

WHICH GODDESS COULD BE HIDDEN
BEHIND THE TITLE “THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN”
IN JEREMIAH’S PROPHETIC BOOKS?

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“But we will do everything that we have vowed, burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and pour our libation to her, as we did, both we and our fathers, our kings and our princes, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem.”
(Jeremiah 44:17)

Since the publication of R. Patai’s book *The Hebrew Goddess* in 1967, there has been an increasing flow of studies investigating the place of the goddess in Israelite religion. The reason for this attention paid to the goddess is not difficult to find: in the 1960s and 1970s there was a growing awareness that religions with only a single male deity maintained and reinforced the subservient position of women living under their impact (van der Toorn 1998, 16). “If God is male, then the male is God”, to quote a slogan from that period (Daly 1973). A little later, scholars of ancient Near Eastern religions, including those of Israel, began to pay particular attention to goddess-cults.

Most scholars accept that diverse ethnic groups and units formed culturally and religiously miscellaneous societies in ancient Palestine. Different cultural groups co-existed, waxed, and waned in “the Land of the Covenant” during the centuries from the end of the second millennium BC until the end of the first. The geneses of these “daughter cultures” were deep-rooted in the traditions of the societies of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Asia Minor. The main aspects of cultural identity can be found in the deepest layers of the oldest religious systems of these ancient peoples.

At the beginning of the Iron Age, the ancient “Goddess religion” had long been in decline, but the mixed-gender pantheon instituted by religious leaders was rising alongside Jewish monotheism in Palestine.

Historians of religion frequently seem unsure of what to do about the gender dimension in religious systems. Walter Burkert, for example, notes that the opposition of male and female is one of the “primary differentiations among the gods” (Burkert 1985, 218). Gender difference is an important element in ancient Near Eastern thinking about the gods, even though the difference between the sexes of

gods does not play the same important role in the Old Testament, because the sex of the divinity appears to have been clearly masculine in all monotheistic systems. Hebrew monotheism is related to a universal god – Yahweh. Exodus 6:3 records for us a precious piece of information regarding the name of the Israelite deity. The passage informs us that the patriarchs referred to God as El Shaddai; by that time the name of Yahweh was unknown to them (Gordon/Rendsburg 1997, 144-5). It could be that Moses learned about the god Yahweh during his life in the wilderness (referred to in different terms: Sinai, Paran, Seir, Teman, Edom); furthermore, several Egyptian texts refer to “Yhw in the land of the nomads” (Gordon/Rendsburg 1997, 145). “YHWH” is not in reality a word but what is known as the “Tetragrammaton”, four consonants standing for the ancient Hebrew name for God, commonly referred to as “Jehovah” or “Yahweh” (*NIDB*, 1087).

Another Canaanite god is Baal who had a cult in competition with Yahweh’s. Baal was worshipped throughout Israel. It was a god who could just as well be associated with the land of Israel as he could be with the lands of Tyre, Sidon, Byblos or Ugarit. He was also a universal god addressed as “Lord, Master” (see Leick 1998, 18-9; *NIDB*, 113-4), but his main function was to make land, animals, and people fertile. In his magical affairs Baal was not alone, he was coupled with a divine spouse, the goddess Anath, respected also as a goddess of war, a bloodthirsty and passionately sexual divine female (their sexual relationship is the subject of a number of Ugaritic texts, see *KTU* 1.96, 10, 11) (Flanders *et al.* 1988, 221; Leick 1998, 6-7).

The Bible as holy scripture of course presents for the reader the official position of ancient Israelite religion. The Bible remained the official outlook of Israelite religious leaders, who adhered strictly to worship of the one God, but from archaeological evidence and even from the books of the Old Testament, it is obvious that in the first millennium BC this line was not followed by the entire population of ancient Israel.

Two inscriptions, both of the 8th century BC, the first from Khirbet el-Qom in Judah and the second from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, a caravan station in the eastern Sinai, refer to the goddess Asherah in connection with Yahweh.

