

Images of Women in Antiquity ed. A. Cameron
+ A. Whit
London, 1983

15 GODDESSES, WOMEN AND JEZEBEL

Peter R. Ackroyd, London

From somewhere back in a remote past, in the thirties or forties, I recollect somewhat imperfectly an account of the death of Jezebel included in a book of schoolboy howlers. It may be that in relating this I am supplementing at some points: the story has now passed through yet another stage of transmission. But, as I recall, we begin with Jehu approaching Jezreel, and Jezebel at the window. In response to his shout of 'Who is on my side?'

there looked out two or three unicorns. And he said: Throw her down; and they threw her down. And he said: Throw her down again; and they threw her down again. And they threw her down unto seventy times seven. And they gathered up of the fragments twelve baskets full.

I do not believe that was ever a schoolboy howler; if it has a genuine basis in reality, it has undergone several stages of elaboration before reaching the form in which I recollect it: the unicorns and the numbers are certainly part of the tradition, but literary, stylistic and source analysis would suggest at least the hand of an editor. In its essentials, however, it remains close enough to its biblical source. No one could doubt that the portrayal of Jezebel accords with the general impression created by the biblical narratives in I and II Kings. Jezebel, according to almost everything in our sources — and we have no others — was the biblical equivalent of the 'bad thing' of 1066 and all that. She is uniformly described as engaged in nefarious practice of one kind or another. She appears as the alien Sidonian wife of Ahab, and his worship of Baal is immediately mentioned in the same breath (I Kings 16.31); she massacred the prophets of Yahweh (18.4); she maintained at her royal table 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the goddess Asherah (18.19 — even for Jezebel, the men exceeded the women); she threatened Elijah with death, and he ran away in terror (19.2f.); she suborned witnesses to contrive the death of Naboth so as to obtain his vineyard for her shilly-shallying husband (21); and perhaps we might add that her daughter Athaliah usurped the Judean throne for seven

years, and, though it is not explicitly stated, was apparently considered responsible for a temple of Baal in Jerusalem (II Kings 11). Jezebel's husband Ahab is described as having done even worse than the previous rulers of the northern kingdom of Israel by his involvement with Sidon and with the worship of Baal (I Kings 16). In one prophetic version of the theme of judgement upon Judah, the accusation is that the Judeans have 'kept the precepts of Omri; what the house of Ahab did, you have done; you have followed all their ways' (Mic. 6.16).

But there is, surprisingly, one contrasting moment. In fact, both Ahab and Jezebel have one moment of heroic quality. I Kings 22 relates how Ahab met his death, and we have a vivid picture of the severely wounded king, propped up in his chariot facing the enemy, while the blood flowed down upon the floor of the chariot; and in the evening he died (22.34f.). It is true that the association of this story with Ahab has been doubted, but this is what tradition has come to say of him.

The Jezebel story is equally striking. When the army commander Jehu, encouraged by a prophetic messenger and the royal officers, took over the kingship and murdered all the members of the royal house, Jezebel is described as having heard the news at Jezreel. When Jehu arrived, she had painted her eyes and dressed her hair, and she stood looking down from a window. As Jehu entered the city gate, she said – ironically, scornfully, we may assume – 'Is it peace, you Zimri, murderer of your lord?' It does not matter for our discussion whether we are dealing with a constructed story rather than with exact history. The story as told portrays here, rather unexpectedly, a woman, the queen mother – a figure of status in both Judah and Israel, the *gebirah* the 'great lady' (Ahlström, 1963, pp. 61ff.; de Vaux, 1961, pp. 117-19) – who taunts the rebel claimant to the throne, when all the power is in his hands, with being nothing but an upstart like the Zimri who assassinated the king of Israel, Elah. The mention of Zimri is interesting, since the story as told in I Kings 16 goes on to relate the actions of another military commander, Omri, who overthrew the rebel Zimri and another claimant to the throne, and took it for himself. He was Jezebel's father-in-law. Whatever else tradition has said about Jezebel, and all of it negative, it records a courageous woman, with the dignity to face certain death with no loss of face. And according to the story, Jehu, having seen her to her death, gave orders that 'this accused woman' should nevertheless be buried, 'for she is a king's daughter' (II Kings 9.34). He gave his orders too late; the scavenger dogs had left nothing but skull, hands and feet, though perhaps this is to be seen rather as the precision with which the narrator aligns the fate of Jezebel to the

