From, Mary Condren, *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1989; Dublin: New Island Books, 2002): pp. 3-22

Eve's Lamentation

I am Eve, great Adam's wife,
'Twas my guilt took Jesus' life.
Since of Heaven I robbed my race,
On His Cross was my true place.

In His Paradise, God placed me,
Then a wicked choice disgraced me.
At the counsel of the Devil,
My pure hand I stained with evil:

For I put it forth and plucked,
Then the deadly apple sucked.
Long as woman looks on day,
Shall she walk in folly's way.

Winter's withering icy woe,
Whelming wave and smothering snow,
Hell to fright and death to grieve--
Had been never, but for Eve! [1]

In A Celtic Psaltery ed. by Alfred Perceval Graves, (New York: F.A. Stokes Co. 1917). For a more literal translation cf. K. Meyer, "Eve's Lament," Eriú 3 (1907) p.148

To this day probably no other name strikes so many chords in the heart of religious men and women as that of Eve. Eve has been the symbol of women's licentiousness, pride, seduction, disobedience, temptation, and spiritual weakness. Eve is the woman we most fear: the symbol of our negative natures, the depths into which we can sink unless we are faithful to our religious heritage. Despite Christian teaching that Christ, by his death and resurrection, has overcome sin, women can never be free of the "curse of Eve." Men, no matter how high the lofty spiritual heights they have climbed, can never be sure of their salvation so long as there are "Eve" figures around.

There are several different accounts of the creation of the world in the Bible, but the story of the creation of Adam and Eve and their disobedience is the one that has had most influence in Western thought. This, in itself, is remarkable, because the story is a very strange one, full of apparent contradictions which, had women had access to formal education, would have been exposed long before now.

The general impression of these stories is that Adam and Eve, having taken the forbidden fruit at the suggestion of the Serpent, were punished simply for their disobedience. This account, however, contains many problems. In the first place the Serpent appears as "more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord hath made." Now if this beast were evil, why was it beautiful and "subtle" and how did it get into Paradise in the first place? When the Serpent asked the woman if she and Adam were allowed to eat of every tree in the garden, Eve answered:

> We may eat the fruit of the trees in the garden. But of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden God said. `You must not eat it, nor touch it, under pain of death.'
> And the Serpent said to the woman:
> `No! You will not die! God knows in fact than on the day you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil.'
> So Eve took the fruit and gave some to her husband.
>
> When God saw what had happened, he cast them out of the Garden of Paradise.

The logical problem is that if man and woman were made in the image of God, why is there a problem when "they become as Gods"? Surely if eating the fruit helped Adam and Eve to know the difference between good and evil, they would be in a better position to know the will of God in the future and to follow it, so it seems infinitely petty to throw them out of

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Genesis 3.

Paradise for that. If they have become as Gods by eating the fruit, why then should they lose Paradise? Since we are told that our lives are merely preparations for the time when we can come to know God fully, why in the Bible, when it seemed possible to know God do Adam and Eve lose Paradise rather than gain it? At face value the story does not make much sense unless we want to promote an image of God as a tyrant who, on mere whim, says "You can eat from this tree and not from that one."

A popular psychological interpretation of the story is that the sin of Adam and Eve is not just one of disobedience, but of sexual transgression, and that the Serpent is really a phallic symbol. This is reinforced by the account that "suddenly they found themselves naked and were ashamed." But this makes no sense when we recall that at the beginning of Genesis, the first command given to all God has created is "Go forth and multiply." Why then if Adam and Eve proceeded to do just that should they be punished?

This interpretation is particularly convenient in the light of the punishment given to the woman:

> `I will multiply your pains in childbearing,
> you shall give birth to your children in pain.
> Your yearning shall be for your husband,
> yet he will lord it over you.'

The man, however, is not punished sexually. His punishment has to do with his working conditions. "With sweat on your brow shall you eat your bread." If the sin had been sexual, why were they not punished equally? Although God had only told Adam not to eat of the fruit of the tree, Eve was also punished.

When God confronted Adam in the garden, his excuse for eating the fruit was: "It was the woman you put with me: she gave me the fruit, and I ate it." Here Adam almost blames God for having given the woman to him. Note that in the text it simply says: "The woman saw that the tree was good to eat and pleasing to the eye, and that it was desirable for the knowledge that it could give. So she took some of its fruit and ate it. She gave some also to her husband who was with her, and he ate it."

The woman sought knowledge and ate the fruit. Adam simply gratified his hunger and then tried to shift the responsibility onto his wife. Yet Adam has gone down in history as the poor, misguided unfortunate, a warning to all men not to listen to women, and Eve goes down in history as the greatest Temptress of all time, the model for the seductive nature of the whole female sex.

Genesis 3:16.

Genesis 3:6

Despite its contradictions, this story has had widespread implications that powerfully affected the treatment of women in society. Women have been identified with Eve, the symbol of Evil, and can only attain sanctity by identifying with the Virgin Mary, the opposite of Eve. But this is an impossible task since we are told that Mary herself "was conceived without sin" and when she gave birth to Jesus remained a virgin. To reach full sanctity then, women have to renounce their sexuality, symbol of their role as Temptresses and the means by which they drag men down from their lofty heights. For this reason most of the women saints of the Catholic church have been either virgins, martyrs, widows or married women who have taken a perpetual vow of continence. Sex and spirituality have become polar opposites in Christian teaching.

From the simple statement that "She gave some to her husband," ecclesiastical scholars have built the most incredible theories of women's power to promote evil. One after another the church fathers proclaimed solemnly that Eve exercised "wicked persuasion" or "corrupted her husband." In the Malleus Maleficarum, (The Hammer of Witches) the 15th century witch hunter's manual, it was stated: "In the Old Testament, the Scriptures have much that is evil to say about women, and this because of the first temptress, Eve, and her imitators."

Cf. Donal Flanagan, "Women: Eve and Mary," in For the Banished Children of Eve ed. M. Condren, (Dublin, 1976): 14-15. Cf. also Rosemary Ruether, Mary:the Feminine Face of the Church (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979). Even before the Eve/Mary dichotomy, divisions were drawn between the "bad" first woman Lilith and Eve, the wife of Adam. Lilith's main crime was her refusal to lie beneath Adam, and this was elaborated in the tradition so that Lilith became a "killer of babies and seducer of men." For some of the stories surrounding Lilith, cf. Barbara Black Koltuv, The Book of Lilith (New York Beach, Maine, Nicolas Hays, 1986), which contains an extensive bibliography; Nella Fermi Weiner, "Lilith: First Woman, First Feminist," International Journal of Women's Studies 2:6 (1979): 551-559.

For a discussion of these themes cf. Jean Higgins, "The Myth of Eve: The Temptress," Journal of the American Academy of Religion 44 (1976): 639-647, p.640; John A. Phillips, Eve: The History of an Idea (New York: Harper & Row, 1984). Yet for an alternative patristic view of the role of women in this story which did not gain general credence, cf., Jean M. Higgins, "Anastasius Sinaita and the Superiority of the Woman," JBL 97:2 (1978): 253-256.

Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, Malleus Maleficarum 1486. pt. 1, question 6. Tr. Montague Summers, (New York: Dover Books,

> A modern commentary on the Paradise story sums up this mentality:
> Eve winds her way into the subject like a serpent. Yes, there we have struck on an ominous affinity...The serpent is the universal casuist for crooked wiles, the end whereof is dust and ashes. It was never till Adam, amorously sighing for companionship, parted with one of his proper ribs, that the talking serpent dared on the idea of beguiling God's gentle gardener.

