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## THE GODDESS IN JUDAISM - AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

All religions start with a cosmogony, a myth that tells the worshippers how the world was formed. The first verses of the Hebrew Bible conform to this pattern. They seem quite straightforward and have provided the basis of belief among Jews and Christians for several millennia, although the Christians recast the words of Genesis to conform to their own new ideas.

In the words of Genesis, Beraishit, 'in the beginning', God created the heavens and the earth. The latter was a formless void, there was darkness 'on the face of the deep', and God's spirit moved on the waters (Genesis 1:1-2). This seems quite straightforward and, given a religious cast of thought, easy to assimilate. But here we must pause.

There is another, quite scholastically respectable, way of translating the Hebrew words. The verses would read: 'In the beginning, a number of gods ("Elohim") began to give birth to the heavens and the earth. The earth still belonged to Tohu and Bohu (goddesses of formlessness and ultimate space), and darkness was on the face of the mother creator goddess Tiamat, and a huge wind flapped its wings over the face of the water.' This translation (which will be commented on in detail in the later section on 'Goddesses in the Hebrew background') is at least as indicative of what the original might have meant as are all the interpretations and translations that have been set out until now. As will be seen, references are made to goddesses and perceptions of creation by them that appeared to be present in Hebrew culture. How different would our attitude to religion and society be if the above interpretation or a version of it had been accepted by both Jews and Christians as a reasonable understanding of the text.

Even if a standard explanation of the Hebrew word Elohim - the gods - could be accepted - that the one God encompasses the whole - yet the concept of female deities or female aspects of deity, of the birth-giving female being associated with the birth of the heavens and the earth, of ideas of chaos and formlessness being a symbol of the totality in which creation is possible -, all this would have produced enormous changes in consciousness of the relationship of women and men and both to the divine.

But it was not the case. All biblical texts are androcentric. They are written, edited and expounded by men, men concerned about male status. When women's stories and words are given, they are interpreted and judged by men.

The new method of feminist interpretation of the Bible is to redress this uneven situation. The texts are reviewed again in the light of a search for the lost female; to find her story, her own words, to attempt to understand what was happening for her and to her, to reclaim and proclaim her. The female in the divine is to be understood in this search as well as the human woman. Feminist Bible scholars have outlined their methods and rationale. For example the theologian Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza writes:

Androcentric texts and linguistic reality constructions must not be mistaken as trustworthy evidence of human culture, and religion ... the text may be the message, but the message is not co-terminal with human reality and history.<sup>1</sup>

Bernadette Brootten, who has surveyed Jewish Hellenistic inscriptions, suggests:

Literature composed by men is the product of men's minds and not a simple mirror image of reality. As we begin to

evaluate all the sources for Jewish women's history ... a much more differentiated picture will emerge. It will then be impossible to mistake male Jewish attitudes towards women for Jewish women's history.<sup>2</sup>

Feminist Judith Plaskow affirms that the

deep resistance called forth by naming the Goddess in Judaism indicates the needs she answered are still with us ... for a God who does not include Her is an idol made in man's image ... acknowledging the many aspects of the Goddess among the names of God becomes a measure of our ability to incorporate the feminine into a monotheistic religious framework.<sup>3</sup>

Where feminist views have been criticized by establishment academics as speculative or subjective, Carol Christ answers their objections:

Though the notion that scholarship is objective has been criticized in ... critical, hermeneutical and other theories, radical feminist scholarship continues to be dismissed as biased, polemical, limited or confessional. This may be especially true of religious studies ... let me state very clearly that I do not propose that we abandon historical research, philosophical reflection, literary analysis or any of the other scholarly methods we have inherited...<sup>4</sup>

These quotations provide the context of the research I set out in this paper. I try and look beyond the androcentrism of biblical and related texts and for sources where I can find the female, divine and human. If challenged about the question of monotheism, I can, if necessary, envisage a monotheism that sees in the One the totality of the All. In human terms the All includes women; in divine terms, I see the All had for many millennia strong acceptance of the female as deity or as an important aspect of it. That perception changed, and the result was then its banishment from history, with the female divine and human so put down, degraded, patronized and derided, obscured and reviled that only now women are beginning to be able to attempt to redress the balance. This means seeking Her out, and reviewing all material in the light of Her banishment. Where is She? We have to ask this at all points. As we do so, we open up a new perspective in history. The landscape to which we are accustomed shifts; its familiar features are still there, but the whole has taken on a new meaning.

My brief is to set out an historical perspective for the Goddess in Judaism. This is of course immediately beset with many problems. How much of what is apparent is historical? I will deal with three questions here. What do we mean, in this context, by historical? When we refer to 'the Goddess' who or what are we referring to? And lastly, when we speak of Judaism what era or kind of Judaism are we dealing with? I will set out the parameters I have chosen, otherwise I might founder in those vastly chaotic waters which are our beginning.

## **1 HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

If by history we mean something provable, I am lost already. Nothing in this context is 'provable'. I have chosen a period whose early date is about 2000 BCE and end date at about 400 CE. The first centuries provide a background in which the Hebrew religion and ultimately Judaism were born. The later date sees the Jews dispersed, the Talmud and rabbinical commentaries well under way, and a homogeneous religion established, while at the same time the mainstream Christian Church has its creed and structure well in place, and is free to spread its doctrines throughout the world.

I have used information from the various disciplines that are concerned with Bible history: exegesis, archaeology, ancient history, etc. I have invented nothing and if I have had personal insights I record them as such.

### **Dates**

I do believe, contrary to much modern accepted wisdom, that dates are a signpost to understanding events. The Bible progresses along a line of history, and it is useful to have some dates to guide us. For those who believe the Hebrew Bible was, directly, or indirectly through prophets and scribes, written by God, no mundane eras are necessary. The rest of us are presented with mountains of contradictory material - which is likely to change, as new scholarship is presented. Taking a

middle line between the various controversies, I am placing the period of the compilation of the Law and the Prophets, and possibly some of the Writings of the Hebrew Bible at about the time of Ezra, say early 400s BCE, and the actual canonization of the texts, after which nothing could be added or taken away, at about five hundred years later. This was undertaken by the rabbis at Jamnia (Javneh) who set up their religious stronghold there after the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 CE.

The events in the Bible may be dated to about 1800 BCE for the time of Abraham, 1300 for Moses and from about 900 for David and Solomon. The Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE and dispersed the Israelites living there. (The riddle of what happened to them has intrigued generations and unlikely answers such as their identification with the Khazars of Russia or the British Israelites of the United Kingdom continue to be asserted.)

The southern kingdom of Judah continued under its kings until the arrival of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon who destroyed the temple in 587 BCE and took the royal and upper classes into Exile. About thirty years later Cyrus King of Persia conquered the Babylonians and allowed the Hebrews back home.

## 2 THE GODDESS

It will be useful to outline some of the meanings this word holds, since it is used indiscriminately and there is no set definition. I will then give my own understanding of it:

(i) For many, the Goddess is god with an -ess. That is, She is the Supreme Being, the Ultimate, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Most of the attributes of God belong to Her although on the whole, despite some texts to the contrary, she is not considered warlike. She may also be felt as a personal deity, available for support and prayer.

(ii) In much modern pagan and wiccan thought and practice, the Goddess is teamed with the God. She is 'prima inter pares'. Both are worshipped together but she is held to be foremost. Goddesses and gods from the mythology of the world are called upon; often the deities associated with one's own country are particularly to be invoked. Such deities are intimately associated with nature and the round of the seasons.

(iii) In feminist spirituality 'the Goddess' is often used to mean the idea of female deity. Sometimes, it may introduce the idea into monotheism as the female aspect of God. On the other hand it may mean any goddess from religion or mythology or any number of goddesses. The classical description of Her as 'many-named' sits well here. She is all or any of the Goddesses of the past or the current polytheisms as well as a reclaimed goddess of today. She is not only a transcendent creating deity, but also immanent and part of Nature and the world. In fact, for many, she is Nature. Women are her representatives because of her birth-giving ability, but that is not all. The words of Isis inscribed on the temple at Sais in ancient Egypt sum her up for today's followers: 'I am all that is, was or ever will be.' (It is quite possible, date-wise, that Moses was familiar with this inscription, which appears in similar form concerning Jahweh in Exodus 3:14, 'I am that I am,' and becomes the holy unspeakable name of God.) In general understanding the trajectory is perceived firstly of a creator mother who conceives a son autonomously; this son becomes her lover and eventually steals her power and overcomes her. Then as this happens a concept of domination in society and over nature takes the place of a previous concept of participation and egalitarianism. This leads to a position of male supremacy and the downgrading of the female in every aspect.

In my own opinion researching and reclaiming information and developing insight concerning goddesses assists women (and possibly men if they are willing) to overthrow their conditioning. Women begin to feel stronger and inspired to overcome their feelings of guilt and inferiority. They feel better about themselves and can demand and take a more satisfactory place in the world, at the same time renewing and being refreshed by spiritual wholeness.

Because I come from an Orthodox Jewish background (though never in adult life being 'observant'), I choose to research the goddesses in the background of my own culture. If I refer to 'the goddess' without a particular name attached it will refer to the idea of a female aspect of deity, a facet of the whole.

Religious practices concerning the goddess today include celebration of seasonal and calendar festivals. Classical and area myths and rituals are 're-invented' in the light of today's needs.

### 3 JUDAISM

Since I am dealing with so vast a period, I have chosen to call 'Hebrew' the period before the rebuilding of the second temple (i.e. pre 400 BCE) and Jewish or to do with Judaism what came after it. I am aware this is open to challenge, but it is as good a working definition as any I know.

Finally in this section, it is important to say I shall not at any time use the phrase 'Judaeo-Christian'. Although it appears to be convenient, in fact there is now growing acceptance of the understanding that it is both inaccurate and imperialistic. Inaccurate because Christianity owes a great debt to Hellenistic cultures as well as to Judaism, and imperialistic because it implies a progression from Judaism to Christianity with the latter taking over from the former. This is not the case. Thus I shall refer to the 'Hebrew Bible' rather than the 'Old Testament'. The New Testament seems to be self-descriptive and as far as I know quite acceptable.

The Hebrew Bible is composed of material from different dates and sources. Some were ancient when they were written down and preserved through an oral tradition, or through more ancient documents; these are usually narratives, hymns, poems and oracles. They may owe a good deal to the background cultures. On the other hand, laws, commandments, strictures and a system of reward and punishment and above all the covenant between God and His people appear to be written by the later authors and editors, whose main concern was to impose male supremacy through their version of monotheism. These editors are often called the Deuteronomists. It is their struggle against the influence of the Goddess in the popular religion that forms much of their Biblical material.

But however hard they tried to banish Her, they were not successful. The concept of a goddess or goddesses in Israel runs through the whole of the Hebrew Bible. We will try and trace it, starting with the background female deities of the ancient Near Eastern people, through the concept of a Goddess as wife or consort to God (Jahweh), then the ambivalence of the wisdom figure (Hochma/Sophia), to the Hellenistic Gnostic world and the birth of Christianity.

There, first subsumed into Jesus Christ, she emerges sometimes as the Holy Spirit within the Trinity and then as the Church, which is totally male-directed.

Finally in much popular understanding she may become identified with the Virgin Mary. It is this long journey of the Goddess that we are beginning to travel now.

#### GODDESSES IN THE HEBREW BACKGROUND

The Patriarch Abraham is said to have lived in 'Ur of the Chaldees'. It is from there he is called by God to leave his birthplace and travel to the land of Canaan, and it is he with whom God made his covenant. It is clear, therefore, that before this call Abraham and Abraham's parents worshipped the deities of their land, and certainly his father is quoted as so doing (Joshua 24:2). Who were these gods and goddesses? Perhaps they bear some relationship to those that Rachel, his grandson Jacob's wife, hid beneath her when she left her father's home (Genesis 31:19,34-5).

We are able to gain some idea about them and to make informed guesses. In the last century or so archaeologists have discovered substantial material concerning the religions of the ancient Near East, and have provided the basis of research for scholars of many other disciplines. Raphael Patai is among those who have researched and commented widely on the female deities who entered the consciousness of the Hebrew people.<sup>5</sup> Here I will only draw attention to the main primary sources of information. These are the Babylonian epics of about 1800-1500 BCE; the Ras Shamra texts from ancient Ugarit, c. 1500 BCE; and a mass of Egyptian papyri which date from the second millennium until the first years of the Christian centuries. In all of them we meet goddesses who bear a very close relationship to female divinities mentioned - usually in a hostile way in the Bible, although one may not always recognize them at first sight.

#### (i) Babylonian epics

Variously called Babylonia, Chaldea and Mesopotamia, this is the 'country between the rivers' - the Tigris and Euphrates - fertile land on which it was easy to live and on which great civilizations had been built. The Laws of Hammurabi and the work of Chaldean astronomers and astrologers are typical examples, and in particular there are a number of long poems, epics, written on clay in the cuneiform script, which record the cosmogony and the religious mythology of the people there.

Two of these poems are the Epic of Creation and the Epic of Gilgamesh. It is from the former that the figure of Tiamat is drawn. Here are its first lines:

*When on high were not raised the heavens  
And also below on earth a plant had not grown up  
The abyss had not broken its boundaries  
The chaos Tiamat was the producing mother of all of them.*

George Smith, the original translator of the cuneiform tablets, believed that Tiamat was the living principle of the sea and chaos.<sup>6</sup> She is depicted on reliefs and in drawings as a vast dragon, and is shown rearing herself on two legs, when she confronts Marduk, her grandson who kills her. The epic recounts: 'She raised herself to her full height and planted her feet firmly on the ground.' Another depiction of her shows enormous wings. She is thus the *primaeval* dragon, living under water, able to walk on land, able to fly and possibly to breathe fire. The formlessness with which we are confronted symbolizes, for me, a wholeness of totality, of land, sea, air and fire, the four elements of creation. It includes all there is waiting to be born, whether the material or the inspirational.

