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NOTES ON METAMORPHOSES OF MYTHIC FIGURES IN RELIGIOUS STORYTELLING

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Reuven Kiperwasser and Serge Ruzer

Abstract

The imagined universe of the people of Late Antiquity was heavily populated by gods. Even the broader philosophical trends and monotheistic foundation of Judaism and Christianity had failed to entirely diminish their power. How then did Jews and Christians cope with such a backdrop presence of "other gods"? Earlier research suggested that Jewish attitudes, which found their way into early Christian sources as well, fluctuate between accommodation and rejection. Following analysis of Jewish and Christian Late Antique literary traditions dealing with gods, and more specifically, goddesses, this essay aims to demonstrate that such "fluctuation" resulted – in addition to the extreme positions – in a variety of middle of the road strategies. These strategies point to a keen harmonizing impulse to absorb—via domestication—motifs with mythic religious vitality from the broader cultural repository.

Keywords

Judaism; Christianity; goddesses; sea goddesses; heavenly lady; Isis; Osiris; Apis

Introduction

The imagined universe of the people of Late Antiquity was heavily populated by gods. It has been argued that from ancient times and by the first century CE the perception that every *ethnos* had its patron god was part and parcel of peoples' outlook. It was shared by Jews, who, as showed by Paula Fredriksen, demonstrated a variety of modes of coping with the presence of foreign gods, which generally speaking included one way or another the insistence on an outstanding idea that their national god was also the ruler of the universe, the only one worthy of their worship.[1] Moreover, the very terms such as "paganism," "polytheism," and even "pagan monotheism" defy clarity, *inter alia*, because the concepts

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[1] Paula Fredriksen, "Philo, Herod, and Paul, and the Many Gods: Ancient Jewish 'Monotheism'," *Harvard Theological Review* 115 (2022): 23–45; https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816022000049

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they are supposed to represent "did not have exact counterparts in antiquity."[2] On top of it, in that period they had a pejorative flavour, which should be avoided in today's scholarly discourse. However, it is impossible to completely evade them.[3]

Paul characteristically exported this Jewish trend to the Gentiles, demanding from those of them who joined the Jesus movement to abandon the allegiance to the gods of their fathers.[4] However, even the broader philosophical trends and monotheistic foundation of Judaism and Christianity combined had failed to entirely expel the "other gods" from the mythological thought-world of Jews and Christians.[5] How then did they cope with those deities' backdrop presence? This question, of course, reaches back to ancient times; for example, one might consider the tradition reflected in Exodus 15:11 ("Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?"). And when the later translator of Ps 95:5 into Greek rendered "gods (אלים)" as *daimonia*, he highlighted their secondary status. We see this strategy again in 1 Cor 8:5-6, where Paul acknowledges to his gentile audience the existence of "many gods," but insists on the God of Israel being the sole deity deserving of devotion.

Nor is the existence of foreign gods later denied by either Jews or Christians, although their power and influence are contested, and there is a tendency to regard them as evil demons.[6] However, sometimes they are rather neutrally allowed into the inner stratum of the religious lore, as in the case of the rabbinic appropriation of Sirens, as was showed by Galit Hasan-Rokem.[7] Paula Fredriksen and Oded Irshai suggest in this context that Jewish attitudes, which found their way into early Christian sources as well, fluctuate between accommodation and rejection.[8] The following analysis of Jewish and Christian Late Antique literary traditions engaging gods aims to demonstrate that such "fluctuation" resulted in a variety of middle-of-the-road positions. The sources that have come to our attention characteristically deal with female deities, who seem to have retained their vital presence in the thought world of our narrators, whereas the male ones have been suppressed and incorporated into the masculine image of God of Israel. [9]

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[2] See, for example, Raffaella Cribiore, *Libanius the Sophist: Rhetoric, Reality and Religion in the Fourth Century* (Ithaka, NY, Cornell University Press, 2013), 7; https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9780801452079.001.0001

[3] Cribiore, *ibid*.

[4] Paula Fredriksen, *Paul, the Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2017), 13-14, 112, https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300225884.001.0001; "Philo, Herod, and Paul," 37-44.

[5] The expression "mythological thought-world" is here used in accordance with the broadly accepted understanding of *myth* as the culture-and-society-conditioned mental blocks providing the matrix of both thinking and narrating. See the wonderful – and characteristically vague – analogy with composing music, suggested by Claude Lévi Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (London: Plon, 1970), 17.

