The Goddess, Syncretism, and Patriarchy: Evolution and Extinction of the Goddess during the Creation of Patriarchy in Ancient Israel

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Abstract

Archaeological evidence has established that an alternative religious culture existed before the establishment of Yahwism\(^1\) and that this culture was indeed polytheistic.\(^2\) In this paper it is argued that a goddess culture reigned from the period of pre-Israelite culture until the early years of the postexilic period (early Judaism). The shift from a goddess-based religion to Yahwism may have had serious implications for the eventual development of Judaism. Several unanswered questions remain concerning this religious culture. This study queries the existence and the ramifications of this religious culture on the foundations of ancient Israelite religion and ultimately Judaism. Finally, it seeks to shed light upon what caused the demise of the goddess tradition.

The Question

“Do not follow other gods, any gods of the peoples about you” (Deuteronomy 6:14) is one of several injunctions against worshipping other gods. The Hebrew Bible is replete with legal codes and regulations that parallel this sentiment. In fact, one of the prevailing themes within the Tanakh is the banishment of idols and the worship of other deities. According to Robert Goldenberg, “The Hebrew Bible proclaims a fiercely held belief that members of the covenant people of Israel are forbidden to worship any being other than YHWH, the god of the covenant.”\(^3\) Yet, however important this concept is to the canon, it proved to be of the utmost difficulty for the ancient Israelites.

These laws regarding the worship of only one supreme deity as well as the emphasis on the separation from other religious cultures solidifies the notion that there existed other religious traditions before the establishment of Yahwism\(^4\) in the ancient Near East. In this paper, it is argued that an alternative goddess tradition functioned from

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\(^{1}\) Worship of Yahweh.


\(^{4}\) Worship of Yahweh
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the period of pre-Israelite culture until the early years of the postexilic period (early Judaism). The shift from a goddess-based religion to Yahwism may have had serious implications for the eventual development of Judaism. Several unanswered questions remain concerning this religious culture. Furthermore, queries exist about the ramifications of this religious culture on the foundations of ancient Israelite religion and ultimately Judaism. Finally, what caused the demise of the goddess tradition?

Archaeological evidence has established that this alternative religious culture was polytheistic. What then, was the cause of the dramatic shift in emphasis from polytheism to monotheism? Before this question can be addressed, another must be answered: What sort of culture was this polytheistic society? Archaeological data from before the establishment of Israel reveals the existence of a religious system in which worship practices were centered on the concept of the goddess and fertility cults.

**Evidence for the Goddess Culture**

There is increasing scholarly interest in artifacts found in archaeological levels that reveal life in ancient Israel and throughout the ancient Near East. These artifacts yield fascinating information about the region that came to be known as the land of Israel. Amihai Mazar’s *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible* provides a timeline that illustrates the existence of artifacts from agricultural communities in the Neolithic Period, ca. 10,000-5,000 B.C.E. until the Iron Age, ca. 1000 B.C.E. (during the time of King David’s reign). Mazar’s study focuses on all aspects of the evolution of life in the Fertile Crescent from the Neolithic Period through the Iron Age. His holistic perspective includes information relevant to all aspects of life including findings concerning female fertility figurines.

Temple fertility figures depict one of the earliest examples of the worship of the mother goddess in the ancient Near East dated to the sixth millennium B.C.E. Mazar writes the following concerning one of the clay figures found at Hurvat Minah:

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A peculiar type of pottery figurine most probably depicts the Yarmukian fertility goddess. Its head is elongated and pointed, and the eyes resemble kernels of grain . . . [she] is shown seated, holding her breasts; she is depicted with exaggerated hips. Various Neolithic communities worshiped images of the mother goddess. The mother goddess continued to be attested as part of the pre-Israelite culture. Archaeological levels dated to the fourth millennium B.C.E. yielded evidence of goddess or fertility cultures. Mazar described the “Venus from Beer-Sheba,” as a “pregnant female statuette with emphasized sexual organs [and] is undoubtedly a fertility goddess, possibly the mother goddess so common since Neolithic times.” The popularity of figurines, both in clay and ivory, grew as time progressed and though advances were made in housing, tools, pottery, and fortifications; images and figurines of these fertility goddesses remained relatively unchanged.

