

# Can symbols be ‘promoted’ or ‘demoted’?: Symbols as religious phenomena

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Religious symbols are part of our world, relating to another world. In order to understand the process by which symbols grow and develop, the particular context of a symbol is important. In this article a particular theory as to what symbols are, is presented. Religion presupposes the existence of two worlds: this-worldly (profane) and the other-worldly (sacred). The means of communication and reference between these two worlds are symbols. Two examples are investigated so as to indicate how symbols can over time either be demoted or promoted. In the case of the Asherah and asherah as related in the Old Testament a demotion of a symbol is illustrated. The growth of ancient Egyptian religion is an example of a possible promotion of symbols. The conditions under which these processes can occur are investigated.

## Introduction

The existence of symbols is as old as the existence of *homo sapiens*. Dillistone (1986:15) refers to the thought process which takes place by indicating how a symbol (a word or an object) awaits to be connected to the referent, that which is encountered through the senses. Humans are according to Dillistone the only species able to make such connections. It is however not clear on what proof Dillistone bases this claim.

It would then not be wrong to say that symbols are man-made. No other living being on earth utilises symbols. This particular human invention operates within different spheres. Rolf (2006:5) identifies the following ways in which the concept ‘symbol’ can be applied. Symbols refer to:

- conventional signs
- signs of replacements or representations
- the totality of the transcendental
- to call to mind a larger body.

These functions can operate within the following spheres (Rolf 2006:5):

- Linguistics (language theory): the written and spoken language as symbols in relationship to our thoughts.
- Knowledge theory: the quality of our knowledge and the way in which we come to this knowledge.
- Art theory: a philosophical analysis of what art is and how the incomprehensible can be expressed.
- Sign theory: the function, types and relationship of signs; how they represent, replace and refer.
- Consciousness theory: how to describe the function of the unconsciousness in terms of its psychological ability to relate to social concepts or religious realities. Symbols can assist in understanding mental concepts in and beyond consciousness.
- Social theory: to explain the existence of constitutive elements in society.

To summarise, Rolf (2006:7) defines symbols as that concept that is used when a case is concerned with the ‘representation of the un-representable’. All aspects of the human condition which refer to elements ‘from the other side’, are signified by the concept of the symbol (Rolf 2006:7).

No clear definition of what a symbol is has yet been given. The problem of a definition will be addressed in the first part of the article. The more important question the current research undertakes is to determine whether symbols can be promoted or demoted. This question is concerned with the ability of a symbol to become more than what it is. Can symbols change in status? Can a symbol indeed replace that which it represents and so take on a different form of existence? Two experiments will be conducted to test this theory. One example is taken from the deities of ancient Egypt and a second example from the Old Testament concerned with the goddess Asherah. In the final part of this research an attempt will be made to determine what the ideal conditions would be under which symbols could be promoted or demoted.

The scope of this research is within the field of symbols as religious phenomena. A theological evaluation of symbols will be necessary.

## Theory of symbol

There seems to be general consensus amongst scholars that, when studying religion a dualistic world view is a prerequisite. Durkheim (2008:36) indicates how religions differentiate between two realms of reality, the sacred and the profane. Religion is concerned with the way in which humans living in this-worldly reality and relate to a dimension of existence in an other-worldly reality. Weber (1968:404) attests to this when he states that the realm of souls, demons and gods can only be presented in a transcendental existence. Compare in this regard Eliade's differentiation between the sacred and profane realities ([1957] 1987). This-worldly reality considers the world in which humans conduct everyday activities; an ordered, 'cosmicized, consecrated world' (Eliade [1957] 1987:29). The other-worldly is seen as the realm of spiritual existence; a chaotic, foreign world inhabited by demons, spirits and souls (Eliade [1957] 1987:29). The sacral sphere does however not exist objectively. It is socially constructed (Bellah 2011:3), meaning that the way in which the sacral sphere is perceived is determined by social agreement.

The definition by Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh (1985:11) of religion is helpful in this regard: 'Religion is a varied, symbolic expression of, and appropriate response to, that which people deliberately affirm as being of unrestricted value for them.' At the base of this definition lies the assumption of the existence of two worlds: A visible world in which we live, and an invisible world to which we relate and respond. The way in which this response and relation is expressed is by way of symbols. Heumann (1983:11) prefers to say that symbols refer to elements on the periphery of society. Symbols are then assigned to religion, sub-cultures or tradition (Heumann 1983:11). Symbols become keys for unlocking the invisible world as well as a medium of expressing the relationship with the religious reality. Symbols come from the visible, ordinary world or territory we live in, but point to something mysterious and unknown. Symbols represent that which we assume to exist in the religious reality or territory. As Dillistone (1986:13) puts it, symbols connect two worlds: the world of the greater, transcendental or the ultimate, the world of ideals, reality, values, convictions and concepts to the world of words, objects, actions, rituals and people. Weber (1968:404) indicates how the transcendental world is only accessible through symbols.

Eliade ([1957] 1987:30) indicates how people consider cosmoising a territory equal to consecrating that territory. The act of consecrating and cosmoising takes place in various forms. Eliade ([1957] 1987:33) refers to one particular instance where the god of a tribe made a sacred pole and anointed it with blood. This pole represented a cosmic axis. The world around this pole was inhabitable due to its connection to the sky above. Orientation towards the surrounding world takes place by identifying the centre, represented by a mountain or a tree (Eliade 1961:42). This image will later in this study become important when the asherah is discussed in more detail.

