

The Resilience of the Feminine in the Hebrew Bible

*By Saumitra Chakravarty**

From women in ordinary life to clan leaders and judges and onward to goddesses and their worship--this essay attempts to study the position of the feminine in the patriarchal, patrilinear society depicted in the Hebrew Bible. Though women were subjugated, enjoyed few privileges beyond the home, were systematically raped and appropriated in conquered populations during Israel's holy wars, forced into incestuous relationships and sacrificed for self-protection by its patriarchs, the Hebrew Bible does provide examples of powerful women like Deborah, the only woman judge of Israel, who defeated the Canaanite army, of Judith's decapitation of the enemy general Holofernes and of Queen Esther's defeat of her detractors. It further shows how the centrality of goddess worship in earlier societies was usurped by the establishment of a monotheistic religious order through incessant wars and conquest and the stern and jealous Hebrew god and his misogynic patriarchs who supplanted it. However, scattered references throughout the Old Testament to older mother goddesses and their anthropomorphic symbols testify to the continued propagation of these cults on the fringes of the new social order. These references include those of Asherah/Ashtoreth associated with the Babylonian Ishtar, goddess of sex, war and fertility, worshipped by King Manasseh, by Solomon's wives and by Gideon's people. Further, there are references to the sacred cult prostitution practised by worshippers of the goddess in the Bible.

Keywords: *Deborah, Judith, Esther, monotheistic, patriarchal, asherah, Ba'al, Ashtoreth, temple prostitution.*

Introduction

The transition from polytheism to monotheism recorded in ancient Hebrew society was to a certain extent the result of the usurping of an earlier centrality of goddess worship by a stern androcentric religious and social order. The incessant wars and the brutal suppression of these settled societies and religious configurations by the nomadic Hebrew tribes as seen in the Bible marked this change as a violent and largely misogynist confrontation. This happened despite evidence of the influence of other polytheistic religions of the ancient Near East in which women played a significant role in the social and religious order. However, scattered references throughout the Hebrew Bible to older mother goddesses, their anthropomorphic symbols and their continued cultic propagation on the fringes of this newly established monotheistic religious order provide ample proof of the continued impact of the earlier religious practices. Such evidence questions the extent to which the attempted eradication of earlier religious influences denigrating them as 'false

*Retired Professor of English, V.V.S. College, Bangalore University, India.

gods' and 'heathen idolatry' was successful among the common people living far beyond the circle of the social and religious elite, more so among their womenfolk.

The Biblical concept of a single, male God propagated by His prophets whose decrees were codified into Deuteronomistic laws reflects the patriarchal social order which produced it. What was the nature of this dominator culture in Hebrew society which was so sternly reflected in its religious order?

The first part of this essay will attempt to analyse the position of women in traditional Hebrew society. It will outline their systematic subordination right from the alleged role of Eve in the Fall narrative to women's inferior status within the family at the mercy of their menfolk, from the erasure of their voices in the Hebrew social hierarchy and the Yahwite religious framework to the vilification of independent souls who tried to carve out a niche for themselves or register their protest against the dictates of their patriarchal detractors. However, even in the midst of this largely misogynistic culture, women did emerge from the shadows to register their protest like Esther, to emerge as rulers, judges and warriors like Athaliah, Deborah and Judith and prophetesses like Miriam and Huldah. The voice of the feminine did find a significant place in the Hebrew Bible.

In the second half I will show how religion as it was practised in the Hebrew society was more syncretistic rather than the monotheistic order it was made out to be by the Yahwistic cult and its propagators. Surrounded as it was by such goddess-centric cultures as that of the Canaanites, the Hittites and Amorites, the imposition of a religious order of a single male God and the belief that it would lead to the total eradication of the earlier goddess-worship was impractical and ineffective. Thus, while Yahwism and the Mosaic Law was preached and propagated by Hebrew prophets and high priests, in actual fact, the goddess cult continued to permeate the lower strata of society, particularly among the women. This worship gave these women a sense of religious involvement, space and agency which they had been denied in the society, laws and religion of the Lord God of Israel. In fact, Saul Olyan, in his monograph entitled *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh* in Israel argues that the polemic against the goddess/asherahs is restricted to the Deuteronomistic History or to materials which betray the influence of Deuteronomistic language and theology (Olyan, 1988). Beyond that-- and sometimes despite the decree, women sought to worship their goddesses like Ashtoreth/Astarte, gather round their sacred asherah poles and trees and offer libations and cakes baked in ashes to her.

The Position of Women in Hebrew Society

Eve in Eden

Regarding the status of women in Hebrew society, scholars believe that the importance allotted to a particular gender in the social and cultural life of these ancient societies was determined by the focus of their worship and vice versa. Therefore, the andro-centric religious order of a stern male God recorded in the

Hebrew Bible would pre-suppose a hierarchical patriarchal system where women were subjugated and their stronger counterparts denounced in every narrative. This begins right from the Hebraic Creation myth and that of the Fall in the book of Genesis. It provides two accounts of the creation of man. In the first, man and woman are created together at the same time from the same dust¹. “So, God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Making a comparison with creation myths of surrounding cultures, Riane Eisler states that in both Sumerian and Babylonian legends we find accounts of how women and men were created simultaneously or in pairs by the Goddess (Eisler, 1987:64). However, in the second account in the Book of Genesis, obviously the work of a different poet, a hierarchical statement of subordination has been established: “Then the Lord God formed man out of the dust of the ground...the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs...And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and he brought her to the man” (Genesis 2: 21-22). This narrative of subordination ‘she shall be called Woman because she was taken out of man’ (Genesis 2:23) is continued throughout the narrative of the Fall and the expulsion from the idyllic Eden. In the second narrative, her creation is antecedent to man and therefore functional to his cause.

