

Egyptian and Canaanite Religious Convergence: The Mysterious “Queen of Heaven”

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ABSTRACT

Since the publication of R. Patai's book *The Hebrew Goddess* in 1967, there has been an increasing flow of studies investigating the place of the goddess in Israelite religion. The reason for this attention paid to the goddess is not difficult to find: in the 1960s and 1970s there was a growing awareness that religions with only a single male deity maintained and reinforced the subservient position of women living under their impact. A little later, scholars of ancient Near Eastern religions, including that of Israel, began to pay particular attention to goddess-cults. The paper highlights the issues of Egyptian and Canaanite religious convergence which is visible from the first millennium BC and focuses on goddess-cult in the Old Testament. Analyzing the famous passages' prophet Jeremiah, the author of the article comes to the conclusion that the expression "the Queen of Heaven" contains the allegory. The author presumes that under the title of "the Queen of Heaven" could be hidden the Goddess Hathor, who was a 'type' of Queen of Heaven and worshiped by Israelite women.

INTRODUCTION

In ancient pantheons, each goddess could be perceived as the incarnation of a universal feminine "type." The groups of those primordial goddesses from different areas of the Ancient Near East generally constituted a symbolic system of femininity and they referred to the transformative character of the feminine phenomenon as well (Neumann 1991:21-29). I share the idea that certain historians of religions claim that each goddess was the archetype of "idea", however, it is reasonable to presume that the respective "idea" (which, in other words, could be transformed into a function, a symbol, an image, a view, an aspect, and a character) was ambivalently correlated to masculine and to feminine archetypes. A female "Warrior Goddesses" were present in the Ancient Near Eastern pantheons, as well as a male "Warrior Gods", who were supreme deities of their societies. In Ancient Egypt and Babylonia, patrons of kingship, state, or cities are equally male and female duties. Those goddesses controlled broadly all aspects of human and animal life, namely fertility, procreation, healing, and death. The male and female duties sometimes comprised similar functions, and they could be associated with the same archetypes, such as "water", "earth", "city", "statehood", "neither world" (the Land of the Dead), or "heaven".

Only the ideas of "Mother -hood", "Maternity", nursing, and rising newborns were unquestionably associated with the central functions of the Archetypal Feminine, with several sub-connected aspects, and these features never connected with male gods. The idea of fertility, birth, and nursing was closely related with the Great Mother Goddess (Cameron 1981: 9-10). The elementary character of the Feminine – the Great Round, the Great Container – has a "supernatural reproductive function": everything born of it belongs to it and remains subject to it (Neumann 1991: 25). The ancient fertility Goddess herself was never too far from mortal women in their everyday moments of need, whether in the marriage bed or at the birthing stool. Women in their reproduction functions "imitate" universal birth by giving symbolism of the Earth Mother Goddess. At the same time, the human females, reduced to little more than a womb-vassal, were the mortal images of the Earth Mother (Neumann 1991: 42-44).

In our paper, we would like to highlight the issues of Egyptian and Canaanite religious convergence which is visible from the first millennium BC. At the beginning of the Iron Age, the ancient 'Goddess religion' had long been in decline, but the mixed-gender pantheon instituted by religious leaders was rising alongside Jewish monotheism in Palestine.

Among the authors of the Old Testament, Jeremiah is the only one who mentions a goddess as the ‘Queen of Heaven’ and we have no evidence before or after Jeremiah for such a title in the books of the Old Testament. It seems rather curious that he used this unusual name for a goddess. If the ‘Queen of Heaven’ were the same Canaanite goddesses as Asherah or Ashtoreth, it would have been easier for him to use these common terms to name her. It is still uncertain to scholars which goddess could be hidden under this title. According to some scholars, the title ‘Queen of Heaven’ might conceal the Great Goddess Astarta-Ishtar, whilst others suggests Ashtoreth, goddess of love and fertility, synonymous with the Assyrian and Babylonian Ishtar, I believe that there is one other candidate – the Egyptian Hathor, which could be hidden under this title.