Some of these commentators also suggest that Adam's eating the fruit was a matter of generosity and self-sacrifice. Since his wife was to be condemned, Adam did not want to be parted from her. Other eminent fathers suggest that he simply ate the fruit so as not to anger her.

The story also had very practical implications for women, enabling discrimination between the sexes. Adam, for all practical purposes, represents the world of production, Eve the sphere of reproduction. There is no comparison between the treatment of these spheres in Christian moral theology. For instance, although Adam was punished by having to work by the sweat of his brow, this has never prevented men from developing the tools of agriculture and technology that make the production of food much easier by lessening the labor involved. However, when women have sought to alleviate the pains of childbearing the whole weight of moral theology has fallen on their heads.

One of the punishments given to woman is: "Your yearning shall be for your husband,

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1971) p.44.

Eric Robertson, The Bible's Prose Epic of Eve and her Sons (London: Williams and Norgate, 1916) pp.35ff. Cited in Higgins, "The Myth of Eve," p.641.

Cf. Higgins, "The Myth of Eve," p.643 ff.

As recently as 1959 Pope Pius XII told a meeting of obstetricians, "Even the pains that, since original sin, a mother has to suffer to give birth to her child only draw tighter the bonds that bind them: she loves it the more, the more pain it has cost her." Pope Pius XII, "Address to Obstetricians," 29th October 1951. Cited in Mary Daly, The Church and the Second Sex (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) p.114. For a history of the legacy of this attitude to women cf. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Expert's Advice to Women (Garden City, NY: Anchor Day Press, 1979).

yet he will lord it over you." Again when women try to lessen the weight of patriarchal oppression, this has been resisted with the full weight of biblical authority. In the Christian tradition it is assumed that her oppression is due to her Original Sin and little should be done to alleviate it. Clearly the story has been interpreted in such a way as to foster the subjugation of women. Was this necessarily the conscious intention of the original story-tellers, or was this a consequence of the major changes taking place in Hebrew society, that the story reflected? A closer look at the story in its ancient Near Eastern context gives us vital clues as to the complexity of what was actually going on.

> At the end of the creation story Yahweh says:
> See this man has become like one of us, with his knowledge of good and evil. He must not be allowed to stretch his hand out next and pick from the Tree of Life also, and eat some and live for ever. So Yahweh God expelled him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he had been taken. He banished the man, and in front of the garden of Eden he posted the cherubs, and the flame of a flashing sword, to guard the way to the Tree of Life.

In these verses we have evidence that there were, in fact, two trees, the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life. Why did God not want man to eat from the Tree of Life and live forever, or how was it even in man's power to do so? It seems obvious that what we have here are remnants of themes which were common in the creation stories of the ancient Near East and that the compilers of the Genesis stories (scripture scholars recognize that there was not just one writer) drew extensively on the ancient traditions to give us, what they considered to be, a composite version. Unfortunately, however, as we will see, their version radically altered the themes of the more ancient stories.

Genesis 3:22-24.

In treating the story of "Adam and Eve" I am aware that the present composition of the Book of Genesis is made up of several editorial strands which have been put together to form a composite whole. This partly accounts for some of the contradictions in the story, but the fact that the various strands have held together in their present form for so long testifies to the fact that the present story is the one which best reflects the thinking of the canonical editors. For an account of the various strands which go into the making of the Book of Genesis cf. Martin Noth, A History of Pentateuchal Traditions (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1972), pp.228-261.

Some scholars treat these stories in a more positive light. Cf. for instance, Phyllis Trible, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); Trible,

How did Eve, and we women by means of identification with her, come to earn such a bad reputation? To understand this we have to take an intense look at the background to the Eve story of the Hebrew Bible tradition in the context of ancient Near Eastern mythology.

We have seen that the biblical commentators almost identified Eve with the Serpent, and that this identification was not justified by her role in the Genesis story. However, there is weighty evidence that the figure of Eve is based on much older stories and that the original Eve did appear in the form of a Serpent. The name Eve hawwah means "mother of all the living" but hawwah also means "serpent" in many Semitic languages. Some scholars suggest that originally there may have only been three characters in the Paradise stories, God, Adam, and a Serpent-deity. If this were the case then the Serpent deity would have been blamed for cheating Adam of the Garden of Paradise.

The identification of the Serpent with Eve, therefore, is based upon much older sources and is probably the reason why both Eve and the Serpent are treated so badly in the Genesis story. So who or what was the Serpent, why was the Serpent a threat to Yahwism the emerging faith of the Hebrew people, and why was it so important to overthrow its influence in human history? To understand this in the Near Eastern context we have to go much farther back in time, at least as far back as the culture of the ancient Sumerians.

Sumer was one of the great cultural capitals of the ancient world and many other cultures borrowed their system of writing (cuneiform) to inscribe their own records and writings. Most of the Sumerian literary documents were composed about 2,000 B.C.E.(Before the Common Era) whereas the Biblical documents were not written much earlier than 1,000 B.C.E. The image of the serpent is found frequently on the artifacts of the ancient Near East.

"Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," JAAR 41 (1973): 30-48; cf. also John A. Bailey, "Initiation and the Primal Woman in Gilgamesh and Genesis 2-3," JBL 89 (1970): 137-150.

Cf. A. J. Williams, "The Relationship of Genesis 3:20 to the Serpent," ZAW 89:3 (1977): 357-374; Stephen Langdon, The Sumerian Epic of Paradise, the Flood and the Fall of Man Pennsylvania, University Museum Publications of the Babylonian Section 10:1 (1915): 36-37.

Cf. Gerhard Von Rad, Genesis (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961) p.93.

For a recent treatment of this question from a Jewish perspective, cf. Jacqueline Tabick, "The Snake in the Grass," Religion 16 (1986): 155-167.

Serpent symbolism came from many sources, and the biblical writers probably got theirs indirectly from the Sumerian influence on Canaanite, Hurrian, Hittite and Akkadian literature, especially the latter "since the Akkadian language was used all over Palestine and its environs in the second millennium B.C.E. as the common language of the Fertile Crescent." In fact, the tribe of Abraham was probably responsible for bringing Sumerian influence into Palestine.

Already in the Sumerian mythology and that of the surrounding regions there were stories of the Creation, Flood, Fall, the quest for immortality, and similar later Biblical themes. The ancient writers borrowed from other sources as well. For instance, the Babylonians had a myth of a serpent stealing a plant of rejuvenation. In these myths, the themes of the Tree of Life, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the Serpent, disobedience and immortality all play major roles but are put together in different cultures, almost like different variations of characters on a chess board, to come to some very different conclusions.

Scripture scholars are in no doubt that the Yahwist (the name commonly given to the final editor of the story in Genesis) drew on many sources when compiling the narrative for his own particular purposes. Here we will explore the image of the Serpent in these earlier creation stories since this has had such crucial significance for women.

The symbol of the Serpent was the one most widely used to represent or adorn the Goddess of the ancient Near East, or to depict, or mediate, the relationship between Goddesses and human culture. In Egypt and Mesopotamia, according to the evidence derived from

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Cf. S.N. Kramer, The Sumerians:Their History, Culture and Character (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p.291-292.

