

IN THE WAKE OF THE GODDESSES

Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation
of Pagan Myth



Tikva Frymer-Kensky

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Preface

I began this book eight years ago, while teaching a course on women and religion at the University of Michigan. As histories and theologies of “the Goddess” appeared, I became increasingly disturbed. A scholar of ancient Near Eastern religions, I had read many texts written for and about goddesses, and had formed some clear impressions of the goddesses of the ancient world. This modern literature on the Goddess was alien to my understanding of the worship of these ancient deities. There was not one Goddess, there were many goddesses; they were not enshrined in a religion of women, but in the official religion of male-dominated societies; they were not evidence of ancient mother-worship, but served as an integral part of a religious system that mirrored and provided the sacred underpinnings of patriarchy. My first reaction was scholarly bemusement: how could people write about goddesses when they couldn’t read any of the ancient literature? This soon passed into a form of territorial protectiveness: goddesses, after all, were my turf: when nonscholars wrote about such matters, not only did they invade my turf, but they excavated with a steam shovel, confusing the issues and making it harder to discern the delicate vestiges of the past. In doing so, they also trivialized and invalidated my area of expertise: if you could discover all you needed to know about the Goddess from inside your soul and your mind, why should anyone study Sumerian and Akkadian? Should not knowledge of the ancient texts be the authoritative ground from which to analyze and critique modern theories about the Goddess? I began to get angry: why wasn’t anyone listening to the scholars? But the anger became directed at myself as I realized that scholars weren’t writing much that was pertinent. It is not sufficient to criticize others and point out where their theories are disproved by facts. The issues raised by the new Goddess writings are real issues, and if current beliefs seemed wrong, then it was up to

me to study these ancient deities in as exacting and responsible way as I could. The subject is vast and mostly unexplored, and I chose to study the myths in order to concentrate on the function of these goddesses. What is it that goddesses do in a religious system? What does the femaleness of the deity indicate about that deity, and what does the existence of both male and female deities suggest about the nature of humanity and the cosmos? The results of my study constitute the first part of this book, "The World of the Goddesses."

I could not stop there. Neither do people reconstruct or reinvent ancient paganism out of antiquarian curiosity, nor is the modern interest in the Goddess purely academic. Rather, it stems from a desire to remedy the results of millennia of misogyny and marginalization in the monotheist religions. The Goddess is an alternative to aspects of monotheism that are now perceived as painful to women and dangerous to the earth. The study of ancient goddesses has important implications for our understanding of monotheism, and should illuminate aspects of it that have been ignored or covered over when viewed from other perspectives. Once we realize that the goddesses of ancient pagan religion were not vestigial remnants of a romantic female past, that they had real functions within their religious systems, then we must ask: what happens to those functions when the goddesses are no more? If goddesses represent certain elements in the conceptualization of culture, how does the absence of goddesses affect this conceptualization? If the interplay between gods and goddesses determines the working of the cosmos, how does the lack of this interplay influence our understanding of the world? And if the world of the gods and goddesses exemplifies gender relations and gender ideology, does the concept of gender change when there is only one god? As I studied the ancient polytheist literature, I turned to the Bible with new eyes and asked these questions. The transformations that biblical monotheism brought in the way human beings look at themselves and at the universe are described in the second part of this book, "In the Absence of Goddesses: Biblical Transformations."

The picture of biblical monotheism that emerges is significantly different from that of later monotheist religions, and one must ask: how did we get from there to here? If biblical monotheism transformed the way we look at everything, why did it not stay the dominant vision? What were the problems within biblical monotheism that made it unstable? What were the questions it left unanswered, and what was unsatisfactory in the answers it provided? Part III of this book, "The Unfinished Agenda," considers some of the changes from biblical

monotheism in the development of postbiblical Western religion. After studying these issues, I have become convinced that biblical monotheism has much to say to us today, and in the epilogue, I add my voice to current theological discussion.

