The Goddess in the Exodus: Nina Paley's *Seder-Masochism* and Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism, and Female Divinity in the Ancient World

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THE GODDESS IN THE EXODUS

Nina Paley's *Seder-Masochism* and Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism, and Female Divinity in the Ancient World

Caryn Tamber-Rosenau

Nina Paley's animated musical *Seder-Masochism* reimagines the story of the Exodus. To Paley, the Exodus is not the pinnacle of God's relationship with Israel but the silencing of Goddess religion. Paley draws heavily on the work of some "goddess feminists" to argue that YHVH's rise killed "the Goddess." This article discusses how *Seder-Masochism* portrays goddess worship in the ancient world in general and ancient Israel and Judah in particular. Tamber-Rosenau explores how Paley's filmic portrayals of goddesses interact with the current state of scholarship on ancient goddesses. She then shows how the film's central thesis that God silenced and killed the Goddess connects with Paley's antitransgender ideology.

Keywords: Exodus, Passover, radical feminism, *Seder-Masochism*, transgender, trans-exclusionary

Nina Paley's film *Seder-Masochism* is about creation and the Exodus and Passover and goddesses and religious violence and patriarchy and Paley's relationship with her own father. To Paley, the Exodus is not the pinnacle of God's relationship with Israel but the silencing of goddess religion. In this article, I discuss how *Seder-Masochism* uses artifacts and scholarship on goddess worship in the ancient world to support Paley's case. I explore how Paley's portrayals of goddesses interact with scholarship on goddess worship. I then show how the film's central thesis that God silenced and killed the Goddess—the charge of deacide—connects with Paley's anti-transgender ideology. Specifically, I probe how Paley interprets the work of one strand of "goddess feminism" to support this anti-trans

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stance. In making this connection, I use a contextualist approach to film criticism, which foregrounds Paley as the creative force behind the film and mines her writing for insights into the film.

Seder-Masochism (2019) is the follow-up to Paley's controversial 2010 film *Sita Sings the Blues*, a retelling of the Ramayana narrated by shadow puppets who cannot agree on the story's details. The Ramayana is interspersed with a story about the breakup of Paley's own marriage set to a soundtrack of 1930s torch songs. The film was well received critically, but some Hindus took exception to Paley retelling a sacred story from a culture not her own.[1] With *Seder-Masochism*, Paley, a secular Jew, turns her attention to the holy texts of her own culture. She has been explicit about her connection to the subject matter, even printing up and signing a "Jew card" that, she wrote, "entitles me to call my current project Seder-Masochism."[2] Prior to its full release, Paley had been posting individual scenes and songs online for years. One, a biting satire of the history of war over Israel-Palestine set to the Pat Boone song "This Land Is Mine," from the 1960 Zionist epic film *Exodus*, achieved viral status in 2012.[3]

Paley's Goddesses in the Exodus

The main narrative of *Seder-Masochism* is a retelling of the Exodus story. The tension is between the Israelites' devotion to goddesses and the jealousy of the monotheistic God, expressed through his representatives Moses and Aaron. In contrast to the Hebrew Bible, the film sides with pluralistic goddess religion. Goddesses appear throughout the Exodus component of the film, reminding the Israelites of their power and seeking devotion in return. Near the beginning of the movie, Moses encounters God in the wilderness, but he is so listless that God needs to grab Moses's attention by making his flock of goats tap dance. Moses eventually starts dancing along, brandishing his shepherd's staff like a vaudeville cane. This represents the general portrayal throughout *Seder-Masochism* of Moses as an unremarkable man who becomes chief enforcer for a violent deity. In a subsequent dream theophany (and a departure from the biblical source material), goddesses appear to Moses while he sleeps, singing and dancing to the Pointer Sisters' "You Gotta Believe" ("You gotta believe in something / so why not believe in me?"). Paley's goddesses are animated photos of ancient artifacts. As Moses heads back to Egypt to speak with Pharaoh, he encounters cartoon renditions of

[1] For example, Sharmila Lodhia, "Deconstructing Sita's Blues: Questions of Mis/Representation, Cultural Property, and Feminist Critique in Nina Paley's Ramayana," *Feminist Studies* 41, no. 2 (2015): 371–408.

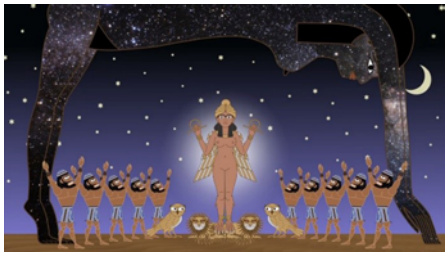
[2] Nina Paley, "My Jew Card," *Nina Paley* (blog), November 20, 2011, https://blog.ninapaley.com/2011/11/20/my-jew-card/.

[3] Roz Warren, "How Nina Paley Made 'This Land Is Mine' Viral," *Forward*, August 13, 2014, https://forward.com/schmooze/203992/how-nina-paley-made-this-land-is-mine-viral/.

Egyptian deities like Isis and Hathor. After the Israelites leave Egypt, cross the Red Sea, and enter the wilderness, Moses sings the Four Tops' "Reach Out (I'll Be There)" as the people gather manna and water provided by God. As Moses sings, he smashes the Judahite pillar figurines the Israelites have been venerating. At the end of the number, Moses points meaningfully to a storm cloud enrobing a phallic mountain that he climbs to encounter God. The message of the goddess appearances is clear: the Israelites worship goddesses, Egyptian and other, even after the Exodus. Moses, acting as God's agent, will not tolerate worship of deities other than YHVH, and he will enforce that stance through force.