This dual world view presented by Hall *et al.* (1985) and elaborated on by Eliade ([1957] 1987) seems to be at the basis of understanding religion (cf. Bellah 2011:5). This dualism is however extended by Bellah's suggestion of the existence of multiple realities (Bellah 2011:2). Bellah differentiates between the main spheres as the 'working reality' (a term Bellah borrows from Alfred Schutz 1945) – where humans live their daily lives – and the reality concerned with religion. Man can at times 'escape' the working reality by engaging in experiences such as watching television, a movie or a play. These activities seem less real than our 'working reality'. Other such escapism activities identified by Bellah (2011:3) are sleeping, dreaming, travelling, daydreaming, watching a movie, praying or meditating.

The 'working reality' where humans spend the majority of their time is socially constructed. Compare in this regard Peter Berger's theory of world building as a way in which man constructs the world we live in (Berger 1990:8). Every culture creates its own world and by doing so creates differentiated realities. The reality a human is engaged in when practising religion, is one of the multiple realities identified by Bellah. This religious reality is also socially constructed and therefore leads to multiple religious realities (Bellah 2011:5).

Symbols become the keys to unlock the hidden reality in the religious world enabling communication between the two worlds. Symbols are the keys to unlock the transcendental or sacral reality. Symbols have their origin in the 'working reality' (this-worldly reality), but refer to elements in the other-worldly reality (religious world). Any element in the 'working reality' is a potential symbol (Bellah 2011:8) as it can be used to relate to the other-worldly.

It is however not as simple as to suggest the use of symbols to refer to the communication between two distinct but linked worlds. Eliade, looking at it from a theological perspective, suggests that symbols are the intermediary medium between the profane and the sacred. Bellah on the other hand, working from a psychological perspective, understands symbols as a possible way of connecting with other realities.

For Bellah (2011:19) the function of symbols is either the representation *of* something or the representation *for* something. If the symbol represents something, the symbol exists independently in our minds and independently of the 'something' it represents. An image recalls the existence of something and merely reminds of its existence. Making something immanently present is to understand that the symbol is being representative of that which it represents. The symbol not only represents but also makes present.

Symbols are however not identical to that which they refer to, nor do they share in the same substance (cf. Toynbee in Dillistone 1986:12). The function of symbols is not to reproduce but to illuminate (Dillistone 1986:13). Symbols become instruments which assist the human mind in understanding. Symbols are therefore a guide to reality and

not a photocopy of reality. In some cases symbols can indeed be confused with the actual reality. This is the difference between representation *of* and representation *for* something. This concept will later on in this article explain part of the process that took place in the religions of Israel and Egypt.

The sociological approach by Bellah and the theological approach by Eliade are not the only perspectives from which symbols can be explained. The origin of symbols can be explained from different perspectives.

## Origin of symbols

As to where the origin of symbols lies, Biezais (1979:xi) clearly states that such a question has no answer. There is no possibility to indicate exactly the purpose of the symbolic figures primitive man drew on cave walls. Were these pictures an indication of a pleasurable pastime or the expression of the awareness and experience of some transcendental existence in a different reality? Since the purpose of such drawings is unclear it is impossible to answer this question (Biezais 1979:xi). It is however possible to explain the existence, the phenomena of symbols from different perspectives. This will be the attempt in the rest of this paragraph.

Dillistone (1986:16–18) explains how symbols originated in pre-historic communities. According to Dillistone it is possible that primitive man used hand signals during hunting. A complex system of signs came into being built on past experiences during hunting. The change in culture from hunter-gatherer to sedentary agricultural communities brought about a change in symbols used. Agriculture needed a new set of symbols associated with, for instance fertility and the change of seasons.

There seem to have been two processes that served as sources for the origin of symbols. A process of complex communication signals amongst hunter communities and a second process of communication in development, organisation and production activities associated with agricultural communities.

It is necessary to differentiate between *sign/signal* and *symbol* to avoid confusion. Cassirer (1945:64) sees sign and signal as synonyms – the opposite of symbols.

Fawcett (1970:27) explains that signs are created by the creative human imagination as opposed to symbols which evolve independently and ‘impinge’ on man’s being. Dupre (2000:1) clearly states that all symbols are signs. Signs however are ‘forms which refer to something that is not directly given’ whereas symbols are signs representing something (Dupre 2000:1). Fawcett (1970:28) elucidates this by indicating that signs point to one object only, as opposed to symbols which can refer to a variety of things. Symbols do not merely refer or point towards that which is signified, as signs do. Symbols represent, they in fact ‘make present’ and ‘take the place of’, thus replacing and becoming that which is signified (Dupre 2000:1). Symbols have a mediating function which signs do not possess. To this distinction Dillistone (1986:8)

adds the function that signs and signals want to transform whereas symbols do not necessarily want to transform. Signs want to bring about change and reaction, which symbols do not necessarily intend. Symbols carry meaning in themselves and therefore can be present without causing a change. Symbols are indeed versatile and are able to be applied to different situations (Fawcett 1970:28; Cassirer 1945:36).

There are several ways to describe the origin of symbols. What follows here are five different perspectives of understanding symbols: a morphological analysis is followed by a mythological explanation which is followed by philosophical, psychological and theological approaches.