prophetic judgement attributed to Elijah – 'dogs shall devour the flesh of Jezebel; her corpse shall be like dung upon the ground' (II Kings 9.36f.; cf. I Kings 21.23f., and also II Kings 9.9f.). And there is hesitation here since the same prophetic judgement, differently attributed, is used of the dynasty of Jeroboam I (I Kings 14.11); and also of that of Baasha (I Kings 16.4). The stylised use of the same prophecy suggests a patterning of events to fit a theological interpretation (Ackroyd, 1962, pp. 7-11).

To begin thus with Jezebel is to take up the wrong end of my title first; but I may perhaps be allowed to give this paper a chiasmic structure. We shall return to Jezebel in due course.

If our priorities are right, we ought, I suppose, to begin with the goddesses; though here there are problems in view of the universal hostility to goddesses – and indeed to all other gods – within the pages of the Old Testament. The hostility to goddesses is such that mention of them is very limited and – an important point this – for the most part their mention is closely associated with alien rulers, alien queens, with practices which ought not to have occurred. But even this general statement admits of some qualification; and a closer consideration of biblical and non-biblical evidence raises some difficult but important questions.

I

We may take first two pieces of clear non-biblical evidence: clear, that is, in its statements, though less certain in its interpretation. The first has now been known for many years, and is to be found in the collection of papyri in Aramaic found at Elephantine in Egypt and belonging to the fifth century BC. Two points about these texts may be recalled. They derive from a community which described itself precisely as 'the Jewish force' (*hyt' yhwdy'*). The terms used are quite clear: the military term is familiar in its Hebrew form (*hyl*) in various senses, but one is 'army'. In this context we might speak of a military post or a military detachment, clearly placed at Elephantine for border control duties. The indications are that it was there for more than a century, since it traced its history back to the time at least of Cambyses (Pap. 30.13, 530-22 BC) and the latest documents point fairly precisely to the last years of the fifth century and to the probability of extermination at the hands of Egyptian nationalists. The adjective Jewish or Judean is also explicit; this community described itself as deriving from Judah.

otherwise it would not have used such a term. The comment is obvious; but the reason for stressing it will become plain.

The second point concerns the later history of this community, as the rising tide of Egyptian nationalism threatened. When their temple was destroyed, they appealed for help and protection to the Persian authorities; and they appealed both to Jerusalem and to Samaria. In this there are problems, and they concern both the political organisation of the Palestinian area in this period and the nature of the relationship religiously between Jerusalem and Samaria. It is an anachronism to speak of 'Samaritans' as that term is later used, for the emergence of the Samaritan religious community and its relationship to the Jerusalem community come later (cf. e.g. Coggins, 1975). We may observe, for what it is worth, that the governors in Samaria, two or perhaps three of whom bore the name Sanballat, familiar from the book of Nehemiah where one such appears as Nehemiah's opponent (Neh. 2.19, etc.), could give their sons names indicative of adherence to a religious belief in which the deity Yahweh was prominent and probably central: Delaiah and Shemaiah, two sons of Sanballat I, who appear in the Elephantine papyri; and a Hananiah who appears in the fourth century, son of Sanballat II (Cross, 1975, 5 (188)). More important, we find that the Jerusalem authorities gave assurance of their support, recognising, it would appear, the propriety of the appeal and the religious status of the Elephantine community. It can be argued that the reply imposes some restriction on forms of worship, but a possible explanation of the restriction could be that the Jewish community at Elephantine was being enjoined to avoid practices which would give offence to the religious susceptibilities of their Egyptian neighbours. Now the emphasis on these points is relevant, since in these documents it becomes clear that this Jewish community, claiming and being accorded recognition by Jerusalem, included among the objects of its reverence not only Yahweh (the name appears in a form *Ya'u* (Yahu or Yaho), which might in fact be nearer to the real pronunciation than the debatable Yahweh of modern convention), but also other deities entitled Anath-bethel, Anath-Ya'u, Ishum-bethel and Herem-bethel (Cowley, 1923, pp. xviif.; Porten, 1968, pp. 151-79). The interpretation of these titles or names is not entirely straightforward; but one point is clear, namely that a title or name Anath-bethel can only denote a female divinity. Ishum-bethel and Herem-bethel have been understood as alternative titles of Yahweh. But this could hardly be said of Anath-bethel. Even more clearly Anath-Ya'u would appear to be the consort of Ya'u.