This theme reaches its climax in Paley's portrayal of the golden calf (Exod 32), which she imagines as a joyful return to goddess worship in Moses's absence. While the Bible portrays the golden calf as shocking disobedience immediately following the acceptance of God's covenant, Paley reimagines it as the Israelites returning to their goddess-loving roots. The scene is set to John Lennon's "Woman," with the Israelites singing lyrics such as "Woman / I can hardly express / My mixed emotions at my thoughtlessness / After all, I'm forever in your debt" and "Woman / I know you understand / The little child inside the man / Please remember my life is in your hands." Israelite women clad in Muslim-style body and face coverings pass through the legs of a goddess portrayed as a tree, emerging as bare-breasted goddesses themselves.[4] The Israelite men kneel before these newly minted goddesses, implying an improved status for human women as a result of goddess worship. Paley envisions the goddesses of the Egyptian pantheon, including Isis (Fig. 1), Nut (Fig. 2), Wadjet (Fig. 3), Hathor (Fig. 4), and Bastet (Fig. 4) walking with

[4] While this article focuses on the portrayal of goddesses in *Seder-Masochism*, I must comment on Paley's use of Muslim-style face and body covering as shorthand for women's oppression and of nudity as shorthand for women's liberation. The trope of the oppressed, hijab-wearing Muslim woman set against the free Westerner is common, but it is also lazy. There is a range of Muslim veiling, with multiple options for the hijab and varying degrees of body covering. Paley goes for the niqab, which reveals only the eyes. This is not representative of the way most Muslim women who veil wear their coverings. Additionally, while some Muslim countries mandate veiling, and undoubtedly, some men pressure their wives and daughters to cover, many Muslim women veil voluntarily. In *Seder-Masochism*, however, the veiling is clearly forced. Though it is common for Westerners to see the veiled Muslim as meek, subservient, and oppressed, that is not the way many hijab-wearing Muslim women see themselves. As Abla Hasan writes, "Ḥijāb, as viewed by Muslim women, is an active response that goes beyond the denial of patriarchy. Ḥijāb is an authentic act designed to enable women to reclaim gender equality. It is a way of completely transcending the societal values in which women are obliged to show more of their bodies to gain social approval or professional opportunities" (*Decoding the Egalitarianism of the Qur'an: Retrieving Lost Voices on Gender* [New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019], 113). For more on veiling, Muslim women, and feminism, see Bozena C. Welborne, Aubrey L Westfall, Özge Çelik Russell, and Sarah A. Tobin, eds., *The Politics of the Headscarf in the United States* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), chap. 1. More can be said about Paley's use of Muslim veiling as shorthand for oppression, as well as her use of the Islamic State as a comparison point for biblical zealotry, but that is beyond the scope of the present study.

Figs. 1 and 2: Egyptian goddess Isis (*left*); Egyptian goddess Nut and the Queen of the Night (*right*).

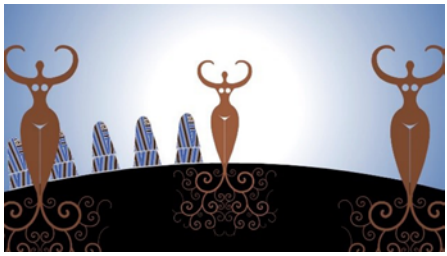

Figs. 3 and 4: Egyptian goddess Wadjet (*left*); Egyptian goddesses Hathor and Bastet (*right*).

the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness. Paley also interprets the golden calf as Hathor (Fig. 6).[5]

Many of the animated goddesses in this scene are based on real artifacts. The goddess-as-tree-with-upraised-branches (Fig. 5) resembles a figurine with arms upraised from fourth millennium BCE Egypt, and goddesses as trees are a common ancient Near Eastern motif. The winged nude woman with froglike feet and a headdress (Fig. 2) is the so-called Queen of the Night from the Burney Relief, which dates to early second-millennium Mesopotamia. The topless woman with the layered skirt, bird, and snakes (Fig. 6) is a mid-second millennium Minoan snake goddess. The twirling woman with a close-fitting hairdo or headdress and no discernible features below the breasts is the Judahite pillar figurine from Early Iron Age Judah (Fig. 7). The images of lions and blooming flowers, which appear throughout Paley's golden calf scene, are common goddess tropes from the ancient Near East.[6]

[5] Occasional others have made this suggestion as well—or have proposed that the calves set up at Dan and Bethel during the divided monarchy were influenced by the Egyptian cult of Hathor—but it is not widespread. See, for example, Eva Danielus, "The Sins of Jeroboam Ben-Nabat," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 58, no. 2 (1967): 95–114.

[6] Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998), 19–108.




Figs. 5 and 6: Veiled Israelite women prepare to pass through the legs of a goddess-as-stylized-tree (*left*); liberated Israelite women dressed as the Minoan snake goddess dance in front of a Hathor golden calf (*right*).

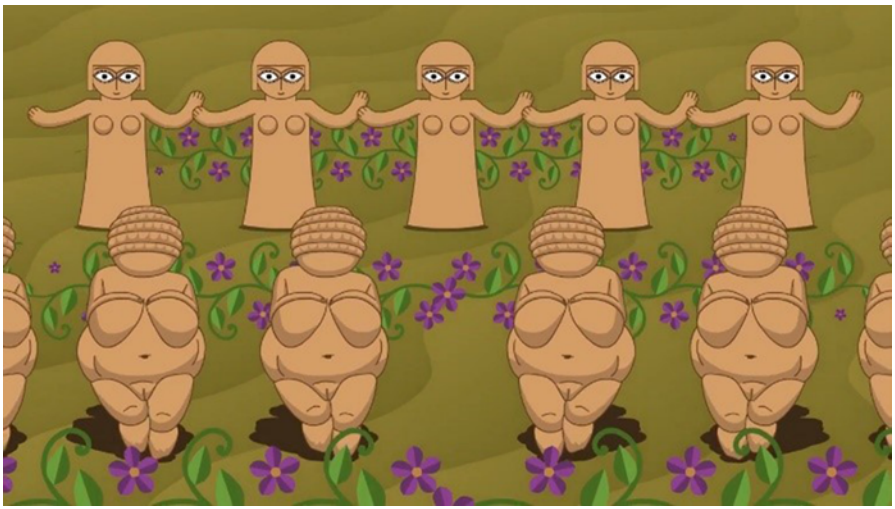


Fig. 7: Judahite pillar figurines and Venuses of Willendorf dance.