Part of the scholarly ferment in recent years has been the realization that the reader is always present in the reading of texts, and that the present is always part of the interpretation of the past. There is no such thing as the totally objective recovery of history, for something informs our choice of questions to ask and our selection of data that seems significant to us. There is also no such thing as one true reading of a piece of literature—even the author's own explanation of the meaning of a work could not encompass the totality of what the work means. Gone is the naïve assumption that knowledge is absolute and absolutely attainable. Instead, we work in a sophisticated universe in which we try to be faithful to the data, knowing full well that we are part of the interpretation of this data. But, if total objectivity is a chimera, how does one distinguish between free interpretative speculations and responsible scholarship? After all, pure subjectivity is an artistic enterprise, not a scholarly one. The answers to this problem are still being articulated, but one working principle is that if the reader is crucial to the interpretation, then the reader should be revealed. If I am the reader of these ancient texts, then my readers in turn should know who I am, what consciously informs my vision, and what might inadvertently affect my judgment. I therefore feel that it is important to introduce myself.

By training, I am an Assyriologist/Sumerologist, which means I spend a large part of my life studying the literatures from ancient Sumer, Babylon, and Assyria. My interests are in religion, law, and literature, and my studies in these areas have only served to reinforce the commitment that brought me into the field: the sense that these ancient religious systems are serious examples of the human quest for understanding, that these ancient cultures are dignified and significant and worthy of respect.

I am also a biblicalist, spending my time studying and pondering the one great book left by ancient Israel. I find the Hebrew Bible to be endlessly fascinating in the intensity of its message, the multiplicity of its meanings, the many ramifications of its thinking, and the impact, past and present, of its existence.

I am also a late-twentieth-century postmodern American feminist Jew, with all that this implies about love of tradition in general combined with desire for free inquiry; love of community with assertion of

self; universal sense of humanity with appreciation of the need for closer associations; and love of my own traditions in particular with a deeply pluralistic understanding of the religious quest. Such seeming contradictions form the dynamic tensions within which I understand my universe and from which I draw my creativity.

In all my efforts, I am a scholar. After months of deciphering, decoding, and interpreting, I am happy when I read the literature on my topic and find that no one before me has seen my questions, has studied the data in quite the same way. But I also feel validated when I work out something carefully and painstakingly from primary data and later discover that someone else had the same insight and published the results in some obscure place or language that had escaped me. Above all, my scholarship makes me extremely reluctant to make assumptions or to draw conclusions that are too facile, too easily arrived at.

I am, as well, a teacher, eager to impart my knowledge, always looking for the text that brings the ancient world alive and the issue that causes the modern person to relate directly to the testimonies of the ancients. I have tried to learn to be a writer, to focus on the line of argument of this book, and not to include many discoveries that I have made that branch out and digress into other fascinating and curious byways in the areas of ancient Near Eastern and biblical religions. And, finally I have learned to be a “person-who-has-written,” to overcome my sense of all that there is yet to explore long enough to share with others what I have already learned.

I have worked alone. The rewards of collaboration have so far eluded me, and I look forward to the day when I can work on a project with a colleague who is close enough in both interests and place to make such collaboration feasible. But I have never worked in isolation. By and large, Assyriologists and biblical scholars in America have a considerable feeling of fellowship for each other. If there are deep personal antagonisms and feuds in my fields, I have remained naïvely and blissfully unaffected by them. Everyone I have talked to has been supportive of me, even when initially suspicious of the possibility of scholarly work on goddesses. I have benefited greatly from my conversations with scholarly colleagues during the years that I have been studying these issues, and would especially like to thank Ann Guinan, Peter Machinist, and Jeffrey Tigay for taking the time to let me talk through some thorny questions as they have arisen. In addition, David Noel Freedman and Moshe Greenberg read and commented on the first drafts of several chapters in the Bible section of this book, Bendt Alster read an early draft on the Sumerian section, Sally Humphreys and Eliz-

abeth Castelli read the section on the Greeks, Neil Danzig, David Goldenberg, and Allan Kensky read the rabbinic materials. As the work progressed, one of my students, Seth Riemer, read chapters in progress and helped improve their clarity and accessibility, as did Diane Sharon and Sasha Golomb. Later, Phyllis Tribble and Sarah Japhet read the first complete manuscript and offered valuable comments. I would also like to thank my two editors at The Free Press, Laura Wolff and Gioia Stevens. Laura Wolff encouraged me in the initial stages, helping me refine my ideas. When Laura left The Free Press, Gioia Stevens patiently saw me through the writing stages and demanded focus and readability. Finally, in the end stages of preparation of this manuscript, when eight years of labor did not prevent the mad last-minute rush to tie up loose ends, I was ably assisted by Etty Lassman, secretary at the Annenberg Research Institute.

