

**Contents**[Course Description](#)[Logistics and Communication](#)[Requirements](#)[Texts](#)[Syllabus](#)[Pedagogical Reflections](#)

# God: The Beginnings

**Instructor**

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**Institution**

Harvard College, a private, four-year liberal arts college

**Course Level and Type**

Undergraduate and graduate-level seminar

**Hours of Instruction**

28 hours (2 hours/week x 14 weeks)

**Enrolment and Year Last Taught**

8 students/1997; 7 students/1998

## Course Description

The figure of God, the most important divine being in the history of the western version of the world, is rooted in a west Semitic deity who first appears in the cultic texts of the area of ancient Syria-Palestine known as Canaan in the mid-second millennium B.C.E. This deity, known as 'El (commonly "El"), is the supreme member of a pantheon of gods and goddesses known to the modern western world until very recently largely through the Hebrew Bible, the sacred writings of ancient Israelites, where, with the sole exception of 'El, these divine beings were condemned and suppressed for over three thousand years. Since the discovery, in 1928, of thousands of cuneiform texts at Ras Shamra (ancient Ugarit) on the Syrian coast, the identities of these long-suppressed divine figures, including 'El, have emerged with new and startling clarity. This course will examine the figure of 'El as he is portrayed in the mythological and cultic texts from Ugarit, and as he is found in inscriptions from ancient Syria-Palestine. In particular, this course will examine 'El's description as divine patriarch in the Ugaritic pantheon, his relationships to other members of that pantheon, and his relationships to his human devotees. A number of questions will assist in focusing this examination: What is a god? What attributes distinguish divine beings from one another and from non-divine beings? Which characteristics of the figure of 'El are emphasized in Canaanite religion and which are not? Can one detect any development in the depiction of 'El? If so, in what direction(s)? What is 'El's relationship to the cosmos?

## Logistics and Communication

This seminar will meet once a week, on Thursday afternoons from 3-5 p.m. in the Coolidge Room in Lowell House. Our meetings will focus on presentations and discussions of the primary and secondary readings assigned for that week. I will provide background material for each session, as necessary. The best way to contact me is by email: [mcafee@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:mcafee@fas.harvard.edu). I usually check email more than once a day and ordinarily respond as soon as I receive a message. You may also reach me in my office in Lowell House, A-22, where I

am the Allston Burr Senior Tutor; the number there is 495-2283, and the person who will usually answer the phone is Tracy Marshall. I am there Monday afternoons from 1-3, Wednesday mornings from 9-11, and Friday afternoons from 2-4. You may have to wait a bit if I am working with students from Lowell House during those hours. Given that you have 24-hour-a-day email access to me, it should not be necessary for you to call me at home.

## Requirements

1. attendance at and participation in all weekly meetings (1 absence may be excused with prior notification of the instructor; beyond this, you risk exclusion from the course, on which see the Handbook for Students 1998-99, pp. 296, 323); this portion of the course counts for 50% of the final grade;
2. one class presentation of assigned readings (15% of the final grade), to be submitted the following week as
3. one 5-7-page paper on assigned readings (10% of the final grade); and
4. one 10-12-page final paper on an approved topic of the student's choosing, due by 5:00 p.m. on Friday, Jan. 15, 1999 (the last day of the fall reading period), in the Lowell House Office (A-22); a 100-word proposal for that paper is due Nov. 19 (25% of the final grade).

## Texts

(numbers 1-4 for purchase at the Harvard Coop)

Coogan, Michael D. *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987);

Parker, Simon B. *The Pre-Biblical Narrative Tradition: Essays on the Ugaritic Poems Keret and Aqhat* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989);

A Bible (any version is satisfactory, although the New Revised Standard Version published as the HarperCollins Study Bible is recommended);

McAfee, Eugene C. *Coursebook for the Study of 'El* (marked with \* in the following syllabus);

Craigie, Peter C. *Ugarit and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983 (on reserve at Lamont Library));

Additional reserve readings at Lamont Library (marked with \*\* in the following syllabus).

## Syllabus

Week 1 (9/17/98)

Introduction to the course: goal, method, sources, mechanics, readings. Introduction to the study of God. Introduction to ancient literature I: oral and written literature.

