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CAN A SEXIST MODEL LIBERATE US?

Ancient Near Eastern “Fertility” Goddesses

Jo Ann Hackett

The assignment to speakers in this final section of the neopaganism series was to discuss the ways in which the recent neopagan movement has influenced our particular scholarly fields. Each one of us, I think, has felt free to modify that assignment considerably, and what I am most interested in talking about is the mirror image of the original assignment. I identify as “my field” the study of the ancient Near East, and in particular of the Hebrew Bible. Neopaganism has not, in fact, made any noticeable impact on my field as yet. The doctoral students I know and the scholars active in the field are still for the most part blissfully ignorant of the recent surge in activity that is happening under the umbrella of neopaganism.

While this movement has not, then, really impinged upon scholarship in my field, that scholarship, especially in its earlier incarnations, has made its mark on modern goddess religion and in a way, I will argue, that is both historically inaccurate and harmful. I will not begin with either ancient Near Eastern scholarship or neopaganism, however. My starting point needs to be an explanation of some of the patterns used in writing about women—female human beings rather than female deities. The problems I encounter in my own field whenever female deities are the issue are, I think, best explained by repeating a couple of truisms from the new scholarship on women, well-known obstacles that women’s historians and anthropologists have been facing in their work.

Describing females solely in terms of sexual functions, and as if we are all the same and always have been, are two of the sexist tendencies in thinking about women that the new scholarship on women is trying to eliminate. Historians studying women complain of the attitude among their professional colleagues that a history of women cannot be written because that history simply does not exist. Women have everywhere and always been the same, and without change and development there can be no history. Carl Degler writes, in his monograph *Is There a History of Women?*⁹:

The ideas expressed in this paper are not new and they are not mine alone, even though I must take responsibility for any misinformation. I have benefited over the years from conversations with several people about the extent to which fertility is a concern of ancient Near Eastern religions. I would especially like to mention and thank Drorah Setel and Gayle Zilber.

Women have heretofore been defined out of history. . . . They have been so delineated as to be removed from the historian's past. Women have been seen principally as wives and mothers, that is, in roles that by their nature seem to be timeless and therefore outside history.¹

Sheila Johansson, in her article "'Herstory' as History," has a section entitled "Women vs. 'Woman'" in which she notes,

Most often it has been those hostile to women who have written of "Woman" and her true unchanging essence. Descriptions and analyses of the eternal feminine have usually been put forth by those anxious to justify the continuance of various forms of social and legal restrictions which confine women to one or two highly circumscribed social roles. . . . Although some writers sympathetic to women have written of "Woman," the remarks of Millicent Fawcett, a nineteenth-century British feminist, still apply: "We talk about 'women' and 'women's suffrage,'" she said: "we do not talk about Woman with a capital W. That we leave to our enemies."²

And what is that "same" that we have always and everywhere been? Women are often described in terms of biological functions. Michelle Rosaldo said much the same thing in her overview/introduction to the book she co-edited with Louise Lamphere, *Woman, Culture, and Society*:

. . . cultural notions of the female often gravitate around natural or biological characteristics: fertility, maternity, sex, and menstrual blood. And women, as wives, mothers, witches, midwives, nuns, or whores, are defined almost exclusively in terms of their sexual functions. A witch, in European tradition, is a woman who sleeps with the devil; and a nun is a woman who married her god. Again, purity and pollution are ideas that apply primarily to women, who must either deny their physical bodies or circumscribe their dangerous sexuality.³

We have no history because we have always been wives, mothers, and whores; in other words, we are interchangeable.⁴ I will argue in the remainder of this paper that patterns similar to these two (we are all alike and we are most easily described in terms of biological functions) can be observed in the way the secondary literature of my field tends to describe the goddesses of the ancient Near East.

¹ Carl Degler, *Is There a History of Women?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 6.

² Sheila Johansson, "'Herstory' as History: A New Field or Another Fad?" in *Liberating Women's History*, ed. Berenice A. Carroll (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 403. Johansson says in her n. 6 that she is quoting Fawcett from Theodore Stanton, *The Woman Question in Europe* (London, 1884), 6.

³ Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Woman, Culture, and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 31.

⁴ These tendencies reflect the nature/culture dichotomy that is often imposed on men and women: women are identified with nature (that which is chaotic, emotional, sensitive), and men with culture (i.e., order, civilization, that which overcomes and controls nature). See, e.g., Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" in Rosaldo and Lamphere, 67–88.