[6] See, e.g., Tertullian, *Ad Scapulam,* 2; Reuven Kiperwasser. "Rabba bar Bar Channa's Voyages," *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 22 (2008): 215–242, esp. 231 n. 60; David Frankfurter, "The Threat of Headless Beings: Constructing the Demonic in Christian Egypt," in *Fairies, Demons and Nature Spirits: "Small Gods" at the Margins of Christendom*, ed. Michael Ostling (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 57-78. And recently, Moshe Simon-Shoshan, "Did the Rabbis Believe in Agreus Pan? Rabbinic Relationships with Roman Power, Culture, and Religion in Genesis Rabbah 63," *Harvard Theological Review* 111 (2018): 425–450; https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816018000184; Geoffrey Herman, "Idolatry, God(s), and Demons among the Jews of Sasanian Babylonia," *Expressions of Sceptical Topoi in (Late) Antique Judaism*, ed. Reuven Kiperwasser and Geoffrey Herman (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 85-99; https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110671483-006

[7] Galit Hasan-Rokem, "Leviticus Rabbah 16, 1 – Odysseus and the Sirens in the Beit Leontis Mosaic from Beit She'an," in *Talmuda de-Eretz Israel*: *Archaeology and the Rabbis in Late Antique Palestine* 2014), 159-190, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614512875.159. Cf. the appropriation of the *fallobates* columns in the praxis of early Christian ascetics, David T. M. Frankfurter, "Stylites and Phallobates: Pillar Religions in Late Antique Syria," *Vigiliae Christianae* 44 (1990): 168-198, https://doi.org/10.1163/157007290X00261.

Our main case studies come from Mesopotamian provenance,[10] a terrestrial region far removed from the sea – one from the Babylonian Talmud discussed vis-à-vis its Palestinian precedent, and two Syriac Christian stories. Yet the inhabitants of those inland areas too were enthralled by the sea and ready to adopt its fantastical image as a vast, threatening space brimming with mysterious treasures and astounding creatures – monsters and gods. Whereas the other items on this wondrous aquatic menu have been already addressed in scholarship,[11] sea goddesses will be the focus of this study, which highlights the strategies for adapting an apparently mythological motif involving them.

Our inquiry, addressing a limited number of previously understudied cases, exemplifies some characteristic strategies of coping with sea goddesses' presence and hopefully charts the course for further investigation. Of course, a comprehensive review of various deities' incorporation into Jewsh and Christian sources remains a desideratum, whereas our study is but an initial inroad in that direction. Despite an obvious chronological disparity of our sources, we discern here a possibility of their synchronic reading as representing a variety of such strategies of cultural adaptation and thus a continuity in the formation of Late Antique ideas. The investigation will go beyond the classical narratology, interested mainly in the poetics of narrative, to an interdisciplinary approach, focusing on the changing forms and functions of narrative patterns and the dialogical negotiation of meanings pointing to issues of cultural context.[12]

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[8] Paula Fredriksen and Oded Irshai, "Include Me Out: Tertullian, the Rabbis, and the Graeco-Roman City," in *Identité à travers l'éthique: Nouvelles perspectives sur la formation des identités collectives dans le monde gréco-romain*, ed. Katell Berthelot, Ron Naiwald, and Daniel Stökl ben Ezra (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 117-132; https://doi.org/10.1484/m.behe-eb.4.00708.

[9] Another model of suppression based on much more ancient materials – this time, of female deities by the male ones – was discussed in Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Macmillan, Free Press, 1992). See also Therese Rodin, *The World of the Sumerian Mother Goddess: An Interpretation of Her Myth* (Upsala: Upsala Universität, 2014).

[10] With some Palestinian traditions appropriated in the Babylonian Talmud providing a backdrop only.

[11] See, for example, Reuven Kiperwasser and Serge Ruzer, "Aramaic Stories of Wandering in the High Seas of Late Antiquity," in *New Approaches to Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*. Das Mittelalter. Perspektiven mediävistischer Forschung / Beihefte 18, ed. Mateusz Fafinski and Jakob Riemenschneider (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2022), 161-177; https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.921

[12] Ansgar Nünning, "Narratology or Narratologies? Taking Stock of Recent Developments, Critique and Modest Proposals for Future Usages of the Term," in *What Is Narratology? Questions and Answers Regarding the Status of a Theory*, ed. Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003), 243–246, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110202069.239.

Isis among Rabbis

Isis, who had originated as an Egyptian deity, was embraced in Greco-Roman culture, where she retained her divine position, acquiring new functions as well, i*nter alia*, as the Mistress of the Sea.[13] The Greco-Roman version of her cult was practiced in Roman Palestine, making it possible that the rabbis there had some exposure to it, though it is unclear if they were aware of her status as the sea goddess. In the urban context, Greco-Roman deities usually became integrated in the life of the *polis*, and "Once Jews moved into the Hellenistic city—itself a pagan religious institution—foreign gods took on a higher cultural tone … This was simple prudence: gods superintended the well-being of their cities."[14] The surviving inscriptions duly attest to that Jewish veneration of foreign deities.[15]

