

Israelite Women as “Ritual Experts”: Orthodoxy or Orthopraxis?

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Introduction

In the course of discussing the well-known late Iron Age Judean Pillar-base Figurines (JPFs), Carol Meyers made the following observation.

In sum, with magic understood to be a profoundly important part of religion in traditional societies, the likely manipulation of JPFs by women in the family household should be considered no less important than the elaborate procedures of priests in communal or national shrines. In using the JPFs and associated artifacts, women would have been invoking the supernatural for the benefit of their families and their communities. Moreover, performing rituals in order to influence the transcendent forces believed to have the power to help (or to hinder) them would have afforded women a sense of control over their own lives. If the phrase “ritual power” is indeed more accurate and less tendentious than the term “magic,” then women’s use of the JPFs was a form of empowerment. (Meyers 2007a: 126)

I had hazarded a similar estimate of women’s roles in my own recent treatment of “folk religion” in ancient Israel (Dever 2005: 236–51), inspired by the anthropologist Susan Starr Sered’s *Women as Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women in Jerusalem* (Sered 1992).¹ However, probably like Carol Meyers, I had not explicitly explored some of the more radical implications of such reevaluations of women’s roles in the evolution of Israelite (and Judeo-Christian) religion.

Author’s Note: I offer this essay to my long-esteemed friend and colleague Carol Meyers, not as the typical research paper destined to be buried in yet another Festschrift, but rather, as a candid and personal reflection on a recent statement of hers that I consider truly revolutionary.

1. I thank my former student Beth Alpert Nakhai for drawing Sered’s extraordinary ethnographic work to my attention; see my use of it in Dever 2005: 247–51, 314. Curiously, Meyers 2007a does not mention this work, though the phrase “ritual experts” appears in its title.

On Gender and Gender Difference in Religious Life

Let me say without equivocation: Meyers is *right*. Of course, women's religious experiences are to be regarded as seriously as those of men. Why has it taken us several millennia to acknowledge this fact of nature? And why do some still find this development threatening? Meyers's almost off-hand observations, however, raise profound issues, which I believe are imperative to explore, given the revolution that archaeology and feminist biblical hermeneutics have fomented (not to mention the current crisis in biblical studies generally). Implicit in her statement are, at minimum, the following presuppositions:

1. Gender differentiation is a fundamental, universal factor in religious life.
2. Functionally, gender differentiation may be related to another dichotomy: belief and practice.
3. In both dimensions, religion is best considered "magic" (or "ritual power," as Meyers prefers).
4. Women's ritual practices in religion are as valid as the text-based piety of men.
5. The ultimate test of religion is not orthodoxy but experience—the "empowerment" of both men and women.

I trust that Meyers would not disapprove of my exegesis of her brief, provocative statement, with which I profoundly agree. Nevertheless, there are questions that remain.

(1) Gender *is* important: it is not simply a "social construct," as post-modernists often assert. Gender roles are constructed, but gender itself is an indisputable biological fact. What, though, are the specific gender differences that would be relevant in analyzing religious experience, ancient or modern?

Elsewhere I have tentatively suggested that men may often be more "verbal," women more "visceral" in the practice of religion, particularly in premodern societies. This seems to me a harmless, indeed banal observation,² yet for this I have been castigated as a male chauvinist. Critics, however, overlook the fact that I was not intending to be judgmental, and that, if anything, I found "visceral" to be preferable. That is, the men of ancient Israel who wrote the Hebrew Bible were preoccupied

2. Numerous brain-scan studies have demonstrated that there are indeed significant biological (and not just cultural) differences between male and female brains. This does not mean that one is "better"—only different and complementary. These differences would have been more obvious but less well understood in antiquity.

with “getting the words right”—fine-tuning the theological formulas—while the women largely attended to the everyday life experiences that defined and preserved the culture.

