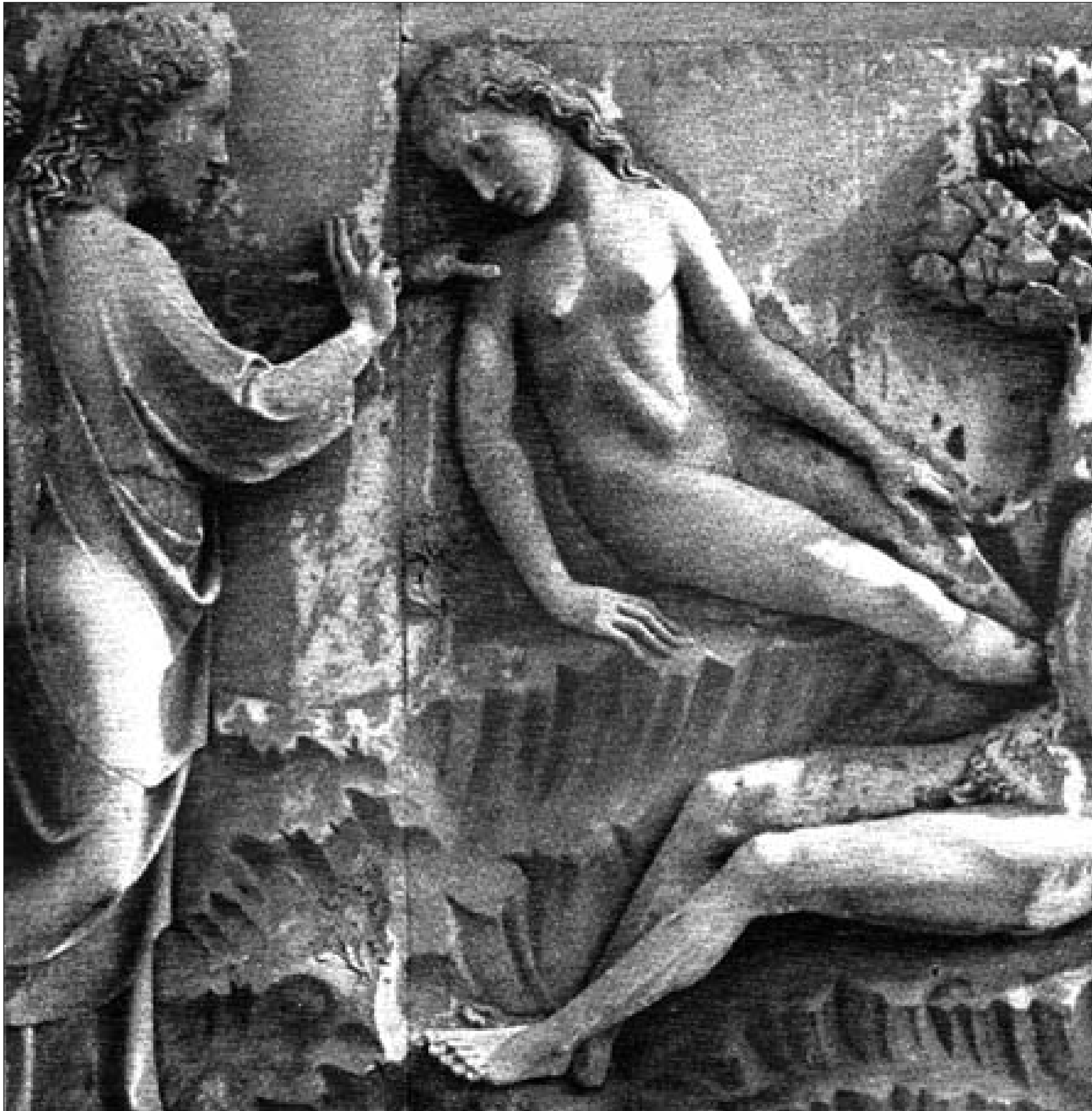
Is the Bible Bad News for Women?

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not the god in whom many women today find comfort. In response to New Age spiritualism or feminist need, such women are inventing goddesses or reclaiming ancient deities to give direction to their spiritual lives. Yet the rejection of the biblical God, and of the Bible itself, might be overly hasty—or so suggests a new generation of biblical scholars.

by Cullen Murphy



The ruins of ancient Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, lie across the Tigris River from what is today the Iraqi city of Mosul. When the Assyrian Empire was brought down, in the seventh century B.C., by invading Babylonians, Scythians, and Medes, the conquerors destroyed the capital and carried off into slavery the inhabitants they didn't kill outright. The conquerors did not spare the great library of Ashurbanipal, with its record of Assyrian civilization stored in the form of cuneiform writing on some 20,000 clay tablets. They burned the library down.

In a way, explains Professor Tikva Frymer-Kensky, a scholar of the Mesopotamian world, it was the best thing the conquering armies could have done, from our point of view—an inadvertent exercise in what would now be known as "cultural resources management." Under ordinary circumstances the clay tablets, each about the size of a bar of soap, would have turned to dust in a few centuries, if not a few generations. But the conflagration fired the tablets, turning them into durable ceramic.

Frymer-Kensky is talking, actually, about other things—the role of goddesses in polytheism; the revolutionary implications, for people in general and for women in particular, of monotheism; the emergence of such feminine biblical images as the figure of Lady Wisdom—when the discussion veers off in the direction of writing and historical serendipity. This turns out to be not quite the tangent it might seem.

Frymer-Kensky is an Assyriologist and a Sumerologist who has focused her interest in questions of gender in antiquity as much on the Hebrew Bible as on the literature of the great Mesopotamian civilizations. She was until 1996 the director of biblical studies for the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia, where she lives, and she has been and remains a professor of Hebrew Bible at the University of Chicago, to which she commutes. She recently began a sabbatical at the Center for Judaic Studies in Philadelphia. Frymer-Kensky has won wide recognition for a cross-cultural study titled *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (1992), in which she attempts to take the goddesses of polytheism as serious theological constructs and social reflections but at the same time disdains the wish-fulfilling popularizations of "the Goddess," a romantically conceived being who now seems to sustain vast territories of certain bookstores and gift shops.