The archeological remnants of worship were also found in the Land of Israel, though in places far removed from the rabbinic Galilee, such as Raphia Gasa and Ashkelon.[16] Amulets with Isis and her representations as a breast-feeding mother (*Isis lactans*) were common in Late Antiquity, and there are numerous depictions and cameos from the Roman era portraying Isis and Serapis together.[17] These, as we will see below, were echoed in rabbinic literature. Our first case of rabbinic response strategy comes from a 3rd-century tradition attested in Tosefta (*t. Avodah Zarah* 5.1):[18]

And the sages say: Only the following [images] are forbidden: those holding scepter or discus or bird or sword, with crown or ring .... those are forbidden. And concerning utilitarian vessels used for hot	וחכמ' אומ' אין אסור אלא שיש בו מקל או כדור או צפור סייף עטרת וטבעת צלם ונחש על המכובדין כגון השיריים והנזמים וקטלאות וטבעות הרי אילו אסורות ועל הבזויין כגון היורות מחמי חמין הטיגנין והקוקמסין והספלין והסדינין והמטבע הרי אילו מותרין.

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[13] See below.

[14] Fredriksen, "Philo, Herod, and Paul, and Their Many Gods," 28.

[15] See five illuminating examples quoted by Paula Fredriksen (*ibid*., 28 n. 13).

[16] Nicole Belayche, "Les dévotions à Isis et Sérapis dans la Judée-Palestine Romaine," in *Nile into Tiber; Egypt in the Roman World. Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference of Isis Studies, Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University, May 11-14, 2005*, ed. Laurent Bricault, Miguel John Versluys and Paul G. P. Meyboom (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 448-469; https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004154209.i-562.101; Jodi Magness, "The Cults of Isis and Kore at Samaria-Sebaste in the Hellenistic and Roman periods," *Harvard Theological Review* 94 (2001): 157-77; https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816001029029.

[17] Laurent Bricault, *Isis Pelagia: Images, Names and Cults of a Goddess of the Seas* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 190; translated from the French by Gil H. Renberg; Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2019), 270-276 ; https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004413900; Reinhold Merkelbach, *Isis regina-Zeus Sarapis: die griechisch-ägyptische Religion* nach den Quellen dargestellt (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1995), 156-158, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110955675

[18] Ed. Zukermandel 2004, p. 468. See Rivka Ulmer, "The Egyptian Gods in Midrashic Texts," *The Harvard Theological Review* 103 (2010): 181-204; https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816010000544.

liquids and … (with such images), they are permitted. However, if one finds a ring with the image of sun or moon, dragon,[19] he should bring it (and hide) to the Dead Sea. This also applies to the images of the Nursing One and Serapis.	מצא טבעת ועליה צורת חמה צורת לבנה צורת דרקון יוליך לים המלח ואף דמות מניקן וסרפס.

This passage provides a 3rd-century CE testimony for the rabbis' acquaintance with the Greco-Roman veneration of Isis, according to which she was associated with her spouse Serapis and frequently portrayed as nursing her son, Horus.[20] This allowed designating her as just the "Nursing One (מניקן)".[21] The whole pericope establishes the list of forbidden idolatrous images, taking care to outline special circumstances when they may be used. Images of sun and moon should be hidden in the desert and, as emphasized at the end, the same goes for the images of Isis and Serapis.

The brief discussion of Tosefta introduces a later evidence of the rabbinic acquaintance with Isis, found in the Babylonian Talmud. In the amoraic tradition in question, which can be reasonably dated to 5th century, R. Yehudah offers the following explication of the tradition attested in the Tosefta (*b. Avodah Zarah* 43a):

This also applies to the images of the Nursing One and *Sar Apis*. Why is she called Nursing One? The reason is that she is in fact Eve who nurses the whole world. And *Sar Apis* is in fact Joseph, the ruler who brought peace to the whole world. He	דתניא, רבי יהודה מוסיף: אף דמות מניקה וסר אפיס, מניקה - על שם חוה שמניקה כל העולם כולו, סר אפיס - על שם יוסף שסר ומפיס את כל העולם כולו; והוא דנקיט גריוא וקא כייל, והיא דנקטא בן וקא מניקה.

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[19] Margarete Schlüter, *'Deraqôn' und Götzendienst* (Judentum und Umwelt 4; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1982), 126-127.

[20] See discussion in Michael Sachs, *Beiträge zur Sprach- und Altertumsforschung: aus jüdischen Quellen*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Veit, 1852-54), vol. 2, 99. According to Moritz Güdemann, "Mythenmischung in der Hagada," *Monatsschrift für die Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums* 5 (1876): 177-195; 6 (1876): 225-23 I; 7 (1876): 255-61, the Tosefta and the Bavli clearly refer to a representation of lsis holding Horus. See also Heinrich Blaufuss, *Götter, Bilder und Symbole nach den Traktaten iiber fremden Dienst (Aboda Zara) in Mi schna, Tosefta, Jerusalemer und Babylonischem Talmud* (Nuremberg: Stich, 1910), 19; Samuel Krauss, "Ägyptische und syrische Götternamen im Talmud," in *Semitic Studies in Memory of Rev. Dr. Alexander Kohut*, ed. George A. Kohut (Berlin: Calvary, 1897), 346; Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: ITS, 1962), 136- 38.

