



SHE

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S/HE



AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF GODDESS STUDIES

Mission Statement: *S/HE: An International Journal of Goddess Studies* is a web-based, peer-reviewed international scholarly journal committed to the academic exploration, analysis and interpretation, from a range of disciplinary perspectives, of Goddesses and the Female Divine in all religions, traditions, and cultures, to be ancient, historical, or contemporary. The journal is a multi-disciplinary forum for the publication of feminist scholarship in Goddess Studies and for discussion, comparison, and dialogue among scholars of differing feminist perspectives.

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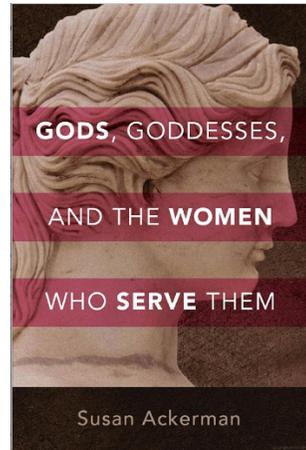
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Susan Ackerman, *Gods, Goddesses, and the Women Who Serve Them* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022)

Reviewed by Mary Ann Beavis

Susan Ackerman is a professor of women's, gender and sexuality studies at Dartmouth College whose research has focused on women's religious practices in ancient Israel since the 1980s. This book is a compilation of previously published works relating to women's religion and goddess worship from as early as 1989, most of them prefaced by short introductions where Ackerman reflects on their significance from her standpoint as a mature scholar. The book is divided into four parts: Goddesses, Priests and Prophets, Queen Mothers, and Women and Worship.



The chapters in Part One investigate the identities and practices associated with ancient Israelite and other Ancient Near Eastern goddesses beginning with a pioneering investigation of the deity referred to as the Queen of Heaven in the biblical Book of Jeremiah (4:16-20; 44:15, 25) (“And the Women Knead Dough”). This goddess, for whom the women of Jerusalem are said to have baked bread cakes, poured out libations, and burned incense, has similarities with “The great East Semitic goddess Ishtar, Ishtar’s West Semitic Counterpart, Astarte, the West Semitic goddesses Anat and Asherah, and even the Canaanite goddess Šapšu” (p. 7). Ackerman concludes that the deity in question particularly shares the characteristics of Astarte and Ishtar, both heavenly Queens—especially Ishtar—whose worship included the offering of bread cakes.

Chapter 2, “Asherah, the West Semitic Goddess of Spinning and Weaving?”, considers the evidence for the ancient Hebrew/Canaanite mother goddess Asherah as the patron of

women's textile production hinted at by the reference in 2 Kings 23:7 to women weavers who lived in the Jerusalem temple compound during the reign of Josiah (c. 640-609 BCE). In view of the ubiquity of goddesses of spinning and weaving in the ancient Mediterranean world (Inanna, Uttu, Tayet, Athena), Ackerman surmises that these women, who were banished from the temple precincts during the Josianic reform, were producing garments to be draped over the cult images of Asherah housed in the temple. The chapter also contains an interesting consideration of the hypothesis that the *eshet hayil* ("valiant woman") of Proverbs 31, who weaves luxury fabrics for her household (vv. 22-23), is a personification of Woman Wisdom, a figure informed by the ancient goddess Asherah. The final chapter in the section, "The Women of the Bible and of Ancient Near Eastern Myth" considers the similarities between the *Enuma Elish*'s account of the defeat of the mother goddess Tiamat by her son Marduk and the notorious story of the Levite's concubine (*pīlegeš*) in Judges 19. Ackerman does not posit a direct relationship between the two narratives, but points out that in both cases, a female figure (Tiamat, the *pīlegeš*) defies ancient near eastern gender norms and is destroyed and dismembered in horrendous acts of male violence.

Part Two of the book begins with "Why Is Miriam Also among the Prophets? (And Is Zipporah among the Priests?)". In fact, five women mentioned in the Hebrew Bible are called prophets (*nēbī'ā*)—Miriam, the sister of Moses (Exodus 15:20), Deborah the judge (Judges 4:4), the wife of the prophet Isaiah (Isa 8:3), Hulda, the prophet who verified the "book of the law" conveniently discovered during the Josianic reform (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 24:22), and Noadiah, an opponent of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 6:14). These women, Ackerman posits, appear at liminal moments in the history of Israel when "the gender conventions that more usually restrict women from holding religious leadership can be suspended" (p. 100). Similarly, Zipporah, the wife of Moses, performs the priestly act of circumcising her infant son during the liminal site of an unspecified lodging on the family's return to Egypt. Chapter 5, "The Mother of Esmunazor, Priest of Astarte," investigates the issue of why priestly roles for women were exceedingly rare in Ugaritic and Hebrew religion, whereas upper-class women of surrounding cultures, like the Phoenician *khnt* (priestess), queen mother of

