FROM GODDESS TO GOD
THE ELIMINATION OF THE FEMALE DEITY.

06.24.15
KAREN GARST

WWW.FAITHLESSFEMINIST.COM
I recently asked a Christian apologist how he could support Christianity given the Bible’s portrayal of women. He responded that the treatment of women, particularly as portrayed in the Old Testament, was a result of the patriarchal society at the time. “That’s just the way it’s always been.” Unfortunately, history doesn’t bear this out.

Gerda Lerner in the *Origin of Patriarchy* describes hunting/gathering tribes as fairly egalitarian.¹ These were usually small groups where women provided for much of the food sources by gathering local plants. This supplemented the hunt and provided the hunter with enough food for the duration of the hunt itself, which took him away from their home base for a period of time. These groups were economically dependent on each other, which created a situation characterized less by fighting than by cooperation. Small figurines, often portraying a pregnant woman or one with pendulant breasts, date from 25,000 years ago. While historians and archeologists debate the specific function of these figurines, there is no doubt that they reveal the mystery and awe of early human beings in regard to life. Imagine the constant threats that beset these early clans. Life was fragile. It is unlikely at this time that the role of men as parents of specific children was known. Yet they knew that without the woman, who gave birth to offspring, the tribe would not survive. Venerating the one who gave birth to new life seems like a natural consequence of these conditions. Riane Eisler, in *The Chalice and the Blade*, states that these figurines were “all expressions of our forebears’ attempts to understand their world, attempts to answer such universal human questions as where we come from when we are born and where we go after we die.”² Giving birth today in the 21st century still seems like magic. Even though we have science to explain all the specifics of what is happening, seeing my son’s head crown as he escaped from my body and hearing his cries soon thereafter was indeed magical. What did they do with these figurines? Did a woman clutch one as she was giving birth? Did a man carve one in anticipation of birth? What we do know is the making of these figurines was not an isolated event and the practice continued for tens of thousands of years. Steven Brutus, following the work of these authors, states that “the most important finding of all this work goes to the root concept of religion itself – *religare*, to tie or bind, to be tied to something; to belong – that the mother-child bond stands at the origin of worship.”³

¹Lerner, p. 29
²Eisler, p. 6
³Brutus, p. 94
Early cave paintings found in the Paleolithic area most often feature figures of animals being killed by the hunters. Werner Herzog in his documentary “Cave of Forgotten Dreams” in Chauvet, France shows that the paintings are not located near the front of the cave where one might imagine a living space with a fire vented to the outside. Rather they are found deep within the cave. Joseph Campbell proposes that these paintings are part of the initiation rites of boys into men. Many of these paintings have been painted over hundreds of time lending credence to some kind of ritual. Chauvet is perhaps the oldest site of these paintings dating from 52,000 years ago. Many others better known such as Lascaux were done 20,000 years later. The figurines, however, are found in the living spaces, not near the paintings.

Marija Gimbutas, archaeologist and pre-historian, spent decades exploring the civilizations that flourished from 7500 to 3500 BCE during the Neolithic age in areas south of the Caucasus Mountains and as far south as Crete. She termed this geographic area “Old Europe.” By this period, people had moved from hunting/gathering to agriculture, which allowed for a more sedentary existence, provided more food, and created permanent settlements. All the elements of a burgeoning civilization were present: use of metals, crafts such as pottery and basket making, textile weaving, and art involving painting and sculpture. In Crete, there is evidence that people built “viaducts, paved roads, designed architecturally complex palaces, had indoor plumbing, a flourishing trade, and a great deal of knowledge about navigation.” Shrines have been found in Neolithic sites with the same figurines that were present during the Paleolithic age. Images and symbols abound on cult objects, painted pottery, and wall paintings. Studying these objects and symbols excavated in the 1960’s by Paul Mellaart and others, Gimbutas and others posit a religion where the “Great Goddess” played a large role. The mystery of birth, the specter of death, and the renewal of life were embodied in this worship. Most of this goddess art is noteworthy by its absence of violent images of war. Much of the art is devoted to nature because both share in regeneration – women have children, trees bear fruit, and the moon is renewed every month. In a fresco from 1600 B. C. E. in Crete, where the veneration of the goddess lasted longer because of its isolation, a woman figure is sitting on a throne flanked by winged dogs and lions. It is difficult not to conclude that the woman played an important role in the worship practices of the time. While there is not a great deal of academic support for a matriarchal culture based solely on the worship of a great goddess, most historians agree that both priests and priestesses were engaged in worship during the Neolithic period.

