

A GODDESS OF ISRAEL

will uncover thy nakedness unto them, that they may see all thy nakedness (Ezek. 16:35-37).

EXCERPT >

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THE PRINCE IS BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD. (1997)

The biblical authors favor the stinging imagery of a cuckolded husband to convey the sense of betrayal that God feels toward his Chosen People—but something else is going on here, something shocking and revealing. When God bitterly turns away the Israelites and sends them back to “the gods which ye have chosen,” he appears to concede that these pagan gods and goddesses may, in fact, be able to do some good for the Chosen People. Jephthah, too, tacitly confirms not only the existence of rival deities but also their authority when he invokes a pagan god named Chemosh in his parleys with the king of Ammon: “Wilt thou not possess that which Chemosh thy god giveth thee to possess?” (Judg. 11:24).

The conventional wisdom is that the references to rival gods in the Bible are intended by God and the biblical authors to be merely ironic or patronizing or both—the One God is taunting the Israelites to seek the favor of the illusory gods that the Almighty knows to be powerless because they do not really exist at all, and Jephthah is only flattering the god worshipped by the deluded Ammonites in an effort to make peace through diplomacy. But so many gods and goddesses show up in so many surprising places in the Bible—and the Israelites find them so alluring, so seductive—that we may be tempted to believe that the Israelites did not always regard Yahweh as the One and Only God.

As Jephthah’s story reaches its tragic climax, as his daughter goes up in flames on the altar of El Shaddai, we might imagine that she is being punished for doing something that the pious authors of the Bible simply refuse to speak aloud.

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Another curious feature of the Hebrew Bible is the absence of a female counterpart to God, a deity who is supposedly above and beyond mere gender but is always described in words that unmistakably suggest his masculinity. “The God of Judaism is undoubtedly a father-symbol and a

father-image," as one scholar pointed out, "possibly the greatest such symbol and image conceived by man."⁴⁸

Virtually every other people in the ancient Near East—and, in fact, throughout the world—imagined that gods came in pairs, male and female, just like human beings, and their sacred writings describe courtships, marriages, childbearing and child-rearing, and a fantastic variety of sexual encounters among their deities. The Israelites alone are told that *their* God is a bachelor and a loner who lacks father or mother, brothers or sisters, friends or lovers. A female consort to the Almighty—"the divine woman who appears in different forms throughout the world, yet remains basically the same everywhere"⁴⁹—is nowhere to be found in the Bible, or at least not in plain sight.

Although the Bible itself seems to allow no place for her, a celestial consort to the Almighty *can* be found in the writings of the ancient rabbis, the secret books of the medieval savants who studied the mystical tradition called Kabbalah, and the rich folklore of the Jewish people. A figure known as the Shekinah came to embody and symbolize the feminine qualities of God—"the loving, rejoicing, motherly, suffering, mourning, and, in general, emotion-charged aspect of deity."⁵⁰ By the thirteenth century, when Kabbalah was in full flower, the Shekinah—sometimes called the Matronit, the Lady, or the Queen—"emerged as a distinct female deity, possessing a will and desire of her own, acting independently of the traditional but somewhat shrunk masculine God, often confronting and occasionally opposing him and playing a greater role than He in the affairs of Her children, the people of Israel."⁵¹

Did the Shekinah suddenly and spontaneously appear in Jewish folklore and rabbinical literature long after the Bible was a closed book? Or can the Almighty's consort be regarded as a remnant of a long and unbroken tradition of goddess worship that reaches all the way back to the ancient Near East? At least one iconoclastic scholar, anthropologist Raphael Patai, argues that the Israelites experienced the same goddess-hunger that can be found in peoples and cultures around the world in every age—and Patai insists, too, that the worship of a female deity by the Israelites was not an act of apostasy but rather "an integral part of the religion of the Hebrews."⁵²

The pioneers of feminist Bible criticism—a movement in biblical scholarship that has refreshed and even revolutionized the study of the

Bible over the last twenty years or so—argue that a “submerged goddess” can be detected in the Bible itself and that “goddess functions”⁵³ are performed by various women depicted in the biblical text. But Patai goes even further. The Israelites did not merely adopt the deities of their neighbors, a common enough practice in the ancient world; rather, Patai suggests, they borrowed various aspects of the Canaanite goddesses and used them to conjure up a female deity that they embraced as their very own. Not until the coming of King Josiah was the goddess of Israel driven underground.

