

FEMININE FEATURES IN THE IMAGERY OF GOD IN ISRAEL: THE SACRED MARRIAGE AND THE SACRED TREE

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The motivation to present this topic is not because feminism is in fashion now, as some may think, but because of the recent discoveries of inscriptions in Israel, which have next to YHWH “his Asherah”. These inscriptions were found in the excavations of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud,¹ 50 km. south of Kadesh-barnea, by Zeev Meshel, who discovered the site. He calls it “Ḥurbat Teman” because of the inscription “YHWH Teman”² found there. In Khirbet el-Qom, close to Hebron, an inscription “YHWH and his Asherah”³ was found. “Asherah” was also found in Tel Miqneh (= Ekron) in the Philistine area. This new discovery of the name Asherah needs explanation and that is why I picked up this topic for discussion.

My study on this subject concerns two problems: the problem of sacred marriage (*hieros gamos*) as well as the problem of the sacred tree (= the Asherah) or the tree of life. Both these phenomena stand at the centre of Jewish mysticism (the so-called Kabbalah) and have been brought to full expression in the texts of this movement. That is why I start with Jewish mysticism whose main features can be traced back to the beginning of our era. As has been seen by Gershom Scholem,⁴ the Kabbalah literature revolves around the ideas of *hieros gamos* and the sacred tree which represents the ten sephirot. The marriage of the god = “The Holy One, blessed be he” (*hqdws brwk hw*) with the

¹ See my article “Kuntillet ‘Ajrud Inscriptions and their Significance”, *Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici* 1 (1984), pp. 121-30.

² Z. Meshel, “Teman Ḥorvat”, in E. Stern (ed.), *The New Encyclopedia of Archeological Excavations in the Holy Land* 4 (Jerusalem, 1993), pp. 1458-64.

³ A. Lemaire, “Les inscriptions de Khirbet el-Qôm et l’Ashérah de Yhwh”, *Revue Biblique* 84 (1977), pp. 595-608.

⁴ *Elements of the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (Jerusalem, 1980).

Shekhinah—a hypostatic term for God in female garb—represents the *hieros gamos*, while the sacred tree with its branches represents the Sephirot, “the countings” of the Kabbalah. These are: (1) *Keter* = crown; (2) *Hokhmah* = Wisdom; (3) *Binah* = understanding; (4) *Hesed* = Mercy; (5) *Hod* = splendour; (6) *Yesod* = Foundation; (7) *Tipheret* = Beauty; (8) *Geburah* = Strength; (9) *Neṣaḥ* = Victory/Endurance; (10) *Malkhut* = Kingdom. Each has an attribute associated with its number. The tree has a central trunk, the so-called pillar of equilibrium, and horizontal branches spreading to the right and the left, which reflect masculine and feminine. The Sephirot (the countings) are seen as the ten divine powers through which God manifests himself.

The same features have been found by S. Parpola in the neo-Assyrian tree of life.⁵ The *Sephirot* = countings in the Jewish mysticism correspond—according to Parpola—to the branches of the Mesopotamian Sacred Tree: *Keter* = Crown is the emblem of the supreme god Anu-Enlil; *Hokhmah* = Wisdom is the attribute of the god Enki or Ea; *Binah* = Understanding belongs to the god Sin; *Hesed* = Mercy is the attribute of Marduk; *Yesod* = Foundation corresponds to Nergal, lord of the underworld; *Tipheret* = Beauty characterizes Ištar; *Geburah* = Strength is associated with Nergal; *Neṣaḥ* = Victory corresponds to Nabu and Ninurta; *Hod* = Splendour corresponds to Adad; *Malkhut* = Kingdom belongs to the king as distributor of the divine stream.

Though this equation of Kabbalah with Assyro-Babylonian theosophy is a new hypothesis, it cannot be ignored, especially when raised by a brilliant scholar like Parpola. Parpola observed that the basic elements of the sacred Kabbalistic tree overlap the Mesopotamian sacred tree. The names and definitions of the Kabbalistic tree with its branches recall the attributes and symbols of the Mesopotamian gods, and the association of the tree with the ten numbers (*Sephirot* = countings) recalls the mystic numbers of the Mesopotamian gods. Jewish scholars who are familiar with both cuneiform literature and Jewish mysticism accept the thesis. As Parpola observed, the Kabbalistic tree has textually explicit explanations which are lacking in the case of the Assyrian sacred tree, the Kabbalistic textual evidence can then shed light on the Assyrian tree and its components.

