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### The Veiled Divinity: A History of the Suppression and Survival of the Goddess

The early religious landscape of human history was not always perceived to be a solitary throne occupied by a distant patriarch, but a vibrant, shared pantheon where both the masculine and feminine counterparts of divinity were central to the natural world and cosmic order (Smith 2001, 55). For millennia, the divine was understood through a gender-diverse lens, reflecting the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth. However, the transition from an inclusive polytheism to a male-centered monotheism was not a natural evolution or a logical progression toward a higher truth. Instead, this paper will argue that it was the result of a systematic restructuring of human consciousness that devalued the feminine Goddess and desacralized the natural world.

Furthermore, this shift was not a simple act of forgetting but the result of a deliberate, ongoing editorial process (Smith 2001, 138-140). Yet the concept of the Divine Feminine was never truly lost; it was merely edited, buried, and forced into the underground of esoteric mysticism and religious heresy (Dan 2007, 48).

#### I. The Archetype of the Mother: Paleolithic and Neolithic Roots

The history of the Goddess begins long before the written word, as it is rooted in the very dawn of human consciousness. During the Paleolithic and Neolithic eras, the Great Mother was revered as the primary source of all life. This reverence is immortalized in the "Venus" figurines

(small, portable carvings of women with exaggerated reproductive features) found across Europe and Eurasia (Baring and Cashford 1991, 3).

In these early societies, the Goddess was synonymous with Nature itself. She represented a fundamental unity between the human experience and the material world. To the Paleolithic mind, there was no separation between spirit and matter; the earth was not a dead object but a living body. The divine was considered to be immanent, meaning that it existed within everything in the physical world. Thus the cycles of the moon, the turning of the seasons, and the mystery of birth were all direct manifestations of the Goddess. Baring and Cashford argue that early humanity viewed time as cyclical rather than linear, modeled after the phases of the moon and the menstrual cycle of women (Baring and Cashford 1991, 49).

The transition from this Mother Goddess to a Father God represents a fundamental shift in how humans perceive their place in the universe. As the focus shifted from a pluralistic goddess of the earth to a monolithic god of the sky, the sacredness of the physical world began to diminish. This Paleolithic baseline established a world where the feminine was merely the "container" of life, a sacred vessel that held the mysteries of existence (Baring and Cashford 1991, 473). To desacralize the Goddess was, by extension, to desacralize the environment that sustained all life.

## II. The Bronze Age Baseline: The Divine Family

As human societies settled into the agricultural civilizations of the Bronze Age, the singular Goddess of the Paleolithic Age evolved into complex pantheons. In the Ancient Near East, particularly in Canaan, the gods were understood to be a "Divine Family" (Smith 2001, 54). Using the Ugaritic texts found in modern-day Syria in 1928, scholar Mark S. Smith has

reconstructed a religious landscape where goddesses were essential pillars of the cosmic order (Smith 2001, 55). The concept of the "Divine Family" in the Ancient Near East was structured around a multi-tiered hierarchy where deities functioned in familial roles that mirrored human social structures. Central to this Ugaritic model was the goddess *Athirat* (known in the Hebrew Bible as *Asherah*), the matriarchal figure and consort of the high god *El*. Mark S. Smith notes that the Ugaritic texts portray a landscape where goddesses were not merely secondary figures but were essential to the "first-tier" of the pantheon, responsible for the generation of the divine children and the maintenance of cosmic stability (Smith 2001, 54-55). This Bronze Age baseline suggests that the Divine Feminine was a standard, indispensable feature of Middle Eastern religion, with figures like the fierce warrior-goddess *Anat* and the mother-figure *Athirat* providing a functional balance to the male-dominated spheres of sovereignty and war (Smith 2001, 61).

This polytheistic framework directly informed the early religious landscape of the Israelites, where the transition toward monotheism was a long, gradual process rather than an immediate shift. Inscriptions found at Kuntillet Ajrud in Egypt and Khirbet el-Qom on the West Bank in Palestine refer to "*Yahweh* and his *Asherah*" indicating that the Goddess remained a standard feature of Middle Eastern religion prior to the rise of strict monotheism (Smith 2002, xxx-xxxv). This archaeological and textual evidence proves that *Yahweh* was originally situated within this Canaanite-style pantheon, frequently associated with *Asherah* as his female counterpart (Smith 2002, 33). Smith argues that the presence of the Divine Feminine was an integral part of the early Israelite religious experience, which was deeply rooted in the shared cultural heritage of the region. It was only through later theological shifts and the editorial work of the biblical writers

that these goddesses were systematically removed or suppressed to facilitate a strictly monotheistic identity centered solely on *Yahweh* (Smith 2001, 47).