As the golden calf segment ends, the Israelites genuflect to a glittering, golden Hathor flanked by other goddesses. A silhouetted Moses atop the penis-mountain watches as lightning flashes from storm clouds.[7] In a subsequent scene, Moses descends, tablets in hand, and smashes them while Israelites and goddesses look on, shame-faced. Led Zeppelin's "Your Time Is Gonna Come" plays in the background—with lyrics like "Made up my mind to break you this time," "Lyin', cheatin', hurtin', that's all you seem to do / Messin' around with every guy in

[7] For representations of YHVH as a storm-god, see Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel*; Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002); and Thomas C. Römer, *The Invention of God* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

town," and "You been bad to me, woman / But it's coming back home to you"—as Moses breaks the golden Hathor, he and the Levites smash other goddesses to bits, and a topless Israelite woman-goddess is forced back into a full-body veil.

By setting the goddess scenes to songs about romance, Paley invokes the common biblical metaphor of the relationship between God and Israel as a marriage. The Israelites, who represent the wife, are repeatedly unfaithful to God, the husband, who sometimes commits graphic, sexualized vengeance but always takes Israel back.[8] The menacing lyrics of "Your Time Is Gonna Come" align with the Bible's repeated portrayal of Israel as a faithless whore who deserves comeuppance from her long-suffering husband. At the end of the number, Paley cuts to a video montage of Islamic State militants smashing artifacts in a museum in Mosul, Iraq.[9] The message is clear: Westerners shocked at militants' destruction of pre-Islamic religious artifacts should consider the Bible, where God's people are frequently commanded to destroy materials seen as insufficiently Yahwistic. By comparing smashed goddesses to priceless artifacts destroyed in the name of extremism, Paley makes the case that the heroes of the biblical texts were no better than modern zealots.

Paley's Goddesses as Gender-Essentialist Tropes

Throughout the film, Paley intersperses the story of the Exodus with three other narrative arcs. The first is an animated Jesus from a sixteenth-century last supper painting. Jesus narrates the events of a Passover seder; the audio comes from a 1950s record of a seder made by a famous cantor of the day. Although scholars debate whether the Last Supper was a Passover seder, the idea that it was seems fixed in the public consciousness, and Paley's move reflects that.[10] The second arc is an animation of a crowned, white-bearded man with the face of a dollar bill, floating in the clouds, talking with a goat on an altar (Fig. 8). The audio comes from interviews Paley recorded with her late father, Hiram, shortly before he died. Hiram Paley as God-the-father responds to questions posed by Nina as sacrificial goat about the Passover seder and the Paley family's lack of Jewish observance, and he also volunteers his thoughts about Nina's life mistakes and lack of financial security. Paley identifies her own father with God-the-father, with patriarchal religion, and—through the dollar bill and Hiram's musings about Nina's need for a more lucrative career—with capitalism. The third arc is a series

[8] The metaphor is used throughout the books of Hosea and Isaiah and in Jer 2-4 and Ezek 16 and 23. Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995).

[9] "Islamic State 'Destroys Ancient Iraq Statues in Mosul,'" *BBC News*, February 26, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31647484.

[10] Joel Marcus, "Passover and Last Supper Revisited," *New Testament Studies* 59, no. 3 (2013): 303–24; and Jonathan Klawans, "Was Jesus' Last Supper a Seder?" *Bible Review* 17, no. 5 (2001): 24–33.

Fig. 8: God-the-father, voiced by Paley's own father Hiram, and the sacrificial goat, voiced by Paley herself. The interviews from which Paley took the audio were recorded shortly before Hiram's death in 2012.

of animations of goddesses. While the goddesses Paley animates throughout the Exodus component of the film establish the framing that she uses to pit matriarchal goddess religion against patriarchal monotheism, it is in this third, standalone goddess arc that Paley makes her anti-transgender stance clearest.

Paley begins the film with the goddesses. The film opens with an animated snake tracing a spiral pattern.[11] As the snake circles, the picture widens to reveal that the snake is in the womb of a female figure imposed over the cosmos. The snake exits her womb and winds around her body. A moon appears behind the figure and moves through its phases, eventually revealing the goddess birthing the sun. The snake multiplies and pushes up through the ground to form plants. Slowly, animals appear, the female figure moving among them. The figure changes shape several times, each time representing a stylized depiction of an ancient artifact usually gendered female. Finally, she becomes a tree, but a man comes along and chops her down. The film then moves to its title card and Moses pasturing his flock. By beginning *Seder-Masochism* with a goddess instead of the Exodus story, Paley establishes the primacy of the creator goddess in her narrative.

[11] For the spiral as goddess image, see Judith Laura, *She Lives! The Return of Our Great Mother: Myths*, *Rituals*, *Music*, *Meditations*, comb. 3rd ed. (n.p.: Open Sea, 2010); and Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Goddess*, 20th anniv. ed. (New York; Toronto: HarperOne, 1999).

In a subsequent goddess interlude, a voice narrating the Passover seder praises God's sustaining power. As he speaks, the viewer sees a silhouette of a synagogue, flanked by a church and a mosque. Goddess figures swim beneath the houses of worship, then dance behind them, and then turn into alligators who gobble the buildings. The buildings reappear, resting on a goddess's body, but she flexes and sends them tumbling into the sea. The animations convey a message of an Abrahamic challenge to goddess supremacy, defeated by the power of the goddesses themselves.[12]

Of course, this is not the end of the road for the monotheistic God. The climax of the stand-alone goddess arc is a scene called "The Birth of YHWH," which immediately follows the golden calf scene. "The Birth" begins with a male figure in a goddess's womb. She squats and births one man, then another (Fig. 9). One of the men, now as large as the goddess, returns carrying an ax, splits her open, and then dons her clothes.[13] Throwing his hands out to his sides, he suddenly transforms into God-the-father. At the moment of transformation, the music switches from an all-female Bulgarian choir to Guns N' Roses' "Used to Love Her," whose lyrics say, "I used to love her / But I had to kill her / I had to put her six feet under / And I can still hear her complain." The message is clear: men committed deacide by ascribing the goddess's power to a male god. That god dressed as his "mother" and pretended to possess her life-giving functions but ended up perverting her peaceful nature into something crass, materialistic, and violent.[14]