Cf. T. Jacobsen, The Treasures of Darkness (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p.214.

Cf. A. L. Frothingham, "Medusa, Apollo and the Great Mother," AJA 15:3 (1911): 349-377; A. L. Frothingham, "Medusa 11," AJA 19:1 (1915): 13-23; Georges Roux, Ancient Iraq (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964) p.69; Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958) p.169; Joseph Campbell, The Mythic Image (Princeton N.J: Princeton University Press 1974) pp. 281-301; M. Esther Harding, Woman's Mysteries: Ancient and Modern (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) pp.52-54; Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor, The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth (San Franscisco: Harper & Row, 1987) pp.100, 155, 268; Riane Eisler, The Chalice and the Blade: Our History Our Future (San Franscisco: Harper & Row, 1987) pp.21, 86-87.

scarabs, scaraboids and seals, the Serpent was an emblem of life. In Sumerian mythology, the Goddess Ninhursag was the Goddess of creation. Known as Nintu she was "the Lady who gave birth." One of her common images was that of a Serpent. As a symbol of life the Serpent had connections with both the sun and the moon and was even said to cause the sun to rise. In the "Book of Gates" in the tomb of Rameses V1 there is a figure of a winged Serpent named "The Leader." Over its head is written, "She Who Causes to Rise Before Re. It is She who Leads the Great God in the Gate of the Eastern Horizon."

In its association with life, the Serpent represented much more than mere sexual fertility, although fertility was an important theme of the cultic occasions when serpentine imagery was used. Serpents hibernate in the winter and reemerge in the spring. For this reason they were ideal symbols of the rebirth of nature every year and represented a guarantee that even though all of life might seem to die off in the winter months, there was yet hope for the earth. In Egypt the Serpent was called "life of the earth," the "son of the earth," "full of years," the "life of the gods," and the "life of forms and of nutritious substances."

The image of the Serpent, because of its association with life, rejuvenation, fertility, and regeneration, was a symbol of immortality. The coiled Serpent with its tail in its mouth was a circle of infinitude indicating omnipotence and omniscience. The Serpent, depicted in several successive rings, represented cyclical evolution and reincarnation. In ancient philosophy or mythological systems, creation and wisdom were closely bound together and the Serpent was a

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K. Joines, Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament (Haddonfeld, N.J.: Haddonfeld House, 1974) p.20.

Kramer, The Sumerians p.122.

S. H. Langdon, ed. Mythology of All Races 6 vols. (Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1931) vol. 5, "Semitic," p. 91; Edith Porada, "Remarks on Mitannian (Hurrian) and Middle Assyrian Glyptic Art," Akkadica 13 (1979): 2-15; Briggs Buchanan, "A Snake Goddess and Her Companions: A Problem in the Iconography of the Early 2nd Milennium B.C.," Iraq 33 (1971): 1-18, pp.12-13. I am grateful to Professor Jo Ann Hackett for these references.

N. Rambova, ed. The Tomb of Rameses VI trans. Alexandre Piankoff, (New York, 1954) p.209. Cited in Joines, Serpent Symbolism p.48.

Cf. Joines, Serpent Symbolism p.111.

Joines, Serpent Symbolism p.19.

potent symbol of both. It is in this capacity that the Serpent appears in the Babylonian and Sumerian mythologies, that contain elements akin to the Genesis story. The Serpent has the power to bestow immortality but also has the power to cheat humankind. In many of the ancient Near Eastern stories--for instance, the Gilgamesh Epic and the myth of Adapa--the Serpent in the form of the gods holds out the promise of immortality but then cheats man at the last minute.

Probably the most important characteristic of the Serpent, for our purposes, is its dual nature and simultaneous capacity for good and evil. In the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the Serpent is said to be "wavering by turns between loving and hating the gods." The Babylonian deities, many of whom were portrayed in serpent imagery, were portrayed as being both good and bad. They had their good days and bad days. Just like humans they fought, made love, hated, died, were injured, were jealous, and gave birth. The main difference between the Gods and humankind was that the ultimate power they had to carry out their wicked or generous desires. The Serpent was, therefore, used to represent both beneficent and hostile sacred powers. The Serpent was pictured as erect when good, but the crawling Serpent was a symbol of evil.

This dual character of the Serpent closely represents the joys and tragedies of human life itself. Life and death, in religions where Serpent symbolism is common, are seen as both beautiful and tragic. When life has run its course, or sometimes even before that in particularly sad situations, death will come inevitably. But the end of a particular human life need not be cause for grief because with the coming of spring everything is reborn. That which has died merely returns to the earth to reappear anew. It may take new shapes and forms but this is a cause for joy. Nothing is static--all will be renewed. Death is not the end but simply a new beginning. The Serpent religions, representing life and death, male and female, good and evil,

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K. Joines, "The Serpent in Genesis 3," ZAW 87 (1975): 1-11.

Cf. M. Eliade, Comparative Religion p.289ff; A. H. Sayce, "Archaeology of the Book of Genesis," Expository Times 19 (1907-8): 137-139; 176-178; 260-263; 326-327; vol. 20, (1909): 327-328, 423-426, 470-472, 505-509; A. H. Sayce, "The Serpent in Genesis," Expository Times 20 (1909) p.562.

Book of the Dead ed. C. H. Davies, (London, 1894) cited in Joines, Serpent Symbolism p.97.

A. Heidel, The Babylonian Genesis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) p.125.

Joines, Serpent Symbolism p.47

provided an integrated representation of human life.

The second major set of symbols in the ancient myths common throughout the ancient world was the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil which were the residences of the gods. Immortality does not belong automatically to the gods: they must constantly eat the fruit of the sacred trees. To refuse someone admission to the Tree of Life means that he or she is, and will remain, mortal. That is why so many of the themes of ancient mortality are concerned with gaining access to the Tree of Life or with being denied access to the tree by a Serpent or a God.

The Serpent often appears in mythology in conjunction with the Tree of Life or the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Serpents are often seen guarding trees upon which berries grow which can give immortality or good health to those who partake of them. In some of these myths the hero has to slay the Serpent before he can partake of the fruits of the tree or give them to his loved one.

We must place the Genesis story against this background in order to realize how radical the narrative is in drastically departing from any version of the myth that had hitherto existed. We can begin by looking at one version, the Sumerian "Garden of Paradise" story that parallels the story in Genesis.

Cf. Sylvia Brinton Perera, Descent to the Goddess: A Way of Initiation for Women (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1981) pp.9-34; Christine Downing, The Goddess: Mythological Images of the Feminine (New York: Crossroad, 1981) pp.12-13; Diane Wolkstein and Samuel N. Kramer, Innanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth (New York: Harper & Row, 1983) p.169. In the dark underworld, the goddess Inanna embraced the dark side of herself in the form of her sister Ereshkigal, saying "Holy Ereshkigal! great is your renown! Holy Ereshkigal! I sing your praises! p.89.

Cf. O. Th. Obbink. "The Tree of Life in Eden," ZAW 46 (1928): 105-112; Wolkstein and Kramer, Inanna p.145, for the tree of life representing the opposing natural forces.

J. MacCulloch, Mythology of All Races vol. 3 Celtic (Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1918) p.131.

Cf. Kramer, The Sumerians p.198ff.; MacCulloch, Celtic p.131. The theme of the hero killing the serpent appears to be a late one reflecting the growing patriarchal culture, and the attempt to destoy or to overcome, the obstacles to the achievement of immortality.

