

DIVINE QUEENSHIP AND PSALM 45

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York 1992.
<i>AfOB</i>	<i>Archiv für Orientforschung: Beiheft</i>
<i>ANET</i>	Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament. Edited by J. B. Pritchard. 3d. ed. Princeton, 1954.
<i>ARM</i>	Archives royales de Mari
<i>BA</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
<i>BAR</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
<i>BCE</i>	Before the Common Era
<i>BDB</i>	Brown, F., S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford, 1907.
<i>BibOr</i>	<i>Biblica et orientalia</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CAD</i>	<i>Chicago Assyrian Dictionary</i>
<i>CHALOT</i>	Holladay, William. <i>A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Eerdmans, 1971.
<i>CE</i>	Codex Eshnunna
<i>DCH</i>	Dictionary of Classical Hebrew
<i>FGrH</i>	<i>Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</i> . Edited by F. Jacoby. Leiden, 1954-1964.
<i>GKC</i>	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> . Edited by E. Kautzsh. Translated by A. E. Cowley. 2d. ed. Oxford, 1910.
<i>HALOT</i>	Koehler, L., and W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Translated and edited under the Supervision of M. E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden, 1994-1999.
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israeli Exploration Journal</i>
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>K</i>	Khetiv
<i>KTU</i>	<i>Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit</i> . Edited by M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartín. AOAT 24/1. Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1976.
<i>LBA</i>	Late Bronze Age
<i>LXX</i>	Septuagint
<i>OECT</i>	<i>Oxford Early Christian Texts</i>
<i>UET</i>	Ur Excavations: Texts
<i>WBC</i>	<i>The Women's Bible Commentary</i> , expanded edition. Edited by Carol Newsom and Sharon Ring. Louisville, 1998
<i>WIS</i>	<i>Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, The Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament</i> , edited by Carol Meyers, Toni Craven and Ross Kraemer. Grand Rapids, 2000.

ABSTRACT

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Queen mothers were arguably an integral part of the cult of YHWH/Asherah in ancient Israel/Judah, although authors of the Deuteronomistic History refused to acknowledge this phenomenon. Most of these women are ignored by the biblical authors, and if mentioned, their evaluations by the authors of the Deuteronomistic History mostly hinged on the approval or disapproval of their sons' reigns. Clearly within this corpus it is impossible to discern the true nature of the queen mothers' duties within cult and court, yet archaeology and ancient Near Eastern parallels reveal a much different story—one that becomes evident in the only marriage text in the Psalter, Ps 45.

Within the text of Ps 45, a queen mother (*šēgal*) presides at the marriage of her son, a ritual that appears to be rooted in the *hieros gamos* ceremonies prevalent throughout the ancient Near East. She appears in a position equal to her son and stands at his right hand; her son is called *Elohim* and is anointed by his adoptive father, YHWH. Aramaic inscriptions from the ancient city of Hatra in modern Iraq have linked the term *šēgal* with a goddess who may have

been synonymous with goddesses such as Ishtar or Asherah. Therefore, the queen mother, or *šēgal* of Ps 45 appears to have occupied a prominent position within the state cult and within this marriage ceremony. Her role reflects that of Asherah, the wife of YHWH, as determined by archaeology, Canaanite mythology, and my own reading of Ps 45.

INTRODUCTION

It is no surprise that the perspectives of the forty-one named kings and their male progeny are given preference in scripture, given the androcentric nature of the Hebrew Bible. However, it is surprising that many named and unnamed queens and queen mothers have survived as invaluable sources of wisdom and prominent members of the cults of YHWH and Asherah—roles that were suppressed by the Chronicler and the authors of the Deuteronomistic History. In the Deuteronomistic history (Josh-2 Kgs), eighteen queen mothers are named and are granted brief descriptions—their evaluations by the Deuteronomistic historians usually contingent on the approval or disapproval (“PN did good/evil in the sight of the LORD”) of their sons’ reigns (see Table 1)¹. Hundreds of nameless women occupy the harems of kings such as Saul, David, and Solomon (see Table 2); others simply never achieve the queen mother status and thus are not assigned much importance within the Deuteronomistic texts (see Table 3). The books of Chronicles only name and discuss ten of these women (Bathsheba, Naamah, Maacah, Azubah, Athaliah, Zibiah, Jehoiaddin, Jecoliah, Jerusha, Abijah) and interestingly omit reference to all queen mothers following the reign of Ahaz.

Only three unnamed queen mothers are found outside of this corpus, one each in Psalms, Proverbs, and Daniel. One of these women is clearly of foreign origin (Dan 5:10-12), while the

¹Table 1 contains a column titled “Evaluation” that assesses the approval (“Positive”) or disapproval (“Negative”) assumed for each queen mother. This evaluation is contingent on the Deuteronomistic historians’ summary of the king’s reign, with the exception of Maacah, who is derided during her son Asa’s reign, although he is portrayed favorably.

queen mother of Lemuel in Prov 31 and the queen mother in Ps 45:9 are of undetermined origin (see Table 4). Though no names are given to these women, remarkably their words are recorded in the text, as they all impart wisdom or instruction.

While firmly establishing the domestic roles of named and unnamed queens, the Deuteronomistic texts are negatively biased in portraying the functionary roles of these women. Named and unnamed queen mothers serve within both the social and religious spheres of the biblical world. These women exercise power and influence as royal counselors and cultic leaders, regents and co-regents, wives and caregivers, deputies for economic exchanges, and diplomats for economic gain. Whether theirs is typical behavior or exceptional personal charisma, the set of terms used to refer to these women, the roles they play, and their elusive yet arguably distinctive position within the cult of YHWH/Asherah merit further attention. This dissertation will assert that queens and queen mothers in ancient Israel/Judah occupied pivotal positions within the cults of YHWH and Asherah as the biblical texts, parallel ancient Near Eastern texts, archaeology, and, most notably, Ps 45 demonstrate.

The dissertation begins with a discussion and analysis of the terms for queen and queen mother used throughout the Hebrew Bible and offers a re-evaluation of the terms, as well as new perspectives on their biblical and historical context. Following the analysis of terms, I will offer a brief discussion of the parallel roles and functions of queen mothers in the surrounding regions of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Ugarit and Phoenicia. Chapter Two then moves to an analysis of all the named and unnamed queen mothers found within the Hebrew Bible, offering a short biography of each, and uncovering any clues given by the text regarding their political and cultic roles as queen mothers. Chapter Three illuminates the cultic roles of women in ancient Israel from household to palace, utilizing archaeological evidence and textual clues to establish the censored

yet pivotal roles of women not only in familial worship, but as representatives of the goddess Asherah in the state cult. Looking toward Ps 45, Chapter Four discusses the complexities of marriage in the ancient Near East from the ritualized *hieros gamos* to the multifaceted aspects of bride-price negotiations, to ultimately uncover and highlight the pronounced ritual nature of Ps 45 and place it within its ancient Near Eastern context. The final chapter offers an exegesis of Ps 45, focusing on the unique portrayal of the king as Elohim, and most importantly on the role of the *šēgal* as mother of the king, counselor to the new bride, and representative of the divine wife of YHWH, the goddess Asherah.

TABLE 1 Named queen mothers in the books of the Deuteronomistic History

QM	Husband	Offspring/King	Father	Origin	Evaluation	DH Reference	Chr Ref
Bathsheba	David	Solomon	Eliam	Unknown	Positive	2 Sam 11-12; 1 Kgs 1-2	1 Chr 3:5
Zeruah	Nebat	Jeroboam	Unknown	Tyre	Negative	1 Kgs 11:26	None
Jezebel	Ahab	Ahaziah, Jehoram, Athaliah?	Ethbaal	Tyre	Negative	1 Kgs 16:31; 18; 19; 21; 2 Kgs 9	None
Naamah	Solomon	Rehoboam	Unknown	Ammon	Negative	1 Kgs 14:21	2 Chr 12:13
Maacah	Rehoboam	Abijam, Asa, Attai, Ziza, Shelomith	Abishalom	Unknown	Negative	1 Kgs 15:2,10,11,13	2 Chr 11:20- 22; 13:2
Azubah	Asa (?)	Jehoshaphat	Shilhi	Unknown	Positive	1 Kgs 22:42	2 Chr 20:31
Athaliah	Jehoram	Ahaziah	Ahab	Israel	Negative	2 Kgs 8:18, 26; 911	2 Chr 21:6, 22- 24
Zibiah	Ahaziah	Jehoash	Unknown	Beersheba	Positive	2 Kgs 12:1	2 Chr 24:1
Jehoiaddin	Jehoash	Amaziah	Unknown	Jerusalem	Positive	2 Kgs 14:2	2 Chr 24:3; 25:1
Jecoliah	Amaziah	Azariah/Uzziah	Unknown	Jerusalem	Positive	2 Kgs 15:2	2 Chr 26:3
Jerusha	Azariah/Uzziah	Jotham	Zadok	Unknown	Positive	2 Kgs 15:33	2 Chr 27:1
Abijah	Ahaz	Hezekiah	Zechariah	Unknown	Positive	2 Kgs 18:2	2 Chr 29:1
Hepzibah	Hezekiah	Manasseh	Unknown	Unknown	Negative	2 Kgs 21:1	None
Meshullameth	Manasseh	Amon	Haruz	Jotbah	Negative	2 Kgs 21:19	None
Jedidah	Amon	Josiah	Adaiah	Bozkath	Positive	2 Kgs 22:1	None
Hamutal	Josiah	Jehoahaz, Zedekiah	Jeremiah	Libnah	Negative	2 Kgs 23:31; 24:18	None
Zebidah	Josiah	Jehoiakim	Pedaiah	Rumah	Negative	2 Kgs 23:36	None
Nehushta	Jehoiakim	Jehoiakin	Elnathan	Jerusalem	Negative	2 Kgs 24:8, 12, 15	None

Note: This table is based on Linda Schearing's, "Queen," in *ABD*, vol. 5, 585-586, with the additions of "Offspring," "Chr Ref," and "Evaluation."

TABLE 2 Unnamed queens from the books of the Deuteronomistic History

Queens	King	Offspring	Origin	Text Ref.	Chr Ref
Wives of Saul	Saul	Jonathan, Ishbaal? Ishbosheth	Unknown	2 Sam 12:8	None
Wives of David	David	Shammua, Shobab, Nathan, Ibhar, Elishua, Nepheg, Japhia, Elishama, Eliada, Eliphelet	Jerusalem	2 Sam 5:13	None
Pharaoh's daughter	Solomon	Unknown	Egypt	I Kgs 9:16, 24; 11:1	2 Chr 8:11
Women of Solomon	Solomon	Rehoboam	Egypt, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Sidon, Hittite Kingdom	I Kgs 3:1; 7:8; 10:8; 11:1-8	None
Wife of Jeroboam	Jeroboam	Abijah	Unknown	I Kgs 14:2-17	None

TABLE 3 Named queens in the books of the Deuteronomistic History

Queens	King/Husband	Offspring	Father	Place of Origin	DH Reference	Chr Ref
Ahinoam	Saul	Jonathan, Merab, Michal, Ishvi, Malcishua	Ahimaaz	unknown	1 Sam 14:49-50	None
Rizpah	Saul	Armoni, Mephibosheth	Aiah	unknown	2 Sam 3:7; 21:8, 10,11	None
Michal	David	none	Saul	Benjamin	1 Sam 14:49, 18:20-29; 19:11-17; 25:44; 2 Sam 3:13-16; 6:16, 20-23; 21:8-9	1 Chr 15:29
Abigail	David	Chileab	unknown	Carmel	1 Sam 25; 27:3; 30:3, 5, 18; 2 Sam 2:2; 3:3	1 Chr 3:1
Ahinoam	David	Amnon	unknown	Jezreel	1 Sam 25:43; 27:3; 30:5; 2 Sam 2:2; 3:2	1 Chr 3:1
Maacah	David	Absalom	Talmai	Geshur	2 Sam 3:3	1 Chr 3:2
Haggith	David	Adonijah	unknown	unknown	2 Sam 3:4; 1 Kgs 1:5, 11; 2:13	1 Chr 3:2
Abital	David	Shephatiah	unknown	unknown	2 Sam 3:4	1 Chr 3:3
Eglah	David	Ithream	unknown	unknown	2 Sam 3:5	1 Chr 3:3

TABLE 4 Unnamed queen mothers in Hebrew Bible outside the books of the Deuteronomistic History

Queen Mother	King/Husband of QM	Offspring	Father of Q.M.	Place of Origin	Text Reference
Queen of Ps 45	YHWH	King of Ps 45	Unknown	Unknown	Ps 45:10
Mother of Lemuel	Unknown	Lemuel	Unknown	Unknown	Prov 31:1
Queen of Babylon	Nebuchadnezzar	Belshazzar	Unknown	Unknown	Dan 5:10-12

CHAPTER ONE: QUEENSHIP IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Defining “Queen” and “Queen Mother”

This chapter will analyze and distinguish characteristics of the Hebrew and Aramaic terms for queen and queen mother utilized in the Hebrew Bible: מַלְכָּה, נְבִירָה, מַלְכָּתָא, שַׁגֵּל, and שָׂרָה. Examination of the various textual usages of these terms will help to ascertain a more precise understanding of their accepted definitions and will give clues as to the identity of these women, thus providing clarification regarding the origins and functions of the offices of queen and queen mother in ancient Israel/Judah.

מַלְכָּה *Malkâ*

מַלְכָּה, the feminine form of מֶלֶךְ (king), is found thirty-five times in the Hebrew Bible in its singular, plural, and construct forms, and is routinely translated as “queen,” “wife of non-Israelite king,”² “wife of the “king,”³ or “queen (outside Israel).”⁴ In I Kgs 10 and 2 Chr 9, eight references are made to the מַלְכַּת־שֶׁבַע, “Queen of Sheba,” an exotic foreign queen who visits the court of Solomon, seeking to meet the famously wise king. She is one of four foreign queens named in the Hebrew Bible (the others are Esther, Vashti, Tahpenes) and the only queen in the

²BDB, 573. *DCH*, 323.

³*HALOT*, 592.

⁴William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 198.

Hebrew Bible portrayed as sovereign in her own right.⁵ This independent, wealthy, unnamed queen rules a wealthy Arabian or African kingdom to the south of Judah and appears in the stories about Solomon to emphasize the opulence of his court and his international reputation for wisdom.⁶ The Queen of Sheba comes to Judah to test Solomon with riddles, a form of speech found within the wisdom tradition. According to Claudia Camp, the queen of Sheba is “Woman Wisdom, cast in narrative form. True to her role, she fulfills YHWH’s earlier promise by bringing the riches and honor that should accompany Solomon’s choice for wisdom.”⁷

In the book of Esther, both Vashti and Esther are addressed repeatedly as מְלִכָּה (twenty-seven times total: Esther, eighteen; Vashti, eight; general reference, one). Esther, whose name is thought to derive from that of the Babylonian goddess Ishtar, becomes queen after being taken into Ahasuerus’ harem as a possible replacement for Vashti.⁸ Once chosen as queen, Esther demonstrates considerable power within the court of Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) as she defies the ruling on appearing before the king in order to save her people from Haman’s genocidal plot—an atypical display for a foreign woman who had attempted to keep her identity hidden. Without being summoned, she goes before the king and requests his presence at a dinner party (Esth 5:4), which he attends in the company of Haman.⁹ As she finally reveals the true purpose of her request following a second dinner party, she unveils Haman’s plot to destroy her people. Not

⁵Linda Scheearing, “Queen” in *ABD* vol. 5, 584. Queen Candace of Ethiopia (Acts 8:27) is the only foreign queen portrayed as sovereign ruler in the NT.

⁶Carole R. Fontaine, “Queen of Sheba,” in *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, The Apocryphal /Deuterocanonical Books and the New Testament*, eds. Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross Kraemer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 270.

⁷Claudia Camp, “1 and 2 Kings,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, expanded edition, eds. Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 108.

⁸Sidnie White Crawford, “Esther,” in *Women in Scripture*, 75.

⁹*Ibid*, 76.

only does she reveal Haman's plot, but she reveals her true identity as a Jew to Ahasuerus who immediately comes to her defense, executing Haman.¹⁰

Queen Esther serves as a remarkable female hero during the time of the Persian Diaspora, when women were more often powerless and pushed to the margins. She was female, foreign, and cunning, using her wit and beauty to save her people and even elevate her kinsman, Mordecai to a high ranking position in the mighty Persian Empire.¹¹

Vashti is another remarkable queen who appears within the book of Esther. The wife of Ahasuerus, Vashti appears in the narrative as a defiant woman who refuses to succumb to the drunken whims of her husband and his noblemen. Ahasuerus and all his noblemen thus appear as impotent fools in the face of Vashti's defiance, and by implication, the defiance of all of their wives.¹² Her refusal prompts a decree in 1:19-20: "Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout his entire kingdom, vast as it is, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike." Sidnie White Crawford states, "the author's customary irony may be at work here: Vashti does not wish to appear before the king and her 'punishment' grants her wish."¹³

In the Song of Songs, the plural of מְלָכָה (מְלָכוֹת) is utilized twice (6:8, 9) in reference to the many noblewomen who cannot compare to the beauty of the male narrator's lover. In 1 Kgs 11, Solomon is said to have had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, all of

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid, 134.

¹³Crawford, "Vashti," in *Women in Scripture*, 166-167.

foreign origin, who, according to the Deuteronomistic historians, lured him to foreign gods.¹⁴ In Song 6:8-9, the women of Solomon's harem appear free from the historians' judgment: "there are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and maidens without number. My dove, my perfect one, is the only one, the darling of her mother, flawless that bore her. The maidens saw her and called her happy; the queens and concubines also and they praised her." Here the foreign women of the harem are praised for their beauty and freely extol the beauty of the king's exquisite lover.¹⁵

In Jer 7:18, 44:17, 18, 19 and 25, the מַלְכַּת הַשָּׁמַיִם appears—the epithet of an otherwise unknown deity named the "queen of heaven."¹⁶ According to BDB, this difficult form of מַלְכַּת occurs only in construct.¹⁷ This deity, otherwise unknown outside of Jeremiah, is condemned as one of the "defections of the populace of Judah from exclusive worship of the god Yahweh."¹⁸ The prophet Jeremiah condemns the women of seventh and sixth century BCE Judah for offering cakes and pouring out libations for the goddess, although she was also worshipped by men, children, "kings," and "officials" in Jerusalem (Jer 44:17). This condemnation seems to indicate that her cult appealed especially to the women, since women of the general populace were, according to Ackerman, prohibited from public or official religion¹⁹ in seventh and sixth century Judah. These women were probably practicing a domestic or household religion and probably played the leading role in this sphere of worship.²⁰

¹⁴Chana Bloch, "Queens and Concubines," in *Women in Scripture*, 315.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Philip C. Schmitz, "Queen of Heaven," in *ABD*, 5:586.

¹⁷BDB, 573.

¹⁸Schmitz, 586.

¹⁹Susan Ackerman, "Women Worshipping the Queen of Heaven," in *Women in Scripture*, 327.

²⁰*Ibid.*

While there is no consensus on the identity of the Queen of Heaven, many have suggested a variety of Semitic goddesses. Kittel proposed that her identity was synonymous with the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar,²¹ while Albright associated her with the west Semitic goddess Anat.²² Recognizing the Canaanite influence on Israelite religion, she was identified as the goddess Ashtoreth,²³ also known by the Greek name Astarte,²⁴ while Dahood suggested the goddess Sapsu.²⁵ More recently however, the Queen of Heaven is recognized not one single deity but rather a syncretistic goddess who combines the characteristics of the east Semitic Ishtar and the west Semitic Astarte.²⁶

As מְלִכָּה is an awkward construction of מַלְכָּה, it would normally appear as מַלְכָּה. It has been suggested that the construct noun מְלִכָּה is derived from the root לִאךְ “to work,” since the consonantal spelling מְלִאכָּה is found in many mss of these verses. This distortion could have been utilized in order to avoid pronouncing what would have been considered the blasphemous epithet of the goddess. Further evidence of this distortion occurs in the LXX that renders the title, “the stars of heaven” and the Targum to Jer 7:18 in Aramaic, “the stars of heaven.”²⁷

In light of the occurrences of מְלִכָּה and its construct forms, I suggest that this term may not only refer to “queen (outside Israel)” or “wife of the king” but would also include foreign

²¹R. Kittel, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, vol. 3 (Stuttgart: 1927), 86.

²²W.F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1968), 130.

²³Schmitz, “Queen of Heaven,” 587.

²⁴William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah Chapters 26-52* Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 304.

²⁵M. Dahood, “La Regina del Cielo in Geremia,” *Rivista Biblica* 8 (1960): 166-168.

²⁶Ackerman, ““And the Women Knead Dough””: The Worship of the Queen of Heaven in Sixth-Century Judah,” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 110.

²⁷Schmitz, 586.

queens residing in Israel, as may be the case in Song 6:8, 9. If the author, who was undoubtedly writing centuries after the time of Solomon, did indeed have the infamous king's multinational "queens and concubines" in mind, their status as מְלָכָה would not have been dependent upon their various nations of origin.

מְלַכְתָּא *Malktā'*

The Aramaic מְלַכְתָּא occurs two times in Dan 5:10 and is the common singular noun in determined form of the Aramaic מְלַכְתָּא (א particle article). This term is defined as "queen (i.e. queen mother)"²⁸ or a Chaldean "queen," Dan 5:10."²⁹ This term is derived from מְלַכְתָּא which occurs in its common masculine singular determined form מְלַכְתָּא (א particle article)³⁰ in Dan 5:10.

This passage contains the story of the mysterious hand that writes on the palace walls of Belshazzar, the king of Babylon. This incident follows the revelry of the king, his wives and concubines, and his courtiers, as they sacrilegiously drink from sacred vessels taken from the Jerusalem temple.³¹ When no one is able to decipher the mysterious writing on the wall, the מְלַכְתָּא enters the banquet hall. She wisely informs the king that only Daniel has the power to read and interpret the writing on the wall. Since the queen informs Belshazzar here that his father Nebuchadnezzar had made Daniel the chief of the diviners and scholars, and the king's wives and concubines were already present, she is viewed as the queen mother, rather than as Belshazzar's wife.³²

²⁸Holladay, 411.

²⁹Gesenius, 478.

³⁰Holladay, 411.

³¹Ross S. Kraemer, "Queen (of Babylon)," in *Women in Scripture*, 341.

³²Ibid, 342.

גְּבִירָה *Gěbîrâ*

The term גְּבִירָה, the feminine form of גְּבוּר, is translated as “mistress, queen, queen mother”³³ and occurs thirteen times in the Hebrew Bible.³⁴ Most commonly associated with Judean or Israelite queen mothers,³⁵ this word is also translated as “mistress”³⁶ in Gen 16:4, 8 and 9 with reference to both Sarai and Hagar.³⁷ In 1 Kgs 15:13 (2 Ch 15:16), King Asa of Judah “removed his mother Maacah from being queen mother (גְּבִירָה),” and Jer 29:2 refers to the mother of King Jeconiah (Jehoiachin) as “queen mother” (גְּבִירָה). In 2 Kgs 10:13, Jehu encounters relatives of King Ahaziah who wish to “visit the royal princes and the sons of the queen mother,” referring to the foreign-born Israelite queen, Jezebel. In 1 Kgs 11:19, the term is used to describe the queen of a foreign nation, the wife of an unnamed pharaoh, Queen Tahpenes, whose name is an epithet for “the wife of the king.”³⁸ Tahpenes is one of four queens of foreign nations mentioned in the Hebrew Bible,³⁹ yet the only such queen given גְּבִירָה status. Since she is otherwise unknown outside of the biblical text and her name offers no clues as to her real identity, her role as the mother of a king is doubtful.

שֶׁגַל *šēgal*

³³BDB, 150. *HALOT*, 173. *DCH*, 323.

³⁴John R. Kohlenberger III and James Swanson, *The Hebrew-English Concordance to the Old Testament with the New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 1994.

³⁵Schearing, “Queen” in *ABD*, 5:583.

³⁶Kohlenberger and Swanson, 1494.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸Susan Tower Hollis, “Tahpenes,” in *Women in Scripture*, 161.

³⁹Schearing, “Queen,” 584.

The term שָׁגַל occurs only twice in the Hebrew Bible in its singular form and is translated as “(queen) consort”⁴⁰ in both occurrences (Ps 45:9; Neh 2:6). It appears in its Aramaic plural possessive form in Dan 5:2, 3, and 23. Interestingly, this word is not a feminine derivative; it has no Hebrew masculine counterpart, unlike נְבִירָה and מְלִכָּה. A closely related verbal form, שָׁגַל meaning “to violate, ravish,”⁴¹ could hold possible clues as to the origins of שָׁגַל. In the Kethib form of Zech 14:2 and Isa 13:16, שָׁגַל is found in its Niphal imperfect third feminine plural form, “women will be raped (violated).” According to BDB, the Masora substitutes the verb שָׁכַב “lie down,”⁴² as שָׁגַל was considered “obscene.”⁴³ Once again in the K of Deut 28:30 the verb is found; however in its Qal imperfect third masculine singular suffix form, יִשְׁגַּלְנָה is translated by JPS as “enjoy her.” Again the Q substitutes the less offensive שָׁכַב. As will be discussed in Chapter Five, this verbal form could render some very intriguing possibilities when discussed within the context of Ps 45.

Elsewhere in the ancient world, the title שָׁגַל is found as both a personal name, and more importantly, as a deity’s name in the Palmyrene Inscriptions.⁴⁴ In the Palmyrene onomastica, cults, rituals, and several deities represent evidence of the Arab origin of the majority of the inhabitants of the city of Palmyra and its principality.⁴⁵ These texts are written mostly in Aramaic, which was the “lingua franca in western Asia from the Achaemenid period onward.”⁴⁶ Palmyrene texts have been found in many countries from the Euphrates to northern England, and

⁴⁰BDB, 993.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid, 1011.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴HALOT, 1415.

⁴⁵Adnan Bounni, “Palmyra,” in *OEANE*, vol. 4, ed. Eric Meyers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 242.

⁴⁶Ibid.

in Palmyra itself about three thousand texts have been recovered.⁴⁷ The epigraphic material from Palmyra comprises a “remarkable legacy of an exuberant assemblage of traditions.”⁴⁸ The substratum of the Aramean tribes that inhabited the area of Palmyra in the second millennium BCE is evident in the names of gods and individuals alike. The Babylonian pantheon is present in some liturgical inscriptions found in the famous Temple of Bel, as the pervasiveness of Phoenician influence is a less prominent phenomenon; yet this influence should not be depreciated.⁴⁹ The rituals described here reflect the presence of both Syro-Palestinian traditions, as well as Arabic cults.⁵⁰

During the 1951 archaeological exploration of the Hatra site,⁵¹ the Antiquities Service of Iraq made an important epigraphic discovery.⁵² At the foot of a marble statue, a broken off piece revealed an Aramaic inscription which M. Fouad Safar read, “Here is offered ‘BDGDY, son of LŠGL’, so that one remembers him for good.”⁵³ This translation led researchers to view the name ŠGL as a personal name; however Caquot contended that this inscription should be rendered “an

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Javier Teixidor, “Palmyrene Inscriptions,” in *OEANE*, 4:244.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 244.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ The ruins of ancient Hatra (modern Tadmor), lies 152 miles east of the Mediterranean and 30 miles west of the Euphrates River, in the center of the Syrian steppe—generally known as the Syrian desert (Badiat ash-Sham). Palmyra lies at the northeastern slope of Jebel al-Muntar of the Palmyrene mountain chain and was well-known for at least four thousand years, as a caravan station between Syria and Mesopotamia (Adnan Bounni, *Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Ancient Near East*, 244). It is one of the ten Legendary Lost Cities of Tayyab, and was thought to have been built by Solomon (2 Chr 8:4).

⁵² The site of the city is a gentle depression in a semi-desert land between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates known as Al Jazirah. Due to its isolated, near-desert location, little to no excavation work had been done on the site, until 1951 when the Iraqi government decided to begin examining the site. Prior excavations of the 1950s resulted in the discovery of at least twelve additional temples since 1960. Restoration work has been underway to preserve the structure, as well as continued archaeological excavations in the region.

⁵³ André Caquot, “La Déesse Šegal,” *Semitica* 4 (1951-1952): 55.

offering BDGGY to ŠGL” therefore interpreting ŠGL as the name of a goddess. In his work “La Déesse Šegal,” (“The Goddess Šegal”), Caquot contends that this is the first direct epigraphic attestation of a divine name that the Palmyrene onomastic evidence has revealed. Within these inscriptions, about fifteen women carry the name ŠGL, and one could conclude that this title is a reference to the Hebrew שגל, but Caquot contends that this is a divine name used as a personal name.⁵⁴ He goes on to connect the deity ŠGL with Ishtar, the Queen of Heaven, Artemis, Aphrodite, and other goddesses who represent the “the star that rises in the Orient in autumn.”⁵⁵ Caquot cites the work of Knut Tallqvist, who also contends that ŠGL is associated with Ishtar, and states that it could have originated as an epithet for her.⁵⁶

Caquot concludes his article by stating that the significance of the Hebrew word שגל lies in its use as “queen,” and more precisely “foreign queen.” However, the word does not appear in the Hebrew vocabulary until the Persian period, perhaps as a borrowing from Assyrian/Akkadian. He suggests a possible common origin for the divine name SGL found in the Palmyrene Inscriptions and the Hebrew שגל—a highly intriguing possibility that could yield fascinating results.

According to G. A. Cooke, שגל is associated with a deity שגל mentioned in Aramaic inscriptions from Tema (Tayma), Saudi Arabia date to the fifth century BCE.⁵⁷ He states that שגל is a deity “otherwise unknown; possibly the ש is the fem. ending.” The name has been

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid, 56.

⁵⁶Ibid, 57.

⁵⁷Tema or Tayma is a large oasis in northern Saudi Arabia, known today as El-Hejaz, known for its abundant and inexhaustible spring G. A. Cooke, *A Text-book of North Semitic Inscriptions: Moabite, Hebrew, Phoenician, Aramaic, Nabataean, Palmyrene, Jewish* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), 197. Tema is a biblical eponym for a son of Ishmael (Gen 25:14).

compared (Corp.) with that of a Babylonian goddess שגל, mentioned in the lexicon of Bar Bahlul, and stated to be the Chaldean equivalent of Aphrodite. Another suggestion is that Singala (*Sing-gala*) “is the moon god.”⁵⁸ Not only is the שגל mentioned thought to be associated with a deity, but is mentioned alongside the name of another deity thought to be associated with the actual goddess, Asherah. Lines 2-3 reveal the first association of the deities in this inscription:

בתימ]א צלם [זי מחרם ושגלא
 ואשירא אלהי תימא לצלם זי
 [In Têm]a, Salm of Mahram and Shingala
 And Ashîra, the gods of Têma, to Salm...

Lines 16-17 of this inscription read:

צלם זי מחרם ושגלא ואשירא
 אלהי תימא לצלם זי הגם א
 Salm of Mahram and Shingala and Ashira
 The gods of Têma, have g[iven] to Salm of Hajam

Regarding the mention of “Ashira” within these inscriptions, Cooke states that in spite of the ך, this could very well be the goddess Asherah, “who was certainly known in Arabia.”⁵⁹ Certainly this association could have intriguing possibilities, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

The use of שגל in Neh 2:6 has led to fascinating speculation regarding the otherwise unknown wife of King Artaxerxes. It can be historically verified that the reign of King Artaxerxes lasted from 464 to 424 BCE and supposedly coincided with Nehemiah’s requests to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. In Neh 2:6, King Artaxerxes speaks to Nehemiah “with the שגל seated at his side.” The presence of the queen may account for the king’s positive response to

⁵⁸G. A. Cooke, 197.

⁵⁹Ibid.

Nehemiah, and while she is unnamed it is possible that she may have been Queen Damaspia (d. 424 BCE) or a lesser royal consort.⁶⁰

Damaspia is the only known wife of Artaxerxes and is mentioned in Ctesias' *Persica*.⁶¹ She was likely descended from a noble Persian family because she is mentioned as a king's wife and was probably given to the king as part of a marriage alliance.⁶² Her status as the king's wife is based on Ctesias' statement that her son Xerxes (II) was the only legitimate heir to the throne since the death of Artaxerxes sparked quite a succession struggle.⁶³ Damaspia's son Xerxes II died shortly after his father,⁶⁴ which allowed his half brother, Darius Ochus, to finally claim the throne. Therefore, Damaspia appears to have been a queen mother, despite her death prior to her son's rule; her death appears to have occurred at the same time as the death of her husband Artaxerxes I.⁶⁵ Since Caquot contends that מַלְּכָה does not appear in the Hebrew vocabulary until the Persian period and denotes a "foreign queen,"⁶⁶ the queen in Neh 2 could make a compelling case for redefining מַלְּכָה as "foreign queen mother" and giving her the name Damaspia. Interestingly, Ps 45:9 also depicts an unnamed מַלְּכָה seated at the side of a king. This queen mother stands at the right hand of her son during an elaborate marriage ritual.

⁶⁰Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, "Queen, Wife of Artaxerxes," in *Women in Scripture*, 287.

⁶¹*FGrH*, 688.

⁶²Maria Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia: 559-331 B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 64.

⁶³*Ibid*, 65.

⁶⁴Xerxes' reign lasted only forty-five days, *FGrH*, 688.

⁶⁵Brosius, 65.

⁶⁶Caquot, "Le Désee Šegal" 57.

In a later work, André Caquot argues that שַׁגֵּל is derived from the Akkadian *ša ekalli*, or “the one from the palace,” which may have replaced the more ancient נְבִירָה.⁶⁷ Many scholars and commentators do not consider the שַׁגֵּל in Ps 45:9 a queen mother, and simply regard her as “consort,” yet her position beside the king in this marriage ritual suggests a different status.⁶⁸ Other scholars would consider שַׁגֵּל a synonym of בְּנוֹת מְלָכִים in v. 10 and therefore the bride would come onto the scene of the nuptials and take her place at the right of the king “in gold of Ophir.”⁶⁹ Since the bride has taken her place beside the king, how is she then in v. 14, “inside” and later led to the king in verse 15? Therefore, the שַׁגֵּל of v. 10 has come to be understood as the mother of the king standing at her son’s right hand, much like the scene in 1 Kgs 2:19: “The king [Solomon] rose to meet her [Bathsheba], and bowed down to her, and had a throne brought for the king’s mother, and she sat on his right.” If the Hebrew שַׁגֵּל and the divine name ŠGL have a common origin in the Akkadian, this could indicate the divine nature of the queen mother in Ps 45. Perhaps she is playing the role of Asherah’s representative at this sacred marriage ritual, as the consort of God who has anointed the king, and as the “adopted mother of the king.”⁷⁰

Another possible but questionable reference to a שַׁגֵּל occurs in Judges 5, the Song of Deborah. Based on parallel couplets in v. 19-21, Susan Ackerman contends that Sisera is a Canaanite king and thus his unnamed mother who speaks in 5:28-30, is a queen mother. She

⁶⁷Caquot, “Cinq Observations sur le Psalm 45,” in *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of P. C. Craigie*, eds. L. Eslinger and G. Taylor (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 259-260.

⁶⁸Christoph Schroeder, “‘A Love Song’: Psalm 45 in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Marriage Texts,” *CBQ* 58 (1996): 428.

⁶⁹H. Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form Critical Introduction*, trans. Thomas M. Horner (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 191-192.

⁷⁰Ackerman, “The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel,” *JBL* 112 (1993): 400.

claims the phrase “kings of Canaan” in 5:19 is parallel to “Sisera” in 5:20 and thus it could be construed that Sisera was himself a Canaanite king. Based on this conclusion, she translates 5:30:

Are they not finding and apportioning plunder?
A maiden, two maidens for every warrior?
Plunder of dyed cloth for Sisera?
Plunder of patterned dyed cloth?
Two patterned dyed cloths for the neck of the *šālāl*?

She leaves the final word, *šālāl*, untranslated, although the NRSV translates this term as “spoil.” Based on suggestions of scholars such as Roland De Vaux,⁷¹ Ackerman supports emending the middle *l* to *g* and revocalizing to *šēgāl*.⁷² She suggests that Sisera’s unnamed mother was ruling in his stead while he was away battling the tribes of Israel—a plausible suggestion based on roles of Ugaritic and Phoenician queen mothers in the Late Bronze Age.

שָׂרָה *Šārâ*

The term שָׂרָה is often translated “princess or noble lady,”⁷³ as is seen in 1 Kgs 11:3, referring to the “seven hundred princesses” in Solomon’s harem and the “noble ladies of Persia and Media” in Esth 1:18. However, this term in plural construct form is utilized in Isa 49:23 and is clearly translated as “queen.” Isa 49:23 contains a portion of Second Isaiah’s vision of all people coming to Jerusalem and acknowledging YHWH as their God. Foreigners would become integrated with Israel and the foreign royalty would become like parents to Israel’s children.⁷⁴ Speaking on behalf of YHWH, Isaiah declares to Israel, “kings shall be your foster fathers, and

⁷¹Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel I: Social Institutions* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965), 119.

⁷²Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 133.

⁷³BDB, 979; Gesenius, 794.

⁷⁴Carol Meyers, “Queens,” in *Women in Scripture*, 322-323.

their queens (וּשְׂרוּתֵיהֶם) your nursing mothers.” Clearly the use of “queens” is meant to parallel the use of “kings” (מְלָכִים) and thus must be considered as part of this study.

Interestingly, the image of the queen as wet-nurse is closely associated with the goddess Asherah. Ivory reliefs carved as a decorative headboard panel from Ugarit depict a queen, acting on behalf of Asherah, suckling two male children. It is possible that the decorative bed was meant for a royal child, and most likely a royal prince as decorative ivory would have only belonged to an aristocratic family.⁷⁵

Queens Throughout the Ancient Near East

Ancient Egypt

The ruler of Egypt was most commonly male. Since the succession ideally passed from father to son, kings married in order to obtain heirs. Therefore, a number of royal women maintained great importance within the king’s immediate circle—his mother, his wives, and his daughters. These women were not limited to their roles as producers of heirs; the king’s mother and his principal wife were bearers of divine queenship, which complemented the divine aspect of kingship.⁷⁶ The cosmological claims connected with queenship are sanctioned in Egyptian

⁷⁵Ackerman, “The Queen Mother and the Cult in the Ancient Near East,” in *Women and Goddess Traditions: in Antiquity and Today*, ed. Karen L. King (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1997), 189.

⁷⁶Gay Robins, “Queen,” in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, vol. 3, ed. Donald Redford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 105.

mythology:⁷⁷ “As priestess in the cult of the god, the royal women act as the female prototype, as the eye which functions as the medium of regeneration for the father.”⁷⁸ Therefore, “royal women in the context of the cult of the king became the medium of the cosmic, as well as the dynastic renewal of the Kingship.”⁷⁹

Makhosazana Nzimande states, “Ancient Egyptian Queenship is a divine office. Queens and Queen Mothers play active roles in cosmology, cultic activities, ritual performances and ceremonies.”⁸⁰ Queenship in ancient Egypt was oriented to the world of the divine in the form of several goddesses, most notably Neith and Hathor along with Wadjet and Nekhbet.⁸¹ It is evident that these goddesses also play a significant role in regard to kingship, “a concept to which one might more properly refer with the nongendered term rulership, because queens could and did rule with impunity.”⁸²

Queens and kings in ancient Egypt held extensive titles related to their roles in the divine, mythic, and human worlds. For kings, these titles were established by the end of the Old Kingdom, but the titles for queens were never fixed and evolved over a much longer period. This could have been the result of the ever-developing role she played and that no single one was ever

⁷⁷Makhosazana Nzimande, “Postcolonial Biblical interpretation in post-apartheid South Africa : the [Gebira] in the Hebrew Bible in the light of Queen Jezebel and the Queen Mother of Lemuel” (Ph.D. diss., Brite Divinity School, 2005), 80.

⁷⁸Lana Troy, *Patterns of Queenship in Ancient Egyptian Myth and History* (Uppsala: Stockholm, 1986), 97.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 102. Cf. Hollis, “Goddesses and Sovereignty in Ancient Egypt,” in *Goddesses Who Rule*, eds. Elisabeth Benard and Beverly Moon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 215-32.

⁸⁰Nzimande, 80.

⁸¹Hollis, “Queens and Goddesses in Ancient Egypt,” in *Women and Goddess Traditions*, ed. Karen L. King (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 225.

⁸²*Ibid.*

established.⁸³ She did fill at least three separate major roles in the Egypt as the wife of the king, the mythologically significant king's mother, and the actual ruler (in at least a few cases). Each role was granted its own title which tended to stand separate from the others, especially in the Old Kingdom.⁸⁴

As “wife of the king” the queen held a varied set of titles: “she who sees Horus [and Seth]”; “great of praise”⁸⁵; and “the great one of the *hts*-scepter,”⁸⁶ —all titles of the king's wife that were rarely shared with the mother of the king. This first title, “she who sees Horus [and Seth]” is thought to refer to the intimacy of the queen with the gods Hours and Seth who were considered to be the king.

