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In the Wake of the Goddesses: Theology, the Humanities, and the Education of Seminarians[1]

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Abstract: Tikva Frymer Kensky's book "In the Wake of the Goddesses" is a repository of theological ideas of enormous use to clergy-in-training. This article examines the book's usefulness, in both Jewish and Christian Seminary contexts, as a trigger for thoughtful discussion, as a convenient source of valuable perspectives on multiple biblical cultural contexts, and as an exemplar of the great themes in humanistic education.

Most of Tikva Frymer-Kensky's full-time academic appointments were at institutions that prepared clergy for service, and clergy education was a passionate vocation for Tikva, who had strong ideas about what constituted appropriate clerical training. The topic of this paper would have been close to her heart. Here, I would like to address the value of *In the Wake of the Goddesses* for clergy education in both Jewish and Christian seminaries. Specifically, I would like to discuss the value of *In the Wake of the Goddesses* for what is called, in some circles, the 'formation' of clergy.

Clergy formation deals with the intersection between knowledge and practice. It is the conscious process of helping clergy-in-training to integrate intellectual knowledge, pastoral skills, and professional identity. As one minister has written about his seminary teachers and mentors, the best in clergy education models ways for students' heads, hands, and hearts to work together.[2]

The most recent and authoritative study of clergy education in America, produced for the Carnegie Foundation by Charles R. Foster and his colleagues in 2005, examined the education and "formation" of clergy-in-training in a variety of Christian and Jewish seminaries and theological schools.[3] This book, *Educating Clergy*, identifies three apprenticeship models currently in practice in American seminaries of all faiths and denominations.

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[1] *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth*, by Tikva Frymer-Kensky (Toronto: Free Press, (1991) 292 pp., $24.95). This article originated as a panel paper in the Assyriology and the Bible Section of the SBL Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA, November 19, 2007. I wish to acknowledge my students during the spring and fall of 2007 for their comments on the value of this book in their own clerical training, especially Medora Geary and Heather Sisk of General Theological Seminary (Episcopal) New York, NY, and Jill Hackell of the Academy for Jewish Religion, Riverdale NY.

[2] C. Scharen in review of Charles R. Foster, et. al, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), at www.yale.edu/faith/downloads/Educating%20Clergy%20Review.pdf

[3] Charles R. Foster, et. al, Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006

The first is the cognitive apprenticeship, the intellectual development of clergy that exposes them to the scholarly tradition and gives them the knowledge base they need.

This apprenticeship is the premiere focus of academically based programs that are the American norm today. Subjects related to the cognitive apprenticeship for clergy-in-training are given most weight by seminaries of all faith denominations, and are most often taught by tenured senior faculty.

The second apprenticeship is the skills apprenticeship, focusing on specific professional clerical and pastoral skills that clergy will need in the 'real world.' Foster calls this second apprenticeship 'pastoral imagination.'[4] Pastoral imagination offers "a way of seeing into and interpreting the world that permeates and shapes clergy practice."[5] It encourages student clergy to strive for moral integrity and social justice. This apprenticeship is less valued than the first by seminaries of all kinds. Often these courses are taught by adjunct faculty in the academy.

The third apprenticeship is that of the professional identity of clergy-in-training. This apprenticeship is left to ad-hoc mentors—exceptional faculty members or senior clergy--who help clergy-in-training develop ways that they view themselves as professionals, and how they reflect upon their own professional identities.[6] Unlike the first two apprenticeships, this one can only partially be addressed within the walls of a seminary. The need to develop professional identity is generally addressed, for example, by requiring clergy-in-training to participate in internships and mentorships. These allow students to begin to integrate the cognitive and practical skills into their own sense of who they are as rabbis, ministers, pastors, or priests.

For the cognitive and the skills apprenticeships, the first two elements of pastoral formation that can most readily be acquired within Seminary walls, Tikva's book can be an indispensable tool in the skilled hands of clerical educators.

Let me begin with the cognitive apprenticeship, which features the most connections between the book and clerical education.

The first and most obvious contribution of the book to the knowledge base of clergy in training is evidence that, theologically as well as culturally, the Bible emerges out of a particular cultural context in the ancient Near East. Tikva's survey in the first part of the book provides a context for the evolution of the Bible based on informed readings of ancient Near Eastern texts, and functions as a corrective for the idea of religious orthodoxy that the Bible emerges from the Divine, *ex nihilo*, in a cultural vacuum.