Ishum(Eshem)-bethel (*šmbyr't*) raises another question. The Old

Testament provides evidence suggesting that the use of the word *šm*, name, particularly but not solely in the Deuteronomistic writings, may represent a tendency towards hypostatization. The 'name of God' appears often to be virtually equivalent to the person of God. Comparison may be made with a north Syrian deity '*šmā*' (II Kings 17.30; cf. also *šmāt šmērōn*, Amos 8.14), which appears to be connected with an Old Aramaic word for name, *šm*. Some Ugaritic texts refer to Astarte as *šm b'l*. (For this and related material and a useful discussion, see Mettinger, 1982, pp. 129-88.) This raises the question whether one way in which a female consort of Yahweh became absorbed into the male deity was by a process of treating the female divinity as a hypostasis of the male rather than as having independent status. It would suggest (see further below) that the concept of deity in Israel includes both male and female elements. An eventual monotheism must by some process eventually move beyond male and female distinctions.

These last points must be tentative and open to fuller discussion. What is clear at this stage of the discussion is that the evidence from Elephantine opens up questions which have not yet been fully resolved. For the moment we may simply note that to those who have noted the hostility with which goddesses are treated in the Old Testament, the picture of religion in a Jewish community in Egypt, with close contact with Jerusalem, may come as something of a shock. It is hardly surprising that attempts have been made at explaining away the evidence. But here, it appears, we have a Jewish community which worships a god and a goddess.

The second piece of evidence comes from some relatively new material found at the site known as Kuntillet 'Ajrud in the Sinai. I have seen only brief reports, photographs of inscriptions and drawings, some discussion of the buildings (Meshel, 1978, 1979). It is clear that there are many unresolved questions. The pictures portray divine figures and symbols, including what may be a representation of the Egyptian god Bes (but cf. Emerton, 1982, p. 10), perhaps not altogether surprising in an area between Palestine and Egypt, though such figures are found more widely in the Levant (cf. e.g. *ANEP*, pp. 663f.). But the texts are quite explicit, even though fragmentary: thus, for example, after a broken opening, 'may you be blessed by Yahweh, our protector, and by his Asherah'; and another 'Amaryau said to my lord . . . may you be blessed by Yahweh and by his Asherah. Yahweh bless you and keep you and be with you'. The two publications of the finds are very sketchy; essentially they say the same thing, but there are one or two curious points.

