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THE LEGACY OF INANNA

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The Lady of Heaven is known by several names in the context of the Ancient Near East: Inanna (Sumerian), Ishtar (Akkadian), and Astarte (Canaanite). Other similar goddesses include Isis (Egypt), Tanit (Carthage), Aphrodite (Greece), and Venus (Rome). An excellent example of how the people of the ANE were aware of the different "versions" of this goddess is the Qudshu relief plaque, which is located in the Winchester College collection.[1] This relief portrays a naked female goddess standing on a lion, holding snakes, and wearing the "Hathor" wig. The accompanying hieroglyphs contain a very revealing list of her different names: Qudshu (Ashera), Anat, and Astarte (Dever 2005: 178; Edwards 1955: 49). This evidence has been widely discussed as a classic example of syncretism,[2] which probably merges two goddesses (Anat and Astarte) into a new type, Qudshu, or equates all three goddesses as the same (Cross 1997: 34). This relief has many iconographic correspondences with the Egyptian Qudshu plaque.

The cult of Ishtar is ancient, as is shown by the remains of Inanna's temple in Uruk (4th millennium B.C.E.), which is near the white temple dedicated to Anu. It is perhaps not inconsequential that the foundations of civilization were laid during this very time, suggesting that a religious motivation was the primary factor for the urban phenomenon known as the "Uruk revolution" (Stone 2000: 236).

Centuries later, the cult of Ishtar seduced the Assyrian Empire. The remains of Ishtar's temple in Aššur extend from the mid-3rd millennium B.C.E. to the end of the New-Assyrian Kingdom (Meinhold 2009: 48). Interestingly, Herman V. Hilprecht has suggested a connection between Nineveh and Nana, an old name for Ishtar (Barton 2007: 20). As an example of her relationship with Nineveh, there are some hymns written ca. 1800 B.C.E., where Assurbanipal I promoted her worship:[3]

1. This Qudshu relief plaque belongs to Winchester College and is known as the "Winchester College relief."

2. Syncretism is the amalgamation of different aspects of culture for several reasons, making the borders of identity diffuse.

3. This song is entitled "Prayer of Assurnasirpal son of Šamširaman" by Barton (Barton 2007).

> 2 To the mother of wisdom…[the lady of] majesty, 3 To her who dwells at Ibarbar, the goddess [who] made me renowned, 4 To the queen of the gods, into whose hands are delivered the command of the great gods, 5 To the lady of Nineveh…[of the gods], the exalted one. (Barton 2007: 133)

She seems to have played a variety of roles and exhibited several traits as the goddess of sexual love, fertility, war, rain, patroness of prostitutes and other independent women, and goddess of the morning and evening star –Venus (Abusch 1995: 848). Therefore, her influence extended from war to love and sensuality, from birth to death. She was usually depicted as a winged, voluptuous woman, naked or semi-naked, with exaggerated sexual organs, standing on lions, and wearing a tall mountain-shaped crown (Jones 2005).

Ishtar/Inanna's role within the Ancient Mesopotamian pantheon was preeminent and dominant. Its social and political configuration embraces her personality profoundly. Several scholars examined her traits both in anthropological and religious studies (Allen 2015; Frymer-Kensky 2006: 61-81; Margalit 1990). Since the study of Ishtar deals with the role of women in ancient societies (Bahrani 2001: 14-27),[4] it is necessary to obtain some comprehension of the role of women in both the religious and the sociological context.

Ishtar's Mythology

According to Sumerian-Babylonian theology, Ishtar or Inanna and her husband (Tammuz) were responsible for the seasonal shifts of summer and spring. These seasons are connected with the death and resurrection of Tammuz, thanks to Ishtar's intervention. Her sister Ereškigal, owner of the netherworld, was responsible for causing Ishtar's death. In consequence, Ea/Enki sent the water of life to Ishtar. She became alive again, producing seed germination and the beginning of spring. The core of this theology is found in the myth "Ishtar's Descent to the Netherworld," which emphasizes death and resurrection. This mortuary topic intertwines religious entities with the natural world.[5] It is remarkable that dying gods were very popular in Sumerian culture;[6] all of them were related to the cycles of nature (Wiggerman 1997: 41). This intricate fusion of nature and religion places Ishtar in the context of one of the most appealing religious motives that captivated the imagination of ancient people, and probably, especially women.

Her dual identity as mother and wife of Tammuz[7] may be confusing to the

4. Bahrani (Bahrani 2001: 14-27) mentions three movements that review the role of women in history: 1) documenting women in the historical record, 2) analyzing her oppressed role in the past, and 3) adopting a systematic approach to processes related to women's studies. The last one focuses on epistemological issues. In addition, she did a review of Ishtar in her book entitled "*Women of Babylon*," which seems to be part of the third movement.

5. Unlike the Jewish-Christian tradition, which stresses God as the Creator of nature, Mesopotamian theology made no difference between gods and creation, or made this difference very diffuse.

6. It is possible to distinguish at least four groups of Sumerian gods according to a specific region: the southern marshes, the farming regions, the herding regions, and the southern orchards. The latter group refers to the netherworld; dying gods belong to this group (Wiggerman 1997).

7. Or Dummuzi; In this case Ishtar is Inanna.

modern reader. However, this duality was very well understood in the ANE. There the female figure played an important role in the transmission of power,[8] especially in the early stages[9] (Langdon 1914: 25). In that case, to keep his royal lineage, the king had to marry his sister, or by default, his mother. Other parallels with this practice can be seen in the Osiris–Isis marriage. In addition, there is evidence that in the Early Dynastic II and III periods, queens were almost on the same level as kings, being depicted and mentioned in the royal tombs of Ur[10] (Rodin 2014: 59, 60). In consequence, Ishtar defined or at least, outlined the underlying concepts for hierarchy. She attached herself to the spine of the political order in a symbiotic relationship: the empire served Ishtar; Ishtar served the empire.