The Khirbet el-Qom inscription is carved into a pillar in a tomb¹. The translation of this text as “Blessed be Uriahua by Yahweh, and from his enemies save him by his Asherah”, is acceptable (Gordon/Rendsburg 1997, 245). The text from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud (southern Negev) refers to Yahweh, and his goddess “Asherah” is invoked in blessings together with “Yahweh of Temat and Yahweh of Samaria” (Renz/Röllig 1995, 59-60; 62-3) alongside which is a depiction of Yahweh and,

¹ Gordon/Rendsburg 1997, 244; Ahituv 1992, 111-13; Miller/Hayes 1986, 111.

in the opinion of many scholars, Asherah². From the Biblical account Asherah/Ashtaroth (*NIDB* “the Ashtorets”; Phoenician: Astarte) seems to have been a very popular goddess among the Canaanite population*. She was a kind of “international” goddess³, who was worshipped all along the coast from Ugarit southward through Phoenicia and Philistia. The Israelite people prized her as well as the other Canaanite god Baal (Judges 2:11-23; 1 Samuel 7:3-4; 1 Kings 11:4-8; 1 Kings 16:29-33; 2 Kings 23:13-4). She was “Universal Divine Feminine”; she shared the very common functions of the Great Mother Goddess – the giving of life, nourishment, procreation of nature and people, love, fertility, etc. bear the character of “Greatness” (for the cult of the Great Mother Goddess, see Neumann 1963). But from the prophetic viewpoint she contained only negative features: her cult worship influenced the people of Israel to live in sin. Actually, from a Christian point of view (also, according to the Israelite law code), in some cases her worship was associated with great indulgence: Astarte’s procreative powers manifest themselves in her associations with the cult of ritual prostitution (her celebrated sanctuary at Eryx was renowned for it). (Markoe 2000, 131). According to 2 Kings 23:7, ritual prostitution related to her cult also flourished in Judah: “he [the king] broke down the houses of sodomites, that were in the house of Yahweh, where the women move hangings for the Asherah”; in other versions of the Bible this passage is rendered: “he [the king] broke down the houses of sodomites ...where women wove hangings for the grove [Asherah - E.A.]” (*Authorised Version*), or “he had houses pulled down of those, who were used for sex purposes in the house of the Lord, where women were making robes for the Asherah” (*Bible in Basic English*). In the Hebrew version instead of “sodomites” we have the word “qadesh”⁴, this term could be related to female counterparts: “qedeshot” are especially outlawed in the Bible, particularly in connection with temple ritual

²There is a debate among scholars as to whether Asherah in these inscriptions refers to the Canaanite goddess of this name or to a cultic wooden pole. Though there is much debate about the identity of the pillar figurine, the weight of the evidence falls in favour of identifying it as an icon of the Goddess Asherah. See Miller 2000.

* Note that according to Patai 1990 (= 3rd enlarged edition of 1967): 55 Astarte is the daughter of Asherah, so that we are dealing with two distinct goddesses which also in Greek can be grouped together by plural forms like *Damateres* or *Potniai* [editorial note].

³ Asherah appears as ‘Athirat in Ugaritic texts, among her titles, epithets, and names are known: “Great Lady She who treads on the sea”, “Lion Lady” (sculpture from Sinai, a lion with a female head), “Lady of the Serpent”, “Lady of the Stars”, she is the holy one = *qdš, qadašu*. (She is also sometimes shown curly haired, holding lilies and serpents in upraised hands, as Qadašu – as she was known in Egypt). See internet resources “Qadash Kinahnu” <<http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Lofts/2938/majdei.html>>.

⁴ “Kaw-dashe” is a sacred person, a male devotee by prostitution to licentious idolatry. For internet versions of the Bible, parallel translations and lexicon, see <<http://biblescan.com/chapter/2kings/23.htm>>; <<http://menu.scripturetext.com/lexicon/2kings/23-7.htm>>; <<http://concordance.biblebrowser.com/2kings/23-7.htm>>.

(Deuteronomy 23:18)⁵. It seems that in the cities of Judah both male and female ritual prostitutes existed; they had been incorporated into the staff of the temple (a house – bah'yith).