In the "The Land of Dilmun" Paradise is a clean and bright land of the living that knows neither sickness nor death. One of the great mother Goddesses of the Sumerians, Ninhursag, who is represented as a Serpent or fishtailed woman, causes eight plants to sprout. This is a very complicated and strenuous process accomplished only after she had brought three generations of Goddesses into being, all conceived, as it is repeatedly stressed, "without the slightest pain or travail." But now, Enki, the Sumerian water-god, enters into the picture.

Enki decides to eat the plants, possibly to wrest the power of fertility from Ninhursag. The angry Ninhursag pronounces the curse of death upon him, and then, so that she will not change her mind, disappears from among the gods. Enki's health begins to fail rapidly, "since as a male god he was not meant to be pregnant." This causes great worry to the other gods, whereupon a fox offers to go and get Ninhursag back on condition that he be properly rewarded. Eventually the fox succeeds and Ninhursag returns. She seats Enki beside her vulva and asks him in turn about the eight organs of his which have begun to fail. One by one she brings into existence eight healing gods to replace the diseased parts. She forgives Enki and the natural order is restored.

This Sumerian story was written at least a thousand years before the Biblical one, and when we turn to the Book of Genesis, we can see that the characters in the story have changed dramatically. In the Genesis story, although the Yahwist was clearly aware that the Serpent was "more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord had made," nevertheless the Hebrew word used for the Serpent here is simply that of an animal rather than a mythological being, God or Goddess. But the true identity of the Serpent comes out in other ways. The woman

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For the origins and genealogy of Ninhursag, cf. Wolkstein and Kramer, Inanna pp.x-xi, 123. She was also called The Earth Goddess Ki, one of the triple pantheon in association with An, the Sky God, and Nammu, Goddess of the Watery Deep.

Langdon, Semitic pp. 91, 111.

Cf. Jacobsen, Treasures of Darkness p.113.

Cf. S. N. Kramer, "Enki and Ninhursag," Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research, Supplementary Studies, 1, (1945). The story may represent one of the first mythological attempts to wrest control of procreation from the female deity. As Sumer increasingly became centralized and militarized Enki supplanted Ninhursag almost entirely. Cf. Jacobsen, Treasures of Darkness p.109.

Von Rad, Genesis p.85; Joines, Serpent Symbolism p.2 ff.

shows no surprise at the Serpent's being able to talk and simply takes it for granted that the Serpent is an authority on the consequences of partaking of the fruit forbidden by Yahweh. In the Genesis story Enki's attempt to wrest fertility from the woman appears to have succeeded: the mortal Adam is responsible for giving birth to Eve. Yahweh reverses the natural order of creation.

There are other comparisons to the Genesis story. Whereas the Sumerian Goddesses all "give birth without pain or travail," in Genesis this is the punishment given to Eve, and all women, for their disobedience. Even more strikingly, whereas Ninhursag is prevailed upon to forgive Enki, Yahweh condemns Adam and Eve to punishment. Clearly something serious is happening to the Serpent imagery in Genesis. The Serpent contradicts Yahweh's telling Eve that she may eat of the fruit of the tree in the midst of the garden. "You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

As it turned out, the Serpent was right. The first couple did not die when they ate the fruit and they came to know good and evil. Apparently what eating the fruit accomplished was granting them insight into the location of the Tree of Life, and for this reason Yahweh threw them out of the Garden of Paradise. Now, even though the Serpent has proved to be right and Yahweh was trying to prevent the couple from "knowing good and evil," the Serpent is punished: "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat, all the days of your life."

Worse is to come: "I will make you enemies of each other: you and the woman. Your offspring and her offspring, It will crush your head, and you shall strike its heel."

And so in the Genesis version of the Paradise story, the Serpent is relegated to being a mere animal; women, who previously could rely on the Goddess for strength in childbirth,

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One of the interesting features of the Ninhursag story is that the Sumerian word for "rib" is ti. The goddess created for the healing of Enki's rib was, therefore, called Nin-ti, the "Lady of the Rib," Kramer, The Sumerians p.149. But since the Sumerian word ti also means to "make live" as well as the "Lady of the Rib" this concept merged to become the "Lady who makes live." Nintu or Ninti, often took the form of a serpent.

Genesis 3:4-5.

Genesis 3:14

would now give birth to their children in pain. Women were made subordinate to men, and they themselves would be responsible for crushing the old source of their strength and comfort: the Goddess in the form of a Serpent. The first couple would henceforth wander the earth with little to comfort them in sickness and in sorrow utterly dependent on the mercy of Yahweh, who, unlike Ninhursag, could not be prevailed upon to forgive them.

Taken at face value, the story is one of the most tragic episodes in human history and yet it has been formative in the religious faith of generations. Clearly the overthrow of the Serpent represented something fundamental and crucial to the foundation of patriarchal culture.

How did it come about that Yahweh was so opposed to the Serpent, and why did the Israelites carry this myth with them in their wanderings? To answer this question, we will have to look critically at the political changes taking place at the time the Genesis stories were being written.

To put it simply and briefly: the form of religion which the Serpent represented was a major threat to the new religion of Israel or indeed to the future of Western civilization. If Israel was to grow as a nation state, with all the entailed political and military trappings, Goddess religions would have to be overthown. Allegiance would have to be to one God, Yahweh, and the central symbolism of the new religion would be based on Promise and History rather than on the Life and Cyclical Regeneration represented by the Serpent.

Political Background

The Genesis narrative is commonly considered to have been written at the earliest towards the end of David's reign, and probably during the time of King Solomon. The Israelites had to have had a certain "political assurance" before writing an historical work of this nature. The Yahwist probably wrote before the appearance of the prophets Amos and Hosea, and certainly before the disaster to the Northern kingdom in 721 B.C.E. The narrative was written

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Cf. Kramer, The Sumerians p.148; S. N. Kramer, Sumerian Mythology (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1944), p.55; MacCulloch, Mythology of All Races p.185.

Cf. J. McKenzie, "The Literary Characteristics of Genesis 2-3," Theological Studies 15 (1954): 541-565.

Cf. Joines, Serpent Symbolism p. 31.

O. Eissfeldt, The Old Testament: An Introduction (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) p.208.

sometime between the tenth and the eighth century B.C.E. and was by no means the first Biblical book to be written, even though it appears first in order.

The reign of Solomon had brought about alliances with several other nations, particularly Egypt and Tyre. This introduced a situation of great cultural diversity and there was extensive building, trade, intellectual activity, and the growth of urban development. The monarchy reigned over the conquered Canaanites, but not all were converts to Yahwism. Solomon's loyalty to Yahweh, in particular, was called into question. He had pagan wives, and encouraged religious tolerance. There is evidence that polytheistic worship with extensive Serpent symbolism was practised in or near the temple.

Yahwism was struggling to be the official cult of the kingdom, but this was meeting with some difficulty since the high priest Zadok may have originally been the high-priest of Canaanite Jerusalem. David may even have permitted Zadok's promotion of the Serpent symbolism in the Israelite religion. In the Book of Kings it says that "Until those days the people of Israel had burned incense to the serpent." The Yahwist was writing then in a context where Serpent symbolism abounded and where polytheistic Gods and Goddesses were still in vogue.