In the Bronze Age (or second millennium B.C.E.), which was ushered in by the change of agricultural communities into cities, the images of the goddess prevailed. However, unlike previous goddess imagery she was not carved or shaped. Rather, the Bronze Age version was cast from a mold and created out of gold, silver, or bronze. From the second half of the Middle Bronze Age both figurines and the stone molds from which they were cast have been excavated. Mazar reports the “Naked Horned Goddess” found at the temple of Nahariyah “probably represented the Canaanite goddess Astarte.” Additional clay fertility goddesses were found and are dated to the Late Bronze Age. Mazar notes that these clay images “represent the naked fertility goddess, and like the

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7 Mazar, 52.
8 Mazar, 78.
9 Mazar, 86.
10 Mazar, 221.
biblical teraphim\textsuperscript{11} (Genesis 31:19-35; I Samuel 19:13-16) they were probably used by women.\textsuperscript{12} The Late Bronze Age, between ca. 1300 and 1200 B.C.E, ancient Israel emerged as a loose band of tribes. The Merneptah Stele is the only piece of archaeological evidence that confirms this time span for the date for Israel’s origins. (The Merneptah Stele has an inscription on it that mentions a group named Israel that lived in Canaan ca. 1207 B.C.E. according to Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman\textsuperscript{13}).

In the early Iron Age with the establishment of Yahwism, images of the goddesses continued to be found. However, these figures are unlike the iconography from previous eras.

Three significant figurines emerged during this period. The first of these images is of a seated female figure or a goddess\textsuperscript{14}. Apparently, as Mazar suggests, this simple form is of Mycenaean origin.\textsuperscript{15} Another figure, depicted, as a liquid holding vessel, appears to have breasts that operate as spouts, probably "functioned in a fertility cult"\textsuperscript{16}.

The third figure from this period is not unlike those seen in earlier societies. She has the traditional large breasts and hips and was found in a cemetery in the Sharon Plain.\textsuperscript{17}

The latest known archaeological evidence that was presented by Mazar also supports the existence of goddess culture. It is dated to a period well after Israel’s emergence. This evidence emanates from the southern kingdom

\textsuperscript{11} Image of a house god.
\textsuperscript{12} Mazar, 273-274.
\textsuperscript{14} Mazar, 324.
\textsuperscript{15} Mazar, 324.
\textsuperscript{16} Mazar, 325.
\textsuperscript{17} Mazar, 357.
long after David’s United Monarchy split and the northern kingdom had been taken into captivity by the Assyrians ca. 722 B.C.E.

According to Mazar, these figures are “the finest examples” and they come from Jerusalem. They are dated to the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E. These small clay figurines depict a fertility goddess Astoreth. Mazar explains, that these figurines “were prominent in daily Israelite religious practice.”

**The Nature of the Goddess**

Even though archaeological evidence for the existence of the goddess has been established in relationship to ancient Israelite religion, it is essential to describe how these figures fit into the daily lives of the ancient Israelites. Since it is known that “the religions of the ancient Near East were, of course, polytheistic” what characteristics of the female deities separated her so distinctly from her male counterparts? Clearly the goddess image continued for several centuries after ancient Israelite religion had been established.

In order to delineate how the idols to which Yahweh refers throughout the Hebrew Bible may be associated with the figures used in goddess culture, it is necessary to explain the nature of these fertility cults. As a part of the analysis, it is important to note how goddess cultures may have been integrated into mainstream Israelite religion.

Tikva Frymer-Kenksy places great emphasis on the goddess Ishtar or Inanna in her work, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*. Ishtar was a central figure in the Sumerian pantheon and Frymer-Kenksy uses her to illustrate the power that the goddess held within the polytheistic pantheons. Even though ancient Canaan and Sumer were close geographically, different deities were worshipped. And the three powerful goddesses that existed in Canaan were less emphasized by Frymer-Kenksy. Interestingly, “it is from Biblical sources that we know the names of the three goddesses who were worshipped by

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18 Mazar, 502.
19 Mazar 501.
the ancient Hebrews down to the days of the Babylonian Exile (586 B.C.): Asherah, Astarte, and the Queen of Heaven, who was probably identical with Anath.”

The two goddesses that dominated the pantheon of ancient Canaanite religion were Asherah and Anath. Steve Davies’ journal article entitled, “The Canaanite-Hebrew Goddess” is a useful guide in the discussion of these goddesses, and how they became central figures to the people of Israel.

