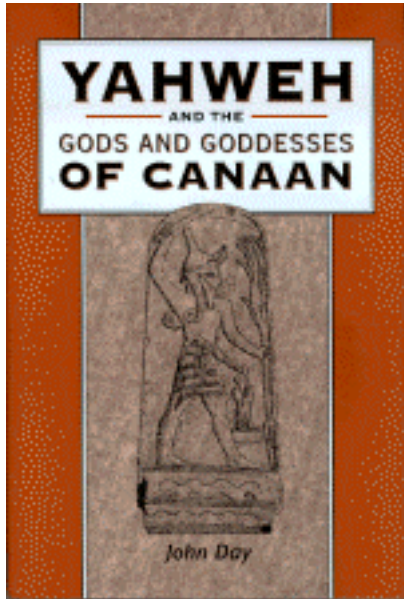


RBL 02/2003



Day, John

Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan

Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
Supplement Series 265

Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000. Pp. 282.
Cloth. \$95.00. ISBN 1850759863.

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In the preface to *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan*, John Day writes that though “much of my time has been devoted to the study of the impact, both positive and negative, of Canaanite mythology and religion on the religion on ancient Israel and the Old Testament ... I have long harboured the ambition of completing a more thoroughgoing and comprehensive investigation of the relationship between Yahweh and the gods and goddesses of Canaan, and this is what now appears before the reader” (7). In seven chapters Day examines the place of Canaanite gods and goddesses in the Hebrew Bible, starting with a discussion of the relationship of Yahweh and El in the first chapter and followed in the next chapters by discussions of Yahweh and Asherah, Yahweh and Baal, Yahweh and Baal imagery, Yahweh and the goddesses Astarte and Anath, Yahweh and the Canaanite astral deities, and Yahweh and the Canaanite underworld deities. The final chapter briefly looks at the rise of monotheism in ancient Israel. The focus of the book is very clearly on philological and mythological readings of the possible points of influence of Canaanite religion and mythology in the Hebrew Bible rather than on Canaanite religion and mythology in and of themselves.

On the whole this is a good book, with many useful suggestions about the place of the Canaanite deities in the Bible, as well as many well-directed criticisms of earlier work.

However, as with the earlier work Day criticizes, this book too has problems, chiefly those inherent in any philologically and mythologically oriented study of such materials. No philological study can be definitive; rather, we are faced with a series of probable solutions to any given problem, which we can then rate as to their greater or lesser chance of being correct. Day is, I think, correct in many cases, but there are also times when his proposals too fall short, as, for instance, in his remarks on the identity of Jeremiah's Queen of Heaven. Day favors the Canaanite goddess Astarte because "she has the advantage of being a native Canaanite deity, such as the deep-seated, folk nature of the cult depicted in Jeremiah 44 suggests" (150). However, as Day also acknowledges, "the word used for the cakes offered to the Queen of Heaven (*kawwanîm*) appears to be an Akkadian loanword (*kamanu*), a word which is actually attested of offerings to Ishtar as well as to other deities" (148). Though Day writes that "the best case can be made for the Queen of Heaven being Astarte," here I think Susan Ackerman's proposal that "what we have here is not simply Astarte, but Astarte in syncretism with her Mesopotamian equivalent Ishtar" (150) in fact seems to be more likely. It is difficult to explain the Akkadian loanword in this context otherwise.

Day's mythological readings of texts occasionally seem to me to push the evidence past probability. He proposes, for example, that the lines "Then he broke the arrows of (*rišpê*) the bow/the shield, the sword, and the weapons of war" is a "totally demythologized" reference to the god Resheph. Day reasons that

[t]his is the Old Testament passage in which the god Resheph has been most clearly and fully demythologized.... The reference must clearly be to arrows, and the fact that a series of human weapons are mentioned alongside them indicates that they must likewise be human arrows and not the plague arrows that are associated with Resheph elsewhere. Clearly the origin of this expression is in the god Resheph, whose arrows caused plague ... but in this Hebrew psalm the divine name in the plural has been totally demythologized so as to refer simply to human arrows of war. (206)

If there is a reference to Resheph in these lines, it seems to me rather buried, to say the least. As Day himself suggests, the reference to the arrows is clearly to human arrows, not to those of Resheph: there is thus nothing in this reference that requires a mythological source. There is certainly nothing else in the passage that suggests a mythological reading; the image evoked of the breaking of human weapons makes sense without reading anything else into it. Here the probability goes against Day's proposal.

In his conclusion on the rise of monotheism, Day asks about the extent to which other gods were worshiped in ancient Israel. Few will disagree with Day that Yahweh was the

most important god worshiped, but we might also put the question somewhat differently and ask what the nature of ancient Israelite religion really was. Is it necessary, or even prudent, in the context of ancient Israel to oppose Canaanite and Israelite religion and mythology as fundamentally different? Although it is a premise in Day's study that such an opposition is meaningful, his study also shows that the religion and mythology we call Canaanite were indeed very important in ancient Israel. Medieval and modern parallels of conversion and religious education would suggest that the kind of syncretism implied by his evidence would have been extremely difficult to uproot and, further, that the people who held the beliefs would not have recognized that they were alien to their culture and religion. (If by *their religion* we mean the religion of the priests and prophets of the books of the Hebrew Bible, then of course the Canaanite deities were foreign, but it is not obvious from the evidence that the people of Israel made this distinction so clearly, if at all.) Canaanite deities would thus have been, for the average believer, as Israelite as any other. The final question to ask thus might not be, as Day asks, "what happened to the Canaanite deities" in postexilic Israel after "absolute monotheism" was established but rather "What happened in the later history of the folk religion of ancient Israel?"

Day's book does have some problems, but it is in general, as I noted above, a good book, one that anyone interested in the role of the Canaanite deities in Israelite religion will want to know.