The literary evidence for Asherah in the Bible calls for a reassessment of the interpretation of many fertility figurines (most notably the so-called pillar figurines and the Astarte plaques) found in Israel (Kletter 1996). They are best understood as imitations of cult images for the purposes of devotion and protection. Some Astarte plaques depict the goddess within a frame⁶. Metal figurines of female deities became popular in the Levant even earlier, during the Middle Bronze Age (see Neghi 1996). These figurines appeared for the first time in the second millennium BC in Byblos, northern Syria, and Anatolia; later they spread to Palestine and to inland Syria. Over a thousand female sculptures found in the offering deposits at Byblos are dated to the time of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom. Similar examples were discovered in Palestine, mainly at the temple of Nahariyah and at the Megiddo shrine. Some of these sculptures were made of gold, some of silver and bronze. An open mould of a naked horned goddess found at the sanctuary at Nahariyah would imply that metal sculptures were cast at Canaanite temples (Mazar 1992, 220-1). Scholars are generally in agreement that these female sculptures represented images of the Canaanite goddess Astarte (who is also known from some cylinder seals of the period) or, in later times, the Biblical Asherah. As we mentioned above, her male consort was mostly Baal, but apparently a bit later also Yahweh. We can, in theory, draw the conclusion that while her cult was so prominent and worship of her so long lasting in the Levant, by the first millennium BC the “universal goddess” was easily adopted as Asherah or Ashtoreth by the Israelites, who as a people were not foreigners and were deeply rooted in Canaanite culture.

The images have been found in great numbers in Judea, from temple floor mosaics to nude Teraphim tucked into grain bins and full-bodied Asherah lost for centuries in the ground⁷. They are evidence that the ancient festivals of the goddess marking the agricultural cycles were still celebrated (Baring/Cashord 1991, 556).

Her pilfered cult symbols encouraged the populace into obedience to priestly rules. The rituals of worship and her places of worship, although taken over by the male God (even the pillar symbol see: 2 Kings 23:3), still evoked the ancient meanings for many worshippers. It is generally recognised that the Bible must be understood in its ancient Near Eastern context: in Judges 2:11 we are told that the

⁵Gordon/Rendsburg 1997, 160-61. Various theories concerning these individuals have been put forth; the most commonly held one identifies them with temple prostitutes, whose function was to engage in ritual orgies.

⁶ Though the frame has been interpreted as a bed or a shrine, see Tadmor 1982, 139-73.

⁷ There are at least two significant articles dealing with issues of goddess worship in *Biblical Archaeology Review* 20.3. See Nakhai 1974; Taylor 1974.

Israelites forsook their God and served “Baal and Ashtoreths” (the plural Ashtoreth is found commonly and refers to the idols or images representing her). The prophet Samuel brought a great revival, but before the Israelites could be saved from the Philistines, they had to forsake the goddess and turn to the Lord (1 Samuel 7:4). Israel kept fairly close to the Lord through the times of Samuel, Saul and David, and into the early days of Solomon, until he lost his wisdom by marrying various foreign women for political reasons. They succeeded in turning his heart from the Lord to Ashtoreth and other idols (1 Kings 11:4-8). In later times, as we maintained above, the Judean king Josiah (639-609 BC) commanded the high priest Hilkiah “to bring forth out of the temple of Yahweh all the vessels that were made for Baal, and for the Asherah, and for all the army of the sky, and he burned them outside of Jerusalem in fields of the Kidron, and carried the ashes of them to Bethel” (2 Kings 23:4). Actually the king was against the idolatrous priests, who were occupied with “burning incense” to Baal, to the sun and the moon, and to the planets and “the army of the sky” (2 Kings 23:5). The artefacts and writings show that much of the pagan culture coexisted quite well with temple Judaism: on the one hand the monotheists took over and incorporated much of the pagan culture, but on the other, the “harlot” side of these things remained silent or hidden. Standard practices including magical incantations: the laying-on of hands for healing, the power of naming (a deity or a person), pilgrimages to sacred trees and hills, astrological charts, forecasts, purification rituals, initiations with honey and the sweet odours of frankincense and myrrh. These and other rituals were connected to the cult of the goddess before, but were still in use in Judaism (Sheres and Blau 1995, 22).