## Morphology

The word *symbol* comes from the Greek word *symbolon* – ‘a sign or a mark to infer a thing’. It can also mean to connect two pieces (Liddell & Scott 1968b:1676). Dillistone (1986:14) recalls the origin of the word as follows: The context of the meaning of symbol is a social environment where two parties would engage in establishing a contract. To signify the binding effect of the responsibilities of the two parties an object would be broken into two parts. Each party keeps a half. When the other party is called upon to act on its responsibility both parties would bring the two parts. The two halves forming a unity again were called *symbola* (cf. Liddell & Scott 1968b:1676). Thus the word ‘symbol’ came to refer to an object, a sign or a word used by two parties to indicate reciprocal responsibility and simultaneously calling into mind a shared meaning.

Originally *symbola* referred to two parts of the same substance, being identical to one another. Dillistone (1986:14) indicates how, through gradual development, the two parts not necessarily had to be of the same substance or same form. The two parts were still able to represent or recall that which is symbolised.

Aristotle understood human language as *symbola* (Rolf 2006:12). Language is a sign (expression) of pre-determined meaning.

## Mythology

The origin of the word *symbol* can also be explained according to mythology. Rolf (2006:3) recalls a myth told by Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium*. The myth tells how man apparently had four arms and legs, a head and two faces with four ears. Due to this superior appearance man became overconfident. The gods decided to teach man a lesson – they divided man into two parts. From now on man would be incomplete, consisting only of the part it once was. Man now is only one part, a *symbolon* (Greek) of a human being. Man constantly is in search of his other half.

From this it seems as if the word symbol came to refer to two distinct elements that once were undivided parts of one another. The one calls to mind the other. Even when only one is present, the other is assumed to be referred to.

## Philosophy

Any explanation of symbols implies a dualism. Symbols are visible expressions of an invisible reality. Dupre (2000:3) differentiates between appearance and content. The appearance, Dupre says, veils and simultaneously reveals the content (Dupre 2000:3). The content is mediated by a symbol (Dupre 2000:3). The human mind, according to Dupre, is in need to express itself in sensuous form. The function therefore of a symbol is to enable the mind to express itself (Dupre 2000:3). There are two poles: the symbolic reality and the reality of that which is symbolised (Biezais 1979:xii). The symbol however contains a 'surplus of meaning' (Dupre 2000:3) and is not simplistic in the sense that it merely refers to one aspect. This duality and relationship between the two poles can be shown (Table 1).

There are certain thought processes at work when establishing a symbol. Compare Dupre's (2000:4–5) analysis of Kant's explanation of the process of the mind to connect the appearance (symbol) with the content. Dillistone (1986:15) refers to this thought process by showing how a symbol (a word or an object) awaits to be connected to the referent, that which is encountered through the senses. Humans are according to Dillistone the only species able to make such connections.

Aristotle's view on symbols operates according to Rolf (2006:11) in the context of linguistics. Aristotle explains the relationship between human speech and human thought with symbols. The audible spoken word is a symbolic expression of the thought in the human mind. Written text then becomes the symbols of spoken words (Rolf 2006:11). The conclusion Rolf comes to is that Aristotle presents a process of symbolising symbols: written words symbolise spoken words. Spoken words symbolise experiences in the mind. Written texts are therefore symbols of symbols.

Aristotle's theory is concerned with human thought as reaction to the surroundings of man. According to Aristotle the constants to which man is exposed are man's surroundings which remain similar. Human thoughts as representation of surroundings are similar. The variable is however human speech which differs according to language differences (Rolf 2006:11). The letters that are written are a mark or a sign (*semeia* – Greek, cf. Liddell & Scott [1986] s.v. *semeion*, as opposed to *sema* [singular] referring to a sign or mark or token) and not symbols (*sumbola* – Greek). Aristotle refers to marks and signs (*semeia*) as symbols (*sumbola*). According to Aristotle words are primarily signs of thoughts and secondarily signs for things.

**TABLE 1:** Symbols and their meaning.

Symbol	That which is symbolised
Appearance	Content
Recognisable	Unrecognisable
Visible	Invisible
Present	Absent
Immanent	Transcendent
Significant	Significate
Reference	Referent

One of the complicating factors in understanding symbols is the fact that symbols as real perceivable objects refer to invisible unperceivable objects. Symbols can be seen as expressions of the unseen, expressions of the un-representable or expressions of the non-existing. In this regard *Plato* provides a solution. Symbols should be seen as referring to something 'non-existing' – '*Nichtseiende*'. This is not the opposite of being – '*Seienden*', but refers to something which is different from it (Rolf 2006:285). The unique nature of the inhabitants of the transcendental world is illustrated by this view.

*Cassirer's* thoughts also provide direction on this matter. According to Biezais (1979:viii) Cassirer's understanding of symbols grew from his idealistic philosophy. According to Rolf (2006:60) Cassirer's theory of the symbol is based on his understanding of epistemology. Cassirer apparently focussed his research of symbols on the psychology of speech and ethnological material (cf. Cassirer 1965a, 1965b). This in turn implies that his theory of culture cannot be seen as separate from his epistemology (Rolf 2006:60). Cassirer maintained the theory that the field that studies the forms of symbols continuously develops (1965a:74). This development follows the track from a discernable meaningful reality, towards a mythical understanding of the world, towards religion (Biezias 1979:viii). Philosophy of religion is according to Cassirer, the latest development. The purpose of philosophy of religion is to explain the dualism between an empirical world and a non-empirical world (Biezias 1979:viii).

