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Latest *Occasional Papers* Treats Old Testament Themes

In “Who Controls the Water? Yahweh vs. Baal,” the lead article in *Occasional Papers* 4, Fred E. Woods presents a fascinating discussion of the polemical usage of water and storm language in the Deuteronomic History (the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings). As Woods notes, the most active deity at the Canaanite city of Ugarit (located in present-day Syria near the Mediterranean coast) is Baal, the god of water and storm. The strong denunciation of Baal in the Old Testament indicates that the Baal cult had deeply penetrated Israelite culture. And while scholars have long been aware of the explicit warnings against worshipping Baal, the metaphorical arguments against Baal have gone virtually unnoticed.

Scholars generally agree that the key to understanding the Canaanite religion of Baalism is the Ugaritic Texts, clay tablets that were discovered in Syria in 1929 and deciphered in 1930. With the discovery of these tablets, a so-called Canaanite bible emerged, with frequent references to Baal, a god portrayed with “his weapon, the lightning, and his voice, the thunder.” As the Israelites left the desert and entered Canaan (the long, narrow strip of land that lay between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea), they entered a lavish agricultural area unknown to them. When they encountered an unpredictable climate and their faith was tried, some may have asked their Canaanite neighbors something like, “What do you do to ensure the fertility of the land?” This seems to have led many Israelites into false worship, which culminated in their embracing Baalism. This prompted the Deuteronomic editors to attempt to resuscitate the covenant people by reminding them that Yahweh and not Baal controlled all aspects of water and storm, and thus life.

This attack against Baalism was both polemical—meaning that it represented an aggressive refutation of the opinions of others—and literary—meaning that it used meta-

phorical rather than literal language. So it is not surprising that the showdown on Mount Carmel between Elijah and the prophets of Baal contains the most obvious climax of water and storm polemics.

When all Israel was gathered to Mount Carmel (perhaps the most neutral position for an encounter between the gods of Canaan and Israel), Elijah admonished them: “If Yahweh is God, follow him; and if Baal, follow him!” (1 Kings 18:21; translation by Fred Woods). The prophets of Baal tried in vain to get their god to consume a sacrificial bull with fire. Elijah then poured an abundance of water in the trench and upon the altar and called upon his God, who consumed the sacrifice and the water with fire (probably lightning). The people standing by cried, “Yahweh, he is the God” (1 Kings 18:39). Soon there followed an abundance of rain. Israel was thus powerfully reminded of Yahweh’s divine power and of his ability to provide for and protect his covenant people on condition of their obedience to the stipulations of his divine laws.

The two other articles in this issue of *Occasional Papers* also deal with Old Testament themes. “Justice and Mercy in the Book of Deuteronomy (Is There Mercy in the Old Testament?),” by Jared Ludlow, uncovers examples of God’s mercy within the book of Deuteronomy to show how both the law of justice and the law of mercy played vital roles in exhorting the covenant Israelites to righteousness. “Garment of Joseph: An Update,” by Brian Hauglid, examines a short passage from the writings of a 10th-century Arabic scholar about the garment of Joseph and argues that Hugh Nibley’s earlier translation of this passage may have been inaccurate.

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