With patriarchal monotheism thus established, a goddess figure joins God in a duet, the 1973 French-language "Paroles, Paroles," by Dalida and Alain Delon. The song moves between a male voice proclaiming his love for a woman and the woman's voice insisting that the love declarations are mere words. Every time the goddess sings "paroles," a picture of a different text flashes on the screen, first cuneiform, then Hebrew, then a Torah scroll, a Qur'an, and a Christian Bible. The words "I am the Lord Thy God" appear next, in Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, and English. As the words swim over the screen, the goddess lies down, covers her head with her arms, and fades away. The scene invokes the idea that, in ancient

[12] For an unpacking of the term *Abrahamic*, including an exploration of its origins and a critique of its theological and political goals and nebulous meaning, see Aaron W. Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[13] The connection to the Mesopotamian creation epic *Enuma Elish* is unmistakable. In that story, which tells how Marduk became the supreme god, Marduk goes to war against the saltwater mother-goddess Tiamat. Marduk defeats Tiamat by forcing the wind into her mouth, then splitting her open at the belly. He splits her in two, "like a flat fish," and uses half of her to create the waters of heaven and half to create the waters of the sea. Scholars have also pointed out the similarities between this creation tale and the aspect of Gen 1 in which God contemplates *tĕhôm* (the deep) and splits it to create the waters above and the waters below (Gen 1:2, 6–7).

[14] Not incidental to this hostile takeover was increased power for men; as Mary Daly famously wrote, "if God is male, then the male is God." Mary F. Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, 2d ed. (London: Women's, 1995).

Fig. 9: A goddess gives birth to a man.

Israel, as elsewhere in the ancient Near East, the chief god had a consort. It further implies that the goddess was once an independent being who created the men who produced God, but he arrogantly seeks to control her, subordinating her cult to his own. She protests and is ultimately overwhelmed by the words ("paroles") of God and his followers, whereupon she disappears.[15]

Paley lists sources for further reading in the credits of the film, which gives insight into what she was reading when she made this movie. She names *The Creation of Patriarchy* by Gerda Lerner, *The Great Mother* by Erich Neumann, *The Language of the Goddess* by Marija Gimbutas, *When God Was a Woman* by Merlin Stone, and *Beyond God the Father* by Mary Daly.[16] These books are different in genre and authors' areas of specialization. However, when Paley read them together, she evidently came away with a narrative of a primeval mother goddess who gave rise to individual goddesses in ancient cultures, who were in

[15] I am reminded of Julia Watts-Belser's statement of the importance of referring to the female deity within Judaism as Goddess, not Asherah: "I don't want a God with a girlfriend, even if She is an awesome presence and holy source in Her own right" ("Transing God/Dess: Notes from the Borderlands," in *Balancing on the Mechitza*: *Transgender in Jewish Community*. ed. Noach Dzmura [Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic, 2010], 238).

[16] Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Erich Neumann and Ralph Manheim, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Marija Alseikaite Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006); Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976); and Daly, *Beyond God the Father*.

turn supplanted and suppressed by the male-gendered deity of the Abrahamic traditions.[17] The story offered by Paley's film is that God killed the Goddess.

Works such as those cited by Paley helped inform, in the 1970s and 1980s, "goddess feminism," also known as the "goddess movement" or "spiritual feminism."[18] This largely Western phenomenon comprises a diverse group of believers and practitioners, united by a desire to explore the feminine divine.[19] Goddess feminists may believe in one deity or many; they may acknowledge male gods or not; they may see goddesses embodied in mortal women, nature, or both; and they may emphasize goddesses' contradictions as a way of describing their all-encompassing nature. They may describe their relationship to goddesses as one of "belief" or "experience" or even acknowledge that the goddess is a useful construct of modern feminism; they may profess belief in reincarnation; and they may express a desire to merge with or "become" the goddess.[20] There is overlap between goddess feminism and Jewish or Christian feminist theology, especially where feminists who still consider themselves part of one of these religions focus on the divine feminine native to the religions, such as Wisdom, Shekhinah, and Mary.[21]

The goddess as mother is a major theme for many.[22] As Cynthia Eller writes, "But if one image predominates amidst the manifold incarnations of the goddess, it is that of mother. . . . Her role as mother is crucial to her identity. It is her ability to give birth and to nurture that justifies the attribution of feminine gender to

[17] Paley does not invent this reading out of whole cloth. The charge of deacide is a common motif of some goddess feminism. See for example Mara Lynn Keller, "Goddess Spirituality," in *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, ed. Rosemary Skinner Keller, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Marie Cantlon, and Thomson Gale (Firma) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

[18] Melissa Raphael, *Introducing Thealogy: Discourse on the Goddess*, Introductions in Feminist Theology 3 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 21.

[19] For more on the overwhelmingly white, Western, middle-class nature of early goddess feminism, see Pam Lunn, "Do Women Need the GODDESS? Some Phenomenological and Sociological Reflections," *Feminist Theology* 4 (1993): 17–38, esp. 21.

[20] Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (Boston: Beacon, 1995); and Keller, "Goddess Spirituality." For a more personal story of one prominent goddess feminist's embrace of the movement, see Carol P. Christ, "From God to Goddess," in Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, *Goddess and God in the World: Conversations in Embodied Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), 75–106. Christ describes early encounters with Stone's and Daly's work when she had become disillusioned with the Christian God but before she had found an alternative.

[21] Raphael, *Introducing Thealogy*, 16–19.

[22] For an example of goddess theology that focuses on the female body and women's life-bringing powers, see Carol P. Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess," *Heresies* 5 (1978): 8–13. At the time, this work functioned as a necessary corrective to the narratives of shame and disgust that have long surrounded bodily processes such as menstruation and childbirth. See also a psychoanalytic approach in Naomi R. Goldenberg, "The Return of the Goddess: Psychoanalytic Reflections on the Shift from Theology to Thealogy," *Studies in Religion* 16, no. 1 (1987): 37–52, esp. 46.

the earth and to the divine for many spiritual feminists."[23] Paley's film repeatedly invokes goddesses as concerned with fertility, to the near exclusion of any other goddess traits. It isn't just in the real artifacts Paley represents in her animations but also in the representations she creates from scratch for these goddess interludes. Paley's choice to portray ancient goddesses almost exclusively as fertility deities is curious. Much of the archaeological work upon which conclusions about a great mother goddess and early matriarchies were based has been shown to have gone beyond the evidence.[24] As Jo Ann Hackett pointed out decades ago, the desire of some modern feminists to identify with fertility goddesses is troubling, given that the concept of the fertility goddess seems to have arisen in the fevered imaginations of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Protestant men. Hackett criticized the goddess movement for what she characterized as misguided attempts to appropriate the biological essentialism of earlier male scholars for women's empowerment.[25]

