

**Carnal Knowledge** *By Faye Flam*

# Just consider the possibility — a Mr. and Mrs. God

Someone wrote to me last week to ask, among other things, whether God has a foreskin. I hadn't considered the possibility that God had male organs. Why would he need them? I was about to leave it to the eternal imponderables when I caught a noted archaeology professor being interviewed on *Radio Times* suggesting that God had a wife.

Writers of the Bible, he said, framed God in male imagery and male language. In other words,

there's a reason this reader didn't ask about God's uterus.

The professor, William Dever, is getting attention these days for his book *Did God Have a Wife?* He defended the book and the concept behind it last week at the joint annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion — a gathering of approximately 8,000 scholars in Philadelphia.

Neither Dever nor the biblical scholars who criticized his book last week

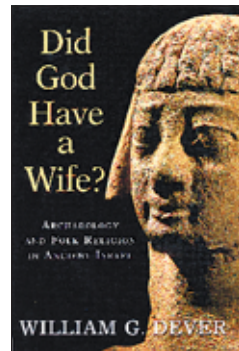
are claiming to be uncovering the ineffable nature of reality. They are simply trying to understand the ancient world in which the Bible was written.

As a trained biblical theologian turned archaeologist, Dever spent more than 30 years excavating in Israel trying to understand the people who gave rise to today's monotheistic religions. In various inscriptions and artifacts, he's uncovered evidence that suggests many people in ancient Israel worshiped a Mr. and Mrs. God

— Yahweh and a goddess named Asherah.

Questions about God's gender and marital status go to the roots of our understanding of God's nature. Some scholars also see the perception of God's maleness as a continued impediment to the empowerment of women.

Perhaps that's why when Dever was scheduled to defend God's wife at the biblical studies meeting, scholars See **GOD'S WIFE** on E3



# He, She or They: Mixing concepts of divinity and sexuality

**GOD'S WIFE** from E1 crouched on the floor and squeezed into doorways. Many looked crushed as they were turned away from a room at the Marriott that proved much too small for such a controversial topic.

Dever's argument rests on numerous artifacts including some with engraved inscriptions linking the name of the God of the Old Testament, Yah-

weh, with "his Asherah." Asherah in ancient Hebrew may refer to a goddess or to a tree, though Dever says the tree was used as a symbol of the goddess, and that it seems forced to assume that anyone was asking blessings from God and his tree.

Dever also argues that the many terra-cotta female figurines found around the region symbolized Asherah. She was a popular goddess.

Four biblical scholars argued against Dever's claims. One made a point of noting that the figurines were not necessarily of Asherah or any goddess. They could be lucky charms or magical items representing mortal women. The critics had some other points to pick but they didn't take issue with the idea that the worship of one god — monotheism — sprang up in a polytheistic world. Nor did

they argue against the idea that many other gods and goddesses were married — Isis and Osiris, Zeus and Hera.

Most of the figurines and inscriptions Dever uses as evidence date back to the time when the Old Testament was being written, he says, but the mandate to the Israelites to worship only one God hadn't reached many people. Some lived in remote places, and

many couldn't read. They continued to practice "folk religions," as Dever put it, in which the mother queen goddess Asherah played a big role.

Would a god-goddess couple give us mortals a better sense of equality and sharing? While a single male God seems a bit degrading to women, referring to God as She seems forced and as problematic as referring to him as He.

After quoting a number of

feminist scholars arguing for a female deity, Dever then quotes his 5-year-old stepdaughter explaining why God must be both "a man and a woman."

It's because, she said, "half the people in the world are women and God has to be for everybody."

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