

Course Code: THEO03214/5951

Course Title: Special Topics in Biblical Studies II: Ancient Goddesses

Course Description

The course will examine how ancient cultures (Egypt, Mesopotamia, Ancient Israel and beyond) conceived of the feminine divine, through close readings of primary sources (myths, hymns, and prayers) and examinations of iconographic evidence (statues, plaques, figurines). While the roles of specific goddesses and their spheres of influence will be examined, the class will engage with issues of gender and sexuality (addressing femininity and masculinity, fertility, virginity, gender violence), and the debates between traditional scholarly approaches and the so-called "goddess movement." A comparative look into contemporary religious contexts will also be offered.

Learning Outcomes

Expected learning outcomes of the class are awareness of the explicit and implicit complexities of the notion of "feminine divine" and critical understanding of the broad issues it raises in scholarship and modern debates about gender constructions as they relate to divine and human ontologies. Through the readings of primary sources and secondary literature, and exploring linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts it is expected that students will be able to engage critically, constructively, and intersectionally about the relationship between social context, history, and religion. Students will also be expected to develop a critical and constructive competence with the academic study of religion and reflect constructively on their personal religious formation.

Course Components

The course will focus on primary texts in English translation, and selected secondary readings, which will provide a context to the material and offer an overview of how scholarship has engaged this topic. Students are expected to have read the required materials in advance of the class and demonstrate a critical attitude towards the readings in light of the discussions and the primary sources.

The class will be in form of a seminar, with a lecture introduction followed by class discussion. Given that the classroom discussion is an essential and integral part of this class, class attendance and participation are mandatory, and unexcused/recurring absences and/or tardiness will result in lowered grades. A discussion forum will be set up for weekly engagement with the readings. Students are required to post on the weekly readings prior to each class.

Course Syllabus

Topic	Contents/ fundamental concepts
<i>Questions and Debates</i>	Gender and the feminine divine; Academic debates and Goddess movements; Monotheism and Polytheism.
<i>The “Mother Goddess”</i>	The myth of the “Mother Goddess” in archeology and public discourse; who “owns” the goddesses?
<i>Goddesses and Creation</i>	Creation, procreation, and the feminine divine.
<i>Egyptian Goddesses</i>	Introduction to the Egyptian pantheon and key Egyptian Goddesses
<i>Isis</i>	The complexity of Isis through history.
<i>Mesopotamian Goddesses</i>	Introduction to Mesopotamian religions; Sumero-Akkadian syncretism; Inanna-Ishtar.
<i>Mesopotamian Goddesses and the Netherworld</i>	The concept of afterlife in Mesopotamian religion, and connections with the biblical Sheol; Ereshkigal, Ishtar, and sex and power in the Netherworld.
<i>Goddesses in Israel and the Levant I</i>	Introduction to the Canaanite pantheon; Anat.
<i>Goddesses in Israel and the Levant II</i>	Introduction to the Israelite Pantheon; Asherah
<i>Queens of Heaven</i>	The Queen of Heaven in Jeremiah and other “Queens of Heaven;” Goddesses and royal power.
<i>Goddesses and Cultic Practices</i>	Issues of genders and the Goddesses’ cultic practitioners; scholarly debates
<i>A comparative look: Greek Goddesses</i>	A look at Greek Goddesses in the Mediterranean context; critique of Western approaches to Greek Religion;

Assessment

The weekly discussion board assignments will contribute 30% of the grade. Class attendance and participation contribute together 20% to the final grade. A 15 pages final paper (40% of the final grade) on a specific topic chosen by each student and approved by the teacher is also required (due date TBD). Finally, students are required to offer a 10-minute presentation (10% of the grade) to the rest of the classroom. Presentations will occur on June 24.

Grading Criteria for Written Assignments (Papers)

A Excellent understanding of the assigned materials and class discussion; sound arguments and organization; logical structure and clear and grammatical sentences, with an original and well supported thesis.

A- Very good understanding of the assigned materials and class discussion; good arguments and organization; logical structure and clear and grammatical sentences, with a sound and well supported thesis.

B+ Solid understanding of the assigned materials and class discussion; acceptable arguments and organization; although logically structured, not always written with clear sentences; the thesis is not completely supported.

B Basic understanding of the assigned materials and class discussion; acceptable arguments and organization; not always logically structured or written with clear sentences; the thesis is not as clear as desired, and not well supported.

B- Regardless of an overall sense that the writer has read the assigned material, the comprehension is somewhat lacking; ambiguous arguments and lack of organization; missing logical transitions; awkward and unclear sentences; unclear thesis.

C+/- Confusion about the assigned materials and class discussion; weak and fuzzy arguments; disorganized and poorly written; ideas are presented but the writer needs help in conveying them to others; thesis is missing or unintelligible.

D-F Serious misreadings (or lack of reading) of the assigned materials; major problems with arguments, organization, and logical structure; incomplete or badly ungrammatical sentences; no thesis.