Tiamat is also referred to as a sea serpent who, in the course of the struggle with Marduk who wants to gain from her the Tablets of Destiny which she holds, creates out of herself all sorts of monsters, mixtures of animal and human and extraordinary shapes of creatures.

The epic goes on to relate how Marduk with the help of his friends blows her belly apart with a mighty wind, and then cuts her into pieces. Each part of her body becomes a different part of the cosmos and is ruled over by Marduk and the other gods. This defeat is proclaimed as the triumph of order and beginning of creation.

Tiamat's name is recalled in Genesis 1:2 where the Hebrew 'Tehom' is usually translated as 'the deep'; it will be recalled that Tiamat is the sea goddess living in the deep. It was her home and in it life itself was waiting to be born.

In addition to the Genesis resonance, there are many passages in the Bible where God celebrates his victory over the dragon, the sea monster and the abyss.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, there is a school of thought which believes that the Babylonian New Year Festival which celebrated Marduk's triumph over Tiamat was the origin of the Hebrew and then Jewish New Year Festival where God in the liturgy for the occasion still celebrates his victory over chaos.

And what was meant by chaos? It is extraordinary that today the notion of chaos, so long condemned, is coming into the foreground of many branches of science as a positive description of basic natural forces. It seems to have an affinity with the 'chaos' of the ancients, then presented as a birth-giving female with all the necessities of creation within her. There also seems to be an appreciation of the relationship of creation to vast emptiness. For a long time the debate about the Genesis creation story included questions as to whether God created the universe *ex nihilo* - from nothing - or put into order something that was already there. The mentions of Tohu and Bohu (Genesis 1:2), usually translated as 'void and without form', indicate there might be a reference to these goddesses of formlessness and ultimate space; it has been thought that Bohu at least may be identified with the great Mesopotamian goddess Bau, another creating mother of the universe, and one who is linked to the 'Mother of the Physicians', Gula. In this association we may see an idea not only of creation but of maintenance and sustenance. Gula's temples in Mesopotamia were arranged as hospitals, and it was part of religious practice in her honour to study medicine and heal the sick. She is the source of medical knowledge. I see a connection between Gula and Wisdom, also the source of understanding and a teacher to humanity. Many texts refer to Gula-Bau as well as to each alone.

Tiamat's form as a dragon needs further comment. Dragons and serpents are interchangeable in ancient literature as well as more modern folklore. The Epic of Creation is an early example of a young male person killing an older dragon monster, which conventional wisdom presents as evil. Even today who is a 'dragon' but a powerful older woman whom younger men would like to be rid of? In the dragon and serpent as the symbol of evil we are naturally reinforced by the story of Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden. When we meet the serpent she is coiled on the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil which has been forbidden to the first couple. The serpent can be seen as knowing all the mysteries; for a long time they have presented an ambivalent problem to commentators. Serpents have remained depositories of knowledge of medicine and have symbolized long life and even immortality as well as indicating temptation and evil. In the Eden story I suggest the serpent is a form of Tiamat who is offering Eve knowledge, good and evil as it might be used; the knowledge that is her inheritance which she can share with her partner if she wishes. It is the power which this gives that is denied, and the outcome is a double defeat. Not only is Eve deprived of the ancient powers that are hers by inheritance, but God puts enmity between her and the serpent: a clear example of the patriarchal policy of dividing women from each other, particularly the young from the old, and causing them to depend on their male partner rather than on female support. We can see in this story a paradigm for the situation where male 'specialists' have deprived human female wisdom of any authority.

To return to Genesis 1:2 Who is it that 'flaps its wings like a bird' over the face of Tiamat? The Hebrew word for this action is *merachepet*. It is variously translated as 'move', or 'hover', the later being more accurate as it gives the impression of vast wings.

Who has wings? The very first name to come to mind is Lilith. There is a statue of her dated to about 1500 BCE where she is a naked woman with spreading wings, she has the feet of a bird and is attended by owls. This is contemporary with a story about her in Mesopotamian literature,<sup>8</sup> in which she is a 'dark maid' who flies off on her wings to the desert.

But in the Genesis account Lilith is not mentioned, although much later the rabbis revealed a story about her in the same time and place, perhaps based on ancient material, that has found much resonance, and which we shall reach in a short while. In Genesis 1:2 it is *ruach elohim*, translated as the 'spirit of God' or alternatively as 'mighty wind', which hovers or moves over the waters. But what is *ruach*? *Ruach* is the Hebrew word for spirit or wind, and like the Latin *anima* or the Greek *pneuma* it can be used for either. Now, whose name tells us that she is also spirit or wind? None other than Lilith. The word Lilith is connected with two root words - *Layil*, the Hebrew for night, and *Lil*, Sumerian (c. 3000 BCE) 'wind' or 'breath' or 'spirit'. Traditionally, until the information from Sumer came to light, Lilith was always associated with night and darkness. There is only one mention of her name as such in the Hebrew Bible. It is Isaiah 34:8-14. The prophet declares:

*The land shall become burning pitch  
Thorns shall grow over its strongholds  
It shall be the haunt of jackals  
Yea the night hag shall there alight  
and find for herself a resting place.*

(RSV)

Very few translations provide the word Lilith itself. 'Night hag' in the RSV replaces the older 'screech owl' in the King James version. The New English Bible gives 'night-jar', RV of 1881 suggests 'night monster'. The Latin vulgate of the fourth century CE from which most Christian translations stem says *Lamia* - these are the Greek 'dirty goddesses'. The Moffat translation uses 'vampires' (plural). French Lilith is 'le spectre de la nuit' and German Lutheran translates her as *der Kobold* (masculine), a spirit or goblin. The Jerusalem Bible is to be commended for actually using her name.

Apart from the last, all these translations have relied on the concept of Lilith as to do with night. But if one accepts the other meaning then Lilith is spirit or air or mighty wind and it is she who hovers over the face of Mother Tiamat, perhaps

in her form as a woman and bird. So much has been written about her. She is the ultimate demon of Jewish tradition, most particularly to women in childbirth and a danger to their new-born infants. People have been taught to fear her. She also became Queen of the Witches in Christian tradition.

But I believe her to be the Lady of the air and wind and the spirit, the living breath of life. She has all knowledge. The rabbinic eleventh-century tale of her in the Genesis story is that during sexual intercourse with Adam - for she was, it seems, his first wife - she refused the 'missionary' position saying, 'I am made of the same earth as you' (and here there may even be a reference to female Adamah, Hebrew for earth, and possibly a lost Mother Earth Goddess). She called on the magic and holy name of God, freed herself from Adam and flew off - yes, flew - into the desert. How did Lilith know the powerful name of God when Adam could only ask God to help him? I suggest it is because it is she who is the Wisdom figure, the spirit.

The presence of Lilith, named or otherwise, in the creation story links her with Hochma who will be discussed below. Patriarchy has turned her into queen of the demons, killer of children, particularly to be feared by mothers in childbirth. And that sums it up; instead of the creatrix she has been made the destroyer. The symbol of women's wisdom and power, she has become a source of evil to be feared most particularly by women. She represents to us our innermost herstory. In reclaiming Her, we women throw off and pour away for ever the poison about ourselves, our so-called inferiority, our evil inner selves, our guilt. On reclaiming Lilith, we reclaim the breath of life that emerges as we give birth to our children, to our works of all kind; we reclaim our wisdom, our knowledge, our power, our autonomy.<sup>9</sup>

Back to the Garden of Eden and the Babylonian epics. In the Epic of Gilgamesh the eponymous hero sets out to seek eternal life. He reaches the Paradise Garden which he is allowed to enter because of the divine blood inherited from his mother Ninsun. He meets in the garden the Goddess Siduri-Sabatu, who is able to provide the 'gift of life'.

The Paradise Garden is of 'dazzling beauty'. The Goddess is sitting by a vine which is the garden's centrepiece, and she is also 'by the throne of the sea'. She is addressed as 'Goddess of Wisdom, Genius of Life'. She is referred to as 'Keeper of the fruit of life'.<sup>10</sup>

Obviously the connections with the Garden of Eden are very clear. We have a goddess, actually keeper of the fruit of life, sitting by a throne of the sea, in the garden. Even the vine is a strong symbol which is repeated many times in both Hebrew Bible and New Testament (Jesus says, 'I am the true vine'), often also indicating God's strength or God's people. The association with the sea is reminiscent of Tiamat and also bears a close relation to the goddesses to be found in the next group of texts we shall discuss.

## (ii) Ras Shamra Texts

In 1929 a body of texts was found at a place called Ras Shamra, in northern Syria, the site of ancient Ugarit, home of the Hittites. Dated to about 1500 BCE, they are composed of descriptions of the life and religion of the Canaanites, including legends, myths and religious invocations, hymns, etc.<sup>11</sup>

Ras Shamra religious texts are usually interpreted as myths which control creation, and whose enactment ritually helps keep creation in being. The proper round of the seasons, the arrival of rain, the changing of light to dark and back again, the unending miracle of new life and its nurture, all these are enacted in such ritual myths. The battle with the sea is a major theme.

In these myths we meet major figures who previously were known to us almost entirely from their appearances in the Hebrew Bible. The supreme Deity is named El, a word which until the time of the discovery had been thought merely to indicate 'God'. One of the major deities is his wife the Lady Asherah. This is the Asherah who appears continuously in Bible narrative. Until Ras Shamra there was a good deal of controversy as to whether she was a goddess as such or either the symbol of a goddess in the form of a tree or pole or wooden statue or else merely one of these which the 'heathen' worshipped without its actually representing a deity in her own right. Now it is clear that she was an ancient goddess, mother of the Lord Baal and the Lady Anat, and chief of a pantheon of enormously powerful female divinities. It is to them that Baal must turn for help in conducting his everyday business. He cannot obtain a house to live in without his mother's assistance. More importantly, when he is killed by the figure of Death it is his sister Anat who brings him to life again. Another goddess, Shaqat, restores a dead child to life. It is the goddesses who have this power, not the gods.

The controversy concerning the Asherim as trees or poles seems to be resolved easily. That these represented her can be in no doubt. It is even possible that the May Pole has links with the Asherim. The tree is widely known to be a symbol of life and a source of and shelter for life. The Bible records the destruction of a large number of trees and groves sacred to her, in an effort to drive out her worship. Thus Asherah was both the goddess and the tree or bough representing her. There was no need for the prophets to call for the destruction of trees in a desert land where every tree was important, unless they believed that with the trees they were exterminating the goddess.

The Ras Shamra stories and the Biblical texts have many similarities and have been analysed widely. Certainly the hostility in the Bible to the goddesses is reflected in the prominent position they held in the Canaanite pantheon. However, it is also clear that they became as much divinities of the Hebrews as of the earlier people. Baal, Lord of the weather in the Ras Shamra myths, is found in the Bible often as the god in opposition to Jahweh.

Asherah's particular powers can be deduced from another well known Bible story, that of the contest between the prophet Elijah and the 'four hundred priests of Baal and four hundred priests of Asherah' (1 Kings 18:19). Elijah is successful at producing the magic that Baal's priests cannot, and they are killed by the people around. Nothing is said about the fate of Asherah's priests. Why not? Several suggestions come to mind. Perhaps that while the people did not mind killing Baal's servants, those of Asherah were too holy and could not be touched; or that Asherah was too well loved to be offended. Some scholars suggest that the introduction of Asherah's priests to the story is a later interpolation, and the editors forgot to say what happened to them. The suggested reason for the interpolation is that the editors wanted to make Elijah's victory all the more conclusive of the power of Jahweh. But the latter idea seems to me to be unsatisfactory, and I prefer the earlier ones, since they would explain why Asherah's priests not only were spared but why there was silence about it - since the Bible editors would not want to draw attention to Asherah's power with the people.

Moreover, my feeling is that she may provide an answer to the much-asked query concerning the choice of knowledge of good and evil as the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden. Can there be a connection with Asherah, was she the mother of all and source of wisdom, that tree whose fruit which above all was not to be eaten? It has to be mentioned here that Biblical authors often used Ashtaroth instead of Asherah, a word which incorporates the word 'shame', and she is also often referred to as 'abomination'. The hostility which was heaped upon her by these religious leaders is balanced by the persistence of her worshippers who refused to allow her to be dismissed from their religion.

The position of the Lady Anat within the Ras Shamra texts is a very powerful one, and has been analysed widely. Cassuto's book provides a sense of the dimension of strength and longevity, the passion and the inspiration, the death-dealing and the cleansing powers of this goddess, whom we will meet again in a later setting. Among the many deities among the Canaanites who are reflected in some way in the Hebrew Bible, I also draw attention to Paghat, goddess of the sun. It is often thought that if there were goddesses, then they were associated with the moon, and the sun represented the masculine deity. However, the Hittites have left us many artefacts indicating that the sun is seen by them as a goddess. In today's Turkey there are numerous depictions of her while their ancient literature is full of her praise. Here is one such verse in praise of Paghat which has later resonances:

*She rises early in the morning  
She sweeps the dew from the grasses  
She carries the clouds on her shoulders  
She instructs the course of the stars.*<sup>12</sup>

Who else rises early in the morning? We are reminded of the panegyric concerning a good wife in the well known chapter of Proverbs 31. This good woman rises while it is yet dark to prepare food for her household. There, the goddess has become demythologized: she is now an ordinary woman - but is she so ordinary? In the Proverbs passage we find signs of unusual strength and power. In addition to providing food and working with textiles, she is able to go out and buy a field, plant a vineyard. She 'girds her loins with strength and makes her arms strong.' Above all, 'She opens her mouth with Wisdom.'

