

# IS THE "QUEEN OF HEAVEN" IN JEREMIAH THE GODDESS ANAT?

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Though the name of the goddess Anat is never mentioned in the Bible, it may be reasonable to speculate that the "Queen of Heaven" mentioned in Jeremiah 7:18; 44:17,18,19,25, may be identified with her. In Canaanite epics, the goddess Anat distinguished herself with strength and courage. She was a mighty warrior, identified also with fertility, and as such was considered to be the goddess of life. Her gracefulness and beauty were symbols for the people.

The cult of Anat passed from Phoenicia and Canaan to Egypt, where she was believed to be the goddess of war. In one of the sanctuaries unearthed in Bet She'an, built by Ramses II in the 13th century BCE, there was found a pillar to Anat, the Queen of Heaven and wife of all gods.

In a later period, her name occurs in documents found at Elephantine, an island called "the Southern Gate," situated north of the first Nile rapids, opposite Aswan. In the fifth century BCE, Jewish mercenaries were stationed at Elephantine. They brought with them the venerable religion of their ancestors, paid dues to the Temple in Jerusalem, and built in Elephantine a spacious temple that had seven porches and a roof of cedar wood.

Documents dated to around 400 BCE, unearthed in excavations at Elephantine, reveal that three deities were worshipped in the temple there: Yahoo, "the Master of Heaven," and the goddesses Ashima and Anat Bet-El, "the Queens of Heaven."

The name of "Anat" is similar to the names of several localities in the land of Israel, among them Bet-Anat in the tribal territory of Naphtali (Josh. 19:38; Jud. 1:33) and of Judah (Josh. 15:59). It does not seem correct, however, to associate Anat with the town of Anathoth, birthplace of Jeremiah.

*Shamgar the son of Anat* was the heroic judge who slew 600 Philistines with an ox goad and delivered Israel (Jud. 3:31; 5:6). Here it is not clear if "son of Anat" means the name of a parent or of a town.<sup>1</sup>

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Josiah, King of Judah (640-609 BCE), carried out a great religious reform by eradicating idolatry and proclaiming the sovereignty of the Torah. Within 50 years, the Babylonians had invaded the land and in 586 BCE, the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed. There were those who attributed the calamities to the cessation of the worship of "The Queen of Heaven," and they complained bitterly to Jeremiah (Jer. 44:15-19):

*'Since we left off to burn incense to the Queen of Heaven<sup>2</sup> [m-l-kh-t hashamayim] and to pour out drink offerings unto her, we have wanted all things and have been consumed by the sword and by famine' (v. 18).*

M-L-KH-T

The term "*m-l-kh-t hashamayim*" in Jeremiah 44:18 was read by the translators of the Greek Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate as "*malkat hashamayim* [Queen of Heaven]." When the masoretes of Tiberias vocalized the Hebrew text in the ninth century CE, the word *m-l-kh-t* was to be read as *melekheth* [מלכֶת], though this word does not make sense. Ramban (Nahmanides) explained that the letter "*aleph*" was actually missing in the word, this omission being "one of the mysteries of the Scriptures." The meaning of the word *m-l-kh-t* with the letter "*aleph*" added means "work," making the phrase "*work of heaven*," connoting sun and stars.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the Aramaic Targum Yonathan translated *m-l-kh-t hashamayim* as "*kokhevet sh'maya* [stars of heaven]."

The vocalization of *m-l-kh-t* as *melekheth* prevented it from being read as *malkat* [Queen of (Heaven)]," thus circumventing the fact that a section of the Jewish people had in the past worshipped a female deity, who may have been Anat.

It appears that Josiah's religious reform did not succeed in totally eradicating idolatrous belief. On the other hand, the exiles in Babylon, the cream of notables from Judah, continued in the spirit of the reform of King Josiah, strengthened by the prophecies of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah. With the Babylonian Exile, there is an end to idolatry and the true beginnings of the Jewish religion.

NOTES

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1. See U. Cassuto, *The Goddess Anat, Canaanite Epics of the Patriarchal Age* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1965).
  2. The "Queen of Heaven" is an oft-studied figure. Scholars have variously identified her as Anat, or as the goddess called Ishtar in Babylonia and Astarte in Canaan. See: Judith M. Hadley, "The Queen of Heaven - Who is She?" in Athalya Brenner, ed., *Prophets and Daniel: A Feministic Companion to the Bible [second series]* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001) pp. 30-51.
  3. See, commentaries of Ramban to Genesis 24:1, Radak, Abarbanel and others on Jeremiah 44:18.
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## RESPONSES from Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's book **TORAH DIALOGUES**

1. There is reason from negative evidence to believe that the truth was carefully hidden from Jacob. Rashi comments on 50:15 that the brothers often dined together but when Jacob died, the appearances no longer had to be maintained. The matter was of such importance that the Torah would surely have mentioned it if Joseph had revealed it to his father.
2. Shifrah and Puah, the midwives; Yocheved and Miriam, mother and sister of Moses; Pharaoh's daughters; Zipporah, wife of Moses.
3. *He made ready his chariot* (14:6). Rashi believes that the Torah would not mention this fact unless it was meant literally. Ibn Ezra rejects this interpretation and compares the phrase to *Solomon built the house* (I Kg. 6:14) which certainly isn't to be understood in the literal sense (see: Mechilta on 14:6).