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Baal and Yahweh as storm gods: A comparative study of Ugaritic and biblical traditions

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This article examines the role of the storm god in two major Northwest Semitic religious traditions: Baal in the Ugaritic texts and Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible. Using a comparative historical-literary approach, the study analyses mythological narratives, storm imagery, divine warfare, kingship ideology, cultic practices, and theological development preserved in both textual and archaeological sources. The Ugaritic Baal Cycle portrays Baal as a storm deity associated with rain, fertility, kingship, and cosmic order within a polytheistic pantheon. Similarly, several biblical texts depict Yahweh through storm-theophany imagery involving thunder, lightning, mountains, clouds, and victories over chaotic waters. The study demonstrates that early Yahwistic traditions emerged within the broader religious environment of the ancient Levant and preserved important continuities with Northwest Semitic storm god traditions. At the same time, a significant theological transformation occurred as Yahweh gradually came to be understood as the exclusive and universal God of Israel. Archaeological discoveries, including inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom, further indicate the diversity of early Yahwistic practices prior to the development of centralised monotheism. The article argues that biblical authors adapted and reinterpreted older West Semitic religious imagery within new covenantal, historical, and monotheistic frameworks. Comparative analysis of Baal and Yahweh, therefore, provides important insight into the religious, literary, and theological development of ancient Israelite religion and the emergence of biblical monotheism.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article contributes to biblical studies and ancient Near Eastern studies by showing that Yahwistic storm god imagery preserves important continuities with Ugaritic Baal traditions while being reinterpreted within emerging monotheistic theology. By combining comparative textual analysis with archaeological and historical approaches, the study also contributes to interdisciplinary discussions concerning religious development, cultural continuity, and identity formation in the ancient Near East.

Keywords: storm god; Baal; Ugaritic texts; Yahweh; Hebrew Bible.

Introduction

Storm-deity traditions occupied a central role within the religious world of the ancient Near East. In Northwest Semitic religion, storm gods were commonly associated with thunder, lightning, rain, fertility, kingship, and divine warfare. Among the most prominent examples are Baal in the Ugaritic texts and Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible. Both deities are described through imagery involving storms, mountains, clouds, and cosmic conflict, reflecting a broader cultural and religious environment shared throughout the Levant. Nevertheless, the theological development of Yahweh in ancient Israel eventually differed significantly from Baal's role in the Ugaritic pantheon. While Baal remained a deity within a polytheistic religious system, Yahweh gradually came to be understood as the exclusive God of Israel within emerging monotheistic traditions.

The discovery of the Ugaritic texts at Ras Shamra in 1929 significantly transformed modern understanding of ancient Northwest Semitic religion and biblical traditions. The Baal Cycle preserves important mythological traditions concerning Baal's conflicts with Yamm, the sea deity, and Mot, the god of death. In KTU 1.2 IV 7–9, Baal is described as defeating Yamm and establishing cosmic order through divine warfare. Similarly, KTU 1.4 VII portrays Baal enthroned upon Mount Zaphon as king among the gods. These texts demonstrate Baal's role as a storm deity whose authority was closely connected with kingship, fertility, and agricultural renewal. Pardee (2002:15–24) and Wyatt (2002:63–78) argue that the Baal Cycle reflects the religious worldview of Late Bronze Age Canaanite society, where divine control over rain and fertility was essential for agricultural survival.

Storm imagery also appears prominently within the Hebrew Bible in passages describing Yahweh's theophanic presence. Psalm 29 portrays Yahweh through thunder, lightning, shaking mountains, and powerful waters: 'The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders' (Ps 29:3 [NRSV]). Exodus 19:16–18 similarly describes Yahweh descending upon Mount Sinai through thunder, lightning, smoke, and fire. Judges 5:4–5 associates Yahweh with storms and earthquakes emerging from the southern regions of Seir and Edom, while Habakkuk 3 portrays Yahweh as a divine warrior advancing through cosmic upheaval. These passages preserve ancient poetic traditions in which Yahweh appears through natural and martial imagery commonly associated with storm deities within the broader ancient Near Eastern world. Day (1985:97–102) and Smith (2003:48–61) argue that such imagery reflects the cultural and theological environment within which early Yahwistic traditions developed.