The same situation exists in the case of the sacred marriage. From explicit textual evidence of the sacred marriage in the literature of

⁵ “The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origin of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy”, *JNES* 52 (1993), pp. 161-208.

Jewish mysticism we may learn about the *hieros gamos* in the Mesopotamian religion. Here I will look at the *hieros gamos* motif, and here I am better off than Parpola, because the countings of the tree have no allusion in scripture whereas the “sacred marriage”—as will be seen—is alluded to in various places in the scriptures.

The sacred marriage appears in a more concrete form than the countings of the tree because here one finds practical expression. For example, the pious ultra-orthodox Jews believe in the union of the bride = the *Shekhinah* with the Holy One. This actually constitutes the idea of the Sacred Marriage that brings harmony to the whole universe. In effect, every religious act should be accompanied by the formula: “This is done for the sake of the union of God and his *Shekhinah*” (*lšm yḥwd qdws’ bryk hw’ wškyntyh*) (see Scholem [n. 4], p. 108). Intercourse between man and wife is recommended for Jews on the eve of Sabbath. Human intercourse—as it were—imitates the intercourse of the Holy One with the *Shekhinah*. The sacred marriage guarantees fecundity and fertility in the universe, whereas human intercourse brings offspring. Thus we read in a passage from the Zohar:

... on Sabbath eve [the people] prepare themselves for intercourse, because they know the exalted mystery concerning the time when the consort is united with the King. [They know that divine intercourse between the *Shekhinah* and *Tiferet* takes place on Sabbath eve.] The companions who know this mystery direct their mind toward faith in their Creator, and then are blessed on that night with the fruit of their loins (Zohar II 89a-b).⁶

The real unity of God is achieved once the union between the *Shekhinah* and the Holy One takes place:

when Israel proclaims the unity of “*Shema* . . . ‘Hear O Israel—the Lord is one’”, the Matron adorns herself in order to enter the chamber together with her husband. All the upper numbers (the Sephirot from *Hesed* to *Yesod* that are of the masculine type) unite with a unique desire to be “one” without separation. Then her husband concentrates in her entrance into the chamber to be all alone with her, to become “one” (Zohar II 135a).

The union between the *Shekhinah* and the Holy One is the main purpose of the sacrifices. The burnt offering symbolizes the relation between

⁶ See I. Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar III* (trans. by D. Goldstein, Oxford, 1989), p. 1391.

the *Shekhinah* and *Tipheret* (her husband) and because of that it is called “the Holy of Holies” and “the mystery of masculine and feminine, together” (Zohar II 231b-237a).

The union of the *Shekhinah* with the Holy One is remarkable in the high priest’s worship on Yom Kippur. At his entrance to the Holy of Holies, he heard the voice of the wings of the cherubim being lifted up for intercourse. When the wings subside the cherubim copulate calmly (III 67b).

By the time the priest enters the Holy of Holies in order to unify the holy name, to unite the king with the consort, the congregation has to be kept at a distance, because the mystery of intercourse demands privacy, and that has been expressed, according to the Zohar, in the verse “No man shall be in the tent of meeting” (Lev. xvi 17) (Tishby [n. 6], p. 884).

The destruction of the temple, represented as the separation of the *Shekhinah* from the Holy One, has been described in a very erotic form. After the destruction of the temple, the *Shekhinah*

enters . . . the Holy of Holies, and she sees it destroyed, and the place of her dwelling and her couch defiled. . . . She cries bitterly . . . and says: “My couch, my couch, the place where I used to dwell. . . . My husband would . . . lie in my arms, when he came to me and . . . took his delight between my breasts . . . My husband, O, my husband, . . . Do you not remember the days of love . . .?” (Tishby [n. 6], p. 877).

Here the Holy of Holies is pictured as the holy couple’s bed chamber, and, indeed, as we will see, we find in Rabbinic sources that the poles of the holy ark were seen as two breasts of a woman, and the Holy of Holies appears as a place of communion for the Holy One and the *Shekhinah*. This is represented, according to the Rabbis, in the verse in the Song of Songs (i 13) about the beloved who is lodged like myrrh between the breasts (*s^erôr hammôr dôdî lî bēn šaday yālîn*).

This term, the mystic couch of love, the place for privacy of the king and the queen, has been found recently in Assyria by K. Deller.⁷ There, we find the term *qirsu* (*‘ārīs* in Rabbinic terms), whose meaning is a row of vines,⁸ in order to isolate them from the outside. This was necessary for secret councils⁹ and for the union of the king and

⁷ “Assurbanipal in der Gartenlaube”, *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 18 (1987), pp. 229-38.