Selected Online Resources

[AWOL](#) (Ancient World Online)

[CDLI](#) (Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative)

[ETANA](#) (Electronic Tools and Ancient Near Eastern Archives)

[ETSCL](#) (Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature)

[OEB](#) (Online Egyptological Bibliography)

[ORACC](#) (Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus)

Selected References for Ancient Near Eastern Texts (Primary Sources)

William B. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (eds.), *The Context of Scripture* (Leiden: Brill, 2003)

Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* 3 Vols. (University of California Press 2006)

Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (CDL Press 2005)

Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps that once...: Sumerian poetry in translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987)

Selected Bibliography (required readings will be listed in the weekly assignments and posted in Blackboard)

Julia M. Asher-Greve and Joan Goodnick Westenholz, [*Goddesses in Context: On Divine Powers, Roles, Relationships and Gender in Mesopotamian Textual and Visual Sources*](#)

OBO 259 (Friburg/Göttingen: Academic Press/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013)

Elisabeth Benard and Beverly Moon (eds.), *Goddesses Who Rule* (Oxford: University Press, 2000)

Tilde Binger *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit, Israel and the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1997)

Izak Cornelius, *The Many faces of the Goddess: the iconography of the Syro-Palestinian goddesses Anat, Astarte, Qedeshet, and Asherah c. 1500-1000* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004)

Douglas R. Frayne al. (eds.) *A Handbook of Gods and Goddesses the Ancient Near East: Three Thousand Deities of Anatolia, Syria, Israel, Sumer, Babylonia, Assyria, and Elam* (University Park; PSU 2021)

Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: women, culture, and the biblical transformation of pagan myth* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992)

Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris (eds.), *Ancient Goddesses: The Myths and the Evidence* (London: British Museum Press, 1998)

Judith Hadley *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (Cambridge: University Press, 2000)

Larry W. Hurtado (ed.) *Goddesses in Religion and Modern Debate* (Scholars Press: Atlanta 1990)

Othmar Keel, *Goddesses and trees, new moon and Yahweh: ancient Near Eastern art and the Hebrew Bible* / Othmar Keel. Sheffield: Academic Press, 1998

Emilie Kutash, *Goddesses in Myth and Cultural Memory* (London: Bloomsbury 2021)

Dvora, Lederman-Daniely, *Sarai: Is She the Goddess of Ancient Israel?* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2021)

Barbara S. Lesko, *The Great Goddesses of Egypt* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999) *available electronically*

Rosemary Ruether Radford, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: a Western religious history* (Berkeley; University of California Press 2005)

CLASS SCHEDULE and READING ASSIGNMENTS

May 15 (Mon)

Introduction

May 17 (Wed)

Questions and Debates

Ancient Goddesses, 6-21; *Goddesses in Context*, 15-38; *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, VII-XI, 1-13; *Goddesses Who Rule*, 1-13; *Goddesses in Myth and Cultural Memory*, 10-23; Jo Ann Hackett “Can a Sexist Model Liberate Us? Ancient Near Eastern “Fertility” Goddesses” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (1989) 65-76; Meret Fehlmann “Ancient Goddesses for Modern Times or New Goddesses from Ancient Times?” *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 8/2 (2018) 155-181;

May 22 (Mon)

The “Mother Goddess”

Ancient Goddesses, 113-132; *Goddesses and the Divine Femininity*, 13-40; Anne Barstow, “The Uses of Archeology for Women's History: James Mellaart's Work on the Neolithic Goddess at Catal Huyuk” *Feminist Studies* 4/3 (1978) 7-18; Kathryn Rountree “Archaeologists and Goddess Feminists at Çatalhöyük: An Experiment in Multivocality” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 23/2 (2007) 7-26

May 24 (Wed)

Goddesses and Creation

Primary Texts: *Context of Scripture* 5-34; 390-403; 450-453.

BM Blog: <https://blog.britishmuseum.org/creation-narratives-and-feminine-power/>

The Great Goddesses of Egypt, 45-63; W.G. Lambert, “Mesopotamian Creation Stories” in Geller – Schipper (eds.), *Imagining Creation* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008) 15-59; Gwendolyn Leick, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature* (Routledge 1994) 11-20;

May 29 (Mon) No Class

May 31 (Wed)

Egyptian Goddesses

Ancient Goddesses, 98-112; *The Great Goddesses of Egypt*, 22-44; 64-80; 81-154

Alleyn Diesel Felines and Female Divinities: The Association of Cats with Goddesses, *Ancient and Contemporary Journal for the Study of Religion*, 21/1 (2008): 71-94

June 2 (Fri)

Isis

The Great Goddesses of Egypt, 155-204; Jennifer Williams, “From Aset to Jesus: The History of the Goddess Aset in Ancient Kemet From Circa 3000 BCE Until the Removal of Feminine Salvation Circa 400 CE” *Journal of Black Studies* 45/2 (2014): 102-124; Deborah Sweeney, Gender and Conversational Tactics in "The Contendings of Horus and Seth" *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 88 (2002) 141-162

June 5 (Mon)