Scholars differ on the matter as to whether symbols as visible signs in this empirical (physical) world refer only to invisible elements in the other-worldly (metaphysical, spiritual) reality. This position would assume the existence of two worlds, one visible and the other invisible. Cassirer suggests a different understanding.

According to Cassirer (1965a:73) symbols do not require an understanding of the metaphysical world. Symbols so to speak jump the fence. Symbols neither belong to the immanent (physical) nor the transcendental (spiritual) world (Cassirer 1965a:73). The value of symbols lies therein that symbols conquer the dualism stemming from a metaphysical two-world view. Symbols do not operate in one or the other of these two worlds. Symbols are one in the world and the world in one (Biezais 1979:viii). The form (symbol) does not present the issue, the form is the issue (Rolf 2006:70; Cassirer 1965b:51). The value of symbols, whether language, myth, science or art (Levesque 1997:66), does not lie in the fact that in symbols an other-worldly existence is somewhere reflected. Symbols much rather possess an own, inner, independent world of meaning (Biezias 1979:viii; Levesque 1997:67).

The implication of Cassirer's theory is that the dualism now becomes a triple world: the metaphysical world as the first, the immanent visible world as the second, and then the world of symbols as a separate world on its own. Humans live in an 'image-world', as Cassirer puts it (1965a:111). Dillistone (1986:120) calls this a 'symbolic universe' in which man resides. The only access to 'objective truth' is the

activity of the human spirit (Cassirer 1965a:111). We know our world merely through the images we create of it in our minds. Therefore human existence in the world becomes an existence by way of symbolic presentation. Man is indeed according to Cassirer an 'animal symbolicum' (1945:26). Our being is defined by our ability to create symbols.

Cassirer's theory stands in opposition to Bellah's and Eliade's ([1957] 1987) assumption that any element within this-worldly reality can become a symbol of and for the other-worldly. The source for symbols is the world we know. We make use of elements familiar to us to represent something unfamiliar to us. The meanings of symbols are assigned meanings. Cassirer claims that symbols carry meaning in themselves (Levesque 1997:65).

Who determines what becomes a symbol? The process of selection of symbols is important (Biezais 1979:xiii). The process is however arbitrary and subjective. Each community identifies elements to become symbols or stop being symbols.

## Psychology

Symbols appear to be part of man's existence in the world. They are built into man's experience (Fawcett 1970:27). Social life, Durkheim (2008:176) says, is only possible thanks to the vast body of symbolism. Psychologists like C.G. Jung (cf. Fawcett 1970:27) suggest that symbols must be universal in past, present and future. The underlying theory is that similar mental processes in humans make use of a common set of symbols that exist universally. This will lead to the conclusion that all humans have a common experience of symbols and react in a similar fashion to this experience. This theory is however unstable.

Durkheim (2008:317) explains how the realm of the sacred is superimposed on the real world, the profane. This superimposed world is identified as the ideal world. Through several psychological processes man explains the one world in terms of the other (Durkheim 2008:317). These psychological processes, Durkheim (2008:317) describes being the result of social life which reaches a certain level of intensity that awakens religious thought. Energies are overstimulated, passions grow stronger, sensations heighten. Man is being transformed and transforms his surroundings. One superimposes powers from the ideal world onto the profane world. To make these superimposed thoughts about the ideal world accessible in the profane reality, symbols are used.

Symbols are contextual. As has been pointed out in previous paragraphs, symbols are socially constructed. Each construction differs according to the boundaries set by the particular community within which the symbol originates. Different communities identify different elements as symbols. The process, by which it is determined what qualifies as symbols, is a contextual process following social guidelines.

There usually are reasons for new impetus in studying symbols. Biezais (1979:vii) indicates how the interest in

symbols during the 1960s – 1970s was due to the development in psychoanalysis presented by Freud and Jung. Human psychic activities find expression in symbols. The form of these expressions (symbols) is determined by the subconscious. The symbols are in fact determined by contents inherited from previous generations and captured in the collective subconscious of society. Only the forms into which the content is poured are determined by current experiences.

The result, Biezais (1979:vii) points out, is that the relationship between the forms and the content is secondary in nature. The way in which current experiences determine the forms in which the content is presented, is of essential importance. This theory is a variation on Jung's theory in that it assumes that the content remains stable and unchanged due to human experiences in life but that the forms (i.e. symbols) into which these experiences are poured, may differ according to current experiences. This theory at least recognises the existence of varying contexts.

## Theology

Religious symbols form a separate category. Rolf (2006:6) places religious symbols within the broader category of psychoanalysis or phenomenology to indicate the relationship between elements in a state of awareness and a state of unconsciousness. Man crosses over from one state of mind to another, either socially or religiously (Rolf 2006:6).