In the first of the texts quoted, the word translated 'our protector' consists of the four consonants *šnm* – which may quite properly be construed as a participle with suffix. It also happens to be the group of letters which form Shomeron, the Hebrew for Samaria. Meshel comments that the name Yahweh is never followed by a proper name, and only in the title Yahweh Sebaot does it appear closely linked to a following word 'Yahweh of the armies' denied by Cross who renders 'he creates the hosts' (Cross, 1973, p. 65). Emerton (1982, p. 9f.) draws attention to another text with 'Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah'; but Teman is an area (the south) rather than a place, and we might compare 'Yahweh of the south' (cf. Hab. 3.3) with the place-name Baal-Zaphan 'Ba'al of the north' (e.g. Exod. 14.2). (A fuller discussion of the connection of the deity name with a place-name is given by Emerton (1982, pp. 3-9).) Meshel may have wished to see a reference to Samaria so that the clearly stated association of Yahweh with Asherah could be associated with the alien north. He does in fact argue for a northern provenance of the people responsible for this material: the particular form of the divine name Yahweh which appears as the affix in proper names such as Amaryau has its analogies in the northern material, for example in the Samaria Ostraca of about 800 BC: the form uses the affix *-yw*, not *-yh* which is common in Judah. Is this a clue which points away from Judah? I think it doubtful if it can be too firmly maintained. Thus a fourth-century BC coin from the province Yehud, Judah, has *yhzqyw hphh* (Stern, 1982, p. 224). Meshel also seems to use both the term 'Phoenician script' and 'Early Hebrew script': it is not clear whether these are intended to be differentiated. My limited skill in epigraphy would suggest that no such differentiation is to be made. Is this another way of implying, in rather popular publications, that these people, whoever they were, could not have been proper Judaeans – though all the historical analogies rather simplistically introduced into the discussion point in fact to Judaeans rather than anyone else? Again we may note that Asherah in the context most naturally suggests a deity: but in one rendering he adds: his *asherah* (using a small letter where Yahweh is rendered by God with a capital) – cella or symbol; in another he queries whether Asherah is deity, tree or shrine (for discussion see Emerton, 1982, pp. 15-18). The Old Testament material makes it clear that Asherah can be a deity – as also in the Ras Shamra texts – but also a symbol of a deity, and perhaps of wood, sometimes at least seen beside a *massebah*, a pillar of stone. It has often been assumed, and probably rightly, that we have here symbols of a male and a female deity. Furthermore, the appearance of

cow/calf imagery in the pictures suggests a comparison with the tradition of calves set up in the northern kingdom by Jeroboam I, interpreted in polemical manner as representations of a deity or deities; but bull symbolism is used of Yahweh, described as the *abbir*, strong one = bull.

Now my concern is not here with the detail of either of these pieces of evidence. The Elephantine material has been discussed many times and very fully, and though problems remain, the texts are understood clearly enough. The publication so far of Kuntillet 'Ajrud is popular and incomplete: a detailed study is much to be desired. But two points emerge: one is that in both cases there are indications, indirect or direct, that the deity Yahweh had a female consort; the other is that in both cases discussion of the texts has involved some endeavours at evading the clear meaning of the material, or at attributing it to a non-Judaean source, and thereby making a claim for the purity of the religious tradition which stems from there. The possibility of a male and female deity pair in the Old Testament period, except as an aberration, offends the susceptibilities of both some Jews and some Christians. It should not surprise us when we consider the wider religious background and the degree to which ideas and practices have changed over the centuries. The evidence of these texts points clearly to the existence in ancient Judah of such apparently aberrant beliefs and practices. The biblical evidence confirms this, but almost always in a polemical context; and it is this that we need now to examine.

II

The discussion of the biblical references to goddesses opens up a wide area involving the Near Eastern background and in particular the evidence of the Ras Shamra texts and of later material which points to the continuance of what are termed 'Canaanite' beliefs (Oden, 1979, who particularly stresses the cult of Asherah). I do not propose to enter into the details of this area; it is sufficient here to observe that the range of information, in texts and in representations, is now very substantial, so that comments on biblical references to the religion of the area may be set in context. We are no longer dependent on a merely polemical presentation of Canaanite religion; we can draw on the rich and complex evidence available, with the result that both greater clarity and a realisation of greater complexity is apparent.

So far as the biblical material is concerned, it is evident that of the

three specific goddess names familiar from the Canaanite material – Asherah, Ashtoret, Anath – the first two appear, the third can be said to be attested but only indirectly. The title 'Queen of heaven' in Jeremiah 7 and 44 probably refers to one of these goddesses; we may observe that the question of identity is less important than the likely assumption that such a title is to be set alongside the title given to Yahweh as 'God of heaven' (e.g. Ezra 1.2) and the use for him of the title 'king', *melek* (e.g. I Sam. 12.12). The 'queen of heaven' may be assumed to be consort of the 'king of heaven'; though this latter phrase does not appear in the biblical text.

Asherah appears commonly enough, either as a deity name or as a symbol of the deity, made of wood – so indicated by the reference to the offering of a sacrifice on the wood of the Asherah in Judg. 6.26, and in other references to burning and cutting down. The distinction between goddess and symbol is not always completely clear.