Fertility Theology

Although Mesopotamian deities seem to have been asexual at the beginning, they were in fact male-female couples that each reproduced another pair (Leick 1994: 19). Apsû and Tiāmat are masculine and feminine, grammatically speaking[11] (Leick 1994: 14). Even more interesting is the case of the Heaven-Earth couple. They are described as man and woman respectively. The sky pours out its vitality (semen) into the earth, which gives birth to divine heroes. In both couples, Apsû/Tiāmat and Heaven-Earth, the water is associated with fertility[12] since the Sumerian word for semen is equated with water[13] (Rodin 2014: 109). The following poem is a metaphorical description of copulation:

> The great Earth (Ki) made herself glorious, her body flourished with greenery.
> Wide Earth put on silver metal and lapis-lazuli ornaments,
> Adorned herself with diorite, calcedony, cornelian and diamonds.
> Sky (An) covered the pasture with (irresistible) sexual attraction, presented himself in majesty,
> The pure young woman (Earth) showed herself to the pure Sky,
> The vast Sky copulated with the wide Earth,
> The seed of the heroes Wood and Reed he ejaculated into her womb.
> The Earth, the good cow, received the good seed of Sky in her womb.
> The Earth, for the happy birth of the plants of Life, presented herself (Leick 1994: 18)

One can see that the core of "fertility theology" in the Mesopotamian pantheon is animism. In this theology, all gods transmit their virtue by sexual reproduction. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that sexual intercourse and giving birth replicate the divine nature. Hence, the woman embodies the "secrets" of divinity and Inanna is a natural development of this cosmic vision of life and religion.

8. This is the female lineage model.

9. Its antiquity can be supported by Semitic cults where the king often assumes the role of dying god (Langdon 1914).

10. Nibanda and Puabi are called "Queen," denoting their high status. On the other hand, the king Mesanepada is called "consort of the nu-gig priestess," denoting his inferior status before the "Queen." In addition, Puabi was buried in a rich tomb, similar to other royal tombs (Rodin 2014: 60).

11. Leick (Lieck 1994, 14) quoted part of the myth from Held: "When on high heaven had not (yet) been created, Earth below had not (yet) been brought into being, When Apsû primeval, their begetter, Primal Tia - mat, their progenitress, (Still) mingled their waters together...".

12. In this way "mingling waters" could be interpreted as a metaphor for sexual procreation.

13. It is especially true when it is connected to Enki and Ninḫursaĝa (Rodin 2014: 109).

Samuel Kramer (Kramer 1983: ix) suggested that the couple (Dumuzi/Inanna) evolved from the agricultural context of southern Sumer to the nomadic life of northern Akkad. The last version emphasized the arbitrary will and power of the gods instead of the force of grain in the earlier version.[14] It is probable that this shifting process took place along with the increasing attempts to centralize the various city-states, causing an amalgamation of local deities.

Therefore, the various relationships in Inanna´s family tree change, depending on the stages of her evolution. For instance, she had several fathers[15] (Lapinkivi 2010: 35). Often, she was seen as the daughter of Anu, but other times her father was Sin (Jones 2005). Likewise, most of the time she and Ereshkigal, her sister, are different entities, but sometimes they seem to be the same. It is evident that the tradition, mythology, and depiction of Inanna grew and evolved. As will be commented on later, political forces played an important role in the unification of local versions of Inanna, using her symbol and personality as the glue for new emerging social structures.

Gender is the essence of this religious system that became intertwined with civilization at its very beginning. Although Sumerian-Babylonian theology seems to be genderless[16] because of some trinitarian patterns: heaven- earth-sea or Anu-Enlil-Ea, it works only on the assumption of female-male reproduction. Probably Inanna was a natural development or extension of the first female deity, mother earth.[17] As we have seen, mother earth female attributes were highlighted in opposition to sky male attributes.

It is clear that fertility is a main component of religion in Mesopotamia even before the historical period. Early references to the mother goddess are seen in several parts of the ANE. For instance, there are early depictions in the form of female figurines with overly-stressed sexual organs in Canaan (Garfinkel 2004). It is of particular interest for this article to mention a terracotta statuette from Çatal Hüyük (Anatolia) dated by archaeologists about 6500 B.C.E. (Bahrani 2001: 46) in Anatolia. This figurine could be a clear example of the "reign of the goddess" within a matriarchal society (Bahrani 2001: 46-47). She is depicted on a throne with two cat-like animals in the act of giving birth. Apparently, its association with womanhood, throne, and birth strengthens the idea of a matriarchal society, a time when the female figure was dominant. There is no evidence of an exclusive female cult in the archaeological record since male and female deities appear together. Nevertheless, the depiction of this mother goddess seems to emphasize

14. Kramer (Krammer 1983, ix) commented that Akkadian Dumuzi is characterized by the astral heavenly bull, and Inanna assumed directing and directive attributes as the Goddess of Love, which is different from her more peaceful earlier version.

15. An, Enlil, Enki/Ea, Nanna/Ŝin.

16. Genderless at least in appearance, since as we have seen, female and male characteristics are part of the fecundity notion inherent to gods.

17. The Sumerians called her Mother Vine-Stalk or Goddess Vine-Stalk (Lapinkivi 2010: 43). Even when there is no certainty of the first stage in Sumerian-Babylonian theology, the Sumerians seem to be very impressed by the natural connection between mother earth and grain, which corresponds with Inanna and her son. The reason for the link between religion and nature is because, in an agrarian society, everything depends on the constant cycle of the flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (Lapinkivi 2010).

the idea of female nudity in the ANE as an equivalent to power[18] (Bahrani 2001). From this example and others, it can be observed that the first mother goddesses were associated with power, sexuality, and motherhood, without clear limits between them (Murray 1934: 93-100).[19]

Sacred Marriage: Source of Power

The Greek term "*hieros gamos*," usually translated as sacred marriage, was initially addressed to the wedding of Zeus and Hera, which subsequently applies to alliances between a couple of deities or gods and humans when marked by ritual (Stuckey 2005). In the case of Inanna/Ishtar and Dumuzi/Tammuz, this ritual is attested to by some extant hymns that describe the human participants as personifying or incarnating them. From this union, divine power is transferred from Inanna to the king.