In the midst of this political turmoil the Serpent was crushed, not only mythologically but also in reality. The bronze Serpent Moses made in the desert, and which may have actually been in the Ark of the Covenant, symbolizing the power of Yahweh, was taken out and smashed by the young king Hezekiah, who "put his trust in the God of Israel."

P. F. Ellis. The Yahwist: The Bible's First Theologian (Notre Dame, Indiana: Fides Publishers, 1968) p.64 ff.

Cf. 1 Kings 11.

Cf. Joines, Serpent Symbolism pp.102-3; S. H. Langdon, Tammuz and Ishtar (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914) pp.114-128.

Ellis, The Yahwist p.64

Joines, Serpent Symbolism p.102.

2 Kings 18:4.

Numbers 21:8-9.

Cf. Eisler, Chalice and the Blade p.88.

Book of Wisdom 16:6-7.

2 Kings 18:4.

Prior to the monarchic period Israel had been organized largely along tribal lines. Although Yahweh appears early on in their history, in general the cult was that of the clan, and animal sacrifices were practised by the clan fathers. The Ark of the Covenant, the throne of the invisible Yahweh, was carried with the clans in their wanderings. There were some local shrines, but none had central significance. What held the tribes together was their common allegiance to the terms of the Covenant which, in particular, laid down clear laws for dealing with others under the rule of Yahweh, i.e. those tribes included in the Covenant who were, therefore, Covenant brothers.

Under the tribal system Israel had no statehood, capital city, central government, or bureaucratic machinery. During this time Israel did not engage in wars of aggression as a nation. There were certainly local disputes, but none of these were responsible for gaining territory for Israel, with the exception of Deborah's victory. Should a dispute arise, the argument would be decided by the clans fighting it out since there was no central mediator.

All this changed drastically at the end of the eleventh century with the rise of Philistine aggression. Israel's decentralized system was simply unable to respond militarily to this outside

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Cf. John Bright, A History of Israel (London: S.C.M. Press, 1960) p. 92.

Bright, History of Israel p.93.

Bright, History of Israel p.136.

Cf. Bright, History of Israel p.143; Jo Ann Hackett, "In the Days of Jael: Reclaiming the History of Women in Ancient Israel," In Immaculate and Powerful eds. Clarissa Atkinson et al (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1985) pp.15-38.

Bright, History of Israel p.159. For a discussion of the significance of Deborah, cf. Hackett, "In the Days of Jael," pp.24-27, 32.

Cf. Book of Judges 12:1-6; Hackett, "In the Days of Jael," p.37.

For evidence of incessant warfare cf. H. Liebowitz, "Military and Feast Scenes on Late Bronze Palestinian Ivories," Israel Exploration Journal 30 (1980): 162-169; A. Malamat, Early Israelite Warfare and the Conquest of Canaan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

threat. Its priesthood was killed or dispersed. . A prophet, Samuel, was mainly responsible for keeping the old traditions alive as he travelled throughout the clans stirring up fervor on behalf of Yahweh and the Holy War. In this situation the question first arose: Should Israel elect a king?

There are many arguments in the Hebrew Bible as to whether or not there should be an Israelite king. The prophets were usually against and the priests favored this idea. The early Hebrews had fought bitterly against kingship. Their God was a God of history, who brought them out of the land of Egypt. When Moses killed the Egyptian his act of rebellion should have brought the local gods out in force. But in fact the reverse happened, confirming the Israelites' belief in Yahweh, who freed and who ruled them. Their God was more powerful than the local gods, and his favor could be maintained by obedience to his rules and regulations. The idea of electing a king seemed to show a lack of trust on their part, but now, in the face of outside aggression, the question took on great urgency.

The Israelites were faced with a major challenge to their traditional social structure. They needed to find a form of political organization that would allow them to mobilize quickly in the event of war. This force would have to be one that transcended tribal loyalties and territories and was not dependent on immediate kinship ties.

This new ruler could not simply be an earthly "Father," since then kinship would still have been the basis for social organization. The notion of "King," however, allowed the people to enter into a Covenantal agreement with the king and rely on him, together with his priests, to adjudicate disputes. Justice then took on an abstract quality in that people began to relate to each other through the king rather than through tribal assemblies coming to agreement in the case of wrongdoing. More importantly, the king had the power to call his people to war.

This change in political organization could be accomplished only by a correspondingly dramatic reform of the religious practices and social organization of the people. There was no point in having a king if his mandates could be contradicted by allegiance to a particular tribal god or by internal power structures within a particular clan. In the polytheistic religions, social order was best maintained, not by the rule of a single king, but by the relationships that existed between members of the extended family, however complex and embittered these became at

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Bright, History of Israel p.165.

I Samuel 10:5-13; 19:18-24; Bright, History of Israel p.166.

Cf. Gideon's rejection of a crown and Jotham's sarcastic fable, Judges 8:22; 9:7-21.

Cf. discussion in 1 Samuel chaps. 8-13.

times. Now if Israel was to expand and prosper, (and especially if it was to go to war), the importance of family or tribal allegiances had to be radically challenged. Political allegiance could not be owed simply to one's clan; nor could the people as a whole take the risk that some clans might be fighting one another at various times and would, therefore, refuse to fight together against a common enemy. Political loyalties had to be extended to include the whole people as represented by their king.

The political changes demanded by military considerations, and the theologies which accompanied these changes, would prove to be extremely problematic for any continuance of Serpent religions that were polytheistic. Sumerian religion, for instance, which was highly polytheistic, perfectly reflected the Sumerian social structures since Sumer was organized on the basis of small city-states, and it was believed, at least in its initial stages, that political unification or domination by one particular king would be contrary to the wishes of the gods.

In polytheism there was great freedom and fluidity in the worship of particular gods. As with the later Catholic saints, people knew to which Gods to appeal for particular purposes, and no one God had power over everything.

Since human society followed the lead of the Gods, having many different Gods resulted in anti-authoritarian forms of government. Now Israel could not tolerate the polytheistic practices of the old religion. Their God had to be much more abstract and not tied down to localities or particular tribes. Moreover, the God of Israel could not be confined to one place; groves, shrines, and holy wells could not be transported as the Israelites moved from one place to another. If Israel was to become a mighty nation, it needed to be united under the worship of one God.

Cf. H. Frankfort, Kingship and the Gods (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1948) pp. 215-230.

For a discussion of the relationship between centralized and militarized forms of government and the exclusion of women from hierarchies, cf. Elise Boulding, The Underside of History (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1976) pp.182-183; Joan Kelly-Gadol, "The Social Relation of the Sexes: Methodological Inmplications of Women's History," Signs 1:4 (1976): 809-823; Jackie Di Salvo, "Class, Gender and Religion: A Theoretical Overview and Some Political Implications," Womanspirit Bonding eds. Janet Kalven and Mary Buckley, (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984) pp.11-34; Judith Ochshorn, Female Experience and the Nature of the Divine (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1981) pp.136-137; Ruby Rohrlich, "State Formation in Sumer and the Subjugation of Women," Feminist Studies 6:1 (1980): 76-102.

The early Hebrews were one of the first people to make the break away from the polytheistic religions based on the cycle of nature to a more abstract form of religion based upon historical experience. This historically based religion, especially their escape from slavery in Egypt, gave hope to the Israelites during their many captivities and oppressions, that life would not always be this way and that the power struggles which took place among the gods, so accurately reflecting their own lives, would ultimately be resolved by a God with a profound sense of justice and ethics who could be propitiated, not by means of cultic offerings, but by means of righteous behavior, particularly by adherance to those rules he had set down for his people.

