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*Households and Holiness: The Religious Culture of Israelite Women* is a revised and expanded version of a keynote lecture delivered by Carol Meyers at the 2001 XVIII Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament (“From Household to House of Yahweh—Women’s Religious Culture in Ancient Israel”) and subsequently published in the *Vetus Testamentum* Supplement volume in which the conference papers appeared. In its current location it is part of the Fortress Press Facets series.

Those acquainted with Meyers’s previous work will not be surprised with the approach taken in this treatment. While acknowledging that recent scholarship has “revisited, reconsidered, revised and revamped” notions of women and Israelite religion (3), Meyers insists that more is needed truly to understand and appreciate the importance of women in Israel’s religious life. Citing weaknesses in contemporary feminist biblical studies (it tends still to represent masculinized approaches and has not separated itself adequately from the perspective of biblical authors [4–6]), Meyers argues that what is really necessary is to recover “women’s religious culture.” Such a task, according to Meyers, involves setting aside a host of generally held assumptions concerning Israelite religion.
First and foremost among these assumptions is that the phrase “Israelite Religion” ever really corresponded to a “well defined historical reality” (13). Moreover, the term “religion” itself, Meyers argues, needs to be redefined anthropologically to avoid focusing solely on its theological (versus practiced) and communal/public (versus individual/domestic) aspects. What is needed, Meyers insists, is a reconceptualization of the issue—instead of looking for “women’s religion,” we need to look at “women’s religious culture” (11).

To reconstruct “women’s religious culture,” Meyers uses a multidisciplinary approach that draws on a triad of differing data: (1) archaeological (the study of the materiality of women’s religious cultures), (2) textual (both biblical and other ancient Near Eastern texts), and (3) ethnographic (which provides interpretive possibilities for the data collected by the other two approaches). Since Meyers identifies women’s religious culture as involving practices that are uniquely female, it is understandable that she chooses activities surrounding women’s reproductive capabilities as the focus of her study and the family household as the primary domain of these activities.

For archaeological evidence, Meyers draws upon pillar figurines (which represent the “physical expression of a woman’s prayers for fertility and successful lactation” [29]); representations of Bes, the Egyptian guardian of childbirth (both iconographic and onomastic); and, finally, the much rarer replicas of bedding/birthing couches (the “couch model”). Meyers combines this artifactual evidence of religious activities in the family household with allusions to women’s religious culture she finds in texts. Included in these are women’s petitionary prayers concerning conception (Hannah, 1 Sam 1:10–11), magical acts aimed at conception (the mandrakes of Gen 30:14–17), and various childbirth rituals (red thread [Gen 38:28–30] and the treatment of newborns [Ezek 16:4], to name only a few). In her chapter on “Ethnographic Data” Meyers proceeds to examine the practices of contemporary Middle Eastern cultures. In these she finds many rituals and customs that resemble the biblical ones under study.

When all the data is amassed and studied, Meyers concludes that “women’s lives in ancient Israel were replete with opportunities for religious expression and experience.” Indeed, they were both “officiants and practitioners of household praxis” (73). Activities such as midwifery, necromancy (to enlist the dead in the protection of mothers/newborns), sorcery (as health-care consultants), and divining (female diviners, she argues, in the ancient Near East also served as midwives and abortionists) were all areas open to women’s participation.

The strength of Meyers’s work is the richness of the interdisciplinary dialogue and cross-fertilization of ideas and data that such an approach yields. Yet using this
“anthropological” approach is not without its problems—problems of which Meyers is well aware. Indeed, throughout her treatment, the astute reader will notice methodological warning flags she herself raises at crucial points of her argument.

Take, for example, her warning to readers concerning the limitations of archaeological evidence. Meyers freely admits that “artifacts of Israelite sites are silent about who used them” (56). This admission is further substantiated in her introduction when she critiques feminist biblical study’s focus on female deities (5) precisely on the point that one cannot link the presence of female deities to female worshipers because both female and male Israelites worshiped deities of both genders. In other words, female deities do not necessarily mean female devotees. Nevertheless, in spite of these cautious reminders, Meyers in chapter 4 (“Archaeological Evidence”) reconstructs women’s religious culture based, in part, on the artifactual evidence of the pillar figurines. These figures, she suggests, are proof of the involvement of women in ritual behavior, since they attest to reproductive issues unique to women (as proof she refers to the hands beneath the breasts as emphasizing lactation). But if the figurines represent female deities (a possibility she would like to rule out completely but cannot), one wonders about the validity—based on her previous caution—of arguing that female figurines are proof of female ritual activity.

Another problem involves the paucity of biblical materials concerning Israelite women’s religious culture of reproduction. This culture, she notes, is “only vaguely alluded to, if at all, in the Hebrew Bible” (19). Thus, when Meyers turns to biblical texts, one must question if she stretches the evidence a bit. A good example of this is when she appeals to biblical texts that reflect what she calls a “magico-medical context”—that is, the mention of mandrakes and their implied fertility connections in Gen 30:14–17. While it is true that prior to this she goes to great length to establish “magic” as an appropriate category of religious activity for women (20–22), I am not sure that all her readers will accept without question the identification of herbal/natural remedies as “magic” or magic as “religious” activity.

Finally, when Meyers turns to her ethnographic evidence in chapter 6, she quickly prefaces her discussion with the acknowledgment that the legitimacy of this approach is sometimes challenged due to “the enormous chronological distance between cultures being compared” (49). Having alerted her readers to the inherent problems involved, Meyers goes on to give evidence from contemporary Kurdish and Moroccan Jewish women as well as Turkish and Iranian Muslim women whose actions, she notes, “bear witness to women’s religious practices, in households and at tombs, with many features that resemble those of biblical antiquity” (55). Once again, for those who question the value of contemporary cross-cultural studies for reconstructing ancient societies, this chapter will be problematic.

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In spite of the methodological issues mentioned above—issues that will no doubt prevent some readers from appreciating Meyer’s work—her reconstruction of Israelite women’s religious culture in antiquity represents a well thought out and bold step to bring the historical reconstruction of ancient women’s lives into the twenty-first century of multidisciplinary scholarship.