CANAANITE DWELLERS IN EGYPT

In the process of empire-building Egypt realized its own superiority and altered its foreign-affairs policy. Commercial contacts with neighbours based on good-will were replaced by military campaigns and deportation of population. Egypt forcibly penetrated into Palestine and whether intentionally or not, it introduced to and shared with conquered society its own culture, religion and technologies and encouraged new social and cultural macro -processes. As a result of these contacts, Egyptian colonies rapidly advanced.

The colonial societies became the recipients of Egyptian civilization. Egypt became a cosmopolitan mega-empire. The societies included within the boundaries of the Egyptian Empire however gradually progressed and the imperial power was forced to face the reality. When “religious pluralism” was first introduced into Egyptian imperial state ideology, it had its political motivation; it was rather apolitical decision than a purely religious reformation of the Egyptian pantheon. Egypt stopped rejecting the gods of foreign peoples, and did not forbid them to worship Egyptian gods even in Egypt (Avaliani 2010:138).

The prophet Jeremiah’s ministry began in Josiah’s reign and ended after the destruction of Jerusalem, which took place in 586 BC. Jeremiah (11:13) proclaimed that the number of Judean cities equaled the number of Judean gods; that is to say, the Yahweh worshipped at the high places was not Yahweh at all, for such Yahwism was no different from the Baalism of the Canaanites whereby each town had its Baal and cult centres. After the Babylonians had

broken Jerusalem, a group of people from Judah fled to Egypt carrying the prophet off with them. Most of these Jews settled in the northern area of Egypt, at places such as Migdol and Memphis (Gordon and Rendsburg 1997: 294). But a unique community of Jews existed in far southern Egypt, at a place known as Syene (Isaiah 49:12), Elephantine (its later Greek name), or Yeb. The origins of this community are not clear, but since there are connections between it and northern Israel, it is possible that the Jews of Elephantine descended from former inhabitants of the northern kingdom (Gordon 1955:56-58). The Elephantine community was ethnically mixed, as indicated by references to Anat-Bethel and Anat-Yahwe alongside Yahweh alone. Jeremiah as a prophet was a religious leader of those Jews who settled down in northern Egypt.

Jeremiah’s denunciation of Jews who had forgotten their God and worshipped the “Queen of Heaven”, is clear evidence that the Jews had not given up worship of pagan deities even in Judean towns and the streets of Jerusalem: ‘The children gather wood, the fathers light the fire, and the women knead the dough and make cakes of bread for the Queen of Heaven. They pour out drink offerings to other gods’ (Jeremiah 7:18). In the next passage in which the ‘Queen of Heaven’ still appears, Jeremiah spoke with Jews who lived in the land of Egypt, at Migdol, Tahpanhes, Memphis and in the country of Pathros (Jeremiah 44:1). He again blamed the people, who were guilty and lived in sin: ‘men knew that their wives burned incense to other gods’ (Jeremiah 44:15). The women who stood by in a great assembly, even males who lived in the land of Egypt, stubbornly clung to their form of ‘polytheism’: ‘But we will do everything that we have vowed, burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and pour our libation to her, as we did, both we and our fathers, our kings and our princes, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; for then had we plenty of food and were well and saw no evil’ (Jeremiah 44:17). In the next passage the same women gave some kind of clarification of what had been happened to them when they gave up to worship the cult of goddess: ‘But since we left off burning incense to the queen of sky, and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have wanted all things, and have been consumed by the sword and by the famine’ (Jeremiah 44:18)¹. Men seem to have been present

¹In other versions, for example in the NIDB, instead of the word sky, ‘Heaven’ is used. In the Hebrew

alongside women at this worship, as the women proudly point out: ‘when we burned incense to the queen of sky, and poured out drink offerings to her, did we make her cakes to worship her, and pour out drink offerings to her, without our husbands?’ (Jeremiah 44:19). The last passage in which the name ‘Queen of Heaven’ appears is Jeremiah 44:25, when the prophet spoke with anger to the ‘Egyptian Jews’: ‘thus says Yahweh of Armies, the God of Israel, saying, You and your wives have both spoken with your mouths, and with your hands fulfilled it, saying, we will surely perform our vows that we have vowed, to burn incense to the queen of the sky, and to pour out drink offerings to her, establish then your vows, and perform your vows.’