This God would make the Israelites his "Chosen People." He gave them the Promised Land, which they were entitled to keep on condition that they obeyed the new set of abstract rules and regulations--the Ten Commandments. The first of these commandments is highly significant:

> Yahweh said, `I am about to make a covenant with you. In the presence of all your people I shall work such wonders as have never been worked in any land or in any nation. All the people round you will see what Yahweh can do, for what I shall do through you will be awe-inspiring...Take care you make no pact with the inhabitants of the land you are about to enter, or this will prove a pitfall at your very feet. You are to tear down their altars, smash their standing stones, cut down their sacred poles... You shall bow down to no other god, for Yahweh's name is the Jealous One; he is a jealous God.'

The change from polytheism to monotheism was to have far-reaching implications. Polytheism was a direct threat to the religious and social organization of Israel, and the Serpent personified that threat in the Genesis story. That Adam and Eve took the fruit, therefore, symbolized not only a petty act of disobedience but a possible sign that they preferred or were going back to the religion of the Serpent.

Book of Exodus 34:10-15; Book of Deuteronomy 4:24.

Some commentators identify the serpent with the Devil, but the image of the Devil did not come into Judaism until much later, after the Babylonian exile of the Israelites, which took place four centuries after Genesis had been written, cf. Joines, Serpent Symbolism pp. 26-27; O. Wintermute, "Serpent," Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplementary Volume, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976) p.817.

We have seen how, in the earlier stories, the Serpent was responsible for keeping human beings away from the sacred trees, but in the Genesis story the Serpent actually encouraged the humans to partake of the fruit and to gain wisdom.

Whereas in the earlier stories death took on a tragic aspect, it was, nevertheless, integrated into the natural cycle of things. Now, not only does death come as a punishment for sin, but it comes at the hands of a woman--the Serpent/Eve. The "Mother of All the Living" becomes the carrier of death. Death had come into the world through sin, and evil was the result of the failure to keep to the terms of the Covenant with Yahweh.

The relationship between Yahweh and humankind took on a more legal character than had been the case with the polytheistic gods, particularly since Yahweh interacted directly with the Israelites. Under Yahwism humankind was now made responsible for almost all evil in the world, rather than its being the responsibility of a jealous or inferior god. The Serpent religions had portrayed their Gods as both good and evil, symbolizing the essential ambiguity and tragedy of existence. But the God of the Israelites, to be effective, could not be both good and evil. To earn the unquestioning allegiance of his followers, he had to represent pure goodness. That is not to say that evil did not befall the Israelites--their history was full of disasters. But in general, the Book of Job is an exception, the prophets and priests taught that evil was the result of human sin rather than divine caprice.

Wisdom and immortality would now come, not from observing the rhythms of the seasons and the beauty of nature, but from Yahweh alone, providing one kept to the terms of his Covenant. The terms of the Covenant, and indeed the will of God, would be interpreted by an elite body of religious functionaries. This perfectly suited the centralization of power taking place in the political realm, since now the people would have to rely on a centralized and increasingly hierarchical religious authority, especially in view of the fact that the religious and political fortunes of Israel were integrally connected.

Those religions that honored the Serpent, representing cyclical regeneration and polytheistic philosophies, had to be overthrown. What better way to do it than by making the

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It was not the case that the polytheistic religions had no ethical consciousness, for instance, the Sumerian goddess Nanshe is described as the goddess:

> Who knows the orphan, who knows the widow,
> Knows the oppression of man over man, is the orphan's mother, Nanshe, who cares for the widow,
> Who seeks out justice for the poorest.
> The queen brings the refugee to her lap,
> Finds shelter for the weak.

Cited in Kramer, The Sumerians p.124.

Serpent the symbol of evil and, thereby, responsible for those disasters for which humankind, even with the wildest imagination, could hardly be held liable?

The Genesis story, we have seen, reached its present form when these social upheavals were at their height. It has continued to serve as a warning of the consequences of the failure to obey God, no matter how seemingly pointless his commands.

The religious consciousness of monotheism introduced into human religious history a profound dualism between God and the world, between good and evil, reason and passion, heaven and hell, God and the Devil, spirit and nature. The form this dualism took was to have profound implications for women's future ability to officiate in future religious rites.

A monotheistic God destroyed the bi-sexual character of the old gods. Unlike the polytheistic gods, who created by rearranging the order of the material things, by giving birth themselves or by means of sexual union between the male and female gods, and who did not recognize dualist distinctions between body and spirit, this monotheistic God had the power to create alone without a sexual partner. Creation was, therefore, an act of will rather than one of fertility. Whatever God willed to be came into existence. He was not at the mercy of passion, the caprices of womanhood, or mere sexuality.

Now that God did not belong to any clan or tribe, it was important to stress that God was above material or family interest, passion, or libido. In the creation stories, for instance, God created the whole world simply out of his mind by means of his Word. Reason and the "will of God" (as interpreted by the priests and prophets), became the whole point of existence, a theme found in the mythologies of many cultures.

Already in the polytheistic religions this process had begun with the appearance of the male Gods. In the Babylonian creation myth, Marduk, in his efforts for supremacy, first slaughters the Goddess Tiamat and cuts her in half to create heaven and earth. His real test for kingship, however, comes when he is required to create "by word alone," that is to say, out of his mind. Similarly, in Greek mythology, Zeus gives birth to Athena from his head. In Egyptian mythology the creator God is Ptah, who simply pronounced the "name of all things." The Stoic philosophers later went on to call creative reason lógós spermatikós.

Cf. The Babylonian Genesis ed. Heidel, p.37.

J. H. Breasted, The Dawn of Conscience (New York: Scribner, 1933) pp.34-35. Cited in Amaury de Riencourt, Sex and Power in History (New York: Delta, 1974) p.39.

Cf. de Riencourt, Sex and Power in History p.39. Cf. also Ochshorn, Female Experience p.139-140 for creation by word rather than body.

These religions devised sophisticated doctrines of re-birth in which women's mere biological birthing was not only superseded but seen to be a positive hindrance. Women's blood, or that which flowed through the veins of their sons, had now lost its power: re-birth, not birth, was important and would be the means of entry into the new social and religious life.

The religion of the Goddess had enhanced nature and helped it to fruition. God the Father, although occasionally helping nature along, was more interested in the development of the "spirit" and anything which hindered this development, nature, women or sexuality would be kept firmly under wraps.

Under polytheism, because the social order depended so much on the natural cycle of fertility, a great of energy must have been expended in religious ceremonies that kept the people in tune with the rhythms of the universe. The Gods could be approached by both women and men. Originally there was very little conflict between lay and official priesthood, and even when there was a distinction made between "high" religion and "folk" or domestic religion, the Gods could still be approached in the temples by both sexes.

Women were reverenced since they held the divine principle of creativity within their own bodies. Spirituality belonged to all members of the clan, not merely to those specially chosen to perform rituals. Rituals had previously been performed communally as the people drew on the vital energies of the universe to support their needs. Humans felt themselves to be part of the cosmos. Inevitably as new centralized social structures arose, religious power began to take on an elite quality. The Goddess was no longer to be found in the bushes, trees and holy wells. The male God, who functioned very much like the patriarchal father demanding obedience, was only accessible to certain members of the right sex who would undertake to "intercede" for the people. In turn, the people would no longer "participate" in the cosmos, but submit to their divine Father or his representatives who could be counted on to know His will at all times. In the new social order in Israel Yahweh might indeed be above sexuality, but his representatives on earth would be firmly male.

