

2005

# The goddess Asherah in ancient Israel and her pillar figurines

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THE GODDESS ASHERAH IN ANCIENT ISRAEL  
AND HER PILLAR FIGURINES

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Art and Design

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Yael Karmi

May 2005

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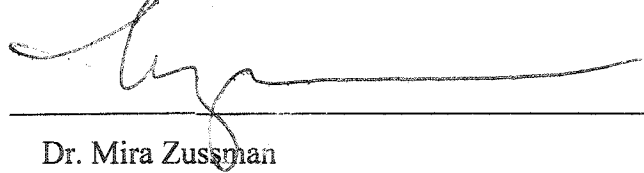
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## ABSTRACT

### THE GODDESS ASHERAH IN ANCIENT ISRAEL AND HER PILLAR FIGURINES

by Yael Karmi

This thesis examines the cult of Asherah in ancient Israel through biblical texts, non-biblical texts, and archaeological findings. Excavations in Israel have uncovered hundreds of clay figurines with enlarged breasts that have been identified as representing the goddess Asherah. These figurines belong to a long tradition of producing goddess figurines that began in prehistoric times; the figurines are thought to promote fertility. Asherah was also represented in a statue in the Temple and in wooden poles or trees adjacent to outdoor altars. In the Ugaritic myths, Asherah appears as the consort of the chief god El, and in the Hebrew Bible as the consort of either El/YHWH or Baal. Over time, her status seems to have deteriorated from an independent goddess to a cultic wooden object, and eventually YHWH takes her roles and attributes as his own. In this process, the goddess does not completely disappear, but instead becomes the female presence of YHWH on earth.

“I Bless You by YHWH of Samaria and by His Asherah.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Inscription on a fragment of a storage jar from Kuntilet Ajrud. Tilde Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit, Israel and the Old Testament*. (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 102-103.

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## Introduction

Her name was forgotten for many generations, but it never disappeared, and her symbols are very much a part of Judaism today. In Ugarit she was called Athirat, in Egypt she was Qudshu, and in ancient Israel she was known as Asherah. She was the consort of the head of the Ugaritic pantheon, El, and people asked for her personal help and protection as well as for her mediation with him. In ancient Israel she became the consort of the chief god YHWH, and it is possible they were venerated as a couple in anthropomorphic form in the temple in Jerusalem. Her tree or stylized pole was put next to his altars, and her clay figurines were extremely popular in Judah. This was the state of affairs probably until the late seventh century BCE, when the Yahwist reformers saw her cult as a threat to the monotheistic and aniconic cause and tried to uproot it. They removed her image from the temple along with images of other deities, cut and burned her trees, and perhaps even broke her figurines. When YHWH became the one and only god of Israel, he assimilated her cult into his, taking over her roles as a mother, a midwife, and a wet nurse, and assuming her attributes: the tree; the lion; and the breasts. In this way, Asherah became part of the monotheistic cult in ancient Israel, and a close look at Jewish sacred objects such as the menorah and the Torah reveals that she is still part of the cultural vocabulary of Judaism today. This paper will explore who the goddess Asherah was, the ways in which she was represented, and the ways in which she was venerated in ancient Israel. In addition, it will examine the relationship between

Asherah and YHWH and the process by which the two deities became one. The “point of departure” for this thesis is the clay figurines of the goddess.

Since the nineteenth century, archaeological excavations in Israel have produced an ever increasing number of small clay figurines, both zoomorphic<sup>1</sup> and anthropomorphic. Most of the anthropomorphic figurines are female; many of them with a self-supporting pillar instead of legs, and an upper part that depicts a woman with prominent breasts (Pl. 1, Pl. 2). The majority of these pillar figurines date from the eighth to the seventh centuries BCE, and they were probably used by the Hebrews who lived in Judah.

The discovery of the pillar figurines raised many questions: Who do they represent? What is the symbolic meaning, or meanings, they express? Who created them and for what purpose? How were they used? What can they tell us about the relations between the Hebrews and their neighbors?<sup>2</sup> All these questions were related to a larger

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<sup>1</sup> Figurines of horses and young bulls are the most common, and many of the horses are accompanied by a human rider. Dever, *Recent Archeological*, 156–7.

<sup>2</sup> One of the most debated topics in biblical research today is the question of the origin of the Israelites. The Hebrew Bible describes a coalition of Hebrew tribes that came from Egypt through the Sinai Peninsula, conquered the land of Canaan by force, and then settled it. According to this narrative, these tribes held a common monotheistic belief in a single god named YHWH or El, but at times they were influenced by the local people and worshipped the local “idols.”

The problem is that there is no evidence outside the Bible for the story of the exodus from Egypt, or for the occupation of the land after a brief and decisive military campaign, as described in the book of Joshua. However, there is archaeological evidence of a massive new settlement in the central hill country of Canaan in the twelfth century BCE. These settlements have specific characteristics, such as the shape of the houses and the diet of their occupants—no pigs’ bones have been found in these settlements. Scholars have offered different explanations for the origins of these “Proto-Israelites,” and how they settled Canaan. Some researchers talk about “peaceful settlement,” and some suggest that the Israelites were actually Canaanites that were driven to settle the hill country by the instability in the cities at that time.