⁸ See M. Kilayim VI 1ff., Eduyoth II 4; see also Ch. Albeck, *Zeraim, Hašlamot*, p. 166.

⁹ On secrecy in prophecy at Mari see recently A. Malamat, “The Secret Council and Prophetic Involvement in Mari and Israel”, in R. Liwak and S. Wagner (ed.),

the queen behind a curtain (= *kikkišu*). According to Deller, the king's staying in that place was like an experience of Paradise. Indeed, the term *pardēs* in Rabbinic literature¹⁰ refers to a place where the king stays with the queen; compare Tos. Hagigah II 3-4, after the story about the four men who entered the *pardēs*: "A parable, to what may the matter be likened? to a king's garden (*pardēs*) with a balcony over it; what must one do? only look, let him not gaze upon it" (cf. J. Hagigah II 5, 77c). For the curtain = *pargôd* that separated between people and a god's/king's secret place, see my study in *Beer-Sheva* 3.¹¹

Indeed, the meal of the king with his consort finds expression, according to the Zohar, in the Sabbath meal of everyone in Israel. On the Sabbath eve the *Shekhinah* prepares herself for the union: "This is the meal of the king so that he can come and eat with me", "prepare the meal of the king". Sabbath meals are called in the Zohar "Meals of faith" (*mhymnwî*) and, as Tishby observes ([n. 6], p. 12-36), it means "meal of the mysteries".

The union of the king and his wife has been shown in erotic colours. Thus we find in Lurianic Sabbath songs the verse:

Between right and left
the Bride approaches
in holy jewels
and festive garments.

Her husband embraces her
in her foundation,
gives her pleasure,
grinds grindings.¹²

This is not to be seen as permissiveness since the matter concerns the legitimate union between a man and his wife or the king and the queen. On the contrary, we have here an attempt to expound the "holy secret" of creation and birth (compare Ps. cxxxix 13-15) as expressed in an anonymous Kabbalistic work of the 13th century: *Iggeret Haqqodesh*¹³ in which it is stated:

Prophetie und geschichtliche Wirklichkeit im alten Israel. Festschrift für Siegfried Herrmann (Stuttgart, 1991), pp. 231-6.

¹⁰ Y. Liebes, *The Four who entered the Paradise* (Hebrew) (2nd edn, Jerusalem, 1990).

¹¹ "'Reed, Wall!! Hear me'—Leak of Information from the Divine Counsel" (Hebrew), *Beer-Sheva* 3 (1988), pp. 63-8.

¹² See Scholem (n. 4), p. 143; Y. Liebes, *Molad* 233 (1972), pp. 540-55.

¹³ *Iggeret Hakodesh*, translated with an introduction by Seymour J. Cohen (Northvale, New Jersey, 1993), p. 73.

The union of a man and his wife . . . is a holy and pure matter if it is done appropriately, at the proper time and with the proper intention, and let nobody think that the proper union is something ugly and disgraceful.¹⁴

That this ideology of *hieros gamos* has its roots in old Jewish tradition may be learned from the following Rabbinic sources:

- (a) Whenever Israel came up to the festivals, the curtain (of the Holy of Holies) would be removed for them and the Cherubim were shown to them, whose bodies were intertwined with one another and would be thus addressed: “Look! You are beloved before God as the love between man and woman” (B. Yoma 54a)¹⁵
- (b) In the same discussion about the Cherubim, we read: What does *k'ma'ar-'is w'loyot sabib* [1 Kgs vii 36; cp. *vv.* 29-30] mean? Rabbah son of R. Shilah said: Even as a man embracing his companion. Resh Lakish said: When the heathens entered the Temple and saw the Cherubim whose bodies were intertwined with one another, they carried them out and said: These Israelites, whose blessing is a blessing and whose curse is a curse, occupy themselves with such things! And immediately they despised them, as it said: “All that honoured her, despised her, because they have seen her nakedness” (Lam. i 8) (B. Yoma 54ab).

It is worth remarking that this Rabbinic interpretation seems to be the real meaning of the verse, since the modern commentaries on this verse are tenuous. We find *ma'ar* as “nakedness” in Nah. iii 5, and *lwy* as “companion” in Gen. xxix 34.