There is some speculation about whether the sacred marriage ritual actually took place and if this included sexual intercourse (Stuckey 2005). Evidence of the latter is given in poems that describe the rite in detail (Jones 2003: 291-302),[20] as well as other sources, like royal inscriptions and economic texts. It is probable that this rite took place on New Year´s day in the palace of the king, known as "the house of life" (Kramer 1963: 490).

In this rite, Inanna prepared herself by taking a bath, and putting on perfume and special clothes (Stuckey 2005). Probably the sacred marriage is depicted in the second part of the Uruk vase. It seems there that Dumuzi is taking Inanna as his consort (Riddle 2010: 21). While worshipers are singing and sacrificing[21] themselves (Jones 2003: 292), Dumuzi approaches her door. Then, she greets Dumuzi and he gives her some gifts. Sexual intercourse follows, and finally both take their seat on the thrones.

In the hymn "The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi," their sexual intercourse is described in agricultural terms (Kramer 1983). The vulva of Inanna corresponds to a field needing to be plowed. "As for me, Inanna, Who will plow my vulva? Who will plow my high field? Who will plow my wet ground?" (Kramer 1983: 37). Along this line, other parallels are plants, grain, and the womb. Apparently, water, plants, and trees of various kinds are metaphors for sexual intercourse (Kramer 1972: 123). Some depictions of Inanna and Dumuzi make a connection between plants and fertility as well. One example is a Mesopotamian cylinder seal

18. The Baubo goddess was similar to Ishtar, with the difference that her cult was restricted to women while Ishtar was supported by men (Murray 1934: 93-100).

19. M. A. Murray (Murray 1934: 93-100) establishes three different kinds of female fertility figures: universal mother, divine woman, and personified yoni. This last one is Murray's technical term referring to figures whose genitalia are the essential part. These three categories correspond to child, virginity, and sexual functions. Murray identifies Ishtar with a "divine/woman."

20. Although there is little information about what happened during the rite, it can be understood partially by the Iddin-Dagan Hymn (Jones 2003: 291-302). There the ritual is two days long. She is invoked and worshipers execute a carnivalesque ritual accompanied by instrumental music. Inanna looks down from heaven on the cultic parade headed by the king. A great feast takes place. When the people go home to rest she appears in dreams, judging evil. An offering of food follows and the consummation of the marriage takes place.

21. This part of the rite is described in the Iddin-Dagan Hymn as carnivalesque: cross-dressing, bondage, and self-mutilation (Jones 2003: 292).

from about 2320-2150 B.C. (Stuckey 2005). There, Inanna welcomes Dummuzi, who is emerging from the base of a tree. Since similar metaphorical language is used in Song of Songs in the Hebrew Bible (Carr 1979: 103),[22] some scholars believe that this book belongs to the same literary genre. However, the book from the Hebrew Bible is not linked to a cultic context.[23]

In the execution of the sacred marriage rite, the king and Inanna/Ishtar´s priestess, *Nin-dingir/Entu*, were avatars in whom Inanna activated the fertile cycle of nature (Niehaus 2008: 43; Stuckey 2005). In consequence, particular power was transmitted from the divine to the human sphere through the king who acts as the mediator between them.

As we have mentioned, the female cult embodies most of the fertility theology of Ancient Mesopotamia. Consequently, Inanna/Ishtar introduced herself through the sacred marriage into the political scene.

Akkadian Syncretism of Inanna

Since culture and religion share a common ground in several aspects such as politics, the ruling society took both into consideration to maintain a sense of unity. In consequence, syncretism took place, amalgamating different myths to produce an official creed. For example, the Akkadian version of the Gilgamesh Epic seems to be a unified version of separate, independent Sumerian stories (Veenker 1981: 199). A similar process amalgamated the enormous corpus of Inanna stories during or about the time of the influence of Sargon of Agade (2300 B.C.). Other versions of Mesopotamian myths also went through the process of adaptation and syncretism.

Perhaps the most famous myth of Ishtar/Inanna is her descent in to the netherworld and resurrection. This is known in two different versions: Semitic and Sumerian. The Semitic version has been a part of the scholarly debate for about one century. On the other hand, the Sumerian version was translated and deciphered by comparing various extant copies[24] since 1940 (Kramer 1940: 18). Both versions are similar in general terms, but several details are different. Kramer (Kramer 1940: 20) suggested that the Semitic version is more emotional and intense than the Sumerian version, and their temporal distance is at least one millennium.

Kramer (Kramer 1940) summarized both versions as follows: In the Sumerian version, (1) Inanna has forsaken heaven and earth, and all her temples descend to the netherworld, (2) she adorns herself with her queenly robes; (3) she asks Ninshubur to plead for her to Enlil, Nanna, and Enki (Semitic Ea); (4) Inanna's

22. Some scholars have discussed to what extent Song of Songs is a reproduction or a sort of imitation of the Dumuzi-Inanna sacred marriage songs. However, the examination of some genres associated with Songs of Songs might suggest that although this Hebrew book reflects many motifs and topoi of Mesopotamian sacred marriage, it is, in fact, lyric love poetry, which distinguishes it from the others (Carr 1979: 103).

