

PETER SCHÄFER, *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (Jews, Christians and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World). Princeton University Press, Princeton / Oxford, 2002. 306 pp. \$52.50/£33.95 (hb). ISBN 0-691-09068-8.

As its name indicates, this book seeks to uncover the lost and forgotten feminine aspect of the Jewish godhead. It is particularly interested in describing how, despite the suppression of goddess worship by Jewish monotheism, already in the Yahwist revolution initiated in the Kingdom of Judah in the eighth century BCE, over time feminine aspects of the Jewish God re-emerge in new and surprising forms, culminating in its fully fledged presentation in the Kabbalah, first manifested in the twelfth-century *Book of Bahir*. The purpose of this investigation is, in Schäfer's words, 'to place the Bahir's concept of God in historical perspective and to demonstrate that its authors were right to claim that all they did and intended to do was reaffirm the "old"' (p. 6). Or in other words, that the feminine in the godhead is not a complete innovation. In a truly historical quest, Schäfer wishes to discover whether these feminine aspects of the Jewish divine, manifested scantily in the sources, are in some way connected one with the other, forming a coherent sequence, or whether they are newly reinvented in every generation. The order of the chapters in his book suggests that Schäfer answers this question in the affirmative, namely that the feminine Jewish God was never really lost. However, in some generations, more than in others, when mainstream Judaism worked harder to suppress this image, it required surprising bypasses in order to survive.

The goddess which the Hebrew Bible reviled and suppressed was somehow preserved in its own text in the image of Wisdom (feminine *hokhmah*), which features as God's female child playmate in creation already in the biblical book of Proverbs. In chapters 1 and 2, Schäfer follows the development of Wisdom in Second Temple Jewish apocryphal literature and in Philo, showing how in all these texts metaphor provides the image of Wisdom with a richer character, not just as God's female companion but also as his consort. Thus the Hellenistic Jewish God was not without female attributes and appendages.

In chapter 4, Schäfer discusses the new theological concept which the rabbis developed in order to describe God's presence among his people: the *shekhinah*. Schäfer shows how the feminine gender of this term could potentially highlight a feminine aspect of the Jewish God, as it indeed does in later literature. This, however, never happens in rabbinic literature. Rabbinic literature, therefore, represents one of those periods in Jewish history when more is done to suppress the feminine in the godhead than at other times. At the same time, the biblical image of wisdom took on a life of its own in the literature of gnostic sects—strange offshoots of Judaism and Christianity. Chapter 3 shows how, just as it was being suppressed by the rabbis, wisdom became practically a goddess in her own right in the gnostic mythology. Bypassing strong Jewish monotheistic tendencies, the feminine image of the divine survived in the literature of a marginal group.

The term *shekhinah*, which the rabbis conceived, raised problems for future Judaism because of its feminine gender. Chapters 5 and 6 show two parallel and competing developments within Judaism on this score. In chapter 5, Schäfer discusses the *shekhinah* of the Jewish medieval philosophers, and shows how strongly they combated the danger it posed for pure Jewish monotheism, but in chapter 6 the emergence of the fully fledged goddess, the *shekhinah* in the twelfth-century *Book of Bahir*, is presented as a counter-development within Judaism, hailing the mythologies and mystical interpretations of the Kabbalah.

In part 2 of his book, Schäfer ponders the question how this unforeseen development came about. He admits that the gnostic presentation of *sophia* (Wisdom) is a tempting

parallel which could phenomenologically explain the Bahiric *shekhinah*. Yet he rejects this explanation on the grounds that no direct connection between the *Bahir* and gnostic influence can be shown. Instead, he suggests walking another bypass: Christian veneration of the virgin Mary and the development of Mariology. He follows the complex path of the relationship between the Jews and Mary from Late Antiquity in the East to twelfth-century western Europe, where the *Bahir* was composed, and suggests that this was the kind of atmosphere which may have produced the *Bahir*'s new remodelling of the *shekhinah*.

In sum, Schäfer's book is clearly written and forcefully presents an interesting and plausible thesis for the presence, survival and re-emergence of the feminine in the Jewish divine from antiquity to the middle ages.

What is missing in the book, and what Schäfer fails to mention anywhere, is the *Sitz im Leben* of this book. Why has Schäfer written this book at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and not, for example twenty years ago, at an earlier stage in his academic career? I think the answer to this question is quite obvious. Although Schäfer nowhere mentions the 'F'-word, there is no doubt that feminist research and feminist interpretation of texts has had a significant influence on his interest in the topic and on the formulation of the questions that this study seeks to answer. This can be demonstrated in the following way. When describing what he seeks to research, Schäfer writes: 'The notion of the necessary evolution of monotheism out of polytheism is . . . stereotyped. The polytheistic religions of the ancient Near East were certainly not the embodiment of religious crudeness and unethical behavior, yearning to be saved by the dawn of biblical monotheism . . . Nor did biblical monotheism represent the final and clear-cut break with polytheistic superstition that we have come to believe' (p. 1). Thus it may seem from this description that the tension between polytheism and monotheism in general is the question which this book researches. That this is not so becomes clear when we realise that Schäfer is not interested, for example, in the God of Israel described in the *Book of Bahir* as represented by ten *sephiroth* (or manifestations), certainly a polytheistic trait, but only in one of these *sephiroth*: the feminine *shekhinah*. When seeking Christian parallels to this Jewish phenomenon, Schäfer is not interested in the Christian Trinity, which is polytheistic and at least two thirds male (and one third genderless), but is rather interested in Mariology: the development of the Mother of Jesus into a goddess-like being. Feminist enquiry is thus the *Zeitgeist* of this book.

