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Idestrom, Rebecca G. S. "Asherah and Yahweh." *Prolegomena* 1:1 (April 1989): 1–5.

Asherah and Yahweh

by Rebecca G. S. Idestrom

Introduction

Recent epigraphic discoveries at two archaeological sites in Israel have raised a number of questions about the nature and significance of the cult of Asherah for ancient Israel. Is the reference to "Asherah" in these inscriptions a personal name denoting a Canaanite goddess, or is it a common noun which refers to a cultic object? While the former interpretation entails a further question about the role of the goddess in the Yahwistic cult of ancient Israel, the latter raises the issue of the identity of the cultic object: whether it was a holy place or chapel, a wooden pole, a stylized tree, a living sacred tree, or a grove of trees.¹ Regardless of which interpretation is adopted, the forty or so Old Testament references to the cult of Asherah² and the severe prophetic condemnation of its practices suggest, at the very least, that the worship of Asherah existed alongside the worship of Yahweh in popular Israelite religion. The purpose of this essay is to consider the cult of Asherah and its role in ancient Israelite religion during the Iron Age II (1000-586 BCE) in the light of the evidence provided by northwest semitic religions, the Biblical texts, and the recent archaeological discoveries made at Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom.

Northwest Semitic Religions

Asherah was one of three goddesses which played an important part in Canaanite religious life, the other two being Astarte and Anath. Before the discovery of the Ugarit inscriptions at Ras Shamra in 1929, only a few extra-Biblical texts

referred to the cult of Asherah. John Day's study of the term "Asherah" in northwest semitic texts, for example, notes its appearance in Akkadian texts from the period of the first dynasty of Babylon (1830-1531 BCE) in the form of "As-ratum", the consort of the god Amuru.³ In the el-Amama letters from the first half of the fourteenth century BCE, the king of Amuru is named Abdi-Asirta, "servant of Asirta". "Asherah" also appears in another fifteenth century BCE Akkadian writing from Megiddo which refers to a summons to seek the counsel of a prophet, "a wizard of Asherah".⁴ The limited nature of this evidence led many scholars to equate the cult of Asherah with that of the goddess Astarte.⁵ With the discovery of the Ugarit texts, however, a wealth of information about Asherah and her role in the Canaanite pantheon has emerged, providing the most important extra-Biblical source for understanding the cult of Asherah.

In the mythological texts of Ugarit "Asherah" appears as "Athirat" (*'atrt*), the consort of the supreme god El. At times, the term also refers to "Elat" (*'ilt*), which literally means "goddess".⁶ In the pantheon she is the Mother goddess and, as such, is referred to as the "procreatress of the gods" (*qnyt'ilm*). An association with the title "Lady Athirat of the sea" (*rbt. 'atrt. ym*) probably explains why her shrines were situated in the coastal cities of Sidon and Tyre and why she was known as the goddess of these cities.⁷ This observation is significant in any consideration of the relation of Yah-

- 1 A. Lemaire, "Who or What was Yahweh's Asherah?", *Biblical Archeological Review* X, no. 6, (1984), p. 42.
- 2 William G. Dever, "Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet 'Ajrud", *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* no. 255, (1984), p. 21.
- 3 John Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature", *Journal of Biblical Literature* CV, (1986), p. 386.
- 4 Day, p. 386.
- 5 Day, p. 385.
- 6 Day, p. 387.
- 7 Day, p. 387. Commenting on the association of cities with gods and goddesses, Raphael Patai ("The Goddess Asherah," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* XXIV, (1965), p. 39.) observes that "In each locality where a particular god was worshipped his personality assumed a local character. Thus there was, as we have seen, an Asherah of Tyre, an Asherah of Sidon".

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weh and Asherah and their association with certain cities in ancient Israel.

On a number of occasions the goddess Athirat is called "Qudsu" (*qds*), a name which means "holiness" or "sanctuary". From the fact that the Semitic root *tr* ("place") came to be mean "holy place", scholars such as Lipinski have contended that it refers to a chapel or holy sanctuary, rather than to a goddess, and ought to be interpreted as such in the Old Testament.⁸ This view, however, does not account for those texts where Asherah clearly appears as a goddess, a consort of El. The many figurines and erotic depictions of Athirat found in Syria, Palestine and Egypt⁹ suggest that this association with El was also understood in connection with fertility, although this role is not emphasized in the Ugarit texts.

