

## INFANT MORTALITY AND FAMILY RELIGION IN THE BIBLICAL PERIODS\*

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### *Resumen*

Las estadísticas de entierros indican un elevado índice de mortalidad infantil al momento de existir la necesidad económica de tener familias numerosas. El temor a la mortalidad infantil resultó en mitologías de diosas raptoras de infantes y de las prácticas religiosas familiares para combatirlas. Además de dar a luz, las mujeres dirigían la economía doméstica, en lo que respecta a la producción de indumentaria y a la preparación y almacenamiento de alimentos. Se pueden identificar herramientas asociadas con estas actividades en casas de sitios israelitas tales como Tell Masos, Tell el-Far'ah, Beersheba, y Tell Halif, junto con lámparas rituales, estatuillas femeninas y amuletos que eran utilizados por las mujeres para controlar las fuerzas sobrenaturales. Los santuarios y capillas locales (donde los residentes ofrendaban a sus deidades patronales) proporcionan paralelos que ayudan a interpretar los artefactos votivos hallados en las casas israelitas. Los textos bíblicos mencionen a mujeres que celebraban mágico-religiosos en sus hogares. Los encantamientos arameos creados para proteger aspectos de la unidad doméstica afirman la preeminencia femenina en los rituales de protección doméstica.

### *Abstract*

Burial statistics indicate high infant mortality when large families were economically necessary. Fear of infant mortality resulted in mythologies of child-stealing goddesses and family religious practices to combat them. In addition to childbearing, women managed household economies, especially clothing production and food storage and preparation. Tools connected with these activities occur in houses at Israelite sites like Tell Masos, Tell el-Far'ah, Beersheba, and Tell Halif together with ritual lamps, female figurines, and amulets women used to control supernatural forces. Ancient Near Eastern house shrines and neighborhood cult rooms where residents presented offerings to personal deities provide parallels that help interpret the votive artifacts Israelite houses exhibit. Biblical texts mention women performing religio-magical activities in their homes. Aramaic incantations designed to protect aspects of the domestic unit affirm women's leadership in protective household rituals.

### 1. INFANT MORTALITY AND FEMALE LIFESPAN

The skeletal analysis of human remains from archaeological excavations in the eastern Mediterranean region confirms biblical clues to Israelites' preoccupation with fertility, infant mortality, and short female life span. The difficult subsistence envi-

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ronment of the hill country, with its dependence on unreliable rainfall and large labor force for successful agriculture, forms the background of the fertility aspects of the Canaanite and Israelite religions. Adult female longevity, along with infant mortality, presented a major obstruction to fertility. Israelites and Babylonians considered women at risk during pregnancy and childbirth and their infants at risk until they were weaned.<sup>1</sup> The extreme danger period for mothers and newborns coincides with the forty-day state of impurity that survives in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religions.<sup>2</sup>

During the whole time span from Upper Paleolithic to the nineteenth century A.D. in the Near East, most women died before menopause,<sup>3</sup> living on the average only to age thirty.<sup>4</sup> Plagues and military conquests launched the Iron Age with about a four-fifths reduction in population,<sup>5</sup> and studies show very high infant mortality for 1150-650 B.C. Because of endemic disease and poor socioeconomic conditions, of the average 4.1 births per female, only 1.9 survived. From 650-300 B.C., this improved to 4.6 births per female, with 3.0 survivors.<sup>6</sup> Data from the excavation of Roman Age Meiron in Upper Galilee indicate that 50% of the individuals identified within the *Kokhim* and central chamber died before age 18, and 70% of those childhood and adolescent deaths occurred within the first five years of life.<sup>7</sup> Osteological analysis of communal burials at other excavations in Israel and Jordan produced similar results.<sup>8</sup> On average, 35% of all individuals died before age 5.<sup>9</sup> High infant mortality kept nuclear families small enough to live in the familiar four-room house.<sup>10</sup> Even without an epidemic,

<sup>1</sup> Karel van der Toorn, *From her Cradle to her Grave: The Role of Religion in the Life of the Israelite and the Babylonian Woman* (The Biblical Seminar 23; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 25–6.

<sup>2</sup> Erle Lichty, "Demons and Population Control," *Expedition* 13.2 (1971): 23.

<sup>3</sup> J. Lawrence Angel, "Ecology and Population in the Eastern Mediterranean," *World Archaeology* 4.1 (1972): 102.

<sup>4</sup> Carol L. Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford, 1988), 112–3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>6</sup> Angel, "Ecology," 95.

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Smith, Elizabeth Bornemann and Joseph Zias, "Human Skeletal Remains," in *Excavations at Ancient Meiron, Upper Galilee, Israel 1971–72, 1974–75, 1977* (ed. Eric M. Meyers, James F. Strange and Carol L. Meyers; Cambridge: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1981), chapter 7.2.

<sup>8</sup> For a comparative chart and references see P. Bikai and M. Perry, "Petra North Ridge Tombs 1 and 2: Preliminary Report," *BAJOR* 324 (2001): 59–78. For earlier reports from Lachish and Jericho see M. Giles, "The Human and Animal Remains: The Crania," in *Lachish III: The Iron Age* (ed. Olga Tufnell; London: Oxford, 1953), 405–9; and *idem*, "The Human and Animal Remains: The Crania," in *Lachish IV: The Bronze Age* (ed. Olga Tufnell; London: Oxford, 1958), 318–22; D. L. Risdon, "A Study of the Cranial and Other Human Remains from Palestine Excavated at Tell Duweir (Lachish) by the Wellcome-Marston Archaeological Research Expedition," *Biometrika* 31 (1939): 99–166; D. R. Hughes, "Report on Metrical and Non-metrical Aspects of E.B.-M.B. and Middle Bronze Human Remains from Jericho," in *Excavations at Jericho. Volume 2* (ed. Kathleen M. Kenyon; London: British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, 1965), 664–85.

<sup>9</sup> Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 112.