The names, titles, cult objects, rituals, and attributes of the Great Goddess could change from place to place to fit the social circumstances and historical background. However, her most archaic symbols – a snake (Gimbutas 1989), the crescent moon (like bull horns), a hill, a tree, birds, Venus, the morning star – always remained in use.

The prophet Jeremiah’s ministry began in Josiah’s reign and ended after the destruction of Jerusalem, which took place in 586 BC. Jeremiah (11:13) proclaimed that the number of Judean cities equalled the number of Judean gods; that is to say, the Yahweh worshipped at the high places was not Yahweh at all, for such Yahwism was no different from the Baalism of the Canaanites whereby each town had its Baal and cult centres. After the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem, a group of people from Judah fled to Egypt carrying the prophet off with them. Most of these Jews settled in the northern area of Egypt, at places such as Migdol and Memphis (Gordon/Rendsburg 1997, 294). But a unique community of Jews existed in far away southern Egypt, at a place known as Syene (Isaiah 49:12), Elephantine (its later Greek name), or Yeb. The origins of this community are not clear, but since there are connections between it and northern Israel, it is possible that the Jews of Elephantine descended from former inhabitants of the northern kingdom (Gordon 1955, 56-8). The Elephantine community was ethnically mixed, as indicated by references to Anat-Bethel and Anat-Yahweh along-

side Yahweh alone. Jeremiah as a prophet was a religious leader of those Jews who settled down in northern Egypt.

Jeremiah's denunciation of Jews who had forgotten their God and worshipped the Queen of Heaven, is clear evidence that the Jews had not given up worship of pagan deities even in Judean towns and the streets of Jerusalem: "The children gather wood, the fathers light the fire, and the women knead the dough and make cakes of bread for the Queen of Heaven. They pour out drink offerings to other gods" (Jeremiah 7:18). In the next passage in which the "Queen of Heaven" still appears, Jeremiah spoke with Jews who lived in the land of Egypt, at Migdol, Tahpanhes, Memphis, and in the country of Pathros (Jeremiah 44:1). He again blamed the people, who were guilty and lived in sin: "men knew that their wives burned incense to other gods" (Jeremiah 44:15). The women who stood by in a great assembly, even males who lived in the land of Egypt, stubbornly clung to their form of "monotheism": "But we will do everything that we have vowed, burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and pour our libation to her, as we did, both we and our fathers, our kings and our princes, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; for then had we plenty of food and were well and saw no evil" (Jeremiah 44:17). In the next passage the same women gave some kind of clarification of what had been happening to them when they gave up to worship the cult of the goddess: "But since we left off burning incense to the queen of sky⁸, and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have wanted all things, and have been consumed by the sword and by the famine" (Jeremiah 44:18). Men seem to have been present alongside women at this worship, as the women proudly point out: "when we burned incense to the queen of sky, and poured out drink offerings to her, did we make her cakes to worship her, and pour out drink offerings to her, without our husbands?" (Jeremiah 44:19). The last passage in which the name "Queen of Heaven" appears is Jeremiah 44:25, when the prophet spoke with anger to the "Egyptian Jews": "thus says Yahweh of Armies, the God of Israel, saying, You and your wives have both spoken with your mouths, and with your hands fulfilled it, saying, We will surely perform our vows that we have vowed, to burn incense to the queen of the sky, and to pour out drink offerings to her, establish then your vows, and perform your vows."

Among the authors (even anonymous) of the Old Testament, Jeremiah is the only one who mentions a goddess as the "Queen of Heaven". We have no evidence before or after Jeremiah for such a title in the books of the Old Testament. It seems rather strange that he used this unusual name for a goddess. If the "Queen of Heaven" were the same Canaanite goddess as Asherah or Ashtoreth, it would have been easier for him to use these common terms to name her. It is still uncertain to scholars which goddess could be hidden behind this title. Some contro-

⁸ In other versions, for example in the *NIDB*, instead of the word sky, "Heaven" is used. In the Hebrew Lexicon for "queen of heaven or sky" we have the term *melekheth ha-shāmayim*. See *NIDB*, 839.