- (c) In the same place we find an interpretation of 1 Kgs viii 8: And the ends of the staves were seen . . . but they could not be seen outside (*wayyera'û ra'se habbaddim . . . w'lo' yera'û hahûsâ*). How is that possible? They were seen and were not seen? . . . They pressed forth and protruded as the two breasts of a woman, as it is said: “my beloved is unto me as a bag of myrrh that lieth between my breasts” (B. Yoma 54a; Tos. Kippurim II 15; J. Shekalim VI 1, 49c).

The Holy of Holies is called the bed chamber for the sacred marriage. Thus we read in an interpretation of the verse: “our couch is shaded with branches”, *'ap-'arsenu ra'anana*, Song of Songs i 16: “Just as a bed is for fecundity (*p'riyya ur'biyya*) so is the Temple” (Yalkut Shimeoni

¹⁴ Cf. M. Idel, *Kabbalah, New Perspectives* (Tel-Aviv, 1993), pp. 70-1.

¹⁵ Idel (n. 14), p. 355, n. 162.

985). It seems that similarly we have to understand "the bed chamber" (*ḥādar hammittôt*) in 2 Kgs xi 2. Indeed, the hiding of King Joash away from Athaliah would be possible only in a place which the high priest alone enters once a year.

ḥādar hammittôt is translated 'idd'ron bêt 'arsātā', an expression parallel to *qirsu* in Assyria, the bed chamber of the king and the goddess in the sacred marriage.¹⁶ The same applies to the phrase in the Song of Songs i 14: "My beloved is to me as a cluster of henna-blossom from the vineyards of En-gedi" (*'eškōl hakkōper dôdî lî b'karmê 'ên gedi*). This cluster of blossom has been interpreted by the Rabbis as the temple (Yalkut Shimeoni 984), and like the incense which atones for all the sins of Israel (Song of Songs Rabbah 1,1).

This view of the Holy of Holies as a bed chamber continues in the liturgical hymns for Yom Kippur. Thus, we find there: "The ends of the poles, as two breasts pressed . . .",¹⁷ and in another hymn: "he runs and enters (the Holy of Holies) and stands between the breasts".¹⁸

The idea of sacred marriage is found in Christian sources: "I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God prepared like a bride adorned for her husband. I heard a great voice from the throne saying: 'Behold the σκηνή [= *Shekhinah* not "tabernacle"] is with mankind, it will dwell with them'" (Rev. xxi 1-3).

"Let us rejoice . . . and give him the glory, for the marriage of the lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready. It was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure" (Rev. xix 7-8).

This concept is found also in Christian gnostic sources:

There were three buildings specifically for sacrifice in Jerusalem. The one facing west was called "the holy." Another facing south was called "the holy of the holy." The third facing east was called: "the holy of the holies," the place where only the high priest enters. Baptism is "the holy" building, Redemption is "the holy of the holy," "the holy of the holies" is the bridal chamber.¹⁹

All these sources reflect sacred marriage in a figurative, symbolic

¹⁶ See Y. Zephaty, *The love songs in the Sumerian literature, a critical edition of Dumuzi-Inanna Songs* (Hebrew) (diss., Bar-Ilan University, 1985), p. 33.

¹⁷ Cf. *Josse ben Josse poems*, edited by A. Mirsky (Jerusalem, 1977), p. 165.

¹⁸ Cf. D. Goldschmidt, *The Order of Prayers for the High Holidays 2, Yom Kippur* (Jerusalem, 1970), p. 442, line 55.

¹⁹ P. 23 of W.W. Isenberg, "The Gospel of Philip (II, 3)", in J.M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (3rd edn, San Francisco, etc., 1988), pp. 139-60.

way.²⁰ The moment we move to the First Temple Period, the evidence about *hieros gamos* and the Sacred Tree becomes more tangible and concrete. Here we find the worship of the queen of heaven (*mlkt šmym*), identical with Ištar, called in Akkadian *šarrat šamê* (cf. Jer. vii 18, xlv 15-19).²¹ To the same category belongs the worship on the roofs in 2 Kgs xxi 5, xxiii 5, 12; Isa. lxxv 3, lxxvi 17; Jer. xix 13, xxxii 29; Zeph. i 5, as well as the scriptures concerning the worship of the Asherah: 1 Kgs xv 13; 2 Kgs xxi 7, xxiii 7.