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WHICH GODDESS COULD BE HIDDEN UNDER THE TITLE ‘THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN’

It is still uncertain to scholars which goddess could be hidden under this title ‘The Queen of Heaven’. Some controversy surrounds the philology and significance of the title, but it is clear that it was a well-accepted female deity to whom, with their families’ aid and connivance, Jewish women made offerings (Jeremiah 17:18; 44:17-25). According to some scholars, the title ‘Queen of Heaven’ might conceal the Great Goddess Astarta-Ishtar (Strachan and Strachan 1985: 47-68), whilst others suggest Ashtoreth, goddess of love and fertility, synonymous with the Assyrian and Babylonian Ishtar, but there is one other candidate – the Egyptian Hathor.

The Goddess Hathor was a ‘type’ of Queen of Heaven, she was a sky-goddess who gave birth to the sun each day as a golden calf. The name Hathor refers to the encirclement by her, in the form of the Milky Way, of the night sky and consequently of the god of the sky, Horus. Her name means ‘the House of Horus’, and in Egyptian, ‘House’, ‘Town’ or ‘Country’ may stand as symbols of the mother. Since Hathor’s name proclaimed motherhood as her principal function, Egyptians imagined her as a cow (Frankfort 1978:171). Although goddess Hathor from the earliest times appears as a universal cow goddess, her primary function was as mother and protector of god Horus. In time, she

became a protector and Mother deity for all women and children, which trait she shared with Isis from the Middle Kingdom onwards (Avaliani 2013:152).

One of Hathor’s epithets was ‘Lady of Heaven’, she being the Heaven as a sky-cow-goddess (Pinch 1993: 162; For Hathor as a ‘Lady of Heaven’ Lichtheim 1984:184). Egyptians had traded with Byblos and identified its Great Goddess, the ‘Lady of Byblos’ with Hathor. On a cylinder seal dated to the 2nd millennium BC, the goddess of Byblos is depicted with the horns and sun disk of Hathor, this artefact and Egyptian texts referring to ‘the lady of Byblos’ (Montet 1928: 61-68, 275-77, 287-90). Also remarkable is that fact that in southern Sinai at the Hathor shrine a sphinx with Egyptian and Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions were found. The Egyptian revealed the votive was for Hathor, but the Proto-Sinaitic dedicated the statue to Baalat, which was recognized as a title of Hathor from Byblos.

Hathor, as the great goddess, was associated with trees, she was a ‘sycamore tree’ goddess. In the third-century BC inscription of Ptoiris is written: ‘I eat bread under the foliage, which is on the palm tree of Hathor, my goddess’ (Budge 1967: lxxxii, 7). Hathor was a birth goddess (Frankfort 1978:71) and her symbol was the Djet pillar (Pinch 1993.fig. 6.12). The pillar represents a mother-goddess, notably Hathor, pregnant with a king or god. A late text calls Hathor ‘the female Djet pillar which concealed Re from his enemies’ (Frankfort 1978: 177-78; Hornung 1982:110).

Hathor’s iconography appears very rich; she was also imagined as a lioness, a snake, a celestial cow, a hippopotamus and a slim woman with a sistrum, but these various forms are not all from the same period. Tree nymphs and a mixed form with a cow’s head do not date before the New Kingdom, but the suckling Hathor-cow occurs in the Twelfth Dynasty, while cow’s horns with inset sun disk are familiar from the Old Kingdom. In sculptures she is associated with the state or Nome, she stands with the king and the personification of the Nome of Aphroditopolis (de Rachewiltz 1960: 60). From the New Kingdom, the goddesses Isis and Hathor seem to have been equal, and by the end of the first millennium, they had become interchangeable in people’s imagination. Isis and Hathor can often be distinguished only by the captions giving their names, not by their iconography (Münster 1968: 119-20). Hathor

Lexicon for ‘queen of heaven or sky’ we have the term *melekhet ha-shamayim*. See NIDB, 839

was also associated with sky goddess Nut (Hornung 1982:241). She was a goddess of fate, and the seven Hathors of Dendera were seen as young women wearing tunics and headdresses (Budge 1969: 30, 78, 92). She was also a healing goddess and a warrior one (Lichtheim 1984: 197-99, 219).