As “mother of the king,” the queen was also thought to be a “daughter of the god,” or of the deceased king and was therefore responsible for the God's (the king's) renewal.⁸⁷ She also carried the title, “all things that are said are done for her.”⁸⁸ As both mother of the king and the daughter of the god, she is seen defined in her relationship to a king, with the third title demonstrates her royal position. Kings' mothers were highly venerated, even receiving cult status, like many queen mothers.⁸⁹ For example, Khenetkawes of the Late Fourth/Early Fifth

⁸³Lisa Sabbahy, “The Development of the Titulary and Iconography of the Ancient Egyptian Queen from Dynasty One to Early Dynasty Eighteen” (Dissertation, 1982 University of Toronto), 357.

⁸⁴Hollis, “Queens and Goddesses,” 215.

⁸⁵Sabbahy, 358.

⁸⁶Troy, 189.

⁸⁷Ibid, 61, 99.

⁸⁸Ibid, 88.

⁸⁹Hollis, “Queens and Goddesses,” 215.

Dynasties⁹⁰ gained cult status, as did Ahmose-Nefertaray in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Dynasties; Ahmose-Nefertaray was even later divinized.⁹¹

In contrast to the queens of the First Dynasty, later ruling queens, such as Hatshepsut, acquired the usual fivefold king's titulary.⁹² Instead of queens whose definitions as rulers were gained by means of Neith, they became "female Horuses" with all the aspects of the king—regalia, names, inscriptions, etc.—of male Horuses.⁹³ These female "male Horuses" even donned the ceremonial royal beard, as did Hatshepsut,⁹⁴ although they, like their counterparts in the First Dynasty, were originally queens, wives of kings.⁹⁵ The historians Herodotus and Manetho, as well as the Turin Canon, made reference to a female ruler named Nitokris in Greek or Nitiqret in Egyptian. While she is unknown in monuments or contemporary documents, according to Manetho, she was the last ruler of the Sixth Dynasty.⁹⁶ In contrast, the female king Sobekneferu, the last ruler of the Twelfth Dynasty, is known from a number of contemporary monuments and attested with the five-fold titulary of a king, as well as a regnal date of Year Three. Similar to Hatshepsut of the Eighteenth Dynasty, Sobekneferu is portrayed in a fragmentary statue donning a combination of female dress and male royal costume and wearing a king's *nemes*-headdress. She could have been the daughter of Amenemhet III and the consort of Amenemhet IV before becoming the primary ruler.⁹⁷

⁹⁰Sabbahy, 80.

⁹¹Hollis, "Queens and Goddesses," 215.

⁹²*Ibid.*, 216.

⁹³Sabbahy, 37.

⁹⁴William Hayes, *The Scepter of Egypt: Volume II the Hyksos Period and the New Kingdom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), fig. 53.

⁹⁵Hollis, "Queens and Goddesses," 216.

⁹⁶Robins, "Queens," 108.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*

The Eighteenth Dynasty (c. 1570-1320 BCE) marked a high point in the history of Egyptian queens⁹⁸ and Hatshepsut was its crown jewel. She was one of the most powerful women to ever rule in Egypt, let alone the entire ancient Near East. Hatshepsut was the daughter of Thutmose I, the third pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty (c. 1550-1295 BCE), and married her half-brother, Thutmose II. Following the early death of her husband, she became regnant to Thutmose III (C. 1479-1425 BCE), the son of Thutmose II by another wife. Most likely, by the seventh regnal year of Thutmose III, Hatshepsut had boldly declared herself king. She was no longer protecting the kingship until her nephew-stepson came of age; she had become the more powerful partner of a co-regency.⁹⁹ She ruled at a time of great prosperity and was an avid builder for the gods, especially at Thebes, where she erected her great funerary temple at Deir el-Bahri and her tomb in the Valley of the Kings.¹⁰⁰

Hatshepsut's title, "God's Wife of Amun" indicates her importance as a member of the cult of Amun, who was the creator god and who was responsible for all the diverse forms present in the universe. He was attended by a number of powerful male priests and was the chief god of the Egyptian pantheon. According to Egyptian mythology, Amun masturbated in order to produce all life that exists in the universe. Another one of Hatshepsut's titles, "God's Hand" indicates her pivotal role as enabling the constant creative act and keeping the cosmos from falling into chaos.¹⁰¹

She maintained these titles until around 1473 BCE when she apparently no longer was content watching the kingship for her nephew-stepson and suddenly assumed the five-fold

⁹⁸Scheuring, "Queen," 583.

⁹⁹"When a Woman Ruled Egypt," *BAR* 32:2 (March/April 2006): 65.

¹⁰⁰Robins, 108.

¹⁰¹"When a Woman Ruled Egypt," 65.

titularly that Egyptian kings had taken since the Old Kingdom. In addition to her given name, Hatshepsut (“Foremost of Noblewomen”), she took on Khnemtamun (“One with Amun”), the throne name Maatkare (“Ma is the ka of Re”), the Horus name Wesretkau (“Strong of the Kas”, the *nebty* name Wadjetrenput (“Flourishing of Years”), and the Golden Horus name Netjerethau (“Divine of Appearances”).¹⁰²

A few statues and reliefs of Hatshepsut show her as king wearing female dress. However on the majority of her monuments, she is depicted as a male king wearing traditional male dress.¹⁰³ It has been suggested that she wore male clothing as a means of masquerading as a male king, however this is unlikely since the depictions were largely ceremonial and, despite her male appearance, inscriptions accompanying her statues and reliefs usually included feminine particles or pronouns that would undoubtedly reveal her identity as a woman.¹⁰⁴

Mesopotamian Queens

Information on Mesopotamian queens is lacking, although there are accounts that support the rule of Queen Ku-baba as ruler of Kish in the third millennium BCE.¹⁰⁵ Ku-baba began as a barmaid but rose to prominence as queen regnant and is the only example of a ruling queen currently known from Mesopotamia. Other Kishite queens achieved distinction as consorts such as Shag-Shag, wife of Urukagina, and Baranamtara, wife of Lugalanda—their status is confirmed by a number of temple records. In the Early Dynastic Period of Lagash, wives of the king functioned in a cultic capacity, while two Neo-Assyrian queens, Sammuamut (mother of

¹⁰²Ibid, 66.

¹⁰³Robins, “Queens,” 108.

¹⁰⁴“When a Woman Ruled Egypt,” 68.

¹⁰⁵Nzimande, 78.

Adad-nirari III) and Zakutu (wife of Sennacherib; mother of Esarhaddon) exerted authority as queen mothers.¹⁰⁶

During the reign of King Zimri Lim of Mari in the eighteenth century BCE (Tell Hariri), royal women held an astonishing array of positions in both the public and private spheres.¹⁰⁷ Zimri-Lim was often away from the palace at Mari conducting campaigns to maintain and strengthen Mari's hold in the upper Euphrates. Because of his frequent absence, he often left matters of state and religion in the hands of his wife Queen Šibtu. Scholars suggest that since no such role for the queen or queen-mother was known in Mari either before or after the reign of Zimri-Lim, the women in his family are examples of women claiming an "unassigned power" when circumstances allowed, rather than of any "assigned power" in the city-state.¹⁰⁸

According to textual evidence from the royal archives of Mari, Queen Šibtu had considerable power, as she not only acted in domestic roles as wife and mother, but carried out tasks given to her by Zimri-Lim and oversaw the affairs of the palace, harem, temple, workshops, and the entire city.¹⁰⁹ She oversaw the city archives, supervised the work of officials, and even acted as an intermediary for many of them in both executive and personal matters.

Mari texts attest to the fact that women offered sacrifices for the main gods of the city-state, Dagan and Adad, as well as Nanna, Samas, Tesub, and the goddesses Ishtar, Hebat, Belat-ekallim, and others. Remarkably, women acted as both lay and professional prophets and were often connected to specific cultic centers. While the Kingdom of Mari reached its height in the

¹⁰⁶Scheuring, "Queen," 583-584.

¹⁰⁷Fontaine, "A Heifer from Thy Stable: On Goddesses and the Status of Women in the Ancient Near East," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: a Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999), 167.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

eighteenth century BCE, a millennium before the height of the Judean monarchy, Chapter Three will offer a more thorough treatment of the cultic roles of women at Mari as a possible influence and predecessor to women in Israelite/Judean cultic roles.

Canaanite Queens

Archives from LBA Ugarit (c. 1550-1200) attest to the prominent role of the queen mother in Canaanite society. The queen mother appears to follow the king in the power hierarchy of the royal family.¹¹⁰ While many parallels have been made to the well-attested *tawananna* of the Hittite Empire, as well as the *גְּבִיָּרָה* of the Hebrew Bible, comparatively little research has been conducted on Ugaritic queen mothers. However, Michael Heltzer has demonstrated the economic power that the Ugaritic queen mother wielded, as demonstrated in the texts U.V. No. 159-161. These economic texts make it evident that the queen mother possessed property and was also able to purchase land. The queen mother also held her own storage facilities (KTU 4:143) that housed two hundred fifty measures of olives, as well as a warehouse for agricultural products.¹¹¹ It appears these holdings were managed by a *šākinu*, chief administrative official, a *mudu*, chief counselor, and officials known as *mârē šarrati* or “sons of the queen,” who were not actually her sons at all, but were known to have been at her disposal. It is also known that she possessed *bunušu-bnšm* or “men, dependents,” and a separate economy known as *gt mlkt*, “the *gt* of the queen” that was run by a majordomo.¹¹²

¹¹⁰Michael Heltzer, *The Internal Organization of the Kingdom of Ugarit* (Weisbaden, Reichert, 1982), 181.

¹¹¹Ibid, 60.

¹¹²Ibid, 182-183.

Susan Ackerman contends that the LBA Kingdom of Ugarit held a similar ideology of sacral kingship to that of the Kingdom of Judah. This would suggest that, like the Judean queen mother, the Ugaritic queen mother played the role of cultic functionary and devotee of Asherah.¹¹³ Words of an Ugaritic king are preserved in the letter RS 11.872 published in 1940 by Ch. Virolleaud.¹¹⁴ Within this text, the king pays homage to his queen mother by bowing at her feet and invoking the gods, asking their protection for her, that she may have peace. This text is one of only a number of what have come to be known as “queen mother letters.” Heltzer has argued that these “queen mother” letters were communications regarding administrative and political issues, sent to the queen mother, who was acting as chief officer while the king was absent from the palace.¹¹⁵ Not only did kings bow to their queen mother but she is addressed as *adt*, the feminine form of *adn*, “lord” (*KTU* 2.11.1, 5 and 15).

The Ugaritic queen mother was also responsible for determining succession to the throne, as is evidenced in a text concerning Ahat-milki, wife of King Niqmepa and queen mother of their son Ammistamru. While Chapter Three will deal with this text in more depth, particularly as it applies to the cultic role of the queen mother, it is worth noting here that the Ugaritic queen mother’s role in succession may have indeed been intertwined with and inseparable from her role as cultic functionary.¹¹⁶

Phoenicia also held ideas of sacral kingship, similar to that of Judah and Ugarit, as is evidenced by Ezek 28:2: “Mortal, say to the prince of Tyre, Thus says the LORD GOD: Because

¹¹³Ackerman, “The Queen Mother and the Cult in the Ancient Near East,” 182.

¹¹⁴Ch. Virolleaud, “Lettres et Documents Administratifs Provenant des Archives d’Ugarit,” *Syria* 21 (1940): 250-253.

¹¹⁵Heltzer, 182.

¹¹⁶Ackerman, “The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel,” 388.

your heart is proud and you have said, ‘I am a god (אֱלֹהִים אָנִי); I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas,’ yet you are but a mortal, and no god.” Ezek 28:9 also reveals evidence of the Tyrian (Phoenician) ideology: “Will you still say, ‘I am a god,’ (אֱלֹהִים אָנִי) in the presence of those who kill you.” Elsewhere in the Phoenician world, tombs reveal inscriptions such as “the god is in his temple/tomb,” not as reference to a deity, but as a member of the royal family,¹¹⁷ whom Ackerman views as the dead king.¹¹⁸

Thus a sacral kingship ideal parallel to that of Judah and Ugarit suggests the significant political power of the queen mother, as well as the institution of sacral queenship—namely the queen mother as devotee of Asherah. Inscriptions from Sidon (c. 500 BCE) and Sarepta (c. seventh century BCE), as well as a relief from Karatepe (eighth century BCE), all suggest and give credence to the institution of divine queenship in ancient Phoenicia.¹¹⁹ While this evidence will be discussed in much more detail in Chapter Three, it is significant to note here that compelling archaeological evidence from neighboring Phoenicia further supports the argument for the essential cultic role of the Israelite/Judean queen mothers as the earthly representatives of Asherah.

Although the roles of the Israelite/Judean queens and queen mothers do not precisely mimic those of their predecessors in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, intriguing parallels exist that will be highlighted throughout this work, as their undeniable influence pervaded the ancient Near East. The neighboring nations of Ugarit and Phoenicia exerted considerable influence on the Israelite/Judean office of queen mother—her role as cultic functionary and devotee of

¹¹⁷G. Knoppers, “‘The God in His Temple’: The Phoenician Text from Pyrgi as a Funerary Inscription,” *JNES* 51 (1992): 105-120.

¹¹⁸Ackerman, “The Queen Mother and the Cult in the Ancient Near East,” 189.

¹¹⁹*Ibid*, 188-190.

Asherah continued well into eighth century Israel and seventh century Judah. As is seen in Phoenician inscriptions and Ugaritic texts, the responsibilities of the Canaanite queen mother were to serve as progenitor of the king's heir, royal counselor, administrator, and cultic official—all capacities that will be adapted by Israelite/Judean queen mothers.

Conclusion

It has become increasingly clear that the lines previously drawn when defining “queen” and “queen mother” can easily become blurred. Uncertainties arise when attempting to match title to function and status. It appears possible that a “queen” or *malkâ* can seemingly hold the same duties as a “queen mother” or *gēbîrâ*. It is most likely that *šēgal* is an Akkadian loan word, can be defined as “queen mother” within its two brief appearances in the biblical text, and may hold a later association with a goddess found addressed within Palmyrene inscriptions. Clues from neighboring nations, especially Phoenicia and Ugarit, reveal exciting possibilities regarding the roles of queen mothers. It seems most likely that Israelite/Judean queen mothers borrowed and adapted much of the divine aspect of queenship from their Canaanite neighbors. Comparative evidence from surrounding nations in the Near East, as well as revisited textual data, reveals new and exciting possibilities when attempting to unravel the mystery surrounding the precise roles and functions of the Israelite/Judean queen mother and in particular, the queen mother of Ps 45.

CHAPTER TWO: TWENTY-ONE QUEEN MOTHERS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Abijah to Zibiah: Eighteen Named Queen Mothers in the Hebrew Bible

In this chapter, I will discuss each of the eighteen named and three unnamed queen mothers found within the Hebrew Bible (despite the dearth of existing information about the majority of these women). Moving in a relative chronology from the United Monarchy, to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and finally to the Southern Kingdom of Judah, each queen mother's biography will be explored. Most of these women are found in the books of 1 and 2 Kgs, (only ten are revisited in 1 and 2 Chr, as discussed in the Introduction), and rarely receive much attention from the Deuteronomistic historians who were more interested in the deeds or misdeeds of their sons and husbands. Interestingly, the Southern bias of the authors is readily obvious, as the names of most Northern queens have been omitted entirely (only Jezebel and Zeruah are named). When provided, information concerning the king's mother is often, although not always, preserved in the introductory regnal formula of her son,¹²⁰ and in most cases her approval hinges on the evaluation of the king's reign (according to the formula "PN did good/evil in the eyes of the LORD").

Of the eighteen queen mothers who are named, fifteen are of Judean kings (Naamah, Maacah, Azubah, Athaliah, Zibiah, Jehoiaddin, Jecoliah, Jerusha, Abijah, Hephzibah,

¹²⁰Linda Schearing, "Queen," *ABD* 5:585.

Meshullameth, Jediah, Hamutal, Zebidah, Nehushta) two are of Israelite kings (Zeruah, Jezebel), and one from the period of the United Monarchy (Bathsheba).¹²¹ The named Judean and Israelite queen mothers come from a variety of locations:¹²² three are foreign (Jezebel, Naamah, Athaliah); five are from the provinces (Zibiah, Meshullameth, Jedidah, Hamutal, Zebidah); three are from Jerusalem (Jehoiaddin, Jecoliah, Nehushta), and seven (Bathsheba, Zeruah, Maacah, Azubah, Jerushah, Abijah, Hephzibah) are named without any mention of their homes.¹²³ Unfortunately, the origins of the three unnamed queen mothers are unknown; only one is associated with a named king (Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 5), yet they all impart wisdom—either to an individual (Mother of Lemuel in Prov 31, *šēgal* of Ps 45), or to an assembled group (Dan 5).

While many of these queen mothers are known in name only, others are nameless—their words are their legacy. Each queen mother’s name or role, her provenance, and any glimpse into her enigmatic life afforded the reader by the biblical authors will be explored and analyzed in an attempt to recover her story and her voice.

Bathsheba בַּת־שֶׁבַע

The name Bathsheba can be translated literally, “daughter of Sheba,” although the biblical text tells us she was the daughter of a man named Eliam, whose place of origin is unknown. As is to be expected, nothing is said of her mother. She was the wife of Uriah the Hittite, and later King David, as well as the mother of King Solomon. She was one of the most

¹²¹See also Schearing, “Queen,” *ABD* 5:586.

¹²²See tables 1 and 4 in Introduction.

¹²³Schearing, “Queen,” *ABD* 5:585.

well known of all queen mothers in the Hebrew Bible, yet her voice is rarely heard, despite her pivotal role in ensuring the succession of Solomon to the throne of David.

In 2 Sam 11, King David notices Bathsheba, then the wife of Uriah the Hittite, bathing on a roof. Looking closely at the language utilized to describe the subsequent events, it seems clear that Bathsheba is but a pawn, the “object of male actions.”¹²⁴ The NRSV conveys the abruptness of the events leading to David and Bathsheba’s affair as he “sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her” (2 Sam 11:4). The verb “to send” (שָׁלַח) indicates David’s command of the situation, while “to get,” or as JPS translates, “took” (קָחָהּ) seems to indicate Bathsheba’s passivity in the situation. However, the potentially sexually laden phrase, “and she came to him” from the Hebrew באָה “come,”¹²⁵ could imply Bathsheba’s compliance in the sexual rendezvous. Interestingly, BDB states that only rarely is the subject of this verb a woman¹²⁶—here in 2 Sam 11 and in Gen 19. One daughter of Lot speaks to the other, “‘look, I lay last night with my father; let us make him drink wine tonight also; then you go (בֹּיֵא) in and lie with him, so that we may preserve offspring through our father’” (Gen 19:34). Clearly in the case of Lot’s daughters the desperate acts of seduction/trickery were performed by the women in order to produce heirs, sired by the father. Could Bathsheba then have “come” to David knowingly?

Lillian Klein suspects that Uriah the Hittite might have been infertile, thus prompting Bathsheba to seek out and fulfill her social and biological function as a woman—to conceive and

¹²⁴Lillian R. Klein, “Bathsheba Revealed,” in *Samuel and Kings: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 2nd series, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 49.

¹²⁵BDB, 99.

¹²⁶Ibid.

bear children.¹²⁷ Klein states, “Bathsheba may well have been purifying herself on the roof with the hope of seducing King David into ‘seducing’ her.”¹²⁸ By submitting to the male authority of King David, Bathsheba hoped to achieve that which her husband Uriah could not give her—motherhood. Thus, she sought out the honor afforded her by motherhood instead of accepting the fate of a barren woman.¹²⁹ Therefore, while her husband was away at battle, David and Bathsheba have intercourse immediately following her menstruation cycle. This information is meant to clue the reader in to the fact that her subsequent pregnancy is attributed to David and not her husband.¹³⁰ In addition to paternity, this detail is meant to emphasize David’s virility and power, hence his ability to rule effectively. This passage is very difficult for later commentators who utilize a myriad of devices to overlook and or justify the relationship between David and Bathsheba. For example, the Babylonian Talmud deals with this passage by blaming Satan (Sanh. 107a), portraying Bathsheba as a “test” for the king, and attributing his act to a selfless attempt to glorify God.¹³¹

G. W. Åhlstrom has deemed Bathsheba the “first Great Lady in Israel.”¹³² Her role as the wife of David and mother of Solomon seems to place her within *gēbîrâ* status; however this title is never actually applied to her even though she clearly occupied such a position.¹³³ Once she is

¹²⁷Klein, 53.

¹²⁸Ibid.

¹²⁹Ibid.

¹³⁰Brenner, “King David and ‘his’ Women,” in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 138-139.

¹³¹Berlin, 98.

¹³²G.W. Åhlstrom, *Aspects of Syncretism in Israelite Religion* (Lund: Gleerup, 1963), 188.

¹³³Niels-Erick A. Andreasen, “The Role of the Queen Mother in Israelite Society,” *CBQ* 45 (1993): 191.

identified as a *gēbîrâ*, conclusions could be drawn as to her status and role, according to her actions in 1 Kgs 1-2. Her role in 1 Kgs 1:11-21, 28-31 demonstrates her involvement in determining the royal succession, which is seen as a major function of the *gēbîrâ*.¹³⁴ However, the argument could be made that she was coerced by the prophet Nathan into petitioning her husband on behalf of Solomon. If Adonijah succeeded David, she could have been banished or executed, so that any claim Solomon had to the throne would be eliminated.¹³⁵ Yet, as the story progresses she clearly demonstrates that her role within the Davidic court is that of counselor in the political and judiciary affairs at court and mediator between political factions in the nation.¹³⁶

Our first glimpse of Bathsheba bathing paints the picture of a seemingly passive, voiceless pawn; however, in 1 Kings 1-2, she assumes the role of a strong and active favored wife as well as a cunning queen mother.¹³⁷ In 1 Kgs 2:13-18, Bathsheba agrees to intercede on behalf of Adonijah, yet it is difficult to discern her intent in this incident. Following his unsuccessful attempt at the throne, Adonijah requests that Bathsheba appeal to Solomon in order that he might be given Abishag the Shunammite as a wife. This very act demonstrates the power that Bathsheba held as a royal intermediary and counselor. Adonijah even asks permission to speak to her, which she grants. However, Bathsheba conveys the request, with a small change in the wording, to Solomon. This prompts a violent reaction from the king, who interpreted the request as an attack on his position.¹³⁸ Adonijah is then put to death by Benaiah, son of Jehoiada. Perhaps this was Bathsheba's way of removing Abishag from Solomon's household. Abishag

¹³⁴Nancy R. Bowen, "The Quest for the Historical Gebira," *CBQ* 64 (2001): 605.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*

¹³⁶Andreasen, "The Role of the Queen Mother," 189.

¹³⁷Berlin, "Bathsheba," *WIS*, 58.

¹³⁸*Ibid.*

had once shared a bed with her husband and had been with David when Bathsheba came to convince the ailing king to designate Solomon as his successor.¹³⁹ Whatever her motive, Bathsheba played a vital role in securing her son's position on the throne and as mediator between feuding heirs.

Zeruah זְרוּעָה

The name Zeruah is best translated as “having a skin disease,” from the Hebrew זְרוּעָה, “to have a skin disease.”¹⁴⁰ Zeruah appears in 1 Kgs 11:26 as the widow of Nebat, an Ephraimite servant of Solomon, and the mother of Jeroboam (reigned 928-907 BCE), the first ruler of the Northern Kingdom, Israel.¹⁴¹ According to a version of the story found only in the LXX, Jeroboam's mother is named Sarira (“lepers”) and is called a harlot (πόρνη): “And there was a man of Mount Ephraim, a servant to Solomon, and his name was Jeroboam; and the name of his mother was Sarira, a harlot” (1 Kgs 12:24). This description, as well as her name in both Hebrew and Greek may be intended as pro-Judean polemics against Jeroboam's rule.¹⁴²

It is quite fascinating to note this naming technique for many Israelite and Judean queen mothers, whose sons' or husbands' reigns are denounced by the Deuteronomistic historians. The Deuteronomistic bias becomes exceedingly obvious and almost comical when considering the only two named Northern queens are Zeruah and Jezebel, whose names mean respectively, “skin disease” and “dung.”

¹³⁹JoAnn Hackett, “1 and 2 Samuel,” *WBD*, exp. ed., 98.

¹⁴⁰*BDB*, 863.

¹⁴¹Burnette-Bletsch, “Zeruah,” *WIS*, 168.

¹⁴²*Ibid.*

Jezebel זִיזְבֵּל

Jezebel was the daughter of the Tyrian king Ethbaal, wife of the Israelite king Ahab, and mother of kings Ahaziah and Jehoram. Ahab had other unnamed wives and many unnamed sons (1 Kgs 20:3, 5, 7; 2 Kgs 10) and thus it would be plausible that Jezebel was the mother of Athaliah; however, there is no clear evidence to support this conclusion, although the possibility is enticing.¹⁴³ The union of Jezebel and Ahab is a prime example of a diplomatic marriage, as their union created a strong alliance between Israel and Phoenicia.¹⁴⁴ Despite the important political ramifications, our first introduction to Jezebel creates the illusion that she is a pawn as she “enters Israel in an arrangement between males.”¹⁴⁵ However, this seeming passivity will be short-lived.

The meaning of Jezebel’s name instantly reveals her status in the eyes of the Deuteronomistic historians, as several derogatory translations can be derived from it. One such meaning is “heap of dung,” the pronunciation dictated by the pointing in the Hebrew *’îzebel*. Originally, her name was probably rendered “where is Zebul” which refers somewhat sarcastically to her god, Baal.¹⁴⁶ Another interpretation, “where is the prince?” seems to recall the precise human sentiment expressed following the death of Baal in the Ugaritic Baal cycle¹⁴⁷ (KTU 1.6 IV 4-5).

According to Mark S. Smith, the ninth century was a critical time for the cult of Baal in Israel; he cites 1 Kgs 17-19 as evidence. Both biblical and extra-biblical texts provide ample

¹⁴³Brenner, “Jezebel,” *WIS*, 102.

¹⁴⁴Scheering, “Queen,” *ABD* 5:585.

¹⁴⁵Phyllis Tribble, “Exegesis for Storytellers and Other Strangers,” *JBL* 114.1(1995), 4.

¹⁴⁶Brenner, “Jezebel,” *WIS*, 100.

¹⁴⁷*Ibid.*

information regarding the cult of Baal in Phoenicia and Israel during this time. The authors of 1 Kgs offer a dramatic account of the infiltration of the Phoenician Baal cult into Samaria and ultimately blame Ahab for its official status in the capital city. Jezebel's strong support of Baal is seen clearly in 1 Kgs 16:31:¹⁴⁸ "And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he took as his wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians and went and served Baal, and worshiped him." The biblical evidence appears to suggest that the Phoenician Baal of Ahab and Jezebel was a storm-god and more specifically, the Baal of Carmel.¹⁴⁹

Jezebel was a powerful, foreign woman, who appeared as a threat to the Deuteronomistic authors of her story. The authors are careful not to refer to her as queen, yet this is precisely what she was.¹⁵⁰ According to Athalya Brenner, Jezebel had two sources of power. As the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, she was a princess by birth, and as the queen mother, wife of Ahab and mother of his heir, she held considerable power within his court.¹⁵¹ Josephus states that Ethbaal was also a priest in the Phoenician cult of Astarte.¹⁵² Brenner suggests that Phoenicia followed the Mesopotamian practice of appointing the king's daughter as the high priestess of the chief local god, who in this case was Baal Melqart. With Ethbaal as the high priest and Jezebel as high priestess, the relationship between the monarchy and state religion was considerably strengthened. Together, the king and his daughter were able to wield substantial

¹⁴⁸Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 67.

¹⁴⁹Ibid, 71.

¹⁵⁰Brenner, *The Israelite Woman* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1985), 24.

¹⁵¹Ibid.

¹⁵²Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities*, 8.13.2.

economic, political, and religious power over their constituents.¹⁵³ Therefore, when Jezebel came to Israel as wife of Ahab, she naturally became an active participant in the government.

According to 1 Kgs 18, she promoted the cult of Baal, which had maintained prominence in Israel, since her status as the god's high priestess was the legal basis for her authority as queen¹⁵⁴ and queen mother.

In spite of the Deuteronomistic attempts at portraying Jezebel in a negative light, the texts still reveal that she was indeed an active partner in the rule of her husband.¹⁵⁵ The religious and political skills she acquired as a Sidonian princess and high priestess would have made her a natural partner within the administration of Ahab. According to 1 Kgs 18:19, she had ample financial resources with which to support four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and four-hundred prophets of Asherah at her own table. Her sole acquisition of Naboth's vineyard by utilizing the name and seal of her husband was most likely a legitimate act on her part "rather than an illegitimate usurpation of authority."¹⁵⁶ Moreover, there is no indication within the text that suggests these assertions of authority were limited only to the Naboth incident.¹⁵⁷ It seems logical that Ahab allowed Jezebel to continue in her religious and political role because it would have strengthened his own rule.¹⁵⁸

As Phyllis Tribble notes, the character of Jezebel emerges as the Deuteronomistic authors'

¹⁵³Gale Yee, "Jezebel," *ABD* 3:849.

¹⁵⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵Brenner, *The Israelite Woman*, 28.

¹⁵⁶Yee, "Jezebel," *ABD* 3:849.

¹⁵⁷Brenner, "Jezebel," *WIS*, 101.

¹⁵⁸Yee, "Jezebel," *ABD* 3:849.

antithesis to the prophet Elijah, to the extent that they emerge as “quintessential opposites.”¹⁵⁹ He embodies obedience to YHWH, while she is a devoted follower of Baal (and possibly Asherah) and arch enemy of the prophets of YHWH. She is a powerful, foreign monarch, while he is a native prophet. Therefore the real conflict that arises in this story is not between King Ahab and Elijah but between Queen Jezebel and Elijah. In 1 Kgs 18:27, Elijah mocks the prophets of Baal, telling them to “shout louder” for their god. He continues by proposing that perhaps Baal has “been detained,” (JPS) or “wandered away” (NRSV); however, the phrase (וְיָצַא) seems more aptly translated here as a euphemism for “bowel movement.”¹⁶⁰ Thus, Elijah wonders aloud if Baal is elsewhere eliminating bodily wastes, implying that this is the god’s only function.¹⁶¹ Perhaps this scatological language foreshadows the demise of Jezebel, as she would become the bodily waste of the dogs that would eventually devour and eliminate her.¹⁶² This seems all too ironic in light of the fact that her name is easily rendered “dung.”

In 2 Kgs 9, the prophecy of Elijah is fulfilled and Queen Jezebel meets her gruesome fate. She adorns her eyes and hair and calls out the window with mock concern for her enemy Jehu. Deborah Appler sees Jezebel’s act of adornment as a “ritual of sacrifice.”¹⁶³ According to the JPS translation of 2 Kgs 9:30, Jezebel was said to have “painted her eyes with kohl” prior to her death (NRSV omits “with kohl”). The term used for “kohl” in v. 30 (קֹהֵל) is also translated as “to pulverize” in Syriac, thus foreshadowing the manner in which she would be pulverized by Jehu’s

¹⁵⁹Trible, “Exegesis for Storytellers and Other Strangers,” 3.

¹⁶⁰John J. Owens, *Analytical Key to the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), 506; Holladay, 350.

¹⁶¹Deborah Appler, “From Queen to Cuisine: Food Imagery in the Jezebel Narrative,” *Semeia* 86 (2001): 59.

¹⁶²Ibid.

¹⁶³Ibid, 64.

horses.¹⁶⁴ According to Peter Ackroyd, this act of adornment in the final scene of Jezebel's life is meant to emulate the portrayal of the "woman at the window," a familiar symbol of ancient Near Eastern art, and "held to represent the Goddess as sacred prostitute."¹⁶⁵ He contends that Jezebel is "being presented, and rejected, as the Goddess herself."¹⁶⁶

Prior to Ackroyd's connection of Jezebel and the woman at the window, R. Herbig proposed that the passage in 2 Kgs 9 should be examined in light of other examples of this image.¹⁶⁷ He identified the female figure as an Aphrodite/Astarte or hierodule of the goddess at the window depicted on a thirteenth-century bronze Cypriot incense stand, on Iron Age Phoenician ivory carvings from Nimrud, and on a stone wall relief at Nineveh displaying Ashurbanipal's ritual couch in a garden banquet.¹⁶⁸ Most scholars that comment on this motif suggest a sexual motivation for the figure's appearance at the window, and both goddess and hierodule are regularly described as "sacred prostitute."¹⁶⁹ These associations follow several ancient sources that deemed the Cypriote version as Aphrodite Parakypusa (leaning or glancing out the window) or that describe a Babylonian counterpart, Kililu, whose names are interpreted as referring to windows and implying "prostitution." In both instances, a ritual consummation is reported as a feature of the goddess's cult.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁴Ibid.

¹⁶⁵Peter Ackroyd, "Goddesses, Women, and Jezebel," in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, eds. A. Cameron and A. Huhrt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 245.

¹⁶⁶Ibid.

¹⁶⁷R. Herbig, "Aphrodite Parakypusa (Die Frau im Fenster)," *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 30 (1927): 917-922.

¹⁶⁸Eleanor Ferris Beach, "Transforming Goddess Iconography in Hebrew Narrative," in *Women and Goddess Traditions*, ed. Karen L. King (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 242.

¹⁶⁹Ibid.

¹⁷⁰Ibid, 242.

Perhaps the depiction of Jezebel at the window in 2 Kgs 9 is an attempt to connect her with the connotations of this motif. Some commentators have said that her adornment was an attempt to seduce Jehu,¹⁷¹ or more likely that her garb was the appropriate queen mother's attire in what would have been a ceremonial welcome home for a returning king or successor.¹⁷²

According to Ackroyd, the association of Jezebel with the goddess in this iconography brings a "more sophisticated analysis of the literary character"¹⁷³ and that perhaps this association helps to explain the "projection into her figure of antagonism to the worship of a Goddess as consort to Israel's God."¹⁷⁴

Immediately following her sarcastic exchange with Jehu she is thrown out the window to her death. The words of Jehu in vv. 36 and 37 are an eerie reminder of the scatological connotations of her name, as he states, "In the territory of Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel; the corpse of Jezebel shall be like dung on the field, in the territory of Jezreel, so that no one can say, 'This is Jezebel.'" Although a different term for "dung" is utilized in this verse (דֶּבֶר), the association is clear; for the Deuteronomistic authors, Jezebel finally became that for which she was named.

There is no doubt that the biblical and later accounts distort the portrait of Jezebel. Her sex, power, influence, religious faith, legal knowledge (as was seen in the Naboth incident), and

¹⁷¹R. D. Barnett, *A Catalogue of the Nimrud Ivories, with Other Examples of Ancient Near Eastern Ivories in the British Museum* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1957), 147.

¹⁷²Joseph Robinson, *The Second Book of Kings*, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Version* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 90.

¹⁷³Beach, "Transforming Goddess Iconography," 243.

¹⁷⁴Ackroyd, "Goddesses, Women, and Jezebel," 245.

foreign origins were definite threats to the strict proponents of Yahwism, and became the targets of a concerted effort to diminish this fearsome queen mother.

Naamah נַעֲמָה

The name Naamah could be rendered, “lovely one,” or “singer” from the Hebrew נָעַם, “to be pleasant, lovely,” or “to sing.”¹⁷⁵ Naamah was one of the many wives of King Solomon and the mother of Rehoboam, the first king of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. In 1 Kgs 14:21, she is called “Naamah the Ammonitess,” rather than the daughter of someone.¹⁷⁶ Three explanations are possible for this reference, according to Edelman. She could have been a commoner of foreign origin. The narrator could have utilized this connection with the Ammonites, the traditional enemies of Israel to express disapproval for Rehoboam’s reign. Finally, she could have been part of a prominent Ammonite family, named as part of a diplomatic marriage alliance.¹⁷⁷

Although the MT describes Naamah as the “Ammonitess,” the LXX describes her as the “daughter of Ana, son of Naash, king of the children of Ammon.” If this description is correct, she would have belonged to royal lineage and thus Solomon married into the royal house of Ammon.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵*BDB*, 653.

¹⁷⁶Diana Vikander Edelman, “Naamah 2,” *WIS*, 129.

¹⁷⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸Ktziah Spanier, “The Queen Mother in the Judean Royal Court,” in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, 191.

Maacah מַעֲכָה

Maacah: “to press, squeeze.”¹⁷⁹ Maacah was the wife of Rehoboam, mother of King Abijam/Abijah, and daughter of Abishalom. She was the first queen mother of Judah, following the division between North and South. 2 Chr 13:2 calls her the daughter of Absalom and “Micaiah daughter of Uriel of Gibeah.”¹⁸⁰ Therefore, the Chronicler appears to disclose a discrepancy regarding her parentage and place of origin.¹⁸¹ The Chronicler also states that the king “loved Maacah daughter of Absalom more than all his other wives and concubines” and therefore placed her son Abijah on the throne (2 Chr 11:22). Her ancestral connection to Absalom and his Geshurite mother brought on her elevation to the position of chief wife. This linked her son Abijah with two branches of the Davidic line.¹⁸² His paternal connection was to Solomon while his maternal association was with Absalom.

Rehoboam’s decision to elevate Maacah to chief wife may have been part of his plan to regain the territory he had lost due to the peoples’ rebellion under Jereboam. According to Spanier, “Maacah’s ancestry and familial connections made her a particularly desirable wife.”¹⁸³ Her familial ties to the kingdom of Geshur and the district of Maacah provided Rehoboam with protection on Judah’s eastern border and created a staging area for pre-emptive attacks along the northern borders of the expanding Israelite kingdom. Spanier contends that Jereboam’s revival of the northern Dan cultic center in the district of Maacah may have been part of his effort to overcome Maacah’s influence in that region (I Kgs 12:26-30). Queen Maacah’s maternal and

¹⁷⁹*BDB*, 590.

¹⁸⁰Alice Laffey, “Maacah 3/Micaiah,” in *Women in Scripture*, 112.

¹⁸¹*Ibid.*

¹⁸²Spanier, “The Queen Mother in the Judean Royal Court,” 191.

¹⁸³*Ibid.*, 192.

paternal connections allowed the king to hold favor with the different factions within Judah and may have served to convince Israelite tribes to return to Davidic rule.¹⁸⁴

Three years after Abijah ascended to the throne, he died and was succeeded by his son Asa. His mother is also named Maacah which could mean she was his grandmother or Abijah and Asa were brothers. The term *gēbîrâ* may refer to her official position within the court rather than her biological maternity (1 Kgs 15:13).¹⁸⁵ If this is the case, it could be argued that queen mothers held their *gēbîrâ* position for life.¹⁸⁶ However in this case, Asa's cultic reforms prohibited his mother/grandmother from retaining her position.¹⁸⁷ Perhaps she only lost part of her status, but the text does not provide enough information to speculate upon this possibility (1 Kgs 15:13).

In 1 Kgs 15:13, there is an explicit link between the *gēbîrâ*, Maacah, queen mother of Asa, and cultic activity, as she had a *מַפְלֵצָה לְאִשְׁרָה* erected in Jerusalem to the goddess, Asherah.¹⁸⁸ Some have argued that this practice was part of the cult of YHWH in the Jerusalem temple and other sanctuaries, and was standard and legitimate in non-deuteronomistic circles.¹⁸⁹ While this passage does not clarify what role Maacah had in the worship of Asherah or if this was done in conjunction with the veneration of YHWH, it is clear that she was a devotee of the goddess and therefore made a cult statue for her. This of course, led to Maacah's dismissal from her *gēbîrâ* status during this era of reform and strict devotion to YHWH.

¹⁸⁴Ibid, 193.

¹⁸⁵Bowen, "The Quest for the Historical Gebira," 609.

¹⁸⁶Ibid.

¹⁸⁷Ibid.

¹⁸⁸Scheering, "Queen," *ABD* 5:586.

¹⁸⁹Saul M. Olyen, *Asherah and the Cult of YHWH in Israel* SBL Monograph Series 34, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 9.

Azubah עֲזוּבָה

The name Azubah comes from the Hebrew עָזַב which means “to leave, forsake,” and in its noun form, “forsakenness, desolation.”¹⁹⁰ According to 1 Kgs 22:42, Azubah is the daughter of Shilhi, whose origins are unknown, the wife of King Asa (reigned 908-867 BCE), and mother of King Jehoshaphat.¹⁹¹

While Azubah is not mentioned after her son’s regnal formula, it is interesting to note that no queen mother is named when her grandson Jehoram assumes the throne. Perhaps Azubah retains her position as *gēbîrâ*, as it is suggested that “the office of gebira is held for life.”¹⁹² This assertion is based on the fact that Maacah was dismissed from her *gēbîrâ* status by Asa, leading us to believe that she would have otherwise retained her position had she stayed in favor with the king.¹⁹³ Therefore, perhaps the omission of Azubah’s name in her grandson’s formula indicates her continued status as *gēbîrâ*.