versy surrounds the philology and significance of the title, but it is clear that it was a well-accepted female deity to whom, with their families' aid and connivance, Jewish women made offerings (Jeremiah 17:18; 44:17-25). According to some scholars, the title "Queen of Heaven" might conceal the Great Goddess Astarta-Ishtar (Strachan/Strachan 1985, 47-68), whilst others suggests Ashtoreth, goddess of love and fertility, synonymous with the Assyrian and Babylonian Ishtar, but there is one other candidate – the Egyptian Hathor. Hathor was of the same type as the Queen of Heaven, she was a sky-goddess who gave birth to the sun each day as a golden calf. The name Hathor refers to the encirclement by her, in the form of the Milky Way, of the night sky and consequently of the god of the sky, Horus. Her name means "the House of Horus", and in Egyptian, "House", "Town" or "Country" may stand as symbols of the mother. Since Hathor's name proclaimed motherhood as her principal function, Egyptians imagined her as a cow (Frankfort 1978, 171).

One of Hathor's epithets was "Lady of Heaven", she being the Heaven as a sky-cow-goddess⁹. Egyptians had traded with Byblos and identified its Great Goddess, the "Lady of Byblos", with Hathor¹⁰. As the Great Goddess she was associated with trees¹¹, with birth (Frankfort 1978, 71) as well as with the Djet pillar. The pillar represents a mother-goddess, notably Hathor, pregnant with a king or god. A late text calls Hathor "the female Djet pillar which concealed Re from his enemies"¹². Hathor's iconography appears very rich; she was also imagined as a lioness, a snake, a celestial cow, a hippopotamus, and a slim woman with a *sistrum*, but these various forms are not all from the same period. Tree nymphs and a mixed form with a cow's head do not date before the New Kingdom, but the suckling Hathor-cow occurs in the Twelfth Dynasty, while cow's horns with inset sun disk are familiar from the Old Kingdom. In sculptures she is associated with the state or Nome, she stands with the king and the personification of the Nome of Aphroditopolis (de Rachewiltz 1960, 60). From the New Kingdom, the goddesses Isis and Hathor seem to have been equal, and by the end of the first

⁹ Pinch 1993, 162. For Hathor as a "Lady of Heaven", see Lichtheim 1984, 184.

¹⁰ On a cylinder seal dated to the 2nd millennium BC, the goddess of Byblos is depicted with the horns and sun disk of Hathor, this artefact and Egyptian texts referring to "the lady of Byblos" are discussed by Montet 1928, 61-8; 275-7; 287-90. Also interesting is the fact that in southern Sinai at the Hathor shrine a sphinx with Egyptian and Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions was found. The Egyptian revealed the votive was for Hathor, but the Proto-Sinaitic dedicated the statue to Baalat, which was recognised as a title of Hathor from Byblos.

¹¹ Frankfort 1978, 171, Hathor as a tree goddess – "sycamore tree". See also the third-century BC inscription of Ptolemy: "I eat bread under the foliage, which is on the palm tree of Hathor, my goddess" (Budge 1967, lxxxii, 7).

¹² Frankfort 1978, 177-8; see also Hornung 1982, 110, fig.11. For Hathor as a pillar, see Pinch 1993, fig. 6.12. The column/pillar Hathor was also associated with a representation of a *sistrum*. The shaft supported a representation of the goddess's head, surrounded by a special shrine. Typical examples of this are to be found at Deir el-Bahri and Dendera (de Rachewiltz 1960, 146-7).

millennium BC, they had become interchangeable in people's imagination. Isis and Hathor can often be distinguished only by the captions giving their names, not by their iconography (Münster 1968, 119-20). Hathor was also associated with the sky goddess Nut (Hornung 1982, 241). She was a goddess of fate, and the seven Hathors of Dendera were seen as young women wearing tunics and headdresses (Budge 1969, 30; 78; 92). She was also a healing goddess and a warrior one (Lichtheim 1976, 197-9; 219).