A cursory summation of Davies’ work on of these goddesses begins with the fact that Anath is the daughter of Asherah, who was “the leading goddess of the Canaanite people”. Asherah was the mother of another powerful goddess, and the mother of the entire pantheon. Asherah was the wife of El, Anath’s father and a controversial figure within the Hebrew Bible. “Anath who was also called Astoreth and Astarte” is mentioned several times in the Hebrew Bible. In the book of Judges there is mention of the Israelites provoking YHWH and it is reported that, “they forsook the Lord and worshiped Baal and the Astoreth” (Judges 2.13). Later, Samuel spoke to the people of Israel and told them “‘if you mean to return to the Lord with all your heart, you must remove the alien gods and the Ashtaroth from your midst and direct your heart to the Lord and serve Him alone.”’ (1 Samuel 7.3)

The Covenant

When God’s covenant with his people was established, the worship of goddesses should have ceased. In fact, two of the Ten Commandments cover this important topic:

God spoke all these words, saying: I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: you shall have no other gods besides Me. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the Lord your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject me, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments (Exodus 20: 1-6)

This passage illustrates that YHWH is not only forceful regarding his place as the one supreme god among the Israelites but also his willingness to punish future generations of those who still accept the previously established deities. The concept of denouncing all
other deities proved difficult for the people of Israel. The Bible “in spite of the efforts of
its monotheistically oriented authors [and] editors, contains some incidental information
as to the religion which all the spiritual leaders of the Hebrews strove to suppress,
eliminate and replace by monotheistic Yahwism” Raphael Patai writes24

Even though his position is not considered mainstream, Patai describes an
improbability that the goddess tradition would be abandoned. He explains the “it was
almost inevitable that the cult of this great Canaanite mother-goddess, [Asherah] who
was venerated also in many other parts of the ancient Near East, should penetrate Hebrew
religion as well.”25 It has been argued that the Israelite infiltration of Canaan allowed for
intermarriage between Israelites and Canaanites as well as other groups that inhabited the
land.

The Problem

Many Hebrew Bible authors and editors assume the relationship between
intermarriage and idolatry and the story of Rachel provides an interesting example. Jacob,
son of Isaac, is commanded to “not take a wife from among the Canaanite women” to
avoid idolatry that might ensue based on Canaanite religious traditions. Therefore, Jacob
chooses to take a bride from a neighboring village to the east (Genesis 28:6-29:2). Later,
after Jacob married two of these non-Canaanite women, he and his family returned to
Canaan to live with his own family. However, Jacob’s second wife Rachel had stolen her
father’s household idols. The theft led to subsequent searches by Laban who demanded
the return of idols. Rachel hid the idols by sitting upon them. She claimed that due to her
menstruation she could not stand; she said, “let not my lord take it amiss that I cannot rise
before you, for the period of women is upon me.” (Genesis 31:17-35)

The biblical references to Astoreth do not affirm the existence of the goddess as
one might expect. But they provide a plausible link between figurines found, the laws
against idolatry and the continuous effort to abolish idolatry found throughout the
prophetic books. One of the earliest allusions to Astoreth by name occurs in the Book of
Judges, which reads:

An angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim and said, “I brought you up from Egypt and
I took you into the land which I had promised on oath to your fathers. And I said, ‘I will never

25Patai, 39.
break My covenant with you. And you, for your part, must make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you must tear down their altars. ‘But you have not obeyed me—look what you have done! Therefore, I have resolved not to drive them out before you; they shall become your oppressors, and their gods shall be snare to you’ (Judges 2:2).

This verse illustrates the intermittent problems that the Israelites experienced. For generations people obeyed God’s commandment. But the generations which “had not experienced [the deliverance of] the Lord or the deeds that He had wrought for Israel,” demonstrated problems (Judges 2:10). As a result, these people began to rely more heavily on the traditions of the surrounding people. According to Judges, “They forsook the Lord and worshiped Baal and the Ashtaroth” (Judges 2:13). Thus, God became enraged with the people of Israel, as a result havoc was wreaked upon them. In fact, from Genesis to Kings the collective people of Israel continually disregard the commandment to avoid worshipping other deities.

In the book of Jeremiah, there is mention of worship of a Queen of Heaven. The prophet writes, “Don’t you see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather sticks, the fathers build the fire, and the mothers knead dough, to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven.” (Jeremiah 7:17-18) YHWH responds vehemently against his people for worship of the Queen of Heaven, “My wrath and My fury will be poured out upon this place, on man and on beast, on the trees of the field and the fruit of the soil. It shall burn with none to quench it” (Jeremiah 7:20). It is plausible to hypothesize that the Queen of Heaven is one of the goddesses described and depicted earlier. Susan Ackerman argues that the Queen of Heaven “as described in the Bible certainly shares with Astarte many features.” For example, Astarte is often called the “Lady of Heaven.”