Athaliah עַתְלִיָּה

Athaliah: “YHWH is great” or “YHWH is exalted.”¹⁹⁴ Athaliah appears in 2 Kgs 8:18 as the “daughter of Ahab” whom King Jehoram of Judah marries as a political treaty between the Northern and Southern kingdoms;¹⁹⁵ this alliance would have been responsible for the end of

¹⁹⁰Scheering, “Azubah,” *WIS*, 55.

¹⁹¹*Ibid.*

¹⁹²Bowen, “The Quest for the Historical Gebira,” 609.

¹⁹³*Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴Brenner, “Athaliah,” *WIS*, 55.

¹⁹⁵Susan Ackerman, “The Queen Mother and the Cult,” 395.

years of hostilities.¹⁹⁶ She could have been the daughter of Omri king of Israel or of Ahab and thus it could be suggested that she was the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel;¹⁹⁷ however, there is no solid evidence that places Jezebel as her mother.¹⁹⁸ A negative light is instantly cast upon Athaliah, as the formula, “and he did what was displeasing to the LORD,” immediately follows her introduction. According to the 2 Chr 22:2-4, Athaliah was Ahaziah’s “counselor in doing wickedly,” thus reflecting the principle that one of the *gēbîrâ*’s primary duties was giving (political) advice to the king.¹⁹⁹

Athaliah came into the Judean court at the head of an entourage that constituted a partisan faction representing her personal interests, as well as cultic and national concerns (2 Chr 22:3-4). She immediately assumed the position of *gēbîrâ*, either as Jehoshaphat’s wife or his daughter in law. She retained this position throughout several reigns, even replacing the mother of Jehoram because of her heavy influence upon the Judean court. Athaliah was the only woman to aspire to and attain the throne of Judah. She seized the throne upon her reigning son’s death²⁰⁰ and managed to garner enough support to reign for six years.

Perhaps the most astonishing display of power exercised by a queen mother is found in 2 Kgs 11, in which Athaliah wielded enormous political authority as she ordered the massacre of the royal family. This move reflected great political acumen considering the “power vacuum

¹⁹⁶Scheuring, “Queen,” *ABD* 5:584.

¹⁹⁷Brenner, “Athaliah,” *WIS*, 55.

¹⁹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹Silvia Schröer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House: Studies on the Figure of Sophia in the Bible*, trans. by Linda Maloney and William McDonough (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 59.

²⁰⁰Andreasen, 180.

which existed after Jehu's murder of Amaziah."²⁰¹ This move was her attempt to remove all possible heirs to the Davidic throne and retain her power in Judah. Her ascension to the throne would have blocked Jehu's advance into Judah and prevented him from reunifying Judah and Israel under his control.²⁰²

Athaliah was removed from the throne and assassinated by the forces of Jehoida on the occasion of the coronation of Jehoash and in the midst of comprehensive cultic reforms designed to reestablish the sole worship of YHWH in Judah (2 Kgs 11:4-20; 2 Chr 23).²⁰³ While there is no textual evidence that directly addresses her role in this cult of Baal, Jehoida destroyed the Temple of Baal immediately following her death—a strong indication that she was a devoted supporter of this cult.²⁰⁴ If this is true, and if she could be considered the daughter of Jezebel, it is possible that she showed allegiance to other cults supported by her mother.²⁰⁵ If Jezebel supported and participated in the cult of Asherah as queen and queen mother, perhaps Athaliah did the same, since the worship of Asherah was indeed a normative aspect of Yahwistic worship in the South.²⁰⁶

²⁰¹ Scheering, "Queen," *ABD* 5:586.

²⁰² Spanier, 143.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ Scheering, "Queen," *ABD* 5:586.

²⁰⁵ Ackerman, "The Queen Mother and the Cult," 396.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Zibiah זִבְיָה

The name Zibiah is derived from זִבְיָה or “gazelle.”²⁰⁷ She is the wife of Ahaziah, the sixth king of Judah who reigned from 843 to 842 BCE, and the mother of king Jehoash (Joash). According to 2 Kgs 12:1, Zibiah was a native of Beersheba, but her lineage is not disclosed in the text. Her marriage to Ahaziah may represent an attempted alliance with the Negev tribes close to the Edomite border.²⁰⁸

Zibiah is mentioned in the introduction of her son’s reign in 2 Kgs 12:13 and 2 Chr 24:1-2. Even though she was not a native of Jerusalem, it is notable that the author of 2 Chr does mention her, since names of queen mothers were often omitted. Joash was acclaimed by his people (2 Kgs 11:14, 20),²⁰⁹ which may account for Zibiah’s appearance in 2 Chr.²¹⁰

Jehoiaddin יְהוֹיָאֲדָן

The name Jehoiaddin comes from the Hebrew יָהּ, the prefix form of YHWH and יֵאֲדָן, which means “luxury, dainty, delight.”²¹¹ Jehoiaddin appears in 2 Kgs 14:2 as the wife of Joash/Jehoash, eighth king of Judah who reigned from 836 BCE to 798 BCE, and the mother of his successor, Amaziah (reigned 798-769 BCE).²¹² She is a native of Jerusalem, yet her parentage is undisclosed in the text.²¹³ Her marriage to Joash was arranged by the powerful priest Jehoiada, according to 2 Chr 24:3 which states, “Jehoiada got two wives for him [Joash],

²⁰⁷*BDB*, 840.

²⁰⁸Schearing, “Zibiah,” *WIS*, 168.

²⁰⁹Andreasen, “The Role of the Queen Mother,” 191.

²¹⁰Schearing, “Zibiah,” *WIS*, 169.

²¹¹*BDB*, 726.

²¹²Burnette-Bletsch, “Jehoaddin/Jehoaddan,” *WIS*, 99.

²¹³*Ibid.*

and he became the father of sons and daughters,” yet does not disclose her name. She appears again in 2 Chr 25:1 as the named mother of Amaziah.

Jecoliah יְכֹלִיָּהּ

The name Jecoliah comes from the Hebrew יָכַל “to be able” and יְהוָה, the shortened form of YHWH,²¹⁴ and is translated “Yah has been able.”²¹⁵ She is a native of Jerusalem and appears in 2 Kgs 15:2 as the consort of King Amaziah, the ninth king of Judah who reigned from 798 to 769 BCE.²¹⁶ She was the queen mother of his successor, Azariah/Uzziah and may have asserted considerable influence during her son’s reign since he was only sixteen years of age when he ascended to the throne of Judah.²¹⁷ According to the text, “he did what was right in the sight of the LORD, just as his father Amaziah had done,” (2 Kgs 15:3) yet he neglected to remove the shrines and people continued to make sacrifices to them. For this offense, he was afflicted with a skin disease.

Jerusha יְרוּשָׁא

The name Jerusha is derived from the Hebrew יְרוּשָׁא meaning, “possession, inheritance.”²¹⁸ According to 2 Kgs 15:33, Jerusha was the daughter of the priest Zadok and the chief wife of Azariah/Uzziah, who reigned in Judah from 785 to 733 BCE. She was the queen

²¹⁴Burnette-Bletsch, “Jecoliah,” *WIS*, 98.

²¹⁵*BDB*, 408,

²¹⁶*Ibid.*

²¹⁷*Ibid.*

²¹⁸*BDB*, 440.

mother of his successor King Jotham, who reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem.²¹⁹ Her priestly parentage would have been quite significant, as the queen mother did indeed act as an official functionary of the court;²²⁰ perhaps this is the “inheritance” that her name designates. It seems likely she would have risen to power early because of the co-regency of Azariah and Jotham, created by Azariah’s affliction.²²¹

Abi/Abijah אַבִּי/אַבִּיָּה

The name Abijah can be translated “my father is Yah” or “my father.” She is first seen in 2 Kgs 18:2 as Abi, the chief wife of Ahaz, king of Judah from 743 to 727 BCE. She was the daughter of Zechariah, a Judean aristocrat, and the mother of King Hezekiah.²²² In 2 Chr 29:1, she is known as Abijah. Since the reign of her son is portrayed quite favorably by the Deuteronomistic historians, Abijah is therefore portrayed quite favorably in the texts, although her presence is fleeting. She is often identified as the mother of the child Immanuel in Isa 7:14.²²³

In the second quarter of the eighth century, as Judah gained military and economic power, the Israelite kingdom began to decline. Internal political conflicts mounted, as did pressure from the Arameans. During this turbulent time, the marriage of Abi and the heir to the Davidic throne was arranged as part of an accord that would have benefited both kingdoms.

²¹⁹Burnette-Bletsch, “Jerusha/Jerushah,” *WIS*, 100.

²²⁰Scheering, “Queen,” *ABD* 5:585.

²²¹*Ibid.*

²²²Burnette-Bletsch, “Abijah 2/Abi,” *WIS*, 45.

²²³*Ibid.*

Their offspring would then provide legitimate heirs in the eyes of both kingdoms.²²⁴

Abi and Athaliah were the only Northern Israelite royal women who became queen mothers in the Judean court. Their influence spanned several reigns and their tenures marked the beginning and end of the house of Jehu. Abi was in the court of Judah when her father, the last of the dynasty, was assassinated. The Judean court then became the center for the activities of the Israelite survivors of the failed dynasties. During her tenure, a strong Israelite influence fell over the Judean throne.²²⁵

Hephzibah הֶפְצִיבָּה

The name Hephzibah is (ironically) derived from the Hebrew הֶפְצִי, “delight in,”²²⁶ and בָּהּ, “in her.”²²⁷ She appears in 2 Kgs 21:1 as the queen mother during the reign of King Manasseh, who reigned in Judah from 698 to 642 BCE, and was the chief wife of King Hezekiah. In 2 Chr 33:1, she is omitted from her son’s regnal formula, probably as the result of the Chronicler’s vast disapproval for Manasseh’s idolatry and failure to maintain his father’s reforms. In light of this, Hephzibah is the only Judean queen mother for whom neither parentage nor place of origin is given.²²⁸ While her husband “Hezekiah prospered in all his works” (2 Chr 32:30), her son

²²⁴Spanier, “The Northern Israelite Queen Mother in the Judean Court,” in *Boundaries of the Ancient Near Eastern World: a Tribute to Cyrus H. Gordon*, eds. Meir Lubetski, Claire Gottlieb, and Sharon Keller, JSOT Supplement Series (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 145.

²²⁵Ibid, 148-149.

²²⁶BDB, 342.

²²⁷Burnette-Bletsch, “Hephzibah 1,” *WIS*, 92.

²²⁸Ibid.

Manasseh “did what was displeasing to the LORD, following the abhorrent practices of the nations that the LORD had dispossessed before the Israelites” (2 Chr 33:2).

Interestingly, the name Hephzibah appears in Isa 62:4, “Nevermore shall you be called ‘Forsaken,’ nor shall your land be called ‘Desolate’; but you shall be called ‘I delight in her,’” referring to Zion restored.²²⁹

Meshullameth מְשֻׁלָּמֶת

Her name comes from the Hebrew, מְשַׁלֵּם, “to recompense, or reward.”²³⁰ Meshullameth was the daughter of Haruz of Jotbah and the wife of King Manasseh. She was the mother of Ammon (reigned 641-640 BCE), who was assassinated by officials in court and avenged by the people of the land, supposedly his original supporters.²³¹ She was a native of the southern provinces according to 2 Kgs 21:19,²³² the introduction to her son’s reign, yet is omitted from the corresponding introduction in 2 Chr 33:1-2. This omission may have been the author’s way of diminishing the significance of the “evil” king Manasseh by not mentioning the queen mother.²³³

Since the exact location of Jotbah is still unknown, there is a possibility that Jotbah could refer to the Galilean site of Yodefat, which could prove politically significant. If Meshullameth was indeed a native of Galilee, her marriage to Manasseh may represent an attempt to strengthen Judah’s ties to the North.²³⁴ If Jotbah could be identified as the southern site of el-Taba,²³⁵ it is

²²⁹Ibid.

²³⁰*BDB*, 1022.

²³¹Andreasen, “The Role of the Queen Mother,” 191.

²³²“City probably in Judah, 2 Kgs 21:19, site unknown.” *BDB*, 406.

²³³Scheering, “Meshullameth,” *WIS*, 125.

²³⁴Ibid.

possible that Meshullameth was of Arab or Edomite origin. If this identification is correct, her marriage to Manasseh could represent an attempted alliance of Judah and a non-Judean people.²³⁶

A Hebrew seal used as a signature in a business transaction bearing the name *mswlm*, Meshullameth, was discovered in Israel, but any connection between this queen mother and the woman mentioned on this signature seal has yet to be determined.²³⁷

Jedidah יְדִידָה

The name Jedidah comes from the Hebrew יְדִיד, or “beloved.”²³⁸ According to 2 Kgs 22:1, she is the daughter of Adaiah of Bozkath²³⁹ and the mother of King Josiah, who reigned in Judah from 639 to 609 BCE. Jedidah’s name appears as part of the formulaic notices that begin the description of the reign of each Judean king. For kings that reigned before the fall of Samaria, the standard pattern reads, “In the XX reign of King PN of Israel, PN began to rule over Judah. He reigned for XX years in Jerusalem; his mother’s name was PN, daughter of PN.” After the fall of Samaria, the pattern remained the same, yet the synchronization with the king of Israel was obviously eliminated.²⁴⁰

²³⁵See Harry Thomas Frank, ed. *Hammond Atlas of the Bible Lands, revised edition* (Maplewood, NJ: Hammond Incorporated, 1990), 39.

²³⁶Scheering, “Meshullameth,” *WIS*, 125.

²³⁷*Ibid.*

²³⁸*BDB*, 391.

²³⁹“City of Judah toward Philistia,” *BDB*, 130. See also Joshua 5:39, which mentions Bozkath as one of the lowland towns occupied by the Judahite clans.

²⁴⁰Ackerman, “The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel,” 399.

Since Jedidah's home of origin is in the outlying provinces of Judah rather than Jerusalem, her rural connections are likely key in the choice of Josiah as successor to his murdered predecessor Ammon.²⁴¹

Hamutal חַמוּטָל

The origin of the name Hamutal is uncertain and could be rendered, "his/my husband's father is the dew."²⁴² Hamutal was the daughter of Jeremiah of Libnah, mother of both Jehoahaz and Zedekiah and consort of Josiah, the Judean king who reigned from 639 to 609 BCE.²⁴³

Hamutal's son Jehoahaz becomes king with the support of the people of the land, although he has an elder half brother (2 Kgs 23:30-36). This suggests that his mother could have had significant influence within the Judean court and may have been responsible for the advancement of a younger son ahead of his older sibling. The fact that Hamutal belonged to a well-connected Judahite family from the outskirts of the kingdom and could claim a superior lineage to that of Jehoahaz's elder brother Jehoiakim, could have played a vital role in Jehoahaz's advancement.²⁴⁴ Zafirra Ben-Barak states, "she was therefore able to effect her son's accession to royal power by successfully exploiting the anti-Egyptian orientation in the kingdom and—what is especially significant—by obtaining the support of the 'people of the land.'"²⁴⁵

²⁴¹ Burnette-Bletsch, "Jedidah," *WIS*, 98-99.

²⁴² Burnett-Bletsch, "Hamutal/Hamital," *WIS*, 89.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ Zafirra Ben-Barak, "The Status and Right of the Gebira," in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 180.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

This situation is reflected upon in Ezekiel's lamentation on the mother (19:1-4), "What a lioness was your mother among lions!" an indication of her high status and position within the kingdom of Judah. This same passage confirms her singular role in placing her son on the throne:²⁴⁶ "She raised up one of her cubs; he became a young lion" (19:3).

It appears that Hamutal did not accompany her son Jehoahaz when he was exiled by Necho of Egypt, because she later serves as queen mother again under her son Zedekiah (2 Kgs 24:18; Jer 52:1).²⁴⁷ Ezekiel's lamentation also reflects her continued status as queen mother²⁴⁸ when the author states, "she took another of her cubs and made him a young lion" (19:5). Likewise, Jeremiah's critique of the king and queen mother in 13:18 may be a reference to Hamutal and Zedekiah²⁴⁹ and seems to point to their shared authority:²⁵⁰ "Say to the king and the queen mother, 'take a lowly seat, for your beautiful crown has come down from your head'" (Jer 13:18).

Zebidah זְבִידָה

The name Zebidah, or "gift," is derived from the Hebrew זָבַד, "to bestow upon, give."²⁵¹ According to 2 Kgs 23:36, Zebidah was the daughter of Pedaiah of Rumah, a site located west of

²⁴⁶Ibid.

²⁴⁷Burnette-Bletsch, "Hamutal/Hamital," *WIS*, 89.

²⁴⁸Ben-Barak, 180.

²⁴⁹Bowen suggests that the author is condemning Nehushta and Jehoiachin here. "The Quest for the Historical Gebira," *CBQ* 64 (2001): 613.

²⁵⁰Burnette-Bletsch, "Hamutal/Hamital," *WIS*, 89.

²⁵¹*BDB*, 256.

the Sea of Galilee.²⁵² Zebidah was the wife of Josiah, the sixteenth king of Judah (reigned from 639 to 609 BCE), and the queen mother of Jehoiakim, who reigned in 609 BCE. While her name appears in Jehoiakim's regnal formula in Kings, the Chronicler neglected to mention her (2 Chr 36:11-12),²⁵³ perhaps due to the disapproval of Jehoiakim's reign.

Nehushta נְהֻשְׁתָּא

Nehushta comes from the Hebrew for "serpent," נְהֻשָּׁה, or "bronze."²⁵⁴ Initially appearing in 2 Kgs 24:8, Nehushta is the daughter of Elnathan of Jerusalem, mother of Jehoiachin, and the consort of Jehoiakim, king of Judah from 608-598 BCE.²⁵⁵ While the Chronicler's account does not mention her, it does state that her son would have been eight years old at the time he took the throne, which may have meant Nehushta had considerable influence in the royal court.²⁵⁶ This was due to her lineage and "pro-Egyptian orientation."²⁵⁷ She is given the title *gēbîrâ*, which may be further indication of her power and status within the Judean court (Jer 13:18).

Because her son did "what was evil in the sight of the LORD" (2 Kgs 24:9), Nehushta, her family, and the royal court surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar and were taken to Babylon. Her removal from the royal court could indicate that she presented a threat to the Babylonians.

In Jer 13:18-19, the author speaks of the crown (עֲטֹרָה) worn by the *gēbîrâ*. Many who

²⁵²See Harry Thomas Frank, ed. *Atlas of the Bible Lands, Revised Edition* (Maplewood, NJ: Hammond Inc., 1990), 15.

²⁵³Scheering, "Zebidah," *WIS*, 167.

²⁵⁴*BDB*, 638.

²⁵⁵Burnette-Bletsch, "Nehushta," *WIS*, 132.

²⁵⁶*Ibid.*

²⁵⁷W.F. Albright, "The Seal of Eliakim, and the Latest Pre-exilic History of Judah, with some Observations on Ezekiel," *JBL* 51 (1932): 91.

date this lament to the eve of the fall of Jerusalem in 597 BCE identify this mother/son pair as Nehushta and Jehoiachin. They are seen as sharing a ceremonial moment on thrones, and, further, it appears that she is most likely seated directly at his side. This passage may also point to Nehushta's role as counselor to her young son.²⁵⁸ However, the oracle itself offers no precise details apart from the defeat and hopelessness felt in the country during this time.²⁵⁹ If this is the case, the oracle cannot offer any information regarding the relationship between the king and the *gēbîrâ*. Yet the very fact that an oracle of judgment is directed against the *gēbîrâ*, as well as the king, may indicate that she holds a highly significant status with the royal house.²⁶⁰

Another possible reference to Nehushta, the *gēbîrâ* of 2 Kgs 24, occurs in Jer 29:2. The author is making reference to the deportees of 2 Kgs 24, among them, הַמְּבִיטָה (“the queen mother”). The author makes the assumption that the *gēbîrâ* is synonymous with the king's mother in 2 Kgs 24:12. The reference to the “queen mother” in Jer 29:2 could then be identified as a reference to Nehushta, Jehoiachin's mother.²⁶¹ As queen mother, Nehushta was mostly likely a participant in the cult of Asherah. The primary piece of evidence for this is her name, which could be considered a derivative of שָׂרָפָה, or serpent.²⁶²

As the “serpent lady,” the *gēbîrâ* Nehushta bears an epithet of Asherah, whose associations with snakes are attested in multiple sources (see also 2 Kgs 18:4).²⁶³ From Egypt, a nineteenth century plaque displays a goddess, identified as “Qudsu, the beloved of Ptah,” astride

²⁵⁸Bowen, “The Search,” 613.

²⁵⁹Robert Carroll, *Jeremiah*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 301.

²⁶⁰Bowen, “The Search,” 614.

²⁶¹Ibid, 615.

²⁶²*BDB*, 638.

²⁶³Ackerman, “The Queen Mother and the Cult,” 396.

a lion, and holding serpents in both hands.²⁶⁴ The Winchester stele reads “Qudsu, lady of the sky and mistress of all the gods,” and shows a goddess, donning a Hathor-style wig, standing astride a lion holding a serpent in her left hand. Therefore a lion-straddling, snake-bearing goddess identified by I. E. S. Edwards as the composite deity Qudsu-Astarte-Anat, is Qudsu, the “holy one.” This deity is well-known from Ugaritic sources as a standard epithet for Asherah.²⁶⁵ This view is supported by F. M. Cross who also maintains that Qudsu is here the equivalent of Hebrew Asherah and Canaanite Athirat.²⁶⁶

Unnamed Queen Mothers in the Hebrew Bible

Three unnamed queen mothers appear in the books of Proverbs, Psalms, and Daniel. Like many of their counterparts within the books of Samuel and Kings, they are unnamed, yet unlike many of the queen mothers in the Deuteronomistic corpus, these women all speak with wisdom and authority, and command the respect of their audience. I will argue that in this sense they fulfill the role of mothers as counselors, a “literary model for the female personification of wisdom, *Hokma*,”²⁶⁷ and embody the ideals of Wisdom whose words are more “more precious than rubies.” The Queen Mother of Babylon in Dan 5 advises the terrified King Belshazzar (and his court) to call on Daniel to interpret the mysterious writing on the wall. The Mother of Lemuel

²⁶⁴J. B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), 470, 473 and 474.

²⁶⁵Ackerman, “The Queen Mother and the Cult,” 397.

²⁶⁶F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays on the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 34. Cf. W. A. Maier, *Ašerah: Extrabiblical Evidence HSM 37* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 82-96.

²⁶⁷Silvia Schröer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House*, 58.

in Prov 31 counsels her son, the king, in building an ideal kingship, while the *šēgal* of Ps 45 advises the new bride of her son, the king, in her duties as royal wife and daughter.

The Queen of Babylon in Dan 5

Daniel 5 tells the tale of the mysterious writing on the palace walls of Belshazzar, king of Babylon, who is hosting an orgiastic drinking party.²⁶⁸ This event comes immediately after he and his entourage have sacrilegiously drunk from vessels stolen from the now destroyed Jerusalem Temple.²⁶⁹ The mood instantly changes from euphoria to fear as the king and his governors are unable to decipher the script on the wall. According to Brenner, at this point the king actually loses control of his bowels²⁷⁰ and the *אֲרַמְיָא* then steps in to inform the party that only Daniel could decode this message.²⁷¹ In the midst of this chaotic occasion, the queen (mother) remains calm and presents her counsel to the king in a respectful manner so that he could heed her recommendation without losing face.²⁷² The king is then reprimanded by Daniel, who prophesies the demise of Belshazzar.

There is much debate as to whether or not the queen in this story is indeed a queen mother. Because she is distinguished from the other wives and concubines, and because she informs Belshazzar that his father Nebuchadnezzar had made Daniel the chief of all diviners, many scholars tend to believe she was Belshazzar's mother. Josephus attempted to minimize the

²⁶⁸Brenner, "Who's Afraid of Feminist Criticism? Who's Afraid of Biblical Humor? The Case of the Obtuse Foreign Ruler in the Hebrew Bible," in *Prophets and Daniel: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 238.

²⁶⁹Ross Kraemer, "Dan 5:10-12: Queen (of Babylon)," *WIS*, 341.

²⁷⁰*Ibid*, 239.

²⁷¹Kraemer, "Dan 5:10-12: Queen (of Babylon)," *WIS*, 342.

²⁷²Brenner, "Who's Afraid?" 239.

role of this queen and found it more appealing to have Belshazzar corrected and counseled by his grandmother and not by his wife, while Origen opted to make her Belshazzar's mother.²⁷³

While it is not possible to concretely tie the queen in Dan 5 to a historical figure, H. J. M. van Deventner attempts to do just that. He suggests that Daniel in its final form dates from the 2nd century BCE, the time right before the persecution of the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes IV.²⁷⁴ If Antiochus is the foreign ruler whom the author of Dan 5 had in mind,²⁷⁵ it might be possible to explore the historical identity of the queen mentioned here. Antiochus IV was born of a marriage between Antiochus III and a certain Laodice.²⁷⁶ He later married a woman whose name was also Laodice who was probably the widow (and sister) of his elder brother, also named Antiochus.²⁷⁷ Therefore, both the mother and the wife of Antiochus IV were named Laodice. While this is not necessarily the true historical identity of the queen (mother) in Dan 5, it could be considered a possibility.

The *Šēgal* of Ps 45

In Ps 45:9, the queen mother stands at the right hand of the king, much like the queen mother in 1 Kgs 2:19: "So Bathsheba went to King Solomon to speak to him about Adonijah. The king rose to greet her and bowed down to her. He sat on his throne; and he had a throne

²⁷³Jerome, *Jerome's Commentary on Daniel*, trans. G. L. Archer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1958), 58.

²⁷⁴H. J. M. van Deventner, "Another Wise Queen (Mother)," in *Prophets and Daniel*, 254.

²⁷⁵André Lacocque, *The Book of Daniel* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 7-8.

²⁷⁶Grace H. Macurdy, *Hellenistic Queen: A Study of Woman-Power in Macedonia, Seleucid Syria and Ptolemaic Egypt* (New York: AMS Press, 1977 [1932]), 93.

²⁷⁷Van Deventner, "Another Wise Queen (Mother)," 255.

placed for the queen mother, and she sat on his right” (JPS). In Ps 45, the *šēgal* appears to act as a divine representative of the goddess Asherah. She appears to preside at the sacred marriage ritual which takes place between the foreign bride (“daughter of Tyre”) and her son the king, the earthly representative of God—one whom Elohim has “chosen to anoint.” She offers words of counsel to her son’s new bride (Ps 45:11-14),

Take heed, daughter, and note, incline your ear: forget your people
and your father’s house, and let the king be aroused by your
beauty; since he is your lord, bow to him. O daughter of Tyre, the
wealthiest people will court your favor with gifts, goods of all sorts.

Very little is known or written about this queen mother. What is her origin? Who was her father? None of this can be discerned from the passage, but parallels to this mysterious woman do exist in the ancient world that can offer us clues as to her identity and roles as this dissertation will assert.

The Mother of Lemuel

The instruction given in Prov 31:1-9 comes from the mother of Lemuel, most likely the queen mother.²⁷⁸ This is the first and only occurrence in Proverbs of an instruction attributed to the mother rather than the father.²⁷⁹ This nameless queen imparts wisdom to her son the new king, and instructs him in conduct with women, temperance, and just rule. She even advises him,

²⁷⁸Perdue, *Proverbs*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2005), 269.

²⁷⁹Carole R. Fontaine, “Proverbs,” *WBC*, exp. ed., 159.

in the sense of an ideal kingship, to exercise his duties as a righteous judge and the defender of widows, orphans, and the poor.²⁸⁰

Within this final chapter, the queen mother offers praise for the capable woman, who appears to be the source and center of the identity of the entire household. The house is hers, and shalom issues from her work and her fear of the LORD. Personified Wisdom also appears as one who builds a house and as co-creator, since in post-exilic times women were equally involved in the rebuilding of households and as well as the nation.²⁸¹ Interestingly this female image of Wisdom as counselor gained its greatest significance in an era when there were no longer any kings in Israel, and therefore no court advisors. Wisdom personified takes the place of the king and becomes a universal counselor, not the advisor of the king of Israel/Judah.²⁸²

While King Lemuel is otherwise unknown in the biblical text, some would interpret the word “oracle” which appears in v. 1, as well as the preceeding collection, the “words of Agur,” as Massa—an Arabian tribe located in the East.²⁸³ This name may refer to a migratory Arabian tribe that appears as early as the late eighth century BCE as the Mas’ aia who could have possibly had migratory routes in Arabia, Edom, and the Transjordan.²⁸⁴ Therefore, king Lemuel is a non-Jewish ruler from the East who receives sage instruction from his wise mother.²⁸⁵

Numerous extrabiblical texts mention powerful queen-priestesses who ruled in the region of northern Arabia. The Queen of Sheba, while not an historical character, represents the

²⁸⁰Cf. Claudia Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Decatur, GA: Almond, 1985) 199-200; 278-79.

²⁸¹Schröer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House*, 62.

²⁸²Ibid, 62-63.

²⁸³Fontaine, “Proverbs,” 159.

²⁸⁴Ibid.

²⁸⁵Ibid.

memory of these powerful women who attained high-ranking positions in a male-dominated society.²⁸⁶ Queen Hatshepsut of Egypt is an example of one powerful queen from the New Kingdom (eighteenth century BCE). She assumed the throne when her half brother and husband Thutmose II died and left his young son Thutmose III as an heir. This allowed Hatshepsut to throw off the “style and prescription of queenship” and rule as “male pharaohs with the appropriate changes of costumes and names.”²⁸⁷

In light of these wise named and unnamed queen mothers, it should be mentioned that counseling and “wisdom” in Israel (and outside it in the case of the Mother of Lemuel and the Queen of Babylon), was by no means a male domain. In the private or in the political sphere, women exercised great influence in their androcentric environment. Prophets such as Deborah and Miriam, wives, and mothers, were entitled to exert that influence through their counsel, and to translate it into deeds.²⁸⁸ This high authority was apparently not limited by status or social class,²⁸⁹ although this study does focus on royal women.

The fact that personified Wisdom appears as a female counselor is founded on certain socio-cultural factors within Israel’s tradition and history and many of the literary figures of women in the Hebrew Bible seem to embody the ordinary experiences of the people of their time: “The prototypes for counseling *Hokmah* are like these historically important women with unusual public authority.”²⁹⁰ The literary and historical counseling women in Israel/Judah made

²⁸⁶Fontaine, “Queen of Sheba,” 270.

²⁸⁷Cyril Alred, *The Egyptians* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 183.

²⁸⁸Schröer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House*, 60.

²⁸⁹Ibid, 61.

²⁹⁰Ibid.

it plausible for personified Wisdom to appear in that role²⁹¹ and perhaps many of these queen mothers were seen as representatives of *Hokmah*, despite mixed representations throughout the Hebrew Bible.

Conclusion

Reflecting upon the assessment of named queen mothers in the Deuteronomistic History, one thing has become abundantly clear—the queen mothers that received the most attention from the authors were portrayed, at least during part of their reign, in a highly negative manner. Bathsheba’s affair with David, although probably not of her own volition, caused the death of their first child, and spurred God’s anger so that “the sword would never depart” the house of David. Jezebel’s association with the North, as well as her foreign status and involvement with the cults of Baal and Asherah, made her a target of bitter ridicule and the victim of a most gruesome death. Remarkably, the only female to exercise sole rule in Israel or Judah, Athaliah, also received the most scathing reviews for her Northern origin and associations with Baal, which led to her untimely assassination. Again, the evidence overwhelmingly points to androcentric Judean bias. Clearly these women had a great deal of power, and as Chapter Three will illuminate, it was ultimately their power within the cult that served as the source of their censure.

It does appear that much more can be discerned from the queen mothers who appear outside the Deuteronomistic History. Their words are forever preserved in the text, yet their

²⁹¹Ibid.

names remain a mystery. Surely these women provide a more unbiased depiction of the queen mother as counselor, advisor, and as Ps 45 will reveal, cult leader.

CHAPTER THREE: WOMEN'S ROLES IN WORSHIP—FROM HOUSEHOLD TO PALACE

Introduction

It is now commonly held that ancient Israel was a nation of many religions and for most if not all of the period of the Hebrew Bible “there was no commonly accepted cultic norm or praxis.”²⁹² In fact, the term “Israelite religion” no longer refers to a unified belief, but refers to the religions of a number of groups with different, although at times overlapping, beliefs, liturgies, and activities.²⁹³ Most of what is known about worship in ancient Israel is what the Hebrew Bible reveals about the religion of the state; however, understanding the religious practices of the common household is pivotal for gaining a comprehensive knowledge of the multi faceted “Israelite religion.”

Comprehending the religion of the family in ancient Israel is difficult as our contemporary ideas of autonomy and individualism tend to skew our perceptions. “There probably was no such thing as personal religion in ancient Israel, or in the ancient Near East as a whole.”²⁹⁴ Therefore, a person’s religion was that of their household and a person’s relationship to a deity was a function of the deity’s connection to that person’s family.²⁹⁵ The difficulty experienced when attempting to draw a clear picture of the religious history of Israel is due

²⁹²Carol Meyers, *Households and Holiness: the Religious Culture of Israelite Women* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 13.

²⁹³Ibid.

²⁹⁴Meyers, “The Family in Early Israel,” 39.

²⁹⁵Ibid.

largely to a later tendency to condemn ancient cult practices, particularly within the Deuteronomistic History.²⁹⁶ According to Susan Ackerman, popular religion is “not the religion that is usually presented to us as normative in the Bible. More specifically, it is not the religion of the Deuteronomistic school, the priests, or the prophets.”²⁹⁷ The Deuteronomistic as well as the prophetic attempts to suppress the prevalence of popular religion is evident in many texts, particularly those that deal with the roles of women in the cult. Queen mothers in ancient Israel and Judah were harshly condemned for their allegiances to the cults of Asherah and Baal, while the women of Judah were derided for their ritual offerings to the Queen of Heaven within the prophetic book of Jeremiah. According to Phyllis Bird, “The religion of Israel was the religion of both men and women, whose distinctive roles and experience require critical attention, as well as their common activities and obligations.”²⁹⁸

As this chapter will demonstrate, women did play key roles in the religious culture of ancient Israel, both within the private home and the public cult, although much of their prominence is diminished in the texts of the Hebrew Bible. Thus, this chapter will move from an analysis of the archaeology of the Israelite household to a study of the roles of women, namely queen mothers, in the religious life of the state. By viewing the religion of ancient Israel as a “subset of Canaanite religion”²⁹⁹ a clearer image will emerge of queen mothers as integral cultic functionaries on behalf of Asherah. Therefore, the evidence discerned by archaeology and

²⁹⁶ Åhlstrom, *Aspects of Syncretism*, 10.

²⁹⁷ Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* Harvard Semitic Monographs 46 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), ix.

²⁹⁸ Phyllis Bird, “The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick Miller (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 398.

²⁹⁹ Michael D. Coogan, “Canaanite Origins and Lineage: Reflections on the Religion of Ancient Israel,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller, P.D. Hanson, S. D. McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 115.

ancient Near Eastern parallels will then serve to illuminate the ultimate focus of this study: the cultic role of the queen mother in Ps 45, and the uncensored biblical portrayal of the queen acting as an earthly counterpart to the goddess Asherah.

Household Religion

Despite the Deuteronomistic effort to discredit and denounce non-Yahwistic cults, it has become increasingly clear that syncretism was widespread in the households of ancient Israel as late as the Second Temple Period.³⁰⁰ Strong archaeological data provides tangible evidence to support the claim for syncretism. Small figurines often associated with fertility were heavily utilized in private cult worship. Biblical texts rely heavily upon the infertile woman who miraculously gives birth to an exceptional male child (Sarah-Isaac, Rachel-Joseph, Hannah-Samuel, etc.). It is commonly held that these stories create the assumption that infertility was uncommon³⁰¹ it was also seen as unacceptable. Religion could have been expected then to acknowledge as well as encourage the natural cycle of life. The widespread distribution of these figurines seems to reflect very common rather than exceptional concerns within the Israelite household.

Women's religious activities and needs tended to center in the domestic realm and relate to women's sexually determined work. Consequently, those institutions and activities that appear from male perspectives, such as public records, as central may be seen quite differently by women, who may see them as inaccessible, restricting, irrelevant, or censoring.³⁰² Local shrines, saints, spirits, home rituals in the midst of other women (often with women as the ritual leaders),

³⁰⁰Ibid.

³⁰¹Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallaxic Approaches* (London: Continuum, 2001), 273.

³⁰²Bird, "The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus," 400-401.

the making and paying of vows, and life-cycle rites, especially those related to birth and death, are widely attested aspects of women's religious practice. These elements of worship appear better suited to women's spiritual and emotional needs and the patterns of their lives than the rituals of the central sanctuary, great pilgrimages, and the liturgical calendar of the agricultural year.³⁰³ Women's religious practices thus revolved around preventative and restorative medical procedures that were thought to intervene with the divine in order to impact the well-being of mother and child.³⁰⁴ However, the public sphere with its male-centered and male-controlled institutions dominated and governed the domestic sphere, with the result that women's activities in worship and beliefs were officially viewed as frivolous, superstitious, subversive, or foreign.³⁰⁵

Concerning the religious practices of women within the home, several biblical texts discuss the use of *teraphim* or *gillulim*, with the latter used as a derogatory term.³⁰⁶ The etymology of this word is unknown yet it occurs fifteen times in the Hebrew Bible, where context is utilized to derive its meaning.³⁰⁷ Genesis 31:33-35 contains a captivating tale in which Rachel steals the small *teraphim* or "household gods" from Laban that are also referred to as *elohim*. According to this passage, five conclusions can be drawn about these household gods in the patriarchal stories. First they represent several deities. They also are associated with nomadic lifestyle and were easily portable. They represent ancestral deities of their clan and were among the family's most highly valued possessions. They were small enough to be hidden under a

³⁰³Ibid, 401.

³⁰⁴Meyers, *Households and Holiness*, 17.

³⁰⁵Cf. I.M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion* (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), 86-88; 96-97; 101.

³⁰⁶Zevit, 274.

³⁰⁷William Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Wm Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 181.

woman's lap. Finally, women may have been primarily responsible for them.³⁰⁸

Furthermore, Michal apparently possessed a large *teraphim* that could have been mistaken for a sleeping man; perhaps the presence of this figurine for Michal was related to her barrenness.³⁰⁹ Jacob scolds Rachel in Gen 30 by stating, “am I in place of *elohim*, who has withheld from you fruit of the womb?” Gen 35:2-4 reveals that an entire household of such gods could have been buried at the foot of a tree.³¹⁰ Other suggestions regarding the function of these household gods point to the prevalence of ancestor worship. Joseph Blenkinsopp suggests that the *teraphim* stolen by Rachel are similar to the *lares* and *penates* of the Romans. However, this is by no means a solid indication of their function.³¹¹

The term *gillulim* apparently comes from the root, “to roll”³¹² but the noun form means (ball of) “dung”³¹³ and is occasionally used in this way³¹⁴ (1 Kgs 14:10). In its plural form, the word means “idol” but in the sense that idols are connected to excrement. In Deut 29:17 *gillulim* are associated with שקרין, an “abominable thing” or “fetishes of wood and stone.”³¹⁵ Ezek 18:12 makes reference to *gillulim* as images on a wall that requires the “lifting of one's eyes” to see them. This could imply that *gillulim* can also refer to painted images, yet exactly what these images depict is uncertain as none are known to survive.³¹⁶

The most substantial class of archaeological finds related to household worship practices

³⁰⁸Ibid, 182.

³⁰⁹Ibid, 275.

³¹⁰Ibid.

³¹¹Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Family in First Temple Israel,” in *Families in Ancient Israel*, eds. Leo Perdue, et. al. The Family, Religion and Culture, eds. Don Browning and Ian Evison (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 82.

³¹²BDB, 164.

³¹³Ibid, 165.

³¹⁴Dever, *Did God Have a Wife*, 182.

³¹⁵Ibid.