Ashtoreth appears, often alongside the masculine Ba'al and often in the plural, to denote the alien deities (so most clearly in Judg. 2.13) which Israel worshipped on forsaking Yahweh. The name appears also in place-names, and as a noun with 'flock of sheep' in the sense of 'sheep-breeding' or the like (Delcor, 1974).

Anath does not occur as the name of a goddess but it appears in proper names, both of places and people. Thus Anathoth is the home of Jeremiah (Jer. 1.1). One of the judges is called Shamgar ben Anath (Judg. 3.31 and 5.6); he is a problematic figure, since in the second passage he would be more readily understood as an oppressor, and his name Shamgar is usually thought to be non-Hebraic. The apparently plural form, Anathoth, also appears as a personal name (I Chron. 7.8; Neh. 10.19), and a man named Anthothiyah appears in I Chron. 8.24 with the same derivation: it seems at least possible that this latter name means 'Yahweh is my Anath' (the form would be plural, as in the place-name). This last provides a point of contact with an ingenious textual emendation, proposed though purely conjectural, to the obscure text of Hosea 14.9 (English 14.8). The text runs 'O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols? It is I who have answered (*ānānī*), I who have watched over him (*ʾāšūrenū* or perhaps 'who have affirmed it' NEB). I am like an evergreen juniper/fir'. The sense is not at all clear. The emendation proposed: 'It is I who am his Anath (*ʾānāth*) and his Asherah (*ʾāšrātō*)', is very close to the received text. Such a proposal is attractive though purely hypothetical; but alongside the proper name Anthothiyah, and in the light of the strongly sexual imagery of the book of Hosea, the claim that Yahweh is himself the female consort, i.e. that he

incorporates the female as well as the male aspects of deity (cf. de Boer, 1974, pp. 38-49; Trible, 1976), is appealing. To this we may add the contention, which seems probable, that the verbal root *nh*, used frequently for example in Hos. 2, means 'to love' rather than 'to answer' (Deem, 1978), suggesting that the material here too may be making deliberate allusion to the goddess and to some process of rethinking the relationship between people and deity which incorporates the ideas which belong to the concept of god and consort.

A less precise attachment to this kind of thought – with some overlap of language – may be detected in the Song of Songs; the unresolved debates about both origin and interpretation make its evidence uncertain (for full recent discussion, see Pope, 1977). The 'Queen of heaven' in Jeremiah presents a further aspect of the thought, for here, in chapter 44, we may observe not only reference to worship being offered to her, with emphasis on the part played by women in this worship but with clear indication of the involvement of men as well, but see a skilful element of polemic in that we are presented with people who claim, reversing the normal statement, that it is neglect of the Queen of heaven which has brought disaster; the prophetic judgments of apostasy are turned upside down.

The biblical evidence in regard to goddesses is thus patchy and clearly incomplete; filling of the gaps is to some extent a matter of conjecture. To do this involves recognition of the nature of the evidence as polemical, directed towards stressing the undesirability of certain religious beliefs and practices. (It may be noted that later tradition, expressed in the actual form of the text, was concerned to suggest that the title 'queen' (*malkāh*) should be replaced by 'work', i.e. product of human activity (*m'leket*). Cf. also the polemic in Isa. 44. against idols made by human craftsmanship.)

Thus we may observe that the Jeremiah material falls into two parts. In Jer. 7, a comment is offered on religious practice in Jerusalem, where members of the community engage in the worship of the 'Queen of heaven'. This is part of a homiletic section, extending through chapter 7 and into chapter 8, largely concerned with the condemnation of the whole people, the justification for the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, on the basis of long-standing apostasy and improper religious belief and practice. It is an example, in specific terms, of an explanation of the disaster to Judah in 587 BC as judgement, and reflects subsequent exposition of the message of Jeremiah in the light of that disaster. Like comparable comments on apostasy and the like in the books from Deuteronomy to Kings (the so-called Deuteronomic