Tillich ascribes four characteristics to religious symbols (Tillich 1964:196–197). These four characteristics are formulated by Tillich in opposition to Cassirer's description of symbols as if they do not represent two separate worlds, one visible and the other invisible. What follows below is a discussion of the four characteristics as translated by the author (cf. Biezais 1979:ix):

1. *Uneigentlichkeit* – [not the obvious]. This refers to the fact that the mention of the symbol does not obviously refer to the symbol itself but to that which it symbolises.
2. *Anschaulichkeit* – [visibility]. This refers to the ability a symbol has to present something invisible, unclear, ideal or transcendental in the form of a symbol, thereby making something visible, clear and present. That which is presented is not dependent on a visible form for existence.
3. *Selbstmächtigkeit* – [self empowering]. Symbols possess inner power that differentiates them from powerless signs. This characteristic is important when it comes to signs and symbols. Signs can at random be exchanged. Signs are not necessary, as they do not possess inner power. Symbols on the other hand are necessary. They cannot be exchanged. Symbols can disappear when they lose their inner power due to the symbol becoming unimportant. Symbols cannot be discovered, only be created.
4. *Anerkanntheit* – [acknowledged; recognised]. Symbols are socially embedded. Acknowledgment of and becoming a symbol happens simultaneously. To create a symbol is a social act. Acknowledging something as a symbol is a collective act in which society participates.

These characteristics identified by Tillich indicate how symbols as religious phenomena, have the ability to represent

and make present in the this-worldly, the transcendental belonging to the other-worldly. In this regard Biezais (1979:x) makes it clear that symbols in a religious context can only have the function to represent. Symbols can never become the objects of veneration. Symbols point to the object of veneration.

With these characteristics in mind we can turn our attention to the practical examples of symbols as presented in two religions (ancient Israel and Egyptian). The mere fact that symbols connect the this-worldly and the other-worldly, or as Bellah (2011:5) refers to them as the 'religious reality' and the 'daily life', indicates the prominence of symbols as religious phenomena.

The theory that symbols can be a representation *of* or *for* the transcendental will now be investigated by looking at two specific examples. These examples come from the ancient religions of Israel and Egypt. In this context the possibility will be investigated whether symbols can in fact lose their representational function (Biezais 1979:x) and indeed be promoted to become the object of veneration. Or can symbols as representations of the transcendental lose their importance and disappear from the religious sphere and so to speak be demoted?

Tillich (1973:278) indicates how symbols can indeed 'die out' the moment the correlation between the revelation and man stops being adequate. Existing symbols become old the moment the revelation of the transcendental changes. Symbols then become inadequate.

## Asherah

This part of the research intends to test the theory about symbols. Can symbols be 'promoted' or 'demoted', and if so when will this most likely happen? These questions are addressed from the perspective of the science of religion.

Who is Asherah? In studying Israelite religion the name Asherah appears as either the name of a goddess associated with Yahweh or as the name given to a symbolic object with religious significance, or the name might refer in both instances to a goddess as well as a cultic object. The fact of the matter is that Asherah was indeed the name of an ancient Ugaritic deity (Hadley 2000:8).

As exponents of the first theory (Asherah as goddess in Israel), Smith ([1990] 2002:xxxii) identified amongst others Day, Dever, Hadley and Olyan, and opposed to this idea are for example Cross and Emerton. Emerton (1999:335) states that the Biblical reference to 'Yahweh and his 'asherah' most probably refers to Yahweh and a cultic object, thereby indicating that the Biblical reference is concerned with the symbol for the goddess and not the goddess herself.

Smith ([1990] 2002:xxxii) is also of the opinion that there must be a distinction made between the goddess Asherah and the cultic object called asherah. Smith is however convinced that by the time of the Judges the word asherah referred to

a symbol used within the Yahwistic cult and that it did not at that stage symbolise a goddess. This does not mean that Asherah was not previously known as a goddess amongst the Israelites. It merely states that at the time of the monarchy in Israel, Asherah no longer functioned as a goddess and that asherah merely referred to a cultic object. Hadley (2000:7) describes this as a process of evolution how the term asherah indicated a goddess and her symbol and eventually became the designation of a cultic object.

Asherah seems to have been a Canaanite goddess who, just as the god El, never functioned as a separate god within the nation of Israel (Smith [1990] 2002:47). There however exists a possibility that Asherah might have been a goddess worshipped within early Israel (Smith [1990] 2002:48, 51).

Asherah is mentioned to have been closely connected with the god Baal (cf. Jdg 6). There are indications that El and Asherah were considered to be husband and wife as depicted in Ugaritic texts (Smith [1990] 2002:51). This however changed when around 1200–1000 BC Baal and Asherah were finally connected (Smith [1990] 2002:48). Some scholars are of the opinion that Israel's opposition to the Baal cult led to the perception that Asherah was considered to be a consort of Yahweh (cf. Jr 2:27) within a pantheon (cf. 1 Ki 18:19; 2 Ki 21:7; Jdg 3:7). Some even reckon that the cultic objects, which functioned as symbols of Asherah, were accepted within the cult of Yahweh (Smith [1990] 2002:48).

The gods El and Baal could be associated with Yahweh as their titles were made into epithets for Yahweh (Smith [1990] 2002:52). This is possible with male gods. It becomes difficult to associate a female with a male god. The titles and descriptions for the female goddess, Asherah, could not be associated with Yahweh. Smith ([1990] 2002:52) indicates how Olyan explained the connection between Asherah and Yahweh as being based on the connection between Asherah and El, where El was being identified with Yahweh.

The later use of feminine language and cultic symbols associated with Asherah, became disassociated from one another so that the symbols in question in the cult of Yahweh did not refer to the goddess Asherah (Smith [1990] 2002:52). Astarte, a Phoenician goddess by origin, eventually took over the functions of the goddess Asherah. The goddess Asherah did not exercise much influence on the cult of Israel, although the symbol associated with Asherah played a role in Israel's religion.