<sup>10</sup> David C. Hopkins, "Life on the Land: The Subsistence Struggles of Early Israel," *BA* 50 (1987): 182.

families would have had to produce almost twice the number of children they wanted in order to achieve optimal family size.

Biblical clues affirm anxieties about infant mortality and female lifespan. Jacob's wife Rachel illustrates the archaeological statistics in that she has trouble conceiving, then dies during her second childbirth. The biblical creation and flood narratives instruct couples to be fruitful and multiply. Meyers traces the origin of the Gen 2–3 narrative to Israelite families' survival and population problems, and she interprets what are traditionally perceived as curses, as prescriptions for men to sweat working the ground six days a week and women to "increase their toil and pregnancies."<sup>11</sup> The Lev 27 table of economic worth assigns women less economic value in the high risk 5-20 age group when they become susceptible to the mortality of childbearing. The demographic situation in Syria-Palestine encouraged taking virgins as war trophies, even after the Midianite Baal Peor crisis (Num 25:1-8; 31:9-18). It appears that when Israelite kings and military men married women from Egypt, Phoenicia, Syria, Moab and Ammon, they imported their family religions with them.

## 2. CHILD-STEALING MYTHOLOGY

Biblical stories of Joseph and the Exodus emphasize the problems Egypt had with plagues and famine. The 16<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Berlin Papyrus 3027 contains incantations for mothers and children that exhibit Egyptian fears of child-stealing spirits:

Another (charm).

May you flow away, he who comes in the darkness and enters in furtively, with his nose behind him, and his face reversed, failing in what he came for!

May you flow away, she who comes in the darkness and enters in furtively, with her nose behind her, and her face turned backwards, failing in what she came for!

Have you come to kiss this child? I will not let you! Have you come to silence (him)? I will not let you set silence over him! Have you come to injure him? I will not let you injure him! Have you come to take him away? I will not let you take him away from me!<sup>12</sup>

Scanty diet and medical care, along with poor sanitation, forced the rate of miscarriages, stillbirths, infant mortality, as well as women's death in childbirth just as high in Mesopotamia, and spawned its mythology of child-stealing demons.<sup>13</sup> To guard against them, Babylonians and Assyrians instituted family religious practices and prayers to protect mother and child. Texts indicate that women placed a deity figurine in their household shrines and recited incantations to protect themselves and their infants against being sickened by Lamaštu and Lilith, preying female spirits who represent the fear of pre- and neonatal mortality:

<sup>11</sup> Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 105.

<sup>12</sup> Adapted from "Incantation for Mother and Child," translated by John A. Wilson (*ANET*, 328).

<sup>13</sup> Lichy, "Demons and Population Control," 23.

... not a midwife, she wipes off the babe.  
 She keeps counting the months of women with child;  
 she is continually blocking the door of the woman in labor,  
 She seizes... the babe from the arm of the nurse.  
 The twin gods who saw her  
 and made her go through the window,  
 made her slip away past the cap of the door pivot  
 bound her with ...  
 She strangles the babes,  
 the weak ones she gives water of...to drink.  
 Who carried fat, she slew the fat;  
 who carried milk, she slew the milk;  
 the nurses who opened widely,  
 who spread a little their strong elbows,  
 she has bitten;  
 ...way with your breast from here!<sup>14</sup>

In these texts, the goddess-demon strangles newborns or kills them indirectly by biting the nurse's breast to "slay" its fat and milk, then substituting her own poison. Women could protect themselves through goddesses who opposed the child-stealer: "may the goddess Annunitu crush the ... snatcher-demon *lamaštu*" or by wearing jewelry like the "fourteen stone beads (as charms) against the *lamaštu*" (CAD 9:66).<sup>15</sup>

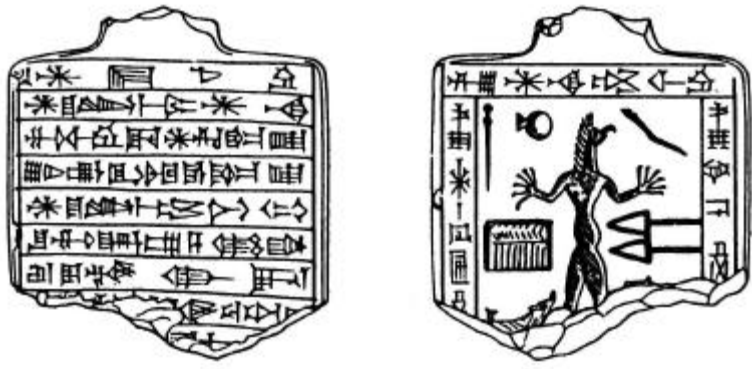


Figure 1: Birdlike *Lamaštu*<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Jan J. A. van Dijk, Albrecht Goetze and Mary I. Hussey, *Early Mesopotamian Incantations and Rituals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 26, 49.

<sup>15</sup> CAD = *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (eds. A. Leo Oppenheim, Erica Reiner and Robert D. Biggs; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1956-).

<sup>16</sup> François Thureau-Dangin, "Rituel et amulettes contre Labartu," *Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale* 18.4 (1921): 161-98.

## 3. PROTECTIVE FAMILY DEITIES

In Babylonia, at Ugarit and in Syria-Palestine family gods, goddesses and protective spirits, as distinguished from deceased ancestors,<sup>17</sup> protected the members and interests of the household, especially women and infants. Logically, family interests differ from or supplement national interests. Personal religion reflects concerns with the everyday physical welfare of individual family members. While kings chose gods from the higher echelons of the pantheon, ordinary citizens approached city and national deities through intermediaries who belonged to their extended families and neighborhoods, who honored them with daily prayers and offerings in domestic shrines rather than in the large state temples. Texts as well as archaeology indicate that these shrines consisted of incense altars and offering platforms located in the streets of residential neighborhoods or in the courts or living rooms of private houses, where residents burned incense or oil to invoke their personal god and goddess and to frighten away unwanted supernatural beings.