Frymer-Kensky understands why some women have turned to the "earth-centered, immanent Goddess of contemporary neopaganism" as "a refuge from, and counterbalance to, what many consider the remote and punitive God of western religions." But do these devotees and theorists understand that the societies that

Detail from a relief carved into the wall of the Orvieto Cathedral: God raises the unconscious Eve out of Adam's side

actually possessed goddesses were deeply patriarchal and would have had no patience for their New Age conceits? Do they appreciate the larger ideological dynamic of monotheism and, in some respects, its potentially positive implications? The presumption that we can speak sensibly about ancient goddesses on the basis of a heartfelt emotional outpouring rather than painstakingly acquired knowledge drives Frymer-Kensky to exasperation.

Yet while forthright in her belief that some feminists' depictions of the past "come right out of their own psyches," she is also sensitive to the demands of psychic want. She is the mother of two children and also published *Motherprayer* (1996), a compilation of spiritual readings on pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood, some of them new but most of them ancient prayers—translated from Sumerian, Akkadian, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Latin. The book grew out of her own need for such a resource, and the apparent lack of one, during her first pregnancy, an unusually dangerous and difficult experience, two decades ago.

In the course of a long conversation at the Center for Judaic Studies, Frymer-Kensky recalls how the circumstances of that pregnancy deflected what had been the vector of her career. The daughter of Polish Jewish émigrés who were actively leftist in their politics and devoutly Conservative in their religion, she was drawn from an early age to the physical sciences, for which she showed a strong aptitude. Her early ambition was to become a chemical engineer, but she found herself thwarted again and again by high school teachers—this was in the late 1950s—who deemed her scientific interests to be inappropriate for a woman and turned her away from formative opportunities. She was understandably embittered by this experience and in retrospect derives an important personal insight from it: "It explains why, although I became and am a very strong feminist, I never had the rage against religion that many of my colleagues did, because I always suffered more out in the nonreligious world"—suffered more, that is to say, from the heirs of the Enlightenment, the modern men of science.

Frymer eventually abandoned any thought of a scientific career and, as an undergraduate studying jointly at City College of New York and the Jewish Theological Seminary, took up instead the study of the ancient world, the philosophy of religion, and the Talmud. (At the seminary, she became the first woman ever to be accepted into the program for the teaching of the Talmud.) She went on to pursue graduate work at Yale University, acquiring a quiver of dead languages and undertaking a doctoral dissertation on certain legal issues in ancient Assyria.

During her years at Yale she encountered two women, Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, who played a significant early role in shaping the field of feminist biblical studies, though their work had little direct

> CULLEN MURPHY *is the managing editor of the* Atlantic Monthly *and a former senior editor of the* Wilson Quarterly. *He is the author of* Just Curious: Essays *(1995) and, with William L. Rathje, of* Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage *(1992). This article is drawn from his forthcoming book,* The Word According to Eve: Women and the Bible in Ancient Times and Our Own. *Copyright © 1998 by Houghton Mifflin, Inc.*

relevance to Frymer's at the time. Plaskow today is best known for *Standing Again at Sinai* (1990), an exploration of the possibility of a feminist Judaism, which has never been out of print. She teaches in the Department of Religion at Manhattan College, in New York. Carol P. Christ, the author of a book on goddesses and goddess rituals titled *The Laughter of Aphrodite* (1987), has abandoned academe altogether. She is today the director of an organization called the Ariadne Institute for the Study of Myth and Ritual, and, among other things, conducts goddess-oriented tours to the Aegean.

A statue of the fertility goddess Astarte dating from the mid-second century B.C.

Frymer completed her dissertation—"The Judicial Ordeal in the Ancient Near East"—and was awarded a doctorate in 1977. By then she was married, and she and her husband, Allan Kensky, a rabbi, were planning a family. When unexpected problems arose in the late stages of pregnancy and she had to rush to the hospital for a Caesarean section, Frymer-Kensky grabbed some things to read: a few novels, a *TV Guide*, and a sheaf of Babylonian birth incantations that just happened to be lying around, left over from her dissertation. In the end, the Babylonian incantations occupied her attention: "Let the one which is sealed up be released. Let the being come out as an independent being. Let it come out quickly so that it may see the light of the sun."

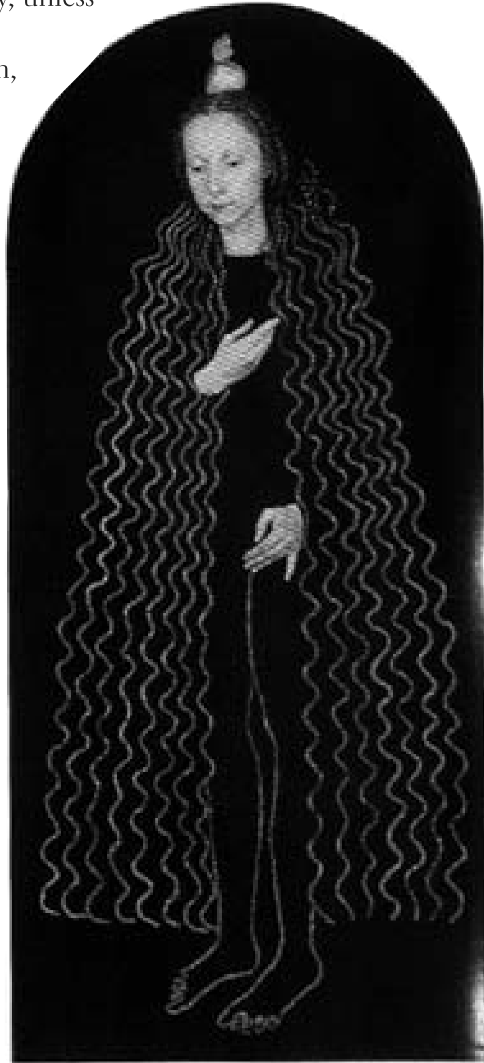
Awaiting the birth of her daughter, Meira, amid the antiseptic silence, Frymer-Kensky became perhaps the first woman in 3,000 years to speak those ancient Babylonian words in the context for which they had been composed.