There has been a noticeable rise in interest in ancient Near Eastern goddesses. I often see the Mesopotamian Inanna mentioned, and in more sophisticated works even the Canaanite goddesses Asherah, Anat, and Astarte. I am of course pleased that Inanna and the others are of interest to those who are concerned with an alternative spirituality, but I have found, to my surprise, that they are often admired not because of their many sources of power and their multifaceted personalities, but rather because they are said to be “fertility goddesses.”⁵

Many feminist writers discuss the “fertility” religions in a negative light and dismiss them as models for modern alternative spirituality.⁶ But they, too, are usually dependent on the descriptions of the religions of the ancient

⁵ While I have found this to be a common concern among students and audiences I have addressed, professional writers do not praise fertility at the expense of the goddesses’ other attributes. (See the next note.) Some, however, do stress fertility to such a degree that it is easy to see how their readers come away with the idea of the “fertility” goddess firmly implanted in their minds. Judith Ochsorn (*The Female Experience and the Nature of the Divine* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981]) is meticulous about presenting the variety of roles and powers available to females in ancient Near Eastern myths (see, e.g., pp. 89–91). Yet she commonly refers to the goddesses as fertility goddesses, even when fertility is not the aspect under discussion, and in her section on the ritual sex accusation aimed at non-Israelite religions (pp. 127–29), she gives a rather positive reading of such a practice as if it celebrated free sexuality for certain women. Peggy Sanday’s book *Female Power and Male Dominance: On the Origins of Sexual Inequality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) seems to me to follow a similar course, and to fall prey to the two anti-feminist tendencies in writing about women that I mentioned above. Her discussion of Inanna (pp. 217–18) exhibits the common practice of laying particular stress on her function as a goddess of love, sex, and fertility (the tendency to describe females in terms of biological functions), even though she goes on to report that Inanna was much more than that in the ancient texts. She also asserts that Anat in Canaan (p. 218) is virtually the same character as Inanna in Mesopotamia (they are interchangeable, like all females).

⁶ Merlin Stone, in *When God Was a Woman* (New York: Dial Press, 1976), 153–62, agrees that the term “fertility cult” is unfortunate, but does so within a discussion of the presumed sexual habits of goddess priestesses, which discussion is a prime example of the kind of dependence on secondary literature that this paper is pointing to. Kathryn Rabuzzi (in *The Sacred and the Feminine: Toward a Theology of Housework* [New York: Seabury, 1982], 36–37) simply assumes “the Goddess” refers to ancient “fertility” goddesses and objects to this image. Naomi Goldenberg (in *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1979], 89) and Carol Christ (in “Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections,” in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. C. Christ and J. Plaskow [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979], 276–78) both argue that the historical data on goddesses should be ignored if they do not present an image that is healthful for modern feminists seeking an alternative spirituality, that “the Goddess” is more than the sum of what we know about ancient goddess traditions. (Christ, in her most recent book, *Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987], does, however, balk at “setting history aside,” and discusses some of what we know about ancient goddesses. She, too, seems to emphasize sexuality in goddess worship, but she urges that fertility be “understood as the cosmic principle of life, death, and renewal” [p. 167].)

Near East that they find in the secondary literature in my field. That is to say, whether feminists embrace or reject “fertility goddesses,” they are generally still working with what I will argue is a biased picture of non-Israelite religions, based on the secondary literature. This secondary literature sets up a dichotomy between Israelite religion and the “fertility” religion of the surrounding peoples and then often rejects these “fertility” deities and “fertility” religions in favor of Israel’s official religion. The clear implication, as we will see, is that if we are moral people, we will do the same. Many feminists today, however, want to find an alternative paradigm of spirituality, an alternative to those built on ancient Israel. Many are accepting the dichotomy between Yahwism and “fertility religion” that is set up in the secondary literature, but rather than rejecting the “fertility religion,” as the secondary literature clearly expects us to do, they often look for models in the goddess- and nature-centered worship that is what they understand to be the ancient alternative to worship of the male Yahweh, the god of Israel. They are defying the bias against nature and goddesses, and celebrating the other half of the dichotomy, celebrating the “fertility goddesses” and the “fertility cults” of ancient Canaan and Mesopotamia. By embracing rather than rejecting the “fertility religion” that is presented as the rival of the official religion of Israel, they think they are defying the male-centered religion of Israel and of the scholars who write the secondary literature.