The text in Ezek. viii attests the nature of this mysterious worship. Here we find seventy elders burning incense in secrecy and darkness to the statue and the graven image, while the women are weeping for Tammuz. Indeed, in Asherah worship the women have a special place. Tammuz symbolized the fertility of the spring season. When the spring season is finished, the god Tammuz, as it were, dies, and this is the occasion for weeping that is illustrated in Ezek. viii 14 by the women mourning at the temple gate the death of the fertility god. Compare the mourning on the death of Hadad (*hădad-rimmôn*), the weather god, in Zech. xii 11. *Rammānu* is an adjective to Hadad and it means "the thunderer", a title of Haddu (= Baal) known to us from Ugarit.²² The same applies to the cult of Ištar, the queen of heaven. It is especially the women who bake cakes for the queen of heaven (*šarrat šamê*). The *kawwānîm* baked by the women for Ištar, the queen of heaven (Jer. vii 16-20, xlv 15-19, 25), are offered in order to ensure fecundity, as is proclaimed by the answer of the women to Jeremiah: "We shall do . . . as did . . . our ancestors, our kings and our princes in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem [to offer to the queen of heaven, in order to form her image], for then we had plenty of food and we prospered" (xlv 17). Ištar, the queen of heaven (= Venus) is practically worshipped here. By weeping they indicate the death of Tammuz, and the worship of the sun is expressed by "prostrating themselves to the rising sun" (Ezek. viii 16). Here we find the worship of the queen of heaven that was forbidden in Israel.

The name Ashtoret (Astarte), identical with the queen of heaven, has the meaning of increase and progeny, as may be learned from

²⁰ On Jerusalem as female see M. Idel, "Jerusalem in thirteenth Century Jewish Thought", in J. Prawer and H. Ben Shamai (ed.), *The History of Jerusalem, Crusaders and Ayyubids* (Jerusalem, 1991), pp. 264-86.

²¹ "The Worship of Molech and of the Queen of Heaven and its Background", *Ugarit-Forschungen* 4 (1972), pp. 133-54.

²² H.J. Greenfield, "Rimmôn", *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (Hebrew) 7, cols. 377-8.

Deut. vii 13, xxviii 4, 18 where fecundity of sheep is called 'ašt'rot šō'nekā.

This ritual was strictly forbidden by the Deuteronomic movement:

You shall not plant an Asherah, any kind of tree, beside the altar of the Lord your God which you shall build. You shall not set up a sacred pillar which the Lord your God hates (Deut. xvi 21-2).

However, the concept of sacred marriage as a source of harmony in the world below with the world above was legitimate. The same prophet, Hosea, who fought against the worship of the golden calves as well as worship at the high places,²³ did not hesitate to adopt the theory about the union of God with his bride Israel. Most instructive is Hosea ii 21-5, which speaks about the betrothal of YHWH with Israel, following which the union of heaven (masculine) and earth (feminine) will take place and will fertilize the land:

I will espouse you forever . . . then you shall know YHWH [as is well known, the verb *yd'* in Hebrew can have the meaning of sexual relations]. I will on that day respond . . . to the sky and it shall respond to the earth. And the earth shall respond with grain and wine and oil . . . I will sow her in the earth as my own . . . (Hosea ii 21-5).

God espouses (again) his bride (Israel), and he gives her for dowry the virtues: righteousness, justice, grace, mercy and faith, and by means of it he reunites himself with the bride. This reunion, that reminds us of the reunion of the Holy One, blessed be he, with the *Shekhinah*, brings fecundity because of the rain (the seed), with whom the heaven seeds the earth (*ūz'ra'tihā llī bā'āres*). The consequence is grain and wine and oil that God gives to the bride as he did in the ideal past (*v.* 10).

The same motif is found in the Sumerian sources of the third and second millennia B.C.E. There, we read about the king who approaches Inanna (Ištar) with lifted head and makes love to her in order to bring fecundity to the kingdom.²⁴

Very instructive is the Sumerian text about marriage between heaven and earth, and the semen that rains down on the earth to fertilize her, reminding us of Hosea ii. We read there:²⁵

²³ M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11* (New York, 1991), p. 373.

²⁴ See recently Zephyat (above n. 16), pp. 15ff.

²⁵ J. Van Dijk, "Le motif Cosmique dans la pensée Sumérienne", *Acta Orientalia* 28 (1964), pp. 36-7.

The heavens talked with the earth
and the earth talked with the heavens.²⁶

The sexual union of Heaven and Earth is concretely depicted
in the "Disputation between Tree and Reed":²⁷

The holy Earth, the pure Earth, beautified herself
for holy Heaven,
Heaven, the noble god, inserted
his sex into the wide earth,
Let flow the semen of the heroes, Trees and Reed,
into her womb.
The Earthly Orb, the trusty cow,
was impregnated with the good semen of Heaven.