By “visceral,” I did not mean intellectually inferior but simply non-literate, which most women in ancient societies everywhere obviously were. And because ancient Israelite women were not able to leave us a written record of their unique religious experiences—their “Bible”—we must fall back on archaeology to help us recover and hear their long-lost voices. Fortunately, recent archaeology in Israel and Jordan, with the increasing input of women in the field, is doing just this. And no one has been farther in the forefront of the new feminist archaeology than Carol Meyers.³

(2) In speaking of the “validity” (although Meyers calls it “importance”) of religious experience, we must confront the question of what determines validity: that is, what are the criteria by which we decide what is or what is not valid? The underlying issue here is obviously one of authority, which is always the fundamental issue in religion; here, specifically, the question is whether authority of Scripture or experience.

Meyers implies that what “empowers” one (in this case, women) is what counts. While I am inclined to agree in principle, I wonder what happens if the rituals do not *work*; that is, the child is not conceived or safely delivered and reared, the harvest fails, the “magic” isn’t effective. Then, *what* “power” over nature or destiny? It may be, however, that in the final analysis a pragmatic approach to religion is ruled out, simply because religion is not about the practical and the everyday but about the transcendent. If truly rational assessments of religion had prevailed, then most of the world’s great religions would long ago have been abandoned. Ancient Israelite religion was a notorious failure by all conventional standards, and it ended in disaster. So was it “invalid” all along?

(3) Finally, focusing (at long last) on women’s religious experiences in ancient Israel is easily justified, given the new data from archaeology. Nevertheless, if women’s beliefs (however inchoate) and ad hoc rituals (however efficacious) are really “equal,” then what are we to make of all traditionally *text-based* configurations of religion, dominated as they have been by males? A judgment would affect not only ancient Israel and

3. On literacy in ancient Israel, most authorities estimate that no more than one percent of the population was truly literate. For Meyers, see a portion of her pioneering publications in the bibliography for this essay and the select bibliography of her works on pp. xiii–xviii of this volume. No one in our related fields even comes close to her output.

the Hebrew Bible as “Scripture” but also later Judaism and Christianity, both of which adopted this Bible as their ultimate authority.⁴ Would the new emphasis on women’s religious beliefs and practices—obviously not “orthodox,” as we now know—not tend to dethrone Scripture?

*“Book Religion” and “Folk Religion”:
On Men’s Cults and Women’s Cults*

How and why did we ever arrive at the dilemma just described? The answer is easy: ancient Israel was a typical patriarchal, male-chauvinistic society, and its spokesmen inevitably created their scriptural God in their own image. And both Synagogue and Church have unwittingly followed the ancient text-based prejudice until this day. This bias has been aptly described by Karel van der Toorn as typical of “book religion,” in which a theoretically aniconic religion such as that of ancient Israel comes to adopt a *text*, the Hebrew Bible, as its icon (1997). At that point, the tradition becomes frozen at a particular point in time, incapable of adapting to changing circumstances. In short, the canon is closed.

In contrast to the canonical tradition is what is increasingly being called “folk religion” or the religion of the masses, in contrast to the religion of the few who wrote the Bible. The latter is sometimes mistakenly termed “official” or “state” religion, but this too was influenced by the popular, although “unorthodox” cults. In the last two decades, the discussion of “folk religion” has burgeoned—so much so that it is impossible to cite the literature here.⁵ Most of it, however, is summarized in my *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel*.

A good deal of this literature has focused on what are presumably “women’s cults,” often using the newer archaeological evidence to correct the biblical ideal of Mosaic monotheism, or “normative religion.” There was, of course, no such thing; the *real* religions of ancient Israel

4. See also Islam and its canonical Scripture, the Qurʾān. To be sure, in Judaism, especially Reform Judaism, the Talmud and even later rabbinical commentaries can assume as much authority as the Hebrew Bible. And in any case, modern Judaism makes no pretense at replicating the religions of ancient Israel. As for Protestant Christianity, the doctrine of “progressive revelation” does make continuing reinterpretation of Scripture possible. Finally, even Fundamentalists “cherry-pick” their Scripture.