Tikva presents a thorough overview of Mesopotamian religion, using literary, sociological, and anthropological methodologies in her analyses of original Sumerian and Akkadian texts. Her methods are exemplary for scholars as well as for theologians. For instance, a colleague of Tikva's, Dr. Stephen A. Geller, who himself teaches Rabbis and Cantors at the Jewish Theological Seminary, said of Tikva's survey of Mesopotamian religion: "Perfectly clear and uncluttered, it is probably the best factually based survey of Sumero-Akkadian religion available today."[7] According to a review by Ronald Hendel, *In The Wake of the Goddesses* is a book for

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[4] Language borrowed from Lilly Endowment's VP for Religion, Craig Dykstra, see Foster, *Educating Clergy*, p.12 and *passim*.

[5] Foster, *Educating Clergy*, p.13.

[6] Foster, Educating Clergy, pp.7-8, 123-25, and *passim*.

[7] Geller, Stephen A. Review of *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth*, in *Journal of Biblical Literature* Vol. 112, No. 1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 183-190.
Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-9231%28199321%29112%3A1%3C183%3ABR%3E2.0.CO%3B2-C

non-specialists who can learn that the "arcane discipline of Sumerology has much to contribute" to our own contemporary self understanding and theological contemplation.[8] Hendel notes, particularly, Tikva's portrayal of Enheduanna as one among other women, a great poet, priestess, princess. Enheduanna's literary and theological contributions shaped the early arts of religion and letters. Tikva brings Enheduanna to the attention of the non-academic reader both as a historical precursor and also as an ancient feminist role model.

Tikva's survey in the first part of the book provides a context for the evolution of the Bible based on informed readings of ancient Near Eastern texts. In the second section, the book offers models for how the development of Israelite religion out of the Mesopotamian religious matrix might have occurred. In both sections, Tikva's work offers a grounded antidote for traditional pietistic readings of the Bible as *sui generis*, and offers theological students evidence that religious practice and theological ideas can and do mutate, evolve, and change over time.

The next, and most often noted, cognitive contribution of the book is to Feminist and Gender awareness. *In the Wake of the Goddesses* integrates "feminist" into the study af ancient texts, and also into "academic" and "theological" discourses. In doing so, it serves as a model for students in their own theological thinking, and in their readings of sacred texts.

A corollary contribution of this book to the education of clergy is as an antidote to any 'sentimental goddess-ism' that students may bring with them to seminary.[9] In Part I, "The World of the Goddesses," Tikva extrapolates the life situations of the cultures that produced the texts that she reads. The original Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian texts describe the mundane, perhaps even obvious, goddess roles of mother, lover, sister, wife, weaver, potter, culture-keeper. They also describe the less-common goddess roles of ruler, warrior, savior, and hard-driving, hard-drinking colleague of the major gods. For Frymer-Kensky, the relationships between the gods and goddesses in these ancient texts reflect gender relationships in those cultures. As Tikva writes of the role of the goddess within the male religious mainstream, "There were many goddesses; they were not enshrined in a religion of women, but in the official religion of male-dominated societies; they were not evidence of ancient mother-worship, but served as an integral part of a religious system that mirrored and provided the sacred underpinnings of patriarchy."[10]

Tikva offers a nuanced view of a social reality that is extremely complex, even in cultures with both male and female divinities, offering a corrective for seminarians who expect a single solution to issues of gender inequality or social imbalance.

These are just a few of the ways that *In the Wake of the Goddesses* contributes to the cognitive skills of clergy-in-training, providing not only content information about Mesopotamian religions, but also adding crucial insights about the origin and evolution of

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[8] Hendel, Ronald. Review of *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth*, in The Jewish Quarterly Review, LXXXVI, Nos 1-2 (July-October, 1995) 213-216. See also Drora Setel's review, in which she writes that it "presents issues and information previously available only to scholars in the field." Setel, Drorah O'Donnell. Review of *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth*, in Whole Earth Review, Summer, 1992
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1510/is_n75/ai_12292479

[9] Freidriksen, Paula, Review of *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth*, in National Review, March 1, 1993
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1282/is_n4_v45/ai_13566677

[10] Drora Setel's review in Whole Earth Review, Summer, 1992, *ITWOTG* p.80.

biblical divinity. In addition, it also offers a critical exploration of the connection between goddesses and gender roles.