23. While some similarities are visible, there is no evidence for a cultic use of Song of Songs.

24. Kramer (Kramer 1940: 1) contributed to the deciphering of this Sumerian version by his discovery of two additional fragments in the Istanbul Museum of the Ancient Orient, and by comparing them with previous documents.

descent to the netherworld was supposedly an invitation by Ereshkigal to be present at the funeral of Gugalanna, the great bull of heaven; (5) she is admitted and passes by the seven gates, naked; (6) once in front of Ereshkigal, she is judged by the Anunnaki, the seven judges of the netherworld; (7) by their decree, she is put to death; (8) after three days and three nights, Ninshubur pleads to Enlil, Nanna, and Enki, being listened to only by Enki; (9) Enki sends sexless creatures, kurgarru and galaturru, entrusting them with the "food of life" and "water of life;" and (10) Inanna is revived and re-ascends to the earth, accompanied by the dead. In the Semitic version, (1) Ishtar descends to the netherworld to mourn the death of her husband and child; (2) she orders its keeper to open its doors; (3) when she passes its seven doors, the keeper removes a bit of her apparel; (4) once she passes the last door, Ereshkigal orders Namtar to bring forth 60 diseases against her; (5) Papsukkal, fearing the extinction of life, hastens to Ea for help; (6) Ea sends to Asnamir to intercede for her in front of Ereshkigal; (7) Ereshkigal orders to give her the "water of life;" and (8) she is revived and re-ascends to the earth with her apparel restored.

In the comparison of both versions, their differences in tone and orientation are very clear, which implies a later adaptation of the earlier Sumerian version. The netherworld in the Sumerian mind is related to a foreign land[25] in the mountains, which were a continuous threat for them (Kramer 1981: 154). In regard to this aspect, it is observable how the Semitic version has a different attitude toward the netherworld. While the Sumerian version describes Inanna as a hero in front of Ereshkigal and the seven judges, the Semitic version emphasizes her aggressive attitude toward the netherworld. In addition, attention shifts slightly from Inanna–feminine–to Ea–masculine.

From Inanna to Ishtar

The earliest recorded mention of Inanna's name comes from the Late Uruk, Jendet Nasr periods, about 3400 to 3000 B.C.E. (Collins 1994: 107). Some pictographic signs read INANNA or MUS (radiant). The earliest cuneiform sign of her name is a representation of a ring-post, which is the entrance door of a reed-house. This Inanna symbol is depicted frequently. One example is a bearded man holding stylized flowers and feeding sheep and goats. There, the ring-post of Inanna appears on each side of the man. Collins, (P. Collins 1994) suggested that it symbolizes the "priest-king" of Uruk. Similar "city seals" from the Early Dynasty I period represent a collaboration between cities to support the cult of Inanna at Uruk. The disappearance of the ring-post symbol during the Early Dynasty II period (2750-2600 B.C.E.) could reflect the decline of a centralized form of her worship and increasingly independent cults in different cities (Collins 1994: 108).

An early portrayal of Inanna combines her motherhood and divinity and comes from a trinket mold dated to the third millennium B.C.E., which was found in a house at Titriş Höyük, Turkey (Laneri 2002: 14). It is possible to identify this depiction with Inanna, thanks to the symbols surrounding her. She is depicted

25. The Sumerian word *Kur* "mountain" is equivalent to Hades (Greek) and Sheol (Hebrew). Later on, this word came to mean "foreign land" (Kramer 1981: 154).

holding her breasts, a star with dots nearby, and a symbol of the bull of heaven to her right.[26] There are some parallels of some elements of this trinket mold in other contexts. For instance, the pendant with a pseudo-circular structure is seen at Kültepe (Central Anatolian) and in one tomb at the royal cemetery of Ur. In addition, the star with dots is the cosmological symbol of Inanna and is found in several other places (Laneri 2002: 26). On the other hand, two important characteristics are seen in this mold: Inanna naked holding her breasts and without her horned crown. Both differences make this representation closer to the mother goddess than some later ones.

Another early depiction of Inanna is on the Warka vase (3200-3100 B.C.E.). Here Inanna is represented as receiving an offering from naked priests. Apparently, the king is part of the initiation rite, facing the goddess (Stuckey 2005). This vase clearly distinguishes three social classes: the elite, controlling restricted temples; heads of houses, giving an offering; and the production force represented by herds and plants (Sundsdal 2008: 47-49). Even though only men constitute the elite class, Ishtar is above all social classes. The use of this kind of vase in a ritual context is attested to by other vessels found at Warka with the following inscription: "To Urru, the priest A-gid-ḫa-du for the son of Lugal-kisal-si born of his wife Mu-ḫar-sag has given (this vase)" (Banks 1904: 63).

It is under Sargon's influence that Inanna became Ishtar. The name Ishtar derives from Eshtar, which originated from Attar/Ashtart, a female deity from Ugarit (Collins 1994: 110). It is under this new name that Ishtar obtained male attributes, contrasting with her female attributes, as the goddess of war and love. Sargon intended a syncretism of Sumerian and Semitics deities[27] for the unification of his Sumer-Akkad empire (Collins 1994: 111). This Akkadian period is called the "Dynasty of Ishtar."

Perhaps the female-male characteristics represented on the Warka Vase in the form of a lion and a ram allowed the identification of Inanna with Ishtar, who seems to be clearly of double gender.

There are no extant sculptures of Ishtar coming down to us from Babylon (Ornan 2005: 63). This, however, does not mean that they did not exist.[28] It is likely that they were looted during countless upheavals, due to their precious materials.

Ishtar's connection with war and power is displayed in several depictions where she is standing upon a lion (Rodney 1952: 211-16). Some of the typical elements of these kinds of portraits are a staff (harp) in her right hand as a symbol of command; a ring and rod (land-measuring implements?) as symbols of her divinity; and a lion associated with several divinities (Rodney 1952: 213). In one carving depicted at Maltai, she and Shamash are heading a procession of mounted deities[29] (Ornan 2005: 64). Similar later Assyrian representations suggest that they

26. The double bull-headed pendant is considered as an idealized representation of a byre where the holy cattle was housed (Laneri 2002: 27).

27. Sargon made his daughter, Enheduanna, the high priestess at Ur (Collins 1994:11).

28. Their existence can be deduced from textual evidence of some rituals where divine statues were washed and we have some glyptic devotional themes from Assyria (Ornan 2005, 73).