Given these suppositions, it followed logically that, in the Jewish and Christian traditions, every effort would have to be made to overcome one's passionate nature. "Nature" was passionate and unpredictable and could undermine the relationship betwen God and man, based as it was on obedience. Passionate man would not be in control of his own will, let alone be able to communicate the "will of God" to his people. In consequence, anything which represented mere instinctive sexuality would be abhorrent to Yahweh and could not be tolerated in his temple. For men this would be a matter of abstaining from sexual activity for a prescribed number of days before the religious services. But what about women? How were

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Ochshorn, Female Experience p.38.

women, caught up in the cycle of reproduction, to overcome what had now become a physical handicap? Their sexuality and creativity, far from the asset in previous religious rites, was now a problem. At any one time a woman might be menstruating, be pregnant, or otherwise be unfit to enter the temple. She certainly could not participate in, or officiate in the rites.

These theological changes, taken together with the move from a tribal to a centralized society under a king, were to have profound consequences for the position of women, eventually succeeding in entirely abolishing any routes for female autonomous religious power. Although technically neither male or female, God became in essence a male deity supporting the concerns of men in the emerging patriarchal order.

In the Book of Leviticus, women engaging in their natural bodily functions such as menstruation or pregnancy, were put on the same par with men who had discharges from their bodies (commonly lepers), and much the same prohibitions applied with regard to having contact with them. Even after the male role in paternity had been discovered and recognized, it was only the woman who had to be ritually separated and remain in seclusion after childbirth. Furthermore, the birth of a female child made the mother even more unclean than the birth of a boy. With a male child she was unclean for seven days but for a female fourteen days. Similarly, her period of purification after a male child would be thirty three days and double that for a female.

Although there had been female prophets, these women were strongest in a pre-monarchic Israel when charismatic forms of leadership were the norm. As the religion of Yahweh grew in confidence, particularly in the growth towards centralized statehood, all the most important laws and Covenants were given to men such as Abraham and Moses. In the Ten Commandments, a wife was described as part of the property of the husband. Even where strong women are depicted, as for instance in the stories of Judith and Esther, only their beauty and sexuality guaranteed success over their enemies.

Ochshorn, Female Experience p.129.

Book of Leviticus ch. 12; cf. discussion in Ochshorn, Female Experience p.210.

Cf. Carol Meyers, "Procreation, Production, and Protection: Male-Female Balance in Early Israel," JAAR 51:4 (1983): 569-593, p.571; Cf. Ochshorn, Female Experience p.182.

Cf. Hackett, "In the Days of Jael," pp.16-29.

Cf. Ochshorn, Female Experience pp. 190-191.

In the polytheistic religions the gods interacted among themselves and humans sought to curry favor with them, but the gods did not speak directly to humans. Now Yahweh began to communicate his intentions to men in the literal sense of the word. When the Israelites were about to receive the Covenant, according to the Bible:

> Moses came down from the mountain to the people and bade them prepare themselves; and they washed their clothing.
> Then he said to the people, "Be ready for the third day;
> do not go near any woman.

The Jerusalem Bible comments on this: "It is assumed that sexual relations make men unfit for sacred duties." But it was not simply when hearing the word of God that men had to separate from women. At a time when the Israelites were preparing for war David needed bread to feed his soldiers. Ahimlech the priest told him that he only had five consecrated loaves and the soldiers could eat them only if they had "kept themselves from women." David replied :

> `Certainly women are forbidden to us, as always when I set off on a campaign. The soldiers' things are pure. Though this is a profane journey, they are certainly pure today as far as their things are concerned.'

Contact with women would weaken men's potency when engaging in their two most powerful activities--hearing the word of God or going to war. In this we can see a very clear connection between the development of a militaristic culture and the development of a new male identity over against women or the world that women had represented.

The changes that Israel was experiencing had far-reaching consequences in other realms as the centralized state with its military ethos inexorably led to the overthrow of the matri-centred system. For instance, under the tribal and matrilineal system, the obligation to one's

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Book of Exodus 19:15.

1 Samuel 21:5-6.

For fascinating discussions of the matri-centred nature of early Judaism, cf. David Bakan, And They Took Themselves Wives: The Emergence of Patriarchy in Western Civilization (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979); Savina J. Teubal, Sarah the Priestess: The First Matriarch of Genesis (Athens Ohio: Swallow Press, 1984); Nancy Jay, "Sacrifice, Descent and the Patriarchs," Vetus Testamentum 38 (1988): 52-70.

kin, and particularly the relationship between mother and child and among children of the same mother, was sacred. When a young couple married, the husband, like Adam, "left his father and mother and cleaved to his wife." But under patriarchy this marriage arrangement was destined to change, as matri-focal societies gave way to patri-focal, and the future brides were taken from their homeland to that of their husband ensuring that their children bore his name and that his goods would be passed on through the male line. The conflict engendered by this new social arrangement permeates the narratives of the Hebrew Bible.

We can see this theme in the story of the Levite and his "concubine." This is a very early story but, nevertheless, since it has come into the canon of Hebrew literature, it must be taken as representative of later values. In this story the woman left the Levite to go back to her father's house. We are not told why but as the story progresses it is obvious that the woman was very unhappy with her marriage situation.

When the Levite came to fetch her back, his father-in-law greeted him joyfully: the integrity of the new political system must be upheld. The feelings of the nameless woman, are not recorded. The Levite forced her back home and passing through Gibeah among the Benjaminites wanted to stay overnight. The Benjaminites refused to take them in, whereupon an old man from the Levite's part of the country invited them to stay with him. Later on the "men of Gibeah" came demanding that he give them the Levite. The master of the house went out and said to them: `No, my brothers; I implore you, do not commit this

> crime. This man has become my guest; do not commit such
> an infamy. Here is my daughter; she is a virgin; I
> will her to you. Possess her, do what you please with
> her, but do not commit such an infamy against this man.'
> But the men would not listen to him. So the Levite took
> his concubine and brought her out to them. They had
> intercourse with her and outraged her all night till
> morning; when dawn was breaking they let her go.

The man's daughter, a virgin, was also dispensable. The woman made her way back to where her husband was staying but barely reached as far as the door. Next morning her husband found her there with her hand lying across the threshold. He told her to stand up since they had to continue on their journey but the woman lay still, making no response. She had died of the injuries received during the gang-rape, her hand firmly on the threshold of the men's house in a gesture of accusation.

When the Levite realized that she was dead, he threw her across the back of his donkey and travelled homeward. He cut her body into twelve pieces and sent it around the twelve tribes of Israel looking for retribution. The rest of the Israelites met and offered holocausts and communion sacrifices before Yahweh who told them to exact vengeance on the Benjaminites.

Book of Judges 19:23-25.