Afterwards—"10 months later"—Frymer-Kensky began to wonder, with some asperity, why there was no literary material in the Jewish or Christian tradition comparable to what existed in the Babylonian tradition. She continued to publish scholarly work in her original field

("The Tribulations of Marduk: The So-Called 'Marduk Ordeal Text' "; "Unusual Legal Procedures in Elam and Nuzi") even as her attention turned increasingly to the new question she had posed.

To begin with, Frymer-Kensky explains by way of an answer, the Bible just isn't that kind of book. It is a public document serving a public purpose; it does not preserve very much in the way of private writings, the outstanding exception being perhaps the Song of Songs. The Bible does not even preserve a wedding ceremony. To find birth incantations in the Bible would be like finding excerpts from a Lamaze pamphlet in the *Congressional Record*.

Second, most of the writings from ancient Israel have simply been lost. Wedding ceremonies did, of course, take place among the Israelites. In all likelihood, chants and prayers existed for a difficult labor. But these things have not come down to us because the Israelites were, in a sense, too advanced. We have practically nothing in terms of texts, in effect, because the Israelites had an alphabet. "You wouldn't want to write with an alphabet on clay, unless it was a cuneiform alphabet," Frymer-Kensky says. "Cuneiform, those funny marks, are representations made by sticking the wedge of a reed against the clay—you make the triangular head and the shaft with one quick tick. But once linear script got developed, you couldn't write on clay—it would take too long to draw the wedge through it." The Israelites wrote fluidly with their new alphabet on parchment and papyrus, materials that are easy to transport and easy to store. Unfortunately, they also disintegrate with age. And they are *not* preserved by fire.



Eve *(1993–95), by Rimma Gerlovina and Valeriy Gerlovin*

So much writing survives on clay tablets from the Mesopotamian civilizations—literature, tax records, legal codes, schoolchildren's copybooks—that vast amounts of it still await translation. And the corpus remains "open": new tablets turn up all the time. Indeed, the sanctions-hobbled gov-

ernment of Iraq, which controls most of the important Mesopotamian archaeological sites, has in recent years quietly been selling off freshly exhumed tablets to the West in exchange for hard currency.

By contrast, the corpus of Israelite literature is essentially "closed," limited to the canonical books of the Bible and a few other texts that have been passed along, copied and recopied, from age to age. The Bible makes reference to other major works that once existed but now are lost. For example, the Book of Numbers (21:14-15) refers to the *Book of the Wars of Yahweh*, but the few lines quoted are all that survive. Missing too are the *Chronicle of Solomon*, the *Chronicles of the Kings of Israel*, and the *Chronicles of the Kings of Judah*. A few ancillary fragments of writing have survived, but only because they were written on pottery, or on potsherds, or on amulets.

If this had not been the case—if the surviving corpus were large and diverse—would any significant amount of it have reflected a woman's voice? What forms can that voice take? Can it come only from a woman? Each question begets others, and the answers lead off into the imponderable. Theoretically, though, we can imagine a woman's voice surviving in at least three ways. One is overt and direct: by means of passages actually written by women. A second is indirect: by passages that preserve, through explicit or implicit quotation, the words of women in actual social contexts. The third way is more ineffable but perhaps the most compelling of all: the complex mechanisms of psychology and spirituality, which may under various guises both draw on and demand a feminine presence.

To take the first of these: a subject as basic as the extent of literacy in ancient Israel and whether literacy was accessible to women can be approached through only a handful of clues and is largely a matter of speculation. So little is known about so many aspects of literacy in ancient times that scholars are still debating how prevalent the practice of reading to oneself was—as opposed to reading aloud—or if it was done at all. But the acts of reading and writing do come up directly in the Bible, and there are instances when women are involved.

They make an unlikely pair, Jezebel and Esther. Jezebel is the princess of Tyre and worshiper of Baal who marries the Israelite king Ahab, encourages him to build altars to the false Phoenician gods, and in general, according to the first Book of Kings (16:30), induces him to do "evil in the sight of the Lord more than all that were before him." In Hebrew, Jezebel's name means "Where is the prince?" The reference is to Baal, but the name is also a pun, because the consonants can be fleshed out with alternative vowels to acquire the meaning "dung." Jezebel's idolatry (from the Israelite point of view), her greed, and her scheming aggressiveness fatally complement parallel qualities in her husband and earn a curse from the prophet Elijah, who foresees that Jezebel's corpse will be eaten by dogs. And so indeed it comes to pass, when Jezebel, after the defeat and death of Ahab, is thrown from a window by her retainers: "But when they went to bury her they found no more of her than the skull, and the feet, and the palms of her hands" (2 Kings 9:35). Her name, of course, lives on in the eponymous word mean-

A leaf from an 18th-century manuscript showing Queen Esther begging King Ahasuerus for clemency for the Persian Jews. The text (in Persian but with Hebrew letters) was intended to be read during the festival of Purim.

ing "a wicked, shameless woman." Bette Davis won an Oscar for playing such a woman, a spiteful southern belle, in the 1938 film *Jezebel*.

Esther presents a contrast. She is the descendant of Jews who have been carried off to the court of the Persian kings after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the First Temple at the beginning of the sixth century B.C. However, her identity as a Jew is kept hidden, and Esther is raised at court, where fortuitous events conspire to make her the wife of King Ahasuerus. She becomes aware of a plot to destroy the Jews of Persia, which she foils, precipitating the execution of its mastermind, the evil Haman, and the inauguration of a feast to commemorate the deliverance of the Jews from persecution.

The Book of Esther is read every year at the festival of Purim, which supposedly has its origins in the events the book describes. (The Hebrew *pur* means "lot"; the day chosen by Haman for the destruction of the Jews was selected by lot.)

If we think of Jezebel and Esther as historical characters, they are separated by some 300 years of actual history. The books in which they appear were composed centuries apart. The characteristic the women share is a form of education: they are the only women in the Hebrew Bible who are depicted as able to read and write.