Graves from the Neolithic excavations in Anatolia, modern day Turkey, do not show much differentiation between men and women. This indicates, in one aspect, a more

4 Eisler, p. 75
5 Gimbutas, p. 108
egalitarian relationship between the sexes than in later civilizations where the chieftain, pharaoh, or king was buried in a lavish tomb along with slain wives, children, servants, and grave goods. Rather than weapons, battles, or other depictions of violence, the art emphasizes nature and the fertility of the earth. There also appears to be no evidence of human sacrifice in either Paleolithic or Neolithic sites. Evidence of sacrifice such as altars, pits for blood and caches of bones are not found in shrines in the excavations of these sites. Human sacrifice does not enter the picture until a more patriarchal society is in evidence.

As villages and cities develop, worship can reoccur in the same place. Often a tree or a grove of trees is associated with the worship of a female deity. Later in Canaan, the goddess is associated with a pillar made out of a tree and called an Asherah. Asherahs are mentioned several times in the Old Testament. This practice is in opposition to nomads who wander from place to place and do not have these types of symbols associated with their religion. The “tree of knowledge of good and evil” has been said to represent the Canaanite goddess Asherah because of this association of a female deity and groves of trees. Ritual sex was common in this religion, as in many other fertility cults, and is given force by the many references to the cult prostitutes in the Old Testament.

One of the curious symbols associated with this time period, and in a later Greek and Egyptian society, is the snake. The snake, in sloughing its skin, is a symbol of life’s regeneration, similar to the moon’s cycles. It also hibernates and reappears in the spring, like native plants and later agricultural crops. The symbolism of the serpent continued for thousands of years in many cultures. The Egyptian hieroglyphic sign for the word goddess was a cobra. The goddess Hathor took the form of a serpent in Lower Egypt. Greek’s goddess Athena was later portrayed with snakes and birds. During this time period, the snake was not seen as evil as the Bible later portrayed. Joseph Campbell as quoted in Stanislav Zamyatin’s 7 Things Album states that as early as 3500 BCE,
Sumerian seals show “the serpent and the tree and the Goddess, with the Goddess giving the fruit of life to a visiting male. The old mythology of the Goddess is right there.”

One of the facets of this female deity or goddess was not only her power to give life, but to heal. In Greek culture, Hygeia was the goddess of health, giving us the word hygienic. How interesting it is that her symbol is the snake. Even today, the medical profession uses the caduceus as its symbol - a staff, often with wings on the top, intertwined with two serpents. The caduceus attests to the strength symbols have in a culture and how enduring they can become even when transmuted over long periods of time.

The following is a hymn to Isthar revealing the healing power of the goddess.

Where you cast your glance, the dead awaken, the sick arise;
The bewildered, beholding your face, find the right way.
I appeal to you, miserable and distraught,
Tortured by pain, your servant,
Be merciful and hear my prayer!
I await you, my mistress; my soul turns toward you.
I beseech you: relieve my plight
Absolve me of my guilt, my wickedness, my sin,
Forget my misdeeds, accept my plea!

Another important aspect of the goddess is the relationship between the female and cycles. Menses, the monthly cycle of women, is the Latin plural for month. The cycles of the moon are thus frequently associated with the goddess. The cycles of the moon become the symbols as well for regeneration. The changing phases of the moon become predictable patterns, from full moon to waxing crescent to new moon to waning crescent to full moon. In the Paleolithic carving, Venus of Laussel, the woman holds a bull’s horn with thirteen slashes, which is the number of nights between the first crescent and the full moon. Joseph Campbell hypothesizes that the woman’s hand on her belly may related to another cycle, that of menstruation. Another pattern that appears throughout mythology is a three-day period, used, for example, in the resurrection of many gods. This is the period between the new moon and the first appearance of the waning crescent. It has been used to symbolize regeneration and rebirth. The cyclical nature of the goddess is related to the material world – birth and death, planting and harvest, and full moon and new