I have also been very fortunate as to place. I began in Ann Arbor, but during the years that I have worked on this book, I have lived in Jerusalem, Ann Arbor, and Philadelphia. Everywhere, there were colleagues to talk to and wonderful libraries to use: the École Biblique and Hebrew University in Jerusalem; the University of Michigan Library in Ann Arbor; the Jewish Theological Seminary and Union Theological Seminary in New York; the Annenberg Research Institute, Eastern Baptist Seminary, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, and the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. I have been particularly fortunate in the past few years as a professor at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, a warm, supportive, pluralist environment eager to participate in the development of new ideas, and as a fellow at the Annenberg Research Institute, a taste of scholar's heaven on earth, where scholars are made to feel like the apex of the enterprise of learning instead of the drones.

I have not published this book in preliminary form, but I have lectured on the issues that many chapters raise. Wherever I have spoken, whether to scholars or to lay people, the audience response has been unfailingly positive. The interest that people have shown in my questions and their enthusiasm about my answers have supported me during the darkest, most arduous days of study and writing. I thank all who have learned and caused me to learn, and I dedicate this book to all those involved in the transmissions of tradition and learning: to my teachers and my parents; to my students and my children, and to my husband Allan Kensky, who is my teacher and my student, my colleague and my friend.

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1

Introduction

On the Nature of Monotheism

Religion is on people's minds these days. Fundamental religious questions are being asked. Liberalism versus fundamentalism, orthodoxy and reconstructionism, tradition and revision, immanentism and transcendentalism, rationalism and mysticism are all being debated. Prominent in these discussions are disputes about polytheism and monotheism. The ancient battles between YHWH and the gods,* between pagans and Christians, are being played out again in our time. In their dissatisfaction with the manifestations of monotheism in Judaism and particularly in Christianity, many modern thinkers, particularly feminists, have turned again to polytheistic religions, and in particular to the idea of "The Goddess." Earth-centered, immanent, and immediate, the Goddess of modern neopaganism serves as a refuge from, and counterbalance to, what many consider the remote and punitive god of Western religions.

"Paganism," once a term of scorn, is no longer derogatory. In an ironic twist, the traditional Judeo-Christian view of paganism is often unquestioned. Now however, this paganism is appreciated as body-and life-affirming. Frequently, now, it is monotheism that is under attack. But the "monotheism" attacked as world-denying, body-deprecating and woman-hating has little to do with monotheism as it first appeared in biblical Israel. And the traditional Judeo-Christian view of paganism is very unlike the polytheism reflected in ancient documents. When we

*The letters YHWH stand for the tetragrammaton, the four-letter name of God. The name was most probably pronounced *Yahweh*. However, in Jewish tradition this is not pronounced, and the four letters are pronounced *Adonay* ("God"). In deference to this tradition, I transcribe YHWH and readers can read it as they will.

let the ancient texts speak for themselves, we begin to understand the nature of the monotheist revolution and the promise of our belief-systems.

The age-old questions about monotheism and paganism can be answered today in a new way because of our recovery of the great civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia. The archaeological excavations in Iraq and the decipherment of the cuneiform tablets have revealed the ancient Mesopotamian civilizations: Sumer and Akkad, and the cultures that later developed from them, Babylon and Assyria. These were the mother-cultures of a large area that extended through Syria to the Mediterranean coast, and greatly influenced the many nations that emerged in the "fertile crescent," including Canaan and Israel. The ancient Mesopotamian people have given us a great legacy in the cuneiform tablets that they left behind, tablets that contain the records of the actions and thoughts of the people in Iraq from 2500 B.C.E. until after the beginning of the common era.¹ Not only do they provide an exciting new perspective on the ancient world, they also revolutionize our appreciation of ancient civilization.