For further discussion of the origins of ancient Israel, see Hershel Shanks, “Defining the Problems: Where We Are in the Debate.” In *The Rise of Ancient Israel: Symposium at the Smithsonian Institution, October 26, 1991*. (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992), 1–25.

and very controversial question: was the religion of the Hebrews in pre-exilic Israel polytheistic and iconic or monotheistic and aniconic?

The majority of scholars associate the pillar figurines either with the cult of the Mother Goddess or with magic or both. Some have argued that no further identification is possible, and have named the figurines simply “fertility goddesses” or “Suckling Goddess: *Dea Nutrix*.”<sup>3</sup> However, because there are many written sources that document the local gods and goddesses in the region, other scholars have gone beyond the general idea of fertility goddesses and have tried to discover which specific goddess can be linked with the figurines. One problem is that the distinction between the three major Canaanite goddesses—Asherah, Astarte (Ashtoret), and Anat—is not always clear, even for the ancient writers.<sup>4</sup> As a result, scholars in the past confused the pillar figurines with earlier plaque figurines of the “Naked Goddess” type, thought to represent Astarte.<sup>5</sup> Astarte, however, is not a logical attribution, given that she was more popular in Israel than in Judea,<sup>6</sup> and that she is mentioned only nine times in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>7</sup>

The anthropologist and biblical scholar Raphael Patai was the first to propose that the pillar figurines, which have prominent breasts, represent the goddess Asherah, the motherly Canaanite goddess who served as the “wet nurse of the gods.”<sup>8</sup> He also

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<sup>3</sup> J.B. Pritchard, *Palestinian Figurines in Relation to Certain Goddesses Known Through Literature*. (New Haven, Connecticut: American Oriental Society, 1943), 56.

<sup>4</sup> Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3<sup>rd</sup> enlarged ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967), 56.

<sup>5</sup> An example is the Israel Museum, where the pillar figurines are still labeled “Astarte Figurines.”

<sup>6</sup> Raz Kletter, “Selected Material Remains of Judah at the End of the Iron Age in Relation to its Political Borders.” (Ph.D. diss., Tel Aviv University, 1995), 184.

<sup>7</sup> Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 58. The term “Astarte Figurines” was later accepted by some scholars not in reference to the specific goddess but as a common general name for the pillar figurines.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

suggested that the pillar shape of the figurines is related to the pole of Asherah that is described in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>9</sup> Archaeologists William Dever, Raz Kletter, and others agree that the pillar figurines represent the goddess Asherah, adding that she is the only possible candidate, because of her prominence in the Hebrew Bible and because of the findings from the Hebrew texts from Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet Ajrud, in which the name of YHWH appears together with the name of Asherah.<sup>10</sup> There is a growing scholarly consensus that the figurines represent the goddess Asherah, while at the same time incorporating some attributes of Anath and Astarte.<sup>11</sup> Given that so much has already been written on this topic, this paper will not further debate the issue, but will follow the current interpretation that connects the Judean pillar figurines primarily with the goddess Asherah.

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<sup>9</sup> Patai suggests that “these figurines are the small clay counterparts of the larger wooden Asherah poles which were set up by implementing them into the ground,” thus implying that the lower part of the figurines represented a tree trunk. *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>10</sup> Raz Kletter “Between Archeology and Theology: The Pillar Figurines from Judah and the Asherah,” in *Studies in the archaeology of the Iron Age in Israel and Jordan*, ed. Amihai Mazar, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 199.

Also see Karel Van der Toorn, “Israelite Figurines: A View from the Texts,” in *Sacred Time, Sacred Place*, ed. Barry M. Gittlen (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 60.

<sup>11</sup> Kletter examines all the other possible interpretations and concludes that the figurines represent the goddess Asherah. Kletter, *Between Archaeology and Theology*, 199.

Uehlinger writes: “With regard to the Judahite pillar figurines, we are currently dealing with one figure, which we have identified with the goddess Asherah.” Christoph Uehlinger, “Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary in Iron Age Palestine and the Search for Yahweh’s Cult Images,” in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Karel van der Toorn (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1997), 123.

Dever states that: “There is no longer any reason in my mind to hesitate about identifying these as ‘Asherah Figurines,’ although because of the well known coalescence of the three Canaanite fertility goddesses, they could also represent Anat or Astarte.” Dever, *Recent Archeological*, 159.

Dijkstra writes that: “Ashera was also often associated with Baal in the Bible. This could be the result of her growing identification with Anath-Astarte. At Ugarit Anath-Astarte received the motherly features of Asherah as a nursing deity. Just as El was eclipsed by Baal, Asherah was gradually outstripped by Baal’s partner Anath-Astarte.” Meindert Dijkstra, “El, the God of Israel - Israel, the People of YHWH: on the Origins of Ancient Israelite Yahwism,” in *Only One God? Monotheism in Ancient Israel and the Veneration of the Goddess Asherah*, by Bob Becking et al. (London & NY: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 115.