Moreover, the Canaanite religion shared deep cultural and linguistic roots with its neighbors in Sumeria, Egypt, and Greece. The following entries constitute more than a simple catalog of related theonyms. Serving much like linguistic synonyms, these names highlight the functional and ontological identity shared by these various deities and reveals a shared Mediterranean and Near Eastern heritage where the feminine was never absent.

<u>Culture</u>	<u>Male Deity</u>	<u>Female Deity</u>	<u>Functional Roles</u>
Canaanite	El / Baal	Astarte / Athirat / Anat	Creation, War, Fertility
Sumerian	Anu / Enlil / Enki	Inanna	Sovereignty, Life Cycles
Egyptian	Osiris / Ra	Isis	Magic, Protection, Rebirth
Greek	Zeus	Hera / Athena / Artemis	Family, Wisdom, Nature

Mark S. Smith's research into the Ugaritic texts proves that the early Israelite's cultural neighbors did not see the male and female as competitive, but as complementary. At the head of the Canaanite pantheon stood *El* and his consort, *Athirat* (the Ugaritic name for *Asherah*), the "Mother of the Gods" and a co-creator of humanity (Smith 2001, 55). *Anat* represented the active, fierce aspect of the feminine, and was often associated as the sister-lover of the storm god *Baal*.

The evolution of Israelite monotheism is characterized by a process of convergence, wherein the distinct traits and titles of various Canaanite deities were gradually synthesized into the singular figure of *Yahweh*. According to Mark S. Smith, *Yahweh* was not initially the supreme patriarch of the Levantine pantheon but was a younger deity who rose to prominence by absorbing the functions of the older "Divine Family" (Smith 2001, 7-9). This transition involved the assimilation of *El*'s characteristics, such as compassionate fatherhood and cosmic sovereignty, into *Yahweh*'s identity. By utilizing the Ugaritic texts as a cultural baseline, Smith demonstrates that the overlap between the Canaanite *El* and the Israelite *Yahweh* was a deliberate theological development that allowed *Yahweh* to inherit the authority of the ancient Bronze Age head of the gods (Smith 2001, 138-140).

This process of conflation extended beyond male roles to include the domestic and cultic spheres previously occupied by the Divine Feminine. Smith's research indicates that *Asherah*, originally the consort of *El*, was integrated into early Israelite worship as the counterpart of *Yahweh* before being marginalized by later monotheistic reforms (Smith 2002, 32-35). The absorption of these feminine attributes and associations suggests that this religious landscape was a rich polytheistic tapestry before it was eventually attributed to *Yahweh* as an "all-in-one" deity. This editorial consolidation by biblical writers eventually conflated the powers of the entire Canaanite pantheon, including the fertility and protective aspects of goddesses like *Athirat* and *Anat*, under the singular banner of a solitary male national God (Smith 2002, 47-49).

### III. The Great Erasure: Constructing Monotheism

The move within the religion of the Israelites toward strict monotheism required the "Great Erasure" of the Divine Feminine. This was not a passive transition but an active, often violent, cultural campaign as the writers of the Hebrew Bible used polemics and laws to systematically condemn the worship of the Goddess (Smith 2001, 191-193).

The Book of Kings provides a primary record of this suppression in the condemnation of the *Asherah*, or "*Asherah* poles," which were sacred wooden symbols representing the Goddess (2 Kings 23:4-7). The scholarly annotations in the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* clarify that these biblical texts represent the "official" narrative of the central priesthood in Jerusalem, which was attempting to assert control over older, more diverse religious practices occurring in the countryside (Coogan 2010, 568).

This transition from "Mother Goddess" to "Father God" fundamentally reordered the human psyche. Symbols that were traditionally adjacent to the Goddess, such as snakes (rebirth), trees (the Tree of Life), and fertility, were desacralized and reinterpreted as sources of sin, temptation, or idolatry. As the "Father God" was exalted in the heavens as spirit, the "Mother Goddess" was relegated to the "fallen" earth as mere matter. Baring and Cashford argue that this demonization of feminine symbols was essential to establishing the authority of a singular male creator (Baring and Cashford 1991, 660-661).