In its account of Jezebel's lethal expropriation of Naboth's vineyard, the Bible has this to say: "So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal, and she sent them to the elders and the nobles who dwelt with Naboth in his city." (One of Jezebel's royal seals was, in fact, recently discovered by archaeologists.) The story of Esther ends with her promulgation of a directive to the Jews of Persia: "Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew, gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. Letters were sent to all the Jews."

Should it be surprising that of all the women mentioned in the Bible, only two should be depicted as literate? Should it be surprising, rather, that there are this many? Was literacy common, or at least not out of the ordinary, among women of royal rank, as Jezebel and Esther were? Did it ever extend to the lower classes? These are all questions without reliable answers for the period covered by the Hebrew Bible—without reliable answers when the subject is literacy among men, let alone among women. "I do think that Jezebel could probably read and write," Frymer-Kensky says, "but Jezebel was raised a king's daughter. And we really don't know. The Bible says that Jezebel writes a letter. Of course, documents say that Charlemagne also wrote, but what Charlemagne actually did was dictate."

A picture of literacy even in postbiblical times and other Mediterranean cultures, about which in general we know much more, remains difficult to retrieve. A recent exhibit at the Yale University Art Galleries, titled *I, Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome*, included a number of wooden writing tablets, or *tabulae*, of the kind that women are sometimes seen holding in Roman portraits—for instance, in the well-known portrait from Pompeii of a husband and wife. But in these instances, it seems clear, literacy is being paraded as an exceptional virtue rather than a routine adornment. The earliest Latin document anywhere that is *known* to be in a female hand comes relatively late: it is a Roman letter from about A.D. 100, found near Hadrian's Wall in Great Britain, inviting the recipient to a birthday party.

At one recent meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, a member gave a paper on the subject of female scribes in the Roman Empire. The author, Kim Haines-Eitzen, who now teaches at Cornell University, persuasively made the case that female scribes, or *librariae*, were not uncommon in the service of affluent mistresses. The evidence is often indirect, embedded as a passing reference in something else. Juvenal, for example, remarks in the sixth of his *Satires* that if a husband spurns his wife's sexual

Creation of Eve *(1989), by Martin Maddox*

overtures, the wife's *libraria* will bear the brunt of the spurned woman's temper. *Libraria* in this passage has usually been read and interpreted as *lani pendia*, meaning "wool-worker," thereby disguising the fact that a scribe—a female scribe—is being referred to. The underlying reason for the mistranslation in this case, as apparently in others, is a form of circular reasoning: how could the word be *libraria* when we know that women lacked the skills for that job?

In other instances, female literacy has been simply suppressed. A letter of Eusebius, for instance, reveals that women figured among the scribes he supplied to the theologian Origen; but Jerome, quoting this letter at a later date, makes no mention of the female scribes. One significant manuscript from late antiquity—the fifth-century *Codex Alexandrinus*, which contains both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament—actually contained that great rarity, a scribe's name, in this case that of a woman: Thecla. The possibility that a woman was responsible for the code was nonetheless contested by scholars for centuries, with the notable exception of one 18th-century investigator who accepted the attribution on the grounds that there were so many mistakes in the manuscript.

The issue of female literacy in antiquity, or indeed at any time, is of course of interest for its own sake—for what it reveals about the social status and attainments of women and about the structure and evolution of societies. And it is hardly surprising that some scholars have been picking over Scriptural texts, even if some of their colleagues find the endeavor faintly amusing. (At the lecture on

female scribes in the Roman Empire, the first question during the discussion afterward came from one of the few men in attendance, who asked, "So did women have better handwriting than men?")

But another, and by far the more prominent, motivation for investigations of literacy has to do with the question of authorship. This is a nagging question that hangs over the Bible generally, issues of gender aside. As the biblical scholar Richard Elliott Friedman has written, the Bible

> is at the heart of Christianity and Judaism. Ministers, priests, and rabbis preach it. Scholars spend their lives studying and teaching it in universities and seminaries. People read it, study it, admire it, disdain it, write about it, and love it. People have lived by it and died for it. And we do not know who wrote it.

Could parts of the Bible have been written by a woman, or by a number of women? Even if they were not literally penned by women, in the sense that women composed a full narrative, and applied an ink-laden quill to papyrus or parchment, can any texts or passages be said to reflect women's authentic voices, relatively unmediated by a male editorial hand? There can be no conclusive answer. There has, however, been a great deal of circumstantial speculation.

The speculation that has received the most widespread attention, as well as a great deal of criticism from academic specialists, is the proposition put forward by the Yale literary critic Harold Bloom, in *The Book of J* (1990), that one of the chief strands of text in the first five books of the Bible, which scholars have given the name J, was the work of a woman. *Newsweek* gave its report about Bloom's suggestion the headline "The Woman Who Invented God." *Time* magazine, pithier, ran its account under the headline "Ms. Moses." Bloom contends not only that J was a woman but that she was a descendant of King David, that she lived at the court of King Solomon's son, Rehoboam, and that she in fact had little or no religious motivation at all.

To understand the basis of Bloom's contention is to accept the general outline that biblical scholars have crafted over the years to describe how the Bible was compiled. This outline would not be accepted by the most orthodox of Jews or by the most fundamentalist of Christians, whose interpretation of a belief in the Bible's divine origin extends to particulars of composition. (Orthodox Jews, for instance, believe that the first five books of the Bible, the so-called Five Books of Moses, are the actual product of Moses' hand.) Biblical scholars of a more humanistic bent see the books of the Hebrew Scriptures as encompassing a vast diversity of materials—historical tales, poems, law codes, liturgical invocations, war songs, chronicles, festive chants—whose origins in some cases stretch back to oral traditions rooted in Israel's prehistory and in other cases are as recent as the second century B.C.

The task of molding literary material into the preliminary forms of the first five books of the Bible was begun during the First Temple period, but the most intensive era of biblical formation, according to the scholarly consensus, occurred just afterward, during the half-century of

the Babylonian exile, beginning in 587 B.C., when the Jewish elite and much of the Israelite population endured transplantation to the enemy capital. During this time these five books took final shape, as did the seven books that constitute the so-called Deuteronomistic history. Much of the rest of the Hebrew Bible's content was fashioned after the Jews returned to Jerusalem, during what has come to be called the Second Temple period. Final agreement on what would constitute the canon, the officially sanctioned corpus of the Hebrew Bible, was reached late in the first century or early in the second century A.D.