But as much as *In the Wake of the Goddesses* contributes to the first formation apprenticeship, the cognitive, it also contributes significantly to the second formation apprenticeship, that of pastoral imagination.[11] Tikva models for students a way of "thinking theologically," thereby encouraging students to do likewise.

For example, Tikva provokes pastoral imagination by posing provocative questions. Looking at the appropriation of goddess functions by male gods, as attested in mythical texts spanning millennia, she asks, for instance, about the ever more limited role of the Feminine Divine: "When we see such a pattern of theological change, we must ask whether the religious imagery is leading society, or whether it is following socioeconomic development? Was the supplanting of goddesses in Sumerian religious texts an inner theological development that resulted purely from....the model of an imperial state in which women paid no real political role?"[12]

By asking these questions, the ancient example of the devolution of women's social role becomes an object lesson for today's clergy-in-training: when social gains are taken for granted, they may be lost over time. Contemporary seminary students can learn a hard lesson from this example. Freedoms enjoyed today by any group can, with time and lack of vigilance, be compromised or even lost. In order to preserve hard-won freedoms, as priests, ministers, and rabbis, today's seminarians will have to live the dictum that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."[13]

There is another way that Tikva encourages the pastoral imagination of clergy-in-training. In her analysis of male and female divinities in the ancient world, Tikva offers students an extraordinary way to view the image of God as a model for contemporary pastoral work. She writes:

> When modeling is done by the divine, the modeling does not simply illustrate; it authorizes and approves what it models. This is a powerful two-edged sword. On the one hand, divine modeling for women's family roles gives women esteem within these roles so that these roles become a source of self-satisfaction and nourishment. On the other hand, this same divine modeling makes cultural attitudes and stereotypes part of the realm of the sacred, lending powerful support to these attitudes, and inhibiting change.[14]

It is necessary for clergy-in-training to be aware of the different images of the divine that are available to draw upon in their work.

On the one hand, the image of a genderless God who shares power with humanity can be an inspiring trigger for social change. Clergy who have learned to identify and articulate these images of the divine have powerful tools at hand; these models of the divine can focus social change, inspire social justice, and trigger self-reflectiveness for future congregations.

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[11] See above, fn 5.

[12] *ITWOTG*, p.79 and n.29.

[13] Wendell Phillips, speech in Boston, Massachusetts, January 28, 1852.—*Speeches Before the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society*, p. 13 (1853). *The Home Book of Quotations*, ed. Burton Stevenson, 9th ed., p. 1106 (1964), notes that "It has been said that Mr. Phillips was quoting Thomas Jefferson, but in a letter dated 14 April, 1879, Mr. Phillips wrote: '"Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty" has been attributed to Jefferson, but no one has yet found it in his works or elsewhere.' It has also been attributed to Patrick Henry." www.bartleby.com/73/1073.html

[14] *ITWOTG*, p.25

On the other hand, the ancient Near Eastern examples of the erosion of the power of goddesses, and the arrogation of their powers by male gods, are also a cautionary tale of how rights and privileges taken for granted today may erode and be lost if not actively defended.

However, Tikva's most provocative stimulus to the apprenticeship of pastoral imagination challenges clergy-in-training to participate in an "unfinished agenda of biblical religion" that she calls "religious humanism."[15]

In Part II of the book, after examining the God of Israel's 'radical monotheism,' as expressed in the Deuteronomic, and, to a lesser extent, the Priestly theology,[16] Tikva concludes that this is not a masculinization of the Divine, but, rather, an 'attempt to desexualize religion entirely.' Geller writes of Tikva's argument, "there is no doubt that Yahweh is portrayed in biblical texts as as sexless as the age could conceive,....without consort, kin, prurient passions."[17] The God of Israel is male in grammatical but not in natural gender. As a result of the theology of divine transcendence, the God of Israel is beyond nature, as promulgated by the Deuteronomist in the 8th and 7th centuries b.c.e.