[21] Another combination of Isis with Agape in an oath formula is mentioned in Samuel Krauss, *Griechische und lateinische Lehnwörter im Talmud, Midrasch und Targum*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Calvary, 1898) 2:182; J. Gwyn Griffiths, "Isis and Agape," *Classical Philology* 80 (1985): 139-141, https://doi.org/10.1086/366913. The question why her name was dropped while that of her partner retained remains open. But see Tal Ilan, "Biblical Women's Names in the Apocryphal Traditions," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 11 (1993), 3-67; https://doi.org/10.1177/095182079300001101.

takes the measure and divides properly,
while she takes the suckling and
breastfeeds him.

Unlike the Tosefta, which leaves no doubt about the idolatrous foreignness of those images, the later tradition, far from rejecting them as lifeless idols,[22] judaizes them, suggesting that the Nursing One was only mistakenly identified as Isis, whereas in fact she is the biblical Eve.[23] In addition, Serapis' name undergoes an interesting metamorphosis, becoming interpreted as a merging of two Jewish Aramaic words, which allows his identification with Joseph. *Sar* (סר) stands now for ruler and *apis* is presented as pointing to the verb *mep(h)is*, with its presumed meaning of "providing for." In fact, identifying Serapis with Joseph was a common theme in early Jewish and Christian literatures.[24]

It is worth mentioning that this parsing of Serapis' name may parallel a mythopoetic development. As is well known, Serapis represents a Greco-Roman collation of two Egyptian mythological figures, Osiris and Apis. The theriomorphic representation of Apis as a mighty bull might also suggest a link to Joseph, whose description in Gen 49:22 has been routinely understood as comparing him to a bull.[25]

The above phenomenon exemplifies a distinct strategy of domesticating foreign deities, most prominently Isis, who thanks to her identification with Eve, partially retains her elevated status. The transformation allows her to remain an enormously positive character if not as a goddess than as the "breast-feeder of the world," and secures her foundational status in rabbinic mythmaking. It is worthwhile to note that the initial context of halakhic discussion ignores Isis' wondrous sea-goddess magnitude, downsizing her to a representation in a miniature figurine as object of worship (see above).

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[22] Following such biblical passages as, e.g. Ps 115:4-8; 135:15-18; Jer 10:4.

[23] Cf. the much earlier strategy of Artapanus (2nd century BCE), who in *Concerning the Jews*, identified the Egyptian Thoth/Hermes with Moses (according to Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.27.6).

[24] Jakob Horovitz*, Die Josephserzählung (*Frankfurt am Main: Kauffmann*,* 1921), 120-128; Gerard Mussies, "The lnterpretatio Judaica of Serapis," in *Studies in Hellenistic Religions*. ed. M. J. Vermaseren (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 189-214, esp. 212; Moritz Güdemann, Mythenmischung in der Haggada," in *Monatsschrift f. Geschichte u. Wissenschaft d. Judenthums*, 25.5-7 (1876): 177-195; 225-231; 255-261; Lieberman, *Hellenism,* 138 n. 87. Midrashic references to Osiris in the Horus and Osiris myths have little in common with Osiris-Apis, i.e., Serapis. The equivalence of Joseph and Serapis is in all likelihood based upon Manetho's etymology of Osarsyph (Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 26.26). Mussies, "Interpretatio Judaica," 193, states that this identification goes back at least to the second century B.C.E. Giuseppe Veltri, *Eine Tora für den König Talmai. Untersuchungen zum Übersetzungsverständnis in der jüdischhellenistischen und rabbinischen Literatur* (TSAJ 41; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 69, https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-158781-8. It mentions that the identification of Serapis with Joseph in *b. 'Avod. Zar.* 43a could have derived from the identification of Joseph with a bull since Serapis was a designation of the divine Apis. See also Ulmer, "The Egyptian Gods in Midrashic Texts," 195 n. 68. These ideas could circulate widely and be known to the rabbis even without direct exposure to such literary sources as Josephus or Manetho.

[25] *Gen. Rab*. 86.3, Theodor-Albeck p. 1054.

Sea-Goddesses as Heavenly Lady

Leaving the amoraic traditions in the Babylonian Talmud, we turn to a roughly contemporaneous Christian evidence found in the story from the *Life of Barsauma*—probably a late 5th century composition, written in Syriac (a dialect of Eastern Aramaic)—which relates to events of the early 5th century.[26] According to the *Vita*, Barsauma may have been born in the village of Beth Awton in the district of Samosata around 384 CE and probably died on 1 February 456, in his monastery south-east of Melitene. The *Vita* was composed by Barsauma's disciple Samuel, shortly after the death of his master. Andrew Palmer suggested recently that the text could be dated as early as 456.[27] The protagonist here is one of the so-called "wandering monks" and, consequently, this very long composition contains chains of travel stories, some of them sea voyages awash with miracles and adventures.