These Mesopotamian tablets include the prayers, hymns and the myths of the people of Mesopotamia. They provide a window into ancient religion, for the authors of these tablets were not writing for us: they wrote for their own cultic and ceremonial occasions, and for their own edification. We do not have to glean our information from the writings of later polemicists who might be interested in proving the worth—or lack of worth—of Mesopotamian beliefs or customs. Instead, we can read tablets inscribed by people who believed what they were writing, texts that are a direct reflection of the thoughts, feelings, and concepts of the ancient authors and the people who heard their words. These are not the beliefs of the common people, of course, for "folk" religion usually has its own characteristics, but it is the religion of the scribes, priests, courtiers, and intelligentsia of an ancient world.

If we study the literature of the ancient Babylonians and Sumerians, we can no longer believe the description of "pagan" religion that has long been part of Western tradition and is still often found in modern religious writing. Instead of capricious gods acting only in pursuit of their own desires, we meet deities concerned with the proper ordering of the universe and the regulation of history. Instead of divine cruelty and arrogance, we find deliberation and understanding. Instead of lawlessness and violence, we see a developed legal system and a long tradition of reflective jurisprudence. Instead of immoral attitudes and behavior, we find moral deliberation, philosophical speculation, and

penitential prayer. Instead of wild orgiastic rites, we read of hymns, processions, sacrifices, and prayers. Instead of the benighted paganism of the Western imagination, cuneiform literature reveals to us an ethical polytheism that commands serious attention and respect.

But this new valuation of paganism creates its own dilemmas and awakens new questions. If the Bible is not the first dawn of enlightenment in a world of total darkness, then what is it? If polytheism was not the dark disaster that our cultural tradition has imagined it to be, why was it abandoned in Israel and replaced by biblical monotheism? If the old religions swept away by our own monotheist tradition were not grossly deficient, how can we find the precise significance of one God as opposed to the many? How does a monotheistic religion develop? Did the god of Israel simply absorb all the functions and attributes of the pagan gods, essentially changing nothing? Or did monotheism represent a radical break with the past after all, a break not as simply defined and immediately apparent as has been believed, but no less revolutionary?

The discovery of advanced polytheism poses a central theological issue: if polytheism can have such positive attributes, what is the purpose of monotheism? Did the Bible simply substitute another system, one that represented no advance towards a better understanding of the universe and a more equitable way of living? Indeed, were there some aspects of paganism lost in the transition that present, in fact, a more positive way of living in the world? The immediacy of these issues makes imperative an analysis of the nature of paganism and the precise nuances and essential messages of the monotheist revolution of the Bible. We cannot build our spiritual quest on prejudiced assumptions and polemical attributions. We must attain a profound knowledge of ancient polytheism and a sophisticated reading of the biblical texts informed by this knowledge. Thanks to the discovery of ancient Near Eastern literature, we have the ability to study these questions, understand our own past religious development, and make informed contributions to our future.

Among the many elements of our civilization that are first recorded in Sumer is writing itself, invented in Sumer in the early third millennium B.C.E. There are few natural resources (other than petroleum) in southern Iraq, where these civilizations emerged. There is little stone and little wood, practically nothing but clay and reeds. The Sumerians mixed clay with reeds to make bricks for their building, and they pressed the reeds into the clay for their writing. Their writing was not always intended for posterity, but because of the durable nature of the

clay, it has nevertheless survived. Sun-hardened clay tablets may shatter, and break, but they often survive. When these tablets were fired, either intentionally or through the burning of the buildings in which they were housed, they became even harder and longer lasting. It is due to the durability of clay that so many documents have survived to reveal the culture of the ancient Mesopotamians.

Not only are the antiquity and authenticity of the cuneiform tablets exciting; they enable us to pose far more detailed and sophisticated questions about the ideas of the ancients than any we might attempt to answer by interpreting nonliterary cultural artifacts. Through careful reading and analysis of these texts, we can reconstruct the past and trace the origins of many of our cultural institutions as far back as the beginning of writing. This is a fascinating and tantalizing enterprise, but it entails many difficulties and a sometimes elusive goal. Many problems in the study of ancient civilization need to be understood and stated at the outset. First, we have to be aware of the incomplete nature of our data base. Our information is sporadic, for despite the abundance of cuneiform documents, we are nowhere near to having a complete record of Mesopotamia. We cannot fully select which tablets we can study—the availability of evidence depends on the accident of archeological discovery. We have not dug up all the tablets waiting in the sands of Iraq, we have not copied and studied all the tablets that are sitting in our museums, we have not yet assembled and edited all the literature that these tablets contain. We are not even aware of what it is that we do not yet know. This fact is somewhat intimidating, for it is dangerous to argue from silence, and we are constantly aware that carefully worked-out conclusions might be invalidated by a newly discovered tablet. Nevertheless, enough tablets have been excavated so that we can at least begin the reconstruction of ancient ideas.