³¹⁶Ibid, 183.

appears to be the small clay figurine of a nude female representing one of the native goddesses—most likely Asherah, wife of El (and YHWH) and patroness of fertility (*dea nutrix*).³¹⁷ Hundreds of these figurines have been found in numerous locations, including over three hundred near the Jerusalem temple. These finds appear to coincide with the biblical evidence recalling numerous attempts to eradicate goddess worship (mainly Asherah) and impose Yahwism as the official national cult, removing goddess devotion from the important role it had traditionally played in the life of the people. The attempts of Manasseh to restore the goddess cult were perhaps a conservative reaction to the Yahwistic ideology and one that appeared to survive both Josiah's reforms and the fall of Jerusalem shortly thereafter.³¹⁸ The goddess cult was probably the most popular among women and appears to be defended by them in one of the few places a biblical author allows the voices of women to be heard on the subject of religion:

We will not listen to you in the matter about which you spoke to us in the name of your God. On the contrary, we will do everything that we have vowed—to make offerings to the Queen of Heaven and to pour libations to her, as we used to do, we and our fathers, our kings and our officials, in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem. For then we had plenty to eat, we were well-off, and suffered no misfortune. But since we stopped making offerings to the Queen of Heaven and pouring libations to her, we have lacked everything and we have been consumed by the sword and by famine. And when we make offerings to the Queen of Heaven and pour libations to her, is it without our husbands' approval that we have made cakes in her likeness and poured libations to her? (Jer 44:16-19)

According to Carol Meyers, these female figurines may not necessarily represent a specific goddess due to their lack of insignia or decoration that would point to the association with a particular deity. She suggests that these figurines were utilized in magical practices that focused upon particular family situations such as fertility or producing healthy children. Rather

³¹⁷Ibid.

³¹⁸Ibid.

than a specific deity, these figurines could represent human females seeking the aid of a deity. No matter what they represented precisely, these figurines were clearly a central part of women's religious culture.³¹⁹

It is logical to conclude that the popular and domestic religion of Israel during the Divided Monarchy was a natural function of the social life of the household unit rather than an individual choice. Households were in close communion with the dead, who could often intercede on behalf of the living.³²⁰ Cult worship of YHWH, El, Baal, and the Queen of Heaven took place within the household while other more important occasions would have required attendance at the local sanctuary or *bāmōt* (בָּמוֹת), which the state cult repeatedly and unsuccessfully attempted to eradicate.³²¹

The earliest household shrine known is a two room structure found in the village of Tell el-Wawiyat in lower Galilee and dates to the twelfth century BCE. The cultic contents found there consist of a low column base, an ornamental basalt stone tripod bowl, a broken female figurine, and a jewelry mold.³²² Dever suggests that Tell el-Wawiyat was still a “predominantly ‘Canaanite’ village at the beginning of the Iron Age, as many Galileean sites were.”³²³ This influence could possibly account for the cultic contents. Northeast of Jerusalem, at the village of Ai, the eleventh and twelfth century BCE settlement was “certainly Israelite”³²⁴ and contains the unique find known as “Room Sixty-Five.” In Room Sixty-Five, archaeologists uncovered a large room with low benches around the walls. Distinctive objects were unearthed here such as

³¹⁹Meyers, *Households and Holiness*, 29.

³²⁰Blenkinsopp, 82.

³²¹Ibid.

³²²B. A. Nakhai, *Archaeology and the Religions of Canaan and Israel* (Boston: ASOR, 2001), 173.

³²³Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids: Wm Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 208-211.

³²⁴Dever, *Did God Have a Wife*, 113.

specialized ceramic vessels of which several would fit on top of a cult stand, a fenestrated offering stand decorated with a mysterious row of human feet around the bottom, jewelry, and animal figurines.³²⁵ Another site from the twelfth to the eleventh centuries BCE is nearby Kh. Raddana where household shrines in two building complexes were located. Within these shrines stone platforms were found, along with a large multi-handled bowl probably used for libation offerings.³²⁶ At northern Tell el-Farah, most likely biblical Tirzah, in the northern Samarian hills, a tenth century BCE level shrine probably existed, although the evidence uncovered was scattered about. Here a *naos*, or terra-cotta model temple, and several female figurines were uncovered.³²⁷

Within more substantial households, the presence of cult objects such as incense stands, small altars, and model sanctuaries suggest that familial rituals were carried out under the direction of the paterfamilias.³²⁸ At the Tel Beer Sheba in the northern Negev, evidence of a domestic cult has been unearthed.³²⁹ At this site, typical Iron Age artifacts of a “religious” nature were found in most of the domestic complexes of stratum III, ninth century, and stratum II, eighth century. Several figurines and zoomorphic vessels were found to have been sporadically scattered. In building twenty-five, a house in the western quarter of the city built between the outer wall and the perimeter road, three cult objects were found in a single locus assigned to stratum II of the eighth century. In room twenty-five, archaeologists unearthed a paved room used for domestic purposes, a miniature lamp or incense burner, female figurine and model

³²⁵Ibid.

³²⁶Ibid, 115.

³²⁷Ibid, 117.

³²⁸Blenkinsopp, 82.

³²⁹Zevit, 652.

couch, probably associated with a birth stool or birthing bed.³³⁰

In seventh century BCE Judah, Assyrian and Babylonian religious practices seem to have been adapted into the family cultic practices. This is evidenced by the cultic places on rooftops of houses in Jerusalem at this time (Zeph 1:5; 2 Kgs 23:12; Jer 19:13; 32:29). This would indicate that the family shrine was transferred to the flat roof because here, according to Assyrian and Babylonian usage, the occasional prayer ceremonies and invocations were enacted.³³¹ This was connected to the astral character of Babylonian and Assyrian religion, in which the gods were directly identified with particular stars. Therefore, the rituals often took place by night or at sunrise. Thus while the prophetic and Deuteronomistic critics of these private cults make the charge of star worship (Jer 19:13; 32:29 Zeph 1:5), this may not necessarily have been the case. For a long time, the families within these cults were primarily concerned with the healing of a sick member. Older astral elements that had once accrued to Yahwistic religion in the Jerusalem cultic tradition took on a new religious and cultic relevance for individuals. In these family ceremonies, the typical cultic actions involved altars for incense and libations that are often mentioned in Babylonian and Assyrian invocation rituals yet were probably already customary in Israel at an earlier date.³³²

William Dever suggests that these family shrines served either a single nuclear family, or more likely, a larger family compound. At these private shrines, there were no fixed times of worship, no priestly supervision, and no particular manner of worship.³³³ Women played a significant role in private family worship during the brief, daily visits to the shrine made by

³³⁰Ibid, 175.

³³¹Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period, Vol I: From the Beginnings to the End of the Monarchy*, trans. John Bowden (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1994), 189.

³³²Ibid.

³³³Dever, *Did God Have a Wife*, 117.

many of the household members.³³⁴ Since there were no official priests, the wife and mother of the household often played the role of *paterfamilias*; worship continued in this matter in the countryside outside of Jerusalem, despite the attempts at centralization. These households did not consider their worship “non-Yahwistic” since theirs was simply another approach and “another way of expressing their beliefs and hopes.”³³⁵

In Lev 12:2-8; 15:18-33; 18:19; 20:18, several women’s rituals relating to childbirth, menstruation, and abnormal genital discharge are discussed in relation to community shrines.³³⁶ Despite the female orientation of these rituals, in this Priestly text, the women are never allowed to go directly “before YHWH” as do the male members of the community in presenting the animals for the burnt offering. According to Meyers however, these rituals are not relevant in determining the roles of women within the ancient Israelite household.³³⁷

Thus, archaeology appears to confirm the prevalence of syncretistic worship practices within the household in which women played the prominent role. After the formation of the monarchy, it would seem logical that women would continue to be an important religious functionary within the home, but more controversially, within the public cult.

The Political and Cultic Roles of the Queen Mother in the Ancient Near East

The role and function of the queen mother in ancient Israel and Judah has been the subject of much debate, as some scholars contend her position was essentially cultic in nature,³³⁸

³³⁴Ibid.

³³⁵Ibid, 122.

³³⁶Meyers, *Households and Holiness*, 17.

³³⁷Ibid, 17.

³³⁸Ählstrom, 57-88.

symbolic of the virgin goddess, and an “ideological replica of that of the mother of the gods.”³³⁹ Others assert that her primary role was that of counselor and a source of wisdom³⁴⁰ and her position was superseded only by the king himself.³⁴¹ However, some scholars would conclude that the position of the Israelite queen mother was virtually equal to that of the king.³⁴² G.W. Åhlstrom cites an example from 1 Kgs 2:19 in which the king stood and bowed to his mother when she came before him. Within the same passage, it is seen that the queen mother, Bathsheba, sat on a throne at the right hand of the king.³⁴³

In discerning the role of the Israelite/Judean queen mothers, it is imperative to decipher the emergence of this position. According to Åhlstrom, the queen initially acted as consort to the king, as well as a cultic functionary. Thus the queen mother was the royal partner in the *hieros gamos* ritual,³⁴⁴ as Ps 45 appears to demonstrate, but not in every case, according to Andreasen. Before becoming queen, Bathsheba was with David on the roof that was presumably used for fertility rites. However, upon becoming queen mother, even while David was alive, she no longer filled such a role, according to Andreasen.³⁴⁵ Therefore, Andreasen suggests that the position of queen mother was associated with an “older queen who no longer bore children, who had abandoned the royal bed in favor of younger concubines, who exercised great influence over the princes and princesses in court, who had paid her debt in fertility to the nation, and who had now earned its respect as its “corporate” mother.”³⁴⁶

³³⁹Ibid, 78.

³⁴⁰Andreasen, “The Role of the Queen Mother,” 188.

³⁴¹G. Molin, “Die Stellung der Gebira im Staate Juda,” *TZ* 10 (1954): 161.

³⁴²Åhlstrom, 62.

³⁴³Ibid.

³⁴⁴Ibid, 65.

³⁴⁵Andreasen, “The Role of the Queen Mother,” 183.

³⁴⁶Ibid.

Much can be discerned about the Israelite position of queen mother from her Hittite precursor, the *tawannanna*. These ancient Semitic queens occupied positions of great influence and held their positions for life. In death she was succeeded by her daughter in law.³⁴⁷ The *tawannanna* served as regnant in the event of the king's death or as his deputy during his absence. She participated in a broad spectrum of activities that included the political, military, diplomatic,³⁴⁸ and religious spheres³⁴⁹ and on occasion, could oppose the king.³⁵⁰ S.R. Bin Nun has suggested that in the earliest periods of the Hittite Old Kingdom, the *tawannanna*'s only role was that of a religious functionary.³⁵¹ Bin-Nun goes on to assert that only secondarily, in the period of the Hittite empire, does the *tawannana* assume responsibilities with the political, social and economic spheres yet her cultic obligations persisted.³⁵²

The *tawannanna*'s cultic function was that of the high priestess of the sun-goddess Arinna. The office of *tawannanna* seems to correspond to the Sumerian *amadingir*, mother of the god. This may suggest that the position occupied by the queen mother was based on religious considerations. Therefore, in the sacral-royal world she occupied the same position as the mother of the gods in the gods' world.³⁵³ This could explain the prominence of her position and the lifetime appointment to this office.³⁵⁴

In the thirteenth century BCE, Hittite texts record the activity of Queen Puduhepa, wife of Hattusilis III, and daughter of a priest of Ishtar. Amazingly, more is known about this queen

³⁴⁷Ählstrom, 65.

³⁴⁸Schearing, "Queen," in *ABD* vol. 5, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 584.

³⁴⁹S. R. Bin-Nun, *The Tawannanna in the Hittite Kingdom* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter; Universitätsverlag, 1975), 34-50; 107-159.

³⁵⁰Schearing, "Queen," 584.

³⁵¹Bin-Nun, 34-50; 107-159.

³⁵²*Ibid.*

³⁵³Ivan Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 58.

³⁵⁴Ählstrom, 65.

than any other woman from the LBA.³⁵⁵ The words of Puduhepa are recorded as she presided as high priestess in the worship of the Arinna, “O Sun Goddess of the city of Arinna, my lady, mistress of our lands; Queen of Heaven and earth, mistress of the kings and queens of the land of Hatti.” Within the cult of the goddess Lelvani, Puduhepa arranged marriages for the young temple girls and organized the temple personnel, including the men who worked for the temple economy. She also recruited the temple personnel and made arrangements for the annual sacrifices. Queen Puduhepa appears to have been very involved in political matters, even helping to arrange the marriage of Ramesses II to her daughter Manefrure.³⁵⁶

A certain group of women whose rituals may have had significant influence upon the *tawananna* and whose roles appear to cross the “boundaries between the public and private domains”³⁵⁷ are known as the MI.SU.GI (Hittite: MI.hasauwas), or “old women.”³⁵⁸ These women were a class of practitioners that were mentioned in Hittite ritual texts and “were truly indispensable to the functioning of that society.”³⁵⁹ They provided a number of ritual services: the evoking of magic and counter-magic against sorcery, the removing of impurity, resolving quarrels, restoring sexual functions, healing children, pronouncing blessings and curses, and the interpreting omens.³⁶⁰ An Old Kingdom edict of Hattusilis I attempted to quell the influence of the MI.SU.GI on the royal women of the palace. It has even been suggested that the MI.SU.GI, the Hattic city elders and the *tawananna* represented one of the indigenous groups trying to resist

³⁵⁵Fontaine, “A Heifer from Thy Stable,” 170.

³⁵⁶Ibid.

³⁵⁷Ibid, 88.

³⁵⁸O. R. Gurney, *Some Aspects of Hittite Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 44-45.

³⁵⁹Fontaine, “A Heifer from Thy Stable,” 173.

³⁶⁰Ibid, 89.

the influx of cultural change brought in by the Indo-European conquerors.³⁶¹ Names of thirteen women classified as MI.SU.GI are known, along with many other women who appeared as “authors” of magical rituals whom scholars consider to be recognized practitioners as well.³⁶² Apparently, these MI.SU.GI possessed powers so fearsome that kings attempted to legislate against them.³⁶³

B. F. Batto contends that the wife of Zimri Lim at Mari occupied a role akin to that of the queen mother.³⁶⁴ The Mari Letters attest to the power of women in the royal court of Zimri-Lim (c. 1780-1760 BCE), especially as displayed by Queen Šibtu.³⁶⁵ While no royal women of Mari appeared to have held such power prior to or preceding Zimri-Lim’s reign, his daughters and wives were considerably influential within matters of state as well as the cult. In King Zimri-Lim’s absence, Queen Šibtu oversaw the direction of the temple and even escorted cult statues, ordered sacrifices, and relayed divine oracles to the king.³⁶⁶

We are offered tantalizing hints from the Mari Letters regarding the relations between women and the gods and goddesses of their respective regions. Women were often depicted as offering prayers before the gods Samas, Adad, and Dagan for the protection of the king and his armies. As mentioned in Chapter One, women also offered sacrifices, commissioned oracles, and worshipped the main gods of Mari, as well as other gods and goddesses of surrounding regions. They held positions as lay and professional prophetesses for gods and goddesses and were often attached to specific cult centers serving in various roles.³⁶⁷

³⁶¹Bin-Nun, 120-140.

³⁶²Gurney, 45.

³⁶³Fontaine, “A Heifer from Thy Stable,” 173.

³⁶⁴B. F. Batto, *Studies on Women at Mari* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1974), 8-21.

³⁶⁵Ibid.

³⁶⁶Ibid.

³⁶⁷Ibid.

In LBA Ugarit (1550-1200 BCE), queen mothers wielded considerable economic power³⁶⁸ in addition to their official status within their religious communities.³⁶⁹ Even though women in Ugarit were generally not allowed to own property, queen mothers possessed real estate and even purchased land. The properties obtained by the queen mother were managed by an administrative official, a chief counselor, and several “sons of the queen” (Akkadian: *mārê šākinu*)—a term that actually refers to officials of high rank, as discussed in Chapter One.³⁷⁰ The political power of the Ugaritic queen mother is also evidenced in a collection of eight “queen mother” letters, sent to an Ugaritic queen mother from her son, the king. In six of these letters, the kings mention paying homage to the queen mother by bowing at her feet. One king even states that he prostrated himself to the queen mother up to fourteen times. One particularly notable Ugaritic queen mother (*SAL.LUGAL-ut-ti*), Ahat-milki, was so powerful that she began her reign as queen mother by displacing the rightful heir of her ex-husband King Amistamru II (1274-1240 BCE) and secured it for her younger son. It has been suggested that Ugaritic queen mothers acted as regent whenever the king was absent from the palace and even in the place of their son until he had come of age.³⁷¹

Phoenician queen mothers appear to have exercised power in much the same fashion as their Ugaritic counterparts. A Phoenician inscription from King Eshmunazor of Sidon (c.500 BCE) described Eshmunazor’s succession to his father Tabnit while still a child, calling him “the son of a few days.” The inscription also states that Eshmunazor died in the fourteenth year of his reign. Thus he had been a minor throughout much of his rule but appears to have been guided by

³⁶⁸M. Heltzer, *The International Organization of the Kingdom of Ugarit* (Weisbaden: Reichert, 1982), 182-183.

³⁶⁹Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 139.

³⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 134.

³⁷¹Helzer, 182.

Amo‘ashtart—Tabnit’s widow and Eshmunazor’s queen mother. The first person plural was used throughout the inscription, stating that “we” (Eshmunazor and Amo‘ashtart) built temples for Astarte, Eshmun and other Phoenician gods. Again in subsequent lines (18-20), the inscription describes how “we” annexed Dor and Joppa as part of Sidon. Therefore, in both foreign and domestic policy, Amo‘ashtart, queen mother of Eshmunazor, ruled as co-regent and equal with her son.³⁷²

Israelite queen mothers appear to have taken on many of the same roles as Canaanite queen mothers in terms of their responsibilities in naming the king’s successor. This is readily apparent in the ascension of Solomon to David’s throne, achieved through the strong influence of Bathsheba within David’s court (1 Kgs 1). Andreasen argues that when the office of queen was borrowed from Hittite counterparts by Canaan and Israel, the cultic role of the queen mother was then eliminated.³⁷³ However, it does appear that both Israelite and Canaanite queen mothers did maintain significant roles as they devoted themselves to the cult of the mother goddess Asherah.³⁷⁴ Her socio-political responsibilities, particularly in regard to succession upon the king’s death, cannot be separated from a cultic role; her devotion to Asherah was mostly a critical element in her role in matters of succession.³⁷⁵

One text from the Canaanite world that seems to explicitly link the queen mother with Asherah is found in the Ugaritic Baal-Anat cycle.³⁷⁶ Following King Baal’s overthrow and descent to Mot’s underworld and prior to Anat’s rescue mission, the patriarch El and the mother

³⁷²Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 135.

³⁷³Andreasen, “The Role of the Queen Mother,” 181.

³⁷⁴Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 139.

³⁷⁵Ackerman, “The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel,” *JBL* 112 (1993): 388.

³⁷⁶Steve A. Wiggins, *A Reassessment of ‘Asherah’: A Study According to the Textual Sources of the First Two Millennia B.C.E.* Alter Orient und Altes Testament, eds. Manfred Dietrich and Oswald Loretz (Darmstadt: Butzon and Bercker Kevelaer, 1993), 63-66.

goddess Asherah meet to determine which Ugaritic deity would succeed the dead King Baal (KTU I.6.I.44-65). According to Ackerman, the “presence of the mother goddess Asherah at this divine colloquy is suggestive, for it recalls the role that can exist on earth when queen-mothers-to-be begin their tenures by helping to determine the royal succession.”³⁷⁷

This passage from mythology suggests that Bathsheba’s integral role in determining the succession of David in the biblical narrative is quite similar to the pivotal role of Asherah in appointing Baal’s heir.³⁷⁸ When El calls out to Asherah, requesting that she give “one of her sons, so that I might make him king,” she readily nominates her son, Yadi Yilhan, whose name indicates his knowledge and understanding. El rejects this choice, indicating that his strength does not match that of Baal’s. She nominates a second son, Athar the Terrible, whose name indicates his physical strength. However, as he ascends the throne, he literally does not “measure up” since his feet do not reach the footstool of King Baal. About thirty-five lines of the text follow this episode; the scene resumes with Anat beginning her search for Baal. Anat’s actions indicate that only after the unsuccessful attempts of Asherah to name a successor, does she begin her quest to resurrect Baal.

The Ugaritic “Epic of Kret” lends additional support to the strong association between the earthly queen mother and the heavenly Asherah as a text that is concerned with royal succession and issues of the royal heir.³⁷⁹ When Kret loses his wife and entire family, El appears to him in a dream and gives Kret instructions that will help to secure the noble maiden Hurriya as his wife. Kret follows El’s instructions yet deviates by marching to the shrine of Asherah where he makes a vow to the goddess, promising to dedicate gold and silver if he is successful in

³⁷⁷Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 139.

³⁷⁸Ibid.

³⁷⁹Ibid, 140.

procuring Hurriya. It seems this vow is superfluous, as El has already guaranteed his success. However, he neglects to fulfill his vow and the goddess seeks vengeance on Kret by afflicting him with a horrific disease. According to Ackerman, the purpose of the vow lies in the importance of securing Hurriya as the queen mother to his heir, following his death. When Hurriya becomes queen mother, she will become a devotee of Asherah, and thus her earthly counterpart. Therefore, despite El's position as the high god of the pantheon and the binding nature of his decrees, matters concerning queen mothers fall within the jurisdiction of Asherah. Therefore, El should not neglect the patron goddess of the queen mother.³⁸⁰

It would seem quite logical that Israelite/Judean queen mothers borrowed many aspects of the office of queen mother from their closest neighbors, the Canaanites. If, as previously stated, Israelite religion is viewed as a subset of Canaanite religion,³⁸¹ the cultic roles of Israelite queen mothers undoubtedly emulated their Ugaritic and Phoenician counterparts, despite the efforts of the biblical authors to diminish or conceal their true status.

The Israelite/Judean Queen Mother and the Cult of Asherah/YHWH

In *Reassessment of 'Asherah,'* Steve Wiggins contends that the biblical asherah/Asherah is linked to the Ugaritic goddess, Athirat,³⁸² the consort of El, mother of all the gods, and the queen mother.³⁸³ As Richard J. Pettey demonstrates, "Asherah," is actually a hebraicized form of the Ugaritic *trt*, extant sixty-two times; it appears that Asherah and Athirat "are one in the same."³⁸⁴ As the *rabitu*, she holds the power to name an heir to the king's throne, and was the

³⁸⁰Ibid, 141.

³⁸¹Coogan, "Canaanite Origins and Lineage," 115.

³⁸²Wiggins, 93.

³⁸³Ibid, 71.

³⁸⁴Richard J. Pettey, *Asherah: Goddess of Israel* (Peter Lang: New York, 1990), 6.

mother of that heir. Not only is Athirat designated the mother of the gods, but is called *qnyt ilm*, or “ruler of the gods” or even “creatress of the gods.” She is given the epithet as the *paredos* of the sky-god El which implies that she is both ruler and mother of the gods.³⁸⁵ The situation of both Bathsheba (1 Kgs 2:19) and Nehushta (Jer 13:18) at the side of their sons’ thrones appears to be reminiscent of the *paredos*, or “mother of the god,” as well as *qnyt ilm*.³⁸⁶ Interestingly, the Hebrew word for “terebinth trees,” is the same as the Ugaritic and Hebrew words for “gods”—*ilm/elim*. This tree imagery is commonly associated with the worship of Asherah and Astarte. In Isa 57:5, people are attacked for engaging in sexual intercourse under trees: “you that burn with lust among the oaks (בְּאֵלִים), under every green tree; you that slaughter your children in the valleys, under the clefts of the rocks?” Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, this imagery is clearly associated with some sort of cultic ritual whose goal is to “emulate and stimulate”³⁸⁷ the gods who brought fertility (Hos 4:12-13; Isa 1:29; 1 Kgs 14:23-24).³⁸⁸ The sacred nature of the intercourse in Isa 57:5 is indicated by a pun using the Hebrew *elim*, among which the Israelites are accused of lusting. Therefore one could simultaneously read in 5a, “you who burn with lust among the terebinths” and “you who burn with lust among the gods.”³⁸⁹

In 1 Kgs 15:13, there is an explicit link between the *gēbîrâ*, Maacah, queen mother of Asa, and cultic activity as she had an *מַפְלֵצָה לְאֲשֵׁרָה* erected in Jerusalem to the goddess, Asherah.³⁹⁰ The verb from which this word derives (פָּלַץ) means “to shudder,” or to be

³⁸⁵ John Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan: The Ras Shamra Texts and Their Relevance to the Old Testament*, Supplements to VT, no. 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1957), 131, 194

³⁸⁶ Ählstrom, 76.

³⁸⁷ M. H. Pope, “Fertility Cults,” *IDB 2* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 265a.

³⁸⁸ Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree*, 152.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 152.

³⁹⁰ Schearing, 586.

horrified.³⁹¹ However the modern translation of the noun form as “abominable image” is only a scholarly guess at the exact meaning.³⁹² Dever suggests that if the biblical authors had wanted to be precise in mentioning the wooden image of or representation of Asherah, they would have perhaps utilized the terms *teraphim*, *gillulim*, *pesel*, etc. Yet they did not use any of these words and chose to utilize a circumlocution or “way of skirting the issue.”³⁹³ Perhaps the authors’ indirect reference to the Asherah was a way to obscure the name of the goddess. Another possibility is that the writers used the word מַפְלֵצָה to confuse the audience—all an attempt by the Deuteronomistic historians to obliterate her veneration. Since there is no mention of the removal of the asherah, scholars have interpreted Asherah here to refer to the goddess.³⁹⁴

The Vulgate understands the מַפְלֵצָה as a phallic symbol: *‘insuper et Maacham matram suam amovit ne esset princeps in sacris Priapi et in luco eius quem consecraverat subertitque specum eius et confregit simulacrum turpissimum et conbusit in torrente Cedron’*. This assertion of the phallic nature of the מַפְלֵצָה is possible considering Asherah’s association with fertility in the region, but according to Hadley, is unlikely.³⁹⁵ Schröer suggests that this מַפְלֵצָה could refer to a larger Bes statue.³⁹⁶ However, why would a statue of the minor Egyptian deity Bes be made for the goddess Asherah?³⁹⁷ It has also been suggested that the מַפְלֵצָה was an image of YHWH,³⁹⁸ but

³⁹¹BDB, 814.

³⁹²Dever, *Did God Have a Wife*, 185.

³⁹³Ibid.

³⁹⁴Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 64.

³⁹⁵Ibid.

³⁹⁶Silvia Schröer, *In Israel gab es Bilder: Nachrichten von darstellender Kunt im Alten Testament*, OBO 74 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 38.

³⁹⁷Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 65.

³⁹⁸Julian Morgenstern, *Amos Studies I* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1941), 234, 244.

if so, why would the text state that it was “for Asherah”?³⁹⁹ Since the object was cut down and burned, scholars such as W. L. Reed⁴⁰⁰ are led to believe the מַלְאָכָה was indeed an image of the goddess Asherah.

Scholars have argued that Maacah’s Asherah was part of the cult of YHWH in the Jerusalem temple⁴⁰¹ and other sanctuaries and was standard and legitimate in non-deuteronomistic circles.⁴⁰² While this passage does not clarify what role Maacah had in the worship of Asherah or if this was done in conjunction with the veneration of YHWH, it is clear she was a devotee of the goddess. Therefore, she made a cult statue for her. This of course led to Maacah’s dismissal from her *gēbîrâ* status.

While some assume that Maacah’s worship of Asherah in YHWH’s temple was an anomaly since it was eliminated when Asa destroyed the statue she had made, it appears that her statue was replaced in the Jerusalem Temple after Asa’s reforms.⁴⁰³ However, 1 Kgs 15:14 states that Asa did not remove the high places (הַבְּמוֹת), and so he probably did not remove other ‘pagan’ altars, מַצְבֵּוֹת or אֲשֵׁרִים that were commonly associated with such sites, although according to Hadley, he did remove the *gillulim*.⁴⁰⁴ Interestingly, the Chronicler’s account of Asa’s reign (2 Chr 14:1-2) does describe Asa destroying מַצְבֵּוֹת and אֲשֵׁרִים: “Asa did what was good and pleasing to the LORD his God. He abolished the alien altars and shrines (בְּמוֹת); he smashed the pillars (מַצְבֵּוֹת) and cut down the sacred posts (אֲשֵׁרִים).” This perhaps demonstrates the Chronicler’s view

³⁹⁹Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 65.

⁴⁰⁰W. L. Reed, *The Asherah in the Old Testament* (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 1949), 61.

⁴⁰¹Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 145.

⁴⁰²Saul M. Olyen, *Asherah and the Cult of YHWH in Israel* SBL Monograph Series 34, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 9.

⁴⁰³Ackerman, “The Queen Mother,” 391.

⁴⁰⁴Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 65.

that “*asherim* were merely idolatrous objects.”⁴⁰⁵ Whatever it was that Maacah fashioned, Ahlstrom believes that it may be “evidence of the introduction into the religion of Israel of a phenomenon having no direct Jerusalemite or Israelite warrant.”⁴⁰⁶ Yet the asherah itself/herself must have had acceptance in the local cult.⁴⁰⁷

In 2 Kgs 18:4, Hezekiah removes an Asherah from Jerusalem as part of his own reforms which presumably also stood in YHWH’s Temple.⁴⁰⁸ In 2 Kgs 21:7, Manasseh erects an Asherah in YHWH’s Temple in Jerusalem which remained there until it was destroyed by Josiah in the midst of his reforms. Josiah also removed the vessels made for Asherah as part of her sacrificial cult (2 Kgs 23:4) and tore down the structures within the Temple compound where women wove garments to be placed over Asherah’s cult statue.⁴⁰⁹

Archaeology and the cult of YHWH and Asherah

Texts from the Deuteronomistic history suggest that the worship of both YHWH and Asherah in the state Temple of Jerusalem was common in the Southern Kingdom, throughout the ninth, eighth, and seventh centuries.⁴¹⁰ The attempts made by the reformers Hezekiah, Asa, and Josiah to eliminate the worship of Asherah were exceptions. Located ten kilometers southeast of Lachish, inscriptions from Khirbet el-Qom date to the eighth century and supports this assertion. The text was illegally chiseled out from a pillar in a burial cave and is difficult to read as the tools used to smooth the writing surface left ridges and striations in the rock, and the rock itself

⁴⁰⁵Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶Ählstrom, 59.

⁴⁰⁷Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 65.

⁴⁰⁸Ackerman, 391.

⁴⁰⁹Ibid.

⁴¹⁰Ackerman, “The Queen Mother,” 391.

has been naturally cracked and faulted.⁴¹¹ This inscription, while difficult to read, has paired in it from a southern provenance the cult of YHWH and some allusion to the cult of Asherah:

Blessed is Uryahu by YHWH;
 Yea from his adversaries by his asherah he has saved him.⁴¹²
 by Oniyahu
 by his asherah
 and by his a[she]rah.⁴¹³

William Dever contends that here “asherah” should be read “not as an ‘object of blessing’ (a tree or a pole), but as the proper name of the goddess of Asherah.”⁴¹⁴ Dated to approximately 725 B.C.E., the inscription indicates that YHWH, linked somehow to Asherah, had been asked to save an individual named Uryahu from his enemies for the sake of the goddess. The situation presupposed by the inscription was the Uryahu, a devotee of the goddess, had been in some sort of trouble. Abiyahu commended Uryahu to YHWH, suggesting that he save Uryahu not because of Uryahu but for the sake of the goddess.⁴¹⁵ The author of this inscription, Abiyahu, viewed YHWH as more powerful than Asherah—a sort of “divine pecking order.”⁴¹⁶ However, Abiyahu allowed that the two deities were so related that YHWH might be inclined to do something that would benefit the goddess or please her. Therefore, it could be concluded that both deities were powerful, known to each other, and operated in the same sphere.⁴¹⁷

⁴¹¹Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 84.

⁴¹²P.D. Miller, “Psalms and Inscriptions,” in *Congress Volume: Vienna 1980* VTSup 32 (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 317.

⁴¹³Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 86.

⁴¹⁴Dever, *Did God Have a Wife*, 132.

⁴¹⁵Zevit, 650.

⁴¹⁶Ibid.

⁴¹⁷Ibid.

Ziony Zevit reads this inscription as “by Asharata his has saved him,” arguing that the pronominal suffixes are not affixed to personal names in biblical Hebrew.⁴¹⁸ If one viewed the asherah in this case as a wooden image of the goddess, associated with the shrine of YHWH, there is no problem attaching a suffix to the noun. In fact, because of the association with the altar of YHWH, the asherah could be regarded as “his asherah.” YHWH remains the subject of blessing and salvation, but this is to be carried out by the asherah; perhaps the supplicant prayed to YHWH before the asherah in the shrine or by offering prayers to YHWH by means of the asherah, which is therefore mentioned in the inscription.⁴¹⁹

The hand that is present in the inscription is to be associated with fertility as well as death, according to T.J. Lewis.⁴²⁰ In 2 Sam 18:18, the monument or memorial erected for the dead Absalom is called a *yad*; similar uses of *yad* with the meaning of “mortuary stele” can be found in 1 Sam 15:12 and Isa 56:5.⁴²¹ It would seem appropriate then that the supplicant would want to be remembered before the God of his or her salvation.⁴²² Another interesting interpretation of this enigmatic hand is that of a “quick prayer” of someone hiding in the tomb at Khirbet el-Qom.⁴²³ Since the hand is engraved much more deeply than the rest of the inscription, it is best interpreted as more than a “quick prayer”—the reversed orientation of the hand may have indicated an amulet.

⁴¹⁸Ziony Zevit, “The Khirbet el-Qom Inscription Mentioning a Goddess,” *BASOR* 225 (1984): 29.

⁴¹⁹Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 99.

⁴²⁰T. J. Lewis, “Death Cult Imagery,” *Hebrew Annual Review* 11(1987): 273-274.

⁴²¹Ackerman also references the Israeli Holocaust memorial, “Yad va-Shem” in *Under Every Green Tree*, 153.

⁴²²Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 103.

⁴²³R. Hunziker-Rodewald, “‘Aschera’ im Alten Testament: Konkurrenz für den alleinigen Gott?” *Arbeitschrift* (Bern: Evangelical Theological Institute, 1993), 89-90.

At Kuntillet ‘Ajrûd in the eastern Sinai, inscriptional evidence has proven beyond a doubt that the deities YHWH and Asherah were significantly linked as the goddess played a significant role in the Yahwistic cult.⁴²⁴ This evidence also locates a cult of Asherah contemporaneous with Ahab’s reign (the inscriptions date to the eighth or ninth century BCE) in Samaria. An Asherah cult in the northern capital is at least strongly implied by the inclusion of the geographical name Samaria in one of the inscriptions found inscribed on a pithos: “I bless you by YHWH of Samaria and by his Asherah/asherah.”⁴²⁵ This suggests to many that at least among certain religious circles in Samaria, the cult of YHWH and the cult of Asherah were paired. Two other inscriptions found on pithoi at Kuntillet ‘Ajrûd support this idea, “by YHWH of the South (Teman?) and by his Asherah/asherah. May he bless and keep you and may he be with my lord.”⁴²⁶

Many scholars believe that Kuntillet ‘Ajrûd may have been the site of a school, based on the discovery of several abecedaries.⁴²⁷ André Lemaire contends that this explains the presence of the blessing on the pithoi and indicates a scholarly exercise of the type well attested in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Sarepta.⁴²⁸ He goes on to argue that perhaps these pithoi were used as blackboards and the architecture of the site (namely a “bench room”). This appears to indicate that at least a classroom, or perhaps a school, was built here.⁴²⁹ However, the location of Kuntillet ‘Ajrûd leads other scholars to believe that this was far too remote a location to support

⁴²⁴Olyan, 37.

⁴²⁵Zevit suggests, “I blessed you to YHWH of Shomron and to Asheratah,” in *The Religions*, 390.

⁴²⁶Ibid, 395.

⁴²⁷André Lemaire, *Les Ecoles et la formation de la Bible dans l’ancien Israel* OBO 39 (Fribourg and Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 25.

⁴²⁸Ibid, 28.

⁴²⁹Ibid, 30.

a school. Some feel that these inscriptions are graffiti, perhaps written by a soldier.⁴³⁰ It seems likely that Kuntillet 'Ajrūd was some sort of “way station” where travelers stopped to rest and water their animals from the wells in the vicinity.⁴³¹

The figures depicted on the pithos have been the subject of much debate. Judith Hadley contends that the two figures in the foreground are Bes figures, based on the Egyptian dwarf god of protection, music, dancing, etc. They appear to be somewhat androgynous; although it has been suggested that the figure on the right has breasts. However, this may be a misinterpretation of a broad muscular chest. It also appears the two figures possess male genitalia but it is possible that these projections may merely indicate the tail of the lion skin usually worn by Bes.⁴³²

The cow and the calf motif is said to be representative of Asherah, according to Schröer.⁴³³ This depiction was periodically used to represent deities; however, their association with Asherah is not proven. It is more likely to have been associated with Astarte or Anat,⁴³⁴ but is possible that it is a reference to Asherah.⁴³⁵

The enthroned female figure playing a lyre that accompanies the eighth century BCE inscriptions may represent the goddess Asherah according to some scholars.⁴³⁶ William Dever claims that music was associated with the Canaanite cult and that an eighth century pyxis from the Palace of Nimrud illustrates a similar musical procession behind a female deity in similar dress. The supposed Asherah figure in this crudely-drawn illustration dons an ankle-length dress

⁴³⁰A. F. Rainey, “Some Historical Notes on Epigraphic Texts”, Communication given at The Annual Meeting of the SBL (Boston, 1987).

⁴³¹Judith Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 115.

⁴³²Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 140.

⁴³³Schröer, *In Israel gab es Bilder*, 30.

⁴³⁴Keel and Uehlinger, *Göttinnen, Götter, and Gottessymbole: Neuu Erkenntnisse zur Religionsgeschichte Kanaans und Israels aufgrund bis unerschlossener ikonographischer Quellen*, Quaestiones disputatae 134 (Freiburg: Herder, 1992), 273.

⁴³⁵Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 154.

⁴³⁶Ackerman, “Asherah/Asherim,” in *Women in Scripture*, 509.

that possibly exposes the breasts. Dever argues that the emphasis of the breasts may be reminiscent of representations of Canaanite goddesses from the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. Her stylized hair may be the representation of a curled wig that is common of Astarte figurines, sphinxes, and the prevalent “lady at the window” motif and probably an indicator of her goddess status.⁴³⁷ The chair on which she sits exhibits typical throne features, and this type of “lion throne” is always associated with a deity or king and never with an ordinary human being.⁴³⁸ The pawed feet, feathered sides and back turned flair at the top are evidence of this association.⁴³⁹ Conversely Judith Hadley argues this “throne” could simply be a representation of a typical New Kingdom Egyptian chair.⁴⁴⁰ She believes the seated figure is not Asherah but a representation of the Egyptian god, Bes who was often associated with music and dancing—a better explanation for the lyre. She claims the curled hair covering or wig was also typical of Egyptian men and that a woman’s hair covering or wig would have been longer.

Dever has associated this “lion throne” with other parallels, including one showing a Canaanite king on a carved ivory panel (c. 1200 BCE), one on King Ahiiram’s sarcophagus in the Louvre, and a scene on an electrum pendant from Ugarit (c. 1300 BCE). According to him, the artist of the inscription at Kuntillet ‘Ajrûd clearly had this motif in mind and if this is indeed a female deity, it could only be a representation of Asherah,⁴⁴¹ the old Canaanite Mother Goddess and consort of Yahweh in Israelite religion.⁴⁴²

⁴³⁷Dever, “Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet ‘Ajrûd”, *BASOR* 255 (1984): 23.

⁴³⁸Dever, *Did God Have a Wife*, 165.

⁴³⁹Dever, “Asherah, Consort of Yahweh?” 24.

⁴⁴⁰Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 150.

⁴⁴¹Dever, *Did God Have a Wife*, 165.

⁴⁴²*Ibid*, 166-167.

The association of sacred tree imagery with the Canaanite Mother Goddess Asherah can be attested in West Semitic art from as late as the thirteenth century BCE. The Lachish Ewer, dating to the late thirteenth century BCE, pairs sacred tree iconography with a dedicatory inscription to Elat, an epithet of Asherah known from Ugaritic and Phoenician sources.⁴⁴³ Several Late Bronze Age gold and electrum pendants depicting a naked female along with images of lions, snakes, and Hathor's headdress are frequently associated with Asherah and thus should be understood as depictions of her. Furthermore, a stylized branch or tree is often seen etched in the figure's navel and thus should be understood as a representation of Asherah's sacred tree. Hestrin also suggests that the nude female represented on the bottom register of the Taanach cult stand is Asherah since this figure is between two lions characteristically associated with the goddess. In another region of the cult stand, Register 3, the lions are again depicted on either side of a central figure, yet here the figure is a sacred tree—the representation of the goddess.⁴⁴⁴

The goddess Asherah has been associated with several types of figurines dating from as far back as the tenth century BCE in which she is depicted as totally nude with long hair, arms at her side and hands at the breasts. This appears to be a continuation of a Late Bronze Age Canaanite tradition of plaque figures either standing or lying on a couch.⁴⁴⁵ The standing figurines are typically identified with the Late Bronze Age Asherah, especially those with the bouffant wig worn by Hathor, whom the texts equate with the Levantine Asherah as “Qudshu, the Holy One.”⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴³R. Hestrin, “The Lachish Ewer and the Asherah,” *IEJ* 37 (1987): 212.

⁴⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 212-223.

⁴⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 177.