The Syriac Christian texts may be plausibly compared with the rabbinic tradition addressed above. First, they share the Aramaic-Syriac language of narration,[28] which indicates a cultural proximity. Second, there is a geographical proximity, as they were all produced by either rabbinic or Christian storytellers residing in Mesopotamia, a terrestrial region far from the sea. As the following Christian evidence indicates the inhabitants of those inland areas embraced existing mythological models of the sea. To these one may add that the two communities lived in the shadow of the Iranian cultural presence.[29]

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[26] See Aryeh Kofsky and Serge Ruzer with Reuven Kiperwasser, *Reshaping Identities in Late Antique Syria-Mesopotamia. Christian and Jewish Hermeneutics and Narrative Strategies* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2016), 181-216; https://doi.org/10.31826/9781463236977. For the Syriac text of the *Vita*, see *Life of Barsauma*, ed. Andrew Palmer (forthcoming, henceforth *Vita*). Thanks are due to Andrew Palmer for generously sharing the text, and to Johannes Hahn for first drawing our attention to this project of publishing the new full edition of the *Vita*. For an earlier edition, see François Nau, "Résumé de Monographies Syriaques," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 18 (1913): 270–276, 379–389; 19 (1914): 113–134, 278–289. See also François Nau, "Deux épisodes de l'histoire de la Vie de Barsauma le Syrien," *Revue des Études Juives* 83–84 (1927): 194–199.

[27] See Andrew Palmer, "A Tale of Two Synods. The Archimandrite Barsumas at Ephesus in 449 and at Chalcedon in 451," *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 66 (2014): 39. Some doubts concerning the identification of the author were also expressed, see Ernest Honigmann, "Le Barsauma historique et la vie syriaque de Barsauma," in idem, *Le couvent de Barsauma et le patriarcat jacobite d'Antioche et de Syrie*, CSCO 146 (Louvain: Peeters, 1954), 11, who dated the text to the second half of the sixth century, and discerned there a Monophysite provenance (ibid., 6–23). François Nau, "Résumé de Monographies Syriaques," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 18 (1913): 270–276.

[28] It is generally supposed that we are dealing here with two related dialects, Jewish Babylonian Aramaic and Christian Syriac—another branch of Eastern Aramaic. However, how exactly to understand Syriac's relationship to other Late Aramaic dialects, inter alia to the Western Aramaic, is still debated; see Aaron M. Butts, "The Classical Syriac Language," in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King (New York: Routledge, 2019), 224–225; https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315708195-15.

[29] The shared Iranian cultural background was recently elaborated upon in Geoffrey Herman and Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, "Introduction," in *The Aggada of the Bavli and Its Cultural World*, ed. Geoffrey Herman and Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (Brown Judaic Studies; Providence, RI: SBL Press, 2018), xii–xvii; https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv43vr7b.4. The Sasanian-Persian context, had already attracted the attention of

The next passage may be viewed as an independent story unit in the account of Barsauma's *Vita* (78.3):

> [Threatened by a storm] the hero's disciples were weeping, flat on their faces at his feet. Then one of these same brethren looked up to heaven and saw what looked like a woman wearing purple (ܕܡܘܬܐ ܕܐܢܬܬܐ ܕܠܒܫܐ ܐܪ̈ܓܘܢܐ). She flew down and when she was close to the ship (ܘܦܪܚܐ ܗܘܬ ܒܐܐܪ ܘܢܚܬܐ ܨܝܕܗ ܕܐܠܦܐ) she called out to them: "Give the glory to God and you shall step out of the sea safe and sound (ܘܒܫܠܡܐ ܘܢܦܩܝܢ ܐܢܬܘܢ)!"

A teary-eyed disciple raises his eyes heavenward and sees a woman enrobed in purple – a clear sign of royalty. The lady of the vision, described as capable of descending through the air, approaches the ship and instructs the travelers to give glory to God so that they will emerge unharmed from their sea tribulations. This exhortation is a clear allusion to Deut 32:3, the verse, which the narrator interprets as a call to God to protect against the threatening forces of nature. An instructive parallel may be discerned in a poem penned by the Empress Eudocia, Barsauma's contemporary whom he would meet in Jerusalem,[30] in praise of the hot baths at Hamat Gader, a place frequented by a religiously variegated clientele. Glorifying the place's wondrous healing prowess, she first mentions a variety of patrons, among them a female goddess "Hygeia herself," supposedly empowering the healing ability of the baths, but finally declares: "But I will sing of God, famous in skill, for the benefit … of mortals."[31] Remembering old gods thus goes hand in hand with the need to acknowledge the overwhelming authority of the new one.