History), it offers a rationale of the disaster, directed towards the rethinking necessary in the aftermath and with a view to the future. Jeremiah 44 offers a use of the same motif, but here with a slightly different aim: it portrays a refugee group in Egypt, which has been shown to go there contrary to the divine word mediated by Jeremiah, engaging in the same practices, with an upside-down theology to justify themselves. It is part of a reworking of Jeremiah material designed to demonstrate that the hope for the future cannot lie with such refugees in Egypt; that the future in Judah is already lost; that hope rests in Babylon alone, in the exiled Jews there. It is a demonstration eventually to be brought to its logical conclusion in the writings of the Chronicler some two centuries later in which the future can only be thought of in this way because Judah itself was left totally depopulated during the exile – a view which clearly lacks historical basis, but represents a significant theological pressure, and relates, as does the Jeremiah material, to the problems of the rehabilitation of the Judean community under Persian rule. It must be doubtful how far this evidence can be used to reconstruct actual religious ideas and practice, and how far it represents projections into the Jeremiah material of a specific localising of religious failure understood as responsible for disaster.

In the main passages which deal with condemnation of the people – both Israel and Judah – in the period of the monarchy, Ashtoreth (or Ashtaroth in the plural) appears with reference to alien religious practice, either alongside reference to Ba'alim (e.g. I Sam. 7.4) or in explicit reference to other gods (so perhaps I Sam. 7.3; cf. Judg. 2.13, 10.6) or in reference to a shrine connected with non-Israelites at Beth-shan (I Sam. 31.10); or, in I Kings 11.5, in reference to the goddess of the Sidonians in a passage which deals with the many wives of Solomon, and includes also reference to the god of the Ammonites, named as Milcom (11.5), though this is probably a title, as is also Molech (11.7), and to the god Chemosh of the Moabites (11.7), known directly from the Moabite Stone (cf. *ANET*, 320).

Asherah appears in connection with an image made by Maacah, mother of king Asa of Judah (I Kings 15.13); with prophets of Asherah and of Baal in the Jezebel narrative, already noted (I Kings 18.19); with an image put in the Jerusalem temple by Manasseh (II Kings 21.7); and with the removal of the worship of the goddess under Josiah (II Kings 23.4, 7), in which some detail is given of the vessels and garments or shrines made by the women in the Jerusalem temple. II Kings 13.6 refers to the Asherah in Samaria in a comment on the continuing evil practices of the northern kingdom (see also below). In all these instances

reference is to undesirable introduction or approved abolition of a cult of the goddess. From the viewpoint of the writers of the books of Kings, the practices of the north were all religiously wrong, so that the presence of the Asherah at Samaria is merely another example. The presence of such practices in Judah is attested by the reference to abolition, but here the Josiah reference belongs in the context of the picture of a reforming ruler, directly contrasted with his grandfather (and effective predecessor) Manasseh: it owes something at least to a patterning of the narratives in which good and bad kings alternate over the last century of Judah's existence. The Maacah reference is slightly out of step, but since the same name appears as non-Israelite in connection with Absalom, it is often inferred – though the chronology seems a little difficult – that we are dealing with same alien family, and that the Asherah was a foreign introduction. The prominence given to Jezebel as a foreign princess provides the clearest and fullest presentation of the theme that the worship of the goddess was a foreign import.

But is this true? If we take all the evidence, the worship of a goddess – with one or more names or titles – is clearly associated with a native king, Manasseh, and with Judeans/Jerusalemites. If we add yet one more piece of evidence, this point is underlined. For one passage has so far been untouched, that in Judg. 6 which tells the first part of the story of Gideon. This relates how Gideon was both divinely designated as leader – a theme to be developed in the second part of the story – and commanded to pull down the altar of Baal and to cut down the Asherah, both to be found in the possession of Gideon's father. The status of Gideon's father is unclear, but since the altar and symbol of the god and goddess are evidently regarded highly by the people of the place (6.28), and Gideon is threatened with death for his sacrilegious action (6.30), it is hardly likely that this is a private shrine; and since the name of Gideon's father is Joash, in which the divine name Yahweh appears as the prefix, it is clear that he is to be regarded as a worshipper of Yahweh. The inference is that this altar and symbol were associated with Yahweh and a consort Asherah, the former being designated, as may be seen from other evidence, quite normally as Ba'al, lord.