This is a puzzling preoccupation for feminists to have. In my field, “fertility religion” is a euphemism for ritual sex, for ritual prostitution. When scholars write about fertility religion and fertility goddesses, they do not have in mind the creative power of women in childbirth, e.g.—far from it. What some feminists are embracing is not ancient goddesses, ancient religions, and ancient women, but rather the fears and fantasies of modern Western scholars in my field, many of whom were Protestant clergymen. The very dichotomy is a set-up, a fantasy. We have virtually no evidence that there ever were any “fertility goddesses” or “fertility cults” in the ancient Near East *as they are described in the scholarly literature*. That is not to say there was never any fertility religion. Fertility religion is everywhere. It is all over the Bible,⁷ it was part of Canaanite and Mesopotamian religion, and it is part of modern Western religion, too. Anyone who has ever prayed for a baby, or “thanked God” when the rain came and the crops did not die, is practicing a form of fertility religion. The religious concern for fertility is quite common. But none of that has much to do with what modern biblical scholars mean when they talk about fertility cults.

To illustrate my point I will summarize what we know about some ancient gods and goddesses, and then offer a selection of writings from prominent scholars of the ancient Near East, so as to compare what we know to what we are generally told. I will narrow my focus to Canaan. Meso-

⁷ See Gen. 25:21, e.g., or Hos. 2:8–9, for Yahweh as a fertility god.

potamia is much more complicated and the points I want to make are easier to make with Canaanite religion. (By Canaan I mean the land area that is now modern Lebanon, much of Syria, Israel, and Jordan.)

In the myths we have preserved from Canaan, from around 1500 B.C.E. the gods most responsible for fertility are male. Baal is responsible for the fertility of the crops and El for the fertility of human beings.⁸ One of the narratives about Baal is a “fertility myth.”⁹ In the form we have it, it is rather confusing, but it is certain that Baal “dies” in the myth in a confrontation with the god Mot (“death”). It seems that Baal’s dying causes crops to dry up or, at any rate, to put human beings in danger. He is rescued by his sister Anat who conquers Mot; and then fertility returns to the earth.

The three major goddesses in Canaanite myth, Asherah, Astarte, and Anat, have various functions within myth and ritual texts. Asherah is a marine deity in the second millennium texts, “Asherah of the Sea”; Astarte plays little part in these texts, but in the first millennium, she seems to have replaced Asherah as the goddess of the seafaring cities of Tyre and Sidon. From her name we know Astarte must have been originally an astral deity, the evening star. The third important goddess in the Canaanite pantheon is Anat, a bloody warrior who delights in gore, but who also has a soft spot for her brother and possibly consort, the god Baal.

Most scholarly reconstructions of Canaanite religion, however, depend on external sources for their information, rather than the Canaanite texts themselves,¹⁰ sources such as: (1) biblical passages that imply that the rivals to Israel’s official cult were very much concerned with fertility and were probably celebrated as often in a natural setting as in a temple (e.g., Jer. 3:6; Hos. 2:5; 4:13–14¹¹) (2) naked female figurines that archaeologists have turned up from the area of the world we call Canaan at this time;¹² (3) the

⁸ See the beginnings of the Kirta epic and the Aqhat epic, conveniently available in Michael D. Coogan’s *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 58–59 for Kirta; 32–33 for Dan’el in Aqhat. Particularly this second point, that it is to El that one must appeal for offspring, could be a signal that Canaanite religion supported, and was supported by, a particularly patriarchal society. Maintaining that the true source of children is the patriarch-god, not the child’s mother as would appear, could be a form of counterbalance to the obvious female role in reproduction. (This analysis is based on a similar argument, one that concerns the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22, in Nancy Jay, “Sacrifice, Descent and the Patriarchs,” *Vetus Testamentum* 38 [1988]: 52–70.)

⁹ Several Baal narratives are brought together in Coogan, 86–115; see especially pp. 106–15 for the Baal and Mot cycle.

¹⁰ Native Canaanite ritual texts are now slowly becoming more accessible. We know, for example, that Canaanite ritual was sacrificial and apparently included an ancestor cult, at least in the royal family.