The asherah, the symbol of the goddess Asherah (Smith [1990] 2002:111), apparently was a wooden pillar of some sort, which was erected besides an altar and came to symbolise a tree (cf. Dt 16:21; Jdg 6:25–26). This might reflect elements of a fertility cult: a tree that grows produces fruit and enables life to exist. Within Mediterranean symbolism a tree was considered a symbol of femininity.

The asherah as a symbol was accepted in Israel (2 Ki 23:4, 6, 7, 15). This does not mean that Asherah was worshipped as a

separate deity but that the symbols associated with Asherah indeed became acceptable symbols within the cult of Yahweh. This does still not exclude the possibility that Asherah (also known as Anat in earlier periods) was indeed worshipped in Israel during an earlier period (Smith [1990] 2002:48) (cf. the titles in Gn 49:24–26 which are connected to Asherah).

Some scholars (as indicated by Hadley 2000:4) understand Asherah only to refer to a wooden object with no relevance to any goddess. Asherah would then, according to Canaanite parallel, refer to a sacred grove, a chapel or shrine (Smith [1990] 2002:112). Scholars holding this view see the texts (Jdg 3:7 & 1 Ki 18:19) that refer to the goddess by this name, as of dubious character. Some scholars (see Hadley 2000:5) understand the asherah to refer to a wooden object, which was considered the symbol for a goddess. Lemaire (in Hadley 2000:5) understands that the majority of Biblical texts that mention asherah, refer to a living tree. Asherah then becomes the technical term that refers to a sacred tree planted next to a shrine or altar. There are however multiple problems with the translation of the asherah in Biblical texts. There is no univocal claim that asherah refers to a wooden object or sacred tree.

The apparent function of the asherah as symbol in Israel was to indicate a place (next to an altar) where a deity could communicate with man (Smith [1990] 2002:115). The asherah also played a healing role (Smith [1990] 2002:117). Parts broken off from the wooden pole (the asherah) could bring about healing. It seems as if the asherah as symbol existed for quite some time within the cult of Yahweh without necessarily referring to the goddess with a similar name.

Eliade ([1957] 1987:33) refers to the concept of an *axis mundi* as the centre for all religious orientation. This axis of the universe was from early times on indicated by a wooden tree or pole planted at a particular place. The holy tree connected the underworld, this world as well as the transcendental spiritual world. The pole made habitation of the area around the pole possible as the pole in fact sacralised the vicinity of the pole (Eliade [1957] 1987:33). In the way in which the pole connected all spheres of reality (the transcendental, the this-worldly and the nether-worldly) the place around the pole became the gateway to the transcendental, enabling communication with the transcendental. In this sense the wooden pole called the asherah, might have played a similar role in the religion of Israel. The name of the goddess Asherah who was originally symbolised by a tree or pole, was associated with this cultic object next to an altar. The goddess was no longer present, but her symbol was. The symbol had a new purpose – to enable communication with Yahweh.

The qualities of Asherah and Yahweh were never reconciled as at times seems to have been the case with Yahweh and El and with Yahweh and Baal (Smith [1990] 2002:48). It is also not likely that a separate cult for Asherah continued to exist besides the official cult of Yahweh.

Here we have to do with the phenomenon of a symbol that replaced the worship of a god (in this case a goddess). The goddess was replaced by the symbol associated with the goddess. The symbol was no longer a symbol *for* Asherah but a symbol *of* Asherah, replacing the goddess in totality. The goddess was now no longer venerated, but the object that was previously the symbol of the goddess. The symbol became a secondary symbol in the sense that it no longer represented the goddess. It now referred to a cultic object, that merely as symbol, assisted in the worship of another god. The asherah was now as Smith explains ([1990] 2002:48) a symbol in the Yahwistic cult.

In this way a symbol was demoted. The symbol once associated with the goddess Asherah became a (secondary) symbol of something else accepted within a different religion. There are enough reasons to believe that the symbol, the asherah, associated with the Yahwistic cult had no longer a connection with the goddess Asherah. The symbol became so to speak an inadequate expression of the correlation between the revelations of the transcendental and man (Tillich 1973:278). This 'inadequacy' causes what is referred to here as the demotion of symbols.

## The gods of Egypt

To talk about Egyptian religion immediately leads to the question 'what is Egyptian religion?' As Assman (2003:104) indicates, it is impossible to talk about one form of Egyptian religion stretching over a history of 3500 years as being one, unchanged religion.

It is not clear whether ancient Egyptians had a monotheistic or polytheistic religion. The outward appearance of Egyptian religion was that of polytheism. This has however been described as a superficial portrayal; the true essence of Egyptian religion is monotheism (Hornung 1971:18). Several scholars had varying opinions on this issue. Apparently due to the contributions of French scholars (e.g. Emmanuel de Rouge in 1869), the Egyptian religion was depicted as being monotheistic (Hornung 1971:18). This notion was based on the evolutionistic understanding of the development of religion (Wente 2002:225). It is more obvious that the complex concept grows from the simplistic. Monotheism precedes polytheism.

Indeed ancient Egypt knew many gods. There is however consensus amongst scholars that underlying ancient Egyptian religion was one god. This notion is based on Christian bias: firstly that God is one, otherwise He would not exist and secondly that to depict gods with animal features is degrading the sacred (Hornung 1971:15).