Archaeological evidence of Egyptian and Canaanite religious convergence is visible from the Late Bronze Age. There are several Egyptian and Canaanite images of a naked goddess standing on a lion. In Egypt they are identified as Qudshu, ‘the holy one’. From Lachish temple this goddess is shown in profile wearing an Egyptian crown, standing on a horse, and holding two lotus flowers (Mazar 1992: 273). Lotus flowers and papyrus were the sacred plants of Hathor. We have several examples of clay figurines representing a naked goddess, which were common Canaanite art objects; they might have been used by women as amulets or sacred images. The nude goddess is usually standing, holding snakes or lotus flowers; in most cases her hair is styled with the typically Egyptian ‘Hathor’s Locks’ (Mazar 1992:274), a style that was very peculiar and related to Hathor’s images (Avaliani 2013:152). This style was absolutely distinct from others and perhaps related only to Hathor. Maybe Hathor was being assimilated to these Canaanite goddesses from a very early a time, which is why this hairstyle was also borrowed from the Egyptian goddess.

From the Old to the Middle Kingdom Hathor was a very prominent female deity in Egypt. It seems that the daughters of nearly all pharaohs were her priestesses (Lichtheim 1975: 16, 18, 85, 87). As a universal goddess in Egypt, Hathor was also worshipped as a divinity of music and dance. Her sacred object was the sistrum. Hymns to Hathor survive from the temple of Dendera, the metropolis of the Sixth Nome of Upper Egypt, which was the cult-centre of Hathor (Dendera is same as Iunet). The hymns bring out that aspect of goddess which made her the counterpart of Aphrodite: she was worshipped with wine (liquid), bread, music and dancing: ‘Behold him, Hathor, mistress, from heaven; see him [pharaoh] Hathor, He comes to dance, He comes to sing! His [offering of] bread is in his hand; he defiles not the bread to his hand...’ (Lichtheim 1992:108). In this context the pharaoh performs ritual dance in honour of the goddess with bread in his hand. From earlier records - ‘the Stela of the Butler Merer of Edfu’, dated to the Transition Period to the Middle Kingdom - the bread offerings to Hathor were

an established element of the ceremonial worship, when the priestess of Hathor made offerings of white bread and ‘who pleases in all that one [Hathor] wishes, who serves the heart in all that one wishes, the sister-of-the-estate, praised of Hathor lady of Dendera...’ (Lichtheim 1975:87). We can discover some analogies between ‘The bread offering ritual to goddess Hathor’ and the passage from the Book of Jeremiah, when the Jewish women are making ritual ‘cakes of bread for the Queen of Heaven’. Both the Egyptian and Jewish women from Egypt (even in Judean towns) presented bread to the Queen of Heaven bread, which seems to be a very common offering to the Sky Goddess; even the king of Egypt was performing ritual dances with special white bread in his hand.

In conclusion, the Late Bronze Age witnessed Canaan falling under a 400 years of Egyptian domination. This is why Canaanite goddesses were encountered with Egyptian features, while Canaanite goddesses were also familiar to Egyptians. Their similar features, aspects, functions and rituals related to these various goddesses had made them interchangeable in people’s minds. So, Hathor could easily be associated with the Biblical goddess cult of Asherah/Ashtoreth. but at the same time she was distinguished from Asherah/Ashtoreth by the prophet Jeremiah, who gave her a very peculiar title – the Queen of Heaven. Why? If the Judean women in Egypt still worshipped the prominent Canaanite goddess-cult of Asherah, it would have been more natural to name her with this her traditional (Biblical) name; but Jeremiah spoke to ‘Egyptianised’ Judeans, who possibly by this time worshipped ‘their goddess’ in Egyptian shrines and temples (and most likely in Egyptian style) dedicated to Hathor, and had made white cakes in her honour following to Egyptian tradition. In these circumstances the Judean goddess had gained a correlation with Egyptian Hathor, which is why for the prophet she was related to Egyptian tradition much more than to Canaanite, and received a name to distinguish from Asherah/Ashtoreth - the Queen of Heaven. Finally, the historical phenomenon of the symbiosis of cultures and religions consists in the case of interactions and cross-influences between different cultural elements and units in the ancient Levant. By following the cults of this area, one can see that cultural and religious exchange between the ‘ancient’ and ‘new’ world of Canaan is evident, where the Great Mother Goddess cult still existed and flourished.

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