One final aspect of the cult of Athirat which is relevant to an understanding of the role of Asherah in the Bible is the estrangement between Athirat and El recorded in the Hittite myth of Elkunirsa. With her husband's permission, Asertu (Athirat), the wife of Elkunirsa (El), succeeds in seducing the storm god, Baal-Hadad. John Day comments that this myth may explain why Asherah is associated principally with Baal in the Old Testament:

"It does suggest estrangement between Elkunirsa (El) and Asertu (Athirat) and helps shed some light perhaps on the background of the Old Testament allusions that associate Baal and Asherah. Perhaps she was eventually successful in getting her man."¹⁰

The Biblical Texts

While the Biblical "Asherah" is known as the consort of Baal, some scholars also claim that the goddess may have been viewed by some Israelites as the consort of Yahweh.

"It is understandable that in certain circles Yahweh should have Asherah as a consort, since Asherah was originally El's consort and we

know that El and Yahweh were equated in ancient Israel."¹¹

To confirm or deny this proposal one must examine the evidence of the Biblical texts. From all of the references to Asherah, asherim and asheroth in the Biblical account, it is evident that the Canaanite cult of Asherah became intrinsically related to the worship of Yahweh — a syncretistic development adamantly opposed by the prophets. The Biblical text, however, is somewhat ambiguous regarding the identity of "Asherah". Is she a goddess or a cultic object? The evidence suggests that Asherah appears both as a goddess and a cultic object.

Only a few references refer to Asherah as a goddess. 1 Kings 18:19 states that she had four hundred prophets associated with her cult. Manasseh made an image of her (*pesel ha'asera*) and placed it in the Temple of the Lord (2 Kings 21:7). 2 Kings 23:4,7 associates her with male prostitution in the Temple. More references, however, seem to indicate that "Asherah" was a cultic object. 1 Kings 14:23 and 2 Kings 17:10, for example, describe an "asherah" as something which could be made by human hands. The verbs used in connection with the removal of this cultic object also suggest that it was made of wood: it could be 'cut down' (Jud. 6:25,25; 2 Kings 18:4; 23:14), 'hewed down' (Deut. 5:5; 2 Chr. 14:2), 'broken into pieces' (2 Chr. 34:4,7), 'burnt down' (Deut. 12:3; 2 Kings 23:15). On the basis of Deuteronomy 16:21, "You shall not plant a tree as an asherah beside the altar of Yahweh your God that you shall build", some scholars have argued that the "asherah" was planted as a sacred tree or even as a grove of trees. This suggestion fits with the rendering of "asherah" in the Septuagint as "grove" (*alsos*), a translation adopted by the King James Version and supported by the Mishna.¹² Lemaire, for one, understands "asherah" as a sacred, living tree or as a group of trees.¹³ The evidence in support of this position, though, is not extensive; indeed, it is limited to a single text. The predominant description of the asherim views them as hand-made, not planted objects. It

8 John Emerton, "New Light on Israelite Religion: The Implications of the Inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud", *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* XCIV, (1982), p. 16.

9 Day, p. 389.

10 Day, p. 391.

11 Day, p. 393.

12 Day, p. 307.

13 Lemaire, p. 50.

seems, therefore, from this brief survey, that while there are few references to the goddess Asherah, the majority identify a cultic object, probably a wooden pole, which symbolizes the goddess.

Regardless of how one interprets the meaning of "Asherah", the Biblical account strongly suggests that the cult of Asherah was a feature of popular Israelite religion. Arguing that the matriarch Leah may have worshipped Asherah, Patai, for instance, interprets *be'aseri* as an oath, "By Asherah", referring to the goddess (Gen. 30:13). It is not self-evident, however, that this is the case. More explicit references to the worship of Asherah occur in the book of Judges. After Judges 3:7 notes "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs", Gideon is told in Judges 6 to remove the Asherah pole which stands beside the altar of Baal (vv. 25,26,28,30). These texts imply that the cult of Asherah existed among the Israelites during the period of the Judges. Her close association with Baal in these texts also suggests that Asherah was understood to be a consort of Baal.

Throughout the period of the monarchy the cult of Asherah continued to play a significant role in popular Israelite religion. The extent of its influence is evident from the fact that the two great religious reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah were not able to eradicate it.¹⁴ In the northern kingdom, Ahijah prophesied against Jeroboam because he had caused the Israelites to sin by making Asherah poles (1 Kings 14:15,16). Ahab and Jezebel perpetuated this sin by setting up an Asherah pole in the capital city of Samaria, where they had also built a temple for Baal (1 Kings 16:32,33). Jezebel's roots in the city of Tyre, where the cult of Asherah was prominent, perhaps accounts for her association with the continuing worship of Asherah in Israel.¹⁵ During Ahab's reign, the prophet Elijah contested the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah who ate at Jezebel's table (1 Kings 18:19). The association of the

prophets of Baal and Asherah intimates that a close relation existed between the devotees of the two deities. While the cult of Yahweh was victorious in this particular contest (1 Kings 18:40), it is curious to observe that while the text notes the slaughter of the prophets of Baal, it says nothing about the fate of the prophets of Asherah. Scholars have assumed either that they were killed with the prophets of Baal, or that the reference to the prophets of Asherah is a gloss. Freedman argues, however, that the silence of the text in this regard is intentional, signifying that they were allowed to exist and continue their cultic practices.¹⁶ These prophets of Asherah, he suggests, can be identified with the four hundred prophets which Ahab summons for advice in 1 Kings 22:6.¹⁷ If this thesis is correct, then it would appear that the cult of Asherah was considered, in some sense, to be Yahwistic. Freedman thinks that the worship of Asherah was very much a part of Israelite religion because Asherah had become known as Yahweh's consort.