The apparent belief that Egyptian religion was essentially monotheistic was replaced by a new understanding as early as 1880 when Maspero stated that Egyptian religion was in fact polytheistic in nature (Hornung 1971:22). The idea that Egyptian religion was monotheistic was denounced. Alternative views were presented, ranging from polytheism, henotheism to pantheism (Hornung 1971:24). From 1930

onwards, after the contributions by Junker and Drioton a new-monotheistic understanding became apparent again (Hornung 1971:27). Variations on this theory exist when claiming that both monotheism and polytheism existed; monotheism being reserved for the educated and polytheism for the masses (Hornung 1971:25).

The difference between monotheism and polytheism is based on an understanding of the concept of divinity in Egyptian belief. The description of Egyptian religion as monotheistic or polytheistic proves to be insufficient as Beth says (in Hornung 1971:27). A different and perhaps more appropriate way of describing Egyptian religion would be to emphasise the symbolic nature of the Egyptian religion, as Wilkinson (2002:340) suggests. By way of symbols, Assman (2003:110) suggests that the world of humans and the world of the gods were connected in Egyptian religion. The symbols became representations of the gods living in the 'religious reality', to borrow Bellah's (2011:2) expression. Assman describes Egyptian religion as rather being a culture in which a particular world view is presented (2003:104). As to whether it being monotheistic or polytheistic, Assman (2003:111) argues that Egyptian religion was without a doubt polytheistic but could at one stage for political reasons have been presented as being monotheistic.

There is not much known about the monotheistic, prominent deity in Egyptian religion. The archaeologist Auguste Mariette described the monotheistic God of Egypt as 'single, immortal, uncreated, invisible and hidden', descriptions based on references found in Egyptian texts (Hornung 1971:21). Some scholars believe that as the qualities, functions and influence of this main god grew, the qualities and functions became personified in the form of separate deities. This theory was as early as 1879 presented by Paul Pierret (Hornung 1971:20). The different gods were considered to have different roles or functions of the supreme, single, hidden God according to Pierret, or the gods were aspects of the one God according to Chabas (Hornung 1971:20).

Wilkinson provides a theory in accordance with the monotheistic understanding of Egyptian religion as to the origin of the different gods. This theory however rests on the symbolic understanding of the Egyptian religion. Wilkinson ([1853] 1990:327) speaks of the 'division of the attributes of God.' Each of the different functions, attributes, characters or influences on the world by the one god was given a name by the Egyptians (Wilkinson [1853] 1990:327). The different names implied a separation from the one god and subsequently the names became gods.

Every characteristic of the once main god (i.e. creator, wise, almighty, merciful, eternal, ruler of the dead) became known by a different name and so became a separate god. As the bringer of light, the god was known as Amun. As creator the god was known as Ptah. The spirit god was named Nef, Nu or Num; the father principle was called Khem and the mother principle Maut.

These different gods held specific hierarchical positions and to make these abstract principles visible they were assigned some fixed representation (Wilkinson [1853] 1990:328). The gods became signs of the various attributes of the once One God (Wilkinson [1853] 1990:328). An ensuing process of subdivision upon subdivision led to numerous gods. These deities were presented in familiar forms, many associated with an animal figure. The intention however was never to create the impression that this was indeed the form of the gods, but merely a symbol by which the gods could be differentiated from one another (Wilkinson [1853] 1990:328). Over time this idea changed and the gods were united with their visible symbolic forms, thus creating a multitude of deities.

The apparent representation of the attribute of the god by way of a symbol was intended to capture the attention of the worshipper or represent some legendary element or abstract idea (Wilkinson [1853] 1990:328). Instead the worship of the visible image (symbol) replaced the apparent intention of representation. Wilkinson ([1853] 1990:327) is of the opinion that it was never the intention that the symbol was to be seen as a perfect representation of the appearance of the god. It merely functioned as a symbol of the god. Over time this custom disappeared and the symbol became the god.

Wilkinson (2002:341) indicates with reference to the understanding of the Egyptian symbols, that symbols might be esoteric or exoteric, meaning that symbols could simultaneously conceal or reveal. The hidden character of a god was made known by way of expressing it in a symbol. At the same time the true nature of a god might be concealed due to the symbol that made the understanding of the god vague.

This article does not want to argue the correctness of the assumption of a primary monotheism amongst Egyptians. The intention is to indicate how a process of development employed symbols. The apparent symbolic representation of a divine character was later regarded as a representation *for* the divine. The symbol changed from referring to something, to becoming the referent: that which was referred to. In this manner the symbol was promoted from being a mere representation of something to becoming that something itself.

## Conditions conducive to promoting or demoting of symbols

Symbols are not static and fixed. On the contrary, symbols are organic and therefore grow and develop.

Symbols of transcendence appear within every society. These symbols constitute a complex system of belief. The nature of symbols is organic, leading to the natural occurrence of symbols changing. Symbols can grow, change and develop and even disappear. As we have seen from the above arguments and examples, symbols can undergo a change in status. This changing of symbols is more likely to take place under certain conditions.



## Introduction of new deities (plurality of gods)

When a community for whatever reason becomes aware of the existence of a new deity, a new configuration of symbols of acknowledged deities can take place. New deities can be introduced when a community is exposed to another cultural community through war; nomadic interaction or the need arises for the formation of a new concept of deity. This seems to have been the case when considering the ancient Egyptian religion. The process in which one supreme deity was being divided into many aspects, functions or characteristics that developed into separate gods, serves as an example. A similar process of re-configuration can take place when a deity becomes obsolete.