Over the last three decades, a great deal of research has been done on the goddess Asherah and the Judean pillar figurines.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the major works on the subject were written either by biblical scholars such as S. Olyan and T. Binger,<sup>13</sup> who focused primarily on the textual sources, or by archaeologists like Kletter, who has published the most comprehensive and up-to-date study of the Judean pillar figurines, but steers clear of textual material and any implications from his findings regarding the question of polytheism and aniconism in ancient Israel. Kletter tends to stress the differences between the Asherah figurines and other goddess figurines in order to establish their unique “Judean” identity, even though there are many similarities between them. In order to research this topic fully, there is a need to consider the goddess Asherah and her figurines as part of the larger cultural fabric of the time, and as part of the ancient tradition of goddess worship. Judith Hadley has written one of the most thorough books to date on the goddess Asherah, in which she explores both textual and artifactual data and provides useful detailed summaries of earlier research on the topic. However, she devotes only a small part of her book to the Asherah figurines, since she does not consider it possible to identify the biblical Asherah with the pillar figurines.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Sasson offers a few possible reasons why the debate about the place of cultic figurines in Israelite worship has recently come to the fore. Jack M. Sasson, “On the Use of Images in Israel and the Ancient Near East: A Response to Karel van der Toorn,” in *Sacred Time, Sacred Place*, edited by Barry M. Gittlen, 63–70 (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 68.

<sup>13</sup> Saul Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of YHWH in Israel* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1988). Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit*.

<sup>14</sup> Hadley writes: “It has not been proved that asherah, in either the singular or plural form as found in the Bible, refers directly to the pillar figurines. This does not, however, exclude the possibility that these figurines were popular, domestic copies of some larger Asherah image, perhaps found in the temple in Jerusalem or at another major shrine.” Judith M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 201–202.



The Keel and Uehlinger study demonstrates how exploring the iconographic meanings of artifacts can be crucial for their understanding. They conducted extensive research on divine symbolism, and compared various images of gods and goddesses from ancient Israel with gods from neighboring regions, arguing that the images are more important for an understanding of the nature of religion in ancient Israel than textual evidence.<sup>15</sup> The disadvantage of such an approach is that images without texts are more likely to be interpreted incorrectly. It makes sense to study prehistoric material that way, but since written evidence from the Iron Age in Israel does exist, we should definitely take it into consideration. Another problem with the Keel and Uehlinger research is that they assumed that aniconic tendencies prevailed in Judah and Israel during Iron Age II (1000–586 BCE), and based on examining seals primarily, they claim there is a decrease in the use of anthropomorphic figures to represent deities, concluding that “anthropomorphic cult statuary apparently had a rather poor status in pre-exilic Israel and Judah.”<sup>16</sup> However, in a later article, Uehlinger admits that this assumption was incorrect and says, “Judahites were as such no more aniconicists than the neighboring Moabites or Ammonites.”<sup>17</sup> This change in Uehlinger’s view is a good example of the recent shift in thought among scholars toward accepting the idea that monotheistic, aniconic Judaism originated from pagan iconic traditions.

Authors such as Gadon, Patai, and Van der Toorn, who were among the first to support this idea, take an integrative approach and examine both texts and images to

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<sup>15</sup> Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 325–336.

<sup>16</sup> Uehlinger, “Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary,” 101.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

place the cult of Asherah in the context of goddess worship. Gadon interprets her cult as part of the larger tradition of goddess worship in the ancient world;<sup>18</sup> Patai discusses Asherah as one of the female deities that the Hebrews worshipped throughout history;<sup>19</sup> and Van der Toorn compares her cult to Mesopotamian practices. Their studies have contributed significantly to the understanding of the Asherah figurines, though they were not solely devoted to the subject of the goddess Asherah. This paper will follow their synthetic approach, which relies on both the archaeological and textual evidence, but it will explore the subject in greater depth. One issue that has not been fully researched is the connection between the cult of Asherah and the earlier goddess traditions. This paper will try to address that connection by showing the origins of the Asherah figurines and comparing them to earlier goddess figurines and their iconography.

The first chapter of the thesis discusses the goddess Asherah in the ancient Near East as she appears in extra-biblical texts, and examines the etymology of her name. It also discusses the importance of child bearing in the ancient Near East, which helps to explain the popularity of the Asherah cult. The second chapter explores the hostile approach of the biblical writers toward Asherah, as well as the evidence the Bible presents about her cult. In addition, this chapter examines biblical sources that demonstrate how YHWH took over the goddess cult. The third chapter discusses the Asherah pillar figurines and other archaeological findings, some of which suggest that YHWH and Asherah were worshipped together as a couple. Chapter Four explores the larger context of goddess worship, concentrating on those aspects that are relevant to

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<sup>18