---

13 Zamyatin, p. 55
14 Lerner, p. 143
15 Lerner, p. 143
16 Campbell, p. 9
moon. Carol Ochs states that the matriarchal view of death is “a direct consequence of the reverence for physical, material creation and the material world as a whole… because the womb and the earth are equated, the mother (earth) is seen as both the source of life and the recipient of the dead.”\textsuperscript{17} Judith Ochshorn cites a reverence in polytheism for femaleness in her association with “receiving the dead back into the womb of the earth or as sitting in judgment of the dead along with male divinities.”\textsuperscript{18} Two thousand years later, all four gospels show that women are the first to appear at the tomb of Jesus to perform their duties to the dead. Patriarchal cultures, in contrast, view life as more linear, as a means to an end. Patriarchal culture has a less positive view of the material natural world and often views death as a means to a more spiritual existence.\textsuperscript{19}

Because in earlier hunter-gatherer societies women performed the gathering of plants and seeds, it has been hypothesized that women may have been responsible for the establishment of agriculture through the observation of the sprouting of seeds that were perhaps inadvertently sown. In many agricultural societies, the planting, if done with a simple hoe, was often relegated to the women of the tribe. When the plow and team of horses came along, the man took over. Hebrew women were attracted to the fertility cults in Canaan because of the role women played. Through the cultic practices, they felt that their land would be more fertile.\textsuperscript{20}

One of the rituals that were practiced when a female deity was present was the Sacred Marriage, called \textit{hieros gamos} in Greek. Texts in Sumer can be found from the third millennium BCE that describe these rites. The priest and priestess represented the goddess and her male consort or god. This union was often portrayed as uniting twin souls such as between Osiris and Isis who were also brother and sister. The purpose of this rite, which was performed in temples for two thousand years, was fertility and power. The male god died, symbolizing the dormant cycle of the earth, and was reborn through union with the goddess. Sometimes this rite involved the king actually being killed and a new king appointed. Since the union was sexual, images of male and female sexuality in various art forms such as sculpture and statuary reflected its celebration. Written poems and stories also attested to its existence.\textsuperscript{21} Female sexuality was “seen as assuring the orderly and prosperous functioning of human society.”\textsuperscript{22} How different this celebration of sexuality is from most of the portraits of sex in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament,

\begin{itemize}
\item Ochs, p. 96
\item Ochshorn, p. 193
\item Ochs, p. 100
\item Sanday, p. 220
\item Lerner, p. 127
\item Ochshorn, p. 239
\end{itemize}
women’s sexuality has a far more sinister aspect. Women’s bodies are unclean, any sexuality outside marriage is seen very negatively and condemned, and atonement must take place after the woman has a child. Near the temple in Jerusalem, Semitic women are found mourning the death of one of these male vegetation gods, Tammuz. (Ezekiel 8:14). Judith Ochshorn in The Female Experience and the Nature of the Divine states that these women experienced “a decline in their own status both within and without the temple before the second millennium was to end.23

The consort was in evidence in many regions - as early as 3000 BCE in Egypt, in the literature of Sumer, in Babylon, Anatolia, and Canaan. In classical Greece the legend involves Aphrodite and Adonis and in Rome Cybele and Attis.24 These are good examples of how culture spreads, adopts certain symbols or themes, modifies them to their culture, and carries them forward. To think that the Bible was not influenced by these memes is to ignore the ways in which culture is transmitted. It is not made out of whole cloth, it evolves, just like everything else. To set the Bible apart as “divine truth” and the balance of all other culture as myth is simply unbelievable.

While Marija Gimbutas, Joseph Campbell, and Riane Eisler would argue for a matriarchal culture in the early Neolithic era, others such as Gerda Lerner disagree. In any event, all agree that the female, whether goddess alone or in conjunction with a male, played an important role in the beliefs of the people living in these areas. “It is whether the quality of Woman, the being of Woman, the sense of Woman was understood, known and respected,” said Campbell.25 Unfortunately, change was coming.