Back to J: whatever the ultimate sources of its content—Canaanite myth, Israelite folk tradition, divine inspiration—the Book of Genesis has long been seen by scholars as embodying a number of distinct literary threads. As early as the 17th century, a French cleric, Richard Simon, suggested that Genesis was the product of interwoven sources. In the 18th century, a number of investigators looking into the phenomenon of doublets—the fact that key stories, such as the accounts of the Creation, the Flood, and so on, are typically told twice, in differing versions—noticed a distinctive pattern. In one group of doublets, the designation used for God is the Hebrew word *El*, and in the other the word used is the Hebrew tetragrammaton *YHWH*. Scholars gave the name E to the first source and J to the second source; as scholarship has become more refined, Genesis has also acquired a P (for priestly) source and an R (for redactor, or editor) source. Depending on what paths we follow we may encounter further refinements, such as J1, J2, and J3.

Abram's Counsel to Sarah *(c. 1896), by James Tissot*

Harold Bloom's focus is on J, the Yahwistic writer, the author of what would seem to be the oldest strand of Genesis. The J he discerns is a woman who was writing primarily for women and who conceived of Yahweh as essentially a literary character rather than as a god to be worshiped and prayed to. Bloom surmises further that J was a close friend of the so-called Court Historian, the author of most of the second book of Samuel, and he emphasizes the particular attention J paid to women. About six times more text is devoted to Eve than to Adam, and whereas J's treatment of major male figures (Abraham, Jacob, Moses) is mixed, the treatment of female characters (Sarah, Rachel) is on the whole sympathetic. "I think it accurate to observe that J had no heroes, only heroines," Bloom writes.

Bloom contends, more than a little disingenuously, that "in proposing that J was a woman, at least I will not be furthering the interests of

any religious or ideological group." In truth, his proposition about the gender of J (which he came to regret having mentioned at all, according to one interview, because it distracted from his larger contemplation of the meaning and significance of J's work, whoever J happened to be) predictably found favor in certain religious and ideological camps even as it elicited widespread skepticism (or, at best, deep agnosticism) among most biblical scholars.

Besides pointing out what they saw as inadequacies in the translation Bloom was working with, the skeptics questioned many of his guiding assumptions, including the idea that a characteristically "female" form of writing that is objectively discernible exists. "It must be said," the eminent biblical scholar Robert Alter observed, the year after Bloom's book appeared, "that the evidence offered for J's female identity is rather tenuous. We are repeatedly told, often with engaging wit, that J in Genesis exercises an extraordinary degree of imaginative sympathy for the plight of women and the viewpoint of female characters. But this is also true of the authors of Judges and Samuel—note the instance of the rape of Tamar—not to speak of later books like Ruth and Esther." By the same reasoning, Alter added, "one could easily conclude that *Anna Karenina*, with its splendidly realized if doomed heroine and its large gallery of repulsive, feckless, or clumsy men, must have been written by a woman."

As a writer and as a critic, Bloom is a commanding presence, and a playfully seductive one, whose works always merit attention and usually give pleasure. If his speculations about J's gender garner objections, it is for reasons other than inherent implausibility. Richard Elliott Friedman has noted that whereas it is virtually impossible to imagine the source E coming from a female hand, partly because, among other reasons, E is so closely connected with the priestly class, which historically was exclusively male, J does in fact present more interesting possibilities, partly because of its origin in Judean court circles, where women might have enjoyed unprecedented opportunities. Friedman concludes: "The weight of evidence is still that the scribal profession in ancient Israel was male, true, but that does not exclude the possibility that a woman might have composed a work that came to be loved and valued in Israel."

It may be that *The Book of J* does a disservice in a number of ways. The gleeful outrageousness of its tone makes sense only if the idea of women's high cultural achievement in ancient Israel is in fact nearly preposterous. But as Carol L. Meyers, an archaeologist and religion scholar at Duke University, has noted, "It is an open question as to whether women were deemed inferior, secondary, and otherwise incapable of high art in Israelite antiquity. Most likely such stances are largely post-biblical." Moreover, by emphasizing one authorial possibility, Bloom sweeps off into the shadows many points that might be pertinent to the issue of biblical sources and gender. Even if we discount entirely the notion that women had any kind of hand in the Bible's textual formation, there remains a body of material that may ultimately have originated among women—for instance, various utterances that come from the lips of female prophets,

such as the Song of Deborah and the Song of Miriam. Beyond texts such as these, whose female origin is not only plausible but in the view of some even likely, are texts of more indeterminate status, which can be spoken of as female not in authorship but in genre.

One of the more dramatic episodes of Israel's modern history is the series of airlifts that began soon after the country came into existence in 1948 and brought Jews from neighboring Islamic regions to the new Jewish homeland. Among those coming to Israel were rural Jews from Yemen, who, at one point in late 1948, under the program known as Operation Magic Carpet, arrived at the rate of a thousand a week, airlifted to Tel Aviv aboard DC-4 Skymasters. Most of the Yemeni immigrants were peasants from small villages. Their way of life had been unchanged for centuries and preserved social patterns of presumably great antiquity.

In all, some 45,000 Yemeni Jews were brought to Israel in the course of little more than a year. Not surprisingly, they attracted the attention of scholars of various kinds, in particular of S. D. Goitein, the Hebraic and Arabic scholar, who undertook a close ethnographic study of the Magic Carpet immigrants soon after their arrival. Among the issues he explored were the social and religious roles of men and women, which he found to be sharply distinguished. But certain features of Yemeni Jewish society made a deep impression on him. In an article published in Israel in 1957 but not translated into English until several decades later, he wrote:

> The detail which made the greatest impression on the present writer, turning his attention to women's poetry in the Bible and giving him great insight into it, was this: the Yemenite woman, despite her lowly and limited social position, expressed in her poetry public opinion on the events of the day. Her simple verses filled the function which the editorial in a daily newspaper fills in a modern society. Verses of this sort were devoted to great political events—such as the murder of the Imam Yahya in the spring of 1948 and the suppression of the subsequent revolt, or the bombing of Yemenite villages by British planes—as well as to people and happenings in the neighboring Muslim villages and also, of course, to the Jewish community.