Archaeological evidence of Egyptian and Canaanite religious convergence is visible from the Late Bronze Age. There are several Egyptian and Canaanite images of a naked goddess standing on a lion. In Egypt they are identified as Qudshu, "the holy one". In an image from the Lachish temple this goddess is shown in profile wearing an Egyptian crown, standing on a horse, and holding two lotus flowers (Mazar 1992, 273). As we are aware, lotus flowers and papyrus were the sacred plants of Hathor. We have several examples of clay figurines representing a naked goddess, which were common Canaanite art objects; they might have been used by women as amulets or sacred images. The nude goddess is usually standing, holding snakes or lotus flowers; in most cases her hair is styled with the typically Egyptian "Hathor's Locks" (Mazar 1992, 274), a style which was very peculiar and typical for Hathor's images. This style was absolutely distinct from others and perhaps characteristic only for Hathor. Maybe Hathor was being assimilated to these Canaanite goddesses from a very early time, which is why this hairstyle was also borrowed from the Egyptian goddess. From the Old to the Middle Kingdom Hathor was a very prominent female deity in Egypt. It seems that the daughters of nearly all pharaohs were her priestesses (Lichtheim 1975, 16; 18; 85; 87). As a universal goddess in Egypt, Hathor was also worshipped as a divinity of music and dance. Her sacred object was the *sistrum*. Hymns to Hathor survive from the temple of Dendera (note that Dendera is identical to Iunet), the metropolis of the Sixth Nome of Upper Egypt, which was the cult-centre of Hathor. The large temple of Graeco-Roman date that has survived there records in detail the worship of the goddess in its daily ritual and during festivals. The hymns bring out that aspect of the goddess which made her the counterpart of Aphrodite: she was worshipped with wine (liquid), bread, music, and dancing: "Behold him, Hathor, mistress, from heaven; see him [pharaoh] Hathor, He comes to dance, He comes to sing! His [offering of] bread is in his hand, he defiles not the bread to his hand..." (Lichtheim 1992, 108). In this context the pharaoh performs a ritual dance in honour of the goddess with bread in his hand. From earlier records – "the Stela of the Butler Merer of Edfu", dated to the Transition Period to the Middle Kingdom – the bread offerings to Hathor were an established element of the ceremonial worship, when the priestess of Hathor made offerings of white bread and "who pleases in all that one [Hathor] wishes, who serves the heart in all that one wishes, the sister-of-the-estate, praised of Hathor lady of Dendera..." (Lichtheim 1975, 87). We can discover some analogies between "The bread offering ritual to the goddess Hathor" and the passage from the Book of Jeremiah, when the Jewish women are making ritual "cakes of

bread for the Queen of Heaven". Both the Egyptian and Jewish women from Egypt (even in Judean towns) presented bread to the Queen of Heaven – bread, which seems to be a very common offering to the Sky Goddess; even the king of Egypt was performing ritual dances with special white bread in his hand. In conclusion, the Late Bronze Age witnessed Canaan falling under a 400 years of Egyptian domination. This is why Canaanite goddesses were encountered with Egyptian features, while Canaanite goddesses were also familiar to Egyptians. The similar features, aspects, functions, and rituals related to these various goddesses had made them interchangeable in people's minds. So, Hathor could easily be associated with the Biblical goddess-cult of Asherah/Ashtoreth. But at the same time she was distinguished from Asherah/Ashtoreth by the prophet Jeremiah, who gave her a very peculiar title – the Queen of Heaven. Why? If the Judean women in Egypt still worshipped the prominent Canaanite goddess-cult of Asherah, it would have been more natural to name her with this, i.e. her traditional (Biblical), name; but Jeremiah spoke to "Egyptianised" Judeans, who probably by this time worshipped "their goddess" in Egyptian shrines and temples (and probably in Egyptian style) dedicated to Hathor, and had made white cakes in her honour following to Egyptian tradition. In these circumstances the Judean goddess had gained a correlation with Egyptian Hathor, which is why for the prophet she was related to Egyptian tradition much more than to Canaanite, and received a name to distinguish her from Asherah/Ashtoreth – the Queen of Heaven. Finally, the historical phenomenon of the symbiosis of cultures and religions consists in this particular case of interactions and cross-influences between different cultural elements and units in the ancient Levant. By following the cults of this area, one can see that cultural and religious exchange between the "ancient" and "new" world of Canaan is evident, where the Great Mother Goddess cult still existed and flourished.

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