5. For the most significant works, see Ackerman 1992; 2003; Albertz 1978; 1994; Becking et al. 2001; Berlinerblau 1996; Dever 1984; 1994; 1995; 2005; Holladay 1987; van der Toorn 1997; Zevit 2001. On relevant iconography, see especially Cornelius 2004; Keel 1998; Keel and Uehlinger 1996; Kletter 1996; 2001; Paz 2007. On women’s cults and Asherah specifically, see n. 7 below. For Meyers’s principal works, see 1988; 1991a; 1991b; 1997a; 1997b; 1999; 2003; 2005; 2007a; 2007b.

consisted almost exactly of the practices that the biblical writers specifically condemned. What strikes me is that virtually none of this literature on “folk religion” was produced by archaeologists—those best equipped to deal with the new material culture data on which any revisionist portrait would have to be based. (Meyers, Holladay, and I are the only exceptions.⁶) What does this say about the much-touted “dialogue” between archaeologists and biblical scholars? Nothing very promising, I fear.

Given the fact of gender differentiation, let us now examine the question of whether there were specific “women’s cults” in ancient Israel, presumably dedicated to the veneration of the old Canaanite Mother Goddess Asherah. Here, too, the literature has burgeoned in the last two decades, and much of it seems to presume the widespread existence of an Asherah cult, especially popular among women.⁷ Since the relevant archaeological data are only beginning to be published and discussed, any portrait of “women’s cults” in ancient Israel must be provisional and partly intuitive (that is, based to some degree on ethnographic data). I suggest that the following features will turn out to be typical.⁸

(1) Women’s cults were centered around household and family life, especially in the agricultural villages and small market towns that characterized the states of Israel and Judah in the Iron Age.

(2) Women’s cults found their principal expression and validity in close familial bonds, including extended family and clan relationships. The concern was the perpetuation of the family heritage in all its aspects (or what in pre-politically correct days was usually termed “fertility,” or the notion of plenty in terms of the reproduction of humans and animals and the produce of the fields).⁹ If religion is all about “ultimate concern,” then nothing was more ultimate in a marginal environment than survival.

6. See the sources in n. 5 above.

7. On women’s cults, see Ackerman 1992; 2003; Bird 1987; 1997; van der Toorn 1994; and many of the works cited in n. 5 above. On Asherah specifically, see especially Frevel 1996; Olyan 1988; and Wiggins 1993. Many of Meyers’s works (n. 5 above) are also relevant.

8. For the data, too cumbersome to cite here, see the works cited in nn. 5 and 7 above. Many of the data are documented and summarized in Dever 2005. See also n. 10 below.

9. The term *fertility* may not currently be politically correct, but I use it deliberately. The critique comes principally from doctrinaire feminists who are overreacting to abuses of the past, such as in the “Myth and Ritual” school or in the claim of some Albrightians that the sexual motifs of Canaanite (and Israelite) religion were “lascivious.” Some scholars simply say “plenty” or “fecundity.” Meyers seems to shy away from the term *fertility*, speaking instead of “family reproductive rituals” (2007a: 125).

(3) Women's cults functioned primarily, not through the study of texts, the recital of theological formulas, or the liturgy of official priests, but through nonliterary exercises: simple, largely ad hoc family rituals, over which illiterate women could preside. The emphasis would have been on right relations with family and community as well as the "natural order of things" (in biblical parlance, *hesed* or *šālôm*).

