Scholar Blog- Anna Daniel

Moabite Religion and the Role of Moabite Women in Religious Ritual Practice

Dear fellow colleagues of the Association of Women and Gender Studies of Ancient Israel. I am writing this blog in order to share some interesting findings on Moabite women that may interest this cohort of students, researchers, faculty, and those interested in the lives of women living in and around ancient Israel. In my own personal studies of ancient Israel, I became particularly interested in the religious practices of the Moabite people. Upon reading several articles that discussed Moabite women, such as Ruth or Lot’s daughters, I became really interested in the religious experiences of Moabite women. In this blog post, I will explain my findings when trying to answer these questions: Why role did women play in Moabite religion? Why are Moabite women so dangerous to Israelite men? I hope y’all find this interesting and I’d love to hear everyone’s thoughts below!

I initially came across this very interesting article by P.M. Michèle Daviau titled, “New Light on Iron Age Religious Iconography the Evidence from Moab.” This article describes and then analyzes a plethora of religious artifacts, such as figurines, statues, and alters, that were attributed to Moab. I was shocked to see that Moabite iconography featured women and even depicted women participating in religious rituals. The article depicts several different images of women holding discs.[[1]](#footnote-1) Depending on the way the statue is holding the disc; it can indicate that the depicted female worshipper is holding a drum or holding a platter of food for offerings. These statues provide us with remarkable insights into Moabite religious traditions. Playing musical instruments, such as the drums, for the divine was common practice to worship and appease their deities. Platters of food that acted as sacrificial offerings were also a fairly common practice in Moab and many other surrounding communities. It is particularly remarkable that it is women playing such an important role in Moabite religious practices. Not only are they playing integral roles in worship and rituals, but they are also allowed to stand before the divine and interact with them. Most interestingly, these particular statues were found in tombs. According to the article, there seems to be no concrete explanation as to why they were there. Could they be depictions of women associated with the deceased? The article finds that depictions of such worshippers were never specific to a real person, as the figures were meant to continue the religious act or worship.[[2]](#footnote-2) Are they meant to ensure the deceased continues to worship the deity in the afterlife? Could the statues be built in respect for the deceased? As seen with this article. There seems to be a gap in scholarship that will hopefully be filled as we learned more about these female practitioners!

In addition to music offerings of food sex and sacrifice are also integral parts of Moabite worship and rituals. Turning to the Hebrew Bible, we can see the role women played in these two practices in Numbers 25: “While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor.” While this passage does not paint Moabite women in a very positive light, it does reveal a lot about Moabite religious practice. The deity mentioned here named Baal was one of the deities worshipped by Moabites and many other of ancient Israel’s neighboring religious communities. Baal was understood to be a fertility god, so the connections between sex and Baal were clear. Sex as worship may seem unusual to us in the modern day, but sex was understood as an extremely important ritual practice. In order to remedy the many uncertainties of their ancient world, such as inconsistent rainfall, human fertility, and the growth of crops, sexual activity (even orgies!) was understood to appeal to Baal. If Baal was aroused, he would provide what was needed to create and sustain life.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Sacrifices were understood along the same lines of religious sexual activity. Moabites understood that Baal would oftentimes require sacrifices, even human sacrifices, in order to pacify him.[[4]](#footnote-4) If such sacrifices were not delivered, Baal would punish worshippers often times with earthquakes. As seen in Numbers 25 and the various forms of Moabite iconography I discussed earlier, women also played a key role in the process of ritual sacrifice. While women as practitioners were seen to actually bring and offer sacrifices to Baal, they also recruited Israelite men to partake in their sacrificial rituals. It can be assumed that Moabite women possessed some level of religious authority if they can both invite “foreigners” to worship and conduct the rituals with them. In this way, Moabite women appear to be evangelizing Israelite men by inviting them to partake in Moabite culture and religious practices. Recognizing the potential political and religious aims of portraying Moab poorly, it could be assumed that Moabite women were merely eager to share their culture. Intermarriage was also not uncommon despite its prohibition in many places in the Hebrew Bible. Due to their close proximity, intermarriage often occurred between Israelites and Moabites, especially between Moab and Judah. Instead of evil seducers, these interactions can be read as the intermingling of religious cultures perpetuated by Moabite women. Combining this thought with the Book of Ruth, it seems very likely that Moabite women exchanged cultures both ways and either sought to incorporate their partners into their own religion or were willing to convert to the Israelite religion. It is important to note the many times in which Moabite women themselves were depicted as sharing Moabite religious culture with others.

With this brief overlook of the role Moabite women played within Moabite religion, I can now look to answer my second question. Why exactly were Moabite women portrayed as so dangerous in the Hebrew Bible? I believe the answer lies in Moabite practices of religious sexual rites. If Moabite women were to understand sexual activity as Baal worship then having sex with Israelite men could be understood as worshipping Baal together.[[5]](#footnote-5) Not only would this union defy the strict rules against intermarriage as explained in the Hebrew Bible, but it could be understood as the act of converting an Israelite man. Because Moabites and Israelites were known to exchange cultures, the act of intercourse could be seen as welcoming a foreign man into Moabite culture. In Numbers 25, it is clear that Israelite leaders and God were threatened by Moabite women as they had the power to strip a man of his Israelite identity completely. Sex with a Moabite woman was apostasy and idolatry and could cause an Israelite man to be completely outcasted from the Israelites. In combination with strict boundaries around Israelite identity, Moabite women become extremely dangerous in their capabilities to corrupt an otherwise pure Israelite man. It is once again interesting to note that it is Moabite women who are described as initiating these relationships. Due to their threatening nature and their ability to dilute Israelite identity, it seems Moabite women are in a significant place of power over Israelite men. Such a power imbalance requires strict guidelines in order to protect Israelites, or more importantly, maintain the distinctions between Israel and its neighbors. For the sake of preserving Israelite identity, Moabite women must be portrayed in this way in order for the consequences to be known. The power of Moabite women must be strictly guarded and not allowed to jeopardize Israelite men.

I thought it fitting to conclude this blog post with a more feminist theological approach to depictions of Moabite women in the Hebrew Bible. When it came to answering questions as to why Israel felt so threatened by the prospect of intermarriage, it seemed important to acknowledge the ways in which Moabite women exercised power in these situations. It was incredibly interesting to me to see women play such an important role in Moabite ritual practice as this does not seem to be the case for many ancient religions (or any religions at that…). While Moabite women may have not occupied any leadership or priestly positions within their religions, I believe that it is through the study of women that we can gather a more clear picture of religious practice “on the ground”. Because women have typically been excluded from these places of leadership, women become invaluable subjects for examining how religious traditions were actually practiced by its community members.

1. P M Micheie Daviau, “New Light on Iron Age Reiigious Iconography The Evidence from Moab,” n.d., 324. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Daviau, 324. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Richard Lemmons, “Baalbek Temple Prostitutes and Holy Prostitution for Baal - Ancient History,” Climate Policy Watcher, December 2, 2022, https://www.climate-policy-watcher.org/ancient-history/baalbek-temple-prostitutes-and-holy-prostitution-for-baal.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Expiating Apostasy: Baal Peor, Moses, and Intermarriage with a Midianite Woman,” 458, accessed December 6, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089216692182. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Stephen C. Russell and Esther J. Hamori, eds., *Mighty Baal: Essays in Honor of Mark S. Smith* (Brill, 2020), 186, http://brill.com/edcollbook/title/57258. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)