Patai asserts that Asherah was worshiped from the beginning of Israel’s appearance in the Near East. He claims that this goddess was adapted from the Canaanites. “The goddess was represented by a carved wooden image, implanted into the ground.”26 The Bible mentions the worship of Asherah. In fact, the method of Asherah worship required a tree or a pole adjacent to her altar. The pole became known as an asherah.27 There are several accounts that refer to asherahs. These exist in the books of

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26 Patai, 47.
27 Patai, 40.
First and Second Kings. In 1 Kings it is written that, “he [Asa] also deposed his mother Maacah from the rank of queen mother, because she had made an abominable thing for [the goddess] Asherah. Asa cut down her abominable thing and burnt it.” (1 Kings 15:13)

Some scholars have debated where Asherah was located relative to Yahweh’s Temple. Susan Ackerman argues, “Ma’acah’s image devoted to Asherah stood in all likelihood in Yahweh’s temple in Jerusalem; the Jerusalem Temple is at least the logical place for a member of the royal family to erect a cult statue.” She notes, “the Temple and palace stood side by side in Jerusalem” and that “the Temple essentially functioned as the private chapel for the monarch.”

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The Emergence of Syncretism

It is incorrect to assume that the sort of idolatry discussed above could not have existed or would have been abnormal during this period. The existence of these goddess cultures is more than feasible based on the archaeological evidence provided; the biblical references to the goddesses; and the religious habits shared in the larger ancient Near East. But as monotheism grew, Israelites continued to indulge in the Canaanite cults. This led not to a dramatic break, but rather into a syncretistic religious culture.

Goddess worship was still prominent as late as the eighth century BCE. For example, Maacah, King Asa’s mother, had idols within the walls of the Temple. Susan Ackerman affirms this point: “It was the norm in the southern kingdom in the ninth century, the eighth century, and the seventh century, to worship both Yahweh and Asherah in the state temple in Jerusalem. The zeal of the reformer kings, Asa, Hezekiah, and Josiah, to remove the Asherah cult was the exception.”

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Asa’s family is important because it demonstrates the late use of goddess figurines long after the first Temple had been established. The Temple and palace were built under the reign of King Solomon ca. 968-928 BCE. 30 King Asa ruled from 908-867. 31 As biblical monotheism was growing so was the desire to extinguish all forms of goddess worship. Frymer-Kensky suggests this process began with the prophet Hosea in

29 Ackerman, 391.
30 Finkelstein, 131.
31 Brettler, 2111.
the eighth century, he “[condemned] the bulls” and [disapproved] of the foundations of the cult presence. “King Hezekiah of Judah (eighth century) destroyed the bronze serpent and attempted to outlaw the local forms of worship; King Josiah, a century later, contaminated and ‘eradicated’ the local altars” but the goddess prevailed. She reappeared, “under King Manasseh, who brought the asherah into the temple.”

By the seventh century, “the local altars and steles had been labeled ‘Canaanite’ and destroyed” the Israelites were then “commanded not to plant an asherah next to an altar or erect a stele. The asherah was finally eradicated during the reform of Josiah.”³² It was not until 587 B.C.E. that the Babylonians destroyed the Jerusalem Temple.³³ The push toward monotheism was radicalized. The Prophet Jeremiah who addressed Judah in the late seventh and early sixth centuries³⁴ “[proclaimed] that even the temple can be destroyed and declares that those place their trust in the temple and it cult are practicing a form of idolatry.”³⁵

**The Early Stages of Patriarchy**

As biblical monotheism was growing so was the desire to extinguish all forms of goddess worship. Frymer-Kensky suggests this process began with the prophet Hosea in the eighth century, he “condemns the bulls” and disapproves of the foundations of the cult presence. “King Hezekiah of Judah (eighth century) destroyed the bronze serpent and attempted to outlaw the local forms of worship; King Josiah, a century later, contaminated and ‘eradicated’ the local altars” but the goddess prevailed. She reappeared, “under King Manasseh, who brought the asherah into the temple. By the seventh century, “the local altars and steles had been labeled ‘Canaanite’ and destroyed” the Israelites were then “commanded not to plant an asherah next to an altar or erect a stele. The asherah was finally eradicated during the reform of Josiah.”³⁶