Gimbutas posits that perhaps as early as the fifth millennium BCE, warriors from the north, in successive waves, descended on these early civilizations. These warriors had tamed the horse and rode in chariots. It is surmised that they, as did most warrior clans invading a city, killed the men and children and appropriated the women as wives or slaves.26 In the fourth millennium BCE, they had bronze and in the second they acquired iron.27 As cities without a strong military or defense fortifications, the existing populations were no match for these terrorizing bands, alternatively called Indo-Europeans, Kurgans, or Aryans. It is no surprise that by the end of the first millennium they were dominant across Europe and western Asia.28

23 Ibid, p. 125-6
24 Stone, p. 20
25 Campbell, p. 219
26 Eisler, p. 49
27 Campbell, p. xxi
28 Ibid.
These Indo-Europeans brought with them a male deity, a warrior god that was associated with elements such as thunder, lightening, the sword, and mountains. Cultural transformation takes time and the imposition of this deity was a slow process. Often, the goddess became the consort of the male deity, a loss in status, but still a presence. This cultural meme, a male deity with a female consort, is seen throughout the cultures of Europe, Mesopotamia and Canaan. While these invading hordes took over the civilizations they conquered, they were not obsessed about their deities and often incorporated the names and role of the gods that were present. Hera became associated with Zeus in the Greek pantheon, Isis with Osiris in Egypt, Inanna with Dumuzi in Mesopotamia, and many others. Zeus is the linguistic equivalent of the early Indo-European god Dyaus Pitra, which also survives in the Hindu religion. Hammurabi’s code, perhaps the earliest evidence of codified laws, is written in this milieu. Yet it still shows women in a “high position” and allows women to “manage their own estates, especially priestesses of the temple.” It is interesting to note that in India, the goddesses were revived and are still worshipped along with male deities. Not so within the Judeo-Christian religion or with Islam.

The mythology of many civilizations reveals the struggle of this new male deity with the female goddess existing in areas where the Indo-Europeans came into. Once again, the serpent symbol of the goddess is present. Zeus fights against the serpent Typhon who is the son of the Goddess Gaia (Greek), Apollo also finds a son of Gaia’s, the serpent Python, and Hercules fights the serpent Ladon “who guards the sacred fruit tree of the Goddess Hera.” Merlin Stone points out that the male deity Ba’al, present in Canaan when the Israelites entered, may have been based on the Indo-European word for bull. Ba’al conquers the dragon known under several different names including Leviathan a name seen also in the Old Testament.

As agriculture became the norm and cities formed, a more specialized civilization developed. Kinship through clans was replaced with a more hierarchical structure eventually leading to kingship. As the knowledge of paternity became common, women and children “belonged” to a particular man. Female deities became subordinate to male

---

29 Eisler, p. 57
30 Campbell, p. xxv
31 Stone, p. 43
32 Ibid, p. 68
33 Ibid, p. 68
34 Ibid, p. 109
gods and myths of human's origins bore the perspectives of men.\textsuperscript{35} Temples, eventually taken over by kings, collected tributes of excess food. Military might became institutionalized in a professional military. Writing was developed as early as 3000 B.C.E. and was used to keep account of property transactions and trades. Writing was assigned first to scribes in the temples. Women eventually become excluded from the education this role required. Women’s roles became more and more “circumscribed as the state apparatus [became] more complex,” described Stone.\textsuperscript{36} All of this contributed to the demotion of the female goddess from her earlier position.

In about 1500 BCE, Semitic tribes appeared in Canaan with a male deity, first referred to as El, then eventually Yahweh. There is some disagreement about whether these tribes arose in an area influenced by Indo-Europeans, came from the southern desert in the Sinai peninsula, or were drawn from people already living within Canaan itself. In any event, these tribes were characterized by male dominance. Similar to the new male deity of the invading Indo-Europeans to the North, the Semitic deity was a sky god. He came from “up there.” Often, he becomes associated with a mountaintop. Because of the close relationship of women to nature, female creator deities usually come “from within something – such as earth or water – and create from their bodies,” posits Peggy Reeves Sanday.\textsuperscript{37} The people in the land they sought to conquer, Canaan, worshipped a pantheon of deities and household gods including a male god called Ba’al (the bull) and his female consort called Asherah in Hebrew. A Canaanite sanctuary found in Jerusalem contained many of the mother goddess figurines discussed earlier.\textsuperscript{38}

Throughout the first several hundred years, there was a constant struggle of these tribes to eliminate the worship of the local gods. Throughout the Old Testament, people keep turning to them. One of the gods worshipped by the tribes is called the Queen of Heaven in the Old Testament. “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 to provoke me to anger.” (Jeremiah 7:18) “Then all the men who knew that their wives were burning incense to other gods, along with all the women who were present—a large assembly—and all the people living in Lower and Upper Egypt, said to Jeremiah, ‘We will not listen to the message you have spoken to us in the name of the LORD! We will certainly do everything we said we would: We will burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and will pour out drink offerings to her just as we and our fathers, our kings and our officials did in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. At that time we had plenty of food and were well off and suffered no harm.