Esmunazor II of Sidon (5th century BCE) played priestly roles. Ackerman theorizes that women of child-bearing age were excluded from blood sacrificial roles due to the ritual impurity incurred by menstruation and childbirth specific to these cultures. This issue is further investigated in “Priestesses, Purity, and Parturition,” which shows that menstrual impurity was by no means universally regarded as an impediment to female priesthood in the region. Further, Ackerman speculates that pre-pubescent girls, like the frame-drumming *‘ālamôt* of Psalm 68:26, were able to access Yahweh’s sanctuary, whereas women of reproductive age were confined to the sanctuary’s periphery (2 Kings 23:7; Ezekiel 8:14; Exodus 38:8).

Part Three focuses on another class of women past childbearing age—queen mothers, who, like the mother of Esmunazor, served as priestesses. In “The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel,” Ackerman argues that the king’s mother (*gēbirā*) served not only as a trusted advisor to her son, but also as priestess of Asherah, Yahweh’s divine consort (1 Kings 15:2, 9-13; 2 Chronicles 11:20-22; 15:16). As royal representative of the goddess, the queen mother would have been able “to function as the second-most powerful figure in the royal court, superseded only by her son” (p. 169). The next chapter, “The Queen Mother and the Cult in the Ancient Near East,” situates the sacerdotal role of queen mothers in other West Semitic cultures; in a final section, Ackerman notes the attribution of the queen mother role to Mary in the New Testament infancy narratives and in the *Protevangelium of James*, where the child Mary is dedicated to the temple, and she and other virgins spin the wool for the temple curtain, until she reaches puberty.

The two chapters in Part Four are devoted to considerations of Israelite women’s worship in the domestic sphere, encompassing the house of the God, the temple, the royal palace, and the family residence. In “At Home with the Goddess,” Ackerman concludes that Asherah worship was not confined to the elite, or to women; rather, she sees “a close interrelationship between the Asherah cult as it was practiced in the temple, as it was practiced in the palace, and as it was practiced in Israelite households” (p. 206). She makes the interesting point that in contrast to the worship of the Queen of Heaven (Jeremiah 44:17), which seems to have been confined to women, the worship of Asherah as the wife of Yahweh would have

been intrinsic to the cult in pre-exilic Israel. The final chapter, “Women and the Worship of Yahweh in Ancient Israel,” focuses on the religious lives of women subsequent to Josiah’s reforms, especially in post-exilic times when activities previously open to women, including goddess worship, were severely constrained.

The chapters in this book are highly technical, written by a seasoned scholar for other scholars. Since it is a collection of essays written over the course of some thirty years, there are inevitable overlaps and repetitions. As such, it may be a hard slog for non-specialist readers. However, Ackerman’s work puts paid to popular stereotypes that ancient Israel was uniformly hostile to goddess worship, and that women had no religious roles. Rather, ancient Israel had religious affinities with surrounding cultures, and women were religious actors throughout its history, albeit relatively limited subsequent to the Josianic reform and exile.

Naturally, scholars will have some quibbles with Ackerman’s conclusions. I wonder if Hulda can be described as a liminal figure when she was singled out as the prophet to undertake the important task of authenticating a newfound scripture during a religious reform spearheaded by a king. Similarly, is Zipporah represented as performing a priestly act because her story takes place in a liminal phase of Israel’s sacred history, or simply because she is the daughter of a non-Israelite (Midianite) priest (Exodus 2:16-21)? Are the five women prophets specifically mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures the only ones, or a few of many?

Overall, this book is a valuable collection of essays by a scholar who began her work on goddesses and the women who served them at a time when these issues were considered unimportant or inaccessible by the majority of her colleagues. Beth Alpert Nakhai has observed that the study of women in ancient Israelite religion is all new research and it has transformed biblical scholarship so that the study of women’s religion cannot be ignored (see Religions | Free Full-Text | Women in Israelite Religion: The State of Research Is All New Research [mdpi.com]).¹ Ackerman’s work is very much a part of this new and paradigm-shifting research.

¹ <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/2/122/htm>.

CONTRIBUTORS

Mary Ann Beavis

Dr. Beavis is Professor Emerita of Religion and Culture, St. Thomas More College, the University of Saskatchewan. She is the author of several books and many articles in the areas of feminist biblical interpretation, parable studies, goddess studies, and religion and popular culture. Her most recent publications attempt to reconstruct the experience of enslaved persons in early Christianity. She is the co-author of the Wisdom Commentaries on Hebrews and 2 Thessalonians.