Recent scholarship increasingly distinguishes between early Yahwism and later Judaism. Earlier scholarship, especially that associated with Albright (1990), often emphasised the distinctiveness of Israelite religion from surrounding Canaanite traditions. However, scholars such as Mark S. Smith, Herbert Niehr, Lowell K. Handy, Karel van der Toorn, and Rainer Albertz argue that early Yahwism developed within a broader West Semitic religious environment and retained important cultural and theological continuities with neighbouring traditions. Niehr (1995:71) argues that 'YHWH was seen to be a northwest Semitic weather god from southern Palestine who achieved the position of supreme god in the pantheon of Jerusalem and Samaria'. Similarly, Dijkstra (2001:126) notes that Yahwism was not originally characterised everywhere by exclusive monotheism but developed gradually through historical and theological transformation. These perspectives have significantly reshaped modern discussions concerning the origins of Israelite religion and biblical monotheism.

Archaeological discoveries further support the diversity of early Yahwistic traditions. The inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud refer to 'YHWH of Samaria' and 'YHWH of Teman', suggesting the existence of regional forms of Yahweh worship during the monarchic period. Rather than reflecting a single uniform religion, these inscriptions demonstrate the complexity and diversity of early Israelite religious practice. Dever (2008:176–180) and Van der Toorn (2017:15–29) argue that household religion, regional sanctuaries, and local cultic traditions continued alongside official temple worship for centuries. Such evidence challenges earlier assumptions that Israelite religion emerged immediately as a centralised monotheistic system and instead suggests a gradual historical development shaped by political, social, and theological change.

Historical developments also played an essential role in the transformation of the Yahwistic religion. The Assyrian expansion, the destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE, the religious reforms associated with King Josiah, and the Babylonian exile all contributed significantly to the centralisation and reinterpretation of Yahweh worship. Becking (2001:192) argues that the form of Yahwism promoted in Jerusalem after the fall of the Northern Kingdom increasingly came to be regarded as the only legitimate worship of Yahweh. Schipper (2019:64–65) likewise emphasises that political circumstances and the growing role of Jerusalem shaped the theological development of Israelite religion and the literary formation of the Hebrew Bible. The emergence of biblical monotheism, therefore, reflects a gradual and historically conditioned process rather than a sudden theological revolution.

This article compares Baal traditions in the Ugaritic texts with portrayals of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible to examine how storm-God imagery functioned within their respective religious traditions. The study focuses particularly on mythological narratives, divine warfare, kingship ideology, cultic practices, and theological development within ancient Israel and the broader Northwest Semitic world. By integrating primary texts, archaeological evidence, and contemporary scholarship, this article argues that early Yahwistic traditions preserved important features common within Northwest Semitic religion while simultaneously undergoing significant theological reinterpretation within the historical development of Israelite monotheism.

Baal as storm god in Ugaritic tradition

The Ugaritic texts discovered at Ras Shamra provide crucial evidence for understanding the religious world of Late Bronze Age Canaan. Within these texts, Baal – often identified with Hadad – appears as the principal storm deity associated with rain, thunder, fertility, kingship, and divine warfare. His role is most fully preserved in the Baal Cycle (KTU 1.1–1.6), where he confronts cosmic enemies representing chaos and death. These narratives reflect a worldview in which divine authority was inseparable from agricultural survival and cosmic stability. Green (2003:145–168) observes that storm deities throughout the ancient Near East were commonly associated with royal authority, military power, and the maintenance of order within both heaven and earth. Baal therefore functioned not merely as a fertility god but as a cosmic ruler whose actions sustained life and order within the world.

One of the central episodes within the Baal Cycle concerns Baal's conflict with Yamm, the sea deity who symbolises cosmic disorder and destructive waters. In KTU 1.2 IV 7–9, Baal proclaims his victory over the Sea, 'Surely I struck down Yamm, beloved of El; surely I made an end of River, the great god' (Wyatt 2002:75). The text portrays Baal as a divine warrior whose authority is established through combat against chaotic forces. Victory over the sea symbolised the restoration of cosmic stability and the securing of fertility for the land. Similar combat traditions appear throughout the ancient Near East, where divine kingship is legitimised through triumph over chaos. Day (1985:97–102) argues that

these traditions later influenced biblical depictions of Yahweh's conflict with Leviathan and the sea. Baal's defeat of Yamm therefore functions as both a mythological narrative and a theological expression of cosmic order.