Readings:

Selected visual representations of the God of the west.

\*King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Speech at the Lincoln Memorial, August 23, 1963* (audiotape).

Introduction to ancient literature II: the nature and function of myth. Introduction to the study of ancient religions: the nature of the evidence.

Required Readings:

\*Cohen, Percy S. "Theories of Myth." Malinowski Memorial Lecture, London School of Economics and Political Science, 8 May 1969. *Man* 4 (1969) 337-353.

\*Kirk, G. S. "Myth, Ritual and Folktale." *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*. Sather Classical Lectures. Cambridge and Berkeley: Cambridge University Press; University of California Press, 1970, 1-41.

\*Alter, Robert. "How Convention Helps Us Read: The Case of the Bible's Annunciation Type-scene." *Prooftexts* 3 (1983) 115-130.

Additional Readings:

\*\*Armstrong, Karen. "In the Beginning . . . ." *A History of God*. New York: Ballantine, 1993, 3-39.

Week 3 (10/1/98) Canaan and the Canaanites: history, geography, language, literature. Canaanite religion: introductory overview.

Required Readings:

Coogan 1987, "Introduction," 9-25.

\*Dever, William G. "The Middle Bronze Age: The Zenith of the Urban Canaanite Culture." *Biblical Archaeologist* 50 (1987) 148-177.

\*\*Cooper, Alan M. and Coogan, Michael David. "Canaanite Religion." *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. M. Eliade. New York: Macmillan, 1987, III, 35-58.

Additional Readings:

\*\*Na'aman, Avigdor. "The Canaanites and Their Land." *Ugarit-Forschungen* 26 (1994) 397-418.

\*\*Albright, William Foxwell. "The Role of the Canaanites in the History of Civilization." *The Bible and the Ancient Near East. Essays in Honor of William Foxwell Albright*. G. E. Wright, ed. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961 <1942>, 328-362.

Week 4 (10/8/98) Canaan and the city-state of Ugarit/Ras Shamra. The history, literature, politics, and religion of Ugarit.

Required Readings:

Craigie 1983. Parker 1989, "Introduction," and ch. 1, "Some Conventions of Ugaritic Narrative Poetry," 1-6, 7-59.

\*\*Oden, R. A. "Theoretical Assumptions in the Study of Ugaritic Myths." *Maarav* 2 (1979) 43-63.

#### Additional Readings:

\*\*Kirk 1970, "The myths of Western Asia--Hittite and Canaanite," 220-222.

\*\*Miller, Patrick D. "Aspects of the Religion of Ugarit." *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*. Eds. Patrick D. Miller, Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987, 53-66.

Week 5 (10/15/98) 'El in Canaan and elsewhere: etymology, meanings, functions.

#### Required Readings:

Parker 1989, "Some Non-Narrative types of Speech in the Narrative Poems," 61-98.

\*Cross, Frank Moore, Jr. "'el." *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* I, 242-61.

\*Hadad inscription (KAI 214). Gibson, J. C. L. *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971-1982, II, 60-61, 65-69.

\*Sefire IA and Zakir inscriptions. Rosenthal, Franz., tr. "Zakir of Hamat and Lu`ath," and "The Treaty Between KTK and Arpad." *The Ancient Near East. Supplementary Texts and Pictures Relating to the Old Testament*. Ed. James B. Pritchard. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969, 655-656, 659-660.

\*Deir `Alla inscription. Hackett, Jo Ann. *The Balaam Text from Deir `Alla*. HSM 31. Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980, 1-8, 29-30, 75-89.

\*Oldenburg, Ulf. "Above the stars of El: El in ancient South Arabic religion." *Zeitschrift fuer die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 82.2 (1970) 187-208.

#### Additional Readings:

\*\*Albright, William Foxwell. "Chapter III: Canaanite Religion in the Bronze Age." *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968, 110-152.

\*\*Pope, Marvin H. *El in the Ugaritic Texts*. VTSup. Leiden: Brill, 1955, 1-24.