Helen Benigni

Helen Benigni (Ph.D. Indiana University of Pennsylvania) is a published author and a Full Professor in English at Davis and Elkins College in Elkins, West Virginia. For several decades, Helen has been teaching classes in Comparative Mythology with an emphasis on Goddess studies. Her books, *The Myth of the Year* (University Press of America, 2003), *The Goddess and the Bull* (University Press of America, 2007), and *The Mythology of Venus* (University Press of America, 2013) incorporate the research findings of archaeoastronomers to determine the myths associated with the cycles found on the ancient calendars of the Greeks and the Celts. Identifying the goddesses of the matri-local cultures of the ancients with the seasons represented by the lunar, solar and stellar bodies has been a major endeavor in the study of archetypes, with an emphasis on the feminine archetypes of the celestial realms. Helen's research with the Hellenic Studies Center in Washington D.C., her many trips to ancient sites, and her collaborative efforts with scholars in mythology, astronomy, archeology, and art have led to her discovery of the presence of the Goddess in the night sky and the continued renewal of the Goddess in contemporary times.

Carolyn Lee Boyd

Carolyn Lee Boyd's essays, short stories, memoirs, reviews, and poetry have been published in a variety of print magazines, internet

sites, and book anthologies. Her writing explores goddess-centered spirituality in everyday life and how we can all better live in local and global community. In fact, she is currently writing a book on what ancient and contemporary cultures have to tell us about living in community in the 21st century. She would love for you to visit her at her website, www.goddessinateapot.com, where you can find her writings and music and some of her free e-books to download.

Lilian Broca

Lilian Broca, BFA, Concordia U., Montreal, MFA Pratt Institute, NY, taught studio art at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. Her work was featured in over 70 exhibitions worldwide. Among many distinctions, Broca was the subject of a retrospective exhibition at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle in 2001, collaborated on the book *A Song of Lilith* with esteemed Canadian author Joy Kogawa in 2000, and was the recipient of the Lorenzo il Magnifico Gold Medal at the 2003 Florence Biennale. Broca's art works were awarded First Prize in International Mosaic Exhibitions in San Francisco, Chicago and San Diego. The book *The Hidden and the Revealed: The Queen Esther Mosaics of Lilian Broca*, (Gefen Publishing House, NY, Jerusalem), was launched in 2011. The book *Heroine of a Thousand Pieces: the Judith Mosaics of Lilian Broca* was published in 2015. Two award winning documentaries on the artist are: *Return to Byzantium: The Art and Life of Lilian Broca*, 2012 and *Mary Magdalene in Conversation with Lilian Broca*, 2022.

Susan Hawthorne

Susan Hawthorne, Ph.D. has been researching and writing about prehistory and ancient history since the 1970s. She is a radical lesbian feminist poet, novelist, theorist and co-founder, with Renate Klein, of Spinifex Press. She is the author/editor of 29 books of fiction, poetry and non-fiction. They include her novels *The Falling Woman* (1992) and *Dark Matters* (2017). Her poetry books include *The Sacking of the Muses* (2019), *Lupa and Lamb* (2014), *Cow* (2011) and *The Butterfly Effect* (2005). *Cow* (2011) was a finalist for the Audre Lorde Lesbian Poetry Prize (USA) and the Kenneth Slessor Poetry Prize in the NSW Premier's Literary

Awards. In 2017 she was winner of the Penguin Random House Best Achievement in Writing in the Inspire Awards for her work increasing people's awareness of disability. She is Adjunct Professor in the School of Humanities at James Cook University Townsville.

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Dr. Hwang is the researcher, writer, publisher, and advocate of Magoist Cetaceanism, the matriversal consciousness of cetacean veneration embodied in the socio-historical-cultural expressions of traditional Korea and beyond. After earning her MA and Ph.D. in Religion with emphasis on Feminist Studies from Claremont Graduate University, CA., she pursued M.A. degree at UCLA, CA. She, with Mary Ann Beavis, co-founded *S/HE: An International Journal of Goddess Studies*. Hwang's authored and co-edited books include *Goddesses in Myth, History and Culture*, *Mago Almanac*, *The Mago Way*, *She Rises* trilogy, *Celebrating Seasons of the Goddess*, *She Summons Volume 1*, *The Budoji Workbook*, and *Return to Mago E-Magazine*.