(4) The specific ritual acts would probably have included the maintenance of household shrines and village sanctuaries; prayers and the making of vows; various kinds of animal, food, and drink offerings, and offering gifts for the gods; the manipulation of cultic paraphernalia such as the well-known Judean Pillar-base Figurines; domestic production, such as weaving, accompanied by appropriate rituals; the preparation of food and drink, especially for prescribed local feasts and festivals (not necessarily those described in the Bible); welcoming the new moon; the celebration of life-cycle events such as conception, birth, weaning, circumcision (?), the onset of puberty, betrothal and marriage, illness and recovery, death and mourning; veneration of the ancestors; the performance of various benevolent and charitable works; and pilgrimages to the shrines of local saints.¹⁰

Before proceeding, let us note what "women's cults" did *not* involve. There was no written Bible (Torah) until the very end of the monarchy, if then. And had there been, virtually no one in the hinterland could have read this "Scripture." There would have been little knowledge of a "Sinai Covenant" or "Mosaic Law" (that is, of Torah or the Deuteronomistic *corpus*).¹¹ Most women or men had never been to Jerusalem or seen the temple or met a real priest. Rituals such as the required pilgrimages to Jerusalem or the observance of the sabbatical or Jubilee years could not possibly have been observed by isolated families engaged in subsistence farming. In many, if not most of the above activities, women could have presided over the proper rituals as competently as men, and in some cases they would have done so exclusively. That is what we mean by "women as ritual experts." Their status was indeed

10. In addition to the factual discussion in works cited in nn. 5, 7, and 8 above, see now the instructive "fictive portrait" of life in the Israelite villages in van der Toorn 2003. On daily life, see also King and Stager 2001. Most recently, on the typical Iron Age Israelite house, see Bunimovitz and Faust 2003; Hardin 2010; and Herr and Clark 2009. For specific archaeological data that are evidence for household cult, see the thorough review in Schmitt 2008.

11. There is no need to document the fact that the J, E, D, and P traditions were not rendered in written form much before the seventh century B.C.E. and were not widely distributed even then. On literacy, see n. 3 above.

comparable, as Meyers maintains, to that of the levitical priests. The implication is that *their* piety is no less important in the larger picture of Israelite religion that we hope to draw in light of what we now know, principally from archaeology.

To appreciate the uniqueness of women's folk cults, we now need to compare them with men's cults, that is, with "ideal Yahwism," at least in the minds of the men who wrote the Bible. Let us follow van der Toorn's apt depiction of this as "book religion," which even if it originally characterized only a handful of male elites, eventually became normative.

(1) "Book religion" operated mainly in the sphere of national and political life. It focused on the "mighty acts of God" and the consequent great deeds of heroic men (and perhaps a very few women).

(2) It found its expression and validity in the literary tradition—in Scripture—and its magisterial themes: promised land; exodus and conquest; the Sinai Covenant and the Law of Moses (Torah); a divinely sanctioned monarchy and temple theology; the sole legitimacy of the levitical priesthood and its supervision of all cultic activities, including sacrifices and festivals; and finally, the inspired role of late reformers such as the prophets and the Deuteronomists. Here, women were conspicuously absent. God is not the nurturing mother of the women's cult described above but the vengeful Divine Warrior, and right relations do not matter as much as right beliefs. Here the criterion is not what worked (it ended in disaster) but what was theologically correct: in a word, *orthodoxy*, preserved especially in a literary tradition.

It may be objected, as noted, that "book religion" always represented a marginal, elitist, ultra-nationalistic party, not the position of the majority of either men or women in ancient Israel. It was probably the case that most men participated alongside women in "folk" or family religion. It would then be necessary to qualify what I have said thus far, that "women's cults" were actually subsets of popular religious beliefs and practices, in some aspects of which women naturally predominated. Furthermore, these special concerns of women and the veneration of Asherah no doubt characterized not only "folk religion" but also the royal cult, as Ackerman has persuasively argued.¹² Even here, again, it was experience—*orthopraxy*—that counted most, not orthodoxy. It is worth recalling that, in Jer 44:15–25, our best characterization of "folk

12. Ackerman 2003: 154–61. See already Olyan 1988. This is consensus scholarship today. For clarification of the admittedly unwieldy terms "state," "official," "popular," "folk," and so forth, see now the valuable discussion of Zevit 2003.

religion” in the Hebrew Bible, what matters more to the women is not Jeremiah’s plea for orthodoxy but the fact that their admittedly unorthodox practices were actually *working* for them.¹³ Again, the question of authority: Scripture or practice; texts or life-experiences?