"When Yahweh defeated Baal in the contest at Mount Carmel, Asherah, who had been associated with the latter, now became the former's consort."¹⁸

Whether Freedman rightly identifies Asherah as Yahweh's consort, his observation about the prophets of Asherah is consistent with the evidence that the worship of the cult continued in Israel.

The next reference which indicates that the cult of Asherah persisted in the kingdom of Israel occurs in connection with the reign of Jehoahaz: "The Asherah pole remained standing in Samaria" (2 Kings 13:6). It is interesting that Jehoahaz's father, Jehu, slaughtered all of the priests of Baal in their temple, but left the prophets of Asherah unharmed (2 Kings 10:18-35). Instead, the text notes, the cult of Asherah persisted in the capital of the North during his son's reign. Observing this fact, Freedman states,

14 W. L. Reed, "Asherah", *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* I, Edited by George A. Buttrick (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 251.

15 Day, p. 388.

16 David Noel Freedman, "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah", *The Biblical Archaeologist* L, no. 4 (December 1987), p. 248.

17 Freedman made these remarks at the November 1988 Society of Biblical Literature Convention held in Chicago.

18 Freedman, p. 249.

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"In spite of the violent repudiation of Baal, his associate, Asherah, remained in Samaria untouched. Whose Asherah was she now?...In Samaria, around 800 B.C.E., the official cult of Yahweh included the worship of his consort Asherah."¹⁹

The fall of the northern kingdom is partly explained in the Biblical account as a consequence of the sinful worship of Asherah (2 Kings 17:10-12,16-17). Yet, the cult of Asherah survived in Samaria because it had escaped the reforms and the eradications of Baal worship. Asks Patai:

"Was perhaps the goddess regarded as complementary to, rather than competitive with, Yahweh, and her worship therefore tolerated?"²⁰

If Freedman's proposal is correct, then the answer to this question must be in the affirmative. The Biblical account shows that the cult of Asherah was prominent throughout the duration of the northern kingdom.

The southern kingdom of Judah did not escape the influence of Asherah. Asa, king of Judah, sought to eradicate the cult, introduced by his grandmother Maacah, by removing the Asherah pole and burning it in the Kidron Valley (1 Kings 15:13). That the cult continued to flourish, however, is indicated by the fact that Jehoshaphat also tried to get rid of Judah's Asherah poles (2 Chr. 17:6). During the reign of Joash, notes 2 Chronicles 24:17-18, there was another revival of Asherah worship. Hezekiah's great reform removed the Asherah (2 Kings 18:4), but his son Manasseh reintroduced the cult by erecting an image of the goddess (*semel haqqin'a*) in the Temple (2 Kings 21:3-7).

The central place which the worship of Asherah attained within Israelite religion is particularly evident in the light of the reforms instituted by Josiah. In the process of purifying the temple cult

of Yahweh, the King removed her image from the premises and put a stop to the practice of cultic offerings and prostitution (2 Kings 23:4,6,7,13,14). Josiah removed all traces of her influence in his great reform, yet when the prophet Jeremiah recounts the sins of Judah, he mentions the cult of Asherah as one of the reasons for Judah's downfall (Jer. 17:2). During his mystical journey to Jerusalem, Ezekiel identifies an idol located at the entrance to the Temple of the Lord (Ez. 8:3) as "the image of jealousy". Freedman speculates that this idol represented Asherah, the consort of Yahweh.²¹ Though this interpretation is not self-evident, Ezekiel may have seen the image of the goddess erected in the Temple by Manasseh. The evidence of the Biblical account at least demonstrates that the worship of Asherah was deeply rooted in Israel during the period of the monarchy.

Recent Epigraphic Discoveries

The most recent evidence which sheds light upon Asherah and her role in ancient Israelite religion comes from the archaeological discoveries made at Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom. Inscriptions found in these locations have stimulated the debate about Asherah and her association with Yahweh. Kuntillet 'Ajrud, located on the border between southern Negev and the Sinai peninsula, was excavated in 1975 and 1976 by Zeev Meshel. The site, which dates to ca. 800 BCE, was both a resting place for travelers and a religious center²² for such gods as El, Baal, Yahweh, and Asherah.²³ Whether the site was occupied by a group of priests, as Meshel supposes,²⁴ it was probably a religious outpost for the southern kingdom of Judah.