This proposition is provocative enough, but, in addition, it also reveals a less expected, bolder, yet more "reformed and subtle conclusion distinguishes the book from more polemical feminist positions."[18] Geller goes on to note that Tikva does not advocate a 'refeminization' of contemporary religion, reversing the progressive marginalization of females from Sumerian to biblical religion and beyond. Instead she "pleads for the modern realization of the implicit aim of biblical desexualization: true equality."[19]

In effect, this desexualization of God models for students the possibility of positing a gender-free theology.

Geller concludes that this less expected, bolder, yet more "reformed and subtle conclusion distinguishes the book from more polemical feminist positions."[20]

Tikva challenges theological students of all denominations and faith streams to build upon the biblical models of Divine gender neutrality, and of human partnership with God. This idea, derived as it is from Tikva's reading of biblical religion, has the power to energize the commitment to social justice of clergy-in-training, who now have a paradigm for working within the existing religious cultural context for making change. At the same time, Tikva is radically modeling for seminary students the skills of asking new questions of familiar material, of being open to surprising and unconventional answers, and of never falling back upon the expected.

Geller notes that Tikva is unflinching in her examination of both the positive and negative implications of monotheistic rejection of the religious dimension of sexuality. In Tikva's biblical reading, women and men are equal ontologically, from their creation. It is only circumstantially, through social and cultural conditions, that women are subordinate to men. In the Bible, she writes, women "are not inferior [to men] in any intellectual or spiritual way." Tikva finds misogyny, any sense of a 'battle between the sexes' to be absent from the biblical text.

The negative implication of the monotheistic rejection of the religious dimension of sexuality is that it leaves a vacuum in biblical religion surrounding a major area of human concern. Aside from prohibitions relating to who may have sexual relations with whom and at

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[15] *ITWOTG*, p.219.

[16] On DTR and P reference, see Geller, review in *JBL* 112, No. 1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 183-190, who calls this idea 'one of the author's most significant insights.'

[17] Restating Tikva's proposition, in Geller review, *JBL* 112, No. 1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 183-190.

[18] Geller, review in *JBL* 112, No. 1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 183-190.

[19] Geller, review in *JBL* 112, No. 1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 183-190.

[20] Geller, review in *JBL* 112, No. 1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 183-190.

what times, the area of human sexuality is disregarded in the Bible—it is neither celebrated nor condemned, neither sacralized nor profaned. It is simply ignored.

In Part III of her book, Tikva asserts that Greek misogyny is responsible for the overtly anti-feminine attitudes in classical Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.[21] Tikva's exploration of the impact of Hellenistic culture on later biblical interpretation enables students to separate out the misogyny of the Greeks that entered Rabbinic discourse. Students are then free, in their own theological exploration, to draw upon, build upon, the original biblical models of divine gender neutrality and human equality. These readings offer to clergy-in-training an ideal to strive for in their own congregations as well as in society at large.

But some critics have suggested that Tikva lets the Bible off the hook too easily with regard to its anti-feminine bias.[22] Geller, for example, challenges her downplaying of the biblical metaphor of apostasy, expressed as 'whoring,' embodied in the feminine sexual seductions of Israel by Canaanite women.[23] Tikva asserts that there was probably not a basis in reality to the idea of a Canaanite fertility sex-cult that was an ever-present seduction to Israelite men. Nevertheless, Geller suggests that Tikva does not fully acknowledge the potentially harmful impact that such an anti-feminine metaphor can have, reality-based or not.[24] Geller also asserts that Eve, for example, is a model of female enticement to sin as presented in the Bible. This image needs to be addressed more fully, adding nuance to the function of 'culture bearer' that Tikva asserts for Eve.[25] In short, Geller suggests that the "vaccuum' of monotheistic desexualization of the divine was not as complete as Tikva makes out, and that Hellenism was not the only villain."[26]

It is good for seminary students to look at and wrestle with these issues, to read and evaluate respectful critique, to examine critically both the biblical text and even learned feminist texts like this one, to be able to ask their own questions and to begin to hammer out some of their own responses.