In Jewish folklore, the woman in the first narrative of Genesis 1:27 refers to Adam’s first wife Lilith, created at the same time and from the same dust as he was. Lilith is said to have refused subservience to Adam in the act of copulation, flown away and refused to return to Eden. The Babylonian Talmud sees Lilith as a dangerous demon of the night, which was sexually wanton and stole babies in darkness. She probably originated from the class of demons called *lilitu* mentioned in the cuneiform texts of Assyria, Sumer and Babylon. In the Bible however, only a single mention of Lilith is found in the Book of Isaiah: “Her castles shall be overgrown with thorns, her fortress with thistles and briars...there shall one Lilith repose and find herself a place to rest” (Isaiah 34:14).

The woman in the second narrative of Genesis, created from the rib of Adam is believed to be the woman Adam later calls Eve. Initially this Woman is said to have been created as a ‘helper’ to man. In Genesis 3:20 Adam refers to her as Eve (*Havah*) because she is the ‘mother of all the living’ (*hai*). This is a designation which places her at the very least, as coeval and equal in status to man in the story of Creation. But the fall from grace and the subsequent divine curse reduces her to one who is inferior to, and ruled over by her male consort. Its stern extension into the social order is latent in the divine curse issued to the woman that reduces her from the position of ‘helper’ to man to one ruled by or controlled by man, from near-equal status to ignominious subordination. The pain and burden of child-bearing and-rearing included in the curse creates the primary example of gender stereotyping to be repeatedly invoked in the Old Testament and codified into law in the Book of Leviticus. However, if innocence might be interpreted as a state of enforced ignorance and the tasting of the forbidden fruit the exercise of freedom of choice, its indulgence signifies female insubordination to an androcentric religious order. Moreover, the Fall narrative also signifies a release of the

Woman from androcentric authority, both divine and human, by her independent choice to eat the forbidden fruit. Woman who is created from the rib of Man: ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. . . . And they become one flesh’ (II: 23-24), becomes an independent entity. Also, it is only after the Fall that Woman is named Eve ‘because she was the mother of all living.’ Man and Woman become aware of each other, of each other’s bodies and nakedness and their capacity for copulation and procreation, an independent creator contextualizing the act of creation into the human domain: ‘Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain’(Genesis 4:1). However, in Genesis 4:1-2a, it says that Eve is said to have ‘created a man together with the Lord’. The Hebrew word used for ‘create’ (*qanah*) is the same as the one used for the creative power of God in Genesis 14:19-22 thus possibly ascribing divine status to her power of creation. For other Hebrew women the words used in the Bible are to ‘bear children’.

Alice Ogden Bellis notes that the negative connotation of Eve and her association with sin came not from the Hebrew Bible but from the apocryphal ‘Wisdom of Ben Sira’ of the 2nd century B.C.E. which says:

“From a woman was the beginning of sin
And because of we all died.”
(Bellis, 1994)

It is only in the New Testament in I Timothy 2:13-14, that we may find a similar statement: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve, Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.”

Subordination of Women - Conflicting Views

Carol Meyers however prefers to examine God’s rebuke and curse of the woman after her transgression in the context of the conditions within the ancient Israelite society². Here, she says multiple pregnancies as indicated in the narrative of the expulsion from Eden were a pre-condition for the survival of a few, given the high rates of child mortality (Meyers, 1988:102). Life for the rural folk, both the men and the women of Israel during the Iron Age was hard. They were mostly subsistence farmers or sheep and goat-herds and given the harsh conditions, the hilly and barren terrain and the scarcity of water, they had to work hard and produce large families for a bigger work force. Often, they led a nomadic life where advantages were few and the struggle for survival endless. This is reflected extensively across the Pentateuch in such stories of bitterness and feud as the rivalry between Cain and Abel, between Esau and Jacob for the inheritance of Isaac and in the prolonged exploitation of Jacob by his mother’s brother Laban and his kinsmen. The women suffered repeated pregnancies, many of their offspring dying in infancy as borne out by the many women approaching the Lord’s prophets for miraculous cure of a sick child.

Life and activity for the women beyond their household duties centred round the village well where they drew water for household use as well as for their sheep and goats. Hence the many references to the matrimonial alliances being

conducted at such locations. Abraham's servant entrusted with the task of buying a bride for Isaac from among his kin chooses Rebekah when she offers him water at the well. Noting how both men and women had to wage a daily battle for survival in this harsh and difficult environment, Carol Meyers rejects the contention that Israeli women were inferior to, or the chattel of men: 'women's maintenance roles in traditional agrarian societies is translated into certain kinds of power that overlap with or complement male power' (Meyers, 1988). In fact she rejects both terms 'patriarchy' and 'hierarchy' with reference to Israelite society and prefers to use the term 'heterarchy' that does not imply a vertical power structure. Moreover, despite the usual argument of the patrilocal and patrilineal society depicted in the Hebrew Bible, there is evidence also of a matriarchal culture prevalent in Israel at the time. The tradition of matrilineal marriage is seen in Jacob's marrying Rachel the daughter of Laban, his mother Rebekah's brother. Equally, Abraham's refusal to submit to this custom of marrying into the mother's clan, results in him sending his servant to buy a bride for Isaac from his own patrilocal kinsmen of Harran rather than choose a Canaanite woman. We also find evidence of the right of the mother to name her sons in the episode of Hannah naming her son Samuel and offering him up to the Temple to fulfil her vow. In fact, perhaps the continued propagation of Goddess worship in sections of society other than the royal or priestly class could explain the matrilineality or matrilocality mentioned above. James Frazer connects the worship of a female deity to a mother-kinship system, stating that the status and role of women in the ancient female religions in historic times and its close connection to female kinship and matrilineality was perhaps the very origin of its development (Stone, 1976).