Week 6 (10/22/98) 'El the creator

#### Required Readings:

\*\*"Shachar and Shalim and the Gracious Gods." *Canaanite Myths and Legends*. Tr., ed. by J. C. L. Gibson and G. R. Driver. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978, 123-127

\*Cross, Frank Moore, Jr. Pp. 20-24 of "'El and the God of the Fathers," in *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (see below, week 11).

\*Pope, Marvin H. "Ups and Downs in El's Amours." *UF* 11 (1979) 701-708.

\*Schloen, J. David. :The Exile of Disinherited Kin in KTU: 1.12 and KTU: 1.23.  
Journal of Near Eastern Studies 52/3 (July 1993) 209-220.

#### Additional Readings:

\*\*Cross, Frank Moore, Jr. "Prose and Poetry in the Mythic and Epic Texts from Ugarit." Harvard Theological Review 67 (1974) 1-15.

\*\*Miller, Patrick D. "El, the Creator of the Earth." Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research 239 (1980) 43-46.

\*\*Fisher, Loren R. "Creation at Ugarit and in the Old Testament." Vetus Testamentum 15 (1965) 313-24.

\*\*Clifford, R. J. "Cosmogonies in the Ugaritic Texts and in the Bible." Orientalia 53 (1984) 183-201.

Week 7 (10/29/98) 'El the patriarch and 'El the head of the pantheon

#### Required Readings:

Genesis 35, 49; Numbers 24; Judges 9; Deuteronomy 32; 1 Kgs 22:1-40; Job 1-2; Psalms 18 (cf. 2 Sam 22), 21, 47, 73, 78, 82, 107; Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 23

\*\*de Moor, Johannes. "Myth and Ritual III, KTU 1.114." An Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987, 134-137.

\*Pope, Marvin H. :A Divine Banquet at Ugarit. The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays. J. M. Efrid, ed. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1972, 170-203.

\*Smith, Mark S. "Introduction" and ch. 1, "Deities in Israel in the Period of the Judges." The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990, xix-xxxiv, 1-40.

#### Additional Readings:

\*\*Gray, John. "Social Aspects of Canaanite Religion." Volume Du Congress, Genegve 1965. VTSup. Leiden: Brill, 1966, 170-92.

Week 8 (11/5/98) 'El and Baal: Parentage and conflict

#### Required Readings:

Coogan 1987, "Baal," 75-115.

\*Oldenburg, Ulf. "El and His Family," "Ba`al and His Associates at Ugarit," "Evidences of Conflicts between El and Ba`al," and "The Conflict as Described in Mythology," The Conflict Between El and Ba`al in Canaanite Religion. Supplementa ad Numen, Altera Series (Dissertationes ad Historiam Religionum Pertinentes). Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969, 15-45, 46-100, 101-121, 122-142.

\*Cross, Frank Moore, Jr. "The Song of the Sea and Canaanite Myth." *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973, 112-144.

#### Additional Readings:

\*\*Gibson, J. C. L. "The Theology of the Ugaritic Baal Cycle." *Or* 53 (1984) 202-19.

\*\*Oden, Robert A. "Ba`al samem and 'el." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 (1977) 457-473.

\*\*Clifford, Richard J. "The Temple in the Ugaritic Myth of Baal." *Symposia*. Ed., F. M. Cross. Cambridge, MA: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1979, 137-145.

#### Week 9 (11/12/98) 'El the divine patron I: Kirta

#### Required Readings:

Coogan 1987, "Kirta," 52-74. Parker 1989, ch. 4, "Analysis and Interpretation of KRT," 145-216.

\*\*Wyatt, Nicholas. "Cosmic Entropy in Ugaritic Religious Thought." *UF* 17 (1986) 383-386.

#### Additional Readings:

\*\*Merrill, A. L. "The House of Keret: A Study of the Keret Legend." *Svensk exegetisk Arrsbok* 33 (1968) 5-17.

\*\*Kleven, Terence. "Kingship in Ugarit (KTU: 1.16 I 1-23)." *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie*. Eds Lyle Eslinger and Glen Taylor. *JSOTSup*. Sheffield: JSOT, 1988, 29-53.

\*\*Fensham, F. Charles. "Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature." *JNES* 21/2 (1962) 129-39.