#### IV. The Christian Paradox: Egalitarian Beginnings vs. Institutional Patriarchy

Early Christianity briefly offered a return to a more gender-diverse spiritual landscape, but this too was eventually suppressed by institutional forces. Elizabeth Fiorenza's "historical-critical reconstruction" of early Christian origins posits that the movement began as a radical "discipleship of equals," characterized by an egalitarian structure where women functioned as primary leaders, apostles, and prophets within house churches (Fiorenza 1994, 97; 140). This inclusive beginning was eventually suppressed by a patriarchal institutionalization that sought to consolidate power by marginalizing women and erasing their historical contributions from the official narrative (Fiorenza 1994, 105).

While Gnostic traditions attempted to preserve a more overt image of the Divine Feminine through the complex figure of Sophia and the spiritual authority of Mary Magdalene, the orthodox tradition eventually channeled this feminine impulse into the highly revered figure of Mother Mary. As the institutional Church matured, the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus, was elevated to provide a sanctioned outlet for the devotion previously directed toward the feminine aspects of the godhead. However, this elevation often came at the cost of her human agency, transforming her from a participant in the egalitarian "discipleship of equals" into a symbol of passive obedience that reinforced the new patriarchal order (Fiorenza 1994, 154-155).

Consequently, the concept of the Mother Goddess was successfully reabsorbed into the Christian framework, but in a way that stripped the Divine Feminine of the institutional authority and wisdom it had possessed as Sofia in the earlier Christian and Gnostic communities.

## V. The Underground Stream: Survival through Mysticism

Despite the efforts of institutional religion, the Goddess could not be fully eradicated but went "underground" into the realm of mysticism. Within Judaism in particular, the Divine Feminine survived through the concept of the Shekinah, which can be understood as the "indwelling presence" of God on earth (Dan 2007, 48). Unlike the transcendent "King" or "Father," the Shekinah is linguistically and conceptually feminine, representing God's proximity to humanity as immanent within the physical world.

In the medieval mystical tradition of Kabbalah, the relationship between the male and female aspects of God became a central theme. Mysticism allowed for a "sacred marriage" between the masculine and feminine aspects of the divine. Even while the mainstream Jewish liturgy remained strictly monotheistic, Lurianic Kabbalists introduced the belief in *tikkun*, the idea that human actions are necessary to reunite the exiled Shekinah with her male counterpart, thereby healing the cosmos (Dan 2007, 59).

While Mother Mary is often framed within orthodox tradition as a figure of passive obedience, feminist reconstructions of Christian history suggest her enduring influence stems from her role as a primary, accessible vessel for the Divine Feminine in a largely patriarchal religious landscape (Fiorenza 1994, 154). In the modern world, she serves as a powerful symbol for the ancient Mother Goddess, providing millions of practitioners with a sanctioned spiritual counterpart to a singular male deity and maintaining a symbolic link to the egalitarian "discipleship of equals" found in early Christian communities (Fiorenza 1994, 97).

## VI. Conclusion

The historical trajectory from a gender-diverse "Divine Family" to a monolithic patriarch reveals that the suppression of the Goddess was not an inevitable evolution, but a calculated restructuring of sacred narratives. As Mark S. Smith demonstrates through the Ugaritic texts, the early Israelite experience was deeply embedded in a polytheistic landscape where goddesses like *Athirat* were indispensable to cosmic stability. The systematic conflation of these feminine roles into the singular figure of *Yahweh* effectively marginalized the Divine Feminine, a process later mirrored in the patriarchal institutionalization of early Christianity described by Fiorenza. By transforming a pantheon of relative equals into a strict patriarchal structure, and regulating the figure of Mother Mary into a symbol of passive obedience, institutional forces effectively erased the authoritative "sophic" wisdom once held by women and their divine counterparts.

Ultimately, the Goddess was never fully eradicated, as her presence survived through a diverse underground stream of esoteric mysticism. Within Kabbalah, the Shekinah emerged as a vital feminine symbol, representing a divine immanence that provides a necessary balance to the transcendent Father God. This and other enduring mystical traditions, alongside the persistent veneration of Mother Mary as a sanctioned vessel for feminine divinity, serve as testaments to the resilience, fecundity, and necessity of the feminine archetype.