It is telling that Paley includes in the film imagery that reinforces biological essentialism and the "fertility religion" narrative but leaves out representations that do not easily fit this narrative. For example, nowhere in *Seder-Masochism* do we see representations of the Canaanite goddess Anat, even though the Canaanites were among the Israelites' closest neighbors, and most scholars now believe the Israelites emerged from the Canaanites.[26] Including Anat would have complicated Paley's biological-essentialist narrative, because Anat is an adolescent goddess who has little to nothing to do with sex, fertility, or motherhood.[27] Rather, she is a warrior with an unrestrained bloodlust. Artistic depictions of Anat generally

[23] Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, 143. For more on goddess feminism, especially its relationships with mainstream scholarship, see Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris, "Introduction: Exploring Female Divinity: From Modern Myths to Ancient Evidence," in *Ancient Goddesses: The Myths and the Evidence*, ed. Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1998), 6–21; and Kathryn Rountree, "Archaeologists and Goddess Feminists at Çatalhöyük: An Experiment in Multivocality," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 23, no. 2 (2007): 7–26.

[24] Goodison and Morris, *Ancient Goddesses*; and Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future* (Boston: Beacon, 2000). For a different view, defending Gimbutas from charges that her work does not hold up to academic scrutiny, see Charlene Spretnak, "Anatomy of a Backlash," *Journal of Archaeomythology* 7 (2011): 25–51.

[25] Ruether articulated many of the salient criticisms of goddess feminism in Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Goddesses and Witches: Liberation and Countercultural Feminism," *Christian Century* 97 (1980): 842–47. Ruether wrote, "A tendentious use of historical material reduces everything to one drama: the story of original female power and goodness, and the evil male conquest and suppression of the same" ("Goddesses and Witches," 843). Ruether could have been writing about *Seder-Masochism*.

[26] Philip R. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1995); Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002); Smith, *Early History of God*; William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?: What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002); Mario Liverani, *Israel's History and the History of Israel* (London: Equinox, 2005); and Römer, *Invention of God*.

[27] Neal H. Walls, *The Goddess Anat in Ugaritic Myth* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1992).

show a boyish figure with weapons rather than a womanly physique emphasizing breasts and belly.[28] Similarly, Paley does not engage with the copious material on the Mesopotamian goddess Inanna-Ishtar, who is related to sex but also to war and violence.[29] She includes the nude Queen of the Night from the Burney Relief, who may be Inanna-Ishtar, but none of the many representations of Inanna-Ishtar that show her dressed in typically male garb and carrying weapons. The goddesses in the film are all instantly recognizable as feminine because of their emphasized sexual characteristics, and they all fit into the narrative of matriarchal fertility religion.

Paley uses archaeology to support her bigendered view of the ancient world, ignoring the significant number of sexually ambiguous artifacts from the Ancient Near East.[30] This perhaps is unsurprising, since archaeology is only now beginning to reckon with sexual variation in artifacts and human remains. The discipline has suffered from what Mary Weismantel calls, "the systematic erasure of lives and histories that are inconveniently queer."[31] Weismantel proposes an archaeology informed by transgender considerations, not to artificially impose postmodern ideas of gender on the distant past but to undo the narrow two-sex essentialism inherent in earlier archaeology.

Two-sex essentialism pervades *Seder-Masochism*. Paley creates an intentionally simplified narrative in which female parts lose and male parts win. God is symbolized in Paley's Exodus narrative by a phallic mountain with a low-lying hill on either side (Fig. 10). In one scene, the tablets of the Ten Commandments are shown in the foreground with the mountain in the background, again producing the effect of a penis and testicles (Fig. 11). When Moses and Aaron quash goddess worship once and for all and cement the covenant with God, that covenant is represented by Aaron circumcising giant animated penises (Fig. 12).[32] In *Seder-Masochism*, organic, peaceful, pluralistic goddess religion is about wombs and

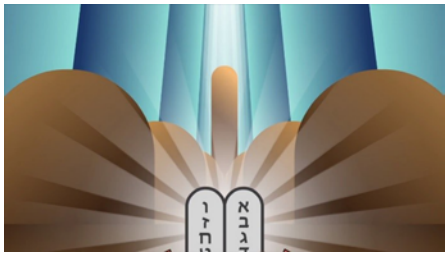
[28] When Anat became popular in Egypt, her depiction shifted slightly, but it would still be a stretch to say the Egyptian incarnation of Anat was a fertility deity. She and Astarte are referred to in a New Kingdom Egyptian text as "the two great goddesses who were pregnant but did not bear" (Harris magical papyrus iii:5, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA10042-5).

[29] Rivkah Harris, "Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites," *History of Religions* 30 (1991): 261–78.

[30] See, for example, Kathleen McCaffrey, "Reconsidering Gender Ambiguity in Mesopotamia: Is a Beard Just a Beard?" in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, Helsinki, July 2–6, 2001 (Helsinki, Finland: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 379–91.

[31] Mary Weismantel, "Toward a Transgender Archaeology: A Queer Rampage through Prehistory," in *The Transgender Studies Reader* 2, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 320.

[32] This focus on the bloody, fleshly, genital aspects of Israelite religion also risks reinforcing a pernicious stereotype about Jews as exotic, sex-obsessed, Orientalized others, often used to differentiate the benighted Jew from the enlightened Christian. I thank Joseph Marchal for suggesting this insight.

Figs. 10 and 11: God hands the Ten Commandments to Moses from atop a penis-and-testicles-shaped mountain (*left*); the Ten Commandments appear in the foreground while the phallic mountain looms behind it (*right*).