29. Few depictions of human-shaped Shamash are also known (Ornan 2005).

were carved to commemorate the temple dedication (Layard 1852: 164; Rodney 1952: 214) or royal usage.

One example of this royal usage is a cylinder seal impression of Sennacherib (Winter 2010: 121). There the king is depicted facing two mounted deities: Aššur and Ishtar. In this political-religious portrait, he identifies himself as a vice-ruler of the chief gods. This seal quotes Aššur's words at the beginning: "Seal of Destinies, which Aššur, king of the gods, seals the destiny of …mankind: whatever he seals he will not alter" (Winter 2010: 122). Another example of this royal usage may be the White Obelisk, Side A, third panel from the top. Here Ishtar is depicted standing on a mountain.[30] It is known that this is Ishtar from the epigraph labeling "Bit naḫti," which is the sacred Ishtar temple at Nineveh (Ornan 2005: 30, 40). There is a close semantic relationship between temple and mountain, with the temples being microcosmic representations of the earth. In addition, floral imagery in Assyrian temples is symbolic of fruitfulness and riches coming from Ishtar (Ragavan 2010: 283-88).

It seems that when Inanna, the goddess of fertility, became Ishtar, the warrior goddess, her symbol became a binding force that legitimized the "state."[31] Then, the fertility theology permeated the transmission of authority from one generation to another. Because of that, animism as the essence of spirituality in Ancient Mesopotamia included the state in the realm of the gods in addition to the natural world. Therefore, the state became a new holy group of elements where the gods displayed their will.

Female Goddesses in Canaan

Several questions regarding religious phenomena at Canaan were raised since the publication of William G. Dever's book: *Did God have a Wife?* (Dever 2005: 181-84). He claimed that Yahwism, in its early stage of evolution, included the concept of sacred marriage between Yahweh and Asherah[32] (Dever 2005: 136, 212-14, 97; Wiggins 2007: 21). Later on, some reforms eliminated Asherah from the elitist theology, but not from the traditional or "folk" religion that was highly supported by women. This hypothesis supposes that the official cult or Yahwism was a reaction against folk religion; meanwhile, it admits some degree of evolution of the Hebrew God thanks to monarchic efforts and the necessity to create a new national identity after the exile. Dever supported the idea that these factors imposed a monotheistic version of Yahweh at the end.

One part of the archaeological evidence quoted by Dever is the discovery of the Judean Pillar Figurines (JPFs) coming from the 9th to 7th centuries B.C.E. These figurines, in accordance with Dever, are Asherah. Their existence might prove in some way that an early version of Yahwism in Israel appeared before the exile. Another argument presented by Dever is the discovery of the Kuntillet

30. Some parallels of deities above mountains are seen (Ornan 2005: 31).

31. If we can use the word "state" at all, since tribal origination was the main structure in Ancient Mesopotamia.

32. Some arguments in favor of this theory are (1) Asherah was the consort of the main god in ANE contexts, (2) deities were represented by symbols, as was Asherah, and (3) the deuteronomists' imprint is seen in its rejection of Asherah (Wiggins 2007: 21).

'Ajrûd inscriptions by Z. Meshel in 1975-76 (Dever 2005: 128, 62, 97; Wiggins 2007: 7). These inscriptions, dating from the 9th-8th centuries B.C.E., mention Yahweh and Asherah as a source of blessing: "…I bless you by Yahweh, [our guardian/of Samaria,] and by his/its ashera/Ashera" (Smith 1987: 333). Another similar inscription, dating from the 8th century B.C., was found on a wall of a tomb at Khirbet el-Qôm: "…May Urimayu be blessed by Yahweh my guardian (?), and his/its ashera/Ashera" (Smith 1987: 334). These inscriptions triggered several scholarly discussions dealing with early Israel's religion.

However, the main argument is not entirely new. Some critical scholars assumed that the deutoronomistic source rejected the idea of a divine couple (Asherah-Yahweh), so several passages would criticize Asherah, and this rejection would be instrumental in formulating the Israelites' rejection of images (Wiggins 2007: 21). In fact, J. Wellhausen reinterpreted Hosea 14.8 as follows: "I am his Anat and his Asherah" (Wellhausen 1898: 134), based on contextual connections already mentioned here previously. Even though this reinterpretation of Hosea 14.8 is not accepted by most scholars[33] (Doyle 1996: 85-86), it reflects the general tendency of critics to reinterpret biblical texts from an archaeological-historical perspective. Then, they conclude that Asherah was part of the official Yahwism during the 8th to 7th centuries (Doyle 1996: 86).

Asherah and Pillar Figurines

Let us take a look at one of the most common religious elements that is currently being discussed under "early religion" in Israel in connection with Dever's understanding of the Judean Pillar Figurines (Dever 2005: 176).

Several naked female pillar figurines were discovered in Israel from the very beginning of Palestinian Archaeology. W. F. Albright (Albright 1935: 96) led the identification of these Judean Pillar Figurines (JPFs) by identifying them with Astarte or Qadesh "beyond all cavil." Even when scholars did not make a difference between the pillar figurines and plaques at this early stage of research, Albright was aware that they were different in function[34] (Albright 1935: 98). Since more comprehensive information was needed, James B. Pritchard published a list of figurines and plaques, which was the first attempt to catalog all female figurines (Pritchard 1943). He recognized the inconvenience of identifying some of these figurines with specific goddesses based on the archaeological data available at that time, being reluctant to label them as Asherah or Ashterot. Later on, T. A. Holland made a broader study, coming to a provisional hypothesis, which suggested that some of these broken figurines symbolize a ritual of an expiatory offering, but he accepted that a full explanation of this phenomenon would require further research based on new data (Holland 1975b: 330).