Similarly, we read in a document from the first millennium B.C.E.:
"When the heavens and earth were taken in marriage" (Sultan Tepe
Tablets, no. 136).

The term *hieros gamos* is Greek,²⁸ and there also the rain has been
described as like semen from the heaven which fertilizes the earth.
Thus, in Aeschylus (a fragment of Athenaeus) we read in a speech of
Aphrodite,²⁹

The chaste heaven loves to violate the earth,
and love lays hold on earth to join in wedlock.
The rain from the streaming heaven falls down
and impregnates the earth; and she brings forth for mortals
the pasturage of sheep and Demeter's sustenance;
and the ripe season for the trees is perfected
by the watery union. Of all this I am the cause.

Similarly, we read in Plato: "For the woman in her conception and
generation is but the imitation of the earth, and not the earth of the
woman" (Menexenus 238A).³⁰

²⁶ For "talking" as a euphemism for copulation in the Akkadian and Sumerian sources, see S.M. Paul, "Euphemistically 'speaking' and a Covetous Eye", *Hebrew Annual Review* 14 (1994), pp. 193-204.

²⁷ S.N. Kramer, *From the Poetry of Sumer* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1979), pp. 29-30.

²⁸ Martin P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der Griechischen Religion* 1 (3rd edn, München, 1967), pp. 120-1.

²⁹ Athenaeus, *The deipnosophists*, IV with an English translation by C.B. Gulick (London, 1959), pp. 233-4.

³⁰ See Isa. xlv 8 and the interpretation of this verse in J. Berakhot IX 3, 14a and Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer ch. 5 (I am grateful to my student Rony Goldstein for this reference).

In the Sumerian and early Old Babylonian religion (2100-1800 B.C.E.) the performance of the sacred marriage was a royal prerogative; the king used to represent the god Dumuzi (= Hebrew Tammuz; cf. Ezek. viii 14) who is the central male figure in the sacred marriage rite. The identity of the female partner in the sacred marriage is still unclear, although it is generally assumed that she was a priestess.³¹

Besides the Dumuzi-Inanna (= Ištar) type of sacred marriage there seems to have existed an additional type of sacred marriage in Sumer, one that took place between deities only. This type of sacred marriage was apparently performed in a symbolical way, such as, for example, by bringing the god's statue into the "bed chamber" of the goddess (see the appendix at the end of this article). It is this type of sacred marriage that survived and continued to be practised after the Isin-Larsa period, at the beginning of the second millennium when the Dumuzi-Inanna type of sacred marriage was totally abandoned.³² However, all these dramatize the "sacred marriage" by acts of ritual; this was prohibited officially in Israel, but was legal as a metaphor. Concerning the symbolic meaning of the sacred marriage we read in Hosea xiv 6ff:

I will be to Israel like dew, he shall blossom like the lily, strike root like a Lebanon tree, his boughs shall spread out far, his beauty shall be like the olive tree . . . they who sit in his shade shall be revived. They shall bring to life new grain and shall blossom like the vine . . .

Ephraim, what more have I to do with idols? I am his Anath and his Asherah! I am like a luxuriant cypress, your fruit is provided by me.

Who is wise will consider these words, he who is prudent will take note of them. For the ways of the Lord are smooth, the righteous will walk on them, while sinners will stumble on them.

The general purpose of the passage is clear: the God of Israel provides fertility, and not the idols. But the words *'ānī 'ānūtī wa'āšūrennū*, "it is I who answer and look at him", hardly suit the context. J. Wellhausen therefore proposed the reading *'ānī 'ānātō wa'āšērātō*, "I am his Anath and Asherah", i.e., the powers of fertility ascribed to these goddesses is, in fact, my power.³³ From the Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscriptions

³¹ J. Bottéro, "La Hiérogamie après l'époque sumérienne", in S.N. Kramer, *Le mariage sacré à Babylone* (Paris, 1983), pp. 175-214.

³² J. Klein, "Sacred marriage", *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 5 (New York, 1992), pp. 868-9.