⁴⁴⁶*Ibid.*

Another intriguing clue regarding the relationship between YHWH and Asherah lies on the Taanach cult stand, discovered on the southern side of the Jezreel Valley in 1968. This cult stand is comprised of four tiers with human and animal representations.⁴⁴⁷ On the lowest tier a naked female stands, holding the ears of two lions beside her. In the next tier two sphinxes with wings appear, while no symbol of divinity has been preserved between them. It appears that a hole was intended to be in this position, with no other symbol. On the next level, two lions appear identical to those on the lowest level. However, on this tier, a tree stands between two caprids instead of the naked female figure. The top scene depicts a pair of columns flanking a quadruped (either a horse or cow) that is supporting a sun disk on its back. At the bases of the two columns are two smaller objects that could depict cult stands.⁴⁴⁸ There is general agreement that the nude female depicted is Asherah as her associations with trees are well attested. If she is to be associated with the goddess Qudshu, this would provide parallels for the lions as her companions.⁴⁴⁹ J. G. Taylor contends that the presence of lions in two levels of the cult stand makes it clear that Asherah and no other goddess could be indicated since she is “the only deity likely to be represented as *both* nude female and sacred tree, in each case flanked by identical pairs of lions.”⁴⁵⁰

Since Asherah is doubly represented, it would make sense that the other two levels represented a second deity; however, the identification of this deity proves a little more

⁴⁴⁷Cf. Pirhiya Beck, “The Cult-Stands from Taanach: Aspects of Iconographic Tradition of Early Iron Age Cult Objects in Palestine,” in *From Nomadism to Monarchy: Archaeological and Historical Aspects of Early Israel*, eds. Israel Finkelstein and N. Na’aman (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi and Israel Exploration Society, 1994), 352-381.

⁴⁴⁸Hadley, “From Goddess to Literary Construct: the Transformation of Asherah into Hokmah,” in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible*, 377.

⁴⁴⁹Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 33.

⁴⁵⁰J. G. Taylor, “The Two Earliest Known Representations of Yahweh,” in *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie* JSOTSup, 67, eds. L. Eslinger and G. Taylor (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 560.

difficult.⁴⁵¹ Some feel the sun disk is clearly a divine symbol while others feel it is representative of the sky in general.⁴⁵² However, if the disk does represent a deity, the next question lies in the quadruped supporting the disk. If it is a cow, it could possibly be identified as Baal-Hadad.⁴⁵³ If it is indeed a horse, as identified by zoological experts acquainted with iconography of the ancient Near East, it is identified as YHWH.⁴⁵⁴ This conclusion is based on evidence from 2 Kgs 23:11, when Josiah removed the “horses of the sun” from the temple in Jerusalem as part of his reforms.⁴⁵⁵ Further evidence comes from Kathleen Kenyon’s excavations in Jerusalem’s Cave One. This site revealed many clay horse figurines bearing clay disks between their ears. This led Kenyon to contemplate these artifacts as reminiscent of the “horses of the sun.”⁴⁵⁶

The lack of representation of a deity in the third register of the cult stand is still problematic, yet Mettinger has suggested an intriguing interpretation. Perhaps there never was a deity in the empty space, and thus no other deity is better represented by non-representation, flanked by two sphinxes, than YHWH.⁴⁵⁷ While the cult of YHWH was not without symbols, the official cult was aniconic. Over the cherub throne and the ark YHWH sat invisibly, as the place where the deity was usually represented was empty and therefore Taylor concludes that the deity

⁴⁵¹Hadley, “From Goddess to Literary Construct,” 379.

⁴⁵²Keel and Uehlinger, 181.

⁴⁵³R. Hestrin, “The Cult Stand from Ta’anach and its Religious Background,” *Studia Phoenicia* 5, ed. E. Lipinski (Leuven: Peeters, 1987), 67, 74-77.

⁴⁵⁴Taylor, “Earliest Known Representations,” 563, n. 15.

⁴⁵⁵Hadley, “From Goddess to Literary Construct,” 379.

⁴⁵⁶Kathleen Kenyon, *Royal Cities of the Old Testament* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1971), 120.

⁴⁵⁷T. N. D. Mettinger, “The Veto on Images and the Aniconic God in Ancient Israel,” in *Religious Symbols and their Functions Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis*, 10, ed. H. Biezais (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1979), 561, n. 11.

portrayed is YHWH.⁴⁵⁸ Thus the stand shows yet another concrete connection between YHWH and Asherah and links the two in a consort relationship, at least in the tenth century BCE.⁴⁵⁹

Prior to the discoveries at Kuntillet ‘Ajrûd, Kirbet el-Qom, and Taanach, H. S. Nyberg proposed an emendation of Deut 33:2-3 that would alter מִיְמִינוֹ [אַשְׁרָה][הָתָּה] לְמוֹ (K preserves אַשְׁרָה, a noun common feminine singular construct which Holladay designates, “obscure”⁴⁶⁰) “lightning flashing at them from his right,” to מִיְמִינוֹ אַשְׁרָה לְמוֹ “at his [the LORD’s] right hand, Asherah.”⁴⁶¹ According to Weinfeld, this is an instructive reading since it follows רַבְבַּת קִדְשׁ, or as he translates, “the myriads of holy ones” who accompany YHWH in the march from the holy abode, an idea perhaps attested in Ps 68:18 “Elohim’s chariots are myriads upon myriads, thousands upon thousands; the LORD is among them as in Sinai in holiness.”⁴⁶² Following [אַשְׁרָה][הָתָּה] in Deut 33:3, the phrase כָּל-קִדְשָׁיו “all his holy ones” appears. This phrase recalls the Ugaritic concept of the divine retinue of El, Asherah, and their holy sons on the one hand, and to “YHWH and his Asherah” in the ‘Ajrûd inscriptions on the other.⁴⁶³ The presence of Asherah and the right hand of YHWH in Deut 33:2 recalls the position of Bathsheba in 1 Kgs 2:19, the unnamed queen/consort in Neh 2:6, and the unnamed queen mother in Ps 45:10.⁴⁶⁴

Asherah and Jezebel

While some would argue that this pairing points to syncretism or heterodoxy within Israelite religion, Olyan argues that the inscriptional evidence indicates that the worship of

⁴⁵⁸Mettinger, “The Veto on Images,” and Taylor, “Earliest Known Representations,” 561 n. 11.

⁴⁵⁹Hadley, “From Goddess to Literary Construct,” 381.

⁴⁶⁰Holladay, 833.

⁴⁶¹H. Nyberg, “Deuteronomium 33, 2-3” *ZDMG* 32 (1938): 320-344.

⁴⁶²Weinfeld, 527.

⁴⁶³Ibid, 527-528.

⁴⁶⁴Ibid, 528.

Asherah was an aspect of the normative religion of the North.⁴⁶⁵ This may lead us to believe that Jezebel may well have participated in the cult of Asherah as part of her obligations to state Yahwism.⁴⁶⁶ Despite the Deuteronomistic condemnation of Ahab's state cult as syncretistic or even non-Yahwistic because of Jezebel's Baal worship, the state religion of Ahab's monarchy remained Yahwism. The very fact that the Asherah was not removed from the sanctuary in Samaria indicates that the worship of the goddess was seen as legitimate in the days of Ahab, even by opponents of Baal.⁴⁶⁷ The names of Jezebel and Ahab's sons, Ahaziah and Jehoram, provide additional evidence of Yahwistic reverence. If one contends that Athaliah was the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, her name ("Yahweh is great") as well as those of her son Ahaziah, her daughter Jehosheba and grandson Joash all attest to the prevalence and influence of Yahwism in the North.⁴⁶⁸

In 1 Kgs 18:19 Elijah calls upon the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah to his contest on Mt. Carmel—a verse most scholars view as an addition, especially since the prophets of Asherah are not mentioned again.⁴⁶⁹ The LXX does mention the prophets of Asherah again in v. 22 which has led Reed to conclude that the original Hebrew text may have included the Asherah reference in both verses and that it is just as likely the phrase "prophets of Asherah" was omitted from v. 22 as it is that it was added to v. 19.⁴⁷⁰ If this is an editorial addition, it is unusual that the authors utilize the singular for Baal and Asherah, against the tendency of later redactors to use the plural.⁴⁷¹ If the verse is not an

⁴⁶⁵Olyan, 6-8.

⁴⁶⁶Ackerman, "The Queen Mother," 395.

⁴⁶⁷Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (New York: Ktav, 1967), 40-41.

⁴⁶⁸Ackerman, "The Queen Mother," 395.

⁴⁶⁹Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 66.

⁴⁷⁰Reed, *The Asherah*, 55.

⁴⁷¹Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 66.

addition, then the subsequent silence about the prophets of Asherah must be explained. Because of this, Raphael Patai concludes that Elijah had no problem with Asherah—only Baal.⁴⁷² He assumes that no harm came to the prophets of Asherah because the contest was only between YHWH and Baal, and that Asherah was seen as the “inevitable or at least tolerable counterpart to Yahweh, as opposed to a rival.”⁴⁷³

John Gray contends that the contest was against not only Baal but also the local Israelites who saw no harm in worshipping both YHWH and the indigenous fertility god. Further, he believes that the area may have always been Phoenician, and was given to Ahab as part of Jezebel’s dowry—something that might explain the phrase, “who eat at Jezebel’s table.”⁴⁷⁴ Freedman suggests that Asherah was originally the consort of Baal and as the winner of the Mt. Carmel contest, YHWH “won” Asherah as his own consort, after defeating Baal. He finds his support in the Kuntillet ‘Ajrūd inscriptions which date to 800 BCE or the time of Jehoahaz, and thus he believes that “asherah” in the inscriptions refers to YHWH’s consort.⁴⁷⁵ Countering this argument, Dijkstra contends that YHWH and Asherah were a divine pair from the beginning, forming an “*interpretatio israelitica* of the divine pair El and his Asherah.”⁴⁷⁶

It is quite notable that Jezebel held the position of queen mother during a period in the history of the Northern Kingdom when Northern kingship most closely resembled the institution of kingship in the South.⁴⁷⁷ For example, the Northern Kingdom of Jezebel’s day functioned according to the Southern principle of dynastic succession rather than adopting the charismatic

⁴⁷²Patai, 40-41.

⁴⁷³Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 67.

⁴⁷⁴J. Gray, *I and II Kings*, 2nd rev. ed, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 385.

⁴⁷⁵D. N. Freedman, “Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah,” *BA* 50 (1987) 248.

⁴⁷⁶M. Dijkstra, “El, YHWH, and their Asherah,” in *Ugarit: Ein Ostmediterranes Kulturzentrum im Alten Orient*, eds. M. Dietrich and O. Loretz (Munster: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 53.

⁴⁷⁷Ackerman, “At Home with the Goddess,” 460.

model. The Omride dynasty envisioned the capital city of Samaria as “an analog to the Southern capital city of Jerusalem.”⁴⁷⁸ Omride policies that established foreign alliances by foreign marriages imitated similar alliances in the Southern kingdom. It is also noteworthy that Jezebel, in addition to being the one Northern woman said to have held the more typically Southern office of queen mother, is the one royal woman of the North who was associated with the worship of Asherah.⁴⁷⁹

Therefore, if Jezebel participated in the Asherah cult during the reign of her husband as part of her marital responsibilities and state obligations, it seems likely that she would continue to participate in the Asherah cult after Ahab’s death when she assumed the role of queen mother. While there is no direct textual evidence to support this, it is significant that the only narrative in Kings (2 Kgs 9) that describes the widowed Jezebel is the story of her death. According to Ackerman, it is significant that Jezebel is lodged at the royal residence in Jezreel and not in Samaria, away from the Baal temple that is most typically associated with her religious affiliations. While in Jezreel, her cultic attentions may have been focused on the state religion of the North that paired the cults of YHWH and Asherah and therefore may be possible to conclude that Jezebel did participate in the worship of Asherah as *gēbîrâ*.⁴⁸⁰ Moreover, the Asherah worship associated with Jezebel was appropriately adopted by her within the context of the Southern-style monarchy instituted in the Northern kingdom by her father in law, Omri. “In a palace conceived of in this particular way, members of the royal court—and especially the king’s mother—are comfortably ‘at home with the goddess.’”⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁸Ibid, 461.

⁴⁷⁹Ibid, 461.

⁴⁸⁰Ackerman, “The Queen Mother,” 395.

⁴⁸¹Ackerman, “At Home with the Goddess,” in *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age through Roman*

However, some scholars would point out that Asherah is not attested in any Tyrian text and that she was not a Tyrian goddess.⁴⁸² It would also appear that she was not “attested anywhere in coastal Phoenicia in the Iron Age.”⁴⁸³ The mention of the “prophets of Asherah” in 2 Kgs 18:19 may not serve as a viable historical witness to her cult in ancient Israel and could even be seen as a textual gloss. Smith asserts that the reference to Asherah could have pointed to the Phoenician goddess Astarte and the threat that she may have posed during the Iron Age. He also presents the possibility, that Asherah may not have been an Israelite goddess during the Iron Age at all, yet admits this is an “argument from silence.” On the other hand, Saul Olyan has argued that in Jer 2:27, the prophet’s mockery and inversion of the goddess’s symbol may attest to the prominence of her worship during the later decades of the Judean monarchy.⁴⁸⁴ This is evidenced by the prophet’s statement, “They say to wood, ‘you are my father,’ to stone, ‘you gave birth to me.’”

It is also possible that Athaliah, one of the most notorious queen mothers depicted in the Hebrew Bible, participated in the Asherah cult. She was given by her parents (Ahab and Jezebel?) to Jehoram, king of Judah as a wife and political treaty between the Northern and Southern kingdoms and to enhance the cultural influence of the North in Judah.⁴⁸⁵ She became queen mother to their son Ahaziah after Jehoram was killed in battle against the Edomites, but

Palaestina, Proceedings of the Centennial Symposium W. F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research and ASOR, eds. William Dever and S. Gitin (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 461.

⁴⁸²M. Smith, 126.

⁴⁸³Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴Olyan, “Cultic Confessions of Jer 2,27a,” *ZAW* 99:2 (1987): 255.

⁴⁸⁵Brenner, *The Israelite Woman*, 28.

shortly afterward, Ahaziah was killed while visiting Jezreel as part of Jehu's bloody coup (2 Kgs 9:27-28).⁴⁸⁶

Following her son's death, she assumed the role of regent and sought to maintain her status by ordering the massacre of the Davidic royal family.⁴⁸⁷ She ruled for six years, only to be deposed by the high priest Jehoida who despised her rise to power and the prevalence of the Baal cult under her rule.⁴⁸⁸ While there is no textual evidence that directly addresses her role in this cult, Jehoida destroyed the Temple of Baal immediately following her death, which indicates she was a strong supporter of Baalism.⁴⁸⁹ If this is true, and if she could be considered the daughter of Jezebel, it is possible she showed allegiance to other cults supported by her mother.⁴⁹⁰ If Jezebel supported and participated in the cult of Asherah as queen and queen mother, perhaps Athaliah did the same since the worship of Asherah was indeed a normative aspect of Yahwistic worship in the South.⁴⁹¹

Asherah and the Deuteronomistic Polemic

While her following appears standard in non-Deuteronomistic circles, the anti-Asherah polemic in the Hebrew Bible appears to be restricted to the Deuteronomistic History, or to materials that betray the influence of Deuteronomistic language and theology.⁴⁹² This polemic is usually seen in highly rhetorical speeches concerning the sins of Israel of Judah against YHWH, (2 Kgs 17:16-17). In some passages, the Asherah is associated specifically with the Jerusalem

⁴⁸⁶Ackerman, "The Queen Mother," 396.

⁴⁸⁷Scheering, 586.

⁴⁸⁸Brenner, *The Israelite Woman*, 30.

⁴⁸⁹Scheering, 586.

⁴⁹⁰Ackerman, "The Queen Mother," 396.

⁴⁹¹Ibid.

⁴⁹²Olyan, 3.

temple or other Yahwistic shrines in Judah (2 Kgs 18:4; 21:7, 23:6, 14), or the reform cult of Jeroboam in the North (1 Kgs 14:15-16; 2 Kgs 23:15).

Deuteronomistic polemics would attempt to label the worship of Asherah as a strictly Canaanite, a non-Yahwistic borrowing. Yet, biblical evidence may suggest otherwise. W.L. Reed suggests that evidence from Genesis may offer clues as the syncretistic practices during the ancestral period. He asks the question, “Why in the patriarchal narratives is it permissible for trees to be planted in Yahwistic cult places?” Genesis 21:33 states, “Abraham planted a tamarisk in Beer-sheba, and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God.” This may indicate, according to Reed, that the asherah was a graven image of the goddess Asherah and not a tree, or it would have been condemned.⁴⁹³ However, this argument does not seem to fully address the dilemma. The conflict lies between the Deuteronomistic anti-Asherah theology and the patriarchal traditions about trees at cult places, not whether the Asherah was a tree or an image. If it was a tree or an image, the Asherah still represented the goddess.⁴⁹⁴ The ancestral narratives regarding the founding of cults at Bethel, Hebron and Beersheba indicate that the sacred tree and pillar (מַצֵּבֹתָ) were recognized as legitimate in the Yahwistic cult very early, and were not considered illegitimate in the time of J and E.⁴⁹⁵

According to Tilde Binger, the only verse from the Hebrew Bible that directly connects YHWH and Asherah is Deut 16:21, which states, “You shall not plant any tree as a sacred pole beside the altar that you make for the LORD your God.”⁴⁹⁶ This verse is utilized for many purposes, including the claim that the cult of asherah or Asherah was common practice. It is also

⁴⁹³Reed, *The Asherah in the Old Testament* (Fort Worth: TCU, 1949), 6-10.

⁴⁹⁴Olyan, 5.

⁴⁹⁵Reed, 42.

⁴⁹⁶Tilde Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit, Israel, and the Old Testament*, JSOT Supplement Series 232, eds. David Clines and Philip Davies (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 122.

definitive proof that the Asherah of the Hebrew Bible was a wooden pole or a living tree. The verb, “to plant,” used with כַּלְעֵץ or “any tree,” appear to imply this without a doubt.⁴⁹⁷ If this verse could be considered part of the ongoing Deuteronomistic polemic against Asherah,⁴⁹⁸ then the qualification, כַּלְעֵץ becomes intriguing. According to Binger, if it was necessary to qualify an asherah as being כַּלְעֵץ, this must mean that it was not an obvious connection.⁴⁹⁹ Binger states, “if the asherah was at all times a wooden thing, or if the word never referred to anything but a thing made out of wood, then there would be no reason to add that one was not allowed to make an Asherah of wood.”⁵⁰⁰ In light of this assertion, Binger then poses the question, would one be able to make an Asherah using clay or stone? Therefore, this does not seem to be a general prohibition against making an Asherah, just not in order to be placed beside the altar of YHWH. And if this is the case, in what locations could the Asherah be placed?

Perhaps the purpose of this prohibition could be that no one would ever consider making an Asherah out of anything but wood, or placing it anywhere but beside the altar of YHWH.⁵⁰¹ However, this verse cannot be used as proof that it was “common practice” to have a wooden Asherah beside the altar of YHWH,⁵⁰² contrary to the argument of Ählstrom who states, “like most prohibitive laws, this one probably originated against a common custom.”⁵⁰³ Binger states, “there is no reason to forbid something that nobody does anyway, but to claim that any prohibition is based on a ‘common practice’ is taking the thing too far.”⁵⁰⁴ Binger utilizes the

⁴⁹⁷Ibid, 122.

⁴⁹⁸Olyan, 9.

⁴⁹⁹Binger, 123.

⁵⁰⁰Ibid.

⁵⁰¹Ibid.

⁵⁰²Olyan, 9.

⁵⁰³Ählstrom, *An Archaeological Picture of Iron Age Religions in Ancient Palestine* Studia Orientalia 55 (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 1984), 8.

⁵⁰⁴Binger, 123.

examples of rape or pedophilia as uncommon customs, yet actions that require legal prohibitions. Perhaps the purpose of this verse is to indicate that Asherah could not be placed beside the altar of YHWH. The group that condemned this practice was quite particular about forbidding her co-existence with YHWH, yet recognized a close connection between the deities.⁵⁰⁵

In Jdg 3:7, the text has moved from the prohibition of Asherahs to description. The verse states, “The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, forgetting the LORD their God, and worshipping the Baals and the Asherahs.” The author of the text is offering an explanation for the fall of the nation and the people are reminded of their sinful beginnings.⁵⁰⁶ It is interesting to note that within this passage, the feminine plural is utilized for Asherah, אֲשֵׁרוֹת. In the majority of passages, the masculine plural is utilized (אֲשֵׁרִים); however, the latter part of 2 Chr mentions the feminine plural. The בָּעֲלִים mentioned here are seen in other Deuteronomistic passages paired with אֲשֵׁרוֹת; however, there is the possibility that there was an unclear understanding of the Asherah here. In the Syriac and Vulgate versions, the text reads *Asherot*, which seems to support the idea that this is a Deuteronomistic addition. This leads to a great deal of confusion regarding the identity of the Asherah and may even point to the goddess Astarte. Regardless, the asherahs here do not indicate a consort relationship⁵⁰⁷ with Baal as the plurals would indicate that classes of deities were being served, not an individual god or goddess.⁵⁰⁸

In 2 Kgs 21:7, a similar passage to the Asa account is found as Manasseh places a carved image (פֶּסֶל) of the Asherah in the Jerusalem Temple. It is not certain whether the verb עָשָׂה in this passage refers to the Asherah or the carved image (פֶּסֶל) and a translation of the phrase אֲשֵׁר עָשָׂה

⁵⁰⁵Ibid, 124.

⁵⁰⁶Wiggins, 102.

⁵⁰⁷Petty, 98.

⁵⁰⁸Wiggins, 102.

does not appear in the original text of the LXX.⁵⁰⁹ Haran translates the phrase here as having a pluperfect meaning—it is an Asherah that Manasseh had made previously and only later had dared to take into the Jerusalem temple,⁵¹⁰ perhaps even replacing the ark and the cherubim.⁵¹¹ Haran contends that Manasseh was the first ruler to bring an Asherah statue into the temple and thus his “great sin.”⁵¹² Verse 3 states that Manasseh made (עָשָׂה) an Asherah (without the definite article). In 2 Chron 33:3, the definite article is also omitted, but Asherah is feminine plural (אֲשֵׁרוֹת). R. J. Pettey asserts that although this terminology is normally utilized elsewhere to describe the destruction of multiple Asherahs, here the Chronicler has used the plural to emphasize Josiah’s subsequent “re-centralization” of the cult. The more Asherahs that Josiah destroyed, the more impressive his reform would seem.⁵¹³ Hadley contends that this was a standard treatment by the Chronicler since the Asherahs “were by that time merely wooden objects.”⁵¹⁴

After assessing the overwhelming data available regarding the identity of Asherah and her many representations, Susan Ackerman logically concludes that “the ancient Israelites understood the term asherah both as a proper name, the name of the Canaanite mother goddess Asherah, and as a common noun designating an object in the shape of a wooden pole or tree that represented the goddess Asherah in the cult.”⁵¹⁵ She goes on to contend that ancient Israelites would probably have perceived both the goddess and her representation as one in the same and

⁵⁰⁹Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 68.

⁵¹⁰M. Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1985), 279.

⁵¹¹Ibid, 281.

⁵¹²Ibid, 278-279.

⁵¹³R. J. Pettey, *Asherah: Goddess of Israel?* (Dissertation, Marquette University, 1985), 153.

⁵¹⁴Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 68.

⁵¹⁵Ackerman, “At Home with the Goddess,” 457.

would have “made little differentiation between these two meanings.”⁵¹⁶

This wealth of information seems to demonstrate that despite the censure of Asa and other reformer kings, the cult of Asherah was not foreign to the Jerusalem court. Therefore, Maacah, nor any other queen mother (Jezebel) should be held responsible for the introduction of this cult into Israel but could be regarded as *gěbîrâ* who participated in state cult worship.⁵¹⁷

G.W. Åhlstrom suggests that in light of the Hittite and Ugaritic parallels, that the office of *gěbîrâ* in Israel was “primarily religious in its motivation, and was based on some cultic function. The queen mother may once, as consort of the king, have symbolized the virgin goddess in the *hieros gamos* ceremony. The position of the queen mother as *gěbîrâ* is thus an ideological replica of that of the mother of the gods in the congregation of the gods.”⁵¹⁸

In light of this evidence regarding the role of the Israelite and Judean queen mothers in the cults of YHWH and Asherah, it is logical to conclude that the unnamed queen mother of Ps 45 is indeed acting in a cultic ceremony as a divine representative of the goddess Asherah, much like her named counterparts throughout the texts of the Deuteronomistic History and elsewhere in the ancient Near East. Ironically, the texts of the Deuteronomistic History provide us confirmation that the cult of Asherah was supported by the monarchy, despite the editors’ attempts to quell this information.

Prophets of Asherah

Perhaps further support for the queen mother as cultic functionary for Asherah could come from a critical look at the role of prophecy, and specifically at the female prophet, Huldah.

⁵¹⁶Ibid.

⁵¹⁷Ackerman, “The Queen Mother,” 392.

⁵¹⁸Åhlstrom, 76.

The prophet Huldah appears in 2 Kgs 22 as a temple prophet who validates a scroll, called “the book of the law,” reportedly found in the temple during repairs ordered by King Josiah (604-609 BCE).⁵¹⁹ Huldah appears as one of only four named female prophets in the Hebrew Bible (the others are Deborah, Noadiah, and Miriam).⁵²⁰ She has been called by some “the first biblical text critic,”⁵²¹ while others have named her “the founder of biblical studies.”⁵²² According to Renita J. Weems, “she is the first figure in Scripture, male or female, whose contributions to biblical history centered on verifying a written document as sacred and holy writ.”⁵²³

Some scholars have suggested that this narrative segment in the Deuteronomistic history is the literary creation of a postexilic writer seeking to explain the exile rather than report actual events of the monarchy.⁵²⁴ Diana Edelman has suggested that Huldah was not a prophet of YHWH as the text purports but that “historically, she might well have been a prophet of Asherah.”⁵²⁵ She states that Asherah’s probable role as divine intercessor would have made her a logical deity to consult under the circumstances in 2 Kgs 22, rather than risk incurring the anger of YHWH by asking the deity about YHWH’s connection with the purported document. When Asherah was omitted from the former Judahite national pantheon, Huldah would have been made into a spokesperson for YHWH instead of the consort/wife of YHWH.⁵²⁶

⁵¹⁹Claudia Camp, “Huldah,” in *Women in Scripture*, 96.

⁵²⁰Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, “Noadiah” in *Women in Scripture*, 132.

⁵²¹Baruch Halpern, “Huldah, the First Biblical Text Critic,” *Other Side* 35 (1999): 51-53.

⁵²²Arlene Swidler, “In Search of Huldah,” *TBT* 989(1978): 1783.

⁵²³Renita J. Weems, “Huldah, the Prophet: Reading a (Deuteronomistic) Woman’s Identity,” in *A God So Near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller*, eds. Brent A. Strawn and Nancy R. Bowen (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 321.

⁵²⁴Camp, “Huldah,” 96.

⁵²⁵Edelman, “Huldah The Prophet—of Yahweh or Asherah?” in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield:Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 231.

⁵²⁶Ibid.

According to 2 Kgs 22:14, Hilkiah, Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah “went to the prophetess Huldah...who was living in Jerusalem in the Mishneh.” According to Edelman, this report indicates these men left the temple complex to meet with her. Thus, she was not necessarily a regular court prophet attached to the main temple of YHWH. It is possible she was consulted in her private home, workplace, or even another temple sanctuary that was located in the new section of the city. Edelman states that the lack of temporal indicators in ch. 22 creates ambiguity about whether Huldah was a court prophet consulted in her home in the evening or whether she was consulted during the day at her place of work.⁵²⁷ In addition to Huldah’s location outside the temple complex, Judean popular religion during the seventh century also seems to lend evidence to her cultic allegiances. As it has been mentioned, both the national Yahwism of Judah and the official religions of other states in Syria-Palestine shared belief in the partnership of YHWH and Asherah, including their place at the head of the divine realm.⁵²⁸

Unfortunately, Asherah’s characteristics and functions as co-head of the Judean pantheon may have absorbed by her husband YHWH, during the rise of monotheism. Her role as intercessor, mediator, and go-between, a trait commonly associated with many female gods (and queen mothers), can be seen in the mythic cycle from Ugarit. Here, she speaks on behalf of Baal with her husband El to persuade him to allow a temple to be built for the young god (*CTA* 4.3.26-36; 4.4.1-4.5.63). Therefore, the situation as depicted in 2 Kgs 22-23 (without judging the historicity of the finding of the law scroll during temple repairs in the time of Josiah) would have been very conducive to the consultation of a divine intercessor Asherah, rather than YHWH. During the time in question, the cult of Asherah would have been in place as part of national Yahwism and there should have been officially appointed and sponsored priests of Asherah.

⁵²⁷Edelman, “Huldah the Prophet,” 243.

⁵²⁸Ibid.

Perhaps it would have been likely for the king to send a delegation to consult YHWH's co-regnant "to determine YHWH's frame of mind, rather than consulting YHWH directly through one of his own prophets, thereby calling attention to the infractions and raising the deity's wrath."⁵²⁹

The words of the prophet Elisha echo the Deuteronomistic disdain for the prophets of Asherah in 2 Kgs 3:13, as Israel had come under attack by their rival Moab. King Jehoram of Israel and King Jehoshaphat of Judah had allied to fight Mesha of Moab and called upon a prophet to speak for YHWH and advise them during this time of crisis. Elisha is called upon but Elisha answered Jehoram's request with biting criticism, "What have you to do with me? Go to your father's prophets or your mother's prophets." Direct reference to the prophets of Asherah is made only once in 1 Kgs 17, as was previously mentioned, "the four hundred prophets of Asherah that eat at Jezebel's table." The consultation of prophets during times of national crisis is well attested, and Elisha recognizes that the use of Asherah's prophets was common in the Northern Kingdom within the house of Ahab and Jezebel. The Deuteronomistic author utilizes Elisha to acknowledge that Asherah would have indeed been called upon at such a time to act as intercessor. Simultaneously, this very practice is condemned as an abomination.

While the exact nature of the relationship between the queen mother and the prophets of Asherah is undetermined, it is quite obvious that female prophets of Asherah would have maintained an important status within the cult—perhaps inferior only to the queen mother. Once again, the Deuteronomistic attempts to minimize the prominence of women in the state cult only confirm their significant status.

⁵²⁹Edelman, "Huldah the Prophet," 248.

The Queen of Heaven

The identity of the Queen of Heaven, mentioned in the book of Jeremiah, has been a source of continual confusion for biblical scholars. Attempting to discern this character requires us to look beyond the biblical picture of Israelite religion.⁵³⁰ The use of archaeological resources, particularly iconographic and epigraphic, as well as parallel evidence from the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean is crucial as comparative data. However, this evidence is not plentiful and is often difficult to interpret. Most importantly, the acknowledgement of the polemical, androcentric nature of the biblical texts can help interpreters see beyond the biases of the writers to uncover the true nature of the cultic practices in ancient Israel.⁵³¹

It has been recently suggested that the Queen of Heaven is not one single deity but rather a syncretistic goddess who combines the characteristics of the east Semitic Ishtar and the west Semitic Astarte.⁵³² Her sacred precinct is called the “highest heavens” in Phoenician Sidon and Eshmunazor’s inscription from the first millennium BCE calls her “Astarte of the highest heavens.”⁵³³ The only extra-biblical evidence for the Queen of Heaven comes from a Northwest Semitic text. The reference is found in the greeting of one of the 6th century BCE papyrus letters written in Aramaic, found at Hermopolis. The letter appears to have been written by a Syrian living in Olf, Egypt to relatives in Syene, and mentions in the opening sentence temples of the god Bethel and the Queen of Heaven.⁵³⁴

Biblical evidence for the worship of the Queen of Heaven in seventh century Judah is

⁵³⁰Ackerman, ““And the Women Knead Dough””: The Worship of the Queen of Heaven in Sixth-Century Judah,” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 109.

⁵³¹Ibid, 110.

⁵³²Ackerman, “And the Women Knead Dough,” 110.

⁵³³Ackerman, “Astarte,” in *Women in Scripture*, 513.

⁵³⁴Schmitz, 587.

found only in the book of Jeremiah (7:18; 44:17-19, 25) where her cult is condemned as a false practice that detracted from the exclusive worship of YHWH.⁵³⁵ Jer 7:17-18 states, “Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven and they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger.” The activities performed to prepare for the worship of the Queen of Heaven required the whole family. Yet, the women appear to play the most important role in her worship as it was their job to make the cakes and pour libations for her.⁵³⁶

In Jer 44, the setting is different as Jeremiah’s focus shifts exclusively to the women. Here the women vow to continue their worship of the Queen of Heaven, “just as we and our ancestors, our kings (מְלָכֵינוּ) and our officials (שָׂרֵינוּ), used to do in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem.” Zevit asserts that while Jeremiah’s focus seems to shift toward the women, clearly both genders continued to participate in the cult as the men’s participation appears to have been restricted to offering incense and pouring libations alongside the women.⁵³⁷ Despite the participation from the men, the cult appears to have been an essentially female realm. In 44:15, “all the men who were aware that their wives had been making offerings to other gods,” appears to indicate there were some men who did not know that their wives were involved in this practice.⁵³⁸ Interestingly, the words used by the great assembly in Jer 44 for “king” and “officials” could easily be slightly modified to render “queens” (מְלָכוֹת) and “princesses” (שָׂרוֹת), who would have more likely been the public cultic figures, making offerings and pouring out

⁵³⁵Ibid, 586.

⁵³⁶Hadley, “The Queen of Heaven-Who is She?” in *Prophets and Daniel: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 32-33.

⁵³⁷Zevit, *The Religions*, 555.

⁵³⁸Ibid.

ritual libations.

As it has been demonstrated, the Queen of Heaven exhibits characteristics of the goddess Ishtar, who is associated with fertility and war. Mesopotamian stories of Dumuzi/Tammuz and Inanna/Ishtar tell of the young fertility god Tammuz, courting the maiden Ishtar, who represents the communal storehouse in which harvested foods were kept.⁵³⁹ Following a successful courtship, the god and goddess marry and through their sexual union guarantee fruitfulness in the land and bounty in the warehouse. This identification of the Queen of Heaven with Ishtar may help to explain her popularity in seventh century BCE Judah, particularly among women, as she too guaranteed continual prosperity and prevented famine.⁵⁴⁰

It has been argued that women in ancient Israel had a higher status and more opportunities to hold public and powerful positions in times of social unrest, as was the case during the period of the Judges.⁵⁴¹ Certainly the events of the late seventh and early sixth century would qualify as such a time when King Josiah was killed. Following his death, Judahites were exiled to Babylon in 597 and 587 BCE; the Temple was destroyed in 587 BCE; and Judah lost its political independence.⁵⁴² While there is little evidence to support this claim, the biblical data about the Queen of Heaven suggests that women of late seventh and early sixth century Judah and Jerusalem held some religious power.⁵⁴³ Ackerman suggests that perhaps this phenomenon would account for the fact that Huldah was the first prophetess reported by biblical writers since the period of the League, and was active during the last quarter of the seventh century (2 Kgs

⁵³⁹Ackerman, "And the Women Knead Dough," 114.

⁵⁴⁰Ibid.

⁵⁴¹J.A. Hackett, "In the Days of Jael: Reclaiming the History of Women in Ancient Israel," in *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, eds. C. W. Atkinson, C.H. Buchanan, M.R. Miles (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 15-38.

⁵⁴²Ackerman, "And the Women Knead Dough," 116.

⁵⁴³Ibid, 117-118.

23:14-20).⁵⁴⁴

It seems likely the Queen of Heaven offered women both protection and prosperity at a time of upheaval and chaos.⁵⁴⁵ Although there is no consensus regarding her identity, biblical texts confirm the importance of women in her ritual veneration. And while no queen mother has been precisely linked to the Queen of Heaven, it is certain they would have been pivotal if not paramount in her cult.

From Asherah to Woman Wisdom

As my argument has sought to establish, the first commandment, “you shall have no other gods before me,” (Exod 20:3) was clearly not followed by all of ancient Israel/Judah—both textual and archaeological evidence are clear indicators. In addition to YHWH, a host of other gods and goddesses were revered by ancient Israel: the Queen of Heaven (Jer 44:7), Astarte (1 Sam 7:4), Asherah (2 Kgs 21:7), and finally, Woman Wisdom.⁵⁴⁶ At the beginning of the twentieth century, Hermann Gunkel wrote, “the sages had a kind of female patron deity of whom they sometimes spoke; Hebrew tradition calls her ‘Wisdom’. For Israel’s sages, this figure was perhaps a mere personification. Some of her features, however, betray her former divine nature.”⁵⁴⁷ Many suggestions have been made for the origin of Woman Wisdom. Some scholars look to goddesses such as the Egyptian Maat or Isis, Canaanite Astarte, Mesopotamian Innana,

⁵⁴⁴Ibid, 124.

⁵⁴⁵Kathleen O’Connor, “Jeremiah,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary with Apocrypha, Expanded edition*, eds. Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 182.

⁵⁴⁶Bernhard Lang, “Lady Wisdom: A Polytheistic and Psychological Interpretation of a Biblical Goddess,” in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods, and Strategies*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 400.

⁵⁴⁷Hermann Gunkel, *Zum religionsgeschichtlichen Verständnis des Neuen Testaments* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1903), 26.

or even a Persian deity.⁵⁴⁸ Some scholars view her as a hypostasis of God's Wisdom⁵⁴⁹ and even as a person⁵⁵⁰ while others continue to view her as a literary device.⁵⁵¹ Claudia Camp sees Woman Wisdom as an adaptation of woman sages and counselors, and the biblical stories about them.⁵⁵² Carole Fontaine suggests that a combination of these positions could provide the best understanding of Woman Wisdom.⁵⁵³ M. D. Coogan suggests that the divine attributes given to Woman Wisdom in Prov 1-9, Job 28, and elsewhere in the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books, is a legitimization of the worship in Israel/Judah of more "established" goddesses, such as Asherah.⁵⁵⁴ According to Judith Hadley, "the apparent apotheosis of Lady Wisdom in the biblical literature is not a legitimization of the worship of 'established' goddesses, but rather is a literary compensation for the eradication of the worship of these goddesses."⁵⁵⁵

Hadley makes reference to the book of Deuteronomy to support this claim since she feels the "de-personalization" or "de-deification" of deities was quite common within this text. She asserts that Deuteronomy does not list a single 'foreign' deity by name throughout the entire

⁵⁴⁸Cf. H. Conzelmann, "The Mother of Wisdom," in *The Future of Our Religious Past: Essays in Honor of Rudolf Bultmann*, eds. J. M. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 230-231.

⁵⁴⁹Cf. for example, R. Marcus, "On Biblical Hypostases of Wisdom," *HUCA* 23 (1950-1951): 57-171.

⁵⁵⁰Conzelmann, "The Mother of Wisdom," 232.

⁵⁵¹R. E. Murphy, "Wisdom: Theses and Hypotheses," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*, ed. J. G. Gammie, et. al. (Missoula: Scholars Press for Union Theological Seminary, 1978), 35-42.

⁵⁵²Cf. Claudia Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, Bible and Literature Series, 11 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1985).

⁵⁵³Fontaine, "Proverbs," *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed. J. L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 501-503. Cf. C. R. Fontaine, "Proverbs," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, expanded edition, eds. C. A. Newsom and S. H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998), 155.

⁵⁵⁴M. D. Coogan, "The Goddess Wisdom—"Where can she be found?": "Literary Reflexes of Popular Religion," communication given at the SBL meetings in Washington DC, 1993.

⁵⁵⁵Hadley, "From Goddess to Literary Construct," 395-396.

book, with the possible exception of Baal Peor in 4:3. In that context, Baal probably refers to a foreign deity in general.⁵⁵⁶ These “foreign” deities are instead referred to as “other gods” or some similar generalization. However, deities such as Shagar, Astarte, Dagon and Asherah are treated as common nouns. Hadley feels that this is an attempt by the authors to eliminate the worship of other deities by “reducing them to merely their roles, and to then grant the control of these roles to Yahweh.”⁵⁵⁷ Apparently, this was a successful attempt by the Deuteronomistic authors to obscure the prevalence of other gods, since Hebrew sources from the late exilic period and later, ignore or appear unaware of the names of these deities.

Perhaps the reference to the “Queen of Heaven” in Jeremiah is evidence of this generalization. As was previously discussed, there is no general consensus on the identity of the Queen of Heaven although many attempts have been made to identify her origins. Perhaps the author of Jeremiah was only aware of worship of some foreign goddess in Israel: only knowing her general designation, not her name.⁵⁵⁸

By the time of the Chronicler, c. fourth century BCE, the separation of the deities from their functions had worked so well that it appears he was unaware even of the goddess Astarte and her prevalence throughout Israel, Judah and Philistia. The Chronicler makes reference to the temple of the Philistines’ gods in 1 Chr 10:10, yet makes no mention of Astarte. According to Hadley, “thus the de-personalization of Astarte is complete: she has moved from being a well-known and presumably widely worshipped deity in Palestine to becoming an abstraction of fertility in Hebrew idiom, and then to total silence on the part of the latest biblical writers.”⁵⁵⁹

Thus, the Hebrew goddesses all seem but a distant and indistinct memory by the fourth

⁵⁵⁶Ibid, 392.