Wissenschaft-des-Judenthums scholars. This was then part of a broader trend among scholars of rabbinic literature to engage with Middle Persian texts pertaining to such areas as philology, law, theology, and more generally the history of the Sasanian Empire. Regarding narratives, a number of significant parallels were identified, particularly in the realms of mythology, angelology and demonology, see Alexander Kohut, *Über die jüdische Angelologie und Dämonologie in ihrer Abhängigkeit vom Parsismus* (Leipzig, 1866). For a brief overview of this period, see Geoffrey Herman, "Ahasuerus, the Former Stable-Master of Belshazzar and the Wicked Alexander of Macedon: Two Parallels between the Babylonian Talmud and Persian Sources," *AJS Review* 29 (2005): 284–288; https://doi.org/10.1017/s0364009405000140. The tendency would be abandoned in the second half of the 20th century, but has undergone a promising comeback in recent years. For a review of early research on these questions, see Herman, ibid., 283–285. See also Yaakov Elman, "Dualistic Elements in Babylonian Aggada," in *The Aggadah of the Bavli*, ed. Geoffrey Herman and Jeffrey Rubenstein (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2018), 273–311; Yaakov Elman, "'He in His Cloak and She in Her Cloak': Conflicting Images of Sexuality in Sasanian Mesopotamia," in *Discussing Cultural Influences: Text, Context, and Non-Text in Rabbinic Judaism*, ed. Rivka Ulmer (Studies in Judaism; Lanham, MD: UPA, 2007), 129–164; Shai Secunda, *The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Bavli in Its Sasanian Context* (Philadelphia: Penn Press, 2014); https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812209044. Cf. Richard Kalmin, *Migrating Tales: The Talmud's Narratives and Their Historical Context* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014); https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520277250.001.0001.

[30] See lately Brian P. Sowers, *In Her Own Words: The Life and Poetry of Aelia Eudocia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2020), 18-21.

[31] See discussion in Sowers, *In Her Own Words*, 22-32.

One notes that not only does this depiction of the Flying Lady lack any explicitly Christian motifs, but throughout the rest of the *Vita* too, there are no references to the Virgin Mary. One may be reasonably disposed then to see here the reflection of a narrative pattern from a common cultural background, adapted by our Christian author.

In other words, even if one cannot definitively identify the provenance of the "flying lady" motif, there are indications that we may be dealing here with a basic mythological theme of broader circulation. Such plots, detached from their mythological origins, would continue to circulate in storytelling milieus for many centuries.[32] An early attestation of the motif in question is found in the Odyssey. When its protagonist arrives near the coast of Scheria, and Poseidon's final storm wrecks his ship, the goddess Leucothea appears to offer him her scarf,[33] a saving talisman (5: 392-401). Odysseus, however, is wary of further help from immortals and reverts to the first rule of seamanship: Stick with your ship as long as it floats.[34] Also in Roman and Hellenistic sources, various female deities are described as divine patronesses of seafarers who save them in their hour of distress. Such is Isis, whom we met above as the Breastfeeding One of rabbinic interest and who, in her Greco-Roman version, also became the “Mistress of the Sea,” with festivals in her honor marking the beginning of the sailing season. Serapes likewise acts as a sailors’ saviour, to name just the two most famous seafaring deities.

Let us especially note the stories of sailors suffering a shipwreck and miraculously saved by Isis (Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* 11).[35] Also worth mentioning is an epigram by a poet Posidippus, where he relates to the identification between an Egyptian Hellenistic queen and Aphrodite Euploia,[36] or, consequently, between the same queen and Isis Euploia or Pelagia.[37] This syncretic female figure, according to Posidippus, is one who grants “a safe sailing and in the midst of the tempest makes the broad sea as smooth as oil for those who call upon her” (ἥ δὲ καὶ εὐπλοίην δώσει καὶ χείματι μέσσῳ τὸ πλατὺ λισσομένοις ἐκλιπανεῖ πέλαγος).[38]

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[32] See note 5 above.

[33] This goddess had once been a mortal princess Ino, a daughter of Cadmus and Harmonia, and the wife of Athamas; after her death and apotheosis, Ino was called Leucothea (Homer, Odyssey 5. 333 ff): "Kadmos' (Cadmus') daughter, slender-ankled Ino who is also Leukothea (Leucothea); once she had been a mortal and spoken with human voice, but now she lives in the salt seas and the gods give her the honour that is her due" (English translation is according to *The Odyssey*, tr. by Walter Shewring with an introduction by G. S. Kirk [Oxford World’s Classics; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008]).

[34] See Robert Foulke, *The Sea Voyage Narrative* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2001), 620-663, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203953570.

