

Hail, Full of Grace!

A Remembrance of Things Past

Dominic Kirkham explores Egyptian origins and biblical beliefs.

In the Cairo Museum of Egyptian Antiquities there is a small statue of Isis, seated on a chair holding the infant Horus. Her posture, seated on a chair, seems oddly familiar. In fact not only is it a posture common among medieval portraits of the Madonna, Mary and the child Jesus, but is almost identical with the statue of Our Lady of Walsingham, once the most significant medieval shrine to Our Lady in Christendom. The resemblances were so striking that one could easily be mistaken for the other.

Yes, remembrance of the past can be unnerving! We like to remember the past in so far as it confirms the present, or at least our understanding of the present. But often it does not. Not only does the past challenge our understanding, it has the capacity to challenge the identity we build around that understanding: a flint blade, a piece of broken pottery, a decayed inscription, a fragment of parchment can be sufficient to bring down whole metaphysical systems of speculation and theological edifices.

For me, mention of the little statue of Isis recalled something from my own past – that is how remembrance works, one thought triggering another. Some thirty-five years ago, I was a member of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary and would often meet with other likeminded devotees to discuss Marian themes. On one occasion we invited the Earl of Lauderdale to address us. This may sound esoteric but the 17th Earl had been restoring an ancient chapel on his estate in the Scottish Borders to the south of Edinburgh as a focal point for ecumenical Marian devotion. A central feature of the chapel would be a small effigy of a Madonna, previously discovered in the grounds, showing a seated mother cradling a child in her arm, very reminiscent of Our Lady of Walsingham. (Readers might also like to know that some fifteen miles to the west lies another chapel at Roslin which twenty years later would acquire global fictional fame as the epicentre of *The Da Vinci Code*.)



Isis suckling – 4th century Egyptian fresco



Seal of the medieval priory of Walsingham



The Temple of Artemis in Ephesus, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World

Our Lady of Walsingham was cursed as a 'counterfeit Ephesian Diana' in a Homily which Queen Elizabeth 1st ordered to be read all over her kingdom.

In a fascinating slide show, which took place one winter's evening in the chapel of the great Norman castle of Arundel, Sussex, the Earl beguiled us with a story of mystery and enchantment. For the little effigy turned out to be from Egypt and had found its way to Scotland in Roman times. (It may be remembered that the Romans did briefly occupy Scotland in the second century AD, building the Antonine Wall across the Central Lowlands.) But an effigy of what? Was it Isis or Mary? No one could really be sure.

At the time I was a theological student with an interest in Marian devotions. I lived in a monastery dedicated to Our Lady of England, which was also a Marian shrine. One of the things that had caught my interest was the origin of the rites surrounding the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into Heaven. This great feast, celebrated on the 15th August, particularly throughout the Mediterranean world, had its origins in Ephesus where tradition tells us that Mary spent her later years with the apostle John and which also happened to be the centre of the cult of Artemis (twinned with the Roman goddess Diana), the great huntress and goddess of fertility. This ancient cult stretched back to the matriarchal societies of Mesolithic times and beyond to the enigmatic 'Venus' cults of the Old Stone Age, focused on the fertile womb; a time when men had their uses as hunters but women were revered as the givers of life.

As the social psychologist Erich Fromm wrote of this period: 'The mother, as goddess (often identified with Mother Earth), became the supreme goddess of the religious world, while the earthly mother became the centre of family and social life' (*The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. Pimlico, 1973.p. 214). Fromm introduced an interesting nuance preferring the word 'matricentric' rather than 'matriarchal' because the latter implies that women ruled over men rather than alongside men, with a dominant role but not a role of domination: the patriarchal societies of male domination and aggression, which we now call civilisation, would come later.

Though nothing remains of what was once the greatest temple in the ancient world at Ephesus and one of the fabled Seven Wonders – save a solitary broken column – what does remain are some parchments of the ancient liturgies of the patronal feast celebrated there on the 15th August. And the curious thing is that those for Artemis (Diana) and those for Mary are in many places identical. Indeed, it would not be stretching credulity to say that the latter were copied from the former: the enthronement of the fruitful mother who bestows blessing to the Earth. It was at the Church Council of Ephesus in 431 that Mary was proclaimed *theotokos*: god-bearer/mother of God. Once again one can detect a process of displacement or replacement. Once again one is left wondering which was which, of what exactly one is looking at.

As with the cult of Isis, so with the cult of Mary. They inhabit not so much a physical space as a psychic space, a place in the mind which explains the order of things and the nature of the world. In ancient Egypt that order was incarnated in the person of the pharaoh. Such a role made him more than a man. It made him a god, an essential link in the cosmic order enacted in ritual. And Isis was the lynchpin of this cultic world, not just for Egyptians but throughout the classical Greco-Roman world. The name itself was a Greek rendition of the more ancient Egyptian word *Ese*, which, curiously enough, does not refer to a person but to a chair and, in its hieroglyphic form, a throne. As with the Madonna at Lauderdale and at Walsingham, the one who is seated on the throne brings forth the king. In the case of Isis the infant she nurses is Horus, the god of the heavens and protector of the pharaohs, whose presence they claimed to incarnate and whose eternal destiny Horus ensured, leading the dead to the afterlife.

The Bible presents a strange and strained relationship between the peoples of Israel and Egypt, much of which hinges on the epic of the Exodus, the monumental figure of Moses and the origins of monotheism. A little piece of pottery was found at Kuntillet Arud in the northern Sinai desert in the 1970s. This ancient travellers' way station is now scarcely accessible, being in the militarised zone between Egypt and Israel, but was excavated briefly in 1975/6 by a team of archaeologists from Tel Aviv University.