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Deepak Shimkhada received his Ph.D. from Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California and currently teaches at Chaffey College as an adjunct professor of Asian art after having retired from Claremont McKenna College in 2011. He is the author of many journal articles and several book chapters. His edited volumes include *Nepal, a Shangri-La? Narratives of Culture, Contact and Memory* (2022); *Nepal: Historical Study of Hindu Kingdom* (2022); *South Asian Studies: Bridging Cultures* (2020); *Nepal: Nostalgia and Modernity* (2012); *The Constant and Changing Faces of the Goddess: Goddess Traditions of Asia* (2008); and *Himalayas at the Crossroad: Portrait of a Changing World* (1987). He is president of Indic Foundation. For his full bio please visit www.deepakshimkhada.com or https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deepak_Shimkhada

Lisa R. Skura

Dr. Lisa R. Skura is an artist and mythologist who earned her Doctor of Philosophy in Mythology with emphasis in Depth Psychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute, in Carpinteria, California. Lisa also has a Bachelor of Science in Design from Buffalo State University, in Buffalo, New York. Dr. Skura is a spinner and weaver of both textile and text as well as a tarot scholar and creator, an empathic energy healer with a deep connection to crystals, and a voracious reader and collector of books. Dr. Skura believes bridges of love are essential to the healing of humanity and the world.

Francesca Tronetti

Dr. Francesca Tronetti is the Refugee School Impact Grant Coordinator at the Erie Multicultural Community Resource Center, where she runs an ESL program for refugee children in middle and high school. She is also an adjunct at Cherry Hill Seminary. She writes articles on ancient Goddess cultures and contemporary

American Paganism for Return to Mago online magazine. She is interested in American Folk Magic Traditions of Appalachia and the Pennsylvania Dutch and developed a course on the subject. A published poet, author, and fiber artist, she hosts a weekly community radio program on green living and self-care. She lives in Northwestern Pennsylvania and studies American mythological creatures and legends.

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For over 30 years, Anna has been a dedicated student of world spiritual traditions, as well as ancient and contemporary healing modalities. She has worked with individuals and groups teaching yoga, meditation and Art in Healing classes; leading support groups, as well as facilitating variety of wellness workshops in hospitals, studios, private and corporate settings. Anna practices and embodies what she continues to learn. She is an artist, researcher, nutritional consultant, activity therapist, intuitive energy healer and a mother. After 33 years living in North America, she has returned to her roots, residing now in Bulgaria.

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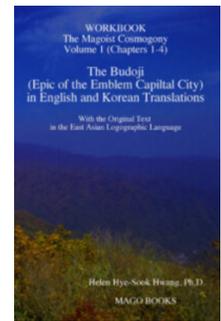
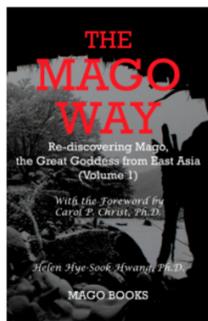
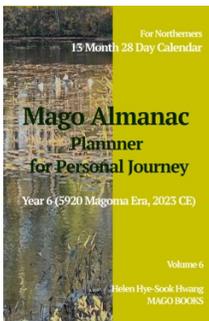
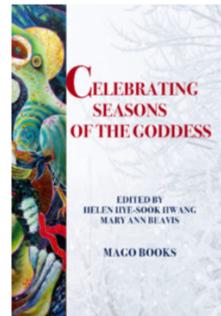
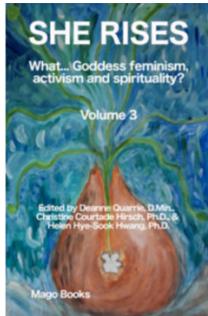
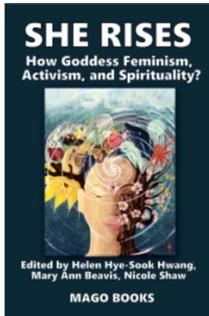
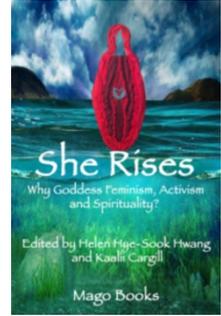
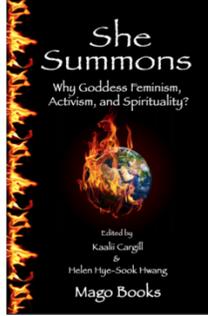
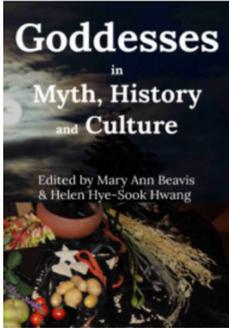
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