\textsuperscript{35} Lerner, p. 54

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, p. 69

\textsuperscript{37} Sanday, p. 57

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, p. 218
But ever since we stopped burning incense to the Queen of Heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have had nothing and have been perishing by sword and famine.” (Jeremiah 44:15-18) Some scholars believe that this reference to the Queen of Heaven is to the goddess Anath also known as Astarte.\(^{39}\) There are numerous admonitions to the Hebrew people who keep turning again and again to the local gods. “And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Ba’als and the Ash’tarothis, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines; and they forsook the Lord, and did not serve him.” (Judges 10:6)

Of all the tribes that came into lands where there was worship of a goddess, the Hebrews were the most extreme in rejecting any incorporation of the goddess into their religion.\(^{40}\) The Old Testament writers used their harshest terms against the Canaanite goddess Asherah. “Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god. May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob, for the man who does this, any to witness or answer, or to bring an offering to the LORD of hosts!” (Malachi 2:11-12-11) Emperor Constantine, after making Christianity the Byzantine Empire’s only religion destroyed the temple of Ashtoreth at Aphaca, claiming worship of the goddess was “immoral.”\(^{41}\) In 380 CE the Bishop “Theodosius closed down the temple of the Goddess at Eleusis, the temples of the Goddess in Rome and the seventh wonder of the world - the temple of the Goddess then know as Artemis or Diana at Ephesus in western Anatolia.”\(^{42}\) The famous Parthenon of the Acropolis in Athens, once the site of the worship of the goddess, was converted into a Christian church in the fifth century.\(^{43}\)

What did these gods give them that Yahweh didn’t? Was it the nurturing nature of the goddess? Was it the veneration of a woman and her role in bringing forth the next generation? Was it the plethora of gods that they worshipped in their households that were tied to certain rituals? We will never know.

Eventually this new religion was able to focus exclusively on the one male deity, Yahweh. This monotheism is only paralleled in this part of the world by the brief reign of Aton who took the name of Akhenaton in Egypt from 1353 – 1336 BCE. The impact of

\(^{39}\) Ibid, p. 218

\(^{40}\) Campbell, p. 16

\(^{41}\) Stone, p. 194

\(^{42}\) Ibid.

\(^{43}\) Ibid.
this change to a single male deity, Yahweh, is profound. Women have no place in the pantheon and they have no role as priestesses in this new religion. As a result they become “less than” men in this religion and, particularly in the Old Testament are treated as the property of men. Gerda Lerner concludes as follows: “There is no longer any maternal source for the creation of the universe and for life on earth, not is there any indication that creativity and procreativity are linked. Quite to the contrary, God’s act of creation is entirely unlike anything humans can experience.”

Yahweh stands alone, above the earth, not part of it, separate from nature, not of its essence. He gives man dominion over this creation. Is it any wonder that conservative religious adherents are less likely to support issues such as climate change, environmental regulations, and preservation efforts? Man rises above nature as opposed to the goddess’ reverence for it. And instead of the divine being within us as with the goddess, it is out there in the sky.

There is a persistent resistance to Yahweh, this single male deity. One example of this outside the Bible appears as late as the second century CE, in Lucius Apuleius’ work, *Golden Ass*, the first Latin novel. Lucius pines for Isis who appears and says, “I am she that is the natural mother of all things, mistress and governess of all the elements, the initial progeny of worlds, chief of the powers divine, queen of all that are in Hell, the principal of them all that dwell in Heaven, manifested alone and under one form of all the gods and goddesses.” The worship of the goddess continued until 500 CE when the last temple to a goddess was destroyed. The patriarchy that was “just the way it always was” didn’t have to be. It was imposed by force on a civilization that previously had existed with a much more egalitarian view on life.

---

44 Lerner p. 180
45 Campbell, p. 86
46 Gimbutas, p. 318-19
47 Stone, p. 17
Bibliography


