Keel, Othmar

_Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh: Ancient Near Eastern Art and the Hebrew Bible_

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This volume consists of two papers, expanded and edited for publication. The first examines the iconography of earth and tree goddesses, chiefly from Syro-Palestinian sources, from the Early Bronze to the Late Iron Age, with an investigation of texts in the Hebrew Bible that refer to tree cults. The second surveys representations of the emblem of the moon god of Harran in monumental and miniature art, from its Aramaean homeland to its manifestations in Syria-Palestine, including a discussion of the festival of the new moon in the Hebrew Bible and the astral cults of seventh-century Judah. Three appendices follow: the first presents translations of inscriptions on four stelae that mention "Sin who dwells in Harran"; the second evaluates evidence for a late Iron Age moon temple near Amman; and the last summarizes a German study by M. Bernet and O. Keel, who argue for the existence of an Iron Age sanctuary of the moon god at the city gate of Bethsaida. The illustrations are well integrated and inform the text at every stage.

Keel asserts that throughout the period in question real and artificial trees were objects of worship in Syria-Palestine as manifestations of the one goddess. He also challenges the attempts of C. Frevel in his lengthy dissertation, "Aschera und der Ausschliesslichkeitsanspruch YHWHs" (1995), to minimize the connection between tree and goddess. According to Keel, this relationship is confirmed by an ample iconography from the Early Bronze Age down to Iron IIA (ca. 2500-1000 BCE) that establishes the close link between tree and goddess as objects of worship. Stylized trees stand next to the goddess, branches emerge from her, fish and caprids are beside the tree, denoting water and fertility. Other depictions show an anthropomorphic goddess with a tree rising from her vulva or navel, trees flanking her, worshipers and caprids on either side of the tree,
exhibiting its divine and life-giving qualities. Fashions in material and representation occasionally changed: vase paintings and terra cotta figures or plaques from the Late Bronze age indicate that the anthropomorphic form of the goddess gave way to the stylized tree flanked by caprids. Keel addresses at length the two thirteenth-century ewers from Lachish (figs. 49-50), where the tree or vulva has the caprids on either side and the word 'lt, goddess, above the tree in figure 49. He uses this to counteract Frevel's contention that there is no certain identification of the tree with the goddess. The author notes that in Egyptian iconography the goddesses Nut, Isis, Hathor or Maat are severally identified with the tree. From this he concludes (p. 38) that the tree might represent different goddesses, but in seventh- and sixth-century Judah it depicted Asherah, since she was the only surviving goddess. In Iron Age I, he notes, the link of the tree to the anthropomorphic goddess became less obvious, but this detachment may have opened the way to associate the sacred tree with the male deity as a symbol of his blessing. For the most part, however, the growing or planted tree mediated the blessing and presence of the life-giving earth goddess (p. 48). In conclusion (ch. 5), he examines texts in the Hebrew Bible that imply the veneration of trees as symbols of the goddess, including texts that strive to obliterate her memory or reduce her to metaphor. The author's iconographic evidence is impressive and testifies to a consistency of imagery that points to the association of goddess and tree over millennia.

Part 2 follows the same outline and methodology. In 115 illustrations, Keel traces the lunar emblem of the crescent moon; anthropomorphic representations are rare, in monumental (figs. 1-14) and miniature art (figs. 14-52). The crescent moon of Harran on its pole and with tassels signified the new, young moon rising against the darkness, bringing light and fertility. The emblem is accompanied by one or two worshipers, or sometimes it is adjacent to a tree. Keel suggests that the miniature art from the eleventh and tenth centuries shows that links had already been established between Harran and Palestine. These were resumed in the eighth and seventh centuries through Aramaeans who served in the Assyrian army and administration (p. 84), when the emblem of the moon god spread to the west. Chapter 10 examines Aramaean name seals, most from the eighth and seventh centuries that portray the lunar emblem or the moon god seated in his crescent boat. Of significance for the religion of seventh-century Judah are those numerous seals found in Palestine that bear the symbols of the astral divinities of the night, the "host of heaven," so abhorred by the Deuteronomists. The reason given for the flourishing of these cults is the presence of Aramaeans holding high position in the Assyrian administration. There is a concluding discussion of the festival of the new moon native to Israel and Judah. Again, the assembled iconographic material successfully portrays the development and diffusion of the lunar emblem in Syria-Palestine. Whether this had any direct influence on the native Israelite and Judahite cults of the new moon in the eighth and seventh centuries is not immediately apparent.

Despite the title, the connection of the iconographic material with Israelite religion is somewhat lightly treated in the two summary chapters; but this is more the result of the
style of the book rather than authorial intent. As in other publications, Keel presents considerable and credible pictorial evidence to support his interpretation of the relevant biblical texts. However, the heavy editing of these texts often makes direct connections difficult and, as Keel remarks (p. 108), much depends on "the value judgements of the exegetes." This study contributes a substantial collection of iconographic material coupled with a stimulating discussion to the field of ancient Israelite religion.