However, it is equally true that in the Mosaic laws codified in Leviticus, the subordinate status associated with women is highlighted. In contrast to the economic, legal and social position of women in societies all around them many of which were in constant interaction in some form or other with the Israelites, that of Hebrew women was certainly inferior. A superior position for women could be seen in other cultures such as that of the Ammonites or the Canaanites where they often took part in politics and acted in official capacities. Ugaritic texts show that after a divorce, a woman had the right to keep her own property. The position of women within the family, particularly that of the mother was high. In Israelite society however, a woman could not ask for divorce, she addressed her husband as *adon* or lord. The laws of inheritance did not include either the wife or the daughters except when there was no male heir. Daughters could be sold into slavery. Though incest was sternly forbidden by Mosaic law, women offered themselves to their fathers-in-law as Tamar did to Judah or even to fathers as did the daughters of Lot, since the greatest curse for a Hebrew woman was to die childless. Childless women offered their female slaves to their husbands to produce offspring as Sarai offered her maid Hagar to Abraham and Rachel offered Billah to Jacob. A good wife tamed her body, her beauty and her sexuality and her loins were girded for procreation. Hard labour and self-sacrifice were the greatest virtues of a Hebrew woman whereas beauty and independence in Israel's daughters were condemned as the qualities of a harlot

who opened her quiver to all and fathers were to beware of such daughters. “Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain” says the poet of the Book of Proverbs (31:30). Therefore a Jezebel who promoted the worship of Baal in contradistinction to Yahwism, a Maacah, the Queen Mother who contributed to the cult of Asherah, a Delilah who seduced and betrayed Samson and exposed the weakness of a man of God, an Athaliah who ruled after destroying her family and defied the patriarchal lineage, are all examples of women who went against the gender stereotyping of traditional Hebrew society and were denounced.

Referring to the absolute binary of the ‘good’ vs the ‘bad’ woman or the ‘virgin’ vs. the ‘defiled’ in ancient patriarchal cultures, Sharon Khalifa-Gueta uses the example of the conflicting figures of Andromeda and Medusa in the Perseus myth in the Greco-Roman one. She observes that representation of Medusa as a snake-haired Gorgon indicates a woman who was too dangerous to exist in the Greco-Roman cultural context, therefore she necessitated control and containment: “Separating Medusa’s female and ‘drakaina’ (female dragon) aspects illuminates the meaning and function of her image in the context of different patriarchal cultures....By demonstrating the reasons that Medusa-Andromeda were fused in the myth of Perseus and comparing the two myths a main theme emerges: the delineation of “good” versus a “bad” woman” (Khalifa-Gueta, 2021).

Ritual Uncleaness

Whereas in earlier Goddess-centric cultures the depiction of menstrual blood linked humans with the mother and ultimately with the Great Mother³ or the Creatrix, in patriarchal Hebrew culture there were stern taboos associated with it. The ritual uncleaness associated with menstruation is seen in the decree: “When a woman has a discharge of blood which is her regular discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean in the evening. And everything upon which she lies during her impurity shall be unclean” (Leviticus 15: 19-20). And again, “And on the eighth day she shall take two turtledoves and two young pigeons and bring them to the priest, to the door of the tent of meeting. And the priest shall offer one for a sin offering and one for a burnt offering; and the priest shall make atonement for her before the Lord for her unclean discharge” (Leviticus 16: 29-30). This association of menstrual discharge with sin requiring not only ritual purification but also atonement, is evidence of the continued association with the role of the Woman in the Fall narrative whereby woman lost her original purity. Moreover, we note the use of menstruation as a simile for the most hated objects. The Book of Esther 14:16 compares Esther’s relationship to the king as being ‘hateful as a menstrual rag’⁴ and in the Book of Lamentations 1:17, Jerusalem is as a ‘menstrual woman’. Similar associations of ritual uncleaness occur with childbirth, particularly with the birth of female offspring in Leviticus 12:2-5. All these taboos shut women out of religious rituals and resulted in a powerful statement against goddess cults to establish the supremacy of a male god and his male prophets and patriarchs as the consecrated force behind an evolving civilization.

Rape and Subjugation

The Mosaic Law therefore installed binaries of acceptance and rejection, reward and punishment within its religious and social hierarchy. Women were not only to be dominated and suppressed as biologically weaker and therefore temperamentally fickle and fragile, they were to be vilified as harlots and slaves. The provisions for the protection of a woman's security laid down in Leviticus only served to heighten her dependence on male guardians who controlled her sexuality. Women were offered as sacrifices for self-preservation as seen in the story of Lot in Sodom when he offered his virgin daughters in Genesis 19:8 or in the Book of Judges where the Levite offered his concubine to be raped and slaughtered to placate a violent mob (19:24-5). Abraham introduced his wife Sarai (later Sarah) to the Pharaoh and to the King of Gerar as his sister for self-protection, thus making her vulnerable to sexual assault by ruthless and powerful monarchs. Hence though a woman's virtue was a closely guarded commodity the loss of which entailed death by stoning, male control and exploitation of female sexuality exposed the woman to concubinage, slavery, sale and rape. Women were to be stoned or burnt to death for losing their virginity before marriage. Victims of rape were to be married to the rapist, or if already married or betrothed were to be stoned to death. The public display of blood-stained wedding sheets as proof of a bride's virginity or the enforced proof of a wife's chastity as seen in the story of Susannah in the Book of Daniel, penetrate the narratives of the high-born as well. Accuser, deliverer, beneficiary of the compensation for false accusations, were however all male. Women were spoils of Israel's holy wars against worshippers of false gods, and rape by divine sanction was an effective weapon of subjugation. The Book of Deuteronomy decreed that in a war against a city that refused to surrender, the males were to be put to the sword, while the women and the little ones and the cattle and everything else in the city, all its spoil, "you shall take as booty for yourselves; and you shall enjoy for yourselves..." (Deuteronomy 20:14). The added sexual license provided to the victors in the same book, is evident in passages like this one: "When you go forth to war against your enemies, and the Lord your God gives them into your hands, and you take them captive, and see among the captives a beautiful woman, and you have desire for her for yourself as wife, then you shall bring her home to your house, and she shall shave her head and pare her nails" (21:10-12). Thus denuded of her previous identity, after the mandatory period of mourning for her relatives killed in the war, the woman's body became the property of her captor. And the Oracle against Babylon in the Book of Isaiah proclaims that "their houses shall be plundered and their wives ravished" (13:16).