It is not hard to see why Goitein discerned strong parallels between modern-day Yemenite women and many of the women in the Bible, whose taunts and laments, warnings and advice, prayers and prophecies, likewise serve as a gloss on the great events in the lives of the Israelites and their neighbors. Women did not necessarily write the biblical stories in which these words and commentaries appear—indeed, they almost certainly did not—but is it far-fetched to see such stories as transmitting a memory of women's voices or women's authority? Goitein used the image of feminine "remnants" in oral literature that leave "a recognizable impression" in the stories as they come down to us. He also used the image of these remnants being poured over time "from one vessel to another."

Scholars sympathetic to this idea focus not on identifying or speculating about male and female authors but on identifying male and female *genres*. In their book *On Gendering Texts* (1993), the Hebrew Bible scholars Athalya Brenner and the late Fokkelien van Dijk-

Hemmes designate these genres "M" and "F," hoping that the very abstraction of such minimalist terminology will shift thoughts away from the gender of scribes bent over their work and toward the idea of "textualized women's traditions."

One genre to look at is that of the so-called naming speech—the formal bestowal of a name upon a newborn child, typically embedded within a larger explanation of the meaning of that name. The birth of each of the children of Leah, the unloved wife of Jacob, is followed by a naming speech in which the child's name is derived from a Hebrew pun. For instance: "And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, 'Because the Lord has looked upon my affliction; surely now my husband will love me'" (Genesis 29:32), the name Reuben meaning not only "Behold, a son" but also mimicking the Hebrew words meaning "looked upon misery." Jacob will never love her, but Leah will continue bearing sons. Upon the birth of her fifth, she says, "This time I will praise YHWH, therefore she called his name Judah" (Genesis 29:35), the name Judah embodying the expression of thanks to the Lord.

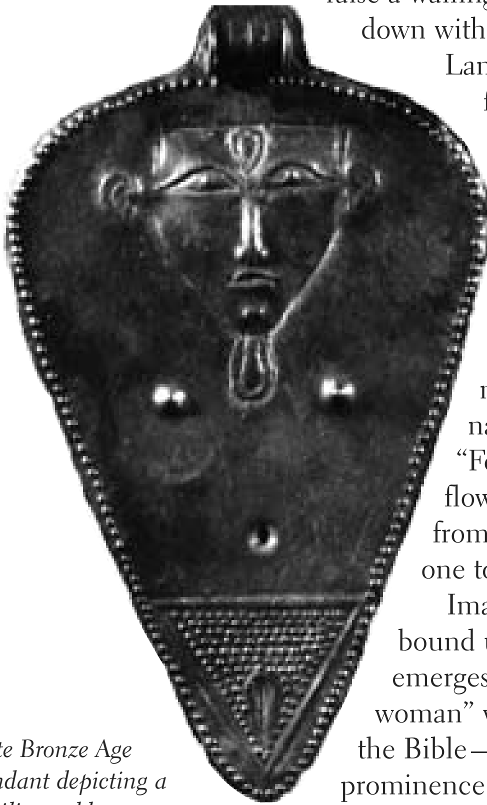
In the Hebrew Bible as a whole there are 41 instances in which children are formally named in the context of a naming speech, and in two-thirds of these cases the person doing the naming is a woman. In a number of other cases—notably, that of the birth of Esau and Jacob to Rebekah—the use of the passive voice conceals the identity of the name-giver, although we can assume that it must be a woman, since the naming occurs immediately after childbirth, when only women would have been present. "The act of naming is significant," the commentator Savina Teubal has written, "because it places the name-*giver* in authority over the name-*bearer*." She goes on to observe, "In biblical times, it seems, children were named the moment they were born—by mothers and midwives who chose names appropriate to the conditions, or their perceptions of the birth itself." (Of course, one of the more prominent instances of namegiving does not involve a newborn child at all but rather the new creature, woman, to whom Adam gives the name Eve, meaning "mother of all living." As you might imagine, a considerable number of feminist scholars have examined this episode in every conceivable light.)

Other genres of F texts, as Brenner and Hemmes classify them, include birth songs, such as the Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10), with its strong echo in the "Magnificat" of the New Testament, and the famous songs of victory, including Deborah's and Miriam's, and those of the nameless women who come forward dancing with tambourines after success in battle.

Biblical passages give evidence, even when not quoting women directly, of occasions when women's speech of a formal and public kind was an accepted aspect of social drama. From the mouths of women must have come words of ritual goading, taunting, and mockery, and also words of soothsaying and of prophecy. Four women are explicitly given the title "prophet"—Miriam, Huldah, Noadiah, and the wife of Isaiah; the unremarkable manner in which the Bible mentions the status of these women suggests that the role of prophet was an established one.

Although the words women customarily used are not preserved,

many references, such as the following one from Jeremiah (9:17), indicate that women were central to expressions of mourning and lamentation: “Call for the mourning women to come; send for the skillful women to come. Let them make haste and raise a wailing over us, that our eyes may run down with tears.” In the Book of Lamentations, which records the final destruction of the Israelite kingdom and the beginnings of exile, the fallen city of Jerusalem is depicted as a woman mourner, a dirge singer, and her words (1:16) perhaps capture some of the language that such a singer might have employed on an ordinary occasion in ordinary times: “For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me who might revive my spirit, one to revive my courage.”



Late Bronze Age pendant depicting a fertility goddess

Imagine many of these functions bound up in one person, and what emerges is a tentative sketch of the “wise woman” who appears from time to time in the Bible—a woman whose familiarity and prominence in the ordinary life of the people, a number of scholars suggest, may have helped give rise to one of the more powerfully attractive feminine images in the Bible, the figure of Wisdom.