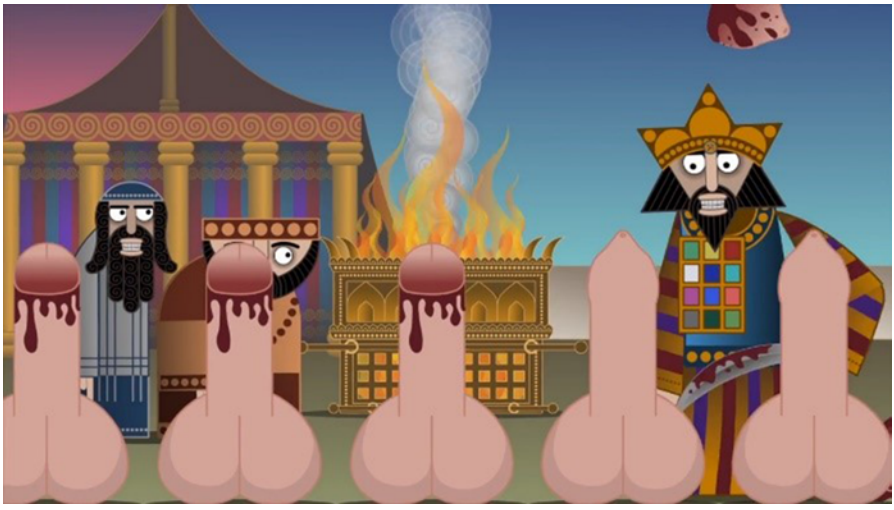


Fig. 12: High Priest Aaron circumcises giant penises to "The Things We Do for Love," by 10cc.

breasts, and artificial, violent, exclusive monotheism is about penises and testicles.[33] Paley even spells this out with an original song toward the end of the movie, called "God Is Male," whose lyrics proclaim, "God is Male / He's old, he's white / His beard is long / His asshole's tight / He watches everything you do / and then He throws the Book at you / Mighty father in the sky / Mighty chromosomes XY / Like the sons of Israel / God's a patriarchal male."

[33] The peaceful matriarchy is a theme of some work on feminist spirituality. As just one example, see Charlene Spretnak, "Introduction," in *The Politics of Women's Spirituality*, ed. Charlene Spretnak (New York: Anchor, 1982), xvii.

History's Goddesses

In recent decades, archaeological discoveries have made clear that goddesses were worshiped in ancient Israel. The Judahite Pillar Figurines, terra-cotta figurines discovered by the thousands in Judah in strata dating from the eighth–sixth centuries BCE, are apparently nude and have prominent breasts, leading many scholars to interpret them as goddesses, perhaps connected to fertility or nursing. Pre-exilic inscriptions addressed to "YHVH and His Asherah" at Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet ʿAjrud indicate a connection between YHVH and Asherah, though there are debates about whether "His Asherah" is a cultic representation, the goddess herself, or something else. Most likely, at least some Israelites worshiped Asherah as God's consort.

There is also plenty of biblical evidence for goddess worship in ancient Israel. The Deuteronomistic Historian frequently castigates kings for either promoting the worship of Asherah or not doing enough to stop it.[34] There are also mentions of the goddess Astarte in the Deuteronomistic History, most notably the statement that in Solomon's old age, he began to worship the deities of his foreign wives. The prophet Jeremiah excoriates Judahites for following "the Queen of Heaven," prompting God's wrath and the destruction of Jerusalem. By criticizing goddess worship, Jeremiah confirms its existence. Perhaps it is in these biblical condemnations of the worship of a goddess alongside the Israelite God that Paley found inspiration for the "Paroles, Paroles" scene of *Seder-Masochism*. In her telling, God seeks to subjugate the goddess and succeeds ultimately in eliminating her. However, in ancient Israel, there is limited evidence for a female deity worshiped instead of or as superior to YHVH. Surrounding cultures tended to pair supreme male gods with female consorts, and that is likely in Israel as well.

Paley's *Seder-Masochism* is not an accurate representation of what goddess worship in ancient Israel and Judah could or would have looked like. Nor should we expect it to be, because Paley is an artist and not a biblical scholar. It's not reasonable to give Paley a failing grade because she is heavy-handed in her deacide narrative. However, it is reasonable to ask why she goes overboard in her portrayal of a goddess quashed by the Abrahamic God? Why does she repeatedly use the image of a pregnant, laboring goddess? Why does she set such images against a monotheistic Yahwism represented by penises and testicles? Why are all her goddess representations so clearly feminine, and why are the more ambiguously gendered figures attested in antiquity absent?

TERF Battles in Seder-Masochism

Seder-Masochism's perspective on goddess religion and Yahwistic monotheism cannot be understood fully without examining Paley's point of view on

[34] See, for example, 1 Kgs 14:15, 14:23, 15:13, 18:19; 2 Kgs 17:10, 21:7.

transgender issues. In activist parlance, Paley is a TERF—a "trans-exclusionary radical feminist."[35] Paley criticizes what she calls "gender colonialism." She argues that people with male genitalia who "identify" (her scare quotes) as women are trying to colonize the female gender while insisting that they are refugees from masculinity. This refugee/colonizer language draws an analogy with Zionism, which Paley also opposes and sees as European colonialism. In a 2018 blog post, she writes that biology defines womanhood: "Biology is the beginning and end of 'womanhood,' the alpha and the omega. If I wear pants, I'm a woman. If I wear a dress, I'm a woman. If my hair is long or short, I'm a woman. If I take testosterone, I'm a woman. If I cut off my breasts . . . I'm a woman. If I identify as a man, I'm a woman. And if a person has a penis he's a man."[36] Elsewhere in the post, Paley writes that she has become invested in arguing against transgender activists because of her work on *Seder-Masochism*. She describes those who identify as trans women as trying to inhabit womanhood and supplant those who already reside there, just as, she argues, happened when a single male God elbowed out goddesses in antiquity. "God used to be female," she writes. "All of Her attributes were taken over by the male God. Creation, fertility, vegetation, the bringing forth of food, life and death—all that was once the Goddess's is now God's. It's like the male God put on Her clothes, and then 'identified' as Her, and there's no Goddess any more [*sic*]."[37] Reading this makes clearer the meaning of "The Birth of YHWH," where a man splits the goddess in half, dons her clothes, and becomes God-the-father. Paley sees patriarchy as taking over goddesses' creative and sustaining functions and assigning them to a single male God. This portrayal is a perversion of trans experiences. In Paley's formulation, trans women "possess" femininity to achieve greater power, which she conceptualizes as a kind of toxic masculinity—violent, all-encompassing, and oppressive.[38] This is at odds with how trans women describe their experiences.[39] Trans women do not generally aim