⁵⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁵⁸Ibid, 392-393.

⁵⁵⁹Hadley, “From Goddess to Literary Construct,” 393.

century BCE and perhaps Woman Wisdom was created to fill that void. Within the Hebrew Bible, Prov 8:22-31 lends the most support to the view of Wisdom (חֵכֶמָה) as a deity. She states, “YHWH brought me forth at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.” Of course, there is much debate over חֵכֶמָה as it can be translated “get, acquire, create.” Did YHWH give birth to Wisdom, acquire her, conceive her? She is the first of YHWH’s creations and was present at the beginning. According to Prov 3:19, “YHWH founded the earth” by her. Whether she is seen as a child of YHWH or a female counterpart (or indeed both), she appears to be identified here as a divine figure. By the Hellenistic period, she is not only a co-creator, but an all-knowing agent of creation as in Wisdom 8:1, “She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well,” and 8:6, “and if understanding is effective, who more than she is fashioner of what exists?” Therefore, following the demise of the monarchy and the Babylonian Exile, the role of queen mother as counselor and cultic functionary of Asherah was diminished and replaced with the figure Woman Wisdom. This figure embodied the ideal queen mother—imparting counsel and acting on behalf of the divine.

Conclusion

Clearly, the evidence is overwhelming: women in ancient Israel/Judah were key religious functionaries in the household, as well as in the public cult. Archaeology offers compelling data regarding the true religious lives of the ancient Israelites who revered not only the male YHWH, a deity adapted from the Canaanite El, but El’s and later YHWH’s wife and counterpart, Asherah. The cult of YHWH and Asherah undoubtedly involved the participation of queen mother, acting on behalf of the divine mother, while the king acted on behalf of the divine father—thus emulating the cosmic on earth. Ugaritic and Phoenician literature provides exciting

clues regarding the cultic aspects of queenship which were clearly adapted by ancient Israel/Judah, although biblical references to support this are scant and often misleading. Despite the attempts of the Deuteronomistic historians to demonstrate otherwise, it has become increasingly evident that the duties of the queen mother would have extended beyond the palace walls to the center of public religious life. I contend that Ps 45 illuminates what the Deuteronomistic Historians attempt to eclipse. Ultimately, it allows a glimpse of the queen mother acting as cultic functionary—a position that would have required wisdom as well as charismatic leadership, rivaled only by that of the king.

CHAPTER FOUR: MARRIAGE IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Introduction

A majority of what is known about marriage and wedding customs in the ancient Near East is based on accounts of marriages involving those who held positions of power and influence in society: pharaohs, nobility, kings, queens, epic heroes, and even gods themselves.⁵⁶⁰ It is to be expected that ancient literature would feature royalty and deities more than the everyday lives of commoners.⁵⁶¹ Obviously, ancient Israel never produced a marriage manual for its citizens, although many view the climax of the Jahwistic creation account as the exhortation, “a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). While this account is not the oldest text in the Hebrew Bible, although placed near the beginning of the canon, it is still surprising that no marriages in the Hebrew Bible conform to this account. Because the biblical accounts of marriages between men and women (rather than divine marriages) are so diverse and found within a variety of contexts, it is extremely difficult to discern a common motif and concept of marriage in the Hebrew Bible.⁵⁶²

This chapter will discuss marriage in the context of the ancient Near East, initially exploring its economic, legal, diplomatic, and cultic aspects. Biblical and extra-biblical accounts will be analyzed in order to demonstrate features common to many marriage texts—courting rituals, betrothal rituals, gift giving, household negotiations, and consummation. Finally, these

⁵⁶⁰Victor P. Hamilton, “Marriage: Old Testament and ANE” in *ABD* vol. 4, ed. David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 560.

⁵⁶¹*Ibid.*

⁵⁶²*Ibid.*

features will be compared to Ps 45 in order to highlight the pronounced Near Eastern character of the marriage ritual found in vv. 8-17 and to support the theory that this account may be the remnant of a *hieros gamos* ceremony in which the king, queen mother, and bride act on behalf of the divine.

Economic Aspects of Marriage: Ancient Mesopotamia & the Biblical World

According to Victor Matthews, “the natural order of life in ancient Mesopotamia assigned particular roles to each person—whether king, priest, soldier, farmer or slave, male or female. Once a person had managed to survive childhood, the expectation was that he or she would become a contributing member of the household and the community.”⁵⁶³ In the Sumerian “Hymn to Gula,” the following stages of a woman’s life are recounted: “I am daughter, I am bride, I am spouse, I am housekeeper.”⁵⁶⁴ Matthews suggests a similar list for a man’s life “I am son, I am bridegroom, I am husband, I am head of household.”⁵⁶⁵

In ancient Mesopotamia, girls married at an early age, between fourteen and twenty, while boys married much later, between twenty-six and thirty-two.⁵⁶⁶ Within the patriarchal households of ancient Mesopotamia, usually the father or eldest brother was responsible for the negotiation of marriage with the bride’s parents or guardians.⁵⁶⁷ On occasion, the groom would

⁵⁶³Victor Matthews, “Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East,” in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 6.

⁵⁶⁴Marten Sol, “Private Life in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *CANE* vol. 2, ed. Jack Sasson (New York: Scribner, 1995), 486-487.

⁵⁶⁵Matthews, “Marriage and Family,” 7.

⁵⁶⁶M. T. Roth, “Age at marriage and the household: a study of Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian forms,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29 (1987): 737.

⁵⁶⁷Samuel Greengus, “Old Babylonian Marriage Ceremonies and Rites,” *JCS* 20 (1966): 59.

be able to negotiate for himself if he was an adult and/or his father had passed away.⁵⁶⁸ Important considerations within marriage negotiations were social parity, economic advantage, and expansion of the kinship network. According to Matthews, social parity was always a “minimum goal.”⁵⁶⁹ No family wanted to marry below their social status, at least when making arrangements for the first wife. This was necessary as the couple’s offspring would inherit property, establish social ties, and create a network of economic connections that would benefit both families.⁵⁷⁰

To date, no evidence of a formal, written marriage contract in Mesopotamia has emerged, yet it does seem likely that there was a formal set of rituals and procedures that accompanied the marriage alliance. Samuel Greengus has demonstrated that most of these contracts were actually negotiated and established in oral form.⁵⁷¹ However, textual evidence exists involving legal protections for both parties as well as the economic details involved with feeding the wedding parties. These celebrations sometimes endured for a lengthy period prior to the transfer of the young woman to her husband’s household.⁵⁷²

Preliminary contracts were made between families to begin the formal process of marriage in ancient Mesopotamia. A formal request was made by the family of the groom, asking (*sālum*) the prospective bride’s father or guardian for consent to the union.⁵⁷³ The Laws of Eshnunna provide a clear statement explaining the necessity of parental consent (CE §27-28):

If a man took another man’s daughter without asking her father

⁵⁶⁸Matthews, “Marriage and Family,” 7.

⁵⁶⁹Ibid.

⁵⁷⁰Ibid.

⁵⁷¹Cf. Greengus, “The Old Babylonian Marriage Contract” *JAOS* 89 (1969): 505-532.

⁵⁷²Meir Malul, “*SILLĀM PATĀRUM* ‘To Unfasten the Pin’ *copula carnalis* and the Formation of Marriage in Ancient Mesopotamia,” *Ex Oriente Lux* 32 (1991-1992): 71.

⁵⁷³Matthews, “Marriage and Family,” 8.

and mother and did not arrange *kirrum* and a marriage pact⁵⁷⁴ with her father and her mother, though she live in his house for a year, she is not his wife.⁵⁷⁵

A *kirrum*, a public ceremony in which the agreement between parties was announced, and a contract with the bride's father and mother were necessary so that the marriage could be officially recognized.⁵⁷⁶ The word *kirrum* actually refers to an earthenware vessel used to contain beer,⁵⁷⁷ but it was also applied to this public occasion of announcement in which the ceremonial libation was shared between the families. Eventually, the term was expanded to include the marriage feast.⁵⁷⁸

In addition to the mutual consent required by the families of the couple, the giving of a bride price, the *terhatum*, and prenuptial agreement regarding potential divorce by either party were included in the contractual arrangement. Some Babylonian texts utilize this term, *terhatum*, to mean no more than the "price for a woman." It has even been demonstrated that some "marriages" were just the purchase of impoverished girls.⁵⁷⁹ Stipulations within the *terhatum* existed for polygamy (usually due to illness or infertility), obligations for the repayment of debts during the betrothal period. The inheritance rights of offspring were also possible aspects of the agreement.⁵⁸⁰

In ancient Mesopotamia, the bridegroom's family was to deliver the bride-price to the bride's household following the consent of the families. According to John van Seters, in Near

⁵⁷⁴"Marriage pact" is a translation of *riksātum* which is generally understood to have been a written document. The translation "marriage pact" is intended to convey this as an oral agreement, which usually does not involve a written document (Greengus, "Old Babylonian Marriage," 62).

⁵⁷⁵Greengus, "Old Babylonian Marriage Ceremonies," 62.

⁵⁷⁶Reuven Yaron, *The Laws of Eshnunna* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1969), 32-33.

⁵⁷⁷*CAD*, 8:408-410.

⁵⁷⁸Greengus, "Old Babylonian Marriage Ceremonies," 57.

⁵⁷⁹J. N. Postgate "On some Assyrian ladies," *Iraq* 41 (1979):79f.

⁵⁸⁰Matthews, "Marriage and Family," 8.

Eastern Law the father had the right to keep the bride payment for his own usage. However, it was a common practice as early as the Old Babylonian period and in the Nuzi texts to return a portion of the bride payment to the bride as her dowry.⁵⁸¹ This practice was not limited to the second millennium. Elephantine papyri and Arabic society from the modern period reveal that the entire bride payment (*mhr*) is given over to the bride.⁵⁸²

The bride-price gift, which was presented on a tray or table and included clothing, jewelry, food, drink, and oil, insured the bridegroom's right to the marriage. The gifts protected the bride from sexual advance or abuse during the period of betrothal.⁵⁸³ M. Stol contends that the bride price was paid in installments.⁵⁸⁴ Texts from Nuzi demonstrate that when the first child is born, another part is paid.⁵⁸⁵ Interestingly, in Mesopotamian documents, at least prior to the Neo-Babylonian era,⁵⁸⁶ no requirement for the bride's virginity prior to the betrothal arrangement is indicated.⁵⁸⁷ Obviously, biblical law places heavy emphasis on this, as is evidenced by Deut 22:13-21 in which proof of a young bride's virginity (בְּתוּלָה) could be required by her new husband and family. In many traditional societies, each household

⁵⁸¹John van Seters, "Jacob's Marriages and ancient near East Customs: a Reexamination," *Harvard Theological Review* 62.4 (Oct 1969): 392.

⁵⁸²Reuven Yaron, *Introduction to the Law of the Aramaic Papyri* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 47f.

⁵⁸³Raymond Westbrook, *Old Babylonian Marriage Law, AfOB* 23 (Horn: Berger, 1988), 36.

⁵⁸⁴M. Stol, "Women in Mesopotamia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 38.2 (1995): 126.

⁵⁸⁵K. Grosz, "Dowry and brideprice in Nuzi," in *Studies on the civilization and culture of Nuzi and the Hurrians I: Studies in Honor of Ernest R. Lacheman on his Seventy-First Birthday*, eds. David Owen and M. A. Morrison (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1981): 176f.

⁵⁸⁶Benno Landsberger, "Jungfraulichkeit: Ein Beitrag zum Thema 'Beilager und Eheschliessung'," in *Symbolae Iuridicae et Historicae Martino David Dedicatae*, ed. J. A. Ankum et. al. (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 2:43.

⁵⁸⁷Malul, "To Unfasten the Pin," 73.

vigorously sought to protect its virgins, as this was a matter of honor.⁵⁸⁸ Virginitly was the “legal guarantee of land and children for a household” in the biblical world,⁵⁸⁹ and as Deut 22 indicates, evidence of this could be required at the time of marital consummation.

The acceptance of the bride-price by the bride’s household was then the basis for her move from the legal control of her family to that of her husband’s household. The term *ahāzum*, or “to take in marriage” is used for this transfer but this does not necessarily mean an immediate physical transport from her father’s/mother’s house or sexual intercourse.⁵⁹⁰ Nonetheless, the parties are bound to legal constraints that restricted all sexual rights from that moment on to the household of the groom. Any violation of these rights by other men, including the father of the groom after the marriage had been consummated, was viewed as an act of adultery or rape.

There were also certain guarantees regarding the *terhatum*, requiring it be cancelled if the bridegroom chose to withdraw from the marriage contract prior to the actual wedding.⁵⁹¹ Interestingly, there is no indication that the prospective bride was involved in the nuptial negotiations, nor that she was obligated to make a formal declaration consenting to the marriage; yet her lack of participation does not necessarily indicate that she was treated like property.⁵⁹² Gen 24 illustrates a fascinating episode of the nuptial agreement as the bride, Rebekah, was asked to consent to the union and agreed before she was sent to the household of Isaac. “They said, ‘we will call the girl, and ask her.’ And they called Rebekah, and said to her, ‘will you go with this man?’ She said, ‘I will ’” (Gen 24:57-58).

⁵⁸⁸Phyllis Bird, “‘To Play the Harlot’: An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor,” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy Day (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 77.

⁵⁸⁹M. J. Giovanni, “Female Chastity Codes in the Circum-Mediterranean: Comparative Perspectives,” in *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, ed. D. D. Gilmore (American Anthropology Association, 1987), 61-74.

⁵⁹⁰Matthews, “Marriage and Family,” 10.

⁵⁹¹Ibid.

⁵⁹²Ibid.

In order to mark the rite of passage of the young bride from child to adult, gifts were given to the bride's family by the family of the groom by an official known as the *susapinnu*.⁵⁹³ This official was associated with the bride and functioned as a guardian of the bride's chastity during the betrothal period and protected the couple on their wedding night from demons that might disrupt the consummation of the marriage.⁵⁹⁴

On the day that the groom entered the household of the bride, the bride bathed and was anointed with oil, an initial ritual of transformation that marked her introduction in to the household of her husband.⁵⁹⁵ In Ps 45, it is the groom who is anointed by YHWH with the "oil of gladness"—a ritual performed only in the context of marriage and thus exudes heavy erotic overtones. In Assyria, anointing took place on the same day as bathing and usually marked a change in legal personality or a rite of incorporation.⁵⁹⁶ In Middle Assyrian Law, anointing the new bride with oil is part of the marriage ritual and is performed by the bridegroom:

42. If a seignior poured oil on the head of a(nother) seignior's daughter on holiday or bought betrothal presents on a festival, they shall not make any return (of the gifts).

43. If the seignior either poured oil on (her) head or brought betrothal-presents (and) the son to whom he assigned the wife either died or fled,
He may give (her) to whichever he wishes of his remaining sons...⁵⁹⁷

A Sumerian ritual text describes the preparation of the marriage bed/couch and the bathing and anointing of the goddess Inanna (which is discussed later in this chapter). The groom's party, comprised of his friends and possibly his parents, was housed and fed by the

⁵⁹³Greengus, "Old Babylonian Marriage Ceremonies," 61, 70.

⁵⁹⁴Meir Malul, "SUSAPINNU: The Mesopotamian Paranymp and His Role," *JESHO* 32 (1989): 270-275.

⁵⁹⁵Greengus, "Old Babylonian Marriage Ceremonies," 65-66.

⁵⁹⁶Ibid, 66.

⁵⁹⁷J. B. Pritchard, ed. *The Ancient Near East: Supplementary Texts and Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 182-183.

bride's household. A text known as UET 5 636 records the expense of such visits where provisions such as grain, oil, beer, and sheep were purchased for the entire wedding party:⁵⁹⁸

On the day that they brought the marriage gift, for those who
brought the marriage gift, 1 qua fine oil
(with which) they anointed themselves;
1 pan...flour, 1 pan course flour, 2 (jars)
"second" beer
2 sheep, their value 2 shekels, 5 qua gee, 5 qua sesame oil,
its value, 1 shekel,
...cake,
bran [cake]s placed...⁵⁹⁹

Further description of the new bride's preparation appears in a fragmentary document containing a lament over the death of Enlil.⁶⁰⁰ The bride is adorned in a wedding garment, and an encircling headband is put on her head.⁶⁰¹ In Ur III and Middle Assyrian texts,⁶⁰² this ceremonial dress may have been a means of honoring the bridegroom or displaying the wealth of her father's household.⁶⁰³ By the wearing the veil, the bride was also displaying the symbol of her married state and her new membership in the household of her husband.⁶⁰⁴

Following the anointing of the bride, which demonstrated the incorporation of the bride into the groom's household, the groom placed a covering or veil onto his new wife—a ritual known as *pussumu*.⁶⁰⁵ According to Babylonian pseudo-prophecy that paints an idyllic picture of

⁵⁹⁸Greengus, "Old Babylonian Marriage Ceremonies," 55-58.

⁵⁹⁹Translated by Benno Landsberger, in "Old Babylonian Marriage Ceremonies," 56.

⁶⁰⁰Georg A. Reisner, *Sumerisch-babylonische Hymnen nach Thontafeln griechischer Zeit* (Berlin: Spemann, 1896), 69.

⁶⁰¹Malul, "*SUSAPINNU*," 248.

⁶⁰²Greengus, "Old Babylonian Marriage Ceremonies," 72 notes 118-119.

⁶⁰³Matthews, "Marriage and Family," 11.

⁶⁰⁴K. Van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 47.

⁶⁰⁵Ibid, 43.

family relations, “the bride will be veiled and she shall humbly serve her husband.”⁶⁰⁶ While the role of the veil in the wedding ceremony is sometimes acknowledged, it is rarely noted that the garment is utilized in a dual capacity. The bride comes to her groom wearing a veil and is later veiled again by her husband; however, this is not the same veil.⁶⁰⁷

In a variety of Mesopotamian texts, the veiling of the bride by the husband is well attested. When the marriage gift (*biblum*) was brought to the home of Šibtu from Zimri Lim, envoys from Mari placed a veil over the princess. Thus, the emissaries acted in the name of the king—although the action was performed by others, he was the juridical person responsible for the veiling.⁶⁰⁸ The Middle Assyrian Laws (§ 41) rule that the man who wants to turn his concubine (*esirtu*) into his legal wife must veil her in front of five or six witnesses while publicly announcing her as his wife. Therefore, the public veiling was the non-verbal part of the ritual by which he proclaimed his bride as his wife.⁶⁰⁹

Physical consummation was the final step in the marriage ritual and is known by the legal phrase *ana bīt emim šasûm*, “to claim the house of the father-in-law.” This final act occurs in the context of the entrance of the bridegroom into the bridal chamber. Upon entering, the bridegroom brought his friends, or witnesses, who would accompany him to the house of his father-in-law⁶¹⁰ and possibly the *susapinnu*, so that they could witness the consummation of the relationship.⁶¹¹ When the bride submitted fully to her husband, the phrase “to unfasten the pin of

⁶⁰⁶Rykle Borger, “Gott Marduk und Gott-König Šulgi als Propheten: Zwei prophetische Texte,” *BiOr* 28 (1971): 3-24.

⁶⁰⁷Van der Toorn, 44.

⁶⁰⁸Ibid.

⁶⁰⁹Ibid.

⁶¹⁰Matthews, “Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East,” 12.

⁶¹¹Meir Malul, “To Unfasten the Pin,” 73, n. 39.

her virginity” was used, most likely in reference to the unpinning of an undergarment around her waist prior to sexual intercourse.⁶¹²

Having consummated the relationship, the bride is now given rights to compensation in the event of divorce⁶¹³ and rights to property if widowed⁶¹⁴—neither of which would have been legal prior to the physical union of her marriage.⁶¹⁵ Through the act of sexual intercourse, the couple’s legal status and social standing within the community had been changed.⁶¹⁶ Moreover, the wife now lived under her husband’s name and thus benefited from his social standing.⁶¹⁷ Following the consummation, and only then, would the family of the bride release her dowry.⁶¹⁸

Victor Matthews utilizes a text (CT 48, 50) from the reign of Ammi-ditana in the Old Babylonian period to illustrate this “transaction” in detail:

Sabītum the daughter of Ibbatum—Ibbatum her father has given her as a Wife into the house of Ilšu-ibni, her father-in-law for his son Warad-Kubi. Two beds, two chairs, one table, two chests, one grindstone, one grindstone for ZÍD.GU-flour, one 10-litre container, one empty *šikkatum*-jar. All of this is what Ibbatum gave to his daughter Sabītum, and arranged for her to enter into the house of her father-in-law Ilšu-ibni. Ibbatum has received ten shekels of silver as her “brideprice”; he has kissed (?) (it?) and has tied it to the fringe of his daughter Sabītum(’s dress). It will be given back to Warad-Kubi. Should Sabītum say to her husband Warad-Kubi: “You are no longer my husband,” they shall tie her up and throw her into the water. And should Warad-Kubi say to his wife Sabītum: “You are no longer my wife,” he shall pay her 1/3 of a mina of silver as separation money. Emuq-Adad is her “father”; he is responsible for what she says (or: for her legal affairs?).⁶¹⁹

Much like the bride-price paid by the groom’s family, the dowry was an economic incentive to create the marriage bond. The manner in which the dowry texts were written

⁶¹²Ibid, 70.

⁶¹³Ibid, 75, n. 56.

⁶¹⁴Martha T. Roth, “The Neo-Babylonian Widow,” *JCS* 43-45(1991): 1-26.

⁶¹⁵Matthews, “Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East,” 12.

⁶¹⁶Westbrook, *Old Babylonian Marriage Law*, 58-59.

⁶¹⁷Van der Toorn, 47.

⁶¹⁸Westbrook, *Old Babylonian Marriage Law*, 46.

⁶¹⁹Translation by Stephanie Dalley, “Old Babylonian Dowries,” *Iraq* 42 (1980):57-58.

suggests that they served to protect the property of the bride in the event of her husband's death or a divorce. It remained as the wife's property once she had given birth to children which then became her legacy to them. Even in the event of her death and her husband's subsequent remarriage, the children still retained full rights to their mother's dowry, and no other children by their father were allowed rights to it.⁶²⁰

Historically, economic interests and property rights have been a primary aspect, if not the most important aspect, of the institution of marriage.⁶²¹ Many traditional definitions of marriage “presuppose a stable arrangement, legally and religiously sanctioned, by which two persons of different sex agree to cohabit for the purpose of procreation, sexual communion, mutual support, and economic cooperation,”⁶²² however marriage has assumed many forms not included in this definition. Many of the statements made about marriage in the Bible are quite disparate from the social realities of the ANE as several types of marriage did exist and are attested to throughout the biblical period. There are no precise biblical laws that deal directly with marriage and the dissolution of marriage; however, the economic aspects of marriage are always evident—especially in laws dealing with rape, adultery, and injuries that lead to a miscarriage.⁶²³

Biblical sources reveal very little regarding the bridal dowry. The Hebrew terms זָבֻד (Gen 30:20) and שְׁלֵחִים (1 Kgs 9:16; Micah 1:14) refer to property given to the woman at marriage and therefore to her husband's household (Gen 30:20; 31:14-16). The bridal gift could include land (Josh 15:18-19; Judg 1:12-15), as Caleb's daughter, Achsah, demands גְּלֵחַת מַיִם (“basins of water”⁶²⁴) in return for being sent into the Negev. In 1 Kgs 9:16, the unnamed

⁶²⁰Matthews, “Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East,” 14.

⁶²¹Blenkinsopp, “The Family in First Temple Israel,” 58.

⁶²²Ibid.

⁶²³Ibid.

⁶²⁴BDB, 165.

Pharaoh gives his daughter, the wife of Solomon, the destroyed city of Gezer as a dowry. Indeed such gifts were an indicator of the wealth, status, and honor of the bride's household.⁶²⁵

“The Marriage of Šibtu” from the Mari Letters, places a strong emphasis upon the economic aspect of the marriage union.⁶²⁶ Within the Mari Letters, King Zimri-Lim (ca. 1780-1760 BCE, middle chronology) sends a messenger to the King Yahmad in Aleppo to request one of his daughters, Šibtu, in marriage. This situation resembles the economic arrangements made between the house of Abraham and Rebekah's “mother's house” in Gen 24. In both accounts, the decisive moment in the marriage ceremony is the entrance of the wedding gifts into the home of the bride and finally their acceptance by the household. The sanctioning of the marriage and the symbolic expression of its completion follows as the bride places the veil upon her head. Since Šibtu's marriage ceremony takes place in the palace of her father, without the presence of the groom, her marriage is considered to be the “earliest marriage by procuracy.”⁶²⁷ The final correspondence of Asqudum deals with the technical problems of bringing the bride, accompanied by her maidens to Mari where she will meet her husband.⁶²⁸

It is not certain whether or not this marriage by procuracy can be assumed from Ps 45:8-16, but the Mari Letters give a clear indication that the principle parts of the marriage ceremony take place in the home of the bride. It seems the process of handing over gifts to the father of the bride would have preceded the ceremony seen in Ps 45. In the context of the “Marriage of Šibtu,” Ps 45 would take place at the time of the bride's arrival at the palace of the king of Mari.⁶²⁹

⁶²⁵Blenkinsopp, 60.

⁶²⁶Schroeder, “A Love Song,” 422.

⁶²⁷Ibid, 423.

⁶²⁸Ibid, 422.

⁶²⁹Ibid.

Gen 24 tells the story of Isaac and Rebekah's marriage and bears a strong resemblance to the "Marriage of Šibtu."⁶³⁰ The matrimonial mission of Asqudum is paralleled by that of Abraham's servant, who is equipped with the wedding gifts in order to locate a bride for Isaac. Here, the marriage is completed as the bride's family (her mother and brother) accepts the gifts, Rebekah agrees, and she places the veil on her head.⁶³¹ From the list of gifts from Abraham that his servant delivers to Rebekah and her family, one could conclude that Abraham was a wealthy man. The number of gifts her family receives when she marries emphasizes the economic basis of a union between a husband and his primary wife. Her indirect dowry enriches the marriage fund and helps to secure her position in the household and that of any children she may bear.⁶³²

Rebekah is also sent off to her husband with a blessing much like that of Ps 45:17, "may you, our sister, become thousand of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes," (Gen 24:60). The central purpose of this marriage seems to be expressed here—the creation of a lineage.⁶³³

An interesting contrast presents itself in the story of Rebekah and Isaac to that of the marriage in Ps 45. Precise instructions are given to Abraham's servant as he sets out to "procure" Rebekah, "swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, but will go to the land of my birth and get a wife for my son Isaac." Abraham's instructions indicate an emphasis upon endogamy, while the marriages of the unnamed king in Ps 45 and Zimri-Lim appear to be exogamous situations; both kings acquire foreign brides from outside their tribes and clans. The

⁶³⁰Ibid, 423.

⁶³¹Ibid, 424.

⁶³²Naomi Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis 24: A Household Economics Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 84.

⁶³³Schroeder, 423.

choice of a partner for an unmarried woman in the biblical world and within the larger context of the ancient Near East was obviously a matter of concern for the entire household to which she belonged and for the household to which she was to be transferred.⁶³⁴ According to Joseph Blenkinsopp, “the exchange of women was the most significant of the transactions between households, too important to be left to the vagrancies of individual choice.”⁶³⁵ While this description of marital practices in the biblical world seemingly reduces women to currency, it does help to explain the varying traditions of exogamy and endogamy in the creation of alliances between certain social groups. The marital practices of certain societies obviously depended upon their economic needs, whether the need was for new alliances or, conversely, maintaining consanguinity.⁶³⁶ Abraham’s actions in Gen 24 are a means to fulfill God’s promise of progeny through Isaac and maintain the consanguinity of the newly emerging covenant community.

Gen 24 and the “House of the Mother”

The language of Gen 24 seems to recall the courtship of two lovers in the Song of Songs. The female narrator mentions her mother often but never her father while her brothers appear to assume the guardian role of a father.⁶³⁷ Like Rebekah in Gen 24, the female narrator in Song gives the final approval of her lover. In Song, the woman and man pursue each other equally. The Song is definitely a woman’s story and the house is her mother’s,⁶³⁸ as is Rebekah’s, Šibtu’s and Inanna’s. The “mother’s house” is unique within the Hebrew Bible as it is only mentioned on 4 occasions: Gen 24, Ruth 1, Song 3, and Song 8. Carol Meyers notes that within the Hebrew

⁶³⁴Blenkinsopp, “The Family in First Temple Israel,” 59.

⁶³⁵Ibid.

⁶³⁶Ibid.

⁶³⁷Nicholas Ayo, *Sacred Marriage: The Wisdom of the Song of Songs* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 133.

⁶³⁸Ibid, 132.

Bible there are several places the “house of the mother” indicates the same entity as the “house of the father.”⁶³⁹ She asserts that the “house of the mother” is the female oriented counterpart to the “house of the father,” a term found many times in the Hebrew Bible. In the instances that the “house of the mother” is used with the Hebrew Bible, “it is linked to love, wisdom, women’s agency, and marriage.”⁶⁴⁰ Clearly this is the situation in Song as the female narrator takes her beloved to her “mother’s house, to the room where she gave me birth.” There is no mention of the man’s chambers; he leads her to his wine rooms in 2:4, “he brought me to the banquet room and his banner of love was over me.” It appears that the male lover goes to her mother’s house by day to court her (2:8-13), and by night to seek a private rendezvous (5:2-6).⁶⁴¹

With the emphasis on the house of the mother, “there is also the intimation of a matriarchal culture, in which the critical lineage is that of the female line.”⁶⁴² As the female narrator brings her male lover to her mother’s house and her mother’s bed, she brings him into the “legitimate line of the culture, making him legitimate, giving him a part of the heritage.”⁶⁴³ The house of the mother is the place where the romance is centered in Song of Songs as it is here she shares the secrets of erotic love.⁶⁴⁴ Thus the themes of courting (3:4), birthing (6:9), feeding (8:1), and mating (8:2) are focused upon this central location.⁶⁴⁵ However, Frymer-Kensky would argue that the context of the Song lies in the sacred marriage ritual, that which provides a

⁶³⁹Meyers, “Returning Home,” in *A Feminist Companion to Ruth*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 95.

⁶⁴⁰Leila Leah Bronner, “The Invisible Relationship Made Visible,” in *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible, 2nd Series*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 188.

⁶⁴¹Ayo, 133.

⁶⁴²Ibid, 134.

⁶⁴³Ibid.

⁶⁴⁴Ibid, 133.

⁶⁴⁵Ibid.

“powerful symbol for the union of forces involved in the creation of fertility.”⁶⁴⁶ I contend that Ps 45 also has its origin in the sacred marriage ritual. The psalmist allows us a tantalizing glimpse into the events that lead to the consummation of the union between the king and his new bride, the queen, as she is blessed by the queen mother, and led into the chambers of the king.

Another interesting structural parallel to Gen 24 is found in Ugaritic, with the marriage of the epic hero King Kret.⁶⁴⁷ As the epic begins, Kret’s wife has “departed,” which is most likely to be understood as a euphemism for “died,” and therefore Kret seeks a second marriage because she had provided him no heir.⁶⁴⁸

The clan [of Kret] died out;
 the house of the [k]ing was destroyed,
 though there were seven [br]others,
 eight sons of a mother.
 Kret, his children wiped out,
 Kret is devoid of an estate.
 He had taken his wife,
 his destined bride.
 He took a wife, but she departed.
 Progeny by a mother had been his:
 1/3 died though healthy,
 1/4 of disease,
 1/5 Reshef carried off,
 1/6 by the Lads of Yamm,
 1/7 fell by the sword.⁶⁴⁹

The remainder of the epic deals with Kret’s journey at El’s direction to Udom, his eventual obtaining of Harrai as a wife, their trip back to Kret’s home, their marriage, and finally the divine promise of progeny. This text demonstrates that romantic love did appear to play a role in marriage at Ugarit. Kret describes his new wife, Hurrai, in terms reminiscent of the Song

⁶⁴⁶T. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddess* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 55-56.

⁶⁴⁷Hamilton, 560.

⁶⁴⁸*ANET*, 143.

⁶⁴⁹Edward L. Greenstein, "Kirta," in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, ed. S. B. Parker. Writings from the Ancient World 9 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 9-48.

of Songs: “Whose charm is like Anat’s charm/ Whose loveliness is like Astarte’s loveliness/ Whose brows are lapis lazuli/ Eyes, bowls of alabaster!”⁶⁵⁰ Interestingly, distinct structural parallels exist between the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah in Gen 24 and the marriage of Kret and Hurrai: 1) lack of a wife; 2) commission to secure a wife; 3) travel to the land of the future wife; 4) divine aid; 5) beauty of the bride extolled; 6) bride price negotiations; 7) sending off the bride; 8) marriage blessing; 9) travel back with the bride; and 10) the marriage.⁶⁵¹

The Diplomatic Marriage

It appears that endogamy was the norm during the patriarchal narratives, as has been discussed. However, from the beginning of the monarchy, “exogamy is socially tolerated to the point where it inspires indifference rather than anxiety.”⁶⁵² This attitude continues well into the First Temple period as it is assumed the new wife will adapt to her new husband’s cultural and religious customs. Several texts seem to oppose this ideal, such as Jezebel, Maacah, Athaliah’s allegiances to Asherah and Baal. However, as mentioned in Chapter Three, the Deuteronomistic historians portrayed them as deviant when they most likely were practicing normative religion. According to the Deuteronomistic historians, Solomon’s failure as a monarch was a direct result of the religious influences of his foreign wives. Again however, this theological bias and xenophobia is an example of the anti-ideal for the authors, who viewed Torah disobedience as the basis for the nation’s punishment. However, Ps 45 offers an exception to the bias found throughout the Hebrew Bible, as the bride, a “daughter of Tyre,” is clearly of foreign origin, and is not evaluated negatively. While her religious allegiances are not clearly revealed, I will argue

⁶⁵⁰Hamilton, 560.

⁶⁵¹Ibid, 560-561.

⁶⁵²Brenner, *The Israelite Woman*, 116-117.

that they are implied by the nature of the ceremony, the position of the queen mother, and the sacred attire worn by the bride (cf. Chapter Five).

According to Victor Hamilton, perhaps the legal prohibitions against intermarriage were a Deuteronomistic response to conscious deviation from societal norms. This deviation was made even more possible by the religious and political demoralization brought by the fall of Israel in 722 BCE to Assyria.⁶⁵³ Mixed marriages were so prevalent during the Second Temple Period that Ezra and Nehemiah both felt compelled to fight against this practice (Ez 9-10; Neh 13:23ff).⁶⁵⁴ According to the prophets Hosea, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah, women (and often foreign women) were viewed as the chief practitioners of fertility cults. Israelite women are also indicted in this so-called crime, yet foreign women seem to be the main perpetrators.⁶⁵⁵ The postexilic prophet Malachi, most likely a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah, chastised his people for marrying “the daughter of a foreign god” (Mal 2:11) rather than utilizing the phrase “foreign woman” in an attempt to suggest the inevitable religious influence that often accompanied exogamous marriages.⁶⁵⁶

Royal marriages in Israel and Judah often helped to establish alliances, strengthen treaties, assuage political strife, and reinforce existing relationships.⁶⁵⁷ Several accounts in the books of Kgs describe the political marriage: David’s marriage to Maacah, daughter of the king of Geshur; Ahab’s marriage to the Tyrian princess Jezebel; Jehoram’s marriage to Athaliah; and Solomon’s marriage to Naamah,⁶⁵⁸ to name a few. Additional examples include royal marriages

⁶⁵³Hamilton, “Marriage: OT and ANE,” 564.

⁶⁵⁴Brenner, *The Israelite Woman*, 115-116.

⁶⁵⁵Ibid, 117-118.

⁶⁵⁶Hamilton, “Marriage: OT and ANE,” 564.

⁶⁵⁷Scheering, “Queen,” 584.

⁶⁵⁸According to the LXX, Naamah was the “daughter of Ana, son of Naash, king of the children of Ammon.”

to commoners in order to ensure the allegiance of their powerful families, such as the marriage of Zibiah to Ahaziah. According to 2 Kgs 12:2, Zibiah was a native of Beer-Sheba, and her marriage to Ahaziah, King of Judah (reigned 843 to 842 BCE) may represent Judah's attempt at an alliance with the Negev tribes close to the Edomite border.⁶⁵⁹

These examples of exogamy appear frequently in the books of Kgs as members of the Judean royal family frequently took wives from neighboring kingdoms or from the provinces. Thus, queen mothers in the Israelite and Judean royal household came from a variety of locations—quite a departure from the endogamous practices preferred in the ancestral narratives (Gen 24: 38, 29:12) in which households normally looked within the boundaries of the kinship structures of the clan and tribe to find suitable partners for their children.⁶⁶⁰

Part of King Zimri-Lim's political strategy for maintaining strong alliances involved the "giving of daughters in political marriages."⁶⁶¹ Royal daughters utilized for such means were expected to serve their father by acting as informants on the political and socioeconomic conditions in their region. This precarious position often caused friction with husbands who were not fully devoted to their subservient position to Mari. One of King Zimri-Lim's daughters, Inibsarri, was given to Ibal-Addu of Asklakka in marriage but soon discovered that a previous wife of Ibal-Addu's still maintained the position of head wife and queen.⁶⁶² She then writes to her father about her husband's traitorous activities, begging him to allow her to return to Mari, and then escapes to neighboring Nahur.⁶⁶³

⁶⁵⁹Schearing, "Zibiah," in *Women in Scripture*, 168.

⁶⁶⁰Perdue, "The Israelite and Early Jewish Family," in *Families in Ancient Israel* eds. Leo Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, et. al. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997),183.

⁶⁶¹Ibid.

⁶⁶²P. Artzi, and A. Malamat, "The Correspondence of Šibtu, Queen of Mari in ARM X," *Orientalia* 40 (1971): 81.

⁶⁶³Ibid.

Another of Zimri-Lim's daughters, Kiru, was married to Haya-Sumu of Ilansura. Again, Zimri-Lim's political strategy resulted in the misery of his daughter's marriage. He had not only given her in marriage but had established her as mayor. He had also given Haya-Sumu another daughter, Sibatum, possibly as a lesser-ranking wife, but who had become her husband's favored wife, thus inciting the anger of Kiru.⁶⁶⁴ This "love triangle" escalated until Haya-Sumu threatened the life of Kiru.⁶⁶⁵ She finally appeals to her father to allow her to return to Mari and in ARM X 135, Zimri-Lim instructs Queen Šibtu to arrange for Kiru's return to Mari.⁶⁶⁶ There are other accounts of the marriages of Zimri-Lim's daughters—many marriages still unsuccessful while several of the king's daughters describe happiness in their "politically motivated marriages."⁶⁶⁷ Several of Zimri-Lim's daughters were so satisfied in their marriages that they wrote to their father on behalf of their husbands (ARM X 98).

In the aforementioned "Epic of Kret," King Kret extols the beauty of his new bride Hurrai, comparing her to the goddesses Anat and Astarte. While Kret did place heavy emphasis upon the beauty of Hurrai when he addresses Pabil, the main purpose of the king's marriage was to provide an heir to the throne and strengthen political ties.⁶⁶⁸ In the thirteenth century BCE, Ugarit had fallen under the domination of the Hittite empire. Thus numerous marriages between Hittite princesses and Syrian kings took place in order to strengthen political stability, much like the political alliances established with intermarriage between Israelite and Judean royalty.

⁶⁶⁴Fontaine, "A Heifer from Thy Stable," 169.

⁶⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶⁶B. F. Batto, *Studies on Women at Mari* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 42-48.

⁶⁶⁷Fontaine, "A Heifer from Thy Stable," 169.

⁶⁶⁸Carole Roche, "The Lady of Ugarit," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 63.4 (Dec 2000): 214.

Marriage as Cultic Ritual/ Sacred Marriage

This portion of the chapter will discuss the ritual of sacred marriage that was prevalent in the literature of the ancient Near East, focusing mainly upon the parallel rituals of courting and marital consummation. Texts from Mesopotamia, ancient Israel, and Egypt featuring the marriage rituals of both deities and royalty will be utilized to demonstrate common as well as disparate roles of the bride, groom, and their households during the nuptial ceremonies. These texts will eventually serve to illuminate Ps 45 and its place within the sacred marriage literature of the ancient Near East.

