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C:\Data\HaDavar\Classes\Minor Prophets\Zephaniah\Time Frames of Zephaniah.doc
BAAL. The Hebrew noun *ba‘al* means ‘master’, ‘possessor’ or ‘husband’. Used with suffixes, *e.g.* Baal-peor or Baal-berith, the word may have retained something of its original sense; but in general Baal is a proper name in the OT, and refers to a specific deity, Hadad, the W Semitic storm-god, the most important deity in the Canaanite pantheon. It is not clear to what extent local Baals were equated with or distinguished from Hadad. The Baal confronted at Mt Carmel (1 Ki. 18) was probably Meldart, the god of Tyre. The OT use of the plural (*e.g.* 1 Ki. 18:18) may suggest that more Baals than one were clearly distinguished; but in any case there was fluidity in the pagan conception of deities.

The Baal cults affected and challenged the worship of Yahweh throughout Israelite history. The limited OT data about Baal can now be supplemented by the information from the Ras Shamra documents. One of his consorts was *Ashtaroth*, another *Asherah*; and Baal is called the son of *Dagon*. The texts reveal him as a nature deity; myths describe him in conflict with death, infertility and flood waters, emerging victorious as ‘king’ of the gods.

Yahweh was ‘master’ and ‘husband’ to Israel, and therefore they called him ‘Baal’, in all innocence; but naturally this practice led to confusion of the worship of Yahweh with the Baal rituals, and presently it became essential to call him by some different title; Hosea (2:16) proposed ’is, another word meaning ‘husband’. Once the title ‘Baal’ was no longer applied to Yahweh, personal names incorporating the word were likely to be misunderstood. So bōše† (‘shame’) tended to replace *ba‘al* in such names. Thus Esh-baal and Merib-baal (1 Ch. 8:3f.) are better known as Ishbosheh (2 Sa. 2:8) and Mephibosheth (2 Sa. 9:6).

The word Baal also occurs once or twice as a man’s name and as a place-name (*cf.* 1 Ch. 5:5; 4:33).


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*The Louvre, Department of Oriental Antiquities*

A bronze and gold statue of Baal, approximately 7.5 inches tall, one of many found at Ugarit, was worshipped as the deified embodiment of the earth’s fertility. The weapons this statue once held are missing.

Centuries after this statue was made Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:20–40) and exhorted the Israelites, “If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21).¹

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ASHTAROTH, ASHTORETH. 1. Heb. ‘aštōret intoxicating, a mother goddess with aspects as goddess of fertility, love and war, known to the Israelites through the Canaanites (1 Ki. 11:5). The name was common in one form or another, among many of the Semitic-speaking peoples of antiquity. In Mesopotamia Ištar was identified with the Sumerian mother goddess Inanna. The name occurs in the form ‘štrt in the Ugaritic texts, and as ‘strt in the (later) Phoenician inscriptions, transcribed in the Gk. script as Astartē. It has been suggested that the Heb. ‘aštōret intoxicating is an artificial form created from ‘štrt, by analogy with the vowel pattern of bōšēt intoxicating, to show a fitting attitude among the Israelites to the goddess, whose cult as practised by the Canaanites was depraved in the extreme. ‘aštārōt intoxicating is the plural form of the name. The Israelites turned to the worship of Ashoreth soon after arriving in the land (Jdg. 2:13; 10:6); it was rife in the time of Samuel (1 Sa. 7:3–4; 12:10) and was given royal sanction by Solomon (1 Ki. 11:5; 2 Ki. 23:13). After Saul had been killed by the Philistines, his armour was placed in the temple of Asherah at Beth-shan (1 Sa. 31:10), and the excavators of this site have suggested that the N temple in level V there may have been the one in question, though this remains an inference. Numerous clay plaques depicting naked female images have been discovered in Palestinian sites of the Bronze and Iron Ages, and it is probable that some of these are representations of the goddess Ashoreth-Astarte.


ASHERAH. A Canaanite mother-goddess mentioned in the Ras Shamra texts (aḥārāt) as a goddess of the sea and the consort of El, but associated in the OT with Baal (e.g. Jdg. 3:7). While the OT sometimes refers to Asherah as a goddess (e.g., 1 Ki. 18:19; 2 Ki. 23:4; 2 Ch. 15:16), the name is used also of an image made for that goddess (e.g. 1 Ki. 15:13) which consequently came to represent her. The Israelites were commanded to cut down (e.g. Ex. 34:13) or burn (Dt. 12:3) the asherim of the Canaanites, and were likewise forbidden themselves to plant ‘an Asherah of any kind of tree’ beside God’s altar (Dt. 16:21). From these references it appears that the object was of wood, and was presumably an image of some kind. A piece of carbonized wood about 1.2 m long, discovered in the Early Bronze Age shrine at Ai, has been interpreted as a possible asherah, but many scholars would now reject the view that the object was a post, and would give the translation ‘Asherah-image’ in all occurrences. In the AV the word is consistently translated ‘grove’.


