



Hebrew Bible Goddesses and Modern Feminist Scholarship

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Abstract

This essay first traces the association of ancient goddesses with so-called fertility cults and sacred (or cultic) prostitution to J. J. Bachofen's once influential model of human social development, and places prefeminist Hebrew Bible/Old Testament scholarship on this trajectory. It then discusses two streams of feminist theological response to the model, a Great Goddess stream that inverted the values that traditional scholarship associated with ancient goddesses and their worship, and a revisionist stream that strove to reimage the God of the Hebrew Bible to include aspects of the feminine divine. Both streams are assessed critically from the perspective of secular feminist scholarship. Feminist scholars' challenges to the stereotyping of Canaanite goddesses as primarily associated with sexuality and reproduction are then presented, followed by feminists' critiques of both the relevance and veracity of the ancient sources alleged to be evidence for the practice of sacred (or cultic) prostitution. Finally, the essay turns to the texts of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament *per se* and focuses on the three Hebrew Bible goddesses most discussed in the secondary literature, i.e., Asherah, Astarte/Ashtart and the Queen of Heaven.