*What if Women Really Were Equals:
Orthodoxy or Orthopractice?*

Whatever the extent to which women’s religious rituals and Asherah worship permeated ancient Israelite society, recent efforts to highlight the status and role of women raise a provocative question. Conceiving of them as “equals,” even as “equally important” (Meyers) in religious life—that is, balancing the equation—almost requires us to diminish the role of *men*, including those who wrote, edited, and handed down the Bible. If the test of validity is what it seems to have been for most women, and indeed for “folk religion” generally, that is, experience, then Scripture—orthodoxy—can no longer be enthroned as the final arbiter of religious belief and practice. This is a rational argument, and so far, so good. But if the rationale is played out, the apparent conclusion is that anything goes, as long as it feels right. Then, is not religion reduced simply to “warm, fuzzy feelings”? In such anarchy and chaos, what happens to religion as a timeless, overarching, integrating force in society (Latin *religio* ‘binding’)? Moreover, what then of the moral and ethical dimensions that characterize religion (and offset, to some degree, its rigidity and intolerance)? These are profound questions, and they are disturbing for all traditionalists, whether Jewish or Christian, in the interpretation of Scripture. But regarding women at long last as “equals” forces us to confront them. Thus, the challenge: “What if . . . ?”

(1) First is the unavoidable conclusion that androcentric conceptions of “God the Father” should be passé. Why should we ever have used exclusively male language and imagery for the deity? The answer may lie simply in the fact that avoiding anthropomorphic concepts is exceedingly difficult. It is almost impossible for most of us to conceive of God as “pure spirit.” Furthermore, we humans are constrained by language: neither Hebrew nor English has a neuter form. And given the choice, the male writers of the Bible opted for the masculine. Yet even they observed that “God created humankind (*ʾādām*) in his image. . . . Male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). And in the previous verse,

13. See Jer 7:17 and also Ezek 8:14. The best treatment of the context is Ackerman 1992, defending the identification of the “Queen of Heaven” as Astarte.

the writers specify, "Let us make humankind in *our* image" (Gen 1:26; italics mine). And there are well-known passages in which Yahweh is portrayed with more "feminine" characteristics. These observations lead me to conclude that many in ancient Israel, men and especially women, were sophisticated enough to know that "God" transcends human gender categories. Asherah, then, was not a competing deity but the counterpart of Yahweh.¹⁴

(2) A second implication of taking women seriously as "equals" is that the canon—clearly a masculine, clerical concept—should perhaps be reopened. There is no point in trying to "save" the Hebrew Bible, as some feminists have attempted: it is a male-chauvinistic document throughout. Much can be salvaged, but the numerous stories that denigrate women should simply be decanonized. Parts of the Bible may still be regarded as "inspired" but not those parts.¹⁵ If androcentric concepts of religions are out, so too are logocentric conceptions.

(3) A third implication is obvious: women must be fully admitted to all positions of religious education and leadership, to all clerical ranks and privileges. No exceptions can be rationalized. An exclusively male clergy in monotheistic religions such as Judaism and Christianity (not to mention Islam) has much to atone for, not the least in oppression and violence against women. It is time for a change, for less testosterone, for a "kinder and gentler" religion (although this is not the whole solution).¹⁶

(4) If women—at least half the human population—are truly equals, does this not open the way for new, even radical "feminist theologies"? This is too vast a topic for us here (and perhaps for any man).¹⁷ But a few observations may be in order. First is that feminist biblical scholarship, now apparently in its "third wave," seems to many commentators to be essentially a part of other recent radical movements, such as postliberalism, postmetaphysicalism, and (obviously) post-modernism. Sometimes the emergent theology is termed "postcolonial," "liberation," "ecumenical,"

14. This is why I construe Asherah, not as a "foreign deity," but as Yahweh's consort. This notion, first advanced in 1984, is now assumed by many scholars, such as Olyan (1988); Keel and Uehlinger (1996); Hadley (2000); and Kletter (2001).