Tikva advocates the theological idea of "Religious Humanism."[27] This idea emerges out of Tikva's insight that the God of Israel absorbed all the forces of nature formerly assumed by the polytheistic pantheon of the ancient Near East.[28] "In the absence of other divine beings," she writes, "God's audience, partners, foils, and competitors are all human beings, and it is on their interaction with God that the world depends."[29] In the absence of other Gods, "it is up to *humanity* to insure that the foundations of the earth do not totter.

The way to do this is right behavior and social justice."[30] Tikva calls this "monotheist conceptualization of the world" a "stark philosophy of action."[31] As the biblical prophets emphasize, Israel's welfare does not depend on worship rituals. She writes: "Even the officially prescribed sacrificial worship can not ensure peace and fertility. Only non-ritual activity—

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[21] Specifically noted by Hendel, review in *JQR*, LXXXVI, Nos 1-2 (July-October, 1995) 213-216.
[22] Geller, review in *JBL* 112, No. 1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 183-190.
[23] Geller, review in *JBL* 112, No. 1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 183-190.
[24] Geller, review in *JBL* 112, No. 1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 183-190.
[25] Geller, review in *JBL* 112, No. 1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 183-190; *ITWOTG*, p.110-111.
[26] Geller, review in *JBL* 112, No. 1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 183-190.
[27] *ITWOTG*, p.219.
[28] *ITWOTG*, p.107.
[29] *ITWOTG*, p.107.
[30] *ITWOTG*, p.106.
[31] *ITWOTG*, p.105.

fidelity and ethical behavior—brings about the wellbeing of the people."[32] Such a view places the emphasis on humanity's moral responsibility, what Tikva calls 'religious humanism.'[33]

I cannot imagine a statement that better represents the integration of knowledge, skills, and self-identity for clergy-in-training. The integration of text study, social action, and the conviction that one's God-given role in the world is to be an agent of positive change are all modeled here.

The sacred work of making the world a better place speaks to clergy-in-training in a message that resonates from the ancient world to our own. Drora Setel, who also reviewed *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, summarized these ideas in what might be taken as a clarion call to today's seminarians:

> In Israel's philosophy of culture, humans have a greater role in the development and maintenance of the array of powers, functions, occupations and inventions that constitute civilized life than they ever did in ancient Near Eastern myth. Biblical thought urges Israel to devote these powers to God-centered and Godwilled activities, to organize the secular world in the direction of the holy. But the Bible recognizes that the origin of this secular world is indeed secular, that humanity has created civilization and continues to develop it.[34]

This idea, this unfinished agenda, derived as it is from Tikva's reading of biblical religion, has the power to energize the commitment to social justice of clergy-in-training, who now have a paradigm for working within the existing religious cultural context for making change.

The sacred work of making the world a better place speaks to clergy-in-training in a message that resonates from the ancient world to our own. As our students begin this work, it is important to keep in mind a maxim from the collection of Rabbinic wisdom known as Ethics of the Fathers that we teach our Rabbinical students: [35]

Rabbi Tarphon used to say, ***Lo alechah ha-mamlachah ligmor, ve'lo ata ben chorin le-hibbatel mimenah***; "You are not required to complete the task, yet neither are you free to withdraw from it."

This is the challenge that Tikva poses as an 'unfinished agenda' in Part III of *In the Wake of the Goddesses*. In a very real sense, this is the task of educating clergy, just as it is the lifelong mission of the rabbis, ministers, and priests we ordain. And, in a very real sense, this is the task of Tikva's life and work. Tikva modeled the value of the integration of text study, social action, and the conviction that one's God-given role in the world is to be an agent of positive change.

Also modeled in this book is the idea that all the work is not yet done, that there is more to be thought about and discovered and published and acted upon. Tikva did not live to complete the task; And she certainly did not withdraw from it. She left it to us to pick up where her labor ended, as we do with our students, the clergy-in-training who are the next generation of religious and theological leaders.

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[32] *ITWOTG*, p.105-6.
[33] *ITWOTG*, p.219.
[34] Drora Setel, review in Whole Earth Review, Summer, 1992
[35] Pirkei Avot 2:21. "The Ethics of the Fathers' is available at the back of most Orthodox Jewish prayer books. Conveniently in Hebrew and English, see *The Pirkei Avos/Ethics of the Fathers Treasury: The Sages Guide to Living*, Brooklyn, NY:Artscroll/Mesorah Publications, 1995.