¹¹ It is common to translate the Hebrew word *qedeshah* at the end of Hos. 4:14 as “cult prostitute,” as the Revised Standard Version does, although the word literally means something like “holy woman.”

¹² The abundance of these figurines and the identification of similar naked female figures found in Egypt inscribed with the name Q-d-sh (probably “Qudshu”), an epithet of

supposed Mesopotamian (not Canaanite) practice of sacred marriage (*hieros gamos*)—itself a scholarly reconstruction¹³ that suggests that a king and a priestess had sex once a year, in imitation of the gods Dumuzi and Inanna, to ensure fertility in the land; (4) classical (i.e., relatively late) allusions to exotic sexual practices in the religions of Babylon and Egypt, as well as of Canaan, involving women worshipers in prostitution on an irregular basis.¹⁴

Asherah, or the names or epithets of all three Anat-Astarte-Qudshu/Asherah (see I. E. S. Edwards, "A Relief of Qudshu-Astarte-Anath in the Winchester College Collection," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 14 [1955]: 49–51, pls. III–IV) have led many scholars to posit that the common religion of Canaan had something to do with naked female deities, and the figurines are commonly called "fertility figurines." The classic study of these figures is that of James Pritchard (*Palestinian Figurines in Relation to Certain Goddesses Known Through Literature* [New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1943]), and it is still useful. These figures still await a complete and sober comparative analysis by a trained art historian, but much progress has been made since Pritchard's work. See, e.g., Miriam Tadmor, "Female Cult Figurines in Late Canaan and Early Israel: Archaeological Evidence," in *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon*, ed. Tomoo Ishida (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1982), 139–73; Ruth Hestrin, "The Lachish Ewer and the 'Asherah," *Israel Exploration Journal* 37 (1987): 212–23; "The Cult Stand from Ta'anach and its Religious Background," *Studia Phoenicia* 5 (1987): 61–77; T. A. Holland, "A Study of Palestinian Iron Age Baked Clay Figurines, with Special Reference to Jerusalem: Cave I," *Levant* 9 (1977): 121–55; Lawrence E. Stager, "The Archaeology of the East Slope of Jerusalem and the Terrace of the Kidron," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 41 (1982): 111–21; Peter J. Ucko, *Anthropomorphic Figurines of Predynastic Egypt and Neolithic Crete with Comparative Material from the Prehistoric Near East and Mainland Greece* (London: Andrew Szmidla, 1968); Ora Negbi, *Canaanite Gods in Metal* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Institute of Archaeology, 1976). Elizabeth Williams-Forte, in an unpublished Columbia University dissertation ("Mythic Cycles: The Iconography of the Gods of Water and Weather in Syria and Anatolia in the Middle Bronze Age, c. 2000–1600 B.C.," 1982), tentatively identifies the naked goddess in second millennium Syrian seals as Asherah. It is clear now that not all of the naked female figures represent a goddess or goddesses, but many do. It remains to determine both the purpose of the figures and the precise significance of their nakedness. Pritchard suggested some of them might represent a goddess portrayed as prostitute, or a "sacred prostitute" decked out to represent a goddess (87). Most writers simply make a vague reference to fertility or to a Canaanite "fertility cult."

¹³ Drorah Setel suggested to me several years ago that the "sacred marriage" texts need not describe an actual ritual between a king and a priestess, and William Harman, in "Hieros Gamos in the History of Religions: A Perspective From India On A Concept that Grew out of the Ancient Near East" (forthcoming), has recently argued against the positing of a cycle from the fragmentary evidence of scattered texts. S. N. Kramer was more cautious in his book dealing specifically with sacred marriage (*The Sacred Marriage Rite* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969]) than he was in some other publications, and more cautious than most who have followed him: "And who, finally, played the role of the goddess throughout the ceremony? It *must have been* some specially selected votary of the goddess, but *this is never stated* . . ." (p. 79, emphasis mine).

¹⁴ Usually cited are Lucian, *Syrian Goddess* 6; Herodotus, I. 199; and Strabo, *Geography*, 11.14.16, 16.1.20, and 17.1.46. See now R. Oden, *The Bible Without Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 131–53, who outlines the history of the sacred prostitution accusation within our field.