### Annotated Bibliography

Baring, Anne, and Jules Cashford. *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*. London: Viking Arcana, 1991.

This comprehensive work traces the evolution of the feminine archetype from the Upper Paleolithic through the Bronze Age and into the Christian era. Baring and Cashford argue that the shift from the Mother Goddess to the Father God represents a fundamental change in human consciousness, as “Pandora like Eve was blamed for human mortality and All the Troubles that afflict humanity” (Baring and Cashford 1991, 516). This text is essential for documenting how the goddess was not simply forgotten but systematically reinterpreted or demonized in Western mythology.

Boisvert, Donald L., and Carly Daniel-Hughes, eds. *The Bloomsbury Reader in Religion, Sexuality, and Gender*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

This collection of scholarly essays provides a contemporary framework for understanding how religious institutions have regulated gender and sexuality. “By establishing certain norms of behavior and desire as transcendent values, religions regulate expressions of sexuality and gender” (Boisvert and Daniel-Hughes 2017, 1-2). This source connects ancient theological foundations to modern power structures, and illustrates how the exclusion of the feminine continues to impact social and religious hierarchies.

Coogan, Michael D., ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*. Revised Standard Version. 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

As a primary source, this study Bible is essential for identifying specific passages where the Divine Feminine is criticized or suppressed, such as the condemnation of Asherah poles: “The king commanded the high priest...to bring out of the temple of the Lord all the vessels made...for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven; he burned them outside Jerusalem” (2 Kings 23). Additionally, the scholarly annotations help clarify where the "official" narrative of monotheism was being asserted over older, more diverse religious practices.

Dan, Joseph. *Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

This source provides a concise yet rigorous historical survey of Kabbalistic thought in the emergence of the Shekinah as the tenth Sefirah (Malkhut). Dan explains how the Shekinah represents the immanent, dwelling presence of God in the world, distinct from the transcendent aspect of the divine. He writes, “The tenth, the feminine power, is the intermediary that transfers the divine flow to creation, and it is the power of divine revelation to creatures” (Dan 2007, 45).

Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. 10th anniversary ed. New York: Crossroad, 1994.

Fiorenza is a pioneer in feminist biblical interpretation. In this work, she performs a "historical-critical reconstruction" of the early Christian movement, arguing that it began as an egalitarian community before being overtaken by patriarchal institutionalization

because “it challenged and opposed the dominant patriarchal ethos through the praxis of equal discipleship” (Fiorenza 1994, 140). This source provides important evidence for my "cover-up" thesis, suggesting that the feminine presence in early Christianity was actively erased by later church historians.

Smith, Mark S. *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002.

Smith is a leading scholar on the transition from polytheism to monotheism. In this book, he provides archaeological and textual evidence showing that the early Israelite god, *Yahweh*, was originally part of a pantheon and had a female counterpart, Asherah. “Israelite monolatry developed through conflict and compromise between the cults of Yahweh and other deities” (Smith 2002, 8). This is a critical source for proving that the Divine Feminine was part of the "original" religious landscape of the Israelites before being edited out by the scribes of the Hebrew Bible.

Smith, Mark S. *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Building on his earlier work, Smith uses the Ugaritic texts (found in modern-day Syria) to show the shared cultural heritage of Israel and Canaan. This source helps establish the Bronze Age baseline for my essay, showing that the "Divine Feminine" (in the form of deities like *Anat* and *Athirat*) was a standard feature of Middle Eastern religion prior to the rise of strict monotheism. Of the ancient theory of gods and goddesses as divine

children, he writes they are “called in generic terms ‘the seventy sons of *Athirat*’” (Smith 2001, 55).

Sweeney, Marvin A. *Jewish Mysticism: From Ancient Times through the Contemporary Period*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020.

Sweeney explores how the feminine survives in Jewish thought through the concept of the Shekinah (the indwelling presence of God). He writes that Kabbalah mysticism was “fundamentally concerned with understanding the presence of the divine in relation to the world of creation” (Sweeney 2020, 405). This source is vital for my understanding of how the idea of the divine feminine was never fully eradicated from Judaism, but "went underground" into mysticism (Kabbalah).