The good woman still has some aura of goddesses about her, from Paghat to Hochma - whom we meet shortly and where we will also discuss the heritage from Egypt. In the meantime we will follow Asherah from her Canaanite to her Hebrew domain.

### **(iii) Jahweh and his consort**

The publication in 1979 of a paper entitled 'Did Jahweh have a Consort?',<sup>13</sup> by Israeli archaeologist Ze'ev Meshel brought to a head long-standing disputes by scholars on this subject and opened up to the informed public a changing vista of Jewish religious history



and tradition.

Conventionally, Judaism is identified with an absolute monotheism which was to a large extent inherited also by Christianity. Such monotheism is centred on God, Jahweh (Jehovah) who is always referred to in the masculine gender. How could God have a consort? Such an idea must surely be totally pagan and be dismissed out of hand. But no. Current opinion has it that the ancient goddess Asherah was worshipped not only in the setting of the Canaanite religion as wife of El and mother of Baal and Anat, but quite disparately, as the consort of Jahweh. This would have been part of what is called the 'popular religion' of the Hebrews and it is the one that the Deuteronomists and their successors were trying so hard and so unsuccessfully to stamp out.

Because this appears to be such a revolutionary idea it will be helpful to outline some of the material associated with it.

Meshel's excavations took place in 1975 and 1976 at Kuntillet Ajrud, which he describes as a 'remote desert station in the wilderness of North Sinai'. At a crossroads he found the remains of a large building which he believes was used for religious purposes, possibly by travellers on country routes, and was inhabited and kept in order by guardians of the shrine who lived a religious life there. The major find was a collection of ancient Hebrew and Phoenician inscriptions on walls and stone vessels, and there were also spectacular drawings on two large storage jars (*pithoi*). It was assumed that the community was able to survive in this desert region because of the proximity of wells in the vicinity. Meshel remarks that the modern Arabic name means 'solitary hill of the wells'. The site was dated to about the eighth century BCE.

The inscriptions that caused the explosion of interest were found in the bench room and two adjoining side rooms. Including both the name El and the name Jahweh, some of the inscriptions were written on the jamb of the entrance - recalling possibly the instruction in Deuteronomy 6:9 ('you shall write them on the doorposts of your house', which also has become the basis of the *mezuzah* in Judaism). They blessed Jahweh and asked to be protected by him and - this the key surprise - by 'Asherato', mostly translated as 'his Asherah'. Some scholars contend that the word can be translated as naming Asherah in her own right. Beneath the words are drawings of a tree and of a cow with a calf. Nearby are other drawings, particularly one very clear 'tree of life' flanked by two ibexes. Again, 'May you be blessed by Jahweh and Asherato' is inscribed on a jar nearby.

Just as scholars were getting down to an analysis of these finds and their possible meanings, a similar inscription was published from another source. This was a site called Khirbet-el-Qom which has been identified as the Biblical Makkedah.

Following earlier communications by various scholars, it was only in 1979 that J. Naveh published the inscriptions and in 1984 that Z. Zevit expressed an opinion on their meaning. The inscription indicates that it was written by Uriyahu (the name includes a reference to God) who calls for a blessing from 'Jahweh my guardian and his Asherah'. The date is similar to that of Kuntillet Ajrud.

A great deal of research from many disciplines is trying to establish the meaning and implications of these finds and others like them. The linguistic and epigraphic problems of the inscriptions, the cultic or other meaning of the drawings, the symbols that they express, all are a matter of growing discussion which now tends to look outwards and backwards to relevant previous material that was not understood. Traditionalists may want to argue that 'his Asherah' may still be a 'cultic symbol'. Previously an 'Asherah' was identified with a tree or pole, but when one sees the blossoming tree of life, and also considers that the cow and calf together are always a symbol of the mother goddess in the ancient Near East, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the presence of the goddess Asherah is conveyed, and that she and Jahweh are worshipped together and seen as complementary to each other. Even the name Uriyahu would show that the writer was a practising Hebrew, and the supposition that the shrine was inhabited by a group of guardians would indicate that it was supported by enough people to keep it viable.

From Jahweh and his Asherah we turn back to a Biblical married couple, Hosea and his unfaithful wife (Hosea 2). This narrative appears to be a tale of a kind husband who forgives his erring wife, but who turns into God speaking to Israel. There is an obvious parallel but in fact the symbols in the story indicate strongly that the wife is Asherah the goddess, whom God will forgive only when she has yielded her divine powers to him.

This narrative, which starts as a moral tale about the prophet and his apparently unfaithful wife, alters to the relationship of God and his people, who conventionally in Deuteronomic terms are husband and wife. When husband Hosea suddenly turns into God, are we not entitled to conclude that God is speaking to his 'erring' wife, Asherah? She is after all addressed as a 'harlot', the term used by the Deuteronomists to describe a goddess. Her fig trees and vines, well known symbols of the mother goddess, are to be laid waste; her way of life in celebrating nature and seasons owes much to her ancient background.

Another account of Jahweh with a female partner or consort is contained in a set of papyri from Egypt, from a town called Elephantine and dated at about 400 BCE. A Jewish colony lived there which paid its dues to the temple in Jerusalem - this indicates it was accepted as part of the mainstream Jewish community. The surprise is the name of the temple which is recorded as having sent the money - Anat/Jaho. Jaho is a form of Jahweh and Anat the goddess is known to us from the Hittite Ras Shamra texts and elsewhere. What is not in doubt is that the temple of Anat/Jaho was a Jewish temple. It links Jahweh with a goddess, they are complementary and worshipped together and it is reasonable to suggest that they are partners, or consorts. This view is strengthened by the records of other temples in that area. They are referred to as those of Anat Bethel and Asham Bethel.

Bethel is familiar to us. The Hebrew words mean House of God, and we first meet a Bethel in the Bible when Jacob the Patriarch has spoken with God and anoints the stone on which he had slept when God visited him (Genesis 28:19, 22; 35:14-15). The stone is holy because God had been present in it or on it. However, a 'Bethel' is not confined to this, the God of the Bible. The Greek *baetyl* - a similar word - is a meteorite or black stone which falls from heaven, having within it the essence of the goddess, the queen of Heaven. The temples of Elephantine appear to be worshipping her as well as Jaho/Anat; and this is not surprising in view of the Queen of Heaven story in the book of Jeremiah (44:15-19; 7:17-18). Who is the Queen of Heaven? When we meet her the prophet denounces the people for worshipping her. He tells them that their wickedness is responsible for their current disaster. Both women and men reply that when they burned incense and baked cakes for the Queen of Heaven no such trouble fell upon them. They recall that when they lived in Jerusalem the 'children gathered sticks, the men lit fires and the women made the cakes' for the Queen of Heaven.

For me this cameo shows that it was not only the women but the whole family and whole communities who joined in Her worship, and it is important to emphasize that these were Hebrews and not Canaanites or other 'heathen'.

The Queen of Heaven is unnamed and it has often been suggested that she is naturally the consort of the 'king of heaven' as well as being a major deity in her own right. Certainly her longevity is remarkable and is worth noting in our story.

A ritual of baking cakes for the Queen of Heaven, there named as Ishtar (Astarte), is available to us from Babylonian records of about 2000 BCE. A hymn to Ishtar includes the lines:

*O Ishtar I have made a preparation of milk, cake, grilled bread and salt, hear me and be kind.*<sup>14</sup>

Another hymn to Ishtar prays:

*O Ishlar I look on your face, and I make an offering of pure milk with a baked cake.*<sup>15</sup>

A similar sacred practice is recorded again from a Phoenician settlement in North Africa. A list has been found which sets out the wages to be paid to various work people, on it is inscribed: 'wages to the bakers of cakes for the Queen of Heaven'.<sup>16</sup> In Tunisia today there is a site which still contains a temple to the Queen of Heaven and there are stones there with inscriptions to her.

Such inscriptions may be of a very much later date, since well into the Christian era Bishop Augustine of Hippo, in North Africa - the same Augustine who 'invented' the idea of original sin - thundered against women whom he described as going out with filthy dancing to the Queen of Heaven.

This title eventually became attached to the Virgin Mary, who interestingly enough was worshipped in the early centuries by a Christian sect denounced as heretical, who baked cakes in her honour. They were called the Collyridians, a name based on the Greek word collyridos, which means a small cake or bread roll.

This is a long continuum of cakes for the Queen of Heaven from the wayside desert shrine at Kuntillet Ajrud. In

Meshel's description of the settlement there he observed that there were two large ovens for whose size he could see no real reason. In the course of an interview he kindly gave this writer, he agreed that they certainly could have been used to bake ritual cakes.

Although the path we have followed has been one of jumps and crevasses, yet there seems to be a very strong connecting path. The Lady Asherah, a Canaanite goddess, became part of the religion of the Hebrews and appears to have been worshipped as the partner or consort of Jahweh. She is not one particular goddess figure but rather a female deity who can be identified by various names, including that of Queen of Heaven. Her worship continued over several millennia, always condemned by the leadership and always retained by the popular will. That God did have a consort or, understood another way, that the one God included the female with the male and could be approached as either or both was a tenacious belief of the Hebrews. It seems also that while the Hebrew leadership denied Asherah and her sisters, they were open to a female concept of deity in a form more satisfying, yet more perplexing and they had to find new ways of solving the problem for them of the female in the divine.

## THE WISDOM GODDESS

### Hochma

Throughout the Biblical period and then far beyond it a divine female presence has been continually present in Hebrew and Jewish consciousness. This is Hochma, Wisdom.

Everything to do with her is mysterious and paradoxical. In the Bible she is always female. The rabbinic Kabbalists a thousand years later turned her into a male *sephira* on the Tree of Life. She is continually being sought and found, lost and found; she ascends and descends; she finds her place in Israel, she can find no place in Israel. She is the divine female companion of God eternal with him before creation, and is herself involved in the cosmos as creator, nurturer, teacher and artificer. She acts as intermediary between God and humans and is willing to share herself with them and with the world. She may be married to God, or to selected men, and she may be the mother of the created world. Human beings must follow her rules if they are to succeed in this life, and also possibly to partake in an afterlife with God. It was she who helped God to create the universe and she knows all its secrets. She moves through it and orders it well.<sup>17</sup>

All these descriptions of Wisdom are to be found in the Bible or in the Apocrypha. At the same time, she is also portrayed as a woman whom men must seek to marry, she has sex appeal, she can behave like a spurned woman, and she has a sister or counterpart named Folly who boasts that she has knowledge better than Wisdom can offer. She has been described by commentators as a bonus for upper-class men and there is no doubt that she has been subject in the Bible to a great deal of sexist description.

Jewish writers found a solution to the problem of her female divinity and to some of the contradictions by identifying her with the Torah, and this became the normative view in Judaism.

I will take a few only of these Wisdom themes to try and establish a picture of her. Her precedence over creation is found, for example, in Proverbs 3:19, Psalm 104:24. The Lord founded the earth by means of Hochma; he needed to search her out and discover her ways, and he made all his works through Hochma. She is the pre-existent cosmic order that is the source of the world and sustains it. If the casual reader feels that all that is being said is that the Lord used Hochma - or Wisdom - for his creative work, then turn to the famous passage of Proverbs 8:22-30. She is, firstly, created by God, 'the first of his acts of old'. Yet she is there 'from the beginning' before the world is made, and what is more - she was beside him and was daily his delight.

In what capacity was she beside him? The Hebrew is *amon* and reputations have been built and lost on interpretation of this word. Major English language translations give different versions 'as one brought up with him' (AV), 'master workman' (RSV).

Various interpreters have added 'nurseling or even 'nurse' and finally 'connecting post'. The latter is not as remarkable as it may first appear, since Christianity relies on Paul's description of Jesus as one who has taken on the whole of Wisdom and is a connecting link between all creation and the divine (Colossians 1:17).

This set of meanings gives an indication of how extraordinary the description of Hochma actually is. She is a transcendent - or the transcendent cosmic force of the universe - yet she may be a little child. The meaning 'master craftsman' was used by the Greek translators of the Hebrew Bible in the second century BCE - the septuagint, known as LXX, where they used the Greek word *technites* to describe one of Wisdom's characteristics. It will be remembered that in Proverbs 9:1 Hochma 'builds her house with seven pillars', although one Israeli modern commentator says that she did not, that it was done by the wise men of Babylon.<sup>18</sup>

Religious thinkers concerned to expunge all ideas of female divinity from the Jewish religion solved the problem by making Hochma the Torah. Even then her effect could not altogether be dismissed. The Torah itself became identified with Hochma. The written texts of the Law, the first five books of the Bible, took on a sacral character, even a mystic relationship with God. The Talmud tells us that the Torah 'existed before the creation of the world' although prior to the creation of time it is a creation of God. The Torah is the 'eternal now', it existed before time and is not encompassed by time and is the eternal present for those who fear God. It is above history and the action of God in history. The Torah is older than creation and was originally written in black letters of flame on a white ground of fire. God held counsel with it at the creation of the world 'since it was wisdom itself'. This Wisdom is safely, for the pious, banished into the Torah and yet she illumines it with her own divine presence.

Hochma, then, in this religious system which became normative Judaism, is what is left when the divine is taken from her. She is a woman, and one who is viewed with much ambivalence, yet she retains something of the divine which men (that is male human beings) want to use for their own purposes.