It is exciting to hold in our hands something written four thousand years ago and to read from it the words of the ancients. The clay tablet is an authentic message from an ancient author. However, deciphering the message can be difficult. Tablets are frequently incomplete and hard to read. They are often broken, sometimes so badly that we cannot follow the exact sequence of events. They are almost always chipped, particularly at the edges, which, for Sumerian, means at the subject or verb of the sentence. Thus, the meaning is often elusive and tantalizing, and our restorations and translations may be inadequate. Stories and hymns are frequently pieced together from several broken copies of the same text, as we use one to help read the others.

Even when the tablets are perfectly preserved, they are not always

clear. These tablets are written in two ancient languages, Sumerian and Akkadian. Akkadian, a Semitic language, was deciphered almost one hundred and fifty years ago. It can be read with a certain degree of fluency, but there are still troublesome passages where two equally possible translations yield very different meanings. The study of Sumerian is a twentieth-century discipline. Sumerian is neither Semitic nor Indo-European, and cannot be studied by means of grammatical or lexical similarity to other languages. In the last fifty years, there have been enormous advances in our knowledge of the language, and we can read and understand the myths of the Sumerians. Nevertheless, our translations of key passages in Sumerian literature are still somewhat tentative. It is important not to infer too much from any single passage, particularly one whose translation is difficult and problematic. We may also be thwarted in our attempts to interpret meaning and reconstruct ideas, for the tablets tell us only what they tell us, not always the answers to what we ask. In the language of anthropology, these tablets are our native informants, but they are dead. The enterprise is complex, frequently tedious and frustrating, but no difficulties and problems can overshadow the excitement of reading this ancient literature. Rich and fascinating, these texts illuminate the ancient world and our own.

The central question asked by this book is: what happens in the Bible to central ideas of polytheism, and to the functions and roles once played by goddesses? We focus on goddesses for several reasons. There have been several studies of the relationship of the God of Israel to pagan gods, particularly the Canaanite gods El and Ba'al. But a study of goddesses provides a new perspective that reveals aspects of biblical monotheism that have not otherwise been noticed. In addition, we could expect the essentially masculine God of Israel to be able to absorb the attributes of the various male gods, but it might not be as easy for this deity to absorb the functions and attributes of female goddesses. Some of the attributes of these goddesses *are*, clearly, absorbed by YHWH. But others cannot be, and the absence of goddesses causes major changes in the way the Bible—compared with the ancient texts—looks at humanity, culture, society, and nature.

We begin by examining the goddesses of Sumer, despite the fact that the Sumerian tablets were written a millennium before the time of biblical Israel. The reason is quite simple. Goddesses are present and active in Sumerian mythology. Later during the second millennium, information about the goddesses is much harder to glean from the texts. The myths record the exploits and relationship of male gods, and the goddesses have been marginalized. The religion of Israel's contem-

poraries was not one in which gods and goddesses had equal roles and import. There was no longer possible a choice between monotheism and the goddesses, but rather one between monotheism and a male-dominated polytheism.

But in these later religions, the functions that the goddesses of Sumer had performed had to be addressed in some fashion. By the first millennium, the male gods of polytheism had usurped many of these functions, and the goddesses were invoked to perform whatever remaining functions the male gods had not fully taken over. Biblical monotheism did not have this option. Gender had disappeared from the divine, and there are no more “male” and “female” functions. What the “female” functions had been, how the Bible reorganized its world view in the absence of gender, the ramifications of the absence of goddesses in the Bible, and the transformations it entailed are subjects we will consider in the chapters to come.

PART I

The World of the Goddesses