15. See n. 4 above.

16. See the conclusion below and, already, Dever 2005: 304–13 ("What Does the Goddess Do to Help?"). See also n. 21 below on the "Goddess movement" and naïve conceptions of women as the only "nurturers." See also n. 2 above.

17. I have offered a very limited and provisional introduction to feminism in Dever 2005: 304–13. For perspectives of mainstream feminist biblicists and archaeologists, the works of scholars such as Meyers and Ackerman are typical (cited in nn. 5, 7, 8 above). But I do not presume that these scholars would necessarily define themselves as *feminists*. If *feminism* means the unconditional defense of equal rights, then I am a feminist.

“constructive” or “deconstructive,” or in the case of Latina feminists, “mujerista” theology. In any case, all these theologies foreground the *liberation and empowerment of women*. Given that as a desideratum, the question is whether such a goal can be attained within the traditional framework of the Synagogue or Church. And to many, that goal signals a threat to men, at least to the male religious establishment. But what would a truly balanced Judaism or Christianity *look* like? Would it be characterized by a “natural” theology, or by a humanist orientation that would rule out theism altogether (and with it all Scriptures)? For many today, the best option is “post-modernist theology.”

I have inveighed heavily against post-modernist trends in biblical scholarship because, for me, this movement is a theory of knowledge according to which there *is* no knowledge; that is, it is a form of nihilism that I find unacceptable (Dever 2001). Nevertheless, any sort of feminist or “post-chauvinist” theology must face up to the challenge of post-modernism and its related movements.

“Post-modernism,” however, is notoriously difficult, even impossible to define. It is more an attitude of “incredulity toward all meta-narratives” (so Lyotard 1984) than it is a method or a movement.¹⁸ Nevertheless, certain constants can be noted. Among them are: (1) the rejection of all claims to reason or knowledge, as mere “social constructs” (so Foucault); thus the movement is sometimes called “constructivism”; (2) rebellion against all institutional demands on the grounds that “all readings are political”—that is, political institutions are all about race, gender, or power; and (3) deconstruction as the fundamental approach to all texts (and everything becomes a “text”). Given these radical assertions, it is difficult to see how post-modernism can affirm *any* “theology” or for that matter accept any Scripture as authoritative.

Despite these rational considerations (which, according to post-modernism, cannot have any validity), there is now a considerable literature on the topic. As an example, I consulted the authoritative Cambridge Companion series volume on *Postmodern Theology*, a series of essays edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, surprisingly a Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Seminary in Illinois (2003). Perusing this volume and noting the titles of the vast literature cited, I found,

18. For an accessible introduction to “post-modernism” (now typically not in quotation marks or hyphenated), see Lemert 1997 and references there. A penetrating critique from a humanist historian is Windschuttle 1996. For “post-modern” biblical criticism, see below. I discuss “post-modernism” extensively in Dever 2001, with particular reference to biblical archaeology. See also Adam 1995; Vanhoozer 2003.

among other options for a new theology that would embrace feminist concerns, the following:

- Crisis theology
- Process theology
- Radical orthodoxy
- Womanist theology (African-American feminism)
- Post-colonial theology
- Post-metaphysical theology (or “sensibility”)
- Post-critical theology
- Deconstructive theology
- Reconstructive theology
- Constructive theology
- The art of communal practice
- Re-enchantment
- Atheology
- Christian atheism
- The Theo/a-centric movement¹⁹

Any of these options would “decenter” (as post-modernists put it) both Scripture and the religious institutions that perpetuate them. Needless to say, the feminist biblical scholars and archaeologists I know (such as the writers in the bibliography here) do not espouse such extreme views. Nevertheless, these views appear to dominate in mainstream seminaries and departments of religion, and they have even penetrated more conservative religious circles.