This trajectory of thought becomes very clear in the Book of Wisdom of Solomon (BWS), part of the Apocrypha and written in Greek. The author is assumed to be a first-century Jew in Alexandria, centre of the Hellenistic world, where over one million Jews are said to have been living at the time. There they are exposed to all the temptations and attractions of Hellenism, and the author seeks to bring them back to their traditional faith and to demonstrate that their rich cultural heritage has much in common with that of the Greeks. The Wisdom of BWS is now Sophia, Greek translation of Hochma, and it is the Hochma of the Hebrew Bible who is being described in the book.

The Sophia of BWS is either identical with God, is the Spirit of God or is an autonomous divine figure who herself 'protected the first formed father of the world' and led the children of Israel out of Egypt and who at once was responsible for the salvation of the Hebrew and Jewish people. She is the source of all learning and understanding. She taught the author, the Sage (pseudo-Solomon):

*to know the structure of the world and the activity of the elements ...  
the cycles of the years and the constellations of the stars ...  
the nature of animals and the tempers of wild beasts ...  
the varieties of plants and the virtues of roots.*

(BWS 7:17-22)

She instructs him in 'what is secret and what is manifest' and she is described as the fashioner (*technites*) of all things - the last word linking her with the *amon*, the master craftsman of Proverbs 8:30 (see p. 47). It indicates she was the co-fashioner, with God, of the universe. In the same passage Sophia is described in a series of adjectives which emphasize that all that is good is within her.

She is intelligent, but holy, all powerful, overseeing all, beneficent, humane, she pervades and penetrates all things. She is a reflection of eternal light and 'though she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself she can renew all things ... she reaches mightily from one end of the world to the other, and she orders all things well' (BWS 7:21-8:1).

In this description we have, perhaps for the only time openly in Judaism, a laudation of the female divinity who is part of

the essence of the religion. She is an initiate in the knowledge of God and an associate with his works (8:4), she is praised as identical with God or even as God Herself. She springs out of a Hebrew context; she is described in detail and she is there for the Jews to worship and to follow her ways.

At the same time, the Book of Wisdom of Solomon is shot through with contradictions about her. Sophia suddenly changes. The Sage

*'determined to take her to live with me ...  
Because of her I shall have glory among the multitudes ...  
Because of her ... I shall govern peoples and nations shall be subject to me  
Dread monarchs will be afraid of me ... I shall show myself capable and courageous in war.'*  
(BWS 8:9-15)

He has introduced the theme of greed leading to self-aggrandizement, domination, hierarchy and war that has been a keynote of Western civilization. At the time of BWS it is only one thread of a many-layered skein. My own feeling is that this thread became so dominant later because the female had been devalued and the male overvalued, in concepts of divinity and thence of humanity. In BWS, by the end of the book, Hochma/Sophia has vanished entirely. It is as if she had never been there. Before following her on her journey into Gnosticism and then into Christianity it is helpful to place her in her Hellenistic context, since this had enormous influence.

There is some speculation that part at least of BWS may have been written by women. The Jewish philosopher Philo, who lived a little earlier than the author of BWS, wrote about a community, mixed men and women and all Jewish, who lived on the shores of the Dead Sea and were called the Therapeutae. They reached into the lives of the communities around them, preached Sabbath services, and were an influential source of religious instruction. Philo described how women interpreted scripture and led ritual. It has been suggested that possibly BWS may have been their work, or at least those parts of it in praise of Sophia, and that the other parts were put in by opponents who wanted a more establishment-style monotheism. The Therapeutae are among the numerous Jewish sects who existed until the time of the Roman destruction in the first century CE and who perished: the Sadducees, Essenes and others of whom little is known. The Jews remaining were the Pharisees, strict followers of Ezra and the Deuteronomists, who were able to set up their school at Jamnia and establish the religion of Judaism now believed to be normative. In this Sophia is not mentioned, and Hochma is the Torah.

In the Hellenistic world which was the matrix of the birth of Christianity, Jewish religion was held to be of great influence and antiquity, but it was one only - and a one relatively small in numbers among a great many widespread religions. Perhaps the most influential was that of the goddess Isis of Egypt which had spread throughout the 'known world', continuing for something like three millennia and ending only when destroyed by about 500 CE. Wisdom, whether Hochma or Sophia, has frequently been compared with Isis and her sister goddess Ma'at. Isis of Egypt is the great goddess. She has described herself in a well known aretology (self-praise) which is available to us. Here are some lines from it:

*I am Isis, I am she who is called goddess by women  
I gave and ordained laws for humans which no one is able to change  
I divided the earth from the heavens  
I ordered the course of the sun and the moon  
I appointed to women to bring their infants, to birth in the tenth month  
I made the beautiful and the shameful to be distinguished by nature*

*I established punishment for those who practise injustice  
I am Queen of rivers and winds and sea  
I am in the rays of the sun  
Fate hearkens to me  
Hail Egypt that nourishes me.*<sup>19</sup>

Here we see the goddess who is divine and creative, queen of nature who also points out the best ways of living for human beings in whose world she takes part. There is an ethical side to her. The complete hymn, of over fifty lines, balances descriptions of her transcendence with her very real concern for the everyday world of human beings. She punishes injustice, she 'causes the trickster to be caught by his own tricks', she is concerned with women and birth-giving and with the relationships of parents and children. She is very much to be compared with the Hochma of Proverbs in this respect.

Alongside her is Ma'at, goddess of truth, right and justice. This name actually describes a measure of land, and it is on this concept of exactitude and rightness that order and justice depends. Such earthy mundane order is duplicated by the order of the eternal: Ma'at becomes goddess of the underworld where she judges human souls. In this capacity she also exercises mercy, and again there are strong resonances in her judgments and in what she expects from human beings with those of Wisdom in Proverbs. Here is part of a confession the soul is called upon to make before Ma'at. It is called a 'Negative Confession':

*I have not committed iniquity ...  
I have not oppressed the poor ...  
I have not defaulted ...  
I have not in aught diminished the supplies to the temples ...  
I have not murdered ...  
I have not made any to weep ...  
I have not falsified the beam of the balance ...*<sup>20</sup>

It is noticeable that in addition to setting out what the Egyptians considered proper for human behaviour, in the manner of Proverbs, the ideals of human justice usually associated with the Hebrew prophets or even the Ten Commandments are there. But there is also a very human, and one might even say a very female compassion - 'I have not made any to weep' - and also particular exactness and precision in everyday dealings. Ma'at is the cosmic order of the world, like Hochma, which is itself built on order and precision, and in this respect heaven and earth are linked.

Isis and Ma'at have been identified in much of the description of Hochma and Sophia and have also been described as figuring largely in the New Testament understanding of Jesus as Logos in the opening chapter of the Fourth Gospel.

That the masculine Logos is closely connected with Hochma and Sophia is not in doubt. Wisdom is there, but from now on as Christianity develops it is Jesus Christ and becomes a part of him. He is described often with her words and there are statements that all wisdom is in Him.<sup>21</sup> Much of her journey is duplicated in His. Where the Jews encapsulated Wisdom in sacred texts, the Christians subsumed her in the Saviour and then in various ways and times into the Holy Spirit and often into the Virgin Mary. But before that transformation revealed itself, there was a period when Sophia, who had herself changed her character, appeared and was venerated. It is in this Sophia, successor to Hochma in the intertestamental and early Christian world, that we can begin to see another account of fall of the female aspect of divinity.

## THE GNOSTIC DIMENSION

Gnosticism is becoming a powerful influence in feminist research into the overthrow of the female in the divine. The discovery in 1945 of a substantial number of documents in the sand of Egypt at Nag Hammadi brought fresh light to our knowledge of a religious system which previously had been only available through the hostile polemics of some of the

early Christian Fathers. These Nag Hammadi texts, now available in translation,<sup>22</sup> cover a period of four hundred years, which span the two centuries before the common era and the following two centuries. Composed of between fifty and sixty separate 'books' or tractates, they are firmly placed in Judaic and Christian or pre-Christian modes of thought. The documents fall into various groups, based mainly on their dating and the schools which produced them.

Common to many of them, and taking a major part in several, are divine female figures, named Sophia, Epinoia, Protennoia or Barbelo. The first three are all words to do with Wisdom. Sophia herself, although related to Hochma, in fact stands for the Wisdom of the Gnosis. This is the knowledge of the divine mysteries: where we came from, where we are going, the nature of heaven, the divinity within us.

While it is impossible to give an account here of the different religious systems entailed, it is important that there were vast differences between the various schools of thought, and there is no one interpretation of Gnosticism or Gnosis. The only theme that may be common to all is the insistence that divine Wisdom is available to those who, despising the world, seek their spiritual salvation in her; or, in the more Christianized texts, in the Saviour. The earlier Gnostic writers showed Sophia and her divine sisters to be joined with God, creator figures in themselves, or in unison with God. They are available to humans, and in themselves reflect the comprehensive differences in humanity - in fact, they represent the whole and all its inter-connecting parts. One quotation will illustrate this:

*I am Protennoia, the Thought that dwells in the Light.  
I am the movement that dwells in the All, she in whom the All  
takes its stand, the first born as among those who came to exist.  
I am invisible within the thought of the Invisible One.  
I am revealed in the immeasurable, ineffable.  
I am the head of the All, since I exist in everyone.*<sup>23</sup>

She is the invisible essence, yet she is also the first-born of All who came to exist; that is she is immanence and transcendence. In this she reminds us of Hochma. She is the female principle in deity. Protennoia goes on to declare:

*I am perception and knowledge, uttering a voice by means of thought  
I am the real Voice. I cry out in everyone.*<sup>24</sup>

For me, these words are extremely moving. Here is the acknowledged and venerated female divine being, who lives in me and who calls out in me.

But for how long has our female voice been silenced, for how long our perception and knowledge dismissed as worthless, for how long have we women been silenced? Protennoia calls on us to break our silence, to cry out, to speak out. She assures us she is there within us - and has been there from the beginning.

Another female divinity who calls to women and assures us of our dignity and our power is the otherwise un-named Thunder Perfect Mind. She appears to be everywhere and encompasses everything:

*I am the first and the last*  
*I am the honoured one and the scorned one*  
*I am the whore and the holy one*  
*I am the wife and the virgin*  
*I am the mother and the daughter*  
*I am the members of my mother*  
*I am the barren one and many are her sons*  
*I am the one who has been hated, everywhere and who has been loved everywhere*  
*I am the one whom they call Life and you have called Death.*<sup>25</sup>

She is everything and everybody and its opposite. She is female and within her there is the whole range of female life from birth to death, from the mundane woman in the world to the divine Wisdom of Heaven. She shows for me that there is no disunity between something and its opposite. A totality includes all aspects. Linear and dualistic divisions do not exist. So many times we, women in the world, are aware that we are something and we are not something; or we are called names that put us down, and we are punished for being who we are. In Thunder Perfect Mind we can rejoice in a revelation of a goddess who is both outside us and within us, and we can be reminded of that same goddess figure who is the first and the last, who is called life and you - the others - have called Death. Asherah and Ashertaroht were called whore, abomination and death, by those who hated them. Hochma, their sister and descendant, was called the tree of life (Proverbs) before she was divested of her female form. I see in the 'Thunder' the vision of a goddess human and divine who speaks again. Her words are taken over by the newer male-oriented religions. 'I am the first and the last' is a description of God and of Christ (Rev 21:6; 22:13); it not only recalls 'Thunder' but also Egyptian Isis.

The differences in the Christianized and pre-Christian texts in their attitudes to Sophia have been analysed in detail by Rose Arthur. She points to the contrast between the early female Gnostic divinities and the 'fallen Sophia' of the Christians. She remarks that in the Jewish documents Sophia is not a personage in need of male redemption; this idea comes in the Christian texts.

In particular Sophia's fall from divinity is traced in the story of the birth of her child. I will quote part of it from the Apocryphon of John:

And the Sophia of the Epinnoia, being an aeon, conceived a thought from herself with the reflection of the invisible Spirit and foreknowledge. She wanted to bring forth a likeness out of herself without the consent of the Spirit - he had not approved - and without her consort and without his consideration. And though the personage of her maleness had not approved, and she had not found her agreement, and she had thought without the consent of the Spirit and the knowledge of her agreement, (yet) she brought forth. And because of the invincible power that is in her, her thought did not remain idle and a thing came out of her which was imperfect and different from her appearance, because she had created it without her consort. And it was dissimilar to the likeness of its mother for it has another form. She cast it away from her, outside the place, that no one of the immortal ones might see it, for she had created it in ignorance. And she surrounded it with a luminous cloud, and she placed a throne in the middle of the cloud that no one might see it except the holy Spirit who is called the mother of the living and she called his name Yaltabaoth.<sup>26</sup>

Here is a summation of the travels of the goddess. She has invincible power within her, she is able to create without the male principle and does so because she wishes to do so. In this she is behaving in the same way as a long line of ancient mother goddesses, but by now, in the second centuries after Christ, this has to be condemned as a fault, a fault so grievous that her child is imperfect; and this imperfect being then becomes the creator of a faulty and imperfect world. Whose fault is this? Sophia's. Why? Because she does not ask for male approval.