“Marriage presupposes courting and wooing, and the Sacred Marriage was no exception.”⁶⁶⁹ One such example comes from the “Marriage of Sud,” a Sumerian account of marriage between Enlil, god of Nippur, and Sud (who becomes Ninlil following her betrothal), daughter of a minor deity from Eres.⁶⁷⁰ This story is thought to have been composed to commemorate a cultic legend celebrating the gods Enlil and Ninlil. The story behind this myth begins when Enlil seeks out a wife and comes to the city of Eres where he sees Sud, the daughter of Nanigbal. He immediately mistakes her for a prostitute (much like Gen 38), and asks her to be his concubine. Sud refutes his offer and demands an apology. Enlil then sends his servant, Nuska, with gifts to the home of Nanigbal, mother of Sud, for her daughter’s hand in marriage. She accepts, and Sud is to be wed to Enlil. This portion of the story, the mother’s address to Sud, and Sud’s entering Enlil’s palace closely parallels Ps 45:8-16.⁶⁷¹

(Nuska) treated nicely Nangibal, the mother-in-law, the woman
Slandered by Enlil,

⁶⁶⁹S. N. Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 67.

⁶⁷⁰Schroeder, 425.

⁶⁷¹Ibid.

(But) the lady disregarded the flatterer, spoke to her (daughter):
 “May you be Enlil’s favorite wife, may he treat you well.
 May he embrace you, the most beautiful of all, may he tell you:
 ‘Beloved, open wide!’
 Never forget charms and pleasure, make them last a long time.
 You two make love on the ‘hill,’ have children afterwards.
 Entering the house and living there, may abundance precede you,
 May joy follow you. Let the population line your way, let the
 people...spontaneously.
 May the fate I have decreed for you come to pass, go with head
 held high into the August House.”
 Aruru grasped her hand and took her away into the August Shrine,
 She mad her enter the Ekur of lapis lazuli, poured the best perfume
 over her face.
 In the sleeping quarters, in the flowered bed pleasing like a cedar
 forest, Enlil made love to his wife and took great pleasure in it
 (lines 137-149).⁶⁷²

Following this, Enlil changes his wife’s name to Ninlil/Nintu, “the Lady-Who-Gives-Birth and the Lady-of-the-Open-Legs.” From that moment on, Ninlil the queen, would be the mother goddess.⁶⁷³ In a legal sense, this marriage procedure follows closely the pattern found in the Mari Letters as well as Gen 24: the messenger goes to the bride’s house with the groom’s instructions and the wedding gift is accepted by the head of the household as well as the bride. From a form-critical perspective, the same acts that culminate in the consummation of the marriage are paralleled in Ps 45:8-16. The first act is the address by the mother of the bride in “Enlil and Ninlil” (lines 139-145) or in the case of the psalm, the address by the queen mother (Ps 45:10-13). Next follows the instruction of the bride about her new role, then a description of the bride being led to the palace of her husband, the king, for the consummation of the marriage (“Enlil and Ninlil” lines 146-147; Ps 45:14-16).⁶⁷⁴

⁶⁷²M. Civil, “Enlil and Ninlil: The Marriage of Sud,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103 (1983): 43-66.

⁶⁷³Schroeder, 425.

⁶⁷⁴Ibid, 426.

In ancient Ugarit, the marriage between deities was considered the third of three levels of marriage: marriage among mortals, marriage of heroes (such as Kret), marriage between gods and goddesses.⁶⁷⁵ One union of particular interest occurs between the Canaanite moon god Yarih and the Mesopotamian moon goddess Nikkal. Like most sacred marriages, the primary purpose of the wedding is fertility—symbolized by the child that Nikkal will bear to Yarih. Yarih offers the father of Nikkal an exorbitant amount of money for a bride-price (*muhr*): “a thousand shekels of silver/ A myriad of gold” (which demonstrates the vast wealth of the gods, beyond that of any human) so that “she may enter his house.”⁶⁷⁶ In return for this, he will make her fertile, “I shall make her field into a vineyard/ The field of her love into an orchard.”⁶⁷⁷ Of course, this text records a *hieros gamos*, whose fertility creates bountiful harvests for humanity. Although a mythological text, it demonstrates many of the major points of marriage at Ugarit: the groom paying the bride-price to the bride’s father, the dowry for the bride, a virilocal or patrilocal marriage, and a marked concern for fertility.⁶⁷⁸ Of course these features are not unique to Ugarit and share many commonalities with the marriage customs throughout the ANE—both human and divine.

A similar situation occurs in the Sumerian account of the courtship between Inanna and Dumuzi. The bridegroom, Dumuzi, has to offer gifts to the mother’s house in order to ask for the hand of Inanna since the goddess was far closer to her mother Ningal than to her father.⁶⁷⁹ It is from her mother that Inanna seeks advice and approval when Dumuzi comes to the door. Thus

⁶⁷⁵Hamilton, 561.

⁶⁷⁶C. H. Gordon, *Ugarit and Minoan Crete* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1966), 99.

⁶⁷⁷Ibid.

⁶⁷⁸Hamilton, “Marriage: Old Testament and ANE,” 561.

⁶⁷⁹Kramer, 76.

the bridegroom comes with gifts of milk, cream, and beer, begging for admittance.⁶⁸⁰ Inanna's mother urges her to let him in saying:

Lo, the youth, he is your father,
 Lo, the youth, he is your mother,
 His mother cherishes [?] you like your mother,
 His father cherishes [?] like your father,
 Open the house, my queen, open the house.

Therefore, Inanna prepares herself to meet Dumuzi much like Sud prepares for Enlil:

Inanna, at her mother's command,
 Bathed herself, anointed herself with goodly oil,
 Covered her body with the noble *pala* garment,
 Arranged the lapis lazuli about her neck,
 Grasped the seal in her hand.
 The Lordly Queen awaited expectantly,
 Dumuzi pressed open the door,
 Came forth into the house like the moonlight,
 Gazed at her joyously,
 Embraced her, kissed her...⁶⁸¹

In the religious practices of Sumeria and Babylon (2100-1800 BCE) the performance of the sacred marriage was a royal privilege. The king represented Dumuzi, but the identity of the female partner in the sacred marriage is relatively unclear; however, it is generally assumed that she is a priestess.⁶⁸²

Many scholars argue that the origin of the Song of Songs lies in ancient Mesopotamia. They contend this account of sacred marriage had been part of a fertility cult that the nomadic Hebrew borrowed from their urbanized Canaanite neighbors. The Canaanites had borrowed the sacred marriage act from the Tammuz-Ishtar cult of the Akkadians, a modified form of the Dumuzi-Inanna cult of the Sumerians.⁶⁸³ As it has been noted repeatedly, traces of such fertility

⁶⁸⁰Ibid.

⁶⁸¹Ibid, 77.

⁶⁸²Weinfeld, "Feminine Features in the Imagery of God in Israel," 525.

⁶⁸³Kramer, 89.

cults are found throughout the Hebrew Bible, and though the prophets harshly condemned it, it was never completely eradicated.⁶⁸⁴ The prophets themselves even utilized some of this cultic symbolism as they frequently described the relationship between YHWH and Israel as that of a husband and wife. This could be indicative of the existence of a sacred marriage between YHWH and a goddess—mostly likely the Canaanite Asherah. Even as late as Mishnaic times, the maidens of Jerusalem are reported to have gone out at the close of the Day of Atonement during the “Festival of Trees” to dance in the vineyard. There they were met by youths singing “go forth and gaze, daughters of Zion, on King Solomon and the crown with which his mother crowned him on his wedding day, on the day his heart was overjoyed” (Song 3:11). This could be the remnant of a late, if barely recognizable, ancient Hebrew sacred marriage rite.⁶⁸⁵

Stunning parallels exist between the Song and more than a dozen cuneiform Sumerian sacred marriage songs. These similarities are not confined to stylistic features, such as the portrayal of the male lover as both shepherd and king, and of the female as both bride and sister, or of the “formal interlacing of soliloquies, colloquies, and refrains; they extend to theme, motif, and occasionally even to phraseology.”⁶⁸⁶

In the first four verses of Song, the female narrator pleads with her male lover, one whom “the maidens love,” to bring her into his chambers and “to kiss me with the kisses of your mouth, for your love is better than wine.” These words seem to recall the words exchanged between a young bride of the King Shu-Sin⁶⁸⁷ who rhapsodized:

“Bridegroom dear to my heart,
 Goodly is your pleasure, honey-sweet...
 Bridegroom, let me give you of my caresses,

⁶⁸⁴Ibid, 90.

⁶⁸⁵Ibid.

⁶⁸⁶Ibid, 92.

⁶⁸⁷Ibid.

My precious sweet, I would be laved [?] by honey,
 In the bedchamber, honey-filled,
 Let us enjoy your goodly beauty;
 Lion let me give you of my caresses...
 Bridegroom, you have taken your pleasure of me,
 Tell my mother, she will give you delicacies [?]
 Tell my father, he will give you gifts.”

This song was sung by a devotee of the goddess of love who actually describes it as a *balbale* of Inanna—the singing of a rapturous union with her bridegroom, the king Shu-Sin, that “gladdens the heart of Enlil.” This sexual union would bring the blessings of the god to the land as well as the people.⁶⁸⁸ One can imagine such events taking place in Ps 45, following the procession of the bride into the king’s chambers. Perhaps the king and new queen sang of their union in words that would recall the passion of the Song of Songs and bring the blessings of a *balbale* of Inanna.

At Hatshepsut’s temple in Deir el-Bahri, Egypt, one of two extant versions of the Holy Wedding in the eighteenth dynasty is found. Here the meeting of the god Amun-Re and the mortal mother of the king is depicted and the conception and birth of the king is described.⁶⁸⁹ Careful examination of these scenes indicates, however, that although the physical birth of the king is associated with his mortal mother, a relationship between Amun-Re, the goddess Hathor, and the king is suggested. This relationship parallels the divine family of the Old Kingdom in which the meeting between the god and the royal consort results in the birth of the king. The child, however, is presented not to Amun and Ahmose in the final scenes but to Amun and

⁶⁸⁸Ibid, 93.

⁶⁸⁹Lana Troy, *Patterns of Queenship*, 56.

Hathor. Hathor was seen as the divine mother of the king, a complement to the mortal mother, and a source of rebirth just as Ahmose is the source of birth.⁶⁹⁰

Hathor and the king are seen as mother and son in a divine family in which Re, or Amun Re, can be identified as the father.⁶⁹¹ The consort relationship between the king and the goddess Hathor also depends upon the composition of this family group. One specific occasion, the Heb Sed celebration,⁶⁹² allows for the definitive identification of Hathor in the consort role in relationship to the king. This relationship is depicted in the reliefs from the tomb of Kheruef, overseer of the household of Amenhotep III's (reigned 1391 to 1354 BCE) consort Teye.⁶⁹³ The presentation of the Heb Sed found in the tomb includes a scene in which the king is found seated next to the goddess. The king's wife Teye stands behind the couple.

The Heb Sed celebration contains an important element of Hathoric performance—acrobatic dances that accompany the king's participation in the rituals of the Heb Sed. According to E. F. Wente, the enactment of the Hathoric ritual and the presence of the goddess herself suggested that the Heb Sed included a “Holy Wedding” between the king and Hathor.⁶⁹⁴ The inscriptions that accompany the scene describe Teye's role. This text compares the king to Re and Teye to Maat. With the goddess Hathor at his side, Amenhotep III is represented as the consort of the goddess, and as the god Re, “father” of the king. If the purpose of the Heb Sed is indeed renewal, it is therefore logical that Hathor should appear as the consort of the king at this

⁶⁹⁰Ibid.

⁶⁹¹Ibid.

⁶⁹² The Heb-Sed is the ritual celebration or jubilee of a king's reign. Normally, it was first held during the thirtieth regnal year of a king, and from then on, every three years. During the celebrations, the king performed a ritual run and dance, aimed at proving that he was still physically able to rule the country. In doing so, he was also rejuvenated and reborn.

⁶⁹³Troy, 56.

⁶⁹⁴E. F. Wente, “Hathor at the Jubilee,” in *Studies in Honor of John A. Wilson* SAOC 35 (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1969), 90.

point. He is represented in the declining phase of his office that is to be renewed through participation in the Heb Sed.⁶⁹⁵

“Hathor as the mother-consort to the king affirms the relationship between the kingship and the pattern of cosmic renewal.”⁶⁹⁶ The king enters into the role of the male principle—both as father and son—in his relationship with the goddess. This aspect of the kingship is reinforced through the association of the king with Hathor’s cult.⁶⁹⁷

At Luxor, Hathor and the queen mother are depicted embracing, and Hathor then accompanies the queen mother to the birthing chair where she will deliver the king.⁶⁹⁸ In addition to these scenes at Luxor, a dualistic depiction of Hathor with the “mother of the gods,” or *mwt ntr*, Mut (whose identity as mother goddess known from the eighteenth dynasty onward⁶⁹⁹) is utilized to bring together Hathor and the queen mother. This is accomplished by the presence of symbolism for both Lower and Upper Egypt—the disc and horns and the vulture crown, respectively. In the concluding scenes, Hathor, accompanied by Mut, presents the child to Amun-Re. The Holy Wedding sequence therefore combines the theme of the divine birth of the king with that of the cycle of his birth and resurrection.

A New Year’s Festival in Bethel

The liturgy of a New Year’s festival has been uncovered in what is known as “the Aramaic Text in Demotic Script,” now known as papyrus 63 from the Amherst collection. This papyrus is one of nineteen found in an earthen jar near Thebes, several of which can be dated

⁶⁹⁵Troy, 56.

⁶⁹⁶Ibid.

⁶⁹⁷Ibid.

⁶⁹⁸Ibid, 66.

⁶⁹⁹Ibid, 60.

from 139 to 112 BCE.⁷⁰⁰ The papyrus is a collection of cultic texts, mainly prayers, with a story at the end. With the exception of a few words, the text is entirely in Aramaic and is written in a peculiar type of demotic.⁷⁰¹ This New Year's festival is celebrated in Epiph=Tishri (VIII/13, XV/2), like the Jewish Rosh Hashanah holiday, rather than in Nisan, the first month of the Persian-Babylonia calendar.⁷⁰² The rituals of the festival, narrated by the text, are similar to the Babylonian Akitu festival. Like the Akitu festival, they involve the head of the community, whom the narrator refers to as a judge, but in the ritual he is addressed as "king," probably as a representative of the royal family.⁷⁰³

The ceremony begins with the king's arrival at the gate leading into the courtyard of the New Year's chapel that appears to have been built for the occasion beside a graveyard. There, the celebrant recites a blessing, and a voice from inside the chapel calls out to him to enter. He enters, washes his hands, and a statue of Nana, the Queen of Rash, is brought before the assembly of the gods. The gods then rise from their thrones and order her to be seated among them. Each of the assembled gods blesses the king, sheep are slaughtered, sixty singers chant in song, while sixty temple servants burn myrrh and frankincense. The chief god feasts on lamb and becomes inebriated with wine to the accompaniment of harp and lyre music while ducks are brought out on ivory platters.⁷⁰⁴

The sacred marriage ritual is the high-point of the ceremony. The king initiates the rite by speaking to the queen, "Nana, thou art my wife. In thy bridal chamber, a priest sings. Nana, bring

⁷⁰⁰Percy Newberry, *The Amherst Papyri* (London, 1899), 55.

⁷⁰¹Charles Nims and Richard Steiner, "A Paganized Version of Psalm 20:2-6 From the Aramaic Text in Demotic Script," *JAOS* 103 (1983), 262.

⁷⁰²R. C. Steiner, "The Aramaic Text in Demotic Script: The Liturgy of a New Year's Festival Imported from Bethel to Syrene by Exiles from Rash," *JAOS* 111(Ap-Je 1991): 362.

⁷⁰³Ibid.

⁷⁰⁴Ibid.

near to me thy lips.” Outside of the bridal chamber the king and goddess keep a vigil, while music is played to keep them awake. At the appropriate time, the king invites the goddess to enter the bridal chamber, “My beloved, enter the door into our house. With my mouth, consort of our lord, let me kiss thee.” They enter a “perfumed hideaway” where the goddess is laid upon an embroidered bedspread. The ceremony culminates as Nana and Baal of Heaven exchange blessings and a promise is made by the king to rebuild the ruined capital of Rash.⁷⁰⁵

It appears that the authors of this text may have been deportees from Bethel, living in Egypt. A dialogue within the text contains the words of a man who relates that he was forced to abandon his home, a magnificent, “city full of ivory houses.” In a later dialogue within the text, a young man discloses that he is a native of Judea, his brothers from Samaria.⁷⁰⁶ Interestingly, the sacred marriage ritual in the text is followed by a “pagan version of psalm 20.”⁷⁰⁷ This text has been linked by scholars such as M. Weinfeld⁷⁰⁸ and Z. Zevit⁷⁰⁹ to Jeroboam’s temple in Bethel, a city renowned for its “ivory houses” (Amos 3:14-15). This “pagan version” is a hymn to Horus that closely parallels vv. 2-6 of Ps 20, a royal psalm seeking God’s help for the ruler which may have been utilized at the time of enthronement. It has been proposed that it would have been used in an annual festival or anniversary of kingship, or even a New Year festival, yet some assert it was more likely a liturgy used prior to a military campaign.⁷¹⁰ Interestingly, Ps 20 shares

⁷⁰⁵This is probably a reference to “the land between Babylonia and Elam, which the Assyrians call Rash/Arash,” (Steiner, 363). It is possible that Ashurbanipal deported inhabitants of Rash to Samaria and specifically to the city of Bethel (Steiner, 363).

⁷⁰⁶Ibid.

⁷⁰⁷Ibid.

⁷⁰⁸M. Weinfeld, “The Pagan Version of Psalm 20:2-6: Vicissitudes of a Psalmic Creation in Israel and its Neighbors,” [Hebrew], *EI* (1985): 131.

⁷⁰⁹Zevit, “The Common Origin of the Aramaicized Prayer to Horus and of Psalm 20,” *JAOS* (1990): 224.

⁷¹⁰Peter Craigie, *Psalms 1-50 World Biblical Commentary* vol. 19, ed. Bruce Metzger (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 185.

common features with Ps 45:1-8 that also calls the king God's anointed and glorifies the king's military might. Perhaps both Ps 20 and Ps 45 were utilized as part of the New Year's or Enthronement Festival that culminated with the *hieros gamos* ritual suggested in Ps 45.

It is remarkable that a sacred marriage ceremony, imported from Bethel and appropriated for a Jewish community in Egypt, survived as late as the second century BCE. It is even more remarkable that the sacred marriage text occurs together with an adapted version of Ps 20. It is not difficult to see similarities between Ps 45 and the aforementioned sacred marriage text: the presence of gods/God, reverence for the queen, use of exotic spices, the presence of singers and musicians, the entrance of the king and queen into the bridal chamber, and the bestowal of blessings on the royal couple. Finally, the reference to "ivory palaces" within both texts could point to a common origin for both Ps 45 and the sacred marriage text from Bethel, although this would be difficult to determine.

Conclusion

As it has been demonstrated, many marriage texts throughout the ancient Near East share remarkably common features regarding the economic negotiations (courtship), and nuptial rituals of the bride and groom. In both divine and human marital negotiations, the concerns are primarily for the maintenance and ultimate proliferation of the bride's and groom's households. For both gods and humans, the marriage gifts to the family of the bride as well as their subsequent acceptance were of primary importance, as was the dowry of the bride. Of course in most marital arrangements, fertility of the couple was the utmost concern. For the divine marriage, the livelihood of the nation was at stake, while for the human marriage, the perpetuation of a lineage was at stake.

When viewing Ps 45 in its Near Eastern context, it becomes clear we are only witness to a portion of the elaborate ceremony. Prior to the praise of the king in vv.2-9, surely elaborate negotiations took place between the households of the Tyrian princess and the king.

Undoubtedly, the princess prepared for the ceremony and consummation by dressing in elaborate ritual robes, perfuming and beautifying herself, and heeding the marital advice of the queen mother, as well as perhaps her own mother. Following the ceremony seen in vv. 14-16, the ritual consummation would have taken place as the bride is sent off with the blessings of the queen mother. Their union would ensure continuity for the royal lineage and prosperity for the nation.

CHAPTER FIVE: “AT YOUR RIGHT HAND STANDS THE QUEEN MOTHER”

Introduction

The superscription of Ps 45 immediately intrigues the reader as we are lured by the promise of a “love song.” The audience is instantly captivated by the fantastical description of a god-like warrior-king, whose majesty and might is lauded by the psalmist. An exotic foreign princess dressed in rich opulence awaits her bridegroom, the king, alongside her anxious companions, as the queen mother advises and blesses her. Together, the king and his new bride will produce progeny who will rule throughout the land, and will carry their names forever. One cannot help envision the grandeur of such an occasion in ancient times, yet this elaborate setting is just one of the features that makes Ps 45 unique within the Psalter. In v. 7, the psalmist addresses the king as “Elohim,” or God—nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible is this attested⁷¹¹ although kings throughout the ANE were often addressed in this manner. Moreover, it is also the “only psalm where women occupy a central place.”⁷¹²

The wedding ceremony described in Ps 45 has prompted scholars to look to other ancient Near Eastern sources for marriage texts that may illuminate the specific context of this distinctive psalm, as was described in chapter four. This chapter will synthesize ancient Near Eastern archaeology and literary parallels along with intertextual clues to demonstrate the unique nature of this text as one that regards the unnamed king as an “Elohim” and YHWH’s adopted

⁷¹¹God speaks to the king in Ps 2:7, calling him “my son.”

⁷¹²Bowen, “A Fairy Tale Wedding? A Feminist Intertextual Reading of Psalm 45,” in *A God So Near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller*, eds. Brent Strawn and Nancy R. Bowen (Winona Lake, IN: Eienbrauns, 2003), 53.

son, reveals the role of the unnamed queen mother and new bride as cult functionaries, and demonstrates the queen mother's role as earthly representative of YHWH's divine consort, Asherah.

“Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever”

The setting of Ps 45 is fascinating to speculate upon, yet extremely difficult to discern. It has been suggested the psalm may have been a wedding song written for the marriage of King Ahab to the Tyrian princess, Jezebel.⁷¹³ There are several clues within the psalm that could support this argument. The use of the phrase בַּת־צֹר in v. 13 leads many to believe this is indeed a reference to Jezebel, “daughter of Tyre.”⁷¹⁴ Reference to ivory palaces in the psalm could refer to the ivory palaces excavated in Samaria, however rooms decorated with ivory have also been found in Jerusalem, which could support a Judean provenance.⁷¹⁵ Finally, in v. 8, the use of אָהַבְתָּ “you love” could have been used in reference to Ahab, whose name utilizes the same root. This appears to be a respectable theory, but is not possible to prove concretely. J. Mulder associates the psalm with the Davidic house and more specifically, with Josiah, drawing largely on Akkadian royal tradition,⁷¹⁶ although, according to John Eaton, the examples from this tradition “cannot establish dates for the origin of the phraseology.”⁷¹⁷

According to T. H. Gaster, the Near Eastern practice of treating ordinary brides and bridegrooms as royalty should allow Ps 45 to be read as an elaborate description of a

⁷¹³J. Clinton McCann, Jr., “Psalms,” in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 4, eds. Leander Keck, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon 1996), 861; H. J. Kraus, trans. by Hilton Oswald *Psalms 1-59* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1988), 454.

⁷¹⁴Ibid, 861.

⁷¹⁵Kraus, 454.

⁷¹⁶J. Mulder, *Studies on Ps. 45* (Almelo, Netherlands: Karmel), 1972.

⁷¹⁷John Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* Studies in Biblical Theology (Alec Allenson: Naperville, IL, 1975), 118.

conventional wedding ceremony appropriated from a more ancient tradition. Thus, attempting to read this text within a specific historical framework would be quite absurd.⁷¹⁸ K. Bernhardt maintained a very minimalist view of the royal psalms in general and believed they had been so completely reworked through “historicization and democratization”⁷¹⁹ that discerning their particular setting and usage was not possible.⁷²⁰

Therefore, while it may be impossible to determine the precise setting for which Ps 45 was composed, I will contend that it does preserve a remnant of a sacred marriage ritual for an undetermined king and queen, dating to perhaps as early as the ninth century BCE. This ceremony is attended by the king as YHWH’s son, the queen mother as representative of Asherah, as well as the new bride who, upon her marriage to the king, will assume her role in the cult and court. This psalm had most likely been appropriated from its original *hieros gamos* context and subsequently utilized for unspecific wedding ceremonies. In later use, it most likely lost its original cultic context, hence its position in the Psalter.

Rather than support the theory that this psalm was composed for a particular king during the Hebrew monarchy, and was later utilized for subsequent royal weddings,⁷²¹ others question whether or not it should actually be placed “among the sacral and ritual ceremonies of the annual cult of royalty.”⁷²² The “Epic of Kret” from the Ras Shamra texts, discussed in Chapter Four, has

⁷¹⁸T. H. Gaster, “Ps 45” *JBL* 74 (1955): 239.

⁷¹⁹Scott Starbuck, *Court Oracles in the Psalms: The So-Called Royal Psalms in their Ancient Near Eastern Context* SBL Dissertation Series (Atlanta: SBL, 1996), 98.

⁷²⁰K. Berndhardt, *Das Problem der altorientalischen Königsideologie im Alten Testament: unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Geschichte der Psalmenexegese dargestellt und kritisch gewürdigt*, VTSup 8 (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 298-299.

⁷²¹Craigie, 338.

⁷²²Kraus, 453.

given rise to the idea that the marriage of the king was a sacral act of the annual cultic-mystic celebration of enthronement.⁷²³

Viewing Ps 45 in light of similar ancient Near Eastern texts adds a variety of dimensions to the reading of this psalm. The entire psalm “approximates the tone and tenor of the ancient Near East’s ‘court style’ that indulges in extravagant praise of the ruler.”⁷²⁴ The first major section of the psalm addresses the king’s splendor, a theme that can be found in a number of Near Eastern texts (several of which that will be addressed subsequently). In Ps 45, the king is praised as “the most beautiful person among human beings” in his appearance.⁷²⁵ In the Petersburg Papyrus no. 116, similar praises are offered the Egyptian king as he is “the most beautiful of human beings.”⁷²⁶

The appearance of the king was not only the only measure of his splendor, as a wide variety of status symbols would have been utilized to demonstrate this. In v. 5, the psalmist tells the king to “ride on victoriously for the cause of truth,” suggesting he ascend his war chariot.⁷²⁷ The splendor of the king is manifested in the strength of his horses and his mounting of the grand vehicle. “Let your right hand teach your dread deeds” in v. 5 completes the image of a mighty king in his grand chariot, his right hand symbolizing his powerful control and ability to smite the enemy. A sandstone relief found at Medinet Habu in Egypt depicts Rameses III (1197-1165 BCE) mounted upon his chariot, riding forth against the Libyans, the reins held fast in his right hand.⁷²⁸ Ramses II is depicted destroying Libyans at Abu Simbel, holding an enemy fast with his

⁷²³J. Pedersen, “Die *Krt*-Legende,” *Berytus* VI 2 (1941): 63-105.

⁷²⁴Schroeder, 453.

⁷²⁵Ibid, 454.

⁷²⁶Ibid.

⁷²⁷Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 280.

⁷²⁸Ibid, 281.

left while smiting him with his right.⁷²⁹ The portrayal of the king's splendor furthers the establishment of "right order and the defense of the helpless."⁷³⁰

The king is often depicted as a great hunter, an aspect of his ability to establish order. Hunting scenes from Ugarit and Assyria show close parallels to war scenes in which the king subdues and smites the enemy.⁷³¹ An Ugaritic ivory tablet dating to 1400 BCE depicts a king's triumph over the enemy, intermingled with hunting scenes as a naked goddess (perhaps Asherah?) looks on from the left of the scene.

The Egyptian pharaoh did not act arbitrarily but lived under the obligation to maintain maat which is translated as "truth" but which really means "the right order" by whom the gods are said to live—the implicit structure of creation, of which justice (maat) is an integral part.⁷³² (Of course, Maat was personified as a goddess, the daughter of the sun god Re.) Amenhotep III proclaimed his effort to "make the country flourish as in primeval times by means of the designs of Maat."⁷³³ Thus, much like the Egyptian pharaoh, living by the order of Maat, so must the king of Ps 45 "ride on victoriously for the cause of truth and to defend the right; let your right hand teach your dread deeds."

The King as *Elohim*

The portion of Ps 45 that sets it apart from the rest of the Psalter (and the entire Hebrew Bible) is the address to the king as "Elohim" or God. This has been a controversial topic as scholars have speculated upon its "intended" translations for centuries. The NRSV renders the

⁷²⁹Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), fig. 10.

⁷³⁰Keel, 281.

⁷³¹Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, fig. 11.

⁷³²Ibid, 51.

⁷³³Ibid, 157.

Hebrew in v. 7 “thy throne, O God, endures forever and ever,” a translation that has been accepted by many scholars,⁷³⁴ while the JPS English translation of Tanakh renders the verse, “your divine throne is everlasting,” omitting the address of the king as Elohim. The psalmist appears to believe the king embodies the values of God and pursues God’s purposes. The name “Elohim” occasionally designates individuals who “exercise God-given authority over others.”⁷³⁵ In Exod 4:15-16 YHWH addresses Moses, “He [Aaron] indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as Elohim for him.” Again in Exod 7:1, YHWH addresses Moses in a similar fashion, “See I have made you like Elohim to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet.”

In ancient Israel—and most likely, especially in Jerusalem—the ancient Near Eastern royal traditions regarding the divinity or godlikeness of the ruler have been reflected in two ways: 1) a modified adoption statement has been utilized in the royal psalms, according to which the enthroned king is credited with the role of a “son of God” (Ps 2:7); 2) some statements in the Hebrew Bible move the earthly king very near to YHWH (David is *הַמֶּלֶךְ הָאֱלֹהִים* in 2 Sam 14:17, 20 or even *כְּאֱלֹהִים* Zech 12:8) but that the king is called *אֱלֹהִים* without reservation is seen nowhere else.⁷³⁶ Hermann Gunkel argued that this type of hyperbole was utilized by historic kings of Israel yet its origins were outside of Israel.⁷³⁷ He refers to the divine lineage attributed to Hammurabi, said to have been the son of Marduk as well as the epithet of the Egyptian pharaoh, called “good god.”⁷³⁸

⁷³⁴J. A. Emerton, “The Syntactical Problem of Psalm XLV.7,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 13 (1968): 58.

⁷³⁵McCann, 862.

⁷³⁶Kraus, 455.

⁷³⁷H. Gunkel, “Königpsalmen,” *Preußische Järbucher* 158 (1914): 54.

⁷³⁸Ibid, 51.

Therefore, we might assume that the deification of the earthly king which is well-documented throughout the ancient Near East, may have contradicted faith and this exceptional psalm cannot be taken as a comprehensive ideology of divine kingship.⁷³⁹ However, in light of parallel texts from the ancient Near East and clues from other royal psalms, this “exceptional psalm” offers tantalizing interpretive possibilities regarding the king as God’s adopted son. F. M. Cross argues that part of the ideology of Judean (not Israelite) kingship involved viewing the Davidic king as the adopted son of YHWH, the divine father.⁷⁴⁰ Among several pertinent texts (2 Sam 7:14a; Ps 2:7; Isa 9:5) Cross believes Ps 89:27-28 to be the definitive statement⁷⁴¹ of the Judean royal ideology:

He [the king] will cry out to me [YHWH],
 “You are my father, My god and the rock of my salvation.”
 I surely will make him my first-born,
 The highest of the kings of the earth.

Ps 89:27-28 bears a strong resemblance to an Egyptian text which preserves an oracle for Ramses III as pronounced by the god Ptah-Tatenen and thus fits well within the ancient Near Eastern royal ideology.

I am thy father. I begot thee, so that thy entire body is of
 the gods, for I assumed my form as the Ram, the Lord of
 <Mendes>...thou are my champion, to perform benefactions
 for my ka. I begot thee, appearing like Re, and I exalted thee
 before the gods; the King of Upper and Lower Egypt.

Several other ancient Near Eastern cultures viewed the king as divine as is demonstrated in several Akkadian, Babylonian, and as discussed, Egyptian texts. If the translation, “your throne is God forever and ever,” is utilized for Ps 45:6, then an identical construction is found in

⁷³⁹Ibid.

⁷⁴⁰F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 241-265.

⁷⁴¹Ibid, 258.

the Babylonian *Epic of Creation* where it is said of Marduk, “thy word is the heaven-god.”⁷⁴² Another possibility for translation of Ps 45:7 as “thy throne is like God’s throne for ever and ever,” allows comparison with the words *se-kar-ka ilu A-num*, “thy word is like that of the heaven god (Anu)” from the Babylonian Creation Epic.⁷⁴³ Driver believes the psalmist’s words are anthropomorphic here and do not have a vocative intent (“Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever”). He asserts, “a direct invocation of God in the midst of words addressed to an earthly king is out of place.”⁷⁴⁴ It is also possible to understand these words as representing “Marduk’s advancement from the position as chief god of Babylon to that of head of the entire Babylonian pantheon,”⁷⁴⁵ the thrust of the creation epic.⁷⁴⁶ The parallel phrase “thy destiny is unequalled,” suggests that hence, Marduk is the supreme god.⁷⁴⁷

Another parallel can be seen in the “Hymn to Ninurta” as the various parts of Ninurta’s body are identified with different gods. Line sixteen reads, “Anu and Antum are thy lips, thy word,” not indicating the lips or words are “like” these deities, but are these deities. This evidence would therefore suggest “thy throne is God.”⁷⁴⁸

In many Egyptian texts, Pharaoh is called simply “the god” (*netjer*) or “the good god” (*netjer nefer*) and is thought to be the embodiment of the god, Horus, “the Great God.”⁷⁴⁹ Even as the son of Horus, the king was also seen in relation to other deities and it was possible that

⁷⁴²D. C. Simpson, ed., *The Psalmists* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 124.

⁷⁴³G. R. Driver, “The Modern Study of the Hebrew Language,” in *The People and the Book: Essays on the Old Testament* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1925), 116.

⁷⁴⁴Ibid, 115.

⁷⁴⁵A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 11.

⁷⁴⁶J. R. Porter, “Notes and Studies: Psalm XLV.7,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 12 (1961): 52.

⁷⁴⁷Ibid.

⁷⁴⁸Driver, “The Modern Study,” 115.

⁷⁴⁹Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, 36, 39.

multiple gods addressed the king as “our beloved son.” Tuthmosis III appears as son of Atum at Medinet Habu, as son of Re at Amada, as son of Dedun at Semneh, as son of Amon, Ptah, and Hathor at Karnak and thus the king could be proclaimed the son of various gods to express a relationship of dependence and intimacy. Similarly, all goddesses could be addressed as his mother.⁷⁵⁰ At the coronation of the king, the throne that made a prince king became the mother-goddess Isis. The crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt were also goddesses and the “mothers” of the king.⁷⁵¹

The official titulary of the king in ancient Egypt is an elaborate statement revealing his divine nature. For example, the name of Senusert III as it appears in his cartouche reads, “Horus, ‘Divine of Forms’; Two Ladies, ‘Divine of Births’; Horus of Gold, ‘Who becomes’; King of Upper and Lower Egypt, ‘The Kas of Re appear in Glory’; Son of Re, Senusert; granted life and wealth eternally.”⁷⁵² In the mortuary temples of the Old Kingdom, the king appears as the son of the vulture Nekhbet of El Kab who, as the White Crown of Upper Egypt, counts as his mother and is shown nursing him after his rebirth,

Thy mother is the Great Wild Cow, living in Nekheb,
The White Crown, the Royal Headdress,
With the two tall feathers,
With the two pendulous breasts.
She will suckle thee,
She will not wean thee.

The mother-goddesses in multiple texts and reliefs form an integral part of the tombs in which they appear since the mother-image fulfills a distinct function in the Egyptian belief of life after death. Her presence supports a promise of immortality as her main concern is with his

⁷⁵⁰Ibid, 42-43.

⁷⁵¹Ibid, 245.

⁷⁵²Ibid, 46.

rebirth after death.⁷⁵³ While the words of the king's mother in Ps 45:17-18 do not demonstrate a clear concern for her son's "life after death" she does reveal the desire for a sort of afterlife for her progeny—that the name of her new daughter be remembered and praised "forever and ever."

In West Semitic sacral kingship studies, it has been found that many kings are referred to as gods⁷⁵⁴ and give the gods praise for their divine election.⁷⁵⁵ During the Amarna Age (c. 1356 BCE), the king's identity with Shamash, god of the sun, is repeatedly stated, "the king is the sun-god eternally" and he is often called "the sun-god in heaven."⁷⁵⁶ Hammurabi's kingship is said to have been determined by the god, "When Shamash...with radiant face had joyfully looked upon me—me, his favorite shepherd, Hammurabi."⁷⁵⁷ Interestingly, Assurnasirpal II addresses this ode to Ishtar as praise for his kingship:

I was born amid mountains which no one knew
I did not recognize thy might and did not pray to thee.
The Assyrians did not know of thy godhead and did not pray
To thee.
But thou, O Ishtar, fearsome mistress of the gods,
Thou didst single me out with the glance of thine eyes;
Thou didst desire to see me rule.
Thou didst take me from among the mountains.
Thou didst call me to be a shepherd of men.
Thou didst grant me the scepter of justice.

In ancient Sumeria, the coronation of the king took place at Eanna, in the temple of Inanna (Ishtar), as the goddess played an integral role in the recognition of the new king:

He (the ruler) drew near the throne dais of Nin-men-na
("The Lady of the Crown")
He fastened the gold crown upon his head.
He drew near to the throne dais of Nin-Pa

⁷⁵³Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, 174-175.

⁷⁵⁴Ivan Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 80.

⁷⁵⁵Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, 239.

⁷⁵⁶Engnell, 80.

⁷⁵⁷*OECT*, I, 23.

(“Lady of the Scepter”)
 Nin-Pa, fit for heaven and earth...
 After she had discarded his “name (of) smallness,”
 She did not call his *bur-gi*⁷⁵⁸ name
 But called his “name (of) rulership.”⁷⁵⁹

An Assyrian text similarly recounts the ascension of the king and the gods’ symbolic role in his coronation. Following the anointing of the king the text states, “The crown of Assur and the weapons of Ninlil (Assur’s wife) are brought” and before placing the crown on the head of the king, the priest states, “The diadem of thy head—may Assur and Ninlil, the lords of thy diadem, put it upon thee for a hundred years.”⁷⁶⁰

Similarly in biblical texts, the queen mother plays a distinct role in the rearing and preparation of her son for kingship, even interfering with primogeniture to ensure her offspring sat upon the throne (Bathsheba). The role of the queen mother in Ps 45 undoubtedly involved the preparation of her son for kingship—both within the earthly and sacred realms. As a religious functionary, the queen mother would have most likely instructed her son from an early age on his responsibilities within the cult of YHWH/Asherah, as their roles of mother and son representatives of the divine were vital for the nation.

Intertextual Parallels

Although several parallels to Ps 45 have been discussed in chapter four, such as Gen 24 and the Song of Songs, there are two other marriage texts within the Hebrew Bible that can help to illuminate aspects of Ps 45—the marriages of Abigail to David and Esther to Ahasuerus. Nancy R. Bowen links the story of Abigail and David in 1 Sam 25 to Ps 45 in two ways: the

⁷⁵⁸Meaning unknown.

⁷⁵⁹Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, 245-246.

⁷⁶⁰Ibid, 247.

“traditional plot of love and marriage”⁷⁶¹ and a common vocabulary that connects the named and unnamed brides together.⁷⁶² Both Abigail and the “daughter of Tyre,” who are said to be quite beautiful (1 Sam 25:3; Ps 45:11), are married to a “Prince Charming,” and like the king of Ps 45, we know that David too was handsome (1 Sam 16:12). Perhaps the fairy tale romance between David and Abigail led to the fairy tale wedding that Ps 45 extols.⁷⁶³

In Ps 45:3 the king is instructed to “gird your sword,” much like David commands his men, “every man strap on his sword!” (1 Sam 25:13) and thus David does the same. Similar language is used to describe the meeting between David and Abigail as she “fell before David on her face,” (יָפַל) and the manner in which the “peoples fall” beneath (יָפַל) the king’s might (Ps 45:5).⁷⁶⁴ According to Bowen, a power differential seems to arise in both Ps 45 and 1 Sam 25 in which the woman is understood to be subordinate to the man.⁷⁶⁵ While Bowen does make convincing arguments regarding the subordinate position of the young bride in Ps 45, she has overlooked a key figure within the psalm, the מַלְאָכָה or queen mother in Ps 45:9, whose position at the right side of her son suggests her equality within the court and prominence within the cult. As it has been suggested in previous chapters, this unnamed woman acts as a divine representative on earth, much as her son does. Perhaps the young bride will be her successor as a cultic leader, and thus will not assume a role of subservience and submission but one of equal status and influence.

Another biblical text that recalls events similar to those found in Ps 45 is the marriage between Esther and King Ahasuerus. Indeed there are few textual links between the two texts yet

⁷⁶¹Alice Bach, “The Pleasure of Her Text,” 107.

⁷⁶²Bowen, “A Fairy Tale Wedding?” 57.

⁷⁶³Ibid.