On the other hand, some scholars, like Dever, attempted to explain the religious phenomena in Israel during the Iron Age, matching biblical Asherah and JPFs based on a supposed similarity between Asherah poles and her tree symbol

33. Mainstream scholars would disagree that a proper name could take a pronominal suffix (Doyle 1996: 86).

34. Albright supported the idea that Ashera/Qadesh may be a prototype for the pillar figurines, but this prototype may have been unknown. In the meantime, they may have been used as magical amulets for parturition, and this function could be the explanation for their similarity (Albright: 98, 110).

with the pillar bodies of these figurines (Hadley 2000: 4). Kletter (Press 2012: 17) agreed with Dever and concluded that JPFs were Asherah. M. Siebeck (Siebeck 2014) believed that Dever's equation, pillar figurines = fertility cult = Asherah, seems to be inconsistent with the rest of the archaeological information.[35] She also summarized all alternative interpretations of JPFs during the IA as follows: (1) JPFs as goddesses, (2) JPFs as religion, and (3) JPFs as female religion. However, she believed that any of these models are consistent with the current archaeological data.

Late Bronze Female Deities

As we mentioned above, at the beginning of the Bronze Age the fertility cult was firmly associated with divinities; this is also the case with Ishtar, according to several versions. For instance, a goddess with a plant emerging from the top of her head (Pittman 2014: 379) is depicted on a seal from Konar Sandal South on the Halil River, in the Kerman province of southeastern Iran. A horn on the front is portrayed looking forward. The context for this seal is a trash deposit on the side of a huge platform probably used in craft production (Pittman 2014: 390) dated to the Early Dynasty IIIB period in Mesopotamia, the mid-third millennium B.C.E. Another seal from the same area and about the same period portrays a horned goddess holding stalks and with vegetation emerging around her (Pittman 2014: 389). Several other examples could be quoted, but there seems to be sufficient evidence that female deities rooted in the Mesopotamian religious tradition were strongly associated with vegetation.

In this way, public or state female deities in Mesopotamia and the Levant were associated with power symbols such as horns, vegetation, or other conventional symbols associated with divinities during the Bronze Age (Wright 2007: 199-237). These kinds of representations are common on seals, refined ceramic wares, and official depictions on walls.[36]

Similar associations are found in Palestine during the Middle Bronze Age. A seal from Gezer portrays a naked woman who is apparently bold, with two plants on each side (Sugimoto 2014: 14). Her ears are longer than usual and seem to reflect a Canaanite version of Hathor, called "Hathor cow ears" (Ben-Tor 2007: 181). Since Palestine was under Egyptian control during most of the Middle Bronze Age, one would expect some association between Hathor and the local versions of Ishtar. For example, a tree growing out of the navel of a goddess, possibly Hathor, is shown on a gold pendant at Tell el-Ajjul (Hillers 1970: 606; Sugimoto 2014: 13). Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie identified a similar piece as Asherah. Both have three dots under the face and share a common Egyptian Hathor style (Pritchard, and White 2003: 69). Another seal depicting her in a Levantine context shows her hands extending toward a tree with three dots

35. Siebeck discussed the pros and cons of current available interpretations.

36. The headdress relief of a male figurine from Hazor shows as its central component a stylized tree topped by a flower and two horned animals standing on their hind legs facing the tree. Ornan commented concerning this supposed Baal figurine that it is very clear that there were strong connections between trees, horned animals and either gods or goddesses during the Bronze Age. She claimed that this imagery was very common around fourteenth century B.C. in Egypt, and later, it became popular in Canaan (Ornan 2011: 266-270).

under it (Teissier 1996: 102). Astarte figurines were found dating from the Late Bronze Age in large numbers (Stuckey 2003: 137). These plaques were made with clay and follow the general Hathor style from MBA. Sometimes she is depicted holding snakes or stalks. Two other examples of this kind are two figurines found at Gezer, Stratum XIII, dated to the Late Broze Age (Dever, Lance, and Wright 1970: 108). One of them is holding stalks and appears to be a Hathor type. The other is partially broken and seems to depict a necklace, as well as a crown on her head. Her hair is slightly different from the more common Hathor look. Differences between these two artifacts that come from the same locus could be partially explained since they are from different periods (MB II and LB II). This particular difference can be described in terms of continuity, which could indicate a slow evolution of the same deity through different periods in the same location.

Other figurines from Megiddo portray a different style of Hathor. These female figurines are depicted holding their breasts and share some common characteristics, including the wearing of bracelets and having the pubic area represented by a triangle (Pritchard 1943: 5). One of them wears a crown, which would seem to link these figurines to royal deities. These similitudes have been explained as being made from the same mold (Guy 1938: 521) and may also indicate a common feature of domestic religion. In addition, nude female figurines holding their breasts are rarely found in Egypt, which would seem to indicate Asiatic influence (Holland 1975a: 133).

The transition to the Iron Age can be seen in a female figurine from Gezer (Dever 1975: pl. 40) with a tan surface, exhibiting a woman holding her breasts. These typical Iron Age figurines of the mother goddess seem to be more popular than the official female deity Hathor-type from Late Bronze Age. Handmade figurines and mold-made plaques became more widespread than official seal depictions. Another example of the mother goddess is a figurine from Kibbutz Revadim (Sugimoto 2014: 13). On this female figurine, two children are portrayed as hanging from her breasts, and the woman is wearing a necklace and bracelets and points to her vulva. Some common symbols from the Bronze Age are included, such as horned animals, trees, and explicit sexual organs. However, this figure seems to portray an ordinary woman without any identification in terms of divinity. An excellent parallel for this clay figurine would be a fragment of a nude female plaque figurine from Ashkelon. On this figurine are raised emblems: a horned animal next to a tree on the shoulder and a human figure around the neck area (Press 2012: 75).

D. T. Sugimoto (Sugimoto 2014: 11) studied the relationship between trees and horned animals. He reproduced in his article some seals listed by O. Keel (Keel 1998) and concluded that the tree is an Asherah symbol, which disappeared completely by the end of Iron Age and was replaced by the scorpion.