A further pointer may be seen in the statement in II Kings 13.6, that Jehu, who is clearly described in II Kings 10 as having destroyed the temple of Baal and its worshippers, had evidently not removed the Asherah which stood at Samaria. The conclusion must be that Jehu and his time did not regard the *asherah* as being a "non-Israelite" phenomenon' (Ahlström, 1963, p. 51). The point is not absolutely secure, since the summary of the reign of Ahaziah to which 13.6 belongs

cannot be regarded as providing certain evidence about Jehu, and in any case uses some of the conventional language condemnatory of all northern kings. But the singling out of this one item is noteworthy.

III

The interpretation of the evidence as normally offered runs along two lines (for other and wider aspects of the discussion, see Smith, 1971, esp. chs. 2 and 4). First, it is maintained that the worship of a goddess within the Israelite/Judaean communities is due to foreign influence. Even Patai, whose study *The Hebrew Goddess* (1967) contains a mixture of useful information, simplistic account and unproved assumption — often entertaining, but not always reliable — manages to maintain, from comparison with evidence of identifications of deities, that 'Asherah, Astarte and Anath ... arrived, at different times no doubt, among the Hebrews, and, although foreign in origin, they soon adopted the Hebrews as their children ...' (p. 26). So the alien goddess, as he goes on to say, became a Hebrew goddess, fully adopted into the religious life of the people. But she is defined as alien in origin. In this line of interpretation, Jezebel becomes a type; into her figure is projected in detail the hostility to what is believed to be alien practice. Significantly, she becomes the embodiment not only of what is alien to Hebrew religion, but also of what is alien to Hebrew law. The Naboth story, it is often argued, shows that kings outside Israel did not have the understanding that Israelite kings did, namely that the king was as much subject to the law as the ordinary member of the community. The fact that kings are shown as promulgators and upholders of law throughout the ancient Near East makes it doubtful if such a view can be maintained. It is more natural to suppose that kings, in Israel as elsewhere, were not always prepared to accept the dictates of the law which they claimed to uphold. Numerous examples appear in the biblical narratives of kings castigated for wrong social behaviour, as well as wrong religious behaviour. Jezebel is depicted as the stronger character; but Ahab accepts responsibility for the infringement of law, escaping the judgement by his penitent attitude (1 Kings 21.27-9). We may very properly ask how far the whole portrayal of Jezebel is part of a stylised piece of polemic designed to demonstrate that such religious practices as are here indicated do not belong in Israel; that they are alien. This is not genuine religious history: it is arguing against what, on other grounds, has become unacceptable. The archaeological evidence,

particularly that of Kunttilä 'Ajrud, especially if it is to be assigned to an early date, shows the presence of the concept of Yahweh and his Asherah as consort over a very long period of time. We may see, both in Hosea and in the Deuteronomistic History, indications of the polemic against such a concept of deity. I suspect that the Gideon story is part of that polemic; it is unlike any other of the judge presentations, and in fact appears to argue both the case against the female consort and subsequently the case against kingship (so Judg. 8 and its sequel in Judg. 9).

The second line of interpretation is to argue that it was on entry into Canaan that Israel, with its Yahwistic faith from the wilderness period, encountered for the first time a religious culture in which male and female divinities existed side by side. In fact such an encounter is, in Numbers 25, projected into the wilderness period itself, before the actual entry: no detail is given, but the implications of sexual practice suggest the presence of male and female deities. This interpretation is itself part of a much wider concept, in which the contrast drawn between Israelite religion and Canaanite is sharpened. There are two problems about such a line of thought, though it must be recognised that the biblical material has so conditioned its readers to the acceptance of this line, that it is not easy to see how to break away from it. One is that it is recognisably on a par with other aspects of idealisation of the past which can be found in other religious traditions. In the biblical material, the ideal past is projected into the patriarchal period in Genesis, or into the wilderness period as a bridal period; it is also projected into the earliest stages of the primeval story. It has a further effect in the picture of the period of David, and more especially of Solomon, as an ideal one, in spite of much evidence to the contrary. In the formation of such idealisms, the actual facts, if they are discernible, do not do much to undermine the view. The idealisation of David, for example, is amply countered by the narratives of II Samuel, but this has not prevented a picture emerging at variance with that evidence.