From then on Sophia's only way open is repentance, and this means she is constantly weeping. Eventually, fully penitent, she is allowed to return to the lowest place in the spiritual world, well away from her former glory. Where the author of the Book of Wisdom of Solomon moved to wanting to possess Sophia for his own aggrandizement, the later Gnostic books have gone far further. Now she is to bear the guilt for all the world's shortcomings. Much was made of her relationship to



the 'fallen' Eve of Genesis 3.<sup>27</sup>

There is little doubt that the female divine Hochma and Sophia of earlier Gnostics was never forgotten. Vestiges of that philosophy were carried steadily in an underground stream throughout European history. Sometimes they bubbled up strongly, as for example in the Hermetic Philosophy of the Renaissance, as Frances Yates has shown. They continually nourished 'unofficial' movements and sects within the mainstream religions, sometimes openly, sometimes disguised. Where the later Gnostic view of Sophia's disobedience and fault was planted firmly on to all women by the Church, yet many Christians found in Mary the Virgin, and often the Black Virgin, a vision of the earlier goddess. In the Jewish world the establishment religion was satisfied with Hochma as Torah, the law, thus effectively denying the presence of the female in the divine.

This view was challenged by the influence of the mystical sect of Kabbalists who saw in the Shekhinah the female presence of God and venerated her accordingly. But since women themselves were denied access to or knowledge of the Kabbalah for most of its history the idea of a Jewish acknowledgment of the female deity was a closely guarded secret among men who treated it as a hidden doctrine and did not allow any of its consequences to pass into the community.

It is only today that Christian women may understand that Mary might be God the Mother as well as Mother of God; and that Sophia may be the unacknowledged female aspect of Jesus and possibly of the Holy Spirit. Jewish women in the present time may at last enter into their heritage of the divine female, for them in the guise of the Shekhinah, the female indwelling presence of God. The living waters which have bubbled underground for so long are now rising up and pouring out their revivifying streams.

## SHEKHINAH CONSCIOUSNESS

The idea of the Shekhinah is full of contradictions and yet of inspiration.<sup>28</sup> It is used to denote the presence of God and is derived from the Hebrew word to dwell. In Biblical texts it denoted the presence of God at some particular place - e.g. at Bethel, where Jacob met God, in the Meeting Tent with Moses in the desert, in the temple of Solomon at Jerusalem, and even as the deity as a resting place or refuge for humans. The Hebrew word is feminine in gender but for mainstream Talmudic and rabbinical thought it was not used to denote any female essence or element within God. It was, for them, synonymous with His presence, His glory, sometimes with His Holy Spirit (*ruach-ha kodesh*). Sometimes called the Face of God, the glory associated with the Shekhinah shone, for example, on Moses' face when he came down from the mountain. In a comprehensive work of reference on the indwelling of God in the world according to rabbinical literature, a writer early this century was able to provide copious detailed information about the Shekhinah without ever mentioning a feminine aspect.<sup>29</sup>

However, in the alternative and mystical tradition of Judaism known as Kabbalah, the Shekhinah, while keeping her characteristic of 'dwelling', became more and more personified as both divine and female. The Kabbalah literature may be taken to begin in the first four centuries of our era and itself related to an earlier mystical trend associated with the Merkabah (chariot) visions in the Book of Ezekiel, and it had certain affinities with some Gnostic material. From the early rabbinic years, the Kabbalah developed widely, rising to a peak during the Middle Ages, and again was renewed in later Judaism by the Hassidic sects of Eastern Europe.

We meet the Shekhinah on the Tree of Life, yet we also meet her as the 'community of Israel'. In the latter case, she is re-mythologized to become the marital partner of God, reflecting the Biblical tradition of God the husband, Israel the wife. She is addressed as 'Queen, Daughter, Bride' of God. A good deal of sexual imagery is used, in the tradition of that used in the Book of Proverbs about Hochma. Yet at the same time, some sects within the Kabbalists took the Shekhinah right out of this relationship to make her into what Patai has called 'an independent divine female entity, a direct heir to ancient Hebrew goddesses'. This point is also made strongly by Scholem, who compares the Shekhinah within the Kabbalah to the goddesses of the past, yet stresses that it is only for the Kabbalists that she has this character. For everyday and mainstream Jews, the Shekhinah must always be comprehended as God's presence or, at the utmost, the community of Israel.

It is clear that while the Jewish mystics pursued a comprehensive study of female divinity, yet no human female was allowed to take part in this activity or indeed to know anything at all about it. It was totally androcentric in concept and performance. The male students and teachers glorified the female but placed her in relation to themselves, and did not

allow her divinity to enter into the lives of the general Jewish community, or into their worship. It has been emphasized that the study of the Kabbalah was 'not for the rabble'. It was for an elite, which in any case must necessarily be male.

Within this restriction, veneration of the Shekhinah was unbounded. It was emphasized that her glory is God's glory. She is described as a garden full of fruit and nuts, the latter being to do with riddles, puzzles and problems and, at a deeper level, the mysteries of alchemy and magic. Modern students of magic often look to the Kabbalistic writings as a primary source of material.

The Shekhinah has been compared to Lilith and to Hochma. As for Lilith, by the time the Kabbalists were writing she had long been turned into a ferocious demon, although there are a few positive references to her in the literature. Hochma they transformed into a male, equating the creative activity and direct knowledge of the world with the masculine, leaving the more passive aspects of perception and understanding to the female. There is also another fundamental difference between Hochma and the Shekhinah. The latter belongs to Judaism and is identified with the trials and hopes of the Jewish people, whom she comforted in their exile, and mourned within their trials. She was the essence of *tikkun* - the return to harmony of the world. She stands as a female aspect of divinity within Judaism to which Jewish people and especially women can now relate. By contrast, Hochma, Wisdom, was always universal. She called on all to enter her home and eat her food; all could learn from her the secrets of the universe; all could benefit from her instruction and learn to order their lives well. She reached from one end of the world to the other. She was not attached to any one group or people or religion. (Although some writers spoke of her making her home in Israel, this was never pursued widely.) She was co-existent with the universe, the mediator between all within it and deity which she shares.

Just as it is true that Hochma, like Shekhinah, became submerged in male culture, so both can be reclaimed in their free, powerful feminine forms. Now is the time they are both emerging from their long imprisonment.

## THE GODDESS TODAY

A transformation concerning woman's place in both heavenly and earthly society has taken place in the last decade. The underground streams have become torrents. They have led to concern, even crisis, within traditional religions. While during the last hundred years or more women have spoken out strongly against Biblical-based subordination, it is only now that their numbers are large enough and the ideas are propagated widely enough to secure actual changes - many of which are still strongly resisted. Ursula King<sup>30</sup> in her survey of women's spirituality today has listed seven categories of voices: of protest and anger; of challenge; of experience; of spiritual power; of a new spirituality; of a new theology; of prophecy and integration. These come from disparate places, traditions, languages, cultures. They all join into one voice, that of a new women's spirituality. From that list I move on.

All, if we look at any of the categories, must start with anger - at the androcentrism of society and, within religion and theology, of the biblical and religious texts which have formed our culture. What next? It is to seek methods by which the subsumed, the forgotten half of humanity, the underclass of women, the no-no of humanity and of divinity, may be raised up and proclaimed. There is no consensus as to method - far from it - nor as to belief. There are many distinctions and some conflicts. But serving as a framework for all is the knowledge of past injustice and the will to put matters right.

Within the new theology, a network of methods of reinterpretation has been under construction for some years. Christian women research both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, concentrating strongly on demythologizing the stories of sin and on remaking woman in the image of God - both themes in Genesis. Many include such subjects as the immanence of goddess or god in our lives, a new view of salvation that depends on wholeness and connectedness rather than reward and punishment. Areas of research deal, for example, with Mary the Virgin, or with Jesus-Sophia; with sexuality and religion, and with Jesus' position in the background of his times. Some scholars are researching the divinity of Wisdom.

Women within the Jewish tradition are, among much else, reclaiming the Kabbalah, and finding that the Shekhinah, God's female presence, is as much for them as for the men who previously appropriated it. They are able to copy early rituals, such as the blessing of the new moon, that was biblically the province of women, and in their academic studies are able to see and discuss rabbinical rituals outside the mainstream that in fact do not deny women's equality with men. They are taking a hard look at Bible texts and extra-biblical material and finding the forgotten and the overlooked female within them. There is an international growing network of feminist theological dissent.

The Bible has for over a hundred years been subject to various methods of interpretation and exegesis; today the feminist method is followed by more and more scholars. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Rosemary Ruether, both American Catholic feminist theologians, have been pioneering academic methods of demonstrating the received androcentric views and reconstructing a Christianity based on a wholism, indeed a love, that is traditionally purported to be its root. Theories of egalitarianism are suggested in different ways by these authors, who both fully realize women's previous subordination in their religion and who endeavour to see a way out within it. Women in theological research in Europe have formed an organization which centres on exchange of ideas and research in feminist theology. The subjects are of vast dimension: whether of a maligned woman in the Bible - such as Jezebel - or a new understanding of the meaning of the female *ruach* (spirit) in the Hebrew Bible; a discussion of the violence against women in the Bible, and the possibility of a women's liberation theology; a discussion of Mariology and its effect on women - positive or otherwise; a vision of Jesus as liberator of women (although this has serious drawbacks); and, above all, many views of the image of God - referring to Genesis 1:26 - and of reversing the Christian concept of women as vehicles of sin. All these were matters for discussion at a recent conference, as was a new one: within the 'Image of God' concept came the image of justice. The participants at a conference in Germany in 1989 took up the Christian roots of anti-Judaism. Judith Plaskow, in a paper entitled 'Feminist anti-Judaism and the Christian God', warned against the easy way that Christian feminists might follow by taking Jesus out of context to deliver women from their apparent oppressors, thus taking an anti-Jewish theme for granted.<sup>31</sup> She pointed out that the theme of connectedness within Christianity is also present within Judaism and both religions can be called upon by women for a vision of totality and community.

Those who remain in the traditional religions try and work them through to establish a base for egalitarianism and wholism. Others have left them, finding that effort or dream impossible. Daphne Hampson, a British feminist theologian, has put Christianity behind her. She does not, she says, need Christianity for connectedness. She sees a vision of the whole, within a transformation of the meaning of God.<sup>32</sup>

An identification of one's woman-self with God is taken further by many women who move right away from their background religion. Those who turn back to older roots, pick up the myths and stories of the ancient goddesses, take them into sacred activities for themselves today. Again, there is no doctrine or homogeneity: some belong to a wiccan tradition, or faerie; some believe they have inherited secrets through grandmother to grandmother; some take up the cause and the practice of the ancient women healers; some seek goddesses from various cultures and defend and renew them. There are many others. Common to most is the assertion that the divine is not only 'out there' but is in ourselves, most particularly that the goddess is in us women and we in her. Others, myself among them, will state quite definitely that the goddesses who were despised, rejected, tortured, overthrown and continuously kept out of sight by ongoing ferocious brutality are a paradigm of what has happened to women and women's spirituality. In reclaiming them we reclaim ourselves; in reclaiming ourselves, we reclaim them.

Common to all - those in traditional religions who are reworking them; those who have left them behind but still stay clear of goddesses; those who attach themselves to goddesses whether inside or outside their 'home' religion; those who re-evaluate and reconstruct texts without a religious drive - is a sisterhood of understanding and endeavour. Whatever the method used, whatever the actual religious faith or lack of it, whatever charge of intensity is to be found in the work, there is no doubt that all involved with feminist theology - or thealogy as many of us would have it - are struggling to bring justice and truth to religion, especially as it affects women, and thence to the community in which they live. Such justice and truth are not words nor mirages, but affect the everyday lives of women - and men - everywhere.

Throughout the long journey at which we have taken passing glances, there has never been a point that did not contain a female aspect of God. From the goddesses of the ancient Near East who became transformed into the consort of God, and then demonized; from the acknowledgment of Hochma as both cosmic Wisdom and immediacy in the world, to the Torah; from Sophia, identical with the supreme divine power and instructor and guide to human beings, her sisterhood with other female divinities in other surrounding cultures, to her fallen state and her disappearance within the Trinity, and then her reappearance in another form as the Virgin Mary - the goddess has been there. The unfortunate part of the whole matter is that she has been disguised and dismissed. When we look at her history we understand how immense was her defeat.

What do we mean by this? Who was defeated? There is only one answer. We were defeated. And who are we? Well, first we are women, who have undergone defeat after defeat but somehow, like the goddess, on the whole we manage to survive through continuous catastrophes, crippled. Also defeated are men, who have paraded and gloried in their 'godliness' to bring the world to the brink of extinction and themselves to a place of nowhere in particular. The Bible, Hebrew and

New Testament, both in their different ways chronicle the godhead of the female and its overthrow. The results of such male supremacy in religion have been and are horrific.

To heal and revive our world and all the people in it, we need to look again at the older religious traditions that sought and followed a concept of a female God, or within God, or aspect of God. The Divine She, the Mother Earth and Queen of Heaven, the She of the underworld, all express a concept that has been swept from the patriarchal thought and tradition. The kernel of the She within the divine was her association with earth as well as heaven, participation with humankind, a bridge between the transcendent and the mundane, making all of it sacred. Can we re-learn her lessons? Of Wisdom it was written: 'She shall be a Tree of Life to you.' Do we not have to face the flaming sword that the androcentric writers placed in front of her and deny it, so that we may again recognize Her and revere Her? Only in this way can our women's 'thirteenth hour' help humanity survive the crisis which male imbalance has brought upon the created world.