While finishing this essay, I ran across a recent issue of *Harvard Divinity Today*.²⁰ There, I noted the recent appointment of two feminist scholars. Dr. R. Marie Griffin, an evangelical scholar (Ph.D. Harvard, 1995), will become John A. Bartlett Professor of New England Church History. One of her books is *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Her work is hailed as “raising provocative questions about the relation of religion to women’s agency, women’s bodies, and women’s relationship” (*Harvard Divinity Today* 2009: 3). Dr. Mayra Rivera Rivera (Ph.D., Drew University, 2005) will become an Assistant Professor of Theology at Harvard Divinity School. She is a Latina feminist with a Puerto Rican background who is “an exceptionally gifted voice in Latina feminist,

19. See Vanhoozer 2003: 19–20, 39, 42–57, 58–75, 76–91, 92–108, 109–25, 126–45. Perhaps this illustrates best how “post-modernism” really does degenerate into anarchy.

20. The summer 2009 issue, vol. 5/2; no editor or authors specified.

liberation, post-colonial, and constructive theology circles,” according to Susan Abraham, Assistant Professor of Ministry Studies (*Harvard Divinity Today* 2009: 3).

In an article entitled “Toward a Postpatriarchal Postmodernity,” Catherine Keller couples feminism with post-modernism. She also argues that patriarchy is not recent but about 4,000 years old (that is, originating with the Hebrew Bible) and that the current feminism that opposes it will be “culturally and intellectually the most important movement of the twentieth century” (Keller 1990: 63–80, quoted in Vanhoozer 2003: 107). Her “process theology” has been adopted by many, such as Carol P. Christ in *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1997).

This is not the place to distance myself (or colleagues such as Carol Meyers) from the “Goddess movement,” with its self-evident foolishness. It does no credit to *real* feminism, nor does it offer hopeful solutions to our dilemma.²¹ Perhaps we must fall back on a less triumphalist vision than even that of a reformed version of either Judaism or Christianity—possibly, simply humanism. It may be that monotheistic religions generally, with their rigidly male deities and male clergy, are inherently intolerant. The philosopher David Hume maintained that polytheism was more tolerant. In *The Natural History of Religion*, he observed: “The intolerance of almost all religions, which have maintained the unity of God, is as remarkable as the contrary principle of polytheism.”²²

Conclusion

In some concluding remarks in my *Did God Have a Wife*, I suggested:

The rediscovery of the Goddess and of women’s popular cults in ancient Israel redressed the balance. It helps to correct the androcentric bias of the biblical writers. It “fleshes out” that concept of God, brings the divine mystery closer to the heart of human experience, and yes, to the mystery of human sexual love (Dever 2005: 311).

Appreciation of the Goddess in the history of religions should bring warmth, caring, and healing to religion, as well as joy in the sexual union ordained and celebrated by the gods (Dever 2005: 309).

Carol Meyers’s observations on the empowerment of women in ancient Israel were probably not intended to invite the extended commentary

21. See Dever 2005: 304–13.

22. Quoted in Coyne 2009: 40.

in which I have indulged myself here. Nor would she necessarily have approved of all the implications I have drawn. Nevertheless, I found her statement irresistibly provocative, and I hope that others will as well. It is a little gem, buried in the body of a lifetime’s creative dialogue between archaeology and biblical studies.²³

23. Since this essay was completed some time ago, several important publications have appeared. They could not be incorporated, but they would include Albertz and Schmitt 2012; Bodel and Olyan 2008; Dever 2008; Ebeling 2010; and Yasur-Landav, Ebeling, and Mazow 2011.

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