[35] On Isis as a patron of sailors, see Malcolm D. Donalson, *The Cult of Isis in the Roman Empire: Isis Invicta* (Studies in Classics; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 74–75.

[36] Lois Robert, Hellenica XI–XII, Paris 1960, 154 n. 2; Lois Robert, “Sur un décret d’Ilion et sur un papyrus concernant des cultes royaux,” in *Essays in Honor of C. Bradford Welles*, ed. Alan E. Samuel (American Studies in Papyrology; New Haven: American Society of Papyrologists, 1966), 175–211, 200–201 and n. 155; Laurent Bricault, *Isis Pelagia: Images, Names and Cults of a Goddess of the Seas*, 30.

[37] Michel Malaise, “Le culte d’Isis à Canope au IIIe siècle avant notre ère,” in *Tranquillitas. Mélanges en l’honneur de Tran tam Tinh*, ed. Marie-Odile Jentel and Gisèle Deschênes-Wagner (Québec : Université Laval, 1994), 353–370, 358 ; Bricault (previous note).

[38] Posidipp 119. See Susan Stephens, “Ptolemaic Alexandria,” in *A Companion to Hellenistic Literature*, ed. James J. Clauss and Martine Cuypers (Malden, MA / Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 46–61, 52–53, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118970577.ch4; Malaise (previous note), 356–357 n. 23.

Ancient literary tradition sheds further light on the motif of the appearance of sea goddesses at a time of tempest. According to a shipwreck story pattern, storms signal divine displeasure. The adventures of the biblical prophet Jonah cast a long shadow on the narratives created by Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity, a feature already addressed in research.[39] However, the sea voyage, with the dramatic outburst of tempest, was also a well-known *topos* in Greco-Roman storytelling. Jewish and Christian narrators would invoke such motifs, reworking them in accordance with their underlying religious agenda. The resulting narratives were a kind of hybrid creation, containing references to both biblical and broader mythological patterns of narration. Divine intervention calming the mighty tempest is a good example of such adopted and adapted mythological patterns.

One might speculate, then, that the author of the *Vita* appropriated here the broader mythological motif of the flying sea-patroness deity, who rescues seafarers in their time of need. In not referring to her by name, he may have been attempting to neutralize the pagan flavour of the image,[40] turning the goddess into a kind of generic angelic figure. And what if one is ready to consider the less plausible possibility that the author did intend to identify the image with the Virgin Mary?[41] In such a case, granted, that the *Vita* readers would share the recognition, we would witness the motif's further adaptation devoid of explicit polemical overtones. Not unlike the Babylonian Talmud, which turns Isis into Eve, thus preserving the mythological significance of the former, it converts Isis into Mary.

Goddess defeated and ostracised

Quite a different strategy – that of the sea-goddess' symbolic demotion—is attested to in another Syriac story, featuring Nicholas of Myra, a popular early saint (late 3rd—first half of 4th century) and famous as a miracle worker. The narrator, whose provenance is uncertain, is aware of the existence of the patroness of the sea, known to him as Artemis, but refuses to acknowledge her divine standing.[42] Instead, he presents her as a menacing demonic power who will ultimately be subdued by the Christian saint.[43] According to the story, the earlier triumph of Christianity notwithstanding, the people of Myra continued to worship Artemis. Consequently, Nicholas had to overwhelm and exile her. Artemis, in turn, plotted revenge:

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[39] See discussion in Reuven Kiperwasser and Serge Ruzer, "Sea Voyages Tales in Conversation with the Jonah Story. Intertextuality and the Art of Narrative Bricolage," in *Journeys: The International Journal of Travel and Travel Writing* 20 (2019): 39-57; https://doi.org/10.3167/jys.2019.200203.

[40] As has been time and again noted, the term "pagan," which we use here without any derogative overtones, is problematic. See, for example, Cribiore, *Libanius the Sophist*, 7-8.

[41] There seems to exist only rather late evidence for Christian explanations of Stella Maris, Star of the Sea, as a name applied to the Virgin Mary, see Hugh T. Henry, "Ave Maris Stella," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton, 1905-1912), retrieved May 12, 2020, from New Advent: http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02149a.htm.

[42] Syriac authors were well aware of the Greek Pantheon; see Yulia Furman, "Zeus, Artemis, Apollo: John Bar Penkāyē on Ancient Myths and Cults," *Scrinium* 10 (2014): 47-96, https://doi.org/10.1163/18177565-90000092.

[43] See Павелъ К. Коковцовъ," Чудеса св. Николая, епископа города Миръ (Перевод съ сирійскаго)," *Записки Восточнаго Отдѣленія Императорскаго Русскаго Археологическаго*

> By the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Saint Nicholas expelled Artemis, whom the pagans called the mother of gods, and drove her out of the city of Myra in Lycia. Having been expelled, she went and prepared a wondrous oil to burn down the city of Myra.