Pirani, Alix, Ed. *The Absent Mother* 1991

## NOTES

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- 2 Brootten, Bernadette J., *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue*, Scholars Press, CA, 1982, p.150.
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- 6 Quoted in Durdin-Robertson, L., *The Goddesses of Chaldea, Syria and Egypt*, Cesara Publications, Eire, 1975, p.2.
- 7 E.g. Isaiah 27:1, Psalm 74:13, Psalm 89:10.
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- 9 Long, Asphodel P., in *Arachne*, No. 2, MRRN, London, 1985, pp. 26-30.
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- 11 Driver, G.R., *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, 1956.
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- 17 E.g. Proverbs 3:18-19, 8:22-30; Book of Wisdom of Solomon 7:8, 8:1; Ecclesiasticus (The Book of Sirach) 24; The Book of Enoch 42:1-2
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- 21 E.g. 1 Corinthians 1:24.
- 22 Robinson, James R., *The Nag Hammadi Library*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1977.
- 23 Robinson, J.R., 1977, op. cit., pp. 461-70.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid., pp. 271-7.
- 26 Arthur, Rose H., *The Wisdom Goddess*, University Press of America, 1984.
- 27 Robinson, J.R., 1977 op.cit., pp.103-4.
- 28 For historical information on Shekhinah see Scholem, Gershon, *The Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, Schocken, New York, 1969 and Scholem, Gershon, *Kabbalah*, Keter, Jerusalem, 1974; also Patai, Raphael, 1967 (1990), op.cit.
- 29 Abelson, Joshua, *The Immanence of God*, London, 1912.
- 30 King, Ursula, *Women and Spirituality*, Macmillan, London, 1989.
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and with Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's methodology for so doing. This, following Ricoeur, she has named the hermeneutics of suspicion. We are not to be intimidated by the androcentricity of the texts but must search for the female who has been obscured. (Schussler Fiorenza 1984:15-18) In my case, I have been seeking not so much the stories of the women in the Hebrew scriptures but whether a female dimension of deity is to be found there.

One solution to this question was proposed two decades or so ago by Phyllis Trible who has discussed at length the many female characteristics of God in the Hebrew bible. She linked them first with Gen 1:27: "God created the human being in his own image, male and female created he them"; and then, with the cognate Hebrew words for compassion (*rahamim*), and for the womb, *rehem* (Trible: 1978:33). This had the great value to those seeking a female dimension, but within tradition, of keeping a monotheistic stance intact. However, Trible's work does not satisfy the many questions that arise from archaeological finds, chief of which is iconographic and linguistic evidence for a proposition summed up by archaeologist Ze'ev Meshel in the question "Did Yahweh have a consort?" (1979) and by the title of fellow archaeologist Richard Petteys more recent book "Asherah Goddess of Israel." (1990)

### **What do we mean by the Asherah?**

There are 40 references to Asherah in the Hebrew bible, almost all couched in hostile terms. Forms of the name include the singular Asherah, or plural either Asherim or Asheroth. The form Ashtoreth is also found, containing the vowels of the Hebrew word bosheth meaning shame, put in by later redactors.

A few texts from RSV translation will provide a touch of their flavour. Deut 12.2 calls upon the people to "tear down their altars, dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire." 16:21 commands them not to plant any living tree as an Asherah beside the altar of the Lord. Judges 6:25/26 not only insists that the Asherah which the Hebrews have built beside the altar of Baal be cut down but also it must provide the wood to make a burnt offering of the bull that was used to pull down the shrine. There are also references to the Asherah as an image in the temple of Yahweh: (2K 21:7) while the account of Josiah's reform recounts the high priest's actions in bringing out not only the vessels made for Asherah in addition to those made for Baal and the host of heaven ) but also the Asherah itself from the house of the Lord. The text (2K 23:6-7) tells how he burned it and beat it to dust and cast the dust upon the graves of the common people. 1 K 18-19 refers to 400 prophets of Asherah alongside those of the Canaanite god, Baal.

The association of Asherah with trees in the Hebrew bible is very strong. For example, she is found under trees (1K14:23; 2K 17:10), is made of wood by human beings (1K 14:15, 2K16:3-4) and is erected by human beings (2K17:1). The Asherah often occurs in conjunction with shrines on high places, which may also be to other gods such as Baal, and frequently is mentioned in association with the host of heaven. Richard Pettey (1990:153-4) has catalogued each reference and produced tables showing all combinations of Asherah with images, pillars, high places and altars. Using these he argued that Asherah, always associated with the worship of a deity whether JHWH or Baal, is a cultic object used along with the altars, high places and pillars in the service of such deities which included Jahweh (this is also the position of widely quoted biblical exegete Saul Olyan. 1988). It is rather surprising considering the numerous references to trees in connection with Asherah that Pettey does not include them in his formula. To the question was Asherah a Goddess of the Israelites? he answers both no and yes. (Pettey 1990: 210) Certainly no, he says, the biblical authors were unanimous in their abhorrence of Asherah worship, but, yes, she was without doubt popularly accepted as the goddess of Israel. One thing is certain: that the Asherah with attendant asherim has many forms but is never far from trees or the wood of trees.

### **Where you would find an Asherah?**

First you would look on every high hill and under every green tree," (e.g. Jer 2:20, Jer 3:6, Isa 57:5). There you may discover that she is also associated with sexual activities. In the words of the biblical writers, the people of Israel who worshipped her there bowed down playing the harlot, or burned with lust among the oaks. We will return to this subject later. It will however be seen immediately that Asherah was a vital force in the life of the people of Israel, and indeed Raphael Patai in his study of the Hebrew goddess has calculated that "the statue of Asherah was present in the temple for no less than 236 years, two-thirds of the time the Solomonic temple stood in Jerusalem." This worship, he asserts, was part of the legitimate religion approved and led by the king the court and the priesthood". (Patai.1990: 38) So those seeking Asherah would find her in groves and on the hills, and in the temple of JHWH itself. The question now to be answered is:

### **What would you find?**

We see that it is difficult to define Asherah. She is female and something divine that people worship. She appears to be made of wood. She is a living tree that can be planted and cut down, or, she is erected and made by human beings; she stands both in the temple of the Lord and at the shrine of Baal; she is connected with pillars and, in some texts, with the mysterious host of heaven. There are many asherim yet there is one who is worshipped in the temple of Yahweh. She has 400 priestesses serving her. She is worshipped on high hills and under green trees. She is referred to in the singular and in the plural.

Answers to what has often been called the puzzle of Asherah have been attempted for hundreds of years. The most ancient commentators whose works are still extant are the rabbis who wrote the Mishnah, the Oral Law, in about the second and third centuries of this era. The Mishnah's definition of an Asherah is any tree worshipped by a heathen, or any tree which is worshipped.. The great rabbi Akibah said "wherever thou findest a high mountain or a lofty hill and a green tree know that an idol is there".(Danby: 1933:441). Trees described by the rabbis as being an asherah or part of an asherah include grapevines, pomegranates, walnuts, myrtles and willows (Danby:1933:90,176). From this it will be seen that these early lawmakers denied Asherah as part of the Hebrew religion but recognised her as a divinity worshipped by the "heathen", and treated her as a living tree or living part of a tree.

Their testimony was made in exile and under persecution from the Romans, but still within community memory of a former Israel which though a tributary state to Rome, was able most of the time to order its own religious affairs, and to contain the vast memory of its long religious life. Because of this I am inclined to take their view very seriously even though some modern scholars do not agree with them.

John Day, one of the current leaders in the field of Ancient Near Eastern studies expresses a majority consensus when he declares that no serious scholar today believes the Asherah was a living tree. (Day:1986 402) A minority opinion in favour comes from the French scholar Andre Lemaire. Day points out (Day:1986:385-408) that in the late 19th and early 20th century before the major discovery at ancient Ugarit in Northern Syria,( today called Ras Shamra), of Canaanite material ( which we shall be examining a little later on) three main views obtained concerning the identity of biblical Asherah. The German school believed she was the goddess Astarte or her symbol; the British school led by William Robertson Smith, the centenary of whose death was commemorated last year by a distinguished gathering at his alma mater, Aberdeen University, thought that Asherah was not the name of a deity but of a sacred symbol, a wooden pole, such as a maypole used as a cult object. This is still the position of a few scholars, notably Saul Olyan, and Baruch Margalit. It is conceded, that this symbol might be a faint echo of a previous Canaanite deity.

John Day's third category is that Asherah is both a sacred object and a goddess, and this reading he believes is now mostly accepted and most consistent with the evidence (1983: 398). Ruth Hestrin, of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem has gone further and built this into an extremely satisfactory solution to the conundrum.(Hestrin 1991:50-59 ). She states that the goddess Asherah is represented in the bible by three of her manifestations - as an image representing the goddess herself, as a green tree, and as the asherim, tree trunks . She points out that this interpretation fits well with the that of the rabbis statement in the Mishnah. (It is of interest that the question "Is She One or Many?" is one of the most pressing questions now being addressed by the present-day goddess movement (see Long: Feminist Theology, May 1997), and although it cannot be pursued here, it seems as if a study of biblical Asherah may provide some pointers to answers.)

The major reason for the substantial recognition of Asherah as a goddess and for the current explosion of interest in her status and function is the discovery of texts and iconographic material in the territories now Syria, Palestine, Sinai and Israel.

We will look at four major discoveries: In the first Asherah may be recognised as a pre-biblical Canaanite goddess in her own right; in the second and third we have Israelite depictions and inscriptions linking Yahweh and Asherah, while in the fourth pictures of her connect her closely with those of the Tree of Life.

### **The Ras Shamra texts**

In 1929 a substantial discovery was made in Northern Syria, of texts dating to the Bronze age of about 1400BCE. They contained a cycle of divine myths of the Canaanite people. From them, we learn that chief among the gods were El, the father god, and his consort, the Lady Athirat (Ugaritic version of Hebrew Asherah). Asherah's titles included Creatress of

all the Gods, and Mistress of Sexual Rejoicing. She was also called *rbt ym* which has been variously translated as Lady who walks on the sea or perhaps She who walks on the dragon - both suggested by Albright in 1940. A contemporary Hebrew scholar Baruch Margalit remarks (Margalit 1990:266-7) the fact that this interpretation of the divine name Athirat/Asherah endured for nearly half a century is a measure of its appeal as well as the unparalleled authority of its author. However, he yields to linguistic objections raised by other scholars and eventually agrees with John Day that probably the simpler solution, Lady of the Sea, is a preferred alternative. It is often remarked that this title would suit a deity of the Canaanites who lived on the coastline. Later the Israelites took over the higher inland countryside, and this title of Asherah faded from use among them.

The Ras Shamra material shows Asherah to be a powerful deity: she procures a palace for the god Baal when he is unable to do so himself; she is in some conflict with El, who asks Am I am slave that I am must do her bidding? (Driver, *ibid*) but indeed he finds he must; Frank M. Cross in his ground-breaking "Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic" (1973) designates her "as the primary wife of El" and as such the "Creatress of creatures" as well as "the creatress of the gods" (Cross: 1973:15, 32). Her function he believes is as a mother goddess.

Baruch Margalit proposes (1990:269) a different reading of her name: it is "she who walks behind", and, he declares, this describes a wife. His interpretation is idiosyncratic and there is little support for it by other scholars. In fact, a quite different appreciation of Asherah's position in the Canaanite world comes to the fore when it is realised that she is also addressed as Qudsu, holy, and identified with a goddess of that name who (Hestrin and others) was well known in Egypt as a goddess of love at the time of the Phoenician or Canaanite influence there. Mark Smith (1990: 94) points to passages in the Ras Shamra texts that may be relative to the equating of Qudsu with Asherah: in both of them nudity and lovemaking is inferred. In fact, it is usually conceded that Asherah/Athirat and Qudsu are identical deities, whose major function is to do with sexuality and the prosperity of the land and people, arising from it. Such a goddess is a potent deity in her own right, and we may presume that although she appears as a consort of El, ideas of a kind of wifeness that means walking behind, are in the commentator's mind rather than in the text.

An echo of Asherah come to us in the South West of England. IES Edwards (1955:49-57) describes a relief of a goddess called Qudshu-Astarte-Anath which was presented to Winchester College in 1951. Edwards remarks: "No precise information is available concerning either its original acquisition or the date it reached England". She is represented as standing on a lion; above her is a disk and a crescent - perhaps the sun and moon. She is almost naked and is holding a lotus blossom and serpents. This resembles many other depictions which show very similar scenes where sometimes a woman, sometimes a sacred tree takes the centre place. Apparently Winchester no longer has this interesting artifact.

An example of the interchangeability of the tree and the goddess is suggested by the Ancient Near Eastern scholar John Gray. Referring (1967:149) to a relief on an ivory casket found at Minet el Beida, in a neighbouring mound to Ras Shamra and of equivalent date, he writes (Winthom 67 149): "it depicts the Mother Goddess offering heads of corn to two rampant caprids (animals of the goat family.) This is a significant sculpture as it seems a variant on the motif of two caprids similarly flanking a date palm found most abundantly in the vicinity of Tel el Ajjud, Palestine. The Minet -el-Beida sculpture suggests that the tree corresponds to the Mother Goddess and is in fact the Tree of Life." We shall see later other examples of this interchangeability and identification of tree and goddess.

### **Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el Qom**

The second and third of our categories that have persuaded many scholars to regard biblical Asherah as a goddess in her own right consist of shrines bearing texts and pictures. Archaeologist Ze'ev Meshel disclosed in 1979 that he had discovered a rock shelter at Kuntillet Ajrud in Sinai, possibly used by travellers on cross country routes (Meshel. 1979:24-36).

It contained drawings and inscriptions both on the walls and on pithoi - large storage jars. They showed a seated female on a throne playing a musical instrument, portrayals of a cow and her calf and numerous other figures, some in procession. In his communication publishing his findings he asked: "Did Yhwh have a consort?" This arresting question was based on two inscriptions, which read as an appeal for blessings from "Jhwh and his Asherah" or "Yhwh and Asherah" (the word in question is Asherata). Emerton, (1982:2-20), Freedman (1987:241-249), Beck, (1982:3-68), Dever, (1984: 21-37) Oden (1976:31-36), Zevit, (1984:39-47) Hestrin, (1991:50-59), Hadley (1987:50-62) and Day (1986:385-408) are among those who have taken up the task of providing accurate translations and interpretations of this material, but there is still no



consensus on a translation of Asherata. David Noel Freedman even quotes Shakespeare : Can it be, he asks, that we may compare the form "his Asherah" to the last words of Romeo and Juliet : " For never was a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her Romeo."(1987:249).

