



CONTEXT FOR THE CHRIST EVENT:

Canaanite II

THE NORTHERN AREA OF CANAAN, to which Abraham and his family first journeyed from Haran, was well watered and thus supported agricultural communities as early as the eleventh millennium BCE. Excavations at Ras Shamra (Ugarit) and other neighboring sites in northern Canaan, which date to the third or fourth millennium BCE, have revealed evidence for the worship of the god, “El” (plural, “Elohim”).¹ To the Canaanites, El was known as the “Bull” god. After dwelling in Canaan, the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, also began to refer to their god as “El” (e.g., Genesis 14:19; 17:1).

Later, in their travels to and from Egypt, the patriarchs passed through the Negev and Sinai. This southern region of Canaan was largely desert and was home only to nomadic tribes, who ranged over the country with their cattle and other herds. Interestingly, the Negev and Sinai deserts hold the remains of numerous stone “high places” for the worship of the ancient desert god, “YHWH,” and his consort, “Asherah.”² It was here that Abraham’s son, Midian — by his wife, Keturah — settled; and it was here that Midian and his descendants worshiped El (the Bull god) and YHWH (the Calf god) as El’s son (Genesis 25:1-4).

Centuries later, when Moses escaped from the Egyptian Pharaoh’s wrath, he found refuge in the land of Midian with his future father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian. Jethro and Aaron adhered to the tradition that El, the Bull, was the highest god, while YHWH, the Calf, was a divine son of El. However, their conviction was soon challenged when Moses was tending Jethro’s sheep in the desert at the foot of Mount Sinai. Here Moses saw the spectacle of a bush that was on fire but not consumed. “. . . God [Elohim] called unto him out of the

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midst of the bush, . . . [and later in their conversation] God [Elohim] said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM [YHWH]: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM [YHWH] hath sent me unto you” (Exodus 3:4, 14).

This astonishing encounter convinced Moses that “El” and “YHWH” were not father and son. They were not “Bull” and “Calf.” Rather, they were synonyms for the One-and-Only God. However, the difference in beliefs between Moses, on one hand, and Jethro and Aaron, on the other hand, did not fully emerge until shortly after the Exodus, when the children of Israel were encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai. Moses had been on Mount Sinai for nearly forty days with El/YHWH. “And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us . . . ” (Exodus 32:1). Aaron responded by taking gold ornaments from the people and fashioning a molten calf.³ Then Aaron declared, “These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt” (Exodus 32:4). At God’s command, Moses and Joshua descended the mountain and confronted Aaron and the people with their idolatry. Moses took the golden calf, burned it in fire, and ground it to powder. Then he mixed the powder with water and “made the children of Israel drink of it” (Exodus 32:20).

In those days, before the statue of a god was recognized as divine, the priests had to rinse the mouth of the statue with ritual fluid(s), and only then could they declare it to be a living god.^{4, 5} Moses overturned this ritual by making the children of Israel drink the watery remains of the “dead” Calf god themselves (Exodus 32:20). This ritually signified that they too would be dead apart from the intervention of the true God, El/YHWH.

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Over a thousand years later, during his ministry throughout Galilee, Samaria and Judea, Jesus Christ repeatedly affirmed that he himself was YHWH — the I AM (John 4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5, 6, 8). When Jesus was tried for blasphemy, condemned to die at Calvary, and finally hung on a cross, he spoke and said, “I thirst” (John 19:28). “Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar: and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to his mouth. When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost” (John 19:29, 30). Thus, unwittingly, even those who accused Jesus of blasphemy and crucified him ritually acknowledged him as divine. Thus it was finished, and thus God died!

Endnotes

1. See Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 121.
2. See Uzi Avner, "Sacred Stones in the Desert," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 27, no. 3 (May/June 2001): 30-41.
3. See Victor Hurowitz, "The Golden Calf: Made by Man or God?" *Bible Review* 20, no. 2 (April 2004): 28-32, 47.
4. See Michael B. Dick, "Worshiping Idols," *Bible Review* 18, no. 2 (April 2002): 30-37.
5. See Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1990), pp. 182, 183.

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