The inscriptions which have spurred so much debate were found on two large pithoi in the bench-room and appear to be a blessing formula which may be translated, "May you be blessed by Yahweh of Samaria and by his Asherah".²⁵ The

19 Freedman, p. 248.

20 Patai, p. 48.

21 Freedman, p. 249.

22 Zeev Meshel, "Did Yahweh Have a Consort?", *Biblical Archeological Review* V, no. 2 (March/April 1979), p. 27.

23 Walter Maier, III, *Aserah: Extrabiblical Evidence* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), p. 169.

24 Meshel, p. 33.

25 Meshel initially proposed (p. 31) that "Yahweh of *smm*" be translated as "our guardian".

rendering, "Yahweh of Samaria", fits well with the notion that deities became associated with the place where their cults were practiced. A larger debate, though, concerns the interpretation of the phrase "by his Asherah". Does "Asherah" refer to the goddess or to a cultic object? If it is a reference to the deity, then it follows that Asherah was the consort of Yahweh.²⁶ The fact that the "blessing" of Asherah is involved seems to support this conclusion. The problem, however, is that it does not accord well with the normal constructions of Hebrew grammar.²⁷ From a grammatical point of view, "his Asherah" probably does not name a deity; rather, it refers to a cultic object. Given the Biblical evidence, it is likely that the phrase refers to a wooden pole which symbolized the goddess Asherah.²⁸ This conclusion, however, does not negate the possibility that the goddess Asherah was considered a consort of Yahweh in popular Israelite religion.

A second inscription comes from tomb three of Khirbet el-Qom, eight miles west of Hebron. Excavated by William Dever, a four-line inscription was found on a pillar located between two tomb chambers which have been dated to the eighth century BCE. Dever notes that the form of the inscription is typical of Hebrew blessings.²⁹ The names of Yahweh and Asherah occur in the blessing in a manner similar to the inscription at Kuntillet 'Ajrud. In Lemaire's study of the inscription, he changes the word order of the third line, moving the position of "by his Asherah" from last place to first, thereby connecting the phrase with Yahweh. On this reconstruction, thus, lines two and three read as follows: "Blessed be Uryahu by Yahweh and by his Asherah; from his enemies he saved them".³⁰ — a rearrangement which increases the similarity to the inscription at Kuntillet 'Ajrud. Dever understands this as further evidence of Asherah's consort relationship with Yahweh and attempts to prove his hypothesis by identifying the drawing of a seated female playing a lyre above the inscription at 'Ajrud as the goddess Asherah.³¹ If his identification of the picture is unlikely, his observation that both of the blessings connect Asherah with Yahweh is an important

one. It might indicate that the goddess was seen as Yahweh's consort; it does reveal that some Israelites believed Asherah's relationship to Yahweh to be significant enough that she could be an agent of blessing with Yahweh.

One more observation which should be noted is that the phrase "Yahweh of Samaria" identifies the official cult of Yahweh with the northern capital of Samaria. The Biblical account also indicates, however, that Samaria became an important center for the worship of Asherah (1 Kings 13:6). Since both deities were worshipped in the same city, it is not surprising that Yahweh is coupled with Asherah in these inscriptions. This could signify that some Israelite circles worshipped the goddess Asherah together with Yahweh.

Conclusion

This essay has investigated the place of the cult of Asherah in the religious beliefs and practices of Iron Age II Israel. Relevant evidence has been analyzed from northwest Semitic sources, from the Biblical account, and from recent archaeological discoveries. The evidence suggests that Asherah existed as a goddess among the Canaanites, that her cult became significant among the people of Israel, and that certain segments of the cult of Yahweh had a syncretistic element which enabled them to incorporate the cult of Asherah. Though the prophets condemned the worship of Asherah and some kings tried to eradicate her cult, Israel continued its syncretistic practice throughout the period of the monarchy. Inscriptions reveal that Asherah's influence upon the Yahwistic cult was such that some Israelites even sought her blessing, with that of Yahweh. Though it is best to interpret the Biblical references to Asherah as a cultic object symbolizing the goddess, there is a possibility that certain Israelite circles considered the goddess to be Yahweh's consort. This fact would explain why her cult was so readily accepted by some and incorporated into their worship of Yahweh.

26 Dever, p. 21; Freedman, p. 249.

27 See Day, p. 392: a proper noun or personal name does not usually take a pronominal suffix.

28 Day, p. 392.

29 Dever, p. 22.

30 Lemaire, p. 44.

31 Dever, pp. 22ff.