A similar inscription found at Khirbet El Qom - presumed site of the biblical Makkedah - reinforces the problems.

Judith Hadley of Cambridge has examined this and suggests the reading: (1987:51-62)

Blessed be Uriyahu by Yahweh  
For from his enemies, by his (YHWHs) Asherah, he Yhwh saved him  
(again the term Asherata is used.)

Hadley discusses the linguistic problems in some detail; the question returns: do the words actually mean "his" Asherah, or Asherah in her own right? Hadley comes to the conclusion that in this instance, Yhwh remains the subject of the blessing, but it is carried out by "his Asherah". Other scholars provide different understandings: for example, the meaning of Asherah in the context might be "holy place" (Meshel(), a reading which links with previous attempts to define Asherah in terms of a grove or shrine ( Albright (1942:77-78), Day,(1986:388-9) Wiggins(1993:193). Emerton opts for "a wooden cult object representing the goddess".( 1982:20) By contrast, Zevit translates the inscription as : "I blessed Uruyahu to Yahweh and from his enemies oh Asherata save him", where Asherata is an invocation to the named goddess herself(1984:39-47). There is also the question asked by William Dever whether the seated female figure and the depiction of a sacred tree and a cow with her calf may themselves be portrayals of the goddess.()

Dever has been making these questions a prime concern for the last sixteen years. He believes that the concept that Asherah may have been personified and actually worshipped in ancient Israel as the consort of JHwh has been consistently downplayed ()... he contends that the archaeological discoveries provide both texts and pictorial representations that clearly identify Asherah as the consort of Jhwh, at least in some circles of ancient Israel.

It is impossible here to outline the many complexities of the various scholarly arguments, but it can safely be stated that the divine figure of YHwh is associated with either a cult object or a divine and female personage. Opinion on which of these seems to be equally divided; but even assuming that "cult object" is the more accurate interpretation the questions remain of what function that object performed, and whether it was a representation of the goddess. It is clear that positive identification of Asherah as a Hebrew goddess at least in some circles in ancient Israel is much enhanced by these finds.

### **The Cult Stand at Taanach**

The fourth of our archaeological indications of the nature of Asherah takes the form of a pottery stand uncovered at Tel Taanach in Israel, identified as a cult stand or an object used in ritual and worship. Ruth Hestrin has described this object extensively and discussed its possible religious background (Hestrin 1987: 61-77). It is dated to the 10th c BCE and is remarkable for the number and subject of the scenes that decorate it. Hestrin describes them as follows: (1987:65)

"In the lowest register a crudely shaped naked woman flanked by two standing lions is represented...the second register has an opening in the centre flanked by two sphinxes with a lions body, birds wings and a female head. Two round protuberances are seen between the legs. The faces resemble that of the naked woman. A sacred tree is represented in the centre of the third register composed of a heavy central trunk from which sprout symmetrically three pairs of curling branches. Two ibexes stand on their hind legs in an antithetical position.. flanking this group are two lionesses almost identical to those in the lowest register". Notice particularly the shape of the sacred tree and the number of branches - you will see that the trunk plus the branches make it seven fold. I shall refer to this later when we discuss the seven-branched candlestick, the Menorah.

Analysing the decorative material on the cult stand, Hestrin comes to the conclusion that two of the registers show an Asherah, once as a naked woman, and once represented by her symbol the tree. The very fact that the lions in the registers are almost identical in shape and position indicates, she says, that they belong to the same deity. Representations of a nude goddess flanked by lions and holding snakes and lotus blossoms are known widely in the Ancient Near East. In particular, as already mentioned, those uncovered in Ugarit and Minet-el-Beida show similar themes, as do portrayals of Qudshu from Egypt.

Iconographic evidence alone can only suggest an identification between the goddess Asherah-Qudshu and a sacred tree; but support for such an identification is considerable when seen in relation to our textual material. John Day, discussing what he calls the sacred Asherah pole- that is, a pole from a sacred tree and taking on its significance, writes (1986:404): "It may be that the sacred Asherah pole had the form of a stylised tree. The evidence for this I would seek in Hos 14. 9 (Eng 8) There the prophet makes Yahweh declare: " Ephraim what has he still to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after him. I am like a luxuriant cypress, from me comes your fruit". Day continues: "The bold comparison of Yhwh with a tree, unique in the Hebrew bible juxtaposed with the condemnation of idolatry has suggested to many scholars that Hosea is polemicising against idolatry associated with Canaanite tree symbolism. Could this be a polemic against Asherah? A number of scholars have believed that it is"(ibid).

The implications of this suggestion of Day's are far-reaching, and for me they extend as far as the Garden of Eden. The narrative there tells us that the tree forbidden was of knowledge of good and evil; but when humans ate its fruit, they were then denied access to the tree of life. Although this had not been forbidden originally, Gen 3:22 has God saying that the human beings having eaten of the forbidden tree might next" take of the tree of life, and eat and live for ever".

It is time to look further at the Tree of Life.

### **The Tree of Life**

The idea of a Tree of Life is a concept held by many peoples of different cultures. Roger Cook (1974) has surveyed this phenomenon from Ygdrasil, "the great tree which is the Scandinavian axis of the world" and which links the underworld, middle earth and the heavenly land of the gods; to the.. cosmic Bhodi tree under which the Buddha gained enlightenment. Through varying cultures and times the Tree of Life has been a symbol both of this world and a world of the divine. It represents the theme of rebirth, along with the union of opposites. (1974: 25,26). In one instance the great tree is said to shake, bringing about the destruction of the gods and the world. However, concealed within its trunk are the seeds of the world's renewal in the form of a man and a woman from whose union a new race will appear to re-populate the world.

Cook writes: (1974:13):"the full breasted tree divinity is one of the many epiphanies or divine manifestations of the Great Mother Goddess known in mythology the world over. As the Earth Mother (Tellus Mater) she embodies the regenerative powers contained in the earth and the waters...(she is) a perpetual source of cosmic fertility. Woman and Tree alike embody this Great Earth Mother for both are visible manifestations of her fruitfulness".

Whether we agree or not with Cook's description of one universal great goddess, there is no doubt of the association between sacred trees, fertility and a female dimension of the divine. All are involved in the continuation and nurture of life in this world and sometimes in the next. Fertility, in the sense of the continuation and sustenance of the earth and of people is celebrated sexually in the shade of the Tree, or grove; this has been the practice in many cultures among them the people of Israel as we know from our biblical texts. There, as elsewhere, the power of life giving and life sustaining is associated not only with the Tree of Life but very often is one of the attributes of the female divine.

An account of the mythology of the sacred tree is given by Yarden (1971) who connects it closely with the Menorah as we shall see later. Yarden describes an ancient myth of "the cosmic or World Tree usually conceived at the centre of the earth.....with its roots in the Underworld...and crown in Heaven(1971:35). He surveys the extent of this myth in the Ancient Near Eastern world and its echoes in the biblical texts. He records that "representations of sacred trees or their branches appear on even the oldest finds" (1971:37).

He surveys the extent of this myth in the Ancient Near Eastern world and its echoes in the biblical texts and records that "representations of sacred trees or their branches appear on even the oldest finds" (1971:37).

In this connection, we will look to the distinguished biblical scholar Carol Meyers, whom I will later be introducing in connection with the Menorah. In an account of Ancient Near Eastern iconography (1976:25) she writes " it is hardly an exaggeration to indicate that the sacredness of vegetation and trees has been a recurrent and integral theme in a wide range of cultures spanning most areas of the globe and most epochs of human history... the sacred quality of trees lies in the fact of their embodiment of the life principle" (p95). She speaks of "the widespread association of vegetal life with the generative power of the divinity", resulting in the common phenomenon of the manifestation of deity within or at certain

trees which would be especially favoured; these trees would lead the worshipper in the direction of the divinity. Furthermore the divinity revealed in the tree is also the source of the hoped-for life after death.. thus the theophany motif of the sacred tree becomes blended inextricably with the concept of life eternal. The tree of life in the sense of immortal life becomes an inseparable aspect of the regenerative principle contained within plant life" (1976: 96). Here we have clearly set out the relationship between the tree which gives us the daily fruit of our life, and its relationship with divinity and with eternal life. We also can understand from this some of the relationship of fertility practices to the sacred.

Anne Primavesi,(90:240-243)) a leading ecofeminist, has posed the question: why was it a garden in which our first parents were set? And answered it by saying the first thing that is needed for life is food, and it is in a garden or orchard of trees that fruit comes readily to the hand. As today we hear of the enormous tragedies of starvation throughout the worlds southern, peoples, caused solely by the hand of man we may ponder Anne's words again. To live, human beings must eat, and our first parents were put in a place where good things to eat were abundant. So the very first meaning of the Tree of Life might indicate that it will actually keep us alive.

Howard Wallace (1985) in a Ph.D. dissertation entitled *The Eden Narrative* analyses the different meanings of the word life in Ancient Near Eastern literature. Looking at the Babylonian epics of the third millennium BCE which contain accounts of various heroes of that period who attempted to find eternal life, he comments that it is mostly said to be available from plants or leaves. For example, the hero Gilgamesh at one point finds a plant that might have provided what he sought but it is stolen from him by a serpent. Another hero Adapa, through a mistaken decision does not partake of the food and water of life actually offered to him. The divine Ishtar in her descent to the Underworld, in the Sumerian version of the story is given the plant of life. Albright has described(Hebraica 36. 1919-20 258-9) how Gilgamesh reaches the goddess Siduri-Sabatu. She is seated under a vine in the Paradise garden which is described as of "dazzling beauty". The vine is its centrepiece. Siduri-Sabatu is addressed as Goddess of Wisdom, Genius of Life, and referred to as "Keeper of the Fruit of Life". He asks her for the gift of eternal life but she refuses; Wallace writes: The aspect of "life" in these stories changes from one to the other,(but) the various aspects are all part of the broader concept of life in all its abundance; it is worthy to note that the gaining of divine qualities of life is associated with ...eating or drinking some substance which possesses the magical powers to grant this gift". Wallace makes the point that usually the substance needed will be procured from a tree.(1985:101-3).

He compares these texts with Psalm 1, which declares of someone who seeks wisdom: " he will be like a tree transplanted by channels of water which gives its fruit in season whose leaf does not wither. " There we may understand a tree of life that is both temporal and eternal. Its fruit brings abundance in this world but its unwithering qualities bring it into eternal life. Wallace then discusses the Hebrew words for life and sees a possible connection between life- the Hebrew word hayyim, and Eve, Hebrew word Hayya., He proposes a strong association between the two. Can Eve, called the Mother of all living, be identified as the Tree of Life itself? Wallace cites a fertility motif as the connecting link between the two. He sees a strong association between Eve, the Tree of Life, and Asherah, creatress of the gods, and writes ( 1985:114) "it is not impossible that a tree which is associated with fertility and the mother goddess figure on one level of a story could take on other life-giving aspects, also a divine gift at another level, especially when we remember the broad spectrum covered by the word "life".

The biblical writers lived with the evidences around them of sacred fertility rituals on every high hill and under every green tree in honour of the goddess Asherah. It is not impossible that Wallace's identification of Eve in this way could account for the hostility shown to her and the malediction set upon what might be thought to be the joyful human condition of sexuality and reproduction. Wallace's identification of Eve, with Asherah and with the Tree of Life, may be deemed by some to be a walk along the wild side of speculation, yet its resonances with the polemics of the material are strong.

Thus, the ancient monotheistic heritage of the religious system that became traditional Judaism, where the deity is always expressed in the masculine gender, is challenged by current archaeological and textual evidence. This suggests that a goddess or goddesses were worshipped not as part of a residue of foreign cult, but in her own right in the Hebrew religion. She would be associated with all that is meant by life and symbolised by the Tree of Life: an indwelling Deity who was the source of not only of food, sexuality, reproduction, at a mundane level, but also wisdom and possibly the promise of immortal life. The high hills, green trees and groves where she was worshipped were expressions of herself; parts of trees were made into images of her or set up as poles in her honour. Traditionalists might still argue that all these forms of worship were extraneous to the Hebrew religion and were in fact "heathen"; but the current evidence is mounting against them. It is reinforced by a concept of the Tree of Life that has been part of normative Judaism for a millennium and a half: part of normative Judaism but hidden from more than half of Judaism's adherents. I refer to the Kabbalah.