This commodification of female sexuality is deeply embedded into the language of the text. Exploitation of female sexuality was the prerogative of every male within the family and the clan thus ensuring the racial purity and the continuity of the blood line. Childless widows were given to the husband's brothers or their nearest of kin as in the Ruth-Boaz narrative. "If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not

marry without unto a stranger; her husband's brother shall go in unto her and take her to wife, and perform the duty of an husband and brother unto her" (Deuteronomy, 25:5). A tractate of the Jewish Mishnah, the Mishnah Yebamot belonging to the Nashim, refers to the Levirate marriage of a widow to her husband's brother to produce a legal heir for her dead husband. C. Knight in his essay, 'Early Human Kinship was Matriarchal' explains this as 'sibling equivalence'. "In the levirate/sororate, a person steps into the marital role of a deceased sibling with little or no ceremony and as a matter of course. In a sense, the living sibling was 'married' to the deceased's spouse already, since siblings are kin equivalents and marital contracts are arrangements not between private individuals but kin groups on either side" (Knight, 2008).

Sagas of Powerful Jewish Women

However, the Hebrew Bible as a chronicle of male supremacy of a jealous God and his patriarchs intolerant of any perceived threat to the hierarchical power structure is punctuated with the sagas of strong Jewish women. This feminine strength is manifested in many ways, both in women who were rebels against the prevalent cultural and religious ethos and in those who worked within the prescribed confines of patriarchy. Amongst the rebels we have such women as Athaliah, the daughter of Queen Jezebel, who claimed the throne of Judah as her own and ruled for six years before she was violently dethroned even though Hebrew law did not allow women to reign alone. She revived the ancient goddess religion of Ashtoreth, like her mother Jezebel and her grandparents who were the priestess and priest of Astoreth and Ba'al in the Canaanite city of Sidon. Amongst those who manifested their strength within the confines of the established culture of the time, we have Ruth who surrendered her Moabite identity to embrace the God of Israel working hard for a living in its famine-struck land. She united with her dead husband's kinsman Boaz and was rewarded by being recognized as the ancestor of King David. Then there is the prophetess Miriam glorified in the Talmud as one of the three leaders of Israel who was granted the miracle of the Well which would never dry up. She would thus be able to sustain the Israelites during their years of wandering. Her main claim to fame was to reunite her parents after they separated, with the prophecy of the birth of her brother Moses, the chosen one of God. She led the women of the land in a victory song after the drowning of the Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. Like Miriam, Huldah too was a prophetess mentioned in II Kings 22 and II Chronicles 34. The Bible mentions her as one of the seven prophetesses of Israel, the others being Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail and Esther. King Josiah sent his priest Hilkiah to enquire of Huldah for his sake and for that of the people what the Lord in His anger intended for them, since their fathers had not hearkened unto the words of the Lord. And she said to them: Thus, saith the Lord, the God of Israel: 'Tell ye the man that sent you to me, "Thus saith the Lord: Behold I will bring evil upon this place and upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the words of the book which the King of Judah hath read"' (II Kings 22:15-16). However, she

reassured the King by saying that the Lord had heard his prayer and that he would be gathered in peace unto the grave and that he would not live to see the evil that would befall his people.

Among the high born we have the sagas of women like Deborah, Judith and to a certain extent Esther, who manifest a strength independent of and in contradiction to-- the dictates of patriarchy, though their strength arises from their faith in the one true god of Israel. Deborah, the fourth and only woman Judge of pre-monarchic Israel, led her people to victory against the nine hundred iron chariots of the Canaanite commander Sisero. She makes a strong political statement when she tells Barak, "The road on which you are going will not lead to your glory for the Lord will sell Sisero into the hands of a woman" (Judges 5:9). The reference is to Jael, who kills Sisero with a tent peg having lulled him to sleep with a drink of milk, earning her place in the Song of Deborah: "most blessed of women be Jael/the wife of Heber the Kenite, / of tent-dwelling women most blessed" (Judges 6:24). This resourcefulness of the women of Israel is seen elsewhere too as in the attack on Thebez by Abimelech, the son of Gideon by his concubine who is killed by a woman dropping a millstone on his head, leading her beleaguered people to victory when the conventional warfare had failed.

Judith was the daring and beautiful widow of Manasses who lead an austere life refusing to re-marry. She thus defied the Mosaic law of marriage to the husband's kinsman for producing an heir. Upset with her countrymen for not trusting the Lord to deliver them from their enemy oppressors, she dressed in all her finery and went with her maid to the camp of the enemy general Holofernes. She slowly won his trust by promising information about the Israelites and gained entry into his tent. When he was in a drunken stupor, she decapitated him and carried his head back with her. Having lost their leader, the Assyrians fled and the pursuing Israelite army was victorious. Esther was the Jewish queen of the Persian King Ahaseurus, and cousin of his Chief Minister Mordecai. When the king's grand vizier Haman began a pogrom of revenge to exterminate her people and to send Mordecai to the gallows, she revealed her Jewish identity to the king, exposed Haman's evil plans and had him executed. Susannah, falsely accused of meeting her lover by two lustful elders as she returned alone after her bath refused to be blackmailed into having sex with them, choosing imprisonment instead. When she was about to be executed, Daniel intervened and exposed the lies of the elders and saved her life.

This society which was largely misogynistic, often with the sanction of the Hebrew God and his Prophetic pronouncements, is what is believed to have contributed to the strong diatribe against the groundswell of goddess worship in the Israelite social order. We now pass on to a discussion on the extent to which this narrative of 'false gods' found actual acceptance among ordinary people.

