contextual sermons on Elijah's contest with *Baal* (1 Kgs. 18) can empower believers in spiritual warfare. 2) Interfaith Dialogue: Understanding shared ancient Near Eastern roots fosters respectful engagement with African traditionalists, avoiding colonial-era dismissals while upholding Christ's lordship.

Practical Applications for the African Church

Some applications for the African Church include 1) preaching: preachers can use Canaanite idolatry narratives to address modern idols like tribalism, wealth, and others. 2) Discipleship: bible teachers can develop curricula contrasting African Traditional Religion practices with biblical responses like ancestors versus Christ's mediation in Hebrews 7:25. 3) Launch initiatives repurposing traditional sites (e.g., sacred groves) as prayer centers, echoing Hezekiah's reforms (2 Chronicles 31:1).

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Canaanite religion was characterized by polytheism, fertility cults, divination, and ritual practices that stood in sharp contrast to Israel's covenant faith in Yahweh. The persistent temptation of Israel to adopt Canaanite practices provides a valuable theological framework for understanding contemporary challenges of syncretism within African Christianity. While certain cultural practices may be contextualized and transformed for Christian use, the African Church must remain committed to the exclusive worship of Jesus

Christ. The study therefore recommends that theological institutions strengthen biblical and historical studies, churches develop discipleship programmes that address traditional religious beliefs, and pastors engage African cultures with discernment rather than wholesale rejection or uncritical acceptance.

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