This is the mystical system practised until recently only by an elite few, who must be male and married and over forty years of age. It was kept secret from everyone else, notably women. It is the Kabbalah, now more available to those wishing to study it, no matter their sex and age. At its heart stands a Tree of Life. Surrounding the Tree in all its glory is a divine female entity, named the Shekinah, the dwelling place of God. The nearest that the traditional commentators came to the feminine Shekinah was to say it represented the community of Israel, historically in a marriage relationship with God. But distinguished Kabbalah scholar Gershon Scholem found differently. He writes: (1969: 105) "the Shekinah becomes an aspect of God that is a quasi-independent feminine element within him. ..the necessary discovery of the female element with God...regarded with the utmost misgiving by non-Kabbalistic sources was a mystic conception of the feminine principle". The Shekina reflects her own and God's glory, she is the Face of God and she envelopes the Tree in her shining light. She is sometimes represented as a Paradise Garden full of luxurious trees (1969: 58). The Tree of Life in itself, is the image of Gods creation, it offers a depiction of what Cook has called " the mysterious relationship between the invisible transcendent god and the visible world of creation" (Cook 1974: 18). The image used is that of an inverted tree, descending from heaven to earth. Its branches are emanations - called sephiroth; they represent the divine powers and spheres through which the human being can work towards the mystical divine. It is impossible here to address this subject with any but the briefest of glances; it has been the basis of a Western tradition of esoteric religious magical working, has been related to the continuous underground hermetic tradition and today continues to fascinate new generations of seekers with its profundities. It has been and is understood as a most powerful symbol of divine glory. We cannot avoid the connection of this Kabbalistic Tree, an ongoing conception from early rabbinical times to its first publication in the 13th century of our era, with the sacred trees we have been addressing. Certainly there appears to be a large time lag, but Kabbalists will affirm that their material can be traced continuously to biblical times.. The divine female element was re-created, in the understanding of many of the Kabbalists, to become the Shekinah. It is not too fanciful to propose that in her is a resonance of Asherah, whose name and presence became obscured but never lost. We will now look at the connections of this material with

## The Menorah

While the Kabbala was practised by men in the synagogues away from the domestic hearth, there was - and is - in their homes, presided over by the woman, a powerful symbol of that same Tree of Life which was the heart of their study. This is the Menorah. Cook describes it as "an important .. Jewish symbol related to the cosmic tree". (1974:20) We first hear of it in Exodus 25: 31-40.

"You shall make a lamp-stand of pure gold....its cups its capitals and its flowers shall be of one piece with it. And there shall be six branches going out of its sides, three branches of the lampstand out of one side of it and three branches out of the other side of it; three cups made like almonds, each with its capitals and flower, on the one branch, and three cups each with its capitals and flower on the other branch - so for the six branches going out from the lampstand." This lampstand was the desert Tabernacle Menorah guarding and throwing light towards the Ark of the Covenant.

Note that its cups were to be shaped in the form of almonds, which themselves are precursors of returning life to the trees in spring, being the first tree to flower before even its leaves have opened. Carol Meyers today a distinguished theologian made the Tabernacle Menorah her Ph.D. dissertation in 1974. She addresses the relationship between God and the Trees of the garden, and offers the perception (1974: 138/9): "in the primeval cycle of Genesis, the primacy of God separate from nature is the clear message The mythological forces represented by the life-giving nature of plant life ...are confronted ..in a direct way. ..nevertheless there is not a radical and permanent breaking off of such ideas. The power of the underlying mythic ideas was enormous and is not to be under estimated. It evidently lay beneath the surface ready to materialise for a long time during Israel's history" Here Meyers points to the continuity of ideas hidden perhaps within Hebrew monotheism that support the concept of the Genesis Eden narrative as polemic.

When she turns to the Menorah of Exodus, the Tabernacle Menorah, she examines in detail its relation to the iconography and texts concerning sacred trees in the Ancient Near East. She writes that her study "has shown that the tabernacle menorah in form and detail belongs to the conventional way for the sanctity of vegetable life to be depicted." (1974: 133). She declares that it has long been recognised that because of the language employed to describe the Menorah and because of its appearance as a thickened stem or shaft from which its branches project that the whole shape strongly resembles a stylised tree. Meyers cites S.A. Cook (1974) who pointed out this some time ago, largely on the basis of its representation in later Jewish art. He would, she says, have laid it down that the candlestick and the tree inevitably tend to merge into one

another. Goodenough also suggests this, pointing out that the vision of Zachariah (4:1-14) with trees flanking the Menorah perhaps preserves the original meaning of plant form imbued with sanctity." (Men 84) She argues: "A consideration of some of the details of such forms has revealed that there is a close morphological connection between arboreal expressions on ancient seals and monuments and the branched form assumed by the superstructure, as it were, of the tabernacle Menorah. (whose form) is exactly (that) taken by the quintessential stylised tree or branch in the Mesopotamian, Aegean, and Syro-Palestinian religions. Whereas there are various modes for expressing stylised plant life throughout Mesopotamian history it is precisely in the Late Bronze Age that a specific six plus one axis form not only comes to dominate but is also disseminated throughout the Eastern Mediterranean island and coastal areas". (1974: 118/119) Referring to the sanctity of the vegetable and plant life symbolised, she declares that it "involves both the fertility theme of the tree and the immortality concept". She calls attention to the variations in design of the Menorahs of the first and second Temples, and quotes first century Josephus' description of the latter: "facing the table, near the South Wall, stood a candelabrum of cast gold.. it was made up of globules, and lilies, pomegranates and little bowls...it terminated in seven branches, regularly disposed in a row. Each branch bore one lamp". The tree and plant allusions are clear here, as they also are in a Talmudic description which she quotes: "the cups were like Alexandrian goblets, the knobs like Cretan apples, and the flowers like blossoms around the capitals of columns" (1974: 37/38.)

The material that she presents is in line with the views of earlier Jewish scholars in this century concerning the relationship of the Menorah to the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. For example, Menahem Recanati calls attention to the vision of Zachariah, where the text of 4:10 reads " these seven (lamps) are the eyes of God". He claims that this asserts that God governs by means of the Sephiroth emphasised by the seven branches of the Menorah: the divine power is exercised through the Menorah" (E. Jud. 11.1367/. Asher Ben David sees the Menorah as a symbol reflecting the world of the Sephiroth. A similar view is taken by Bahqar Asher.

L. Yarden (1971) has surveyed the Menorah from its inception until the present. He believes it has enormous significance in "fundamental conceptions of (hu)mankind's most fundamental conceptions of Nature, of Life and Death of Cosmos and God.(1971:vi) he connects it with the ancient sacred tree(1971:35-40), and then discusses its light as the "light of God and the Torah ( 1971:48) He shows its ubiquity throughout Jewish history in a series of remarkable pictures of synagogue vessels and decorations from early times until the present.

Present day Kabbalist Ze'ev ben Shimon Halevi argues that in the Menorah we can see a symbol of both the mystical and objective knowledge of the universe conveyed by God to Abraham and to Moses. He writes: " ..the construction of (Solomon's) Temple and the seven branched candlestick are both formulations of the Tree of Life". (p18). In an illustration of the Menorah as the Tree of Life he shows how its stem and branches indicate the different Sephiroth (emanations of God) which to the Kabbalist are the basis of study of eternal wisdom. Words shown at each candle flame are the names of each Sephira.

Halevi writes: "The Sephiroth ..might be regarded as a system of functions in a circuit through which flows a divine current. Any Sephiroth can change direction of flow.. power may be stepped up or down in all Sephiroth".(32)Obviously we cannot follow these paths here, and I am certainly not able to expound this complex and intricate religious system.

If we now look at the Menorah in the religious life of Judaism it is clear that while it has a mystical significance which can lead the adept to the throne of the divine, yet throughout the whole history of Judaism it has taken the form of a practical symbol of everyday religious life. It is kept in the synagogue and in the home. Each winter a special version of it, with nine, not seven branches comes into use for nine days. This is at Chanukah, the winter festival of lights, commemorating the miracle of preservation of the oil for the lights in the Jerusalem temple in the 2nd century BCE when Judas Maccabeus and his brethren led a successful revolt against their imperial persecutors. (1 & 2 Maccabees) By coincidence only, certainly without intention, it happens that I am giving this lecture now on the eve of this year's Chanukah festival, the first candle flame of which will be lit on Menorahs in Jewish homes tomorrow evening.

Depictions of the Menorah are universal in Jewish history. A huge portrayal of it is shown on the triumphal arch of Titus in Rome, emphasising the plight of the Jews losing their home and going into slavery in 70CE, after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Art historian Heinrich Strauss has called attention to the menorah on walls of ancient and medieval synagogues from Asia Minor to Spain as well as to those many in the modern era. He points to its depiction on coins amulets and jewels of all kinds throughout the lands of the dispersion of the Jews, being particularly noticeable on Persian artefacts. Scribbles of menorahs by Jewish prisoners awaiting execution can be seen on the walls of Roman

catacombs, such as beneath the Villa Torlonia. Nearly two thousand years later similar designs were scratched at Auschwitz and Thierienstadt death camps, and when the memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto fighters was unveiled in 1963, two huge Menorahs were seen to be its most significant element.

The Menorah is a homely, as well as a sacred symbol, familiar to all Jewish families and a part of their life as it has been over the centuries. It is unlikely that the ordinary family and particularly the women of the house would be aware of any sacred significance other than its appearance in the story of Exodus and its identification with the Chanukah lights.

There is certainly no idea whatever in normative Judaism that this candlestick could be an image or symbol of, or could in any way resonate with, the goddess Asherah whom the biblical writers and traditional Judaism so abominate. Yet it appears that such a concept is not impossible.

In this talk I have tried to show that there is indeed a case to be made for this, even though it may be thought by some to be a surprising or even a scandalous suggestion.

## Conclusions

To try and gather the threads together: it has only been possible to touch upon some of the themes that underly a concept of the religion of the Hebrew people that is entirely new and surprising to most of us. Although the American scholar Morton Smith, (1971), some twenty-five years ago, opened up ideas concerning the worship of a Hebrew goddess in some circles of the ancient Hebrew religion, it is only recently that it has become accepted as a legitimate study and is attracting more and more interest. Its implications reach far outside traditional scholarship and impinge on our inner beliefs and our conduct derived from them.

I have suggested tonight that the Hebrew religion contains a female divine figure, Asherah, who may have been the consort of God, Yhwh, and also was interchangeable with the Tree of Life. This latter is represented by the Menorah, the seven-branched candlestick, a religious symbol in Judaism whose connection with the female aspect of divinity has been lost. Until the archaeological finds of this century it was generally supposed that the forty texts in the Hebrew bible concerning Asherah, referred to wooden cult objects connected with earlier near eastern goddesses, associated with trees. To perceive in the biblical texts, any reference to the figure of Asherah as a Goddess in her own right, and certainly as a goddess of the Hebrews was condemned.

Re-assessment of this judgement is gaining ground among scholars of different disciplines because of archaeological discoveries. First Canaanite texts gave accounts of a powerful mother goddess named Goddess Asherah; then illustrations and inscriptions linked Yhwh and Asherah together in biblical times in a manner which could be construed to support the idea of a divine couple. This is entirely contrary to the accepted view of divine monotheism expressed solely in the masculine gender.

It was clear that the original description of Asherah as alien to the Hebrews religion could not be sustained; she had certainly been a Canaanite goddess; and it was possible that she was a Hebrew goddess. Further it had been observed that a sacred or cosmic tree attended by animals was a constant theme in Ancient Near Eastern iconography. The cult stand of Taanach gave major indications that the tree could be replaced by and was interchangeable with a female figure conjectured to be a goddess, with some evidence that she might be Asherah. The Tree of Life was generally considered to be dwelling place of the divine, source of fruitfulness, and nourished not only life here in this world, but held the hope of immortality. This background to the Eden story has led to scholarly enquiries concerning its polemic origin. Could the texts have been written as rhetoric against worship of a goddess, who was likely to be Asherah?

Alongside this theme there runs a parallel concept where a stylised version of the Tree of Life is created in the form the seven-branched candlestick the Menorah described in the Book of Exodus. This stood in the first Jerusalem temple and a similar model was placed in the second. Eventually models abounded and came to be a symbol of the Hebrew people. At a later date such replicas were connected with the Maccabean struggles, and continue to hold that identity, as well as that of the Tree of Life.

As time went on, the idea of a divine female figure at the core of Judaism was totally forgotten except within the Kabbalah, a secret mystical form of the religion. Central to this system is the Tree of Life concept, where the ten emanations are

enveloped in the glory of the divine female Shekinah. Praxis within the Kabbalah included identification of the Tree of Life with the Menorah. I have suggested that we may reasonably perceive resonances between the Menorah and the biblical figure of Asherah, herself very possibly connected with the Tree of Life.

Reference has also been made to the Eden story and scholarly commentators who believe that it was composed as a polemic against the worship of Asherah. Referring back to my original question: Was the story of the denial of the Tree of Life to humans in Gen 3:24 a prohibition of worship of the goddess Asherah? It is suggested that an affirmative answer may respectably be given.

Finally, I would like to say that raising these questions is an expression of the profound shift that feminist theology makes to our thinking. As a Jewish woman myself I was until very recently quite unaware of the heritage I have outlined, and I find it inspiring and liberating. I am particularly moved by the Menorah, since now I am able to see in it a reminder that in my background religion of strict monotheism a female aspect or dimension or symbol of the divine may have been present from the beginning. Although Jewish memories of her significance became distorted and eventually faded, yet a symbol of her has been continually present in our homes. I feel that to be a reinforcement of great strength and inspiration since it help restore to women their full personhood of humanity and divinity.

It remains for me, with great pleasure, to thank Dr. Rae and all those many people who have been so kind to me here, and assisted me in every way. I cannot mention them all but I must pick out the Theology Department where Professor Adrian Thatcher and his colleagues have gone out of their way to help me, and in particular my thanks to Dr. Lisa Isherwood, without whose energy and determination I certainly would never have undertaken this study. I want to thank Sue Stephens in the Library and Mike Pepper in Media Services whose help been precious and exceedingly efficient. Lastly a big thank you to the students with whom I have had much so much pleasure in discussion and teaching. It has seemed to me that the connections between the three generations in those lecture rooms - the young students of my grandchildren's generation, the mature students of their parent's age, and myself, were indeed an expression of a true Tree of Life. Thank you.

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