T.C.M. 2

MOLECH. The name of a deity, usually written Molech (Heb. mōlek, 2 Ki. 23:10; Je. 32:35), Melek (‘king’, melek, Is. 57:9), Malcham (‘their king’, Je. 49:1, 3) or once Moloch (Am. 5:26 quoted Acts 7:43, Gk. moloch, AV).

Molech was worshipped in the ancient Near East in the second millennium BC (Mari and Ugarit) and associated with death and the underworld. He may be attested in the element malik found in personal names. His cult was practised by the Ammonites (1 Ki. 11:7, 33) and probably by the Canaanites (Dt. 12:31). It was considered the equivalent of Baal worship, hence the definite article before the name in Lv. 18:21; 20:2–5; 2 Ki. 23:10; Je. 22:35. Weinfeld links it especially with death and the worship of the god Baal-Hadad as ‘king’. Solomon built a high place for Molech on the Mount of Olives, probably to please his foreign wives (1 Ki. 11:7).

The type and extent of the ritual associated with this deity is the subject of debate. The phrase ‘to pass (hbr) the son/daughter through the fire to Molech’ (2 Ki. 16:3; 17:17; 23:10) could refer to a dedication or votive ceremony, possibly fire-walking. King Ahaz was condemned for this (2 Ch. 28:3) as were Manasseh (2 Ki. 21:6) and Samaria (2 Ki. 17:17). Eissfeldt compared this with molk, a dedicatory offering found from the 6th century onwards. However, no extant Phoenician inscription has mlk in connection with child-sacrifice (except later Sanchuniathon). Nor is child sacrifice common in OT or surrounding cultures. It was a rare and detested practice to the true Israelite, as shown in 2 Ki. 3:27; Ps. 106:37–38. This is also shown by the use of ‘sacrifice’ (zbh) or immolation (šrp) on occasions (Lv. 21:9; Dt. 12:31; 18:10). The majority of scholars, however, interpret all references to Molech as child sacrifice and compare it with later Phoenician-Carthaginian (Punic) practice in N Africa where mlk denotes the sacrifice. Whether death by child sacrifice or dedication through fire, both are abhorrent to God. They are associated with Topheth (2 Ki. 23:10; Je. 7:31–32; 19:11–12) and the smouldering rubbish dumps in the Hinnom valley outside Jerusalem. The reforms of Josiah in Judah were marked by the destruction of the high places dedicated to Molech (2 Ki. 23:10, 13) yet the ritual did not die out until after Ezekiel (16:20ff.; 20:26, 31; 23:27).


ZEPHANIAH
Theme / Application Chart

SCRIPTURE: Zephaniah 1:1 – 3:20

THEME: Complacency and its inevitable consequences

APPLICATION: Judah was confident of her relationship with God. That attitude led her into all the political, social, and religious evils of the day. God implored them through Zephaniah to seek the Lord, seek humility, seek righteousness, and to do what He commands. They did not listen and the Babylonian captivity came upon them. Yet in all this, God held out through the prophet the promise of a glorious future. Even the wonderful promises of the future did not motivate Judah out of her complacency.

SPECIFIC APPLICATION: Are we complacent in our relationship to God? “I’m a believer, there is no condemnation coming my way.” “I can do anything I want; I’m forgiven in the Messiah.” Rabbi Paul’s response to such an attitude is in Romans 6:1-2 & 15. Instead, we are exhorted to continue seeking the Lord, seeking righteousness, seeking humility, and doing what he commands (See II Peter 1:3-11). If we do not, we will be tempted to have a complacent attitude such as Judah had.

Let’s allow God’s promise of the glorious Messianic Kingdom motivate us to shun complacency.

With what are you struggling? 1) Seeking the Lord 2) Obeying Him. 3) Seeking righteousness (honesty and integrity in every area of your life) 4) Humility 5) Trusting in God’s future promises.

PLAN OF ACTION: Think of something you could do to respond to God in that area of your life.