During the postexilic period ca. 520-515 B.C.E and after Cyrus permitted the return of Judah’s population, the temple was rebuilt.³⁷ The exile only reaffirmed the need to abolish all previously accepted forms of worship. Gerda Lerner, though not a scholar

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³² Frymer-Kensky, 154-155.
³³ Goldenberg, 11.
³⁴ Brettler, 2109.
³⁵ Frymer-Kensky, 154.
³⁶ Frymer-Kensky, 154-155.
³⁷ Brettler, 2109.
of the Hebrew Bible, asserts this renewed proclamation to abolish all forms of religion that involve deities other than Yahweh:

The prolonged ideological struggle of the Hebrew tribes against the worship of Canaanite deities and especially the persistence of a cult of the fertility goddess Asherah must have hardened the emphasis on male cultic leadership and the tenancy toward misogyny, which fully emerged only in the post-exilic period.\(^\text{38}\)

Despite the exile, not all early Jewish people accepted Yahwism wholeheartedly. Evidence for a syncretistic form of religion was expressed in the postexilic colony at Elephantine. In this religious expression Yahweh and Anat were worshipped.\(^\text{39}\) Goddess cults were much more than the molding and casting of womanly forms. The Elephantine example shows continued influence by goddess worship. It shows these goddess cultures not only existed but also thrived and heavily influenced the creation of modern, monotheistic Judaism. Beatrice Brooks explains “More and more have OT scholars been led, by correlation of the results of archaeology, comparative literature and philology, to find fertility cult symbolism in a considerable part of the Hebrew [Scriptures].”\(^\text{40}\) She explained the relationship between Yahwism cults in the following manner:

Gradually it has been emphasized that the ‘Canaanite’ religion of Palestine was but a variation of the cycle-of-the-seasons cult, and that when or wherever the Sons of Israel may have begun to worship the deity Yahweh, the early religion of Israel in Palestine was little more than a syncretistic fertility cult with Yahweh predominant.\(^\text{41}\)

The fact that the two religions became syncretistic is of great importance. Evolving from goddess worship into a strict monotheism was no simple task. There was not a clean break from one established religion to another. Ron E. Tappy argues:

Figurines in general provide some connectivity between the centralized and localized cults of ancient Israel. As a result, ‘the distance between the official cult and the popular religion was not as great as it is commonly believed’ and ‘instead of being nonconformist, popular religion conformed to the established cult.’\(^\text{42}\)

\(^{41}\) Brooks, 228.  
Gerda Lerner suggests “There was a considerable time lag between the subordination of women in patriarchal society and the declassing of the goddesses.” In patriarchal societies, she claims, women were more marginalized than in societies devoted to the worship of a mother goddess. Ironically, “the spiritual and metaphysical power of goddesses remained active and strong” even though there was a new push toward the subjugation of women. At this point the appeal that these cults possessed is not understood entirely. There must have been a factor stronger than merely tradition that pulled the Israelites close to the goddess.

That life was associated with goddess cults is undeniable. The creative impulse has been attributed to the male and God rather than the female and goddess in Judaism. To construct or develop a patriarchal social structure it would be necessary to emphasize male or god over goddess or female as part of the creative process. Perhaps the paradox created by the monogenetic creator formed an early unfathomable paradox that made dropping the goddess illogical. The roles the mother goddess shifted and changed but prevailed to some time after 400 B.C.E. In some instances, her role shifted from “all-encompassing” to a variety of smaller parts portrayed in several lesser deities.

Tikva Fryer-Kensky illustrates how and why goddess cultures merged with Israelite monotheism. Moreover, she demonstrates why the Israelites shift to monotheism attempted, faltered at stages. Frymer-Kensky writes, “The books of the Bible, written and shaped during a period of a thousand years, witness the formation and development of the social institutions and religious ideas of ancient Israel. Israel grew out of the ancient Near East.” Ancient Near Eastern culture was dominated for centuries by the goddess worship but Israel developed a religious system essentially different from any of those in the Near East. Ancient Israelite religion proclaimed the importance of only one God. This is the struggle, which ensued and evolved from 1300 B.C.E. until the postexilic period as modern Judaism was formed. “Eventually, the ever developing radical

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43 Lerner, 141.
44 Lerner, 142.
46 Tikva Frymer-Kensky, 83.
47 Frymer-Kensky, 83.
monotheism of the biblical thinkers led to attacks on these ancient elements of Israelite worship.\(^{48}\)