These various external sources and speculations, some more and some less dependable as historical sources, seem to be combined in the picture that we often meet in the secondary literature when scholars attempt to depict in detail the rival religions to Israel's national cult. I present a sample of these descriptions from well-known scholars, and I have deliberately drawn from sources that are likely to be read by an outsider seeking access to the worship of Canaanite goddesses. In fact, several of the books I have looked at are standard introductory Hebrew Bible college course textbooks.

Let me start with John Bright's *A History of Israel*, probably the most widely used history of ancient Israel in classrooms in the United States. He gives a full picture of the scholarly consensus and so I will quote him extensively:

Canaanite religion, however, presents us with no pretty picture. It was, in fact, an extraordinarily debasing form of paganism, specifically of the fertility cult. Nominal head of the pantheon, but playing a rather inactive role, was the father-god El. The chief active deity was Ba'al (Lord), a title of the ancient Semitic storm-god Hadad, who reigned as king of the gods on a lofty mountain in the north. Female deities included Asherah (in the Bible also the name of a wooden cult object: Judg. 6:25f.; etc.), Astarte (in the Bible, Ashtaroth or Ash-toreth), and Anat (in the Ras Shamra texts the consort of Ba'al, but known from the Bible only in place names, e.g., Beth-anath). These goddesses, though fluid in personality and function, represented the female principal in the fertility cult. They are portrayed as sacred courtesans or pregnant mothers or, with a surprising polarity, as bloodthirsty goddesses of war. Important in Canaanite myth was the death and resurrection of Ba'al, which corresponded to the annual death and resurrection of nature. As the myth was reenacted in mimetic ritual, the forces of nature were thought to be reactivated, and the desired fertility in soil, beast, and man thereby secured. As in all such religions, numerous debasing practices, including sacred prostitution, homosexuality, and various orgiastic rites, were prevalent. It was the sort of religion with which Israel, however much she might borrow of the culture of Canaan, could never with good conscience make peace.¹⁵

The German scholar Martin Noth, in *The History of Israel*, the main rival to the American John Bright's history, describes Canaanite worship this way:

For the Israelite tribes, who were used to the strict discipline of a patriarchal society, all this moral laxity was contemptible and shocking. It was no doubt bound up to some extent with the special character of the Canaanite cult to which the Israelites, with their devotion to the demands of a stern deity, were particularly antagonistic. The cults which flourished among the Canaanites were the immemorial rites of the great fertility-bestowing mother-deity, generally called Astarte in Canaan, and of a youthful deity who represented

¹⁵ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 118–19.

the annual blossoming and dying of vegetation. These cults included the celebration of a "holy marriage" . . . at a holy place with female representatives of the deity and "sacred" prostitution and the cultic sacrifice of female chastity. There was also the cult of the multiform Baal, the fairly ancient Baal of heaven, and the numerous local Baals which were also givers of life and fertility and held sway in the sphere of sensual life. The Israelites were bound to reject all this, especially the worship of female deities.¹⁶

Anderson in his introductory textbook is initially considerably better:

At the head of the Canaanite pantheon was the high god, El, "the King, Father of Years," whose consort was Asherah. Next in rank was the great storm-god, Baal, the god of rain and fertility, who, like his father, takes the form of a bull, the animal of strength and fertility. His consort-sister is the warrior goddesses Anath, known for violent sexual passion and sadistic brutality.¹⁷

Anderson here describes Baal evenhandedly as a fertility god as well as a storm god, and El is described as a father-god. On the fertility cult, however, he presents a fairly complete version of the popular picture.¹⁸

William F. Albright gave one of the most erudite and yet typical discussions of the three Canaanite goddesses we have been considering:

The three goddesses, Astarte (Ashtaroth), Anath and Asherah, present the most complex pattern of relations. The same Babylonian ideogram is employed in the Amarna Tablets to write the names of both Astarte and Asherah; in contemporary Egypt Anath and Astarte are even fused into one diety 'Antart, while in later Syria their cult was replaced by that of a composite deity 'Anat-Ashtart, Aramaic 'Attar'atta (Atargatis). Astarte was goddess of the evening star, and originally she must have been identical with a male figure, 'Ashtar, god of the morning star, known to us from South Arabia, Moab, Ugarit and Roman Syria. . . . The original character of Anath is still obscure, and Asherah was primarily goddess of the sea.¹⁹

So far, so good. But the immediate continuation of this rather neutral discussion is this:

All three goddesses were principally concerned with sex and war. Sex was their primary function. In an Egyptian text of the thirteenth century B.C. Anath and Astarte are called "the great goddesses who conceive but do not bear," i.e., the goddesses who are perennially fruitful without ever losing virginity. They are therefore both mother-goddesses and divine courtesans.²⁰

¹⁶ Martin Noth, *The History of Israel*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 143–44.