Baal's kingship is further emphasised by his association with Mount Zaphon, the sacred mountain that served as his divine dwelling. Following his victory, KTU 1.4 VII portrays Baal enthroned upon the mountain: 'Baal sits enthroned, the Mighty One rules' (Wyatt 2002:93). In Northwest Semitic traditions, mountains frequently symbolised divine presence, heavenly authority, and political sovereignty. Baal's enthronement upon Mount Zaphon therefore reinforces his identity as king among the gods and ruler over cosmic forces. Keel and Uehlinger (1998:110–130) note that iconographic traditions from Syria-Palestine regularly depict storm gods standing upon mountains while holding lightning weapons, imagery emphasising their control over storms and fertility. The symbolism surrounding Mount Zaphon consequently reflects the broader ancient Near Eastern connection between sacred geography and divine kingship.

The construction of Baal's palace forms another important theological element within the Ugaritic texts. In KTU 1.4 V–VII, Baal receives a palace built by the craftsman deity Kothar-wa-Hasis after obtaining approval from El and Athirat. The text declares: 'A house shall be built for Baal like the gods, and a court like the sons of Athirat' (Wyatt 2002:89). The palace symbolises the establishment of Baal's royal legitimacy and permanent authority within the divine assembly. Hurowitz (1992:87–110) argues that temple-building traditions throughout Mesopotamian and Northwest Semitic literature functioned as ideological expressions of kingship, divine order, and political stability. The palace of Baal, therefore, represents more than an architectural structure; it signifies the stabilisation of cosmic authority through divine rule. Through the temple, Baal's kingship becomes publicly established and ritually maintained.

Ritual practices associated with Baal worship also reveal the close relationship between religion and agricultural life within ancient Canaan. Ugaritic liturgical texts describe offerings, sacrifices, and ceremonial activities intended to secure rainfall, fertility, and divine favour. One ritual text invokes divine blessing through sacrificial offerings presented before Baal and other deities (Pardee 2002:45–53). According to Del Olmo Lete (2004:201–219), ritual performances within Ugaritic religion were deeply integrated with seasonal agricultural cycles and communal well-being. Because survival depended heavily upon rainfall, storm deities occupied a central role within cultic practice. Religious rituals, therefore, functioned not only as acts of devotion but also as communal responses to environmental and agricultural realities within the Levant.

Another major theme within the Baal Cycle concerns Baal's conflict with Mot, the deity associated with death and drought. In KTU 1.5 VI, Mot announces Baal's downfall and descent into the underworld: 'Baal has gone down into the earth' (Pardee 2002:41). Baal's disappearance results in mourning throughout the land and symbolises agricultural decline and the interruption of fertility. His eventual return restores abundance and cosmic balance. Mettinger (2001:88–102) argues that Baal's death and return should not simply be interpreted as a 'dying and rising god' myth but rather as a theological representation of seasonal transition and agricultural renewal. The narrative, therefore, reflects the dependence of agrarian societies upon recurring cycles of rain, drought, life, and restoration.

The relationship between Baal and El further illustrates the structure of the Ugaritic pantheon. El appears as the senior deity and patriarchal ruler of the divine council, while Baal functions as the active storm god who exercises immediate authority within the cosmos. KTU 1.2 I portrays El presiding over the divine assembly while the gods deliberate concerning kingship and authority. Handy (1994:77–95) argues that the Syro-Palestinian pantheon functioned according to patterns resembling a royal bureaucracy, in which divine authority was distributed among specialised deities occupying distinct cosmic roles. Baal's authority, therefore, remained substantial but not absolute within the polytheistic structure of Ugaritic religion. This distinction becomes especially important when comparing Baal traditions with later portrayals of Yahweh within biblical monotheism.

The Baal Cycle ultimately reflects a theological system in which kingship, fertility, warfare, and cosmic stability were inseparably connected. Baal's identity as a storm deity cannot be reduced merely to control over weather phenomena, since his authority also encompassed political legitimacy, agricultural renewal, and cosmic order. The Ugaritic texts, therefore, provide essential evidence for understanding the broader religious environment of the ancient Levant. Smith (1994:29–45) argues that the Baal traditions preserved at Ugarit illuminate important cultural and theological backgrounds shared throughout Northwest Semitic religion. A comparative study of these traditions consequently provides significant insight into the development of storm-God imagery and divine kingship within both Ugaritic religion and early Yahwistic traditions.