They went ahead and "put all the males in the town to the sword." Then realizing that they might totally wipe out one of the twelve tribes of Israel, and also having decided not to give any of their own women to any remaining Benjaminites, they hit on another plan: Asking themselves which of their people had not come to this battle, they attacked Jabeshgilead and killed all present except for four hundred virgins, whom they turned over to the Benjaminite rapists. But then, as further evidence of their "compassion" for the Benjaminites, and as a guarantee that their tribe would not be blotted out, they put the finishing touches to their intrigues:

> `But yet,' they said, `there is Yahweh's feast which is held every year at Shiloh. Place yourselves in ambush in the vineyards. Keep watch there, and when the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in groups together, you too come out of the vineyards: seize a wife, each one of you, from the daughters of Shiloh and make for the land of Benjamin. If their fathers or brothers come to complain to you, we shall say to them, "Forgive them because each one of them has taken a wife for himself, as men do in war. For if you had given them brides, you would have broken your oath, and so would have sinned."' The Benjaminites did this, and from the dancers they had captured, they chose as many wives as there were men; then they set off, returned to their inheritance, rebuilt their towns and settled in them.

And so the former rapists were given further licence to kidnap the women of Shiloh in order to preserve the integrity of the oath which they had made. The war was fought to avenge the destruction of the property of the Levite (he had only consented to her mere rape, perhaps in punishment for her obstinance). Compassion was for the men of the Benjaminites who would be left without issue, not for the unfortunate woman, the virgins of Jabeshgilead, or the women of Shiloh. And as contemporary biblical commentators note, "Not the lust but the violation of the sacred duty of hospitality is considered the more serious." Hospitality, in this instance, clearly refers to the social arrangements made between men to which women as a class were subservient.

This attitude to women is clearly illustrated by two stories with similar themes and with very different outcomes, the story of Jepthah and his daughter, and the story of Abraham and Isaac.

Book of Judges 21:19-24.

Jerusalem Bible Book of Judges 19-24, note h. p.335.

Jephthah was engaged in a war with the Ammonites and was doing very badly until he made a vow to Yahweh:

> If you deliver the Ammonites into my hands, then the first person to meet me from the door of my house when I return in triumph from fighting the Ammonites shall belong to Yahweh, and I will offer him up as a holocaust.

Jephthah marched against the Ammonites and "Yahweh delivered them into his power." But now as Jephthah returned home "triumphant," who should come out to meet him but his beloved daughter, his only child, who was dancing to the sound of timbrels. When he saw her, he exclaimed:

> `Oh my daughter, what sorrow you are bringing me! Must it be you, the cause of my ill-fortune! I have given a promise to Yahweh, and I cannot unsay what I have said.'

Note here that his daughter is not dignified by being given a name, and Jephthah actually blames her for bringing misfortune onto him. His daughter replied:

> `My father, you have given a promise to Yahweh; treat me as the vow you took binds you to, since Yahweh has given you vengeance on your enemies the Ammonites.' Then she said to her father. `Grant me one request. Let me be free for two months. I shall go and wander in the mountains, and with my companions bewail my virginity.'

With her companions she went off into the mountains for two months where she "mourned her virginity." In the meantime, it apparently did not occur to Jephthah to wrestle or bargain with Yahweh again, nor did Yahweh intervene, because when she returned Jepthah "treated her as the vow that he had uttered bound him." The narrative finishes:

She had never known a man. From this comes this custom

> in Israel for the daughters of Israel to leave home every year and to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite for four days every year.

As an earthly father, he had sacrificed his daughter to God the Father, an act which brought him earthly success. The implication is that Yahweh must have been pleased because after this sacrifice Jephthah went on to rule Israel for six years. There is no mention of any retribution for

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Book of Judges Ch. 11:30-31.

Book of Judges 11:35-38.

Book of Judges 11:39-40.

his act and he is apparently rewarded for his contribution towards getting religious land from the Ammonites.

Abraham too was asked to make the ultimate sacrifice when commanded by Yahweh to sacrifice his son Isaac: "Take now your only son, your only one whom you love, Isaac, and walk yourself to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I shall tell you." Abraham went to great pains to build the altar where his son would be sacrificed, but at the point where Abraham took his knife and was about to sacrifice Isaac, the angel of Yahweh appeared and told him not to slay his son: "For now I know that you are an Elohim fearing man, and you have not witheld your only one from me."

Tradition has it that when Sarah heard the news of what Abraham had proposed to do, she fell dead. Her death was the symbolic death of matricentred ethics where the ties to one's children were an extension of one's own lifeblood. In the new patriarchal faith being born, immortality would finally be located in the sacred sphere, in obedience to God the Father, rather than in the chain of Being between parent and child.

The ultimate test of patriarchal ethics was obedience to the point of death, or the willingness to sacrifice even one's own son, in response to the demands of Yahweh, no matter how arbitrary. Nevertheless, the prime symbol of the agreement between Yahweh and Abraham was the semen of Abraham, as Yahweh guaranteed him "seed forever" in return for keeping to the terms of the covenant.

A clear theme emerging from all these stories is that obedience to the word of God, either directly expressed to humans or by means of his commandments, is more important than human life itself, especially the life of mere women. In fact, the word of God can really only be heard when men have separated themselves from women. Obedience to the terms of the Covenant, freedom from passion or instinctive sexuality, allegiance to one God, and the great march into linear rather than cyclical history are the most important elements of the new faith. Obedience to Yahweh would be rewarded with "semen for ever," a vivid reassurance to men of their future immortality through their children, an assurance made conditional upon the father's willingness to sacrifice their offspring to the ultimate Father of all, whether on the battlefield or the altar.

Although this faith was born in the soil of the land of Israel, the main elements of its theology were shared by many of the surrounding peoples as they passed from a matri-centered society based on the kinship system, to a patriarchal social structure. Patriarchy was a product of the new cities, and depended for its existence on abstract justice represented by the king and administered by his representatives. Worship of the monotheistic God Yahweh, to whom the

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Book of Genesis 22:2.

Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publishing Co., 1954) p.278.

Cf. Book of Genesis 15:4,5,18; 17:7; for discussion of this theme cf. Lerner, Creation of Patriarchy pp.189-191.

king was accountable, ensured that no minor deity could be called upon to challenge the king's authority. The sacred ties that bound the people together through their common mothers were now being superseded by a social organization based on the king with the power to summon the people to war.

The Hebrew Bible gave to this great social upheaval a prophetic, poetic, and written tradition whereby its central themes could be spread throughout the world. But there was one main problem: one could not become a Jew simply by conversion into the faith. To become a Jew one had to be born of a Jewish mother. This was clearly a remnant of the old matri-centered culture from which Judaism originated and was to provide a fatal obstacle to Judaism becoming the dominant religion of the Western world. Judaism was still, therefore, to some extent, a tribal religion.

The sacrifice of women was now taken for granted, but Abraham had been spared the sacrifice of his son. It would remain for a new faith, one which completely abandoned biological ties, and one which committed the ultimate transgression, to take on the task of unifying the whole world under the worship of one God. This new faith, fostered in the land of Israel, would become known as Christianity. The sacredness of birth would be replaced by a form of power which took on meaning only after death. The proprietors of this power, the Christian priests, would be effective only insofar as they were not at the mercy of their biology and particularly, insofar as they could resist the temptations of women. God the Father was quite distinct from the Mother Goddess.

The body of a woman, the spouse of the Levite, had been broken and distributed among the Twelve Tribes of Israel: the woman herself passed into oblivion. But the next time a Body would be Broken and passed out among The Twelve--the consequences would be radically different.