So far, it seems that gradual changes were introduced during the Iron Age in terms of female figurines. However, as often happens, some intrusive elements can distort the interpretation of the rest of the evidence. One example of this would be a Hathor pendant, 3.5 cm high and 1.3 cm wide, made in the Egyptian style. The goddess is depicted as standing and wearing an *atef* crown, with

two cow-like ears. Since cow-headed depictions of Hathor are known from the 18th–26th Dynasties, it is hard to identify a chronological context for it. However, the depiction with a crown and scepter is more common in the 26th Dynasty and does not correspond chronologically to the context in which it was found (Currie and Hyslop 2009: 113).

Iron Age Female Deities

After the Sea People settled in Palestine during the 12th century at the beginning of Iron Age I, new forms of female deities were introduced. Philistine forms seem to resemble Mediterranean forms. Thanks to discoveries at Ekron, Tel Miqne, Tell es-Safi, and Ashdod, it is possible to have a better idea about early Philistine religious practices. Females are a central theme in the Philistine cult (Ornan 2011: 266-70). The Aegean Mother goddess is depicted in several ways by ceramic votives.

Michael D. Press has listed about 200 Iron Age figurines, grouping the female figurines in six categories: small standing, handmade figurines; large, seated handmade-figurines of Ashdoda type; composite figurines; plaque figurines; hollow, moldmade figurines; and miscellaneous forms (Ehrlich 2007: 47, 48). He argued that there are more types than Dothan had listed earlier and that apparently, the Philistines went through an acculturation process instead of assimilation. That means that while Philistine culture went through several changes, the underlying thought patterns remained distinct and they maintained their separate identity (Press 2012: 40).

For instance, some figurines known as mourning figurines resemble those of the Mycenean repertoire. They are standing female figurines and were found at Azor, Tell Jemmeh, Tell Jerishe, and Ashdod (Dothan 1982: 237). Most of them have both arms raised to the head in a mourning gesture. A 12th and 11th century B.C.E. context is assured for these figurines.

Ashdoda are female figurines in the shape of a chair. This is unparalleled in the coroplastic art of the Levant and is probably a variant of a Mycenaean female figurine seated on a throne (Landau 2010: 305). A close parallel to the "Ashdoda" is a painted figurine LHI-IIC of Tyryns (Greek), which has a polos hat, nose and ears, a long neck, breasts emphasized by circles, and a triangular pendant on the chest.

The Philistine cult persisted from the beginning of the Iron Age to the Babylonian destruction. Although there is just one complete example, many Ashdoda fragments have been found at Ashdod, Tell Qasile, Aphek, Gezer, Tel Miqne/Ekron, Ashkelon, and Tel Batash/Timnah. The discovery of this complete figure in the shape of a female chair shows a close connection to the Aegean cult of the Great Mother Goddess (Ehrlich 2007: 39). It is remarkable that during the first century following the migration, the Philistines remained faithful to the Great Mother Goddess of the Aegean world.

However, new figurine types seem to have been introduced by the 11th century B.C.E. after the Sea Peoples invasion (Press 2012: 192). Other forms, like the Philistine Psi, were more popular at the beginning of the Philistine occupation.

This type is a standing female figurine with pinched nose and incised eyes and mouth (Wright 2007: 226). Several examples of this type come from Ashkelon. For instance, a cylindrical female figurine with red-brown clay, cream slip, and black horizontal lines on the front, but not in the back, was found on the floor with occupational debris identified as Iron Age I (Press 2012: 43).

This "Philistine Psi" type contrasts with the "Composite Female Figurines" in detail and style. This type of figurine was very popular in Iron Age II, 8th to 7th century B.C.E. (Press 2012: 192). A typical composite female figurine had a tang, was made of brown clay, with traces of white slip, especially around the eyes, a moldmade face with some Egyptian features (Press 2012: 53). The Egyptian influence, particularly in this type, seems to be strong. Another similar type is a female head and torso, with a rounded veil as a headdress. Again, her face is moldmade and follows Egyptian features.

Another Philistine type is the "Plaque Type," some of which have been found at Askhelon dated to the beginning and end of the Iron Age (Press 2012: 192). This type represents different motifs. They are a naked woman, a woman holding her breasts, or a woman holding a baby. This last motif became popular during the Persian period at Dor (Stern 2010: 10-13). Stern suggested that they were connected with Astarte-Tanit based on textual evidence. Motherhood was strongly emphasized at that time with motifs representing babies, women holding babies, and women holding their breasts. This type differs from the Phoenician and northern Palestinian coast (Stern 2010: 11), where the bodies are round and wheelmade, their hair is pseudo-Egyptian, but their wigs are longer and sometimes curly.

In terms of continuity-discontinuity,[37] it can be said that the Sea Peoples' invasion introduced a new period affecting social structures in Canaan. It would be considered as discontinuity based on events influencing Canaan as indicated by Mediterranean fertility cults. This influence, plus the Phoenician impact, may have oriented a new conception of female deities. Judean Pillar Figurines seem to reflect this impact.

Judean Pillar Figurines (JPFs) were used in daily life as amulets[38] (Siebeck 2014), instead of resembling official female deities. Several of these figurines were crude and handmade, with an absence of power symbols such as horns or stalks. Their handmade heads were mostly orange or red with yellow, red, or white paint (Tushingham 1985: 361). Sometimes they had some fine white frits (Ben-Shlomo 2006: 195). Figurines representing motherhood, breasts, painting, and the absence of power symbols resemble Halafian types with similar characteristics, but were different in style. Earlier female figurines stressing motherhood can

37. The continuity-discontinuity model distinguishes between short, medium, and long-term periods. These three times can be affected by social, circumstantial, or event-based changes. While short-term periods affect only the individual (event-based), long-term periods are affected by changes in social structure. On other hand, circumstantial changes affect the medium-term period by introducing gradual changes (Roux, and Courty 2013: 187-93).