Yahweh as a storm god in the Hebrew Bible

Storm imagery occupies a significant place within several poetic and archaic traditions of the Hebrew Bible. Yahweh is frequently portrayed through thunder, lightning, clouds, earthquake, fire, and turbulent waters, imagery commonly associated with storm deities throughout the ancient Near East. One of the clearest examples appears in Psalm 29, where the divine voice is repeatedly associated with cosmic power over nature: 'The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders' (Ps 29:3 [NRSV]). The psalm continues by describing Yahweh's voice breaking cedars, shaking the wilderness, and flashing forth flames of fire (Ps 29:5–7). These descriptions portray Yahweh as a divine warrior whose

authority is manifested through overwhelming natural phenomena. Cross (1997:147–194) argues that Psalm 29 preserves archaic Northwest Semitic storm imagery later incorporated into Israelite worship traditions.

The Sinai traditions similarly present Yahweh through storm-theophany imagery associated with divine presence and revelation. Exodus 19:16–18 describes Yahweh descending upon Mount Sinai amid thunder, lightning, thick clouds, smoke, and fire: 'Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire' (Ex 19:18 [NRSV]). These phenomena emphasise Yahweh's terrifying holiness and cosmic authority. The mountain setting also reflects broader ancient Near Eastern traditions in which deities reveal themselves upon sacred mountains associated with divine kingship and heavenly authority. Hurowitz (1992:87–110) notes that sacred mountain and temple imagery frequently co-occurred in Northwest Semitic traditions to symbolise divine sovereignty and cosmic order. The Sinai traditions, therefore, preserve both theological and symbolic elements associated with ancient storm-deity traditions.

Several poetic texts additionally associate Yahweh with the southern regions of Seir, Paran, Edom, and Teman. Judges 5:4–5 declares: 'LORD, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens poured' (NRSV). Similarly, Deuteronomy 33:2 states that Yahweh came from Sinai and dawned from Seir and Paran. Habakkuk 3:3 likewise describes God coming from Teman and Mount Paran, accompanied by pestilence, lightning, and earthquake. These texts preserve traditions that link Yahweh to southern territories rather than originally to Canaanite urban centres. Niehr (1995:45–71) argues that such traditions support the view that Yahweh originated within the southern regions of the Levant before becoming the national deity of Israel and Judah. The southern storm-theophany traditions, therefore, provide important evidence for the historical development of Yahwism.

The Hebrew Bible also preserves divine combat traditions in which Yahweh defeats cosmic enemies associated with the sea and chaos. Psalm 74:13–14 proclaims: 'You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan' (NRSV). Isaiah 27:1 similarly describes Yahweh punishing 'Leviathan the fleeing serpent'. These passages reflect the broader ancient Near Eastern *chaoskampf* motif in which divine kingship is established through victory over cosmic disorder. Batto (1992:71–88) argues that biblical combat traditions preserve mythological patterns shared throughout the ancient Near East while simultaneously being reshaped within Israelite theology. Yahweh's victory over chaotic waters, therefore, functions as a theological expression of divine sovereignty over creation and history.

Divine council traditions within the Hebrew Bible further reflect the broader religious environment of early Israelite religion. Psalm 82 portrays God standing within the divine assembly among other heavenly beings: 'God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment' (Ps 82:1, NRSV). Similarly, Deuteronomy 32:8–9, preserved in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Septuagint traditions, refers to Elyon dividing the nations according to the 'sons of God'. Mullen (1980:175–209) argues that these traditions preserve older West Semitic concepts of a divine council later adapted within biblical theology. The Hebrew Bible, therefore, reflects stages within the development of Yahwistic religion in which earlier pantheon traditions were progressively reinterpreted within emerging monotheistic thought.

The historical development of Yahwism was closely connected to political and social transformations in ancient Israel and Judah. During the monarchic period, Yahweh worship existed alongside regional sanctuaries, household religion, and local cultic traditions. Archaeological discoveries from Kuntillet 'Ajrud mention 'YHWH of Samaria' and 'YHWH of Teman', suggesting the existence of diverse regional expressions of Yahweh worship. Dever (2008:176–180) and Van der Toorn (2017:15–29) argue that early Israelite religion was characterised by considerable diversity rather than by centralised monotheism. These discoveries demonstrate that Yahwism developed gradually and differently within various political and regional contexts.