³³ *Die Kleinen Propheten* (3rd edn, Berlin, 1898), p. 134.

we learn that Asherah was in fact worshipped during this period, and this verse may be a polemic against this cult (cf. Hosea ii 10ff.). O. Eissfeldt explained the verse which follows in Hosea in the light of Wellhausen's emendation: *mî hākām w'yābēn 'ēleh nābôn w'yēdā'em kî-y'sārîm darkē yhwēh w'saddiqîm yēl'kū bām ūpōs'im yikkāš'lū bām*, "whoever is wise, let him understand these things: whoever is discerning, let him know them; for the ways of the Lord are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them" (v. 10). According to Eissfeldt, this is a gloss added by a later scribe who felt uncomfortable with the notion that God embodies Anath and Asherah. The scribe warns that only the righteous and the wise can properly understand the above verse; sinners will be led astray by it.

Such a comment is akin to the later Hebrew dicta: "this may be revealed only to the discreet", *'ēn m'gallîn 'ellā' laṣṣ'nū'im*, and "let the enlightened keep silent", *w'hammaškil yiddôm*.³⁴ Later scribes, according to Eissfeldt,³⁵ felt this warning insufficient, and thus changed *'ānātō wa'āšērātō* to *'ānūtī wa'āšurennūtī*.

The latest discoveries at 'Ajrud and recently at Ekron, and the wealth of new information about Anath discovered since Wellhausen, serve to validate his suggestion.

The Asherah at 'Ajrud was apparently worshipped with a full array of rites. In 2 Kgs xxiii 7 we read of "vestments" for the Asherah woven by women of Judah, a practice which was well-known in other ancient Near Eastern temples. Vestiges of beautifully-woven cloth were found at 'Ajrud, undoubtedly used in the local cult. One may reasonably assume that these are the vestments which served the Asherah mentioned in the inscriptions.³⁶ In Greece the robe (Peplos) of the Goddess Athene was woven by young girls of noble birth. S. Lieberman³⁷ compared this to the noble virgins who were weaving the veil of the Temple (M. Shekalim VIII 15-16).

It seems that syncretism found expression in Judah not only in

³⁴ It is interesting that this verse has been quoted in the Zohar in a text dealing with secret doctrines: "These matters were not meant to be revealed except to the supreme holy ones, who have entered and emerged (in peace), and who know the path of the holy one blessed be he, and do not deviate either to the left or to the right, as it is written 'For the ways of the Lord are right and the just do walk in them . . .'" (Zohar III 290a).

³⁵ *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 27 (1970), p. 293.

³⁶ See Avigail Scheffer in Z. Meshel, *Kuntillet 'Ajrud*, The Israel Museum cat. no. 175 (Jerusalem, 1978), pp. 15-16.

³⁷ *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York, 1962), pp. 168-9.

Asherah worship, but in the names of the divinity as well. Asherah's consort is El, referred to as *qnh 'rs*, "El creator of earth", known from the 8th-century B.C.E. inscription from Karatepe. This epithet is also reflected in the Hurrian-Hittite myths of the god Elkunirsa from the second millennium B.C.E.³⁸ Surprisingly enough, this very epithet was discovered in the 8th-7th century B.C.E. layer of the excavations in the Jewish quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem.³⁹ This cannot be considered a genuine Israelite epithet of God since the Bible uses *qōnēh šāmayim wā'āreš*, "creator of heaven and earth" (Gen. xiv 18-20) or *'ōsēh šāmayim wā'āreš*, "maker of heaven and earth" (Ps. cxv 15, cxxi 2, xxvii 8, etc.), but never *qōnēh/'ōsēh 'ereš* alone. This particular epithet thus seems to reflect a syncretistic pattern of worship. Hosea may, in fact, be referring to this very El cult in his polemic against syncretism: *s'babūnī b'kaḥaš 'eprayim ūb'mirmā bēt yiśrā'el wihūdā 'ōd rād 'im-'el w'im-q'dōšīm ne'ēmān*, "Ephraim has encompassed me with lies and the house of Israel with deceit; and Judah still follows El and is still faithful to the holy ones" (Hos. xii 1). The members of the council of El are called *qdšm*, "holy ones", in Phoenician inscriptions, and Hosea is apparently referring to El and his sons in his rebuke of Judah's allegiance to El and the "holy ones". The "holy ones" are not only associated with El but also with his consort Athirat. Thus we find in Ugarit alongside *ilm/bn qdš*, "the gods/holy sons", *ilm bn atrt*, "the gods, the sons of Athirat", which seems to indicate that the sons of the mother-goddess Asherah are identical with the sons of El, "the holy ones".