38. Siebeck, in her dissertation about the function of JPFs, compared textual and archaeological data to provide information about the meaning of this phenomenon in Israel and concluded that figurines were used in Assyrian texts as apotropaic amulets. In addition, she studied the context for these figurines and came to the conclusion that they were not associated with official, religious, and high residents (Siebeck 2014).

be found from third millennium B.C.E. contexts (Wright 2007: 220). Jordanian figurines from about the same time reflect similar characteristics as well (Pittman 2014: 379). Therefore, in function, JPFs are analogous to a very early version of handmade or wheel-made figurines existing earlier in Canaan.

In addition, these are clear differences between the two types of female religious representations—those that are connected directly with a deity by official seals and those that seem to have been used in domestic contexts. In terms of continuity and discontinuity of female deities, one can argue that women holding their breasts reflect northern influences, instead of Egyptian ones. Furthermore, figurines connected with vegetation motifs would seem to have been connected with deities, while those connected with motherhood might be connected with daily life.

While the Late Bronze Age was dominated by Ishtar symbols, whether in the Egyptian or Ugaritic style, her official depictions seem to have disappeared by the end of the Iron Age. Obviously, gradual changes in the religious climate took place between the LBA and the Iron Age (Press 2012: 10). Female deities strongly associated with Mesopotamian and Egyptian iconography almost became extinct, while family and domestic expressions such as the pillar figurines remained. The nude woman motif representing Ishtar with her upswept hair, holding stalks, with strong links to vegetation so common in LB are absent during the Iron Age. Apparently, the vegetation motif also disappeared, leaving horned animals alone on seals[39] by the end of the Iron Age (Sugimoto 2014: 16). This lacuna was filled later on with the scorpion. Transitional forms in between allowed certain sorts of symbols to pass on the essence of the old cults to next generations, with the scorpion being the last expression of divinity on seals of Iron Age II (Sugimoto 2014: 14). Evidently a lower class of female deities was also represented in clay. These kinds of goddesses are usually seen as protective spirits in the sphere of family religion (Siebeck 2014). Whether or not they were connected with the state religion, their function seems to have been apotropaic. In other words, their function was to protect and to heal family members (Siebeck 2014: 45). This shifting process may be the result of the monotheistic influence of Hebrew people.

In terms of Dever's equation of "Judean Pillar figurines = Asherah," it would appear that this is an oversimplification in relationship to the phenomenon of religion in Israel, which was more fluid and dynamic. The earlier concept of male-female divine couple from Late Bronze Age, as manifested at Ugarit, seemingly evaporated[40] during the Iron Age. Even though women are connected with several religious manifestations, their later function was not necessarily the same, nor does the social structure support this religious or spiritual symbol and the ideology behind it.[41]

39. Sugimoto (Sugimoto 2014: 14) reproduced in his article several Iron Age stamp seals listed by Keel from several places in Canaan (Ta'anach, Dor, Gezer, Megiddo, Beth Shemesh, Beth Shean) containing horned animals and trees, and stressing that eventually depictions of trees became less popular.

40. I use the term "evaporated" because of the lack of evidence to fully explain this discontinuity. New structures of power evidently affected Canaan, but they are not a sufficient explanation for this discontinuity.

41. While Inanna/Ishtar was a royal goddess during the Bronze Age, reflecting a strong fertility cult, during the Iron Age, female representations were connected with family.

A distinct point exists between the Bronze and Iron Ages in Canaan. The social structure seems to play a major role in the disappearance of a high-status goddess during the Iron Age. Several possible causes can be mentioned for this break, such as the Sea Peoples' invasion, the immigration of Hebrews, and the Phoenician influence. Therefore, it would seem that the assumption of Dever and others of a high female deity paired with Yahweh is unlikely. This assumption does not consider the discontinuity between the Bronze and Iron Ages, and it supposes that the divine couple from the Bronze Age was still vigorous during the Iron Age in Canaan.

Conclusion

We have seen that in earlier periods, Asherah had an official representation and was connected with signs of power, such as horns, plants, crown, and stalks. In contrast, another version of this deity, or what is sometimes called "domestic deity," was represented by a motherhood-oriented figurine typically made of clay.

The identification of Asherah with pillar figurines is based on the assumption that the column or post represented a tree trunk that is frequently associated with Asherah's "sacred tree" (Press 2012: 17). This connection links two elements that would seem to be mostly disconnected during the Iron Age: Asherah as a goddess and a tree as her symbol.

Since religious symbols change over time, they can also change their associations, depending on their interactions over that time. For instance, Inanna became Ishtar during the Uruk period. Then Ishtar was reinterpreted and assimilated into different cultures. In Egypt, she was often associated with vegetation during the Late Bronze Age, but at the beginning of the Iron Age in Canaan, her old connections with nature and horns faded. At that time, motherhood became a dominant focus for female representations. This phenomenon had some parallels in the early Mesopotamian religion.

Religious life in Ancient Mesopotamia allowed two spheres of divinities: the national or public, and the family or domestic. These two spheres were compatible, but they were represented in different ways. Figurines usually belonged to the family realm and were seen as protective spirits (Press 2012: 16). Did these same two levels of deities exist in Canaan, or were there more? (Siebeck 2014: 34-60). If so, it is possible that JPFs in Israel during the Iron Age belonged to the lower level.

It may be seen that Asherah did not succeed at the upper level of society during most of the Iron Age (1200–332 B.C.E.), as can be inferred from the archaeological record; nevertheless, the ancient fertility theology of Inanna was still evident in household religion. She succeeded at the family level. She never died for the common Israelite. The animism was vigorously preserved. Every pillar figurine is a silent witness that the spirituality of pantheism was the main reason for the victory of Inanna over Yahweh. For some reason, the idea of gods permeating nature was attractive to the human spirit.

The Torah describes this fact with mournful words: “The children are gathering wood, the fathers handle the fire, and the women knead the flour to prepare offerings for the queen of heaven, and make libations to foreign gods to provoke my indignation” (Jer 7:18, my translation).

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