¹⁷ Bernhard Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 142.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 139–41.

¹⁹ William F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1942), 74–75.

²⁰ The most obvious reading of conceiving but not bearing is, in fact, just the opposite of

He then judges the cult that concerns these goddesses in this way:

At its best there can be little doubt that there was a certain amount of aesthetic charm about Canaanite literary and artistic portrayal of these goddesses; in the Keret Epic, for instance, the hero's betrothed is poetically described as having "the charm of Anath" and "the beauty of Astarte." At its worst, however, the erotic aspect of their cult must have sunk to extremely sordid depths of social degradation.²¹

We can see that the consensus scholarly picture of the Canaanite cult is really a combination of three literary elements: the sacred prostitution accusation aimed at Canaanite religion and derived largely from classical sources; the sacred marriage reconstructed for Mesopotamia; and the Baal myth wherein the fertility of the land depends on the resurrection of the dead god. The first two are rituals for which only scant and scattered evidence can be evinced, and the third is a myth that may or may not have been the basis for some ritual enactment; we have no contemporary texts that describe any such ritual (contemporary to the mythological texts, that is), much less one that included regular or occasional ritual sex. The existence of the fourth element mentioned earlier, hundreds of "fertility figurines" found by archaeologists, is also considered evidence of the degradation of Canaanite religion: worship of a naked goddess as prostitute or patron of temple prostitutes.

It is common for societies to try to build themselves up by disparaging others. Polemic against foreigners, against the Other, whoever that is felt to be, is common. Israelite literature is not exempt from this phenomenon and many Israelite authors spend their time disparaging the cults that were the rivals of the official Yahwistic cult. I am arguing that one reason many scholars write as they do about the Yahwistic cult's rivals is that they fail to recognize the propagandistic function of much of biblical literature. Rather, they identify with the Israelite authors of the Bible and accept and perpetuate the polemic they find there.

This tendency to identify with the Israelites aggravates the perception of Canaanite religion as sex-centered because in the Bible, religious apostasy, falling away, is often compared with adultery and prostitution. But this is a metaphor, an image, a powerful figure for drawing boundaries between the good guys and the bad guys. Those who practice our religion are blessed and those who have left our religion have, as it were, committed adultery, or gone a-whoring. The presence of female cult personnel in the rival cults makes this metaphor work even better. There were no such women in the official Israelite cult; nor, for that matter, were there in the religious groups to which

Albright's: they would be women who are clearly not virgin (they have conceived), but are also not fruitful (they do not bear). It is also difficult to understand Albright's naming them "mother"-goddesses in these circumstances.

²¹ Albright, 76–77.

most nineteenth- and twentieth-century biblical scholars have belonged. So these scholars have taken their stand on the side of the Israelites and have often even shared the context of the biblical metaphor (no female cult personnel), and have therefore failed to question how far the metaphor may be removed from any kind of historical reality.

The second and more subtle point I want to make concerns the sexual division of labor in some modern views of the ancient heavens. As mentioned above, the deity in Canaan who is most obviously concerned with fertility of crops is a male god, Baal, and the one most obviously concerned with human fertility is El, another male god. Yet, when they are given one-word descriptions, they are usually *not* called “fertility” gods; rather, Baal is a “storm” god and El is the “chief” god of the pantheon; the “fertility” epithet as a one-word explanation is often reserved for the female deities of Canaan. Baal is a storm god and Asherah is a fertility goddess.²²

Imagine my chagrin, then, when I get inquiries from students and audiences about the “fertility” religion of the ancient Near East, and the “fertility” goddesses and “mother” goddesses. First of all, I cannot believe in them as that and that alone. But even if one were to accept the extreme nature/culture dichotomy these scholars have constructed (see n. 4) and embrace the nature part, doesn’t that mean approving of ritual prostitution, of selling women’s (and rarely homosexual men’s) bodies to feed the treasury of some fertility deity’s temple? For that is the fertility religion envisioned by scholars in my field.