The other problem centres on the extreme difficulty of defining the Israel of the pre-settlement period, and of knowing where the wilderness and exodus traditions are to be placed in relation to the subsequent development of the community. The problems of the so-called settlement period are so difficult to resolve that while it would be oversimple to move to the kind of portrayal which pictures Israel as arising out of internal movements within Palestine, it is equally oversimple to speak in terms of a radically different group coming from outside (for a recent assessment, see Ramsey, 1981). Some element of reinforcement

for such simple idealism has come from the assumption — found for example in T.E. Lawrence — that the nomad Arabs of the desert represent a cleaner and more invigorating atmosphere, congenial to particular types of religious development: a view which is as romantic as that which supposes that Hebrew is by its very nature a language peculiarly adapted to religious thought.

These wider issues are not susceptible to easy resolution. They are an expression of an anxiety which I feel about the ease with which biblical scholars and adherents of the religious traditions which stem from the biblical materials emphasise the distinctiveness of those materials in contrast with a partly imagined outside world, while increasingly the relationship between the biblical and non-biblical has come to be clear. The differences — and these are still to be explained — lie in the fact that the biblical material itself is not simply the product of the context in which it originated, but is the result of the long process of interaction between tradition and the thought of the community, in the course of which many changes took place. It is somewhere within that interaction that the undesirability came to be accepted, generally if not universally, that an adequate concept of God demands uniqueness and onliness.

IV

I am well aware that I have said something about Jezebel and something about goddesses, but not much about women. But in part this has been implied by what amounts not to a defence of Jezebel but to an attempt to understand the projection into her figure of antagonism to the worship of a goddess as consort to Israel's god. It is possible here to wonder whether one of the details of that vivid description of the last scene of her life means more than is at first sight clear: when she paints her eyes and dresses her hair and looks down from the window, she appears rather like the portrayal of the 'woman at the window', a familiar symbol of ancient Near Eastern art, and held to represent the goddess as sacred prostitute (*ANEP*, 131). It is almost as if she is being presented, and rejected, as the goddess herself. The projection of antagonisms into female figures is to be found not only here but also in the opening chapters of Genesis and in the portrayal of 'dame folly', the seductress, in the opening chapters of the book of Proverbs (e.g. Prov. 5; 7). But if that one-sided picture has sometimes seemed to dominate, we may recall that the biblical material portrays a 'dame wisdom' also

in Proverbs (e.g. Prov. 1.20ff.; 8), as well as an ideal woman in the final chapter of the book (31.10-31); it portrays heroines of war like Deborah in Judg. 4-5 and Judith in the book of that name, and of loyalty like Esther, and prophetesses like Huldah (II Kings 22); and equivocal characters like Bathsheba, the adulterous wife of Uriah the Hittite who was also the mother of the ideal king Solomon. And perhaps it is not altogether amiss to recall that the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew I has room within it for the heroic but ambivalent Tamar of Genesis 38, of Rahab the harlot the mother of Boaz the ancestor of David by Ruth (Ruth 4.17, 18-22), as well as that 'wife of Uriah', here so described rather than named.

Further Reading

- Ahlström, G.W. (1963), *Aspects of Syncretism in Israelite Religion*, Horae Soederblomianae, S. Gleerup, Lund
 De Boer, P.A.H. (1974), *Fatherhood and Motherhood in Israelite and Judaean Piety*, Leiden
 Cowley, A. (1923), *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.*, Oxford
 Porten, B. (1968), *Archives from Elephantine. The Life of an Ancient Jewish Military Colony*, Berkeley and Los Angeles
 Smith, Morton (1971), *Palestinian Parties and Politics that shaped the Old Testament*, New York and London
 Tribble, P. (1976), 'God, Nature of, in the Old Testament', *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Abingdon, Nashville and New York, Supplement, pp. 368f.