\*\*Gibson, J. C. L. "Myth, Legend, and Folk-lore in the Ugaritic Keret and Aqhat Texts." *Congress Volume*, Edinburgh, 1974. *VTSup*. Leiden: Brill, 1975, 60-68.

#### Week 10 (11/19/98, paper proposals due; no class 11/26/98, Thanksgiving Day) 'El the divine patron II: Dan'el

#### Required Readings:

Coogan 1987, "Aqhat," 27-47. Parker 1989, ch. 3, "Analysis and Interpretation of AQHT," and ch. 5, "Conclusions and Implications," 99-144, 217-232.

#### Additional Readings:

\*\*Dressler, Harold H. P. "The Identification of the Ugaritic DNIL with the Daniel of Ezekiel." *VT* 29.2 (1979) 152-61.

\*\*Day, John. "The Daniel of Ugarit and Ezekiel and the Hero of the Book of Daniel." *VT* 30.2 (1980) 174-84.

\*\*Healey, John. "The pietas: of an Ideal Son in Ugarit." UF 11 (1979) 353-56.

\*\*Gray, John. "The Goren: at the City Gate: Justice and the Royal Office in the Ugaritic Text 'Aqht'" Palestine Exploration Quarterly 85 (1953) 118-23.

## Week 11 (12/3/98) 'El the divine patron III: Abraham

### Required Readings:

Genesis 11:27-25:18; 28; Exodus 3, 6

\*Cross, Frank Moore, Jr. "The God of the Fathers," "'El and the God of the Fathers," and "Yahweh and 'El." Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973, 3-75.

\*Bright, H. C. :Kin, Cult, Land and Afterlife--a Biblical Complex. Hebrew Union College Annual 44 (1973) 1-54.

\*Biale, David. "The god with breasts: El Shaddai in the Bible." History of Religions 21 (1982) 240-256.

\*Eissfeldt, Otto. "El and Yahweh." Journal of Semitic Studies 1 (1956) 25-37.

### Additional Readings:

\*\*Segal, Moses H. "El, Elohim, and YHWH in the Bible." Jewish Quarterly Review 46 (1955) 89-115.

\*\*Wyatt, Nicolas. "Problem of the 'God of the fathers'." ZAW 90.1 (1978) 101-104.

\*\*Wifall, Walter R. "El Shaddai or El of the fields." ZAW 92/1 (1980) 24-32.

## Week 12 (12/10/98) 'El the divine warrior and the divine judge

### Required Readings:

Exodus 15, 19; Judges 4-5; Psalms 29, 68, 114; Isaiah 51; Habakkuk 3 The book of Daniel (esp. ch. 7)

\*Cross, Frank Moore, Jr. "The Divine Warrior" and "A Note on the Study of Apocalyptic Origins." Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973, 79-111, 343-346.

\*Miller, Patrick D. "El the Warrior." HTR 60 (1967) 411-31.

\*Emerton, J. A. "The Origin of the Son of Man Imagery." Journal of Theological Studies n.s. 9 (1958) 225-242.

### Additional Readings:

\*\*Wilson, Robert R. "This World--and the World to Come." Encounter 38 (1977) 177-124.

## Pedagogical Reflections

This course is designed to introduce students to the idea that the deity commonly thought of simply as "God" has a history, and a very particular one in the two numerically dominant religions of North America, Judaism and Christianity. The roots of this deity lie in the religions of western Asia Minor in the middle of the second millennium B.C.E., commonly known as Canaanite religions. The principal source of texts from this region and period is Ugarit. The goal of this course is to expose students to the primary texts from Ugarit and other locations in Syria-Palestine, with special attention to the depiction of the deity El. In this process, students will also be introduced to basic historical, archaeological, social, geographical, and methodological issues related to the study of the religions of the ancient Near East. The most successful aspects of the course were the primary readings (translations of the major Ugaritic texts by M. D. Coogan), and my background presentations to and exegeses of the primary texts; the least successful aspects of the course were some of the more complex secondary readings (such as F. M. Cross) and the student presentations of primary texts. Although I remain committed to the pedagogical value of student presentations for the presenters, for the other members of the seminar, the value can vary widely.

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