

"Pray God and Keep Walking": Exile and the Gendering of Religion in the Hebrew Bible

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The "orthodox" religion of the Hebrew Bible is unique within its ancient Near Eastern context for the absence of a goddess. Not only is the god of Israel, Yhwh – conceived of as creator god or storm god – unique in his lack of a consort, but the relationship his people share with a divine entity does not extend to the worship of a goddess. Where the biblical texts speak of a goddess, be she Asherah, Astarte, Anat or the Queen of Heaven, she is relayed through the vituperative voices of the prophets or historians in the service of the Hebrew Bible's mono-masculine divine myth. The archaeological record, however, paints a very different picture. From it, we can see that Yhwh worship did in fact incorporate the legitimate worship of a female deity. Yet the very same record shows that after the Babylonian exile, worship of a female deity vanishes from the material culture, as it would seem does she vanish from the written record of Persian Period Yehud. The discussion to follow will therefore be concerned with two interrelated questions. Firstly, how and why did the exile spell the end of any legitimate context for the worship of a female god? And secondly, given that gods performed specific (cosmological) functions in any given society, how does the Hebrew Bible accommodate for the loss of Israel's goddess(es)?

In service of addressing the first question, the discussion initially turns to the textual and archaeological evidence for female deities in Iron-Age Levant. Here the record is unequivocal. Evidence points to the worship of a number of different goddesses: Asherah, Anat and Astarte, all Syro-Levantine goddesses with a distinct and illustrious mythological pedigree, as well as the Queen of Heaven, who may or may not be a Levantine manifestation of Ištar. Each appears to have control over a specific domain, the functional roles associated with each straddling the goddess between the cosmological poles of love (e.g. goddess of childbirth) and/or violence (e.g. goddess of war). But the record also shows that by the end of the 6th century BCE, the goddess has all but vanished, initiating one of the great transformations within Israelite religion. This "transformation" can be accounted for in any number of different ways, but two stand out. On the one hand, Tikva Frymer-Kensky argues that a parallel shift is noticeable in all Near Eastern religions, wherein with the ascent of statecraft and empire, all male gods rise to the fore and usurp roles once taken by a goddess. By this logic, Yhwh eventually replaces the language associated with and functions taken on by the various Levantine goddesses. On the other, the catastrophe of the Babylonian exile and the religious transformation towards monotheism that insured Israel's survival spelled the end to the licit worship of a female divine figure.

Monotheism, of course, raises more questions than the problem it putatively solves. With respect to the worship of a female deity, such questions include: What to do with the vibrant theology that accompanies the goddess(es)? How to account for the realm over which she once ruled? And most importantly, where did she go? In attempting to address these questions in particular, the discussion then turns to the Hebrew Bible, asking whether we can detect the remnants of a goddess in the biblical texts. Positively, I suggest that traces of a female deity can be found in five scriptural figures: Lady Wisdom, Deborah, Yael, Esther, and Judith. All display characteristics that fall outside the realm of the acceptable when compared to ancient notions of the "feminine". All, however, act in a manner that the goddess once did. But what of the goddess's cosmological spectrum? Using the work of Zainab Bahrani, which emphasises the cosmological otherness of the goddess, the discussion turns finally to two texts. First to Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly in Proverbs, where the spectrum is transformed into a sapiential choice. And then to Eve, who, I suggest, is presented as the superlative figure of difference, colouring the entire Hebrew Bible and gendering religion from its outset.

The Hebrew Bible pays witness to one of the greatest religious transformations in the ancient world, that of a second-generation, Levantine storm god battling the waters of chaos into the sole God overseeing his creation. Perhaps the greatest casualty of this "Biblical Transformation" was Israel's goddess, who for all intents and purposes dies for the cause of religious survival. Yet she did not disappear entirely. Indeed, if compelled to find her, the starting point is to look to the Bible's heroines.