Assman (2003:105) suggests that the rise of monotheism in Egypt was due to political reasons to unite the people of Egypt within one state religion. A process of standardising the religion in Egypt led to the introduction of one all-powerful god. Monotheism in Egypt then existed not as an expression of a particular view on divinity but rather to apply a political strategy (Assman 2003:111). With Assman's theory in mind, the possibility arises that polytheism existed in Egypt before monotheism was introduced. Any which way, a re-configuration of the gods and their symbols was necessary notwithstanding the fact that the way deities were perceived changed over time.

## Symbols are contextual

This refers to the diachronic understanding of symbols. Symbols exist in a particular context. There are reasons why a certain symbol is used in a certain context. The process of determining why a certain symbol exists within a particular context is important. Symbols are socially determined. Symbols exist due to the collective acknowledgement that they are symbols (Heumann 1983:78; Tillich 1964:197). The social environment in which a symbol exists forms the social context for that symbol. Symbols also determine the relationship between people (Heumann 1983:71). Symbols become indicators of identity to those using the symbols, a letter of introduction so to speak. Symbols as expressions of identity set up the boundaries between peoples.

The process of the demoting of the symbol of Asherah serves as an example. Pressure by the prophets of Yahweh upon the people of Israel to abandon the worship of idols brought about the marginalisation of Asherah. By not worshipping Asherah, the people of Israel gave an indication of the understanding of their inherent identity: being people of Yahweh.

Tillich (1964:197) indicates that religious symbols especially are bound to their social context. The context in which the revelation of the transcendental occurs, gives rise to the symbol which becomes the adequate expression of the revelation to man. Should the symbol become outdated due to a new social context, such symbols die out (Tillich 1973:278). Tillich (1964:211) refers to this as the process of

profanisation of symbols. The context becomes a determining factor regarding the changes symbols undergo.

The cultural context of symbols is also a determining factor of the way in which symbols might change. As man is identified as an 'animal *symbolicum*' by Cassirer (1945:26), man's ability to create symbols and thereby to contribute to the growth of culture, is undeniable (Rolf 2006:70). Man and symbols exist within a particular cultural context. This context is continuously growing through man's ability to generate culture. Changing cultural contexts therefore lead to the creation of new symbols or the interpretation of existing symbols.

## Symbols are historic

This refers to the synchronic understanding of symbols. Symbols have a lifespan. Whilst some symbols are being born others die out. Symbols exist in time and are therefore exposed to the limitations of time. Symbols have their own history. There is a specific historic development to be traced for each and every symbol. Whenever a symbol becomes obsolete a demotion or even promotion of the symbol can take place.

Symbols connect people via tradition to their past (Heumann 1983:82). By investigating symbols one is in fact tracing the history of a particular tradition as expressed over time in symbols. In every new timeous context people understand and relate to the divine.

## Dangers of Symbols

It is however necessary to warn about the dangers associated with the study of symbols. One of the main problems of studying symbols is decontextualisation. When investigating symbols it can easily happen that a symbol is removed from its context and inter-relatedness to other symbols and studied in isolation. This can limit the knowledge of such a symbol. It is necessary to investigate the position of a symbol within its context and see its relationship with other symbols and how it functions within a belief system.

A second possible danger when studying symbols is reductionism. It can easily happen that the only perspective on a context is to seek out the symbols within that particular context and interpret the meaning of the system according to the understanding of symbols. The whole can indeed be re-presented by a part, but the whole is not the part. The understanding of the whole of a system can never be reduced to the understanding of its symbol.

It would be unbalanced to portray a picture where all scholars applaud the existence and usage of symbols. Not all scholars are excited about studying symbols. Todorov (quoted in Rolf 2006:7) indicates how Ferdinand de Saussure postulates that symbols have no place, this statement is based on the premise that symbols are in fact words. Therefore he prefers the term semiotic to symbolic (Rolf 2006:7). The peculiarity

of De Saussure's statement is that what he describes as words is indeed referred to by Aristotle as symbols (Rolf 2006:11). The critique by scholars against the study and use of symbols can be related to reductionism or decontextualisation.

## Conclusion

Can symbols be promoted or even demoted? Bellah provides the clue to the solution to our apparent question. By indicating that symbols can operate as representation *of* or representation *for* the transcendental provides the guidelines. As long as the symbol is a representation *of* the transcendental it is still two entities existing quite separately: one existing in this worldly reality and referring to another entity existing in the other-worldly, religious reality. It is an attempt at making comprehensible that which is invisible and even incomprehensible.

The moment the symbol becomes a representation *for* the transcendental it is not an attempt at making the transcendental present, but it is indeed the embodiment of the transcendental. The symbol then replaces the transcendental. When and wherever the symbol appears, it is not considered to be the representation of the transcendental but in fact it is the transcendental.

This is the way in which the Egyptian gods and asherah are to be understood. The apparent representation of the deities was transformed to become the representation for the deities. The symbols became the objects of veneration and replaced the objects they referred to. Thus the symbols were 'promoted' or 'demoted' from being apparent representations of the deities to be in fact the deities themselves. The implication would surely be that the reverse is possible as well. The representation *for* the transcendental can go through a process of 'demotion' to become a representation *of* the transcendental as the case might have been with the asherah. This process is contagious and can be part of the development of symbols within any religion.

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