Goitein wrote about the wise women he encountered among the Yemeni immigrants, offering a composite portrait:

> This is a woman who keeps a watchful eye on her fellow villagers from the day of their coming forth into the light of the world until their death. It is she who helps during childbirth; she who knows the remedies and other treatments. . . required in case of illness; she who assists in matchmaking and, when necessary, who makes peace between husband and wife. Her advice is sought not just by her family but by her whole village. It is she who is most proficient at whatever craft is practiced in the district, and she, too, who is the poet who “declaims” before the women at weddings and other festive occasions and in mourning as well.

A wise woman from Tekoah (2 Samuel 14) speaks eloquently before King David, urging him to make peace with his son Absalom. A wise woman from Abel-Beth-Maacah (2 Samuel 20) negotiates on behalf of her city and saves it from destruction. The idea of “wisdom”—*hokma*, a word of feminine gender—in the Hebrew Bible, as Carol Meyers has pointed out, cannot be neatly encapsulated; it can apply to a mother’s nurturing, to the teaching of household and cultural tasks, to a knowledge of folkways, to the

skilled wielding of technology, to the astute perception of what constitutes a righteous path. In the Book of Proverbs, wisdom is personified not only as a woman but as a divine consort: "The Lord created me the first of his works long ago, before all else that he made. . . . Then I was at his side each day, his darling and delight" (Proverbs 8:22-30).

Lurking within this exalted figure of Wisdom, conceived of specifically as a woman, is surely the wise woman of ordinary communal life. These organic origins aside, some scholars also point to the psychological significance of Wisdom's full emergence only in the writings of the postexilic period, when the public focus provided by the Davidic monarchy was forever gone. And as still other scholars suggest, it is important to see Lady Wisdom in the context of monotheism itself—to see her as a powerful expression not only of the divine feminine, an obvious role, but even more significantly as a means of intercession. As Frymer-Kensky (among others) has pointed out, in the transition from polytheism to monotheism it is of course significant that God is now only male, but the greater significance is simply that God is singular: "In the absence of other divine beings, God's audience, partners, foils, and competitors are all human beings, and it is on their interaction with God that the world depends."

The place known in Arabic as Kuntillet Ajrud, "Solitary Hill of the Wells," can be found in the northeastern region of the Sinai Peninsula, at a place where important caravan routes once intersected, including the north-south route from Gaza, on the Mediterranean coast, to Elat, on the Gulf of Aqaba. Beginning in 1975, a team of archaeologists from Tel Aviv University undertook excavations at this site, unearthing the foundations of structures dating back to the ninth century B.C., when this territory would have been under Israelite control. Among the discoveries were two *pithoi*, or standing stone monoliths, and on one of them had been drawn some images of men and women and also words in Hebrew that some interpreters ventured to read as: "by Yahweh, our guardian, and his Asherah."

For two decades, the finds at Kuntillet Ajrud have been a source of debate. To begin with, is the translation correct? If so, is "Asherah" meant to designate the Canaanite goddess of fertility, the consort of the chief male god, El? Are we to suppose, then, that Yahweh too had a consort, and that the monotheistic Israelites made room for a goddess, "his Asherah"? Was Kuntillet Ajrud their shrine? Or was it just a caravansary, abounding in the graffiti of travelers? And might "Asherah" refer not to the Canaanite goddess specifically but merely to the Israelite cult-image of the same name, a sacred tree or symbolic wooden pole planted near stone altars?

These are questions that elicit both narrow academic inquiry and, among some feminists with an interest in religion, a broader emotional resonance. The Israelite worldview, which offered a revolutionary vision

centered on a single deity, came into being amid a cultural context of polytheism. All of the Israelites' powerful neighbors—the Canaanites, the Assyrians, the Egyptians—had sophisticated religious systems that featured pantheons of goddesses as well as gods, with the functional responsibilities of cosmic governance and earthly development apportioned among them. The Israelites, not surprisingly, were hardly immune to the attractions of these systems. Atavistic references to them appear in many places in the Hebrew Bible. And, of course, the explicit embrace of foreign gods by the Israelites causes frequent breaches in the covenant with Yahweh. The fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians is precipitated in part by King Manasseh's installation of a shrine to Asherah in the Temple. The Lord vows (2 Kings 21:13) in response: "I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down."

The broader emotional response occurs on a different plane. It is only natural to wonder if women must inevitably suffer disadvantages in a religious system that lacks powerful goddesses, or indeed goddesses of any kind—one in which goddesses may in fact have been suppressed. And it is only natural to wonder about the theological and psychological consequences of a system in which the one god there is comes across as a male.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky understands such complaints. At the same time, she sees polytheism and monotheism in a considerably different light from the one that is typically trained on either subject. She writes in *In the Wake of the Goddesses* (1992): "If you could discover all you needed to know about the Goddess from inside your soul and your mind, why should anyone study Sumerian and Akkadian?"

Superficially, elements of polytheism undeniably hold a certain appeal. In a culture such as ours, with all its talk about affirmative action and minority set-asides, and all the public invocation of the importance of role models, the presence of women in an ancient pantheon can strike a reassuring note of progress. In the pantheons of Mesopotamia, vital natural and social functions such as the growing of grain, the brewing of beer, the making of pottery, and the turning of wool into cloth are associated with women who enjoy divine status. In the Sumerian pantheon, the goddess Nisaba watches over the storage rooms, among other duties, storage rooms perhaps being a cultural analogue of the womb. Nisaba is responsible also for yet another form of storage: writing, the warehouse of memory. And, of course, goddesses are generally associated with fertility and sexual pleasure. But male gods fill most of the important roles. They control the earth and the skies and the elements—the power structure of the universe—and they dominate the female gods. The religions of ancient Mesopotamia do not by any means constitute "women's religion." Moreover, the whole system presupposes—and legitimates—the division of heaven and earth, of thought and theology, along gender lines. In the end, the goddesses provide little in the way of succor. Frymer-Kensky writes: "The existence and power of a goddess, particularly of Ishtar, is no indication or guarantee of a high status for human women. In Assyria, where Ishtar was so promi-

nent, women were not. The texts rarely mention any individual women, and, according to the Middle Assyrian laws, married women had to be veiled, had no rights to their husband's property, . . . and could be struck by their husbands at will."