It is plausible that the creation of a patriarchal society had as much to do with repressing the goddess culture as it did with the subjugation of women’s roles within society. With the loss of a powerful female figure like the goddess it left an opening to prescribe the role of women. Now that an all-powerful male god achieved complete control, men could dominate society. In the years before Yahweh, the goddess evolved into a “birthing goddess.”\(^{49}\) Gerda Lerner outlines the ways in which the goddess imagery developed:

More elaborate settings with distinct and constantly recurring symbolic attributes…shown amidst pillars or trees, accompanied by goats, snakes, birds. Eggs and symbols of vegetation are associated with her. These symbols indicate that she was worshiped as a source of fertility to vegetation, animals, and humans…the belief system that manifested in Great Goddess worship was monistic and animistic. There was unity among earth and the stars, humans and nature, birth and death, all of which were embodied in the Great Goddess.\(^{50}\)

With a totalitarian male god, much of sexuality changed.\(^{51}\) When the transfer of religious emphasis switched from female to male, the importance of reproduction was transferred from the female to the male as well. God became increasingly desexualized and new purification laws arose.”\(^{52}\) This is obviously a shift from previously held views of sexuality, illustrated by the hyper-sexualized feminine archaeology found in the area.

A double standard emerged, Gerda Lerner writes:

“All Israelite women were expected to marry and thus passed from the control of fathers (and brothers) to that of husbands and fathers-in-law. When the husband died before his wife, his brother or another male relative assumed control over her and married her. While the custom of the levirate has frequently been interpreted as a ‘protective’ device for the widow, it speaks most strongly to the male concern for the patrimony within the family.”\(^{53}\)

Hebrew men were also allowed an increase in sexual freedom; polygamy was prominent with the early patriarchs of Judaism as was the ability to freely mate with slave girls.\(^{54}\)

The shift from goddess worship to Yahwism was complex and involved several facets of ancient Israelite life. God had promised to make Israel his people and give them

\(^{48}\) Frymer-Kensky, 154.
\(^{49}\) Lerner, 147.
\(^{50}\) Lerner 147, 148.
\(^{51}\) Frymer-Kensky 187-188.
\(^{52}\) Frymer-Kensky, 188-189.
\(^{53}\) Lerner, 169-70.
\(^{54}\) Lerner, 170.
a land. The condition for receiving these blessings was the worship of no other gods; and
the abolishment of all other god forms. Israel owed God complete and total loyalty. As
Frymer-Kensky states:

“It [monotheism] has been shaped by Israel’s desire to understand and justify the fall of Israel in 722
B.C.E. and of Judah in 587 B.C.E., and the accusations of infidelity and apostasy with which these
books attack the people is part of their soul-searching and self-blame for the catastrophe that befell
them.”

The change from idolatry to Yahwism involved changing the worldview of the
entire people. Frymer-Kensky notes how fundamental the change was. She asserts,
“Eliminating other gods and jettisoning old religious practices changes fundamental ideas
about the working of the cosmos. The image of God must expand to include all the
functions previously encompassed by an entire pantheon.”

Ultimately, the shift reframed ancient Israelite cosmology—ideas about women,
women’s societal role, and ideas of gender on the whole are significant part of this epic
change. Traditionally in polytheistic religions, when a major life event occurred (birth,
death, marriage, etc.) one god could be called upon to service the devotee’s need. Now
with the Yahwistic concept, “Israel cannot commit to worshipping only one God unless
that God—all alone—can control the environment so that Israel can thrive in the land.”

It took several hundred years to root out goddess worship. It lasted into the early
years of Judaism’s Diaspora: “One cannot belittle the emotional gratifications with which
she must have rewarded her servants who clung to her for six centuries in spite of the
increasing vigor of Yahwist monotheism which had the occasional support of kings, and
the persistent and unflagging advocacy of the prophets.” It may be concluded that the
change to Yahwism affected perceptions about women and their roles directly. When
Yahwism was introduced, a patriarchal system emerged and became dominant. Frymer-
Kensky affirms this conclusion. She writes, “The eclipse of the goddesses was
undoubtedly part of the same process that witnessed a decline in the public role of
women, with both reflective of fundamental changes in society.”

55 Frymer-Kensky, 84.
56 Frymer-Kensky, 85.
57 Frymer-Kensky, 88.
58 Patai, 52.
59 Frymer-Kensky, 80.
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