[35] Some who have been dubbed TERFs object to the term as a slur and hate speech. See, for example, Meghan Murphy, "'TERF' Isn't Just a Slur, It's Hate Speech," *Feminist Current*, September 21, 2017, https://www.feministcurrent.com/2017/09/21/terf-isnt-slur-hate-speech/. For more on the debate over TERF in academia, see Colleen Flaherty, "Philosophers Object to a Journal's Publication 'TERF,' in Reference to Some Feminists. Is It Really a Slur?" *Inside Higher Ed*, August 29, 2018, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/08/29/philosophers-object-journals-publication-terf-reference-some-feminists-it-really. For her part, Paley does not seem to object to the term, since she uses it to tag trans-related posts on her blog. See also Sara Ahmed's discussion of anti-trans feminists and her refusal to dialogue with them in Sara Ahmed, "An Affinity of Hammers," TSQ 3m nos. 1–2 (2016): 22–34. For more on the term *TERF* and its discontents, see Ruth Pearce, Sonja Erikainen, and Ben Vincent, "TERF Wars: An Introduction," *Sociological Review* 68 no. 4 (2020): 683–84.

[36] Nina Paley, "Gender Colonialism," *Nina Paley* (blog), February 7, 2018, https://blog.ninapaley.com/2018/02/07/gender_colonialism/.

[37] Paley, "Gender Colonialism."

[38] R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

[39] While it is impossible to prove a negative—i.e., that no trans woman thinks of her experience this way—it is worth citing some prominent stories from trans women to show that this is not the norm. See

to possess feminine attributes to achieve hypermasculine power; to suggest this betrays a deep misunderstanding of trans lives.[40]

Paley's arguments suffer from several faults. She insists that her comments are not about transgender individuals but about the "trans movement," ignoring that trans-rights activists are in fact largely trans individuals advocating for their own rights to live as themselves. Her view that the trans-rights movement is a sinister plot by men to colonize women is a paranoid conspiracy theory.[41] Paley conflates sex and gender—which, as decades of research have indicated, do not involve a simple one-to-one mapping of one onto the other—and misses that sex is a complex interplay of biology, society, and politics.[42] She ignores the existence of intersex people.[43] She ignores the existence of gender dysphoria as a condition that can cause significant negative outcomes to patients if not treated.[44] She ignores the existence of people who identify as agender or gender fluid. She ignores the stakes of anti-trans rhetoric, expressing sympathy for the discrimination and physical violence faced by trans people but seemingly not connecting those dangers to the attitudes she supports.[45]

Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 280–304; Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 1 (1994): 237–54; Jennifer Finney Boylan, *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* (2003; repr., New York: Crown, 2013); Joy Ladin, *Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey between Genders* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012); and Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love, and So Much More* (New York: Atria, 2014).

[40] I thank Joseph Marchal for this insight.

[41] See also discourse about assumptions that ciswomen need protection from trans women who are actually men buys into a racialized narrative of the vulnerable, implied-white woman (Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent, "TERF Wars," 680–81).

[42] Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1053–75; Fedwa Malti-Douglas, "Introduction," in *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*, ed. Fedwa Malti-Douglas (Detroit, MI: Macmillan 2007), xiii–xx; and Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent, "TERF Wars," 689.

[43] Iain Morland, "Intersex," *TSQ* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 111–15; Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent, "TERF Wars," 689; María Victoria Carrera-Fernández and Renée DePalma, "Feminism Will Be Trans-Inclusive or It Will Not Be: Why Do Two Cis-Hetero Woman Educators Support Transfeminism?" *Sociological Review* 68, no. 4 (2020): 746–47.

[44] "Gender Dysphoria," in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

[45] As Siobhan M. Kelly writes, "I believe it is necessary that we recognize that feminist religious scholarship is partly responsible for contemporary political rhetorics of safety and exclusion that make my life, and the lives of so many like and unlike me, so much more precarious." They connect feminist rhetoric about trans women forcibly taking something they have no right to with arguments that rapists and other predators will take advantage of trans-inclusive bathrooms to attack vulnerable women ("Feminist Transphobia, Feminist Rhetoric: From Trans-Exclusive Radical Feminism to HB 2 [@theTable: Transcending Transphobia]," *Feminist Studies in Religion*, August 30, 2016, http://www.fsrinc.org/feminist-transphobia-rhetoric/.

The anti-trans rhetoric in Paley's argument stems in part from her uncritical use of some early feminist theology, especially Daly. Daly was the thesis adviser to Janice Raymond, whom she cites often in *Beyond God the Father*.[46] Max Strassfeld teases out the connections between Daly, whose work is still foundational for many doing feminist theology and religious studies, and Raymond, whose work is generally considered transphobic and tends to be used by feminist scholars today only as a counterpoint. Raymond denies the femaleness of trans women, seeing deep psychological pathologies and sometimes nefarious purposes in male-to-female trans people.[47] Daly's innovation was to take Raymond's work and apply it to conceptions of God. In decrying feminists who speak of "the Goddess" or "goddesses" without also shifting their understanding of the divine, Daly wrote, "Thus *The Goddess* can be reduced to a static symbol, a mere replacement for the noun *God*. Such replacement can amount to a 'change' as minimal as a transsexual operation on the patriarchal God." She cited Raymond's thesis that trans women are men undermining the concerns of ciswomen from the inside, and concluded, "A transsexed patriarchal god is still patriarchal and will function (at least in subliminal or subterranean ways) to serve the interests of the fathers, for such a symbol is external to the experienced reality of women and nature."[48] To Daly, and now to Paley, there is a deeper, perhaps metaphysical meaning to womanhood that a change in genital configuration cannot reproduce, as there is a fertility-related profoundness to ancient goddesses that the male-gendered Abrahamic god merely pretends at. There is a real danger to this way of thinking about God. As Strassfeld notes, Daly's "theology of unnaturalness" hurts trans people.[49]

Paley is an atheist. She writes, "Gods and Goddesses are fictional, of course. What's happening now is a continuation of the erasure of the Goddess: the erasure of womanhood itself."[50] This is significant because it suggests that, rather than using TERF rhetoric to support a belief about how God killed the Goddess, Paley is using a male takeover of goddesses as a metaphor to support her anti-trans stance. The creative work of *Seder-Masochism* is playing handmaid to Paley's TERF ideology.