⁷⁶⁴Ibid, 58.

⁷⁶⁵Ibid.

the event of royal marriage connects them.⁷⁶⁶ Much as the Tyrian princess of Ps 45 is commanded to “forget your people and your father’s house,” Esther is told to keep her Jewish identity secret in order to survive within the Persian court. This reference to the “father’s house” reveals a concern for descent and property transmission that is traced patrilineally.⁷⁶⁷ According to Bowen, “hidden within this concern for lineage is a concern for the loyalty and faithfulness of the bride to her husband. Such loyalty is usually expressed by sexual fidelity. It is the sexual faithfulness of the wife that ensures that offspring are in fact the descendants of the husband.”⁷⁶⁸ Therefore, the continuity of descent and property transmission confidently remains within the family.

It is fairly obvious that the bride, the “daughter of Tyre” in Ps 45 is of foreign origin, although others speculate that “daughter of Tyre” could be a metaphor for the personified city.⁷⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the bride’s instruction to forget her people clearly indicates her foreign origin. Thus, the psalmist insists that when an Israelite king marries a foreign woman, she is required to forsake all the political and religious loyalties and give her loyalty to her new nation Israel, and god, YHWH.⁷⁷⁰ Therefore, according to the conventions of Ps 45, Esther is obligated to remain sexually faithful to Ahasuerus, politically loyal to Persia, and theologically loyal to the myriad of

⁷⁶⁶Ibid, 59.

⁷⁶⁷C. J. H. Wright, “Family,” in *ABD*, vol. 2, 762-766; Carol Meyers, “‘To Her Mother’s House’: Considering a Counterpart to the Israelite *Bet’ ab*,” in *The Bible and Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. David Jobling et. al. (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1991), 40-42.

⁷⁶⁸Bowen, 60.

⁷⁶⁹F. W. Dobbs-Allsop, “The Syntagma of *bat* Followed by a Geographical Name In the Hebrew Bible: A Reconsideration of its Meaning and Grammar,” *CBQ* 57 (1995): 451-470. The NRSV translates v. 13 “people of Tyre” instead of the literal, “daughter of Tyre” since this clearly is a reference to the city paying homage.

⁷⁷⁰Ibid.

Persian deities (as her Persian name suggests).⁷⁷¹ However, the triumph of Esther's story lies within her undying faithfulness to her people as she risks her life to rescue them from Haman's genocidal plot. "Thus, it appears that there is loyalty and then there is loyalty. Esther and Psalm 45 display a hideous tension. Psalm 45 expects the bride to forsake what Esther says she will die to defend—her people."⁷⁷²

According to Nancy Bowen, Ps 45 is song to be sung "*in memoriam*, in memory of the damage done to women and men by this fairy tale world."⁷⁷³ She states that the language of the Song of Songs suggests we need to sing songs that resist this "fairy tale world of Ps 45," since it reveals a discourse that allows a woman to choose to whom she will offer her love.

While Bowen offers a profound intertextual re-reading of this psalm, when viewed within the text's own cultural framework, a fascinating alternative perspective could emerge. Instead of viewing Ps 45 as a text having "*no* function of any kind in contemporary communities of faith,"⁷⁷⁴ perhaps the overlooked roles of the queen mother and new bride could help reclaim the censored cultic functions women in ancient Israel/Judah. According to Carol Meyers, "when we perceive with horror the way women appear in literary productions emerging from that specific spatial and temporal location, we may be reacting in a way that is unfair to that location, its inhabitants, and its cultural expressions."⁷⁷⁵ Therefore, instead of reading Ps 45 "*in memoriam*" as suggested by Bowen, perhaps reading the text *in situ* will reveal far more than what is discerned from intertextual readings and a twenty-first century lens.

⁷⁷¹Ibid, 61.

⁷⁷²Ibid, 62.

⁷⁷³Ibid, 71.

⁷⁷⁴Ibid, 55.

⁷⁷⁵Carol Meyers, "Recovering Objects, Re-Visioning Subjects," in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible*, 284.

The “Oil of Gladness”

Scholars such as H. J. Kraus suggest the possible setting of events in Ps 45:8-16 within the festival of the king’s enthronement, since God does anoint the king with oil in v. 8 (JPS).⁷⁷⁶ In light of Ugaritic parallels, the king’s anointing with oil was preparation for the wedding ceremony.⁷⁷⁷ It appears that this is indeed a ritual of marital consummation, much like those described in chapter three. *Šemen śāsōn*, or “oil of gladness” is a specific term and is never used within the context of anointing an individual for the office of kingship.⁷⁷⁸ The “oil of gladness” or שֶׁמֶן שְׂשׂוֹן appears in only one more place in the Hebrew Bible, Isa 61:3, also within a marriage context,⁷⁷⁹ “to provide for those who mourn Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning...”

As was mentioned in chapter three, anointing as part of the marriage ritual is well-documented in texts from the ANE, although as demonstrated in Middle Assyrian Laws (42-43), the bridegroom anoints the head of the bride. As described in chapter four, the goddess Innana anoints herself with oil in preparation for her marriage to Dumuzi. However, Ps 45:8 describes the anointing of the king by God, which does add an intriguing aspect to this marriage ritual—God is integral to this ritual and the ultimate source of joy for the lovers.⁷⁸⁰ Perhaps the “oil of gladness” could also be viewed in the context of male arousal and sex as the gift of God. If שֶׁמֶן is considered within the closely related verbal form שֶׁמַּן meaning “to violate, ravish,” perhaps the

⁷⁷⁶Kraus, 453.

⁷⁷⁷McCann, 339.

⁷⁷⁸Schroeder, 426. Cf. BDB, 1032.

⁷⁷⁹Cf. Schroeder, 426. Cf. BDB, 1032. In Isa 61:3, God anoints the prophet and thus commissions him to provide the “oil of gladness” whereas in Ps 45, God anoints the king/groom with “oil of gladness.”

⁷⁸⁰Ibid, 427.

king's arousal is foreshadowed. Clearly these images are intertwined as the following verses demonstrate a distinct erotic tone.

Several texts from the Hebrew Bible connect the theme of שִׁשׁוּן with the ritual of marriage.⁷⁸¹ Jeremiah repeatedly references this connection (16:9; 25:10; 33:11), as in 7:34 he states, “And I will bring to an end the sound of mirth and gladness (שִׁשׁוּן), the voice of the bride and bridegroom in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem.” Isa 62:5 states, “For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder (Heb. your sons) marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices (מְשׁוֹשׂ) over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.” While this verse utilizes a variant form of שִׁשׁוּן, the connection is made between exultation/gladness and the act of marriage. In Isa 62, the marriage between a young bride and groom is analogous to the marriage between God and a feminized Zion.

Viewing שִׁשׁוּן שִׁמְן in Ps 45:8 within the context of v. 9 provides a clearer understanding of the phrase. In vv. 9-10a, the king's robes are “fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia; from ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad; daughters of kings are your favorites.” This description is laden with erotic imagery that is clearly paralleled in texts throughout the Hebrew Bible.⁷⁸² In Song 1:3-4, the female narrator speaks longingly to her lover, “your anointing oils (שִׁמְנוֹתַיִךְ) are fragrant, your name is perfume (שִׁמְן) poured out; therefore do maidens love you.” In Prov 7:17-18, the sages warn against the Strange Woman who can easily entice a young man with the intoxicating aroma of her bed, “I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. Come let us take our fill of love until morning; let us delight ourselves with love.” Of course several texts from Song utilize the erotic connection between exotic scent and sexuality. The female narrator of Song 1:13 proclaims, “my beloved is to me a bag of myrrh that lies

⁷⁸¹Ibid.

⁷⁸²Ibid.

between my breasts,” and in 4:6, the male narrator claims, “I will hasten to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense,” making reference to his lover’s breasts and genitalia. In Song 5:13 the female narrator describes her lover’s lips as “lilies that distill liquid myrrh”—perhaps as the result of his hastening to the “mountain of myrrh”?

The New Year’s festival described in papyrus 63 of the Amherst collection supports the connection between the exotic scents of myrrh and frankincense and the erotic connotations of the marriage ceremony. As mentioned in chapter four, prior to the consummation of the marriage, myrrh and frankincense are burned prior to the king and queen’s entrance into the bridal chamber.⁷⁸³ Like Ps 45, the accompaniment of stringed instruments is mentioned prior to the union of bride and groom.⁷⁸⁴ In the Aramaic text, the bride and groom enter a “perfumed hideaway”⁷⁸⁵ prior to the marital consummation, perhaps much like the king and his new bride in Ps 45.

These parallels definitely strengthen the argument that the king’s myrrh-scented robes are indeed imbued with eroticism and “exude sensuality”⁷⁸⁶ in Ps 45. The exotic scents of myrrh, aloe, and cassia clearly served as an aphrodisiac for the final culmination of the marriage scene in vv. 15-16. The theme of “gladness” from v. 8 is continued with *בְּשִׂמְחָה תִּגִּיל* in v. 16, as the maidens and bride now enter the palace of the king. In the myth of Enlil and Ninlil, exotic fragrances played a significant role in this final scene of love between the couple (lines 147-149):⁷⁸⁷

She [Aruru] made her enter the Ekur of lapis lazuli, poured the best perfume over her face.

⁷⁸³Steiner, “The Aramaic Text in Demotic Script,” 362.

⁷⁸⁴Ibid.

⁷⁸⁵Ibid.

⁷⁸⁶McCann, 842.

⁷⁸⁷Schroeder, 427.

In the sleeping quarters, in the flowered bed pleasing like a cedar forest,
Enlil made love to his wife and took great pleasure in it.

In Song 7:12-13, this connection is again demonstrated clearly as the lovers go forth into the vineyards to consummate their desperate and perhaps taboo love for one another:

Let us go out early to the vineyards,
and see whether the vines have budded,
whether the grape blossoms have opened,
and the pomegranates are in bloom.
There I will give you my love.
the mandrakes give forth fragrance,
and over our doors are all choice fruits,
new as well as old, which I have laid up for you,
O, my beloved.

Interestingly, mandrakes (*Mandragora officinarum*) were viewed as aphrodisiacs and fertility aids (Gen 30:14-17), the roots of which were thought to resemble female genitalia.⁷⁸⁸ While their scent may be regarded as fetid,⁷⁸⁹ here their scent apparently aids further in the lovers' arousal.

The Šēgal and the Bride

The Sacred Attire

Confusion regarding the identity of the שִׁגְלָה in Ps 45:10 has led some commentators to view her as the young bride, since 10a makes reference to “daughters of kings” which some had emended to “daughter of the king.”⁷⁹⁰ However, as was mentioned in chapter one, A. Caquot proposed that שִׁגְלָה was a later synonym of נְבִיחָה and is derived from the Akkadian *ša ekalli*, “the

⁷⁸⁸Pope, *Song of Songs*, 648.

⁷⁸⁹Ibid, 649.

⁷⁹⁰Schroeder, 428.

one from the palace.”⁷⁹¹ This can be confirmed by 1 Kgs 2:19, as Bathsheba, queen mother, assumes her position of authority at the right hand of Solomon,⁷⁹² and even Nehushta, who in Jer 13:18 is paired evenly with her son, seemingly sharing a ceremonial throne. One clue can be derived from the description of the clothing worn by the queen in v. 10 versus the description of that worn by the princess in vv. 14-15. The queen stands at the king’s right hand, “in gold of Ophir,” *בְּכֶתֶם אוֹפִיר*. Interestingly, the new bride is donning “gold-woven robes” (*זָהָב לְבוּשָׁה*) (*מִמְשָׁבְצוֹת*) in v. 14, that in English translation would appear similar to the finery worn by the queen mother, but the Hebrew reveals a remarkably different description. It would appear the garb of the princess is woven with gold, or “chequer work inwrought with gold,”⁷⁹³ and therefore seemingly different from that of the queen mother in “gold of Ophir.”

The description of the bride’s attire recalls the marriage of Inanna and Dumuzi as “she covered her body with the noble *pala* garment, arranged the lapis lazuli around her neck.” Like the goddess Inanna, the princess of Ps 45 dons attire (perhaps more specifically, robes) fitting only for royalty, priests and/or deities. Interestingly, the only other uses of the term (in the feminine, plural form)⁷⁹⁴ describing the attire of the princess (*מִמְשָׁבְצוֹת*) are found in Exod 28:11,13; 39:6,13, 16 (in plural, absolute, construct form in 28:13, 14, 25; 39:18) and describe the garment to be made for the high priest, Aaron, “As a gem-cutter engraves signets, so you shall engrave the two stones with the names of the sons of Israel; you shall mount them in settings of gold filigree,” (Exod 28:11). JPS translates *מִמְשָׁבְצוֹת* as “frames of gold,” as in Exod 28:13-14, “Then make frames of gold and two chains of pure gold; braid these like corded work, and fasten the corded chains to the frames” (JPS). However, in Exod 28:39, the Piel perfect

⁷⁹¹Caquot, “Cinq observations,” 259.

⁷⁹²Schroeder, 428.

⁷⁹³BDB, 990.

⁷⁹⁴Ibid.

(second masculine singular) form of שִׁבְצָה, שִׁבְצָה is translated “checkered tunic” (NRSV) and “fringed tunic” in JPS, while Holladay translates the form as “weave in patterns.”

Outside of the references in Exod and Ps 45, this particular word in verbal and noun forms is not found.⁷⁹⁵ In all occurrences it refers to the garb of a priest or in the case of Ps 45, royalty. Could there be a connection? Is the bride in Ps 45 wearing priestly garments indicating the role she will assume as divine representative and cultic leader? I assert that this sacral garb helps to confirm the association of the new bride with her future cultic role as representative of Asherah.

In Exod 28:4, the masculine, singular, noun, construct form occurs, תְּשֻׁבֵץ, in a similar context, as YHWH gives specific commands to Moses regarding the vestments for the priesthood, “these are the vestments that they shall make: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a checkered tunic (וְכִתְיֹתָי תְּשֻׁבֵץ), a turban, and a sash.” The NJPSV translates this phrase as “fringed tunic” while the NRSV and NEB translate the phrase “chequered tunic.” The concept of the “chequered tunic” recalls a study conducted by Nahum Sarna on an eighteenth century BCE mural in the palace of Zimri-Lim at Mari that depicts figures dressed in garments made of many small rectangles of multicolored cloth. He stated that this dress was seen frequently in Mesopotamia on steles, plaques, statues, paintings, wall reliefs, cylinder seals and amulets from c. 2400-1400 BCE.⁷⁹⁶ It appears that these ankle-length striped garments, with either wavy or straight strips, are illustrated with five to twelve tiers of pleated fabric or strips of felted or woven wool.⁷⁹⁷

⁷⁹⁵Cf. BDB, 990.

⁷⁹⁶N. Sarna, *Genesis JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 255.

⁷⁹⁷Cf. Marie-Henriette Gates, “The Palace of Zimri-Lim at Mari,” *BA* 47 Je (1984): 75.

Similarly, a nineteenth century BCE mural on the wall of the Egyptian noble, Beni Hasan, depicts Asiatics dressed in knee-length to mid-calve length sleeveless tunics that attach at one shoulder. Colorful geometric designs decorate lengthwise stripes on these garments, worn by both men and women.⁷⁹⁸ Archaeological evidence supports the existence of royal priestesses in ancient Mesopotamia from c. 2400 to 540 BCE. One such piece of evidence comes from a fragmented calcite disc that depicts the priestess and daughter of Sargon (c. 2350 BCE), Enheduanna, performing a priestly ritual donning an ankle-length garment trimmed with strips of pleated material, which covers both shoulders and arms. A later depiction on Enheduanna on a stele portrays the powerful priestess wearing a similarly flounced garment which bears one shoulder.⁷⁹⁹

It appears that increased length, as well as the number of flounced rows, indicated high social standing and wealth in ancient Mesopotamia as even figures of gods from ancient Mesopotamia also don the flounced or pleated ankle-length robes. The time and labor necessary to produce such garments from the highest quality woven wool would have commanded a high price, and thus only the wealthy wore such finery. It even appears that this fashion was much less evident after the fifteenth century BCE and may have been reserved for representations of deities. Nonetheless, several archaized representations of the flounced garment appear from 1300 to as late as 700 BCE.⁸⁰⁰ Relatively recently, two inscribed Israelite seals dating to the eighth century BCE portray high officials donning the flounced skirts.⁸⁰¹

⁷⁹⁸Adrien Bledstein, "Tamar and the 'Coat of Many Colors,'" in *Samuel and Kings: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 2nd series, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 67.

⁷⁹⁹Ibid, 77.

⁸⁰⁰Ibid, 76.

⁸⁰¹André Lemaire, "Name of Israel's Last King Surfaces in a Private Collection," *BARev* 21.6 (1995): 51.

In fifteenth century BCE Mesopotamia, a figure identified as a “minor goddess” or “interceding goddess” is seen leading the hand of a worshipper, either a king or official, toward a major deity, holding her hands aloft in supplication. She is depicted in the flounced gown, wearing a headdress with horns—an indication of her status as minor goddess and intercessor between humans and the divine.

Clearly, the flounced, striped or checkered garment was prevalent in ancient Mesopotamian depictions of high officials and deities and was seemingly akin to the attire worn by the young bride in Ps 45 described in Ps 45:14-15 as “gold-woven robes (מְמוֹשְׁבָצוֹת זָהָב לְבוּשָׁה); in many colored robes (לְרִקְמוֹת) she is led to the king.” Perhaps JPS captures this parallel more precisely with the translation, “her raiment is of chequer work inwrought with gold.” It is quite easy to envision the garments of the princess in Ps 45 as quite similar to those worn by priestesses and deities, adorning the walls of Zimri-Lim’s palace in Mari and would thus be indicative not only of her royal position but of her priestly status as well.

Interestingly, v. 15 offers further confirmation of this assertion with a closer examination of לְרִקְמוֹת translated “many-colored robes.” This term is defined as “garment, clothing, raiment”⁸⁰² and in 2 Kgs 10:22 describes garments worn by worshippers of Baal. “He said to the keeper of the wardrobe, ‘Bring out the vestments (לְבוּשׁ) for all the worshippers of Baal.’ So he brought out the vestments for them.” Also, Jeremiah makes use of this term to refer to the clothing placed on idols, “their clothing is blue and purple; they are all the product of skilled workers” (Jer 10:9). Clearly this term has a sacral aspect, referring to the garments of worship and reverence—both those worn by worshippers and those placed on the gods by worshippers. Surely these garments are akin to those woven for Asherah by women in the Jerusalem Temple

⁸⁰²BDB, 528.

(2 Kgs 23:7). The Deuteronomistic historians utilize the qal participle feminine plural absolute, אֶרְגוּת, from the verb אָרַג “to weave.”⁸⁰³ Amazingly, this verb occurs as a qal participle masculine singular absolute in Exod 28:32. Here it describes the blue robe of the ephod, “It shall have an opening for the head in the middle of it, with a woven binding (מְעִשָּׂה אֶרֶג) around the opening, like the opening in a coat of mail, so that it may not be torn.” The same verb utilized to describe the woven work of the priestly ephod is used to describe the weaving done for Asherah. It appears there is an intriguing connection between these sacred garments.

Thus, the bride in Ps 45 who not only dons “gold-woven robes” but also “many-colored robes” is now presented as a person of veneration, as one to be revered as an intermediary between the human and divine, wearing sacred raiment and assuming her new role as priestess and queen.

The Wisdom of the Queen Mother

As chapters one and two have discussed, Ps 45:11 records the words of the queen mother, or שֶׁגַל (*šēgal*), however many commentators view these words as the psalmist’s.⁸⁰⁴ Parallel texts from the myth of Enlil and Ninlil mentioned in chapter four lend support to the idea that the queen is speaking, giving advice to the young bride regarding her new role as the king’s wife: “May you be Enlil’s favorite wife, may he treat you well. May he embrace you, the most beautiful of all, may he tell you: ‘beloved, open wide!’... You two make love on the hill, have children afterwards...” While clearly the mother of Ninlil speaks in this text, it is very similar to the

⁸⁰³BDB, 71.

⁸⁰⁴Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 284; Gunkel, *Psalmen*, 192; Kraus, *Psalmen*, 492.

admonition given to the bride by the queen mother in Ps 45 as well as the entire sequence of the marriage ritual so far discussed.⁸⁰⁵

Listen, daughter, consider, and incline your ear;
forget your people and your father's house
and the king will desire your beauty.
Since he is your lord, bow to him;
the people of Tyre will seek your favor with gifts,
the richest of the people with all kinds of wealth.

As it has been mentioned, the queen mother speaks here with wisdom, much like the mother of Lemuel in Prov 31, who advises her son on the ideal wife—both offering advice on the actions of the ideal daughter in law.

In Song 3:11, the mother of Solomon is mentioned as playing a significant role on the wedding day of her son, “Look, O daughters of Zion, at King Solomon, at the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart.” In this text, it appears that the consent of the queen mother is necessary for the wedding to place since she may have played the role of crowning her son.⁸⁰⁶ While there is no other text in the Hebrew Bible that adequately supports this idea, it is a fascinating possibility that appears to lend further credence to the importance of the queen mother as a court functionary.

As was previously mentioned, the only other occurrence of the word שַׁגְלָה (in its singular, Hebrew form) in the Hebrew Bible is found in Neh 2:6, “the king [Artaxerxes] said to me (the שַׁגְלָה also was sitting beside him). . .” This queen is traditionally identified as Damaspia from Greek sources⁸⁰⁷ who may have also been a queen mother (see chapter one). She too is seated at the side of her husband, which may have indicated her high status. It is noteworthy that she is at

⁸⁰⁵Schroeder, 429.

⁸⁰⁶Pope, 448.

⁸⁰⁷Eskenazi, “Queen, Wife of Artaxerxes,” in *Women in Scripture*, 287; David J. A. Clines, *Ezra-Nehemiah in The Harper Collins Study Bible, NRSV*, n. 2:6.

his side at the time of Nehemiah's request to return to Jerusalem. Although we do not hear her voice, it is possible she was influential in this decision since she seems to be in position of equality. Greek sources emphasized the influence of women on Persian royal courts although Persian sources do not mention or portray royal women. However, the character of Esther clearly demonstrates this plausibility, as does the unnamed queen mother of Dan 5,⁸⁰⁸ as both had considerable influence within the Persian court and spoke with authority, directly to their kings.

The question that remains arises from the use of the term *šēgal* for the queen mother. If this is indeed an Akkadian loan word, why is it used in a text that appears to date as early as the monarchic period and is found within the Hebrew Bible only one more time in a text from the postexilic period (Neh 2)? In both cases, it refers to a queen, positioned authoritatively beside a king. It is not clear whether the *šēgal* of Ps 45 is of foreign origin as is the queen of Neh 2, but it is a possibility. One could speculate on a myriad of possibilities, yet no decisive conclusion seems clear. The Palmyrene Inscriptions offer an enticing connection between this title and a Babylonian goddess who would have been "the Chaldean equivalent of Aphrodite,"⁸⁰⁹ and according to the later work of Caquot, a link between *šēgal* and goddesses who represent the "the star that rises in the Orient in autumn."⁸¹⁰ The fifth century Aramaic inscriptions from Tema, Saudi Arabia (see chapter one) even suggest a possible connection between *šēgal* and Asherah. If the two were closely associated, as is seen in this inscription, could there not be a connection between the earthly *šēgal* and the goddess Asherah within the text of Ps 45?

⁸⁰⁸Eskenazi, "Queen, Wife of Artaxerxes," 287.

⁸⁰⁹G. A. Cooke, *A Text-book of North Semitic Inscriptions*, 198.

⁸¹⁰André Caquot, "La deesse Segal," *Semitica* 4 (1951-1952): 56.

The Arrival of the Bride

As the bride enters the house of the bridegroom, she becomes the “member of a new community.”⁸¹¹ The king has taken in marriage, the daughter of a foreign king, perhaps as part of a tribute paid to him⁸¹² and as could be suggested by the use of the verb *תָּבֵא* in v. 15 that could be rendered, “to bring as tribute.”⁸¹³ As was discussed in chapter four, this marriage could be the result of a political alliance as exogamy had become more prevalent in the monarchic period—the apparent original setting of this text. The verb *מִבְּאוֹת* “those brought (to you),” in v. 15 is a hophal participle from *בָּא* which can be translated in the context of a “bride coming into her husband’s house,”⁸¹⁴ or even “to be brought in” as a gift,⁸¹⁵ much like the thirteenth century illustration of Ramses II’s marriage to Manefrure, daughter of the Hittite king Hattusilis III and queen Puduhepa, as part of a peace negotiation between the two forces.

The scene in Ps 45:8-16 seems to suggest the bride was brought to the king “inside” a canopy or litter as *פְּנִימָה*⁸¹⁶ could be translated in this manner.⁸¹⁷ In Song 3:6-10, the bride’s arrival at the home of the bridegroom is described, “What is that coming up from the wilderness, like the column of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of the merchant? Look, it is the litter of Solomon!” Again, exotic fragrances such as myrrh and frankincense are seen in the context of a marriage ceremony. The text goes on to describe the elegant canopy or litter: “He made its posts of silver, its back of gold, its seat of purple; its

⁸¹¹Kraus, 456.

⁸¹²Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 284.

⁸¹³Holladay, 126.

⁸¹⁴BDB, 98.

⁸¹⁵Ibid, 99 (2 Kgs 12:5, 10, 14, 17)

⁸¹⁶Ibid, 819.

⁸¹⁷Schroeder, 429.

interior was inlaid with love.” It would be easy to imagine the princess in Ps 45 being carried in to the king in such a manner, seated in an opulent canopy, shimmering in her woven robes.

Arriving with the bride were “her companions” (רַעוּתֶיהָ), much like princess Šibtu in the Mari letters and Rebekah in Gen 24:61, whose nurse and “maids” or “attendants”⁸¹⁸ (נְעָרוֹת) accompany her to the house of Isaac.⁸¹⁹ Interestingly, the specific term רַעָה “companion, attendant;—of maidens”⁸²⁰ appears in only one other place in the HB—Jdg 11:37.⁸²¹ Before Jephthah’s daughter is sacrificed as part of her father’s vow to YHWH, she asks him, “let me be for two months, and I will go with my companions (רַעוּתִי K) to bewail my virginity.” It appears that it was customary that “virgins spent together the time of transition from the status of a virgin to that of a married woman,”⁸²² although in the case of Jephthah’s unnamed daughter, the violent fulfillment of her father’s enigmatic vow would replace the fulfillment of marriage vows. A similar feminine noun, רַעָה appears in Song 1:9, 15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4 and is utilized by the male narrator as a term of endearment for his female lover.⁸²³

In Ps 45, the רַעוּת of the bride correspond to the חֲבֵרִים or “peers”⁸²⁴ of the bridegroom in 45:8,⁸²⁵ the “fellows” of the male lover in Song 1:7, as well as the *ibrim*, or the groom’s friends (and possible family) in ancient Babylonian marriage ceremonies⁸²⁶ (also mentioned in chapter four). The final verses leading to the consummation of the marriage are paralleled by lines 147-149 of the myth of Enlil and Ninlil as Enlil’s sister leads Sud (Ninlil) into Enlil’s palace for the

⁸¹⁸BDB, 654.

⁸¹⁹Schroeder, 430.

⁸²⁰BDB, 946.

⁸²¹Ibid.

⁸²²Schroeder, 430.

⁸²³BDB, 946.

⁸²⁴Ibid, 288.

⁸²⁵Schroeder, 430.

⁸²⁶Greengus, “Old Babylonian Marriage Ceremonies,” 55-58.

consummation of the marriage⁸²⁷ and much like the procession of Rebekah and her companions to the house of Isaac. Song 1:4 also demonstrates a similar parallel to vv. 15-16 of Ps 45:⁸²⁸

Draw me after you, let us make haste.
The king has brought me into his chamber.
We will exult and rejoice in you;
we will extol your love more than wine;
rightly do they love you.

An Egyptian chest found in the Valley of the Kings depicts Tutankhamun and Nefertari in an intimate scene between the king and his wife. The king symbolically pours a liquid into the hand of the queen who is leaning against his knee. This picture could be read as a hieroglyph, “hand” (*dr.t*), “to pour” (*stj*), “liquid” (*mw*), “mouth” (*r*), and “to drink” (*shb*). This, to the Egyptians, symbolized the “intimate relation postulated by the picture.”⁸²⁹ Perhaps a parallel could even be drawn to the “oil of gladness” poured out in Ps 45 and other rituals of anointing with oil seen in connection to marital consummation throughout the ancient Near East. This intimate act sustains and preserves the dynasty, a parallel to Gen 24:60, “O sister! May you grow into thousands of myriads; may your offspring seize the gates of their foes,” and Ps 45:16, “Your sons will replace your ancestors; you will appoint them princes throughout the land. I commemorate your fame for all generations, so peoples will praise you forever and ever.”

Verses 16-17 of Ps 45 are said to be the words of the psalmist to the king, however it is imperative to note that the Hebrew lacks “O king”—an addition seen in some English translations of the text, obviously as a means of clarification since the new bride was previously addressed. Interestingly, Craven and Harrelson suggest that one read these verses in unpointed Hebrew, removing the supplied vowels which render the subject of vv. 17-18 as masculine.

⁸²⁷Schroeder, 431.

⁸²⁸Ibid.

⁸²⁹Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 284.

Since the princess is addressed in the preceding verses (by the queen mother), could it not be possible that the psalmist (or queen mother) addresses the new bride here?⁸³⁰ If the text is reinterpreted in this light, perhaps the bride could be viewed not as subservient (as per Bowen) but as pivotal and one whose name would be praised “forever and ever.” Therefore, if one views the new bride as the addressee here, a comparison could be made with the praise given Inanna, following her sacred union with Dumuzi at the Akitu Festival, “Holy Priestess! Created with the heavens and earth, Inanna, first daughter of the Moon, Lady of the Evening ! I sing your praises!”

It could even be argued that the psalmist is indeed female since many psalms seem to be “open for male and female reconstructions and identifications.”⁸³¹ Similar suggestions have been made regarding Ps 131:2b which strongly point to a female psalmist, “But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother (עַלֵּי אִמִּי); my soul (עַלֵּי נַפְשִׁי) is like the weaned child that is with me.” Since עַלֵּי is a rather unusual occurrence in the Hebrew Bible, Melody Knowles suggests a repointing of עַלֵּי to עָלֵי as a return to the original pointing.⁸³² She states,

assuming that the speaker of the text was not a woman (in view of the masculine voice of much of the psalter and the attribution to ‘to David’ in the superscription), the scribes vocalized the text in an unusual but permissible fashion. Disregarding the parallelism with the next part of the verse, they made an interpretive decision regarding the sex of the speaker and obfuscated the female voice in the text.⁸³³

⁸³⁰Toni Craven and Walter Harrelson, *The Book of Psalms*, 47.

⁸³¹Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, “Body Images in the Psalms,” *JSOT* 28.3 (2004): 304.

⁸³²Melody Knowles, “A Woman at Prayer: A Critical Note on Psalm 131:2b,” *JBL* 125 (2006): 387.

⁸³³*Ibid.*

Thus this example from Ps 131 seems to support the previously mentioned possibility that the pointing seen in Ps 45 was an assumption made by the Masoretes, and indeed these verses were meant as an address to the new bride, given by the queen mother.

Further support for the idea of female authorship could arise from the perspective of the psalmist, especially in vv. 13-15. Here, the princess and her attendants await “in her chamber” (פְּנִימָה) prior to their grand entrance, while the psalmist describes her attire. It seems that only another female would be allowed inside this woman’s domain, and thus only a woman could describe the scene prior to the bride’s arrival. Moreover, while an address to the bride is given by the queen mother in vv. 11-14 who is already at the king’s “right hand” in v. 10, it would not be difficult for a female psalmist to insert the sage words of the queen mother here, perhaps given to the young bride within the royal chamber (פְּנִימָה), prior to her placement to right of the king in the sacred ceremony. Who is more qualified to write a “love song” (שִׁיר יְדִידָה) in which the bride, her attendants, and the queen mother occupy the central positions, than a woman?

An Attempt to Date Ps 45

It seems most likely that the psalm in its final form, dates centuries after the rise of the monarchy—perhaps as late as the Persian Period.⁸³⁴ It is well-known that the origins and compilation of the Psalter are complex and cannot be precisely dated. It is thought that the psalms within it come from a variety of periods—from pre-monarchic (in a few cases) to postexilic. It is most likely that Psalter had reached much of its present form by the fourth

⁸³⁴Gaster, 248.

century BCE⁸³⁵ and that the “order, and even the content, of the latter part of the Psalter was still fluid in the second century BCE, and can only have been settled finally after that time.”⁸³⁶

If one looks to the position of Ps 45 within what is known as the “Elohistic Psalter” clues point to a post-monarchic date. According to Craigie, the evidence strongly points to the conclusion that the “Elohistic Psalter” was compiled from earlier collections and its editorial revisions,

included the deliberate and frequent revision of *Yahweh* to *Elohim*. This process may indicate that the purpose of the compilation was the production of a collection of hymns specifically designed for the temple’s worship, at a time when the divine name *Yahweh* was used only with considerable hesitation.⁸³⁷

If this corpus represents a “second stage in compilation” from earlier collections that contains revisions of YHWH to Elohim it could be possible the psalm was adapted from a much older work dating to approximately the time of the monarchy. The use of *šēgal* and “Elohim” may then point to a later revision, perhaps as late as the fourth or fifth century BCE.

It is important to note the “Korahite” designation of Ps 45 when attempting to assign a date. 2 Chr 20:19 states that the Korahites were a Levitical guild of temple singers and thus it seems that this collection contains psalms that were preserved by, associated with, or composed by this group. According to Scott Starbuck, this collection could perhaps be considered their “greatest hits.”⁸³⁸ Starbuck contends that the placement of Ps 45 within the Psalter may not have had anything to do with the actual unique content of the psalm but that it was already part of the

⁸³⁵Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 31.

⁸³⁶John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 463.

⁸³⁷Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 30.

⁸³⁸Starbuck, 109.

Korahite collection and thus included with the entire corpus.⁸³⁹ According to M. D. Goulder, the Korahites traveled south to become part of the Levitical priesthood in Jerusalem after the Assyrian conquests in c. 730 BCE.⁸⁴⁰ An inscribed bowl from the site of the temple of Arad makes reference to the “sons of Korah” and dates to approximately 715-687 BCE, while 1 Chr 2:43 links Korah to Hebron.⁸⁴¹

Conversely, G. Wanke argues that the Korahite psalms first originated in post-exilic times and became prominent about the fourth century BCE. The highly developed Zion theology present in the Korahite psalms appears to reflect a post-exilic setting. Zion motifs such as paradise, order over chaos and the mountain of God were applied to Jerusalem as the city became the focus of Israelite optimism in post-exilic communities.⁸⁴² Interestingly, Wanke does not deny that Ps 45 appears to be pre-exilic in origin and presumes it was taken into the Korahite songbook from an earlier time.⁸⁴³ Thus, Marvin Tate concludes that the Korahites were active in both pre-exilic and post-exilic periods and most likely held a subordinate role to the Zadokite priests in the temple. They probably drew on multiple traditions for poetic motifs, perhaps including material from Northern festivals and sanctuaries.⁸⁴⁴

Significantly, no personal or regnal name has been preserved in Ps 45 and thus the continued difficulty in dating the psalm. This omission is quite glaring, as the use of kings' names and titularies was crucial for ideological justification of royal houses throughout the

⁸³⁹Ibid.

⁸⁴⁰M. D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Sons of Korah* JSOT Supplement (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1983), 83.

⁸⁴¹Marvin Tate, *Psalms 51-100* Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 20 (Dallas: Word Books Publisher, 1990), 352.

⁸⁴²G. Wanke, *Die Zionstheologie der Korachiten* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1966).

⁸⁴³Ibid, 5, 109.

⁸⁴⁴Tate, 352.

ancient Near East.⁸⁴⁵ Perhaps Ps 45, as with other royal psalms, was a “stock liturgical text of the Jerusalem temple”—an anonymous text that was re-used by later royalty.⁸⁴⁶

Divine Queenship and Kingship

The previously discussed motif of divine sonship in Judean royal ideology appears to further our understanding of the role of the queen mother in the Judean monarchy. If the king is the adopted son of YHWH, then as it has been demonstrated, it is logical to conclude that the adopted mother of the king was Asherah, in light of her role in the cult of YHWH.⁸⁴⁷ In light of the biblical evidence, it seems to be clear now why a queen mother such as Maacah would devote herself to the worship of Asherah within the Jerusalem court—because of the “well-known Jerusalem royal ideology that conceived of the king as the metaphorical son of Yahweh.”⁸⁴⁸ Ackerman suggests a pairing of the notion of metaphorical sonship with that idea that at least at several points in ninth, eighth, and seventh centuries BCE, YHWH’s cult in Jerusalem incorporated the worship of his goddess consort Asherah (as was discussed at length in chapter 3) and thus just as YHWH was understood as metaphorical father of the king, so Asherah would have likely been understood as the metaphorical mother of the king.⁸⁴⁹ Would it not be likely then that the queen mother, the king’s actual mother, would associate herself with the cult of his metaphorical mother, Asherah?

The queen mother could thus be perceived as the earthly counterpart to Asherah, the king’s heavenly mother. The queen could even be considered the human representative or

⁸⁴⁵Starbuck, 68.

⁸⁴⁶Ibid, 85.

⁸⁴⁷Ackerman, “The Queen Mother and the Cult,” 400.

⁸⁴⁸Ackerman, “At Home with the Goddess,” 460.

⁸⁴⁹Ibid.

surrogate of Asherah. This could offer a fitting explanation for the queen mothers whose cultic allegiances appear to be to the cult of Asherah,⁸⁵⁰ and as a fitting role for the queen mother in Ps 45. Thus the cultic roles of Judean queen mothers on behalf of Asherah stand in close relationship to the political responsibilities assigned to the queen mothers within their sons' courts.⁸⁵¹ Therefore, as it has been discussed at length, a clear relationship existed between YHWH and Asherah, as is reflected in the archaeological evidence and in evidence from the Israelite/Judean monarchies—a clear reflection on earth as it was in the heavens.

While this is a bold assertion that has been given no attention, a definite link between divine kingship and divine queenship⁸⁵² exists in Ps 45. As it has been discussed, the opening verses of this psalm express the ideas of sacral monarchy, which was prevalent in the Near East. The king was seen as “more or less directly God’s representative on earth: as God’s creation, the son of God, the image of God or even God himself, who imposed divine rule outside the state and established divine order within.”⁸⁵³ It was as if YHWH gave birth to the king, declared him to be his son and even called him god or Elohim.⁸⁵⁴ In ancient Egypt and throughout Mesopotamia, the gods were present and even responsible for the king’s coronation, much like the scene in Ps 45, as God anoints the king in the presence of the queen mother—representative of the goddess, Asherah. Here the queen mother occupies a position equal to that of her son and presides at this sacred ceremony as a court and cultic functionary.

Despite the fact that the king appears to occupy the central position in Ps 45:2-9, women do command the focus in this psalm, as the scene climaxes with the arrival of the new bride and

⁸⁵⁰Ackerman, “The Queen Mother and the Cult,” 400.

⁸⁵¹Ibid.

⁸⁵²Remarkably, the word “queenship” is considered a spelling error on the 2003 Microsoft Word[®] program.

⁸⁵³Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite*, 116.

⁸⁵⁴Ibid, 117.

the final blessings of the queen mother. The king is lauded and praised as Elohim, yet his words are never heard in this ceremony—only the words of the (female?) psalmist and the queen mother resonate in this psalm. Perhaps this was the intention of the psalmist, whose seemingly female perspective offers an otherwise restricted point of view from within the chamber of the new bride, where she records the invaluable counsel of the queen mother, advising the princess in her new role as wife of the king.

Conclusion

This study has hopefully offered a glimpse into women's roles in worship as well as common religious practices that appear to be suppressed by the biblical texts. As this chapter has revealed, much more can be gleaned from Ps 45 than previously thought regarding the roles of women in the cult, more specifically the roles of queen mothers in ancient Israel/Judah. Indeed the cults of Asherah and the Queen of Heaven saw more prevalence than the Deuteronomistic historians would allow us to see and with this in mind, we can begin to reformulate our ideas about Yahwism and its role in the lives of both royalty and commoners, both men and women. Perhaps Ps 45 will become a gateway for the reevaluation of the study of the YHWH/Asherah cult, although the difficulties in date and provenance it and other "royal psalms" present, continue to be a hindrance. However, as scholars probe what is presented as the "orthodoxy of the establishment" versus "the religion of the people"⁸⁵⁵ in the Hebrew Bible, the roles of women will be brought "into sharper focus"⁸⁵⁶ so that the story of their faith can be told without the fear of what it represents—an equal status for women and men in the realm of the divine.

⁸⁵⁵Phyllis Trible, "Five Loaves and Two Fishes," in *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology*, ed. John Reuman (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 62.

⁸⁵⁶Ibid.

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