In the light of the 'Ajrud inscriptions, it is worthwhile taking a second look at H.S. Nyberg's proposed emendation of *mîmîno 'ēš dāt lāmô* to *mîmîno šrt lāmô*, "at his [the Lord's] right hand, Asherah" (Deut. xxxiii 2).⁴⁰ This reading is instructive, since it comes after *rib'bōt qōdeš*, "the myriads of holy ones" (cf. the Targum and LXX) who accompany Yahweh in his march from his holy abode, an idea attested in Ps. lxxviii 18: *rekeb 'ēlohîm ribbōtayim 'alpē šinān 'ādōnāy bām sînāy baqqōdeš*, "God's chariots, myriads of thousands of archers, the Lord amongst the holy ones at Sinai". After *šrt* in Deut. xxxiii 2 we find "all his holy ones", *kol-q'dōšāyw*. All this brings us close to the Ugaritic concept of the divine retinue of El, Asherah and their holy sons (*bn qdš*) on the

³⁸ See about this myth H.A. Hoffner, "The Elkunirsa Myth Reconsidered", *Revue Hittite et Asiatique* 23 (1965), 76, pp. 5-16.

³⁹ N. Avigad, "Excavations in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, 1971", *IEJ* 22 (1972), pp. 195-6.

⁴⁰ "Deuteronomium 33, 2-3", *ZDMG* 92 (1938), pp. 320-44.

one hand, and to “Yahweh and his Asherah” in the ‘Ajrud texts on the other.⁴¹ Asherah at the right hand of Yahweh in Deut. xxxiii 2 reminds us the consort, the paredros of the king; cf. 1 Kgs ii 19; Ps. xlv 10 (compare Neh. ii 6 and Athena as paredros of Zeus). T. Frymer-Kensky⁴² justifiably states that the sacred marriage provided a powerful symbol for the union of forces involved in the creation of fertility. The actual ritual event escapes us. The sacred marriage is a metaphor or symbol with powerful dimensions of meaning.

In sum, there is a great difference between belief and practice in ancient Israel. The *hieros gamos* as a divine principle has been elaborated, especially in the mystic literature, which flourished in the Kabbalah. However, the religion of Israel prohibited the performance of any ceremony regarding the *hieros gamos*. By the same token, the worship of the sacred tree which has left traces in ancient Israelite worship (compare the tree planted by Abraham in Gen. xxi 33) has been strictly prohibited by the Deuteronomic movement. However, as a symbol of the divine imagery it continued in the Kabbalah, and it exists in it until the present day.

Appendix

The New Year Festival and the sacred marriage (an Aramaic text in Demotic script); according to R.C. Steiner, *JAOs* 111 (1991), pp. 362-3:

A voice from within calls out to him to enter . . . After he enters and washes his hands . . ., the statue of Marah (= Nanai), the Queen of *rš*, is brought into the assembly of the gods . . . The gods rise from their thrones . . . and give the order for her to be seated among them . . . Each of the assembled gods is asked to bless the king . . . Sheep are slaughtered . . . while sixty singers . . . lift their voices and sixty temple servants . . . burn myrrh and frankincense . . . The chief god is invited to feast on lamb and to become inebriated with wine, to the accompaniment of sweet harp and lyre music . . . The king initiates the rite by declaring: “Nanai, thou art my wife . . . Nanai, bring near to me thy lips . . . My beloved . . ., enter the door into our house. With my mouth, consort of our lord . . ., let me kiss thee”. They enter the “perfumed hideaway” . . ., where the goddess is laid upon an embroidered bedspread.

⁴¹ See my article in *Shaton* 4 (1980), p. 283.

⁴² *In the Wake of the Goddesses* (New York and Toronto, 1992), pp. 55-6.

According to Steiner, the text deals with the liturgy of a New Year festival in Bethel. Indeed, we find in a Hittite text a New Year festival in which the gods assemble and determine about fertility. There we read:⁴³ "For the weather god a festival of New Year is prepared. All the gods gather in the house of the weather god. Sadness should be removed . . . eat and drink and decide the fate of life for the king . . . decide about the fate of the crop".

A New Year festival in such terms is found in M. Rosh Hashana I 2. The joyful character of the festival can be seen in Neh. viii 9-10. The command to be glad on the festival appears here as in the Hittite text:

Do not mourn or weep . . . you may go now; Refresh yourselves with rich food and sweet drinks . . . for this day is holy to our Lord. Let there be no sadness, for joy in the Lord is your strength. . . So all the people went away to eat and drink.⁴⁴

⁴³ H. Otten, "Ein Text zum Neujahrsfest aus Bogazköy", *OLZ* 51 (1956), cols 102-5.

⁴⁴ See my article in *Shaton* 5-6 (1981-4), p. 236.