“[T]he goddess to whom the Hebrews clung with such tenacity down to the days of Josiah, and to whom they returned with such remorse following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple,” writes Patai, “was, whatever the prophets had to say about her, no foreign seductress, but a Hebrew goddess, the best divine mother the people had had to that time.”⁵⁴

A poignant story told by the rabbis captures the intimate attachment that the Jewish people felt toward the Shekinah throughout the centuries of exile from the Promised Land—and suggests, too, that the human longing for a female counterpart to the Heavenly Father is fundamental and undeniable. According to one rabbinical tradition, God stayed behind in Jerusalem even after the Temple was destroyed by the legions of Rome and the Jewish people were forcibly dispersed throughout the ancient world. But the Shekinah, a tender and loving mother to the children of Israel, insisted on accompanying them into exile and succored them during the long years of oppression in the lands of the Diaspora.

Still more pointed is the mystical tradition in Judaism that imagines the Shekinah, as queen and consort of God, engaging in sexual intercourse with the Almighty in joyous celebration of the Sabbath. The Kabbalists who espoused the idea of divine sexuality were careful to insist that the mating of God and the Shekinah was only a mystical and not a carnal encounter. But the same notion found a more literal expression in the Jewish tradition that a husband and wife ought to engage in “conjugal union” on the Sabbath, a day of rest, study, and prayer on which every act is sanctified, including the act of sexual intercourse.⁵⁵

Only the dimmest shadow of the Shekinah can be detected in contemporary Judaism, but at least one ritual contains an ember of the old passions that she once kindled in the hearts and souls of the people who

venerated her over the millennia. At the beginning of the Friday evening prayer service in most synagogues, the congregation turns away from the ark where the Torah scrolls are kept and faces the door of the sanctuary while singing a hymn that was borrowed from the mystics who studied the Kabbalah. "Come O bride!" the congregation sings in greeting the unseen figure who is imagined to be the Sabbath Queen and the bride of the Almighty. Although few worshippers realize the origins or meanings of the ritual, it is one last echo of a tradition that may reach all the way back to Jephthah's daughter.

A CROWN OF FLOWERS

Jephthah's daughter, as she appears in the *Biblical Antiquities* of the ancient author known as Pseudo-Philo, embodies precisely the same qualities that are ascribed to the Shekinah: she is "loving, rejoicing, motherly, suffering, mourning, and . . . emotion-charged." According to Pseudo-Philo, Seila and her companions seek out a place for their ritual observances that resembles the "high mountains" and "leafy trees" that are described as the sites of pagan worship by the biblical authors. Seila is made to address her words of lamentation to the beasts of the forest and the forest itself. So we might wonder if the "rewritten Bible" of Pseudo-Philo offers a clue to the mystery of where Jephthah and her companions go and what they do to "bewail [her] virginity."

Now Pseudo-Philo did not dare suggest that Seila is a goddess-worshipper, much less a goddess. Indeed, Seila is made to seem even more sanctimonious in *Biblical Antiquities* than she appears in the rabbinical literature or the Bible itself. According to Pseudo-Philo, Seila absolves her father of any guilt in her death. "May my words go forth in the heavens," says Seila, "that a father did not subdue by force his daughter whom he has devoted to sacrifice."⁵⁶ Although she seems to understand that her father's vow is legally flawed, Seila does not engage him in a debate over the fine points of the law, nor does she appeal to the rabbinical courts; rather, she encourages her father to do exactly what he has promised to do. "And now do not annul everything you have vowed," she instructs him, "but carry it out."

Pseudo-Philo imagines that God himself, who holds himself aloof