Returning to her native habitat on the high seas and assuming an appearance of a devout Christian woman, she sought to implicate the naive Christian seamen in her conspiracy:

> She then disguised herself as a pious Christian woman and appeared to the seafarers, who were sailing to Myra to kneel before the holy Nicholas. She told them: "I ask you to take this oil and when you arrive in Myra do anoint with it the church so that I will be well remembered there." They took it and put it into a jar, because they were not aware of the nefarious plot.

It is at this point that St. Nicholas saves the day:

> And when the seafarers were sailing, Saint Nicholas appeared to them coming in a small boat and said: "O brothers, what did that lying woman say to you?" They showed him the jar with the oil in it. “Do not listen to that woman, because she is in fact Artemis who leads people astray. Throw the jar with the oil into the water and see what happens.” When they did so, a strong fire started running over the water for the distance of fifteen miles. They looked and marveled, and praised God. Having arrived in Myra, they went up to the holy Nicholas and were blessed by him. And they said: "It was truly you, our our holy father, that appeared to us at sea and performed that great wonder." And they told him everything that had happened. The ascetic then prayed for them and blessed them, and they departed from there praising God.

The polemical christianizing features of the story are clear in the emphasis on Artemis’ expulsion in connection to her being worshipped by the city’s pagans, who viewed her as the mother of gods. Her malign machinations come in response to Nicholas’ actions against her sanctuaries in his town.[44] Though Artemis’ status as a sea-goddess is not spelled out, the

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Общества (Pavel K. Kokovtsov, “Miracles of St. Nicholas the Bishop of Myra [from Syriac],” *Bulletin of the Eastern Section of the Imperial Russian Archaeological Society*) 9 (1896): 79-86.

[44] See Евгений В. Аничков, “Св. Николай и Артемида Эфесская,” *Записки Восточнаго Отдѣленія Императорскаго Русскаго Археологическаго Общества* (Yevgeniy V. Anichkov, “St. Nicholas and

story highlights her power over the sea, which she exploits to her own ends. Yet her plot is thwarted by the saint who, as it turns out, is also capable of wondrous appearances at sea. Artemis thus loses her status as mistress of the sea to the new Christian master, who will now be venerated as the true patron of seafarers.[45]

Demoting Artemis to the status of a spiteful witch, seems to fit a broader tendency in descriptions of Christian monks fighting the machinations by traditional Greek deities, where those deities, Artemis among them, are portrayed as demons.[46] This tendency is paralleled by the evidence from Jewish magic incantation texts, as that ordered in 3rd-4th century by one Judah of Sicily.[47] Introducing a Christian saint as the new ruler of the water abyss, however, remains a distinguishing mark of the tradition about Nicholas.

Conclusion

This essay discussed a number of traditions that exemplify balancing acts between inherited mythological motifs and their reworking in the light of the sensibilities of late antique Jewish and Christian narrators. In the first part of the study, we saw how rabbinic traditions deal with the images of Isis and Serapis, specifically how the Babylonian Talmud integrates them, somewhat surprisingly, in its own mythopoetic constructs. The next example, the *Vita of Barsauma*, showed that Christian authors also appropriated the sea goddess, presumably Isis, as part of their theologically charged mythic universe.

For our narrators, the forces of the sea, their *terra firma* symbolic representations included, apparently retained their threatening appeal. The sea voyages thus provide a meaningful borderline experience, collating the authors'—and their audience's—religious outlook with the chaos of the mythical universe. A variety of strategies to deal with the tension inherent in encountering goddesses may be discerned – from subtle adaptive measures that offset the pagan flavor of the background tradition to its full-fledged metamorphosis.

Without making any claim for influence or direct interaction, the comparative reading of Jewish and Christian responses to the challenge of the goddesses' presence in the narrators' imagined universe highlights important parallels in the types of strategies employed. Of course, goddesses would retain their appeal in later times too, when they would undergo transformation by means of allegorizing from their individual archaic identity into demythologized powers or ideas foundational for literature and philosophy.[48] This in a sense would constitute a replay of interpretational strategies employed already within the classical culture itself. This essay, however, emphasized a different setting, where the response to the "goddesses' challenge" comes not from philosophically minded circles, but from a keen

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Artemis of Ephesus," *Bulletin of the Eastern Section of the Imperial Russian Archaeological Society*) 9 (1896): 74-77.

[45] *Ibid*, pp. 76-77.

[46] Frankfurter, "The Threat of Headless Beings," 68-69.

[47] *Ibid*. p. 69.

[48] See Emilie Kutash, *Goddesses in Myth and Cultural Memory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

harmonizing impulse to absorb—via domestication—motifs with mythic religious vitality from the broader cultural repository.

This essay may be seen as dealing with the history of the patterns of religious mentality, and thus, even with the limited set of cases under discussion, their exploration holds the promise of uncovering further characteristic trends.

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