The religious reforms associated with King Josiah and the influence of Deuteronomistic theology significantly transformed Israelite religion. According to 2 Kings 23, Josiah centralised worship in Jerusalem and removed alternative cultic practices throughout Judah. Becking (2001:192) argues that this period marked the increasing promotion of mono-Yahwism in which Jerusalem-centred worship came to be regarded as the only legitimate form of devotion to Yahweh. Historical crises such as the Assyrian expansion and the Babylonian exile further intensified theological reflection concerning covenant, divine judgment, and national identity. Schipper (2019:64–65) notes that these political developments strongly influenced the literary formation of biblical traditions and the emergence of later monotheistic theology. The development of Yahwism, therefore, cannot be separated from the historical experiences of ancient Israel and Judah.

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasises that early Yahwism should be understood within the broader religious environment of the ancient Levant rather than interpreted exclusively through later Jewish and Christian monotheistic categories. Smith (2002:32–56) argues that early Israelite religion preserved important continuities with Northwest Semitic religious traditions before the emergence of exclusive monotheism. Similarly, Hundley (2022:33–51) emphasises that Yahweh traditions originally functioned within a wider divine world shared across the ancient Near East. Rather than emerging suddenly as a fully developed monotheistic religion, Yahwism evolved gradually through historical, literary, and theological transformation. The Hebrew Bible consequently preserves both continuity with earlier West

Semitic religious traditions and the progressive reinterpretation of Yahweh as the exclusive God of Israel.

Comparative analysis: Baal and Yahweh in terms of divine roles and worship practices

The comparison between Baal in the Ugaritic texts and Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible reveals both continuity and significant theological transformation within Northwest Semitic religion. Both deities are portrayed through storm imagery involving thunder, lightning, clouds, mountains, and divine warfare. These similarities reflect a shared religious and cultural environment throughout the ancient Levant rather than simple literary borrowing. At the same time, the theological trajectories of Baal and Yahweh developed in markedly different directions. While Baal remained a member of a polytheistic pantheon associated with cyclical fertility, Yahweh gradually came to be identified as the exclusive God of Israel within emerging monotheistic traditions (Smith 2003:86–110).

One of the clearest similarities concerns divine warfare against cosmic disorder. In the Baal Cycle, Baal defeats Yamm, the sea deity representing chaos and destructive waters. KTU 1.2 IV 7–9 records Baal's declaration: 'Surely I struck down Yamm, beloved of El; surely I made an end of River, the great god' (Wyatt 2002:75). Likewise, several biblical passages portray Yahweh overcoming the sea and sea monsters associated with chaos. Psalm 74:13–14 proclaims: 'You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan' (NRSV). These traditions reflect broader ancient Near Eastern combat myths in which divine authority is established through victory over cosmic enemies.

The imagery of divine combat serves different theological purposes within the two traditions. In the Ugaritic texts, Baal's victory secures fertility and seasonal stability for the land. His kingship must continually be defended against rival powers such as Yamm and Mot. In the Hebrew Bible, however, Yahweh's victories increasingly emphasise universal sovereignty over creation and history rather than cyclical agricultural renewal alone. Batto (1992:71–88) argues that biblical authors adapted older mythological motifs while transforming them within Israelite theological reflection. The biblical traditions, therefore, preserve continuity in symbolic language while simultaneously redefining their theological significance.

Both Baal and Yahweh are strongly associated with sacred mountains that symbolise divine authority and heavenly rule. Baal reigns from Mount Zaphon, which functions as the centre of divine kingship within the Ugaritic texts. KTU 1.4 VII describes Baal enthroned upon the sacred mountain after the completion of his palace: 'Baal sits enthroned, the Mighty One rules' (Wyatt 2002:93). Similarly, the Hebrew Bible associates Yahweh with Sinai, Zion, and other sacred mountains. Exodus 19:18 describes Mount Sinai covered in smoke because 'the LORD had descended upon it in fire' (NRSV). Sacred mountains in both traditions, therefore, function as places where divine authority becomes visible within the world.