Interestingly, given that Paley's film is situated in a Jewish cultural milieu, she does not list among her sources for further reading perhaps the most important Jewish feminist theologian of the late twentieth century, Judith Plaskow. Plaskow's

[46] Max Strassfeld, "Transing Religious Studies," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 1 (2018): 37–53, esp. 45.

[47] Janice G. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979; repr., New York: Teachers College Press, 1994).

[48] Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, xviii.

[49] Strassfeld, "Transing Religious Studies," 47.

[50] Paley, "Gender Colonialism." Simultaneous atheism and goddess feminism is not unheard of, as Raphael points out (*Introducing Thealogy*, 55). She cites goddess feminist founding figure Naomi Goldenberg's atheism, as articulated in Naomi R. Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon, 1979), 53.

Standing Again at Sinai provided a critique of women's exclusion from traditional Judaism and a reimagining of God and Jewish spirituality that took women into account.[51] In not consulting Plaskow, Paley missed an opportunity to see how feminist and trans theology can collaborate regarding liberation in Jewish spaces. In a 2010 dialogue, Plaskow and Elliot Kukla, a San Francisco rabbi and transgender activist, discussed how feminists and trans activists can together produce an inclusive Jewish theology. Plaskow first expressed hesitation about trans discussions "chang[ing] the subject" from women's oppression, but Kukla opined that they actually continue the conversation. Plaskow ultimately agreed, writing, "Imagining a transgender God builds on the feminist project of recovering the female aspects of God but highlights the shifting nature of the divine gender and the ultimately problematic nature of gender categories."[52] Plaskow and Kukla's dialogue neatly frames the potential tension between feminist and trans theological goals and considers ways in which trans-informed conceptions of the divine may aid feminism as well. This dialogue provides a corrective to Paley's framing of trans rights as necessarily a threat to feminism. As Plaskow concluded, "We can think of God as masculine, feminine, female, male, both, neither, in various combinations, and in terms that have nothing to do with gender, so that through multiplying, we dissolve."[53]

This approach is not restricted to Plaskow and Kukla. Trans theology is happening within and outside of Judaism, in academic circles, among the clergy, and beyond.[54] Rabbi and theologian Julia Watts-Belser writes that embracing a variety of gendered and nongendered metaphors for God emphasizes the enormity of the divine, conveys that gender is an insufficient category for talking about God, and affirms that humans live in a world where gender matters.[55] In another example, this one personal and poignant, trans Jewish scholar Joy Ladin writes, "Even though I have expanded my definition of humanity to include people who, like me, do not fit the terms of binary gender, God seems as queer to me as ever—inhuman, incomprehensible, unlike anything I can say or know."[56] To Ladin, a God beyond gender and human understanding has always seemed

[51] Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1990).

[52] Judith Plaskow and Elliot Kukla, "Remapping the Road from Sinai," in Dzmura, *Balancing on the Mechitza*, 138.

[53] Plaskow and Kukla, "Remapping," 140.

[54] A small sampling: "TransTorah," accessed February 2, 2022, http://transtorah.org/index.html; Tara K. Soughers, *Beyond a Binary God: A Theology for Trans* Allies* (New York: Church, 2018); Deborah Addington, "Transtheology.Org," accessed February 2, 2022, http://www.transtheology.org/index.html; Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2007); and Justin Edward Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2003).

[55] Watts-Belser, "Transing God/Dess," 239.

[56] Joy Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018), 66.

especially relatable and comforting. As Plaskow, Kukla, Watts-Belser, Ladin, and others show, trans theology, like feminist theology before it, offers new possibilities for thinking about divinity and religion. Paley's film, conversely, is a throwback to a time before (some) feminist theologians started listening to what trans experiences can contribute to conceptions of God. *Seder-Masochism* presents a reductive and essentialist picture of Goddess-the-mother defeated by God-the-father.

Art matters. Most laypeople will never read scholarly books or articles about religion in ancient Israel or feminist and trans theology—but they might watch a clever animated film with a rocking soundtrack and an easy-to-understand message. (It seems doubtful that voices protesting Paley's anti-trans opinions are loud enough to make much of a dent in her audience.) The public's ideas of ancient history and the Bible are strongly informed by pop culture: how many people picture *The Ten Commandments*' walls of water when they think about the sea splitting during the Exodus, or the torture-porn of *The Passion of the Christ* when they imagine Jesus's suffering? How many envision a voluptuous, snake-wrapped Eve holding an apple when they read Gen 2 and 3, thanks to the influence of countless paintings, films, and advertisements? Because pop culture is so important in the way the public thinks about history, it is important to call out inaccuracies and misrepresentations when we see them.

Paley is neither a biblical scholar nor a theologian, and we need not demand from her scholarly proficiency. However, when an artist uses scholarship to inform an ostensibly liberationist work that is also deeply exclusionary, it is imperative for the scholarly community to lend our expertise to making sense of the work. Scholars should provide a reality check for the claims the artist makes, engaging deeply with the scholarly literature. We must ask questions about the choices the artist makes, about the types of scholarship she cites and fails to cite, and about the conclusions she draws from the scholarship. Where important work is ignored or faulty conclusions are drawn, it is the scholar's role to point that out.

Informed by her anti-trans stance, Paley has produced a film strongly aligned with a sort of feminist theology that sees a primeval mother goddess displaced or even slain by the monotheistic God. Paley's film may be worth watching for its artistry, its humor, the way Paley ties together patriarchal religion and her relationship with her personal patriarch, and its innovative take on the Exodus story. However, viewers cannot fully understand *Seder-Masochism* and Paley's ideas about goddess religion without examining her deeply problematic trans-exclusionary writing, which is inseparable from her art. As Paley herself has made clear, the beginnings of her anti-trans activism lie in the making of *Seder-Masochism*. Reading about how Paley's TERF ideology and her film developed in tandem brings into focus the film's biological-essentialist emphasis on breasts, genitals, and childbearing and its reliance on an oversimplified view of goddess studies.

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