The subject of the feminine aspect of the divine has interested feminist scholars from the start of second-wave feminism. Yet it seems that the interest in the topic has its prehistory. In 1967, 35 years before Schäfer's book appeared, the anthropologist Raphael Patai published his book *The Hebrew Goddess*, in which he too set out to trace the feminine aspect of the divine in Judaism from biblical times down to the Kabbalah and after. The purpose of that book had been to explain how, despite the fact that 'Goddesses are ubiquitous' (as he begins his book), Jewish monotheism had attempted to suppress goddess worship. The pattern of Patai's book is quite similar to that of Schäfer's. He begins with the biblical goddesses and their suppression in the Yahwist revolution and then follows their developments. Interestingly, instead of Wisdom, Patai hinges on the Cherubim as signifying God's double male/female aspect in antiquity. Some of his readings are quite tantalising. Then he joins Schäfer in assessing the *shekhinah* as God's feminine aspect, and finally reaches the Kabbalah, following closely not only the emergence of the feminine aspect of God in it but its various developments, both as the manifestation of good (the *matronit*) and the manifestation of evil (Lilith).

In his 'history of research' introduction, Patai dismissed the theory which was in favour at the end of the nineteenth century—of the one-time existence of an ancient, primitive matriarchy, represented by the primeval Mother Goddess, which was then taken over by a more advanced patriarchy, represented by monotheism. Instead he posited the apologetic idea that 'since [God] is without body, he possesses no physical attributes and hence no sexual traits. To say that God is either male or female is therefore completely impossible'. Yet Patai concedes that the Hebrew language, which is strongly gendered, has led the simple-minded to the conclusion that the Jewish God is male. Thus, some sort of female supplement became necessary.

Feminist studies completely overturned this rather naive point. In 1980, in a very influential piece published in the newly founded Jewish feminist journal *Lilith*, Annette Daum expounded her thesis which maintained that feminist neo-paganism was 'Blaming the Jews for the Death of the Goddess.' In this article, Daum showed how the re-emerging feminist movement, in its post-modernist stance of inverting the conventional view of history observed through the lenses of Judeo-Christian theology, began viewing pagan goddess worship as empowering for women, and how the suppression of the goddess by Jewish monotheism had effectively ended women's cultic participation and importance. This article made no suggestion that Jewish monotheism was sexless. In fact, it affirmed the masculine character of the Jewish God. What it intended to do was to alert its readers to the danger of a re-emerging anti-Semitism which might result from such an approach. This issue is addressed in a rather veiled manner in Schäfer's book. He maintains that his book 'does not favor monotheism over polytheism, but neither does it strive to exorcise the prejudice of the alleged superiority of Jewish-Christian monotheism with the attempted revival of ancient pagan values' (p. 3).

The challenge to Daum's accusation was taken up, for example, by the influential Christian theologian Phylis Tribble. In her groundbreaking book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, she argued that the God of the Old Testament is not really masculine, and exposed in her book the feminine images and metaphors used to describe him. He is called *rahum* (merciful), which comes from the same root as *rehem* (womb). He is designated *shaddai* (female breasts). Tribble argued that God's feminine aspects need not be searched for in his female consort but are found in himself. However, Tribble's argument may be taken as apologetic. The most critical book affirming the Hebrew God's masculinity is Howard Eilberg-Schwartz's scandalous *God's Phallus*, which was published in 1994. In this book, Eilberg-Schwartz argues, for example, that only man was created in God's image, and the Jewish man more so, because God is actually circumcised. This, of course, is only one of the surprising masculine aspects of the Jewish God that Eilberg-Schwartz brings to light.

Furthermore, Schäfer's various feminine aspects of the divine have, under feminist influence, been widely researched. The biblical female goddess has been pursued by several scholars such as Tikva Frymer-Kensky in her book *In the Wake of the Goddess*. The feminine aspects of the Kabbalah have been addressed by Elliot Wolfson (*Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism*, 1995), and so on. It has remained for Schäfer to come and put the pieces together, retrace Patai's steps and expose the fallacy of his assumption that the feminine aspect of the divine is only required on linguistic grounds. The result is this fine scholarly book, which places the marginalised feminine in the Jewish God back into the heart of Jewish scholarship and theology.