The Narrative of 'False Gods' and of Goddess Worship

The religion of the Israelites in the First Iron Age (1200-1000 BCE) had sprung from the ancient Canaanite religion and like all other religions of the

ancient Near East had been fundamentally polytheistic in nature⁵. The Canaanites who were a Semitic people like the Hebrews, lived in agricultural communities and worshipped Asherah, the chief goddess of their pantheon, also known as Asherah of the Sea, the goddess Astarte, sometimes associated with the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar⁶ and Anath, called the 'Mistress of the Sky'. Thus, in the Canaanite religion, goddesses played a leading role and were believed to be the consorts of kings. This influence percolated down into the Hebrew religion from the time of the Hebrew tribes arriving in Canaan right up until the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. After the Israelite conquest of the Canaanite country in the period of mixed Canaanite-Israelite settlement with inter-marriages between the Israelites, the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites and other such tribes, the Hebrews continued to serve their Ba'als and the Asherahs.

What was the nature of the newly formed Israelite identity and of its God? In the transformation from a polytheistic to a monotheistic religious order, why should the new God of the Israelites who was conceived as an Absolute Being have a gendered identity? Was it the natural outcome of a patriarchal, patrifocal, patrilinear society where the Godhead was perceived as the patriarch of the community? Was it an attempt to counterbalance the polytheistic influence of neighbouring tribes? Raphael Patai argues that since the concept of the One and Only God of Israel is not only that of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent one but of an aphysical Being, "to say that God is either male or female is therefore completely impossible from the viewpoint of traditional Judaism. (Yet) The two Biblical names of God, Yahweh (pronounced, out of reverence for its great holiness, as 'Adonai' and usually translated as "the Lord") and Elohim (or briefly El, translated as 'God') are masculine. When a pronoun is used to refer to God, it is the masculine 'He' (Patai, 1967).

We know that with the emergence of the monarchy, there was a promotion of Yahweh, the family god of the kings as the national god around the time of the Second Iron Age (800-600 BCE). The monotheistic revolution was therefore a rather late entry into the religion of the Israelites and an elitist one created by the priestly class as noted by Yairah Amit⁷ (Amit, 2006). It was an attempt to forge a stern and independent Israelite identity to counteract the combined trauma of conquest and the Babylonian exile. It produced a distinctive literature of its own expressed in new genres in which an androcentric religious system of a single male God was the central focus. The laws that it promulgated claimed to be the revelations from this God through his prophet Moses. The narratives it bred envisioned a patrilineal and patrifocal society with little space for the role of women beyond the home and then too under the guardianship of male members of the family as seen in the earlier section of this essay.

With regard to the authorship of the Hebrew Bible, three sources have been ascribed to it: the P or the priestly source, the J or the Yahwite source and the E or the Elohist source. Much of the Pentateuch is believed to be derived from the priestly sources put together by an all-male group of hereditary priests centred round the Temple of Jerusalem far from the lives of the ordinary men and women in distant rural areas. Carol Meyers, explaining the androcentric nature of the

Hebrew Bible surmises that in addition to this, much of the Deuteronomic history which runs through from the Book of Joshua to 2 Kings and forms the core of the Hebrew Bible, was probably based on court records or traditions of royal circles within the palace (Meyers, 1988). The next narrative account of Israel's national existence, she says, from 1-2 Chronicles through Ezra and Jeremiah echoes the Deuteronomic account and follows it into the post-exilic, post-monarchic period. In the Hebraic society as depicted in the Bible therefore, the establishment of Yahweh as the sole and unrivalled object of worship, the association of earlier goddess cults with the negative construct of false gods and idol worship and the systematic destruction of earlier symbols associated with the goddess, reveal an extreme form of intolerance.

Against such a background of an andro-centric religious order, Sallie McFague argues that the particular problem that feminist theologians have with Western religious language is its patriarchal character. It is not just that "God the Father" is a frequent appellation for the divine, but that the entire structure of divine-human and human-human relationships can be understood only in a patriarchal framework. 'The complex of 'male' images has long functioned in the Christian West—but it has done so in a way that is oppressive for all but (privileged) men. So, the notion of God as the 'father', 'lord' or 'king' now seemingly, unavoidably conjures up oppressive associations of ownership, obedience and dependency and in turn dictates, consciously or otherwise, and a whole complex of attitudes and behaviours on the part of theistic believers' (McFague, 1982). While there was an acknowledged role for priestesses in neighbouring civilizations like the Assyrian or the Phoenician such as the one for Ishtar's priestess in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Hebrew temples did not admit female priests.

However, far from the Temple in Jerusalem and the royal courts several aspects of the popular religion continued to flourish through folk religions and women's cults, particularly in the rural areas. The rural masses continued to worship their earlier gods. The major deities among them included El, Ashe'rah, Yahweh and Ba'al. Repeated references to 'the gods of the fathers' in the Hebrew Bible provide ample evidence of a religion based on the cult of ancestors and the worship of family gods, an example of which may be found in Rachel carrying with her these family gods stolen from her father Laban (Genesis 31:19). Commenting upon this contradiction in the Jewish religious practice of the time, William Dever concludes that biblical monotheism is an artificial phenomenon which did not affect the lives of the common people (Dever, 2005). It will be the purpose of this section of the essay to highlight the many examples of the resilience of feminine power in its divine and human forms that challenged the exclusivity of this patriarchal order.

In this context, it is important to try to understand why this substratum of cultic worship of goddesses as well as other 'pagan' gods like Ba'al continued to permeate Hebrew society despite the negative connotations of apostasy that had been attributed to it in Israel's stern monotheistic adherence to Yahweh.

The Survival of Older Religious Cults and the Narrative of False Gods

Regarding the other gods worshipped in the Canaanite pantheon from which the religion of the Israelites had emerged in the Iron Age, El or Elohim was later fused into Yahweh. Hence as noted by scholars the Yahweh-Elohim fusion was translated as ‘the Lord God’ as distinct from God. We also have the reference to El Shaddai which translates into ‘God Almighty’ found repeatedly in the Bible. The Canaanite pantheon harboured powerful goddesses like Ashe’rah. Syed Waqas notes that the supreme goddess of Canaan was perceived as the goddess of all goddesses and the female counterpart of Baal. He also says that the propagation of goddess worship and the temple-prostitution associated with it originated from fertility cults which will be dealt with later in this essay (Waqas, 2022). In a Sumerian inscription from 1750 B.C. Ashe’rah is called Ashratum the bride of Anu, the Father god of Heaven. Since the Sumerian Anu has been identified with the Ugaritic El, she is called the consort of El. Several Ugaritic tablets unearthed from the ancient port city of Ugarit, the modern Ras Shamra, bear testimony to that.