Figurines invited the family deity or their emissaries, male *šedu* and female *lamassu* spirits to come into the house to protect its residents:

You write on the magic figurine's side, "This is the one who makes the favorable *šedu*-spirit and the favorable *lamassu*-spirit come in" (*CAD* 9:63; *KAR* 298:36).<sup>18</sup>

The term *lamassu* refers to a benevolent goddess that Neo-Babylonian art depicts as introducing worshippers into the presence of important deities.<sup>19</sup> Cognate with *šedu*, Deut 32:17 and Ps 106:37 mention *šedim* that received Israelite sacrifices.

Excavations and texts reveal that Assyrians and Babylonians placed figurines on guard in the courtyards or bedrooms of their houses, hung or buried them near doorways, or placed them on roofs.<sup>20</sup> For example, they buried one of the protective god Lahmu, with "Get out, evil demon!" and "Come in, good demon!" inscribed on his arms in a seventh century BCE foundation at Assur.<sup>21</sup> Figurines Assyrians put in their house windows or buried beneath thresholds at Nineveh and Nimrud had names like "the one who drives away the *Asakku*-demon,"<sup>22</sup> another name for the child-stealer.

<sup>17</sup> Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylon, Syria, and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of Religious Life* (Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East 7; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 168, distinguishes between deceased ancestors and family gods on the basis of *Ugaritica* V, 148.

<sup>18</sup> *KAR= Keilschrifttexte aus Assur religiösen Inhalts* (ed. Erich Ebeling; Osnabrück: Zeller, 1972).

<sup>19</sup> Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (London: British Museum, 1992), 115.

<sup>20</sup> F. A. M. Wiggermann, *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits. The Ritual Texts* (Groningen: Styx, 1992); Erica Reiner, "Plague Amulets and House Blessings," *JNES* 19 (1960): 148–55.

<sup>21</sup> Black and Green, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols*, figure 9.

<sup>22</sup> Lichy, "Demons and Population Control," 24.

Epigraphers dated two limestone plaques from Arslan Tash in Syria, whose West Semitic dialect approximates Hebrew, to the time when Assyria controlled Israel. Grotesque figures on the plaques gobble small humans whose shape, proportions and lack of clothing replicate Assyrian relief depictions of young children mothers carried when Sennacherib captured them.<sup>23</sup> One text exemplifies the Near Eastern concept that demons drain their victims' body fluids while they are sleeping.<sup>24</sup> Scholars like Albright and Cross translated the other text as relying on the god El Olam and his consort Asherah for protection:

Incantations: O Fliers, goddesses...  
 The house I enter, you shall not enter  
 And the court I tread, you shall not tread.  
 The Eternal One has made a covenant with us,  
 Asherah has made (a pact) with us.<sup>25</sup>

The expression "to make a covenant" is familiar from the Bible and combines the notions of a *pact* of protection by superior powers and a *ban* on those that threaten. This plaque illustrates a family naming protective deities to keep night demons from their house.

At Ugarit the large number and distribution of terracotta and precious metal deity figurines in the houses east of the royal palace and in the south residential district underscore the importance of household-based religion.<sup>26</sup> Private citizens at Ugarit, like those of Assyria and Babylonia, replicated the furnishings and rituals of major sanctuaries in their family shrines in less elaborate form with less expensive materials in order to invoke the deities they depended on for daily care. Sacred texts found throughout the neighborhoods—wisdom tablets, a medical ritual for a pregnant woman, conjurations against various evils including demons and evil eyes—indicate that knowledge and practical use of the Babylonian literary tradition was not limited to rare scribal specialists.

<sup>23</sup> For drawings of the plaques see Robert du Mesnil du Boisson, "Une tablette magique de la région du moyen Euphrate," in *Mélange syriens offerts à M. René Dussaud* (Bibliothèque archéologique et historique 30; Paris: Guenther, 1939), 1:423; André Caquot and Robert du Mesnil du Boisson, "La seconde tablette ou 'petite amulette' d'Arslan Tash," *Syria* 48 (1971): 391-406. For the reliefs see Pauline Albeda, "Western Asiatic Women in the Iron Age: Their Image Revealed," *BA* 46.2 (1983): 82-8.

<sup>24</sup> Theodor H. Gaster, "A Hang-up for Hang-Ups: The Second Amuletic Plaque from Arslan Tash," *BAJOR* 209 (1973): 18-26; Frank M. Cross, "Leaves from an Epigraphist's Notebook," *CBQ* 36 (1974): 486-94.

<sup>25</sup> Frank M. Cross and Richard J. Saley, "Phoenician Incantations on a Plaque of the Seventh Century B.C. from Arslan Tash in Upper Syria," *BAJOR* 197 (1970): 42-9; William F. Albright, "An Aramean Magical Text in Hebrew from the Seventh Century B.C.," *BAJOR* 76 (1939): 5-11. Dennis Pardee, in "Les documents d'Arslan Tash: authentiques ou faux?," *Syria* 75 (1998): 15-54, while differing on readings of the deity names, defends the authenticity of these inscriptions.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Marguerite Yon, "Ugarit: History and Archaeology," *ABD* 6:695-706; idem, "The Temple of the Rhytons at Ugarit," in *Ugarit, Religion, and Culture* (ed. Nicholas Wyatt, Wilfred G. E. Watson and Jeffrey B. Lloyd; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1996); Jacques-Claude Courtois, "Ras Shamra," *Dictionnaire de la Bible Supplément* (vol. 9; Paris: Letouzey & Ane, 1979).

Practitioners at the household level assisted their family members or neighbors to deal with normal human life situations and perceived dangers.

A text defying Lamaštu from a house at Ugarit shows Semitic women's tenacious combat of infant mortality, as it is close to versions from Sargon's library at Nineveh five to six centuries earlier and similar to Neo-Assyrian child-stealing texts.<sup>27</sup> Also from Ugarit comes the tiny cuneiform cylinder archaeologists found on an infant's skeleton in a Greco-Persian Period grave.<sup>28</sup> The Lamaštu texts expel the child-stealer by naming god and goddess pairs.