The symbolism of mountains also reflects broader ancient Near Eastern concepts of kingship and cosmic order. Keel (1997:132–145) notes that sacred mountains frequently served as the meeting place between heaven and earth within ancient Near Eastern iconography. Storm deities were often portrayed standing atop mountains, wielding lightning weapons as symbols of power over nature and nations. Yet important differences emerge between the two traditions. Baal's authority remains geographically centred within the cosmic landscape of the Ugaritic pantheon, whereas biblical traditions increasingly portray Yahweh as sovereign over all lands and peoples. Yahweh's kingship, therefore, expands beyond territorial limitations and becomes universal in scope.

Cultic practices associated with Baal and Yahweh likewise reveal both continuity and transformation. Ugaritic ritual texts describe offerings, sacrifices, and seasonal ceremonies intended to secure rainfall, agricultural fertility, and divine blessing. Pardee (2002:45–53) notes that ritual life within Ugarit was deeply connected to the rhythms of agriculture and communal survival. Similarly, the Hebrew Bible preserves elaborate sacrificial traditions involving burnt offerings, grain offerings, and festival observances (Lev. 1–7). Agricultural festivals such as Passover, Weeks, and Booths also remained closely tied to seasonal cycles within Israelite worship. Both traditions, therefore, demonstrate the close relationship between religion, fertility, and communal life in the ancient Levant.

Despite these similarities, Israelite religion gradually developed a stronger emphasis upon covenant, law, and centralised worship. Deuteronomy repeatedly insists that sacrifices must occur only at the place chosen by Yahweh (Dt 12:5–14). This emphasis differs from the broader regional cultic practices reflected within the Ugaritic texts. Zevit (2001:271–310) argues that Israelite religion adapted many West Semitic ritual traditions while integrating them into a covenantal theological framework. Worship increasingly became connected not only with fertility and blessing but also with obedience, covenant identity, and national faithfulness. The Israelite religion, therefore, transformed inherited ritual traditions through historical and theological reinterpretation.

The role of kingship also differs significantly between the Baal Cycle and biblical portrayals of Yahweh. Baal's kingship depends upon recurring victories over hostile cosmic powers and is closely connected to seasonal renewal. In contrast, Yahweh is increasingly presented as an eternal king whose authority transcends nature and history alike. Psalm 93:1 proclaims: 'The LORD is king, he is robed in majesty' (NRSV), while Psalm 97 associates Yahweh's reign with clouds, fire,

lightning, and cosmic judgment. Mowinckel (2004:56–78) argues that royal psalms incorporated older divine kingship traditions into Israelite temple worship. Yet within biblical theology, Yahweh's kingship becomes associated with covenantal sovereignty rather than with cyclical fertility mythology.

Another major distinction concerns the structure of the divine world itself. The Ugaritic texts preserve a polytheistic pantheon headed by El and populated by deities such as Baal, Anat, Athirat, Mot, and Yamm. KTU 1.2 I portrays El presiding over the divine council while the gods deliberate concerning authority and kingship. Early biblical traditions likewise preserve traces of divine council imagery. Psalm 82:1 states: 'God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment' (NRSV). Deuteronomy 32:8–9 similarly reflects older traditions involving the 'sons of God'. These passages indicate that early Yahwism emerged within a broader West Semitic religious environment.

Over time, however, biblical theology progressively reinterpreted these earlier pantheon traditions. Smith (2002:32–56) argues that Yahweh gradually absorbed functions previously associated with other deities within the Northwest Semitic world. The process was neither immediate nor uniform but unfolded over centuries through political, social, and theological transformation. Archaeological discoveries from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom demonstrate that diverse forms of Yahwism existed simultaneously during the monarchic period. Stavrakopoulou and Barton (eds. 2010:1–8) therefore emphasise the diversity of ancient Israelite religion rather than viewing it as uniformly monotheistic from the beginning.

Historical developments played a decisive role in reshaping Yahwistic religion. The destruction of the Northern Kingdom, the reforms associated with King Josiah, and the Babylonian exile all contributed to the centralisation and reinterpretation of Yahweh worship. Becking (2001:189–222) argues that the Josianic reforms increasingly promoted mono-Yahwism centred upon Jerusalem. Similarly, Schipper (2019:64–65) emphasises that political instability and imperial domination profoundly influenced the theological development of Israelite religion. Unlike the cyclical worldview reflected within the Baal Cycle, biblical traditions increasingly interpreted historical events themselves as manifestations of divine judgment and covenantal purpose. Yahweh consequently came to be understood not only as ruler over nature but also as sovereign over history and Israel's destiny.