However, a considerable amount of modern scholarship is also inclined to link Asherah to the Hebrew Yahweh. Proponents of this viewpoint base their assumption on archaeological evidence, mainly inscriptions and drawings recovered from Kuntillet Ajrid, an Iron Age site in the Sinai Peninsula discovered in 1975. The inscription found on large storage jars in Hebrew and Phoenician texts contains the phrase “I have blessed you by Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah.”⁸ Z. Meshel himself, the archaeologist who was part of the excavation admits that the goddess Asherah may have been Yahweh’s consort in some circles. Saul Olyan and archaeologist William Dever claim that this evidence proves the association with Asherah in the cult of Yahweh and that the linking of Asherah with Ba’al⁹ was a polemic initiated only within Deuteronomistic circles to propagate the narrative of ‘false gods’. In Israelite folk religion too Ashe’rah functioned as the goddess and the consort of Yahweh.

Asherah was the principal female deity and patroness of mothers. Her images were probably used among Israelite women as talismans to aid in conception, childbirth and lactation. She has been called the ‘creatress of the gods’, numbering 70 of the Ugaritic pantheon. Scholars like John Day have associated these seventy sons of Ashe’rah mentioned in the Ugaritic Ba’al myth with those of the Canaanite god El, later fused into Yahweh (Day, 2002). In this context, Genesis 6:3 makes mention of the Nephilim who were apparently the offspring of the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men”. They were huge in size and great in strength and later lived in Canaan. In Deuteronomy 32:8 we find a similar reference to “When the Most High gave to nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God.” (*beneelohim*)

Thus Asherah, used both as a proper and a common noun in the Hebrew Bible, indicates both the Goddess and her symbols used in worship. One of the Asherah symbols was the sacred tree, probably the date palm. Jeremiah 17:3 talks of “their Asherim, beside every green tree...” It also included sacred pillars

as indicated by the Lord's command in the line from Exodus 34:13: "You shall tear down their altars, and break their pillars, and cut down their Asherim." These pillars were upright stones which stood near Ba'al shrines. Many verses talk of such Asherah poles installed in the Temple, which were probably sacred wooden symbols to honour the goddess of fertility. These poles became the sites of social gatherings and events to include religious worship and sacrifice. In private worship women used clay figurines of a naked goddess holding her breasts and her stomach as an image of fertility.

II Kings: 23:7 says of King Manasseh's grandson Josiah who restored Yahweh worship: "and he broke down the houses of the male cult prostitutes which were in the house of the Lord where the women wove hangings for the Asherah." These hangings probably indicated either tent-shrines or garments for the goddess. Many of these were erected by the Israelites in the pre-monarchic period throughout Israel and Judah. The divine decree "You shall not plant any tree as an Ashe'rah beside the altar of the Lord your God which you shall make" (Deuteronomy 16:21) perceives the totemic symbol of the goddess as a threat. Sjoo and Mor, noting that this *ashe'rah* represented the Goddess as Urikittu, the 'green one', the Neolithic mother of all vegetation, claim that their later systematic destruction was the political hostility of the nomadic pastoral Hebrew people and their priesthood to the settled matriarchal cultures and their Goddess beliefs (Sjoo & Mor, 1991).

She was worshipped as the Queen of Heaven as the people's protest against the prophet Jeremiah's divine decree notes: "But since we left off burning incense to the queen of heaven and pouring out libations to her, we have lacked everything..." (Jeremiah, 44:18) And vs 19 of the same book says "...we made cakes for her bearing her image". We find the same reference in Jeremiah 7:18, "The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire and the women knead dough to make cakes for the queen of heaven." In the cities of Judah, these cakes called 'kamanu tumri' were thin unleavened loaves of fine flour, baked in ashes without yeast. Star-shaped cakes along with libations of wine were also offered to the Babylonian-Assyrian goddess Ishtar, the Canaanite Astarte. This tradition continued into the Christian era in the cult of the Virgin Mary where she is worshipped as Stella Maris, (the Star of the Sea) in Syrian Churches with blue and white star-shaped cakes.

In I Kings, which covers a period beginning with Solomon's reign in 971 B.C. to Ahaziah's reign ending in 851 B.C. we see evidence of the worship of the goddess even in royal circles. Solomon's seven hundred wives were of a variety of cultural identities, probably as political alliances between neighbouring tribes. They were Moabites, Ammonites, E'domites, Sido'nians, Hittite women and the daughter of Pharaoh. They were worshippers of goddess cults and eventually led him away from Israel's God. "Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sido'nians and after Milcon the abomination of the Ammonites" (I Kings, 11:1,5).

In the II Bk of Kings which covers the period from the middle of the 9th century to the middle of the 6th century, we find intermittent examples of goddess worship, though there were also Yahwite rulers who tried to eradicate it. While King Hezekiah's reign showed a marked tilt towards Yahwism, destroying Asherah poles and banning her worship, his son Manasseh re-introduced goddess worship in Judah,

offered blood sacrifices of his son to Baal, a practice referred to in Jeremiah 19:7: "...and have built the high places of Ba'al to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Ba'al...". Manasseh "did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord, he built altars in the house of the Lord to all the host of heaven..." II Kings 21: 2-3, "And he burned his son as an offering, and practised soothsaying and augury and dealt with mediums and with wizards...And the graven image of Asherah that he had made, he set in the house of which the Lord had said to David, in this house, "I will put my name for ever." His grandson Josiah on the other hand, commanded the high priest to bring out these sacrificial vessels from the temple of the lord together with the Asherah poles and he burned and broke them and cast the dust into the graves.