In two rooms of the fortress-like building dating back to the ninth century BCE the walls contained a number of enigmatic inscriptions in early Hebrew and Phoenician script invoking various gods: Yahweh, El and Baal. One was to 'Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah' (consort or wife), another to 'Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah'. Perhaps these were invocations for a safe journey. But they were also the deities of different regions, suggesting the origins of the travellers whose gods had equivalent status. As such, they provide an insight into the nature of belief in ninth century Israel and the surrounding territories.

As significant as the names of the gods, if not more so, is the mention of their 'Asherah' – consorts or 'queens', the mother goddess. This word is almost identical to the Ugaritic 'Atirat', the

proper name of the consort of El, and related to the Akkadian 'Asratu' and Hittite 'Aserdue'. In Sumer she is the consort of the chief god, Anu. Thus we are taken back to the very earliest identifiable pantheons, ruled by the Queen of Heaven. This is the title also given to her by the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 7. 16-18) – not in appreciation or devotion but rather outraged denunciation, as the idolatry which is the source of Judah's woes. But the people were having none of it, insisting on the contrary, that it was only 'since we gave up offering incense to the Queen of Heaven and pouring libations in her honour, we have been destitute and have perished either by sword or by famine' (Jer 44. 17-19). The prophet seemingly had a very different view of deity focused on a supreme and solitary male, Yahweh, who alone should be worshipped.

All this is perplexing. Clearly a new concept of deity had evolved in Judah, identified with the cult of a single male god Yahweh. Reviewing what we now know of this process, the archaeologist Amihai Mazar in *The Quest for the Historical Israel* (SBL Press, 2007) writes that 'during most of the monarchic period, Israelite religion, though centred on the national god Yahweh, was based on Canaanite myths, beliefs and cult practices, and a great goddess was worshipped alongside the main male god' (p.177). Within this context and with specific reference to Kuntillet Arud, Mazar notes, 'While the worship of Asherah was condemned by the Jerusalem prophets, they probably represent the new theology that was emerging towards the end of the monarchy (in the 7th century BCE) among the Jerusalem intellectual elite' (p.175). As Mazar comments, this is all substantially different from the pure monotheistic religion that is preserved for us in the Bible.

You can say that again! In fact, I doubt if any ordinary church-goer or believer would even recognise such a picture, and here I would have to include, for most of my life, myself. The biblical text is in no doubt about the sublime origin of this transcendental concept of monotheism in the revelation to Moses on Mount Horeb (Ex. 19). The theophany at the burning bush and revelation of the divine name, Yahweh, is immediate, explicit and compelling (Exodus 3). It was not intended, and indeed has never been understood, as a pious story retrojected on the past in the light of a different state of consciousness that only emerged some five centuries later.

There are many questions raised as to how a seemingly supreme and solitary male god came to dominate our imaginations. In the work previously referred to, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Erich Fromm reflects on the changes in human thinking and behaviour that were taking place in Near Eastern societies in the second millennium BCE, associated with what we call the rise of civilisation. On the changed view of the place of women in society, Fromm observes:

No longer was the fertility of the soil the source of all life and creativity, but the intellect which produced new inventions, techniques, abstract thinking, and the state with its laws. No longer the womb, but the mind became the creative power, and simultaneously, not women, but men dominated society (p.224).

In fact, women are just as capable of using words as men and in some areas, such as feelings, they are often more articulate. Perhaps it was male jealousy of women's power to deliver new life that made men claim the power of the word – *logos* – as exclusively their own. Just as, to combat insecurities about biological fatherhood, men in marriage became the legal owners of their children, to the exclusion of the women who had conceived and given birth to them. But now the logocentric patriarchal state, characterised by the word of command and law, had arrived.

Some consequences of this momentous change are explored in Leonard Shlain's intriguing book *The Alphabet and the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image* (Allen Lane, 1999). His argument is that the advent of literacy led to a denigration of femininity. It is a conflict that has endured and we still see all around us: in the destruction of the female images by the so-called Monotheistic Brigades of Islamic State (ironically also called ISIS!) with a zeal equalled only by the scripturally inspired iconoclasts of the Reformation whose belief was in *sola scriptura* – the word alone. We see it in the great shift that took place in Judean thinking in the seventh century BCE to a solitary male deity with the creation of the Bible. We see it in the rise of the medieval universities which totally excluded women from any form of academic life and consequently of public office. We see it in the current suppression of even debating the role of women at the altar in the Roman Catholic

Church, despite the clear evidence for their clerical and even episcopal status in the early church.

The happy destruction of historical sites by ISIS is but one example of the determination to render the past suitable for the present. So clerics, mullahs and rabbis together seek a place under the so-called great canopy of the Abrahamic faith, secure in their convictions against the questioning tide of secularisation, happy not to know and determined in their attempts to shape the world by the male word of command. Yet little pieces from the past will always prompt other thoughts; a buried effigy, a broken shard, a ruined chapel, a defaced fresco – the historical evidence. Our understanding of the past will continue to be shaped by what we choose to remember, which in turn will shape the future. And the future may not be as certain as we might like to think!

Dominic Kirkham's book *From Monk to Modernity* was published by SOF in 2015.

Mary's Quilt

We'll reach the town tonight
but tomorrow I don't know
what we'll say about the baby.

For months we stitched
in unspoken promises.
Now, pull the quilt up tightly.

I can't explain what's beneath,
but if not for your loyalty, my instinct,
we could have divorced quietly.

Joe, you're strong, take the strain
of the bureaucracy, somewhere
there is a time beyond ourselves.

Later, when you can't sleep
put your hand on my belly,
look at the pinpricks in the sky –
those fiery stitches of our eternity.

James Priestman

For more poems by James see
whatthebiblecouldhavesaid.com