The comparison between Baal and Yahweh, therefore, demonstrates both continuity and transformation within ancient Northwest Semitic religion. Shared storm imagery, divine combat traditions, mountain symbolism, and ritual practices reveal important cultural connections between Ugaritic religion and early Yahwism. At the same time, the Hebrew Bible progressively reinterprets these traditions within a developing theology of exclusive devotion to Yahweh. Roberts (2002:59–76) argues that biblical authors frequently adapted older mythological language to articulate Israel's understanding of divine sovereignty and covenant history. Comparative study consequently illuminates not only the shared symbolic world of the ancient Near East but also the unique historical development through which Yahwism evolved toward biblical monotheism.

Theological and literary development

The theological development of Yahwism cannot be separated from the historical experiences of ancient Israel and Judah. Earlier scholarship often treated Israelite religion as fundamentally distinct from surrounding Canaanite traditions from its beginning. More recent scholarship, however, increasingly emphasises that early Yahwism developed gradually within the broader religious environment of the ancient Levant. Smith (2002:32–56) argues that many features associated with Yahweh originally belonged to wider Northwest Semitic religious traditions before being reinterpreted within biblical theology. The Hebrew Bible, therefore, preserves both continuity with earlier West Semitic religion and significant theological transformation over time. Understanding this development requires attention not only to literary traditions but also to the political and social history that shaped Israelite religion.

Several biblical texts preserve traces of an earlier divine world in which Yahweh functioned within a broader pantheon structure. Deuteronomy 32:8–9, in its Dead Sea Scroll and Septuagint forms, describes Elyon dividing the nations according to the number of the sons of God, while 'the LORD's own portion was his people' (NRSV). Psalm 82 likewise portrays God standing within the divine council among other heavenly beings. These passages reflect older West Semitic traditions involving divine assemblies governed by a chief deity. Mullen (1980:175–209) argues that divine council traditions formed an important component of both Canaanite and early Israelite religious thought. Early Yahwism, therefore, appears to have emerged within a religious environment that was not originally exclusive or fully monotheistic.

The relationship between El and Yahweh represents another important aspect of theological development within ancient Israel. In the Ugaritic texts, El functions as the senior deity and patriarchal head of the pantheon, while Baal operates as the active warrior and storm god. Several biblical passages preserve titles originally associated with El, including El Elyon, El Shaddai, and El Olam. Over time, these titles became increasingly identified with Yahweh himself. Smith (2002:41–52) argues that Yahweh gradually absorbed characteristics and functions previously associated with El within the Northwest Semitic religion. This process contributed significantly to the emergence of Yahweh as the supreme deity within Israelite theology.

The development of Yahwism was also deeply shaped by regional diversity within Israel and Judah. Archaeological discoveries demonstrate that Yahweh worship was not uniform throughout the monarchic period. The inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud refer to 'YHWH of Samaria' and 'YHWH of Teman', suggesting the existence of multiple regional expressions of Yahweh worship. Similarly, inscriptions from Khirbet el-Qom appear to associate Yahweh with Asherah traditions. Dever (2008:176–180) argues that household religion and local cultic practices continued alongside official temple worship throughout much of Israel's history. Ancient Israelite religion, therefore, reflected considerable diversity rather than a single centralised form of belief.

Recent scholarship increasingly distinguishes between early Yahwism and later Judaism. Dijkstra (2001:81–126) argues that Yahwism during the monarchic period did not everywhere possess the exclusive monotheistic character associated with later prophetic and post-exilic traditions. Similarly, Handy (1995:27–43) notes that multiple forms of Yahwism likely existed simultaneously within Judah and Israel. The transition from regional Yahwistic traditions to later monotheistic Judaism occurred gradually over several centuries. Theological development within Israelite religion, therefore, should be understood as an evolving historical process rather than a sudden religious revolution.

Political events played a decisive role in transforming Israelite theology. The Assyrian destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE significantly altered the religious landscape of Judah and contributed to the growing importance of Jerusalem. The reforms associated with King Josiah further centralised worship and attempted to eliminate competing cultic traditions throughout the land. According to 2 Kings 23, Josiah removed local shrines, destroyed cult objects, and centralised sacrificial worship within Jerusalem. Becking (2001:189–222) argues that this reform movement promoted mono-Yahwism by recognising only one legitimate form of Yahweh worship. Political centralisation, therefore, directly influenced theological development within Judah.