Monotheism, the chief characteristic of Western religion, represents a revolutionary theological departure. All the functions and characteristics of those male and female divinities must now be rolled into the being of the one God. "God plays all the roles," Frymer-Kensky writes, "for God is creator and sustainer, provider and destroyer." In the Bible, God brings forth the rain and snow and sun, induces fertility in woman and beast and field, serves as midwife, heals the sick. The complex dynamic of shifting power relationships among the divinities themselves and their mortal clients—the jealousies, the couplings, the wars—is replaced by a single, all-important relationship: that between the one God and the apogee of God's creation, human beings.

Bronze Age statue of Astarte

God in the Bible is not devoid of gender. God is described most often with male imagery, a circumstance that prompts a good deal of literal-mindedness even now. "O'Connor Rips Radical Feminists: God Is a Man" was the front-page headline on the *New York Post* when John Cardinal O'Connor of New York used a 1991 Father's Day sermon to criticize feminist reconceptualizations of the divine. When the director of the York Mystery Plays in England announced in 1996 that the role of God was to be played by a woman at the next staging of the six-hun-

dred-year-old event, the archdeacon of York condemned the proposal as tantamount to "paganism." He observed, "We are made in God's image, and not the other way around."

Yet the God of Israel, unlike the gods of Israel's neighbors, is not a sexual being, possesses no sexual organs, and is never depicted, as Frymer-Kensky memorably puts it, "below the waist." The God of Israel creates the world not by means of sexual reproduction but by an act of will. Depending on circumstance, feminine as well as masculine imagery may be invoked in metaphor. "Now I will scream like a woman in labor, I will pant and I will gasp," says God in Isaiah (42:14). Later in the same book (49:15), God speaks to Israel in this manner: "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you."

Created in the image of the one God, human beings, male and female alike, partake of a single nature: "So God created man in his image . . . male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). As a result, humanity is elevated in status and competence. Whereas in the polytheistic religions the gods bestow technology and skills on human beings, in the Bible human beings develop cultural skills on their own, after "stealing" from the Tree of Knowledge (on a woman's initiative). The first act of Adam and Eve after eating the forbidden fruit is one that in Sumerian mythology would have been the gift of the goddess Uttu: they make clothes for themselves. Soon human beings are tilling fields, forging metal, building cities, writing books, making music. Eventually they will even be capable of biblical criticism. Civilization is in human hands.

The religious vision of what Frymer-Kensky calls "radical monotheism" represents an ideal—and the reality of biblical society did not conform to it. Women were subordinate to men in custom and in law, as they were everywhere in the ancient world. Their property rights were limited. Their sense of purpose in life was often equated with reproductive success. And yet, unlike the sacred literature of other Near Eastern cultures, "the Bible presents no characteristics of human behavior as 'female' or 'male,' no division of attributes between the poles of 'feminine' and 'masculine'. . . . As far as the Bible presents humanity, gender is a matter of biology and social roles, it is not a question of basic nature or identity." There is no battle of the sexes, no pursuit of "male" or "female" goals, no characteristically male or female behavior, no incipient gender-driven solidarity.

The emergence of monotheism can be traced in the texts of the Bible, as intimations of a more populous divine sphere give way to the monopoly of Yahweh. How and why does this process occur? A recent *New Yorker* cartoon shows pagan gods assembled among the clouds, one of them saying angrily to the others, "It's called monotheism, but it looks like downsizing to me"—an explanation that can take its place alongside various scholarly theories. "The Marxist in me asks, how does this happen?" Frymer-Kensky says. "How does a social system where gender is important and where identity is an issue rise beyond that to a kind of universalizing system? My upbringing would like to say, 'Revelation!

Revelation!' The counterquestion would be, how does Marxism arise in the context of the bourgeoisie? which is where it does arise. The answer is, I don't know *how* these things happen."

By elevating human beings, monotheism also puts an enormous strain on them, creating a profound psychological demand for intercessory figures. To whom do we entrust a dialogue with God? There are, obviously, the prophets. But the voice of compassionate intercession is frequently the voice of a woman. The Bible invokes Rachel—"Mother Rachel," wife of the patriarch Jacob, who died giving birth to Benjamin. Zion, the spirit of Jerusalem, is also invoked as a beloved woman. Perhaps reflecting in part the precarious status of women in their society, the fragile, beleaguered polity of the Israelites identifies itself as a woman in its supplications. Possibly the most memorable image is that of Lady Wisdom, who is sometimes depicted as a goddess. It is said in places that she already existed at the time of the Creation. She will go on to become the divine (and feminine) Sophia of Christian theology.

"It's a convergence of the psychological, the historical, and the sociological," says Frymer-Kensky. "Psychologically, the mother is an enormous presence to the infant. The mother is the one who knows what to do when the child is hurt, tired, or wet. This has a deep impact. The impact is reinforced by the fact that women had responsibility for all kinds of technological wizardry that we now take for granted. The preparation of food. Turning sheep's wool into cloth. Collecting herbs and making potions. The 'wise women' of the Bible may be older women who have done these things all their lives. Women are seen to have arcane knowledge. They are the child's first teachers. There is also a sense of women as being in touch with the divine agenda, which is partly, but only partly, because it is women who give birth. Women gain perspective from being pushed off to the margins of the public world, the margins of the political world. There is always something dangerous and also numinous about the margins."

This experience may explain, Frymer-Kensky says, why there are so many stories in the Bible about women, period. If Wisdom shows women exalted, many other stories appear to use women the way Dickens used poor children, as a kind of index of social pathology. Perhaps it is only optimism, but Frymer-Kensky sees a recurring tension in the Bible on the issue of gender. On the one hand, she says, the authors are conscious of gender and of the fact that the social position of women is inferior to that of men, and on the other hand, the authors recognize that women and men are innately equal and that they are in exactly the same position with respect to God. "When I'm reading with a hermeneutic of benevolence," she says, "I call the Bible gender-neutral. When I'm reading with a hermeneutic of suspicion, I call it gender-blind."