Modern goddess-worshippers have correctly seen that in the secondary literature, these ancient goddesses are generally called fertility goddesses and the cults that included them in their pantheons are termed fertility cults or pagan cults, even closer to home for neopagans. Why is this the case if, as I have tried to show, they were in fact often not the fertility deities, and for good patriarchal/patrilineal reasons? and if in fact they were so varied and interesting in their functions, not at all respecting the gender divisions we might expect from the religion of an ancient patriarchal society?

I should say at this point that my immediate scholarly forebears were not the first to suggest such practices, that they have been following a line of nineteenth-century scholars of religion such as Frazer and Robertson Smith in their fascination with such concepts as ritual prostitution.²³ But why is it that secondary literature so often depicts ancient Near Eastern goddesses as “the fertility-bestowing mother-deity” or some such, and points to their

²² Harman also addresses this issue when he points out that in the Inanna and Dumuzi texts, it is usually Dumuzi, the male, who is the source of fertility rather than Inanna. According to Thorkild Jacobsen, Inanna represents the communal storehouse in the early texts; see, e.g., his *Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 14, 36; also pp. 135–43 for the variety of roles Inanna performed.

²³ Again, consult Oden’s discussion, pp. 131–53.

patronage of a seedy cult of ritual prostitution, if these descriptions accord so badly with anything that might be called evidence?

Fertility and mothering are aspects of females that are comforting, known, and nonthreatening to many modern Westerners, and I would suggest it is for this reason (often unconsciously, no doubt) that they have stressed these aspects of the goddesses, even though they are not by any means the most obvious aspects of their personalities. Choosing to put them into the category of fertility or mothering is a way of not dealing with them in their many-sided personalities. And, if all goddesses are at base fertility goddesses or mother goddesses, then they are all interchangeable, they all simply represent some cosmic "feminine principle," and they become even easier to deal with. At the same time, of course, such a misrepresentation conveniently reinforces the reduction of *all* women to the nature side of the nature/culture dichotomy. The fullness and breadth of power these goddesses represented in the ancient world is boiled down to one or two aspects, and they just happen to be the one or two aspects that the scholars doing the boiling are least likely to be threatened by. Hence my earlier statement that I think some feminists are embracing not ancient goddesses but rather modern fears and fantasies. Once the picture is drawn, however, it is taught in undergraduate and graduate classes, it is reported in textbooks, and it is taken for granted.

Summary

Scholars in my field have exaggerated the connection between fertility and *female* deities in the religions of the ancient Near East, and I think they have done this because, as Martin Noth said of the Israelites, they are profoundly uncomfortable with female deities, and find it easier to deal with such power if it is restricted to the sphere of fertility. This delineation diffuses the power of these deities, trivializes their other (in truth, more visible) roles, and makes it possible for modern Westerners to accept their positions in the pantheons of the ancient Near East.

Modern scholars are participating in and perpetuating the biblical polemic when they describe the rivals to Israel's official cult as debased and degrading. The solid historical evidence that can be evinced for the existence of the commonly reported fertility cults is simply too slim to warrant the ardor of many biblical scholars' descriptions.

Finally, I appeal to those who are interested in ancient goddesses to look at the texts themselves: almost all are available in English.²⁴ None of us should accept secondary literature in another field without questioning, but we should question the translations, too, when an important point depends

²⁴ Besides Coogan for the Canaanite material (see n. 8), a handy collection is James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. with Supplement (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

on them, or where gender is a particular issue. Often we will see that editors have simply selected and ordered texts in some arbitrary and historically inaccurate way, and this ordering gives rise to a cycle or pattern that never existed in the society itself.²⁵ We should question as well the assertions of art historians and archaeologists and ask for solid comparative evidence to back up their theories. On the other hand, it is possible to decide that historical data about goddesses and rituals are not important, that we can simply create patterns anew, although Ruether, for one, advises against this sort of tampering.²⁶ The most painful alternative, however, is to swallow, and then embrace, a dichotomy that is, I would argue, constructed precisely of the sexist categories we are trying to transcend. If you want to celebrate ancient female divine power, do it, but first find out what it was.

²⁵ Again, see Harman's discussion (forthcoming). A recent example of such selecting and ordering so as to create a cycle is that of D. Wolkstein and S. N. Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), who express their understanding of what they are doing on pp. xiii and xvii.

²⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Goddesses and Witches: Liberation and Countercultural Feminism," *Christian Century* (10–17 September 1980): 844.