The Babylonian exile marked another crucial stage in the development of biblical monotheism. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BCE forced significant theological reflection concerning covenant, judgment, identity, and divine sovereignty. Exilic and post-exilic literature increasingly portrays Yahweh not merely as Israel's national deity but as sovereign ruler over all nations and creation. Isaiah 45:5 declares: 'I am the LORD, and there is no other; besides me there is no god' (NRSV). Such statements reflect a stronger and more explicit monotheistic theology than earlier biblical traditions. Schipper (2019:64–65) emphasises that imperial domination and political crisis significantly shaped the theological transformation of Israelite religion during this period.

Literary development within the Hebrew Bible reflects these broader historical and theological changes. Earlier poetic traditions often preserve archaic imagery associated with storm deities, divine warfare, and cosmic kingship. Later biblical literature increasingly reinterprets this imagery within ethical, covenantal, and universal theological frameworks. Day (1985:97–102) argues that biblical authors frequently adapted older mythological traditions while subordinating them to the sovereignty of Yahweh. The transformation of earlier religious imagery, therefore, reflects changing theological priorities rather than simple literary borrowing. Biblical literature preserves multiple layers of tradition originating from different historical contexts within Israel's development.

The role of scribal activity also became increasingly important during the exilic and post-exilic periods. Van der Toorn (2009:235–267) argues that scribal communities played a major role in preserving, editing, and reshaping Israel's religious traditions. Through literary activity, older traditions concerning divine councils, storm imagery, and sacred kingship were reinterpreted within increasingly monotheistic theological frameworks. The Hebrew Bible, therefore, reflects not a single moment of composition, but a long process of preservation and reinterpretation shaped by changing historical realities. Consequently, literary formation and theological development occurred together within the broader evolution of Israelite religion.

The theological transformation from Yahwism to later Jewish monotheism was therefore gradual, complex, and historically conditioned. Early Yahwistic traditions emerged within the wider religious environment of Northwest Semitic culture and retained many shared symbolic features associated with storm deities and divine kingship. Over time, however, political crises, cultic centralisation, prophetic theology, and scribal activity contributed to the reinterpretation of Yahweh as the sole universal deity. Stavrakopoulou (2021:37–61) argues that biblical portrayals of God preserve traces of earlier traditions even as they are reshaped within new theological frameworks. The development of the Israelite religion consequently reflects both continuity with the ancient Near Eastern world and profound theological transformation across centuries of historical change.

Conclusion

The comparison between Baal in the Ugaritic texts and Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible demonstrates that both traditions emerged within the broader religious environment of the ancient Near East and shared important symbolic features associated with storm deities, divine warfare, kingship, and sacred mountains. The Ugaritic Baal Cycle portrays Baal as a storm god whose authority over rain, fertility, and cosmic order was essential for agricultural survival and political stability within Canaanite religion. Several biblical texts likewise preserve storm imagery associated with Yahweh, including depictions of thunder, lightning, clouds, and victories over chaotic waters. The comparative evidence indicates that early Yahwistic traditions developed within a Northwest Semitic cultural

context that shared theological concepts and religious imagery with neighbouring societies. At the same time, the Hebrew Bible progressively reinterpreted these inherited traditions within an increasingly exclusive and monotheistic understanding of Yahweh.

The study further demonstrates that the development of Yahwism cannot be separated from the political, social, and historical experiences of Israel and Judah. Archaeological evidence, biblical literature, and recent scholarship collectively indicate that Israelite religion evolved gradually from diverse forms of Yahwism during the monarchic period toward later Jewish monotheism during and after the Babylonian exile. Historical events such as the Assyrian expansion, the reforms associated with King Josiah, and the destruction of Jerusalem significantly influenced this theological transformation. Rather than presenting Israelite religion as entirely separate from Canaanite traditions from its beginning, recent scholarship emphasises both continuity and reinterpretation within the development of biblical theology. Comparative study of Baal and Yahweh, therefore, contributes not only to understanding ancient Near Eastern religion but also to explaining how Israelite religion transformed inherited West Semitic traditions into the theological foundations of biblical monotheism.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Bobby K. Putrawan: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. Philip S. Chia: Investigation, Visualisation, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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