Mesopotamian Goddesses

Primary Sources: Sumerian Literary Texts: [“The Lady of the Great Heart,”](#) [“Exaltation of Inanna,”](#) [“Inanna and Dumuzi A, B, C;”](#) Akkadian Literary Texts: Hymns and Prayers to Ishtar: *Before the Muses*, 85-106; 592-610, 673-677

Rivkah Harris, "Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites" *History of Religions* 30/3 (1991) 261-278; Paul Thomas, “Re-Imagining Inanna: The Gendered Reappropriation of the Ancient Goddess in Modern Goddess Worship” *The Pomegranate* 6/1 (2004): 53-69; Barbara N. Porter “Ishtar of Ninive and her Collaborator, Ishtar of Arbela, in the Reign of Assurbanipal” *Iraq* 66 (2004) 41-44; Eiko Matsushima, “Ishtar and Other Goddesses of the So-Called “Scared Marriage” in Ancient Mesopotamia” in David T. Sugimoto (ed.) *The Transformation of a Goddess: Ishtar – Astarte – Aphrodite* OBO 263 (Fribourg/Göttingen: Academic Press/Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014) 1-14.

June 7 (Wed)

Mesopotamian Goddesses and the Netherworld More Sumerian Literary Texts: [“Inanna’s Descent to the Netherworld;”](#) Akkadian Literary Texts: “Descent of Ishtar into the Netherworld” (Foster 498-505) “Nergal and Ereshkigal” (Foster 506-523)

Neal H. Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death: approaches to ancient Near Eastern myth* (Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2001) 127-182; Alhena Gadotti Never Truly Hers: Ereškigal's Dowry and the Rulership of the Netherworld” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 1-16; Caitlín E. Barrett “Was Dust Their Food and Clay Their Bread? Grave Goods, the Mesopotamian Afterlife, and the Liminal Role of Inana/Ishtar” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 7 (2007) 7-65

June 9 (Fri) (Final Project Topic Due)

Goddesses in Israel and the Levant I

Peggy L. Day “Ugarit’s ‘Mistress of Animals’” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 51 (1992) 181-190; Neal H. Walls, *The Goddess Anat in Ugaritic Myth* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992) 77-159; Kelly J. Murphy, “Myth, Reality, and the Goddess Anat” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 41 (2009) 525-541

June 12 (Mon)

Goddesses in Israel and the Levant II

Selected Biblical Passages

Peggy L. Day, “Hebrew Bible Goddesses and Modern Feminist Scholarship” *Religion Compass* 6/6 (2012) 298-308; Scott Noegel “The Women of Asherah: Weaving Wickedness in 2 Kings 23:7” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 83/2 (2021): 208-219; Ramona Wanlass, "The goddess, syncretism, and patriarchy: evolution and extinction of the goddess during the creation of patriarchy in Ancient Israel" *Women in Judaism* 8/2 (2011) 1-16; Sung Jin Park “The Cultic Identity of Asherah in Deuteronomistic Ideology of Israel” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 123 (2011) 553-564; Susan Ackerman “Asherah: The West Semitic Goddess of Spinning and Weaving?” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 67/1 (2008) 1-29

June 14 (Wed)

Queens of Heaven

Goddesses Who Rule, 69-81 and 165-180; *Ancient Goddesses* 83-97; Susan Ackerman ““And the Women Knead Dough’: The Worship of the Queen of Heaven in Sixth Century Judah” in Bach

(ed.) *Women in the Hebrew Bible: a Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998) 21-32; David T. Sugimoto, “The Judean Pillar Figurines and the “Queen of Heaven”” in David T. Sugimoto (ed.) *The Transformation of a Goddess: Ishtar – Astarte – Aphrodite* OBO 263 (Fribourg/Göttingen: Academic Press/ Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014) 141-166; Rosemary Ruether Radford, *Mary: the Feminine Face of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1977), 11-18

June 19 (Mon)

Goddesses and Cultic Practices

The Great Goddesses of Egypt, 203-257; Julia Assante “Bad Girls and Kinky Boys? The modern Prostituting of Ishtar, Her clergy and Her cults” in Tanya S. Sheer (ed.) *Tempelprostitution im Altertum: Fakten und Fiktionen* (Berlin: Verlag Antike 2009) 23-54; Joan G. Westenholz, “Tamar, Qēdēšā, Qadištu, and Sacred Prostitution in Mesopotamia” *Harvard Theological Review* 82/3 (1989) 245-265; Will Roscoe, “Priests of the Goddess: Gender Transgression in Ancient Religion” *History of Religions* 35/3 (1996) 195-230

June 21 (Wed)

A comparative look: Greek Goddesses

Primary Sources: William D. Furley, *Greek Hymns: Selected Cult Songs from the Archaic to the Hellenistic Period* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001) 116-118, 163-166, 171-176, 178-179, 214-227, 376-378; Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome. A Sourcebook in Translation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1992) 278-285. *Goddesses in Myth and Cultural Memory*, 23-42; Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (New York: Schocken 1995) 1-15; Stephanie Budin “A Reconsideration of the Aphrodite-Ashtart Syncretism” *Numen* 51/2 (2004) 95-145

June 24 (Sat)

Students Presentations

Contact Information

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