#### 4. YAHWEH AND ASHERAH

Near Eastern deities generally worked in teams of the national god and his associates.<sup>29</sup> In both Canaanite and Israelite religions, the goddess Asherah served El as personal assistant. The Israelite culture, although distinctive socio-economically, developed from Canaanite prototypes. Texts like Aqhat and Kirta probably comprised a "Canaanite Bible" that expressed the worldview of the West Semitic people inhabiting Galilee and northern Transjordan, since they do not mention Ugarit, but unfold among toponyms like Lake Galilee, Mt. Hermon, and *Udumu* in Bashan, so that when Israel split from Judah and established its religious centers with Bull El, Asherah, and Baal, it appealed to a long-standing tradition of the region.<sup>30</sup>

Israelites attributed Northwest Semitic and Egyptian imagery for several goddesses to Asherah. Her role as mediator in the Ugaritic Baal Cycle survives as one of her primary functions in Israelite religion. Asherah's stylistic tree in Yahwistic shrines and the formula "by his Asherah" indicate that she was the means of approaching Yahweh as well as the vehicle of his protection. The el-Kom inscription credits Yahweh with rescuing Uryahu from his enemies through Asherah, and the 'Ajrud apotropaic sym-

<sup>27</sup> M. Jean Nougayrol, "Nouveaux textes d'Ugarit en cunéiformes babyloniens," in *Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres. Comptes rendus des séances de l'année 1963. Avril-Juin* (Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1964), 135; idem, "La Lamaštu à Ugarit," in *Ugaritica VI* (Mission de Ras Shamra 17; ed. Claude F. A. Schaeffer; Paris: Guethner and Mission archéologique de Ras Shamra, 1969), 404-5.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 394-403.

<sup>29</sup> The inscription from northern Syria against child-stealing night demons names Baal and his wives (Cross and Saley, "Phoenician Incantations"). Greco-Roman period and later Jewish and Christian incantations against Lilith name a form of Yahweh (*Yahu, Iao, or Shaddai*) and one or more mythologized biblical characters such as Solomon, Michael, or the Virgin Mary as Yahweh's agent-protectors. Compare here Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (4 vols., New York: Pantheon, 1953-1954); Theodor H. Gaster, *The Holy and the Profane: Evolution of Jewish Folkways* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; New York: Morrow, 1980); James A. Montgomery, "Some Early Amulets from Palestine," *JAOIS* 31 (1910-11): 272-81; idem, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (University of Pennsylvania, The Museum, Publications of the Babylonian Section, vol. 3; Philadelphia: University Museum, 1913).

<sup>30</sup> Baruch Margalit, *The Ugaritic Poem of AQHT: Text. Translation. Commentary* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989), 473-75.

bols and inscriptions that ask “Yahweh and his Asherah” for blessing appear to request protection for travelers.<sup>31</sup>

Ugaritic as well as biblical narratives allude to El as child-giver and child-claimer.<sup>32</sup> Although Asherah acts primarily as mother at Ugarit,<sup>33</sup> when El promises Kirta an heir after seven childless wives, Kirta vows to give Asherah silver and gold,<sup>34</sup> indicating that Asherah assists El in promoting family fertility. Fragments of an ‘Ajrud wall inscription presuppose a similar partnership; this Hebrew text promises that Yahweh will enrich them and do them good; as a result they will give offerings to Asherah.<sup>35</sup> Biblical texts agree that Asherah received ritual offerings as a deity from the Israelites when they employ the Hebrew verb עָבַד, “worship, serve” (Judg 3:7; 2 Chron 24:18).<sup>36</sup> Other biblical passages connect incense altars with “asherahs” (Isa 17:8; 27:9).

## 5. RITUAL ARTIFACTS IN WOMEN’S WORK AREAS

Beginning in the earliest Iron Age settlements and continuing under the united and divided monarchies, neighborhood cult rooms and semi-private house shrines substantiate the tradition of offering incense and gifts to personal deities to invoke their protection of the family.<sup>37</sup> Figurines and the ritual apparatus for burning incense and

<sup>31</sup> For description, translations, and interpretations of the Khirbet el-Kom inscription see Joseph Naveh, “Graffiti and Dedications,” *BASOR* 235 (1979): 27-30; André Lemaire, “Les inscriptions de Khirbet el-Qom et P’Ashérah de YHWH,” *RB* 84 (1977): 595-608; William G. Dever, “Recent Archaeological Confirmation of the Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel,” *HS* 23 (1982): 37-43; Ziony Zevit, “The Khirbet el-Kom Inscription Mentioning a Goddess,” *BASOR* 255 (1984): 39-47. For the Kuntillet ‘Ajrud inscriptions see Naveh, “Graffiti and Dedications,” 27-30; William G. Dever, “Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud,” *BASOR* 255 (1984): 21-37; Judith M. Hadley, “Some Drawings and Inscriptions on Two Pithoi from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud,” *VT* 37 (1987): 180-211; Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God* (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 225-48.

<sup>32</sup> Biblical passages that suggest El/Yahweh is child-giver and child-claimer include Gen 16:2; 17:16; 21:1-2; 30:2; Exod 13:1-2, 12-13; Judg 13:5; Ruth 4:12-14; 1 Sam 1:11; 2 Kgs 16:3; 21:6; Job 1:21; Mic 6:6-7; Isa 30:33; and Ezek 20:25-26, 31. Although archaeology has never documented child-sacrifice in the Levant, there is ample evidence for the practice in Phoenician colonies like Carthage.

<sup>33</sup> John Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature,” *JBL* 105.3 (1986): 389.

