

# Road to the Almighty

## A World of Gods

While many of the ideas found in the Hebrew Bible had been kicking around Sumer, Babylon, and Egypt for centuries, it's thought that the primary point of origin for the Hebrew God was Canaan—the region inhabited by Semitic peoples in and around what is now Israel and Jordan.

In the sixth grade you learned that this region was called the “Crossroads of Civilization.” The food 'n fuel truck stop where traders pulled over and swapped everything from stories to slaves on their way to Europe, Egypt, or the Far East. It's one of the most conquered regions in the world, changing hands more often than a gangsta groupie and getting pretty much the same treatment. The interest in this place is remarkable considering what a miserable patch of real estate it is. It's not as if people have spent 4,000 years fighting over Maui or the Hamptons. We're talking about the West Bank. Fun is not this place's middle name. Yet, if a global war wipes out the entire human race, chances are pretty good that the fight will have started over this tortured stretch of land.

Three of the world's great religions call it home. God knows why. But it may not be a coincidence that a region famous for angels, invisible spirits, and prophecies is an arid landscape whose principal product is the mirage.

The Canaanites lived in a network of independent city-states linked by trade and a common culture. Each city had its own attendant gods to serve every imaginable purpose. Families would focus on venerating the dead in the form of household gods and goddesses. At the same time, they would also acknowledge the existence of others deities with names like Mot, Asherah, Astarte and, most important to our story, Baal.

It's from this motherload of deities that the single Hebrew god would emerge, incorporating ideas from Egypt and Babylon along the way. The free market of religious belief was about to produce its first monopoly.

## High God vs. the Personal God

If you're going to worship a god, especially if you've got only one, you want the biggest, baddest, most totally awesome super-being possible—a High God that lords over creation. A cosmic spirit so far beyond human comprehension that trying to understand him is like teaching the economics of crypto-currency to ants, or to anyone else for that matter.

The appeal of this god is that he or she is powerful and awe-inspiring enough to create an entire universe—the kind of distant, unseen god popular in secular periods like classical Greece or the 18th century Enlightenment. The god of Aristotle, Newton, and Jefferson. The author of natural laws. The Prime Mover. The dispassionate, enigmatic loom that weaves together the fabric of time and space.

Unfortunately, this god isn't prone to small talk, or to any talk. I know he doesn't return my calls. Nor does he do personal favors. The only way to know him is through a profound transcendence, usually achieved through years of devotion. Even then, all you're going to get is the vaguest notion of a sliver of his little toenail. Resign yourself to the fact that, in your search for truth, this magnificent god is forever and always a profound and unfathomable mystery.

Or not.

You see, not everyone likes mysteries, or wants to spend twenty years meditating on one foot to understand their god. Eventually this standoffish deity falls out of fashion and people turn to a more emotionally satisfying Personal God.

They want a nice caretaker who answers prayers, dispenses folk wisdom, brings plague upon their enemies, and tucks them in at night. They feel his love and fear his wrath. He has a personality and a face.

This god is a favorite in periods of religious revivalism like, well, today. He's the one who's got 'em writhing in the aisles at church and belting out gospel anthems at football games. He's the god that cures arthritis, wins Country Music Awards, and decides elections in Red States. The god of Joseph Smith, Billy Graham, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and Pentecostal snake handlers.

Ah, but now there's a problem. After decades of worshipping this down-home deity, who would probably fix your transmission if you asked politely, he starts to become overly familiar. If he spends too much time making old ladies do backflips at Sunday service, he loses his cosmic credentials. Miracles start to look like stunts. Beliefs come off as superstitions. People figure the Creator of the Universe has more important things to do than chum up to a pinstriped preacher in a mega-church. Consequently, God gets kicked upstairs again to become the aloof High God.

## **El**

The reason I bring all this up is because Western history waffles between these two concepts of the Almighty. It begins with the High God of Canaan. The supreme deity. His name is El and he's the grand, dispassionate lord of the divine assembly. The Big Kahuna over all the lesser Kahunas. He's symbolized by the bull and is popular throughout Canaan, Syria, and Arabia.

El is a creator god who is detached and above the fray. He's invisible, mysterious, and so highly esteemed that his name is incorporated into many Middle Eastern names like Ishmael or Israel. "El" is short for "Elohim" (el-o-heem), a generic word for "gods." But Elohim will also come to signify the one special god that demands exclusive worship. This means no gallivanting around with other spirits.

## **Yahweh**

Alas, there are other spirits around with which one can gallivant. Among them is another popular Canaanite god named Yahweh. (Ancient Hebrew used no vowels, so the name was actually spelled YHWH.) Yahweh is much more of the Personal God. He's a major interventionist in human affairs. He's a rugged desert deity of thunder, fire, and war—which explains biblical imagery like the burning bush, the pillar of fire, and all the thunder and lightning Moses confronts on Mount Sinai when he receives the Ten Commandments. You walked on eggshells around this god.

## **A Holy Hybrid**

Over the centuries, El and Yahweh would gradually be conflated and become the one omnipotent deity we find in Scripture—the magisterial El and the tempestuous Yahweh both woven together in the text by rival priesthods into a single personality. (We'll see how it all happened.)

What's fascinating about the early books of the Hebrew Bible is that, if you tease apart the passages discussing "God" (meaning El) from those mentioning "the Lord God" (meaning Yahweh), the contrasting personalities of the two original divinities reemerges:

El created life with mere words. Yahweh had to scoop up dirt and blow up a man's nose to create Adam. El gives man dominion over the Earth. Yahweh sticks him in a garden and makes him the groundskeeper. El has no rules. Yahweh lays out restrictions against forbidden fruit with threats of death. And instead of calling his creation "good," as El does, Yahweh discovers a flaw: The man shouldn't be alone. Gotta fix that. But he doesn't create the woman as serenely as El

does. Instead of just speaking, Yahweh knocks the man out, opens him up, clones the woman from his rib, then sews him back up. It's icky, and the whole operation takes place on the ground with, like, bugs 'n stuff.

In these passages we see both the High God and the Personal God at work: El shapes the cosmic firmament. Yahweh plants trees. El uses words. Yahweh works with his hands. El is an aristocrat. Yahweh practically has his name on his shirt.

The genius of biblical religion is that it fuses together the awesome High God with the activist Personal God. Two deities from neighboring but distinct traditions were combined in the pages of Scripture into a single entity that is, in one form or another, still very much with us.