Gideon's people-built altars to Ashtoreth. In some of these references, however, the names of Ashe'rah and Ba'al, her consort appear together. During a famine, Eli'jah told Ahab of God's punishment for the worship of false gods: "Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the four hundred and fifty prophets of Ba'al and the four hundred and fifty prophets of Ashe'rah, who eat at Jez'ebel's table" (I Kings 18:19). The confrontation between Elijah, Ahab and Jezebel marks one such occasion, where a temple was constructed for Baal by Jez'ebel along with an altar for sacrifices and a sacred pole. The Book of Judges also contains references to Ba'al and Ashe'rah: "The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Ba'als....They forsook the Lord, and served the Ba'als and the Ash'taroth." (Judges 2:11, 13) In the Book of Samuel, Samuel said to all the House of Israel, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreth from among you, and direct your heart to the Lord; and serve him only and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." (I Samuel 7:3) In the Book of Jeremiah however, it was mainly the women involved in goddess worship who defied the threat of destruction by Yahweh to continue to burn incense to the 'queen of heaven' and pour libations to her in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem, which in the past had ensured their prosperity and security from misfortune. "We will do everything that we have vowed, burn incense to the queen of heaven and pour out libations to her, as we did, both we and our fathers, our kings and our priests, in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem; for then we had plenty of food, and prospered, and saw no evil." (Jeremiah 44:18) All these references indicate that despite the stern indictment against the 'worship of false gods' and the negative construct of idolatry and apostasy being given to any god other than Yahweh, worship of the goddess continued in Israelite circles even within the priestly or royal elite.

The Tree and the Serpent

Feminist theologians have pointed out the systematic denigration of goddess symbols in the Biblical Creation myth. This is evident in the narrative of the tree of knowledge and the forbidden fruit as the cause and the serpent as the agent of the Fall and the loss of primal innocence. We note that Ashe'rah has been called

the ‘lady of serpents’ in addition to being associated with trees. The symbols connected with the goddess, like the snake and the tree in the Fall narrative have been systematically devalued and reviled by patriarchy in both Hebrew and Graeco-Roman myth¹⁰, perhaps much more so in the former. Jehovah’s curse of the serpent as an agent of evil in the Fall can be attributed to the perceived threat to the supremacy of the male from older goddess-centric religious orders¹¹. Its trampling underfoot into the dust is the re-location of the Goddess/Earth Mother into a subordinate position. This is Yahweh’s first statement of victory over earlier goddess cults.

In the book of Numbers, the punishment of snake bite against a murmuring and dissatisfied people of Israel during their forty years of wandering is negated by Moses by making a bronze serpent and setting it up on a pole, and later the people began to worship it. The bronze serpent, Nehushtan¹² was an object of popular worship during the Israelite monarchy. II Kings 18:4 says that King Hezekiah in obedience to the Lord’s decree, “broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses¹³ had made, for until those days the people of Israel had burned incense to it; it was called Nehushtan.”

In Hebrew society the punishment for worship of these ‘false gods’ or of their totemic symbols was death by stoning as seen in Deuteronomy 17:5. Thus it may be said that despite the tribulations of the Hebrews under foreign rule being attributed to divine judgement on the practice of idolatry, despite incessant warfare and systematic conquest of neighbouring tribes in order to establish the supremacy of the male god of the Hebrews and the expressly negative construct attributed to other forms of worship in biblical terminology (*avodahzarah*, namely, ‘false gods’) and the sternness of the punishment for the improper conduct of religious rituals, references such as those quoted in this essay bear witness to the continued attempts to propagate the worship of the goddess.

Temple Prostitution

Also associated with the temple of the goddess is the practice of sacred prostitution. The union of the high priestess of the Temple of Ishtar with the king in a ritual called ‘hieros gamos’ represented an ancient fertility ritual by re-enacting the marriage of the sky god with the earth goddess for the earth’s bounty¹⁴. Though Deuteronomy 23:17 expressly forbids this sacred cult associated with the worship of the goddess Ishtar¹⁵: “There shall be no cult prostitution of the daughters of Israel, neither shall there be a cult prostitute of the sons of Israel”, Tamar the widowed daughter-in-law of Judah, who later fathered a child by him, was a worshipper of Ishtar and a cult prostitute. (May, Metzgar, 1977). In the Book of Ezekiel, the word ‘harlot’ is used multiple times. It refers both to the fallen state of Jerusalem with its people worshipping ‘false gods’, misusing the divine favours that the god of Israel had bestowed upon them and to the actual practice of cult prostitution: “Is it too slight a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abomination which they commit here” (Ezekiel 8:17). In fact, this cult/temple prostitution had both a spiritual and a commercial connotation. Waqas observes that these women offering themselves to

the pilgrims in the sacred niche of the temple, provided both spiritual bliss and sexual satisfaction after the prolonged physical trauma of the pilgrimage and the separation from their families (Waqas, 2022). There were references to male prostitutes ('qadesh') too. I Kings 14:24 notes: "For they also built for themselves high places, and pillars, and Asherim....and there were also male cult prostitutes in the land." II Kings 23:7 states: "And he broke down the houses of the male cult prostitutes which were in the house of the Lord." 'Qedeshah¹⁶' is a Hebrew word which is used for a sacred prostitute or temple prostitute. However, Merlin Stone in *When God was a Woman* has objections to the use of the term 'ritual prostitute' or 'cult prostitute' as a translation of the word *qadesh* which really means 'holy'. In her view it suggests a total lack of comprehension of the theological and social structure of earlier Goddess oriented cultures. This term originally indicated the women who followed the ancient sexual customs of the goddess and were venerated as sacred by their cultures (Stone, 1976).

Conclusion

The singularity of Yahweh in the Hebrew religious order introduced what Riane Eisler calls the dangers of a 'dominator culture' that she and many other scholars including Stone, Sjoo and Mor associate with a male God and His priestly and ruling class. Its attempt was to sharply divide Hebrew society into binaries of light and darkness, good and evil as opposed to the more inclusive and comprehensive social orders of earlier goddess-centric cultures. It is important to note that while in most other civilizations of the time the change-over was relatively gradual so that the earlier supremacy of the Goddess evolved into the Goddess' role of consort or mother to the newly dominant male God, the Hebrew religion strove fiercely for the total annihilation of all traces and symbols of goddess worship. Along with the goddess the position of women also declined significantly in Israelite society. However, the ground reality remains that change happens more slowly than the elitist writers of the Hebrew Bible cared to admit. Thus, despite all this, examples from both the Hebrew Bible and from Hebrew folklore, folk cults and legends, provide ample evidence that goddess worship continued among the common people even under the shadow of threats from the prevailing andro-centric religious and social order. This reflects the pervading influence of neighbouring civilizations possibly passed on through the nomadic life style of its people, despite Israel's incessant wars and conquests recorded in the Bible. It also reflects the ground reality of a people unwilling to break their ties with an earlier religious tradition which was more compassionate and certainly more colourful than the rigid, harshly punitive and intolerant one now imposed upon them.

Notes

- 1) Joseph Campbell compares this with an ancient Sumerian myth in which heaven (An) and earth (Ki) were in the beginning a single undivided mountain of which the lower part was female and the upper, male. But the two were separated (like

- Adam into Adam and Eve) by their son Enlil (in the Bible by their creator Yahweh) whereupon the world of temporality happened as it did when Eve ate the apple. Campbell, Joseph, 2001, 'Occidental Mythology', Souvenir Press, London
- 2) Carol Meyers translates God's punishment to Eve in Genesis 3:16 as "I will make great your toil and many your pregnancies". She negates the theory that this implies future subjugation of women as well as that of the curse of the pain of childbearing upon Eve by examining the words of the verse in the context of the harsh and difficult life of both men and women of the region during the Iron Age and the necessity to produce many children for a sizeable work force to till the barren soil with the added burden of a scarcity of water. She also notes that the Hebrew word 'izavon' used in God's punishment for Eve is the same as that used for Adam. "Discovering Eve: Israelite Women in Context", Carol Meyers, OUP, New York, 1988.
 - 3) Menstrual blood was linked to the Great Cosmic Mother as a symbol of life-giving energy and the forces of creation and fertility, often associated with the celestial rhythms of lunar cycles.
 - 4) This reference is found only in the additions to the canonical Book of Esther
 - 5) Strict monotheism is believed to have emerged among priests of the Temple establishment during the seventh and sixth centuries BCE. At this time circumcision, dietary laws, Sabbath observance gained greater importance as symbols of Jewish identity.
 - 6) Ishtar/Inanna, a Mesopotamian goddess of sex and fertility was worshipped in Sumer as Inanna, and by the Assyrians, Akkadians and Babylonians as Ishtar, the 'Queen of Heaven'. Her marriage to Dumuzid/Tammuz was also celebrated as a fertility rite. This reference is found in the Hebrew Bible. It is also found in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. She influenced to a large extent the Ugaritic Ashtart and the later Phoenician Astarte. She was worshipped by women with offerings of cakes baked in ashes, a reference also found in the Hebrew Bible.
 - 7) Yairah Amit notes that if the new monotheistic religion sprang from the destruction of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the encounter with the Assyrian Empire, it would have begun in the northern kingdom of Israel around the 8th century BCE. This monotheistic revolution, an intellectual rather than a popular one, gave rise to new forms of expression, new genres and a distinctive literature without parallel in the Near East. Some of the best Biblical literature dates back to this period.
 - 8) In one crude drawing on Pithos A excavated from the Kuntillet Ajrid site showed three naked figures, two of whom standing together have been interpreted as Yahweh and Asherah.
 - 9) The Semitic word Ba'al means "Lord" and from it was derived 'Bel', also meaning 'lord', a name Marduk of the Creation epic 'Enuma Elish' came to be known by. He was the chief god of the city of Babylon.
 - 10) Apollo represented light and purification, one who brings the process of renewal into the world by slaying the python-servant of the Goddess, earlier depicted as the dragon of darkness, now as the symbol of chaos and evil.
 - 11) The Tiamat myth as seen in 'Enuma Elish' is one of the earliest versions of a battle between a culture hero (Marduk) and a sea monster, dragon or serpent, symbolic of the dethronement of the Goddess and her associated symbols.
 - 12) Nehushtan, means 'a brazen thing'. In Book of Numbers 21:4-9. God told Moses to erect this bronze serpent on a pole so that the Israelites could be protected from the bites of the 'fiery serpents' which God had sent to punish them for speaking against God and Moses. In II Kings 18:4, however King Hezekiah ordered the

- destruction of the brazen serpent erected by Moses, ‘for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan.’
- 13) One of the origins of the name Levi associate it with Leviathan. Moses, identified as a descendant of Levi himself used a staff given to him by Yahweh to show the wonders of his god. When confronting the Egyptians who sent snakes towards him, the staff changed into a mighty serpent which devoured the Egyptian snakes. Snake cults had also been well established in Canaan in the Bronze Age.
 - 14) This is part of a Mesopotamian fertility cult representing the fertility god Tammuz/Dumuzid who is the consort of the goddess Ishtar. The anger of Ishtar sends him into the underworld during the hot dry months of summer causing women to lament him. His return renews the earth’s bounty in the annual cycle of vegetation. Ezekiel 8:14 says “Then he brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the Lord; and behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz.”
 - 15) In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Shamhat serves in the Temple of Ishtar in a similar capacity and is sent out to seduce and tame the wild man Enkidu and initiate him into the arts of civilization.
 - 16) The Hebrew Bible uses the term ‘kedeshah/qadesh’ for sacred prostitution as opposed to the term ‘zonah’ for ordinary prostitutes.

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