<sup>34</sup> *KTU* 1.14–16 = *Keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit* (vol. 1; ed. Manfred Dietrich, Oswald Loretz and Joaquin Sanmartin; AOAT 24.1. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1976). *CTU* = *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani, and Other Places* (ed. Manfred Dietrich, Oswald Loretz and Joaquin Sanmartin; 2<sup>nd</sup> enlarged ed.; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1995).

<sup>35</sup> For the inscription see Graham I. Davies, *Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions: Corpus and Concordance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 80; Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses*, 244.

<sup>36</sup> Isa 19:21 clarifies the meaning of עָבַד when it suggests that the Egyptians will serve Yahweh “with sacrifices and grain-offerings.”

<sup>37</sup> Although specific examples here are from Israelite sites, archaeologists also have found house shrines at Trans-Jordanian Ammonite sites like Jawa and ‘Umayri (P. M. Michèle Daviau, “Family Religion: Evidence for the Paraphernalia of the Domestic Cult,” in *The World of the Arameans II: Studies in History*



oil, pouring libations, and gifting grain and luxury items to them are often placed on benches. Houses at Tell el-Far'ah (North), Beersheba, Tell Halif, and Tell Masos provide examples of artifacts and furniture that families employed in household rituals.<sup>38</sup>

Studies on gendered division of labor in pre-modern societies demonstrate that men's activities center on food production and community leadership, while women tend to manage the household economy, including food processing and clothing production.<sup>39</sup> Biblical and other ancient Near Eastern texts, stone reliefs, and paintings portray women as spinners and weavers in industrial contexts as well as in the home-stead subsistence setting of early Israel.<sup>40</sup> Feminine implements connected with food

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*and Archaeology in Honour of Paul-Engène Dion* [ed. P. M. Michèle Daviau, John W. Wevers and Michael Weigl; JSOTSup 325; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001]; Larry G. Herr and Douglas R. Clark, "Excavating the Tribe of Reuben," *BAR* 27 [2001]: 47).

<sup>38</sup> For a description of the common Iron Age four-room house see Lawrence E. Stager, "The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel," *BASOR* 260 (1985): 1-35; John S. Holladay, Jr., "Four-Room House," in *OEANE* 2:337-42; idem, "House, Israelite," in *ABD* 3:308-18. For a compilation of religious objects found at various sites in ancient Israel see idem, "Religion in Israel and Judah Under the Monarchy: An Explicitly Archaeological Approach," in *Ancient Israelite Religion* (ed. Patrick D. Miller, Paul D. Hanson and S. Dean McBride; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallaxic Approaches* (London and New York: Cassell, 2001).

<sup>39</sup> For ethnographic and historical studies on the gendered division of labor see Christine Hastorf, "Gender, Space, and Food in Prehistory," in *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory* (ed. Joan M. Gero and Margaret W. Conkey; Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991); Rivkah Harris, "Independent Women in Mesopotamia?" in *Women's Earliest Records: From Ancient Egypt and Western Asia* (ed. Barbara S. Lesko; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989); Joan M. Gero, "Feasts and Females: Gender Archaeology and Political Meals in the Andes," *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 25.1 (1992): 15-30; Liv H. Dommasnes, "Male/Female Roles and Ranks in Late Iron Age Norway," in *Were They All Men? An Examination of Sex Roles in Prehistoric Society* (ed. Reidar Bertelson, Arnvid Lillehammer and Jenny-Rita Naess; Stavanger: Arkeologisk Museum I Stavanger, 1991); Julie C. Lowell, "Reflections of Sex Roles in the Archaeological Record: Insights from Hopi and Zuni Ethnographic Data," in *The Archaeology of Gender: Proceedings of the Twenty-Second Annual Conference of the Archaeological Association of the University of Calgary* (ed. Dale Walde and Noreen D. Willows; Calgary: Archaeological Association, the University of Calgary, 1991). The Prov 31:10-31 description of a good wife reflects this division of labor: the wife "keeps her eye on the conduct of her household" (31:27), whereas "her husband is well known in the assembly, where he takes his seat with the elders of the region" (31:23).

<sup>40</sup> Prov 31 describes the Israelite matriarch's activities of weaving, spinning, and sewing more fully than her other activities. Prov 31:14-15 emphasizes her labor in food preparation. See also Exod 35:25-26 and 2 Kgs 23:7. For an exception see Exod 35:34-35. A painting from the Middle Kingdom Khnum-hotep tomb at Beni Hasan, Egypt (2052-1778 B.C.) shows women spinning thread and weaving on a loom (P. Newberry, *Beni Hasan* [1893], plate 29). *Ugaritic Text* 51.2:3-4 mentions the spindle of the goddess Asherah. Asherah threatens to stab Baal with it in the Hittite Elkunirša myth from the second half of the second millennium B.C., and other Hittite texts and a stela from Mar'ash picture spindles and mirrors as women's characteristic accessories (Harry A. Hoffner, "The Elkunirša Myth Reconsidered," *Revue Hittite et Asiatique* 23.76 [1965]: 5-16). Records from ancient Sumer indicate that women did the milling, oil pressing, and weaving (Marc van de Mieroop, "Women in the Economy of Sumer," in *Women's Earliest Records: From Ancient Egypt and Western Asia* [ed. Barbara S. Lesko; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989]; Allen Zagarell, "Trade, Women, Class, and Society in Ancient Western Asia," *Current Anthropology* 27.5 [1986]: 415-30; Kazuya Maekawa, "Female Weavers and their Chil-

preparation and textiles frequently occur with incense altars and figurines in the archaeological record of Israelite-house rooms. Often jewelry and accessories that women used to deflect evil forces accompany their weaving and cooking tools.<sup>41</sup>

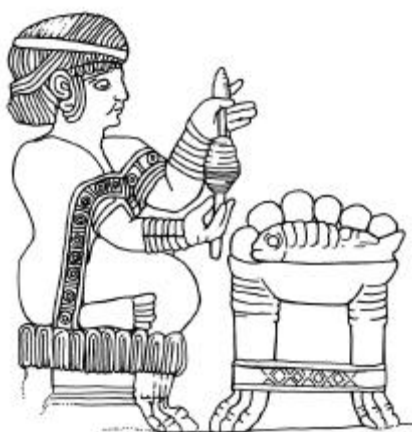


Figure 2: Lady spinning<sup>42</sup>

Israelite families at tenth century Tell el-Far'ah, biblical Tīrzah, did not confine their religious activities to public temples, because most included either a female or an animal figurine in their household commodities.<sup>43</sup> The prophet Ahijah refers to this when he informs Jereboam's wife that it was because Israelites made "asherahs" that her son becomes ill and dies at Tīrzah (1 Kgs 14). Artifacts like the ivory pendant, the cow nursing calf motif, and the blue jewelry plaque represent rituals the Near Eastern heritage associated with preventing infant mortality. No specifically male things accompany these; on the other hand, items

dren," *Acta Sumerologica* 2 [1980]: 81-125). The *Šurpu* incantation tablets from the library of Assurbanipal at Nineveh depict the goddesses Ištar and Uttu spinning a thick multicolored thread (*Šurpu* 5-6:144-153; Erica Reiner, *Šurpu: A Collection of Sumerian and Akkadian Incantations* [Osnabrück: Biblio, 1970], 34). For general discussions of women's economic activity see C. Meyers, *Discovering Eve*; idem, "Women and the Domestic Economy of Early Israel," in *Women's Earliest Records: From Ancient Egypt and Western Asia* (ed. Barbara S. Lesko; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989); idem, "The Family in Early Israel," in *Families in Ancient Israel* (Leo G. Perdue et al.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 1-47.

<sup>41</sup> For archaeological details and analysis see Elizabeth A. R. Willett, "Women and Household Shrines in Ancient Israel" (Ph.D. diss., University of Arizona, 1999). A copy of the dissertation is available from Univ. Microfilms at Ann Arbor, Michigan.

<sup>42</sup> The drawing of lady holding a spindle and a bundle of fibers she is about to spin into thread from an 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century BCE Susa stone relief (National Museums of France, Louvre #SB2834) is an original drawing prepared for the author by Cathy Marlett. A photograph of the relief appears in Maurice Pézard and Edmund Pottier, *Catalogue des Antiquités de la Susiane* [no pub.], 1926, plate 13, and in Lesko, *Women's Earliest Records*, 212.

<sup>43</sup> Archaeological information on this site is from Alain Chambon, *Tel El-Far'ah 1: L'Age du Fer* (Paris: Éditions Recherches sur les civilisations, 1984).

like household pottery and a spindlewhorl confirm women's interest in them. In the north-east section of town, in House 427 excavators discovered bovine and female figurines; House 436 included luxury votive objects; House 442 contained an incense burner and Cypriot bowls; and House 440 produced a nursing female figurine, a horse head from a zoomorphic vessel, an alabaster pendant, and six beads from the courtyard floor near an oven, a female with frame-drum figurine next to a stone bench, as well as a model sanctuary. The houses from tenth century Tell el-Far'ah illustrate Israelite family religion.

In the eighth century houses at Beersheba several figurines occurred with lamps or incense burners.<sup>44</sup> Model chairs that represent the lap of the child-protecting goddess appeared with figurines and incense burners in Houses 25, 808 and 430. House 430 included two cuboidal altars, and its front room housed a female pillar-base figurine and model chair. Structures like offering shelves line the sides of Courtyard kitchen 36 where it adjoins Rooms 25 where excavators found a female figurine, miniature lamp, and model couch and Front Room 94, the site of a woman's oven and cooking pots that held a lamp and a zoomorphic figurine fragment. Stationing a figurine in a house space that fronts the street guards access to the entire house, and lighting a lamp to attract the beneficent deity and deflect evil ones is a ritual Near Eastern women habitually practiced.

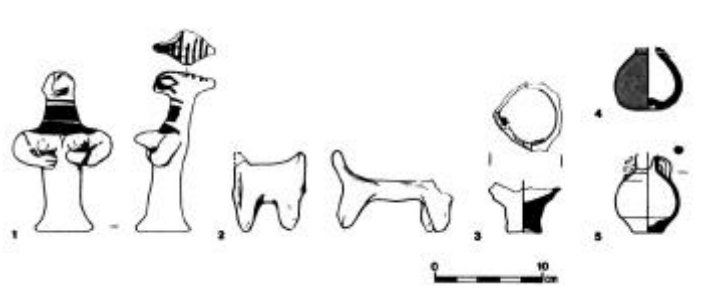


Figure 3: *Figurine, Model Chair, Miniature lamp, and Juglet from House 25*<sup>45</sup>

At Tell Halif (Lahav) a fenestrated incense stand and female figurine head between beveled stone blocks occurred with ordinary household pottery and stone and bone utensils in the broadroom of an eighth century four-room house.<sup>46</sup> Fish bones and carbonized remains of grapes, cereals, and legumes, as well as an oven in the courtyard just outside the room, indicate that this was a food preparation and storage area. This

<sup>44</sup> Archaeological information on this site is from *Beer-sheba I: Excavations at Tel Beer-sheba, 1969–1971 Seasons* (ed. Yohanan Aharoni; Tel-Aviv: Institute of Archaeology, Tel-Aviv University, 1973); Ze'ev Herzog, Anson F. Rainey and Sh. Moshkovitz, "The Stratigraphy of Beer-Sheba and the Location of the Sanctuary," *BAJOR* 225 (1977): 49-58.

<sup>45</sup> *Beer-sheba I*, pl. 71.

<sup>46</sup> Joe D. Seger, "Tel Halif. Notes and News," *IEJ* 43.1 (1992): 6–70; Paul Jacobs, "Iron Age Halif Revisited," *Lahav Newsletter* 51 (1992).

Israelite house shrine at Lahav affords another example of an incense-burning altar and a female figurine associated with a woman's work area.

At Tell Masos the four figurines typical of votives deposited in the Hathor temple at Timna demonstrate that the family in the eleventh to tenth century House 314 revered a protective goddess.<sup>47</sup> Residents likely used the hearth, mud brick structure, and courtyard bench for metalworking and associated religious rituals. Perhaps a woman with a newborn child slept in Room 331, which held three incense burners, three oil-burning lamps, a bead, shells from the Red Sea, and an ivory lion head that symbolized the powerful protector goddesses of the Egypto-Canaanite pantheon.

The benches, careful plastering, and potsherd paneling suggest that Room 169 in House 167 functioned as a shrine. Artifacts from in and around the house hint at luxury votive offerings, and a bone scaraboid carved with animals and a limestone lion head connote the goddess Asherah. Throughout the later seventh to early sixth century rooms at Tell Masos excavators found female and animal figurines, lamps, and a furniture model among women's textile and food processing tools, illustrating the importance of household religion to women's daily life.

These houses from Israelite settlements reveal the cultic artifacts and furniture families employed in protective household rituals. Several storage and sleeping rooms (Tell Masos 307, 331, and 169, Tell el-Far'ah 442 and Tell Halif G8005) contained incense burners or offering structures to invoke deities. Apotropaic jewelry and accessories that repel child-stealing demons accompanied women's food processing equipment (Beer-sheba casemate Rooms 63 and 66 and Courtyard 48 and Tell el-Far'ah Houses 440, 161, and 436) and incense burners and chalices in rear broadrooms (Tell Masos Houses 314 [Room 331] and 42 and Tell el-Far'ah House 442). Similar items come from houses at Lachish, Tell en-Nasbeh, and Tell Beit-Mirsim.

## 6. FEMALE PILLAR-BASE FIGURINES

The common Israelite and Judean pillar-base figurines consist of heads with prominent eyes, heavy breasts emphasized by encircling arms, and conical bodies. Since most come from houses, women likely used them as votives in family religion to invoke the goddess Asherah to ensure successful child-rearing.<sup>48</sup> Votives represent a contract between a person and their deity and stand as tokens of the agreement to provide offerings if the deity protects them or answers a request. Biblical women frequently made vows (Num 30), often in connection with progeny issues. For example, Hannah vowed to

<sup>47</sup> Archaeological information on Tell Masos is from Volkmar Fritz and Aharon Kempinski, *Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen auf der Hirbet El-Msas (Tel Masos) 1972-1975* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983).

<sup>48</sup> So William G. Dever, "The Silence of the Text: An Archaeological Commentary on 2 Kings 23," in *Scripture and Other Artifacts* (ed. Michael D. Coogan, J. Cheryl Exum and Lawrence E. Stager; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 150-1.

dedicate her son to Yahweh if he provided her one (1 Sam 1:11), and King Lemuel's mother calls him "the son of my vow" (Prov 31:2). The vow was a convenient medium of religious expression for women, since it could be practiced outside the sphere of religious and political authority structures.<sup>49</sup>

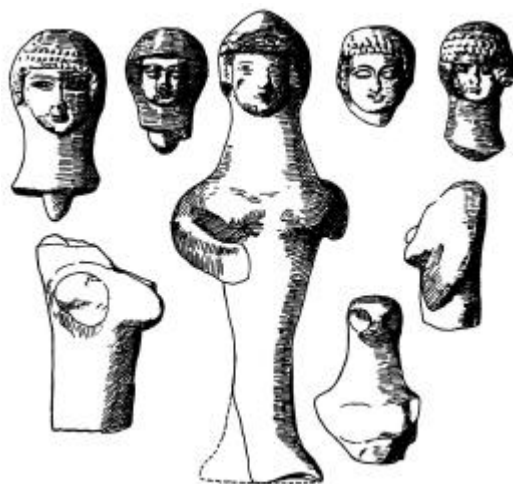


Figure 4: Pillar-Base Figurines from Houses at Tell Beit-Mirsim<sup>50</sup>

A votive figurine may represent either the deity or the votary,<sup>51</sup> or dually identify the goddess as an ideal woman and portray the female worshiper expressing herself in the image and likeness of the goddess.<sup>52</sup> At either end of the scale, the pillar figurine represents a female. The Israelites who made and revered the figurines clearly associated their blatant femaleness with a goddess rather than with Yahweh. If the figurine represents the votary, the votary is obviously a woman and not a man. Representing an Israelite woman, the large breasted pillar-figurine might mean: "This is me—a woman with watchful eyes and full breasts for my infant." Or, "this is what I want—please guard my child and my milk from being sickened by demons." Or, representing the goddess: "This is you. I invoke your name over this child. This figurine invites you to

<sup>49</sup> Jacques Berlinerblau, *The Vow and the "Popular Religious Groups" of Ancient Israel: A Philological and Sociological Inquiry* (JSOTSup 210; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

<sup>50</sup> William F. Albright, *The Excavation of Tell Beit Mirsim. 3. The Iron Age* (AASOR 21-22; New Haven: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1943).

<sup>51</sup> Margaret Morden, "Cult from Clay: The Evidence of the Terracottas from the Lower Sanctuary of the East Acropolis of Idalion" (paper presented at the ASOR annual meeting, Napa, California, November 1997). The paper will be published in the *University of Arizona Expedition to Idalion Vol. 1: The Hellenistic Levels of the Temple Terrace*, SIMA.

<sup>52</sup> Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses*, 108; Max E. L. Mallowan, "Excavations at Brak and Chagar Bazar," *Iraq* 9 (1947): 209.

guard the doorway from child-stealers while I sleep.” The meaning of votive figurines leads us to believe that women manufactured them and used them in their homes to protect themselves and their children.<sup>53</sup>

## 7. WOMEN AS HOUSEHOLD RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Biblical texts describe women’s religious activities in their homes and sometimes mention family support. At Endor a woman consulted the dead Samuel, then prepared King Saul a meal (1 Sam 28:7-25). Huldah prophesied to the high priest and king’s cabinet in her home (2 Kgs 22:14-20). Women baked cakes, burned sacrifices, and poured wine offerings to the “Queen of Heaven” (Jer 7:18; 44:19). Some sewed wristbands and donned head coverings to predict future events (Ezek 13:18-23). A woman’s house was the center of her religious as well as her economic activity.

The woman of Prov 31 kept the night lamp burning and managed household enterprises including real estate, employees, and textile manufacture. Strict division of labor places a high value on women’s work and makes it likely that women supervised religious duties where their presence predominated. Abigail (1 Sam 25) exemplifies the independence and power sagacious women had as household managers. Without informing her husband she collected foodstuffs and sent them to David, whom she dissuaded from blood revenge through argumentation, blessing, and taking blame as if, as Brenner puts it, “the real responsibility for the household is hers.”<sup>54</sup>

The forty-two Roman-era Aramaic texts from Nippur that Montgomery cataloged affirm women’s leadership in household rituals designed to protect aspects of the do-

<sup>53</sup> A workshop in the village of Narok, southern Kenya, provides an ethnographic parallel: only women work there, sculpting only statues with female fertility symbolism, perceived as containing powers or spirits of female fertility. Women buy them and set them in their homes to ensure their own fertility. The figures are not made for tourist shops (Uzi Avner, personal communication). Margaret W. Conkey, “Contexts of Action, Contexts for Power: Material Culture and Gender in the Magdalenian,” in *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory* (ed. Joan M. Gero and Margaret W. Conkey; Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 78 assumes that “in most instances, those who use certain tools and facilities in their tasks are likely to be those who are *primarily* (but not exclusively) engaged in the manufacture and maintenance of them.” Also, from Joan M. Gero: “We suspect, moreover, that women were especially visible and active in household contexts where they played significant roles in household production and household management... Almost ironically, women can be expected to be most visible and active precisely in the contexts that archaeologists are most likely to excavate: on house floors, at base camps and in village sites where women would congregate to carry out their work... Since the user of a tool is in the best position to judge its adequacy, it makes sense that women produced many of their own tools, and indeed it would be most inefficient for them to rely on men for these needs.” See here Joan M. Gero, “Genderlithics: Women’s Roles in Stone Tool Production,” in *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory* (ed. Joan M. Gero and Margaret W. Conkey; Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 169-70.

<sup>54</sup> Athalaya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 40.

mestic welfare of a married couple and their children, house, property, and cattle, including measures against child-stealing demons. Frequently women procured the incantations without reference to their husbands, and Jews as well as Mandaeans and Greeks required the household mother's name in each text.<sup>55</sup> The Talmud reflects this role of women when it stipulates that "all repetitive incantations are in name of the mother."<sup>56</sup> In an ethnographic parallel, every home in Yerani, a poor subdivision of Athens, has a shelf for icons and other sacred substances, with an oil lamp suspended in front of it. Although the *iconostási* is found in a room of several purposes and does not take up any floor area, through its concentrated spiritual presence, the house becomes a temple, with the family as its religious community and the woman of the house in the role of intercessor, patterned on the divine Mother, caring for the spiritual needs of family members parallel to the role of the priest in the community's church. Although the husband may be "head of the family," she is paradoxically the central figure through her association with "essential objects" and hence the sacred dimension.<sup>57</sup>

## 8. GRECO-ROMAN LILITH TRADITIONS

The symbolism of a child-protecting figurine or amulet and its accompanying ceremony remain basically the same through the centuries, although the divine names change as it adapts to different religious cultures.<sup>58</sup> Egyptian and Mesopotamian child-stealing beliefs continue in Greco-Roman period rituals against Lilith. The she-demon appears in Greek as Gogol. The legend of demon confronted by an archangel or saint figure who forces her to tell her names and return the infants she has stolen occurs on a Syriac scroll from Urmi, Persia, that binds "an evil spirit in the form of a hateful woman" who was "the suffocatrix of children and women," and repeats in *The Testament of Solomon*, the pseudepigraphic folktale from the first centuries A.D. that fuses astrological and mystical beliefs Gnostics adopted from Jewish, Egyptian, Assyrian, and Greek teachings. A second century A.D. Jewish tomb at Irbid, southeast of Lake Galilee, held an amulet that calls on God to send his angel to protect a young woman and her unborn child from the "lilith" hiding in her bed canopy. Women's preventive measures against supernatural damage to their young children and breast milk reflect long-standing traditions of dealing with poor milk supply and high infant mortality.

<sup>55</sup> Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, 49.

<sup>56</sup> *b. Šabb.* 66b.

<sup>57</sup> Renée Hirschon, "Essential Objects and the Sacred: Interior and Exterior Space in an Urban Greek Locality," in *Women and Space* (ed. Shirley Ardener; Oxford: Berg, 1997), 81, 85.

<sup>58</sup> Moses Gaster, "Two Thousand Years of a Charm against the Child-Stealing Witch," in *Studies and Texts in Folklore, Magic, Mediaeval Romance, Hebrew Apocrypha, and Samaritan Archaeology* (vol. 3; New York: Ktav, 1971).

## 9. CONCLUSION

Burial statistics that show a high rate of infant mortality and short female life span explain ancient Near Eastern people's preoccupation with human fertility and child-stealing spirits. For agrarian families, this was a life and death issue because producing sufficient progeny assured necessary field labor as well as old-age security. While biblical texts validate a centralized national cult involving a male priesthood and community religious celebrations dependent on specifically male participation, household archaeology reveals an undergirding family system utilizing the technical wisdom and agency of women. Women's ritual for maintaining adequate lactation and preserving the lives of their newborn infants invested them with societal worth and complementary religious power for sustaining a heterarchical culture in a manner that negates images of an Israelite patriarchal hierarchy. Although the Bible is largely silent on this essential socio-religious leadership function of women, we can learn much about it from the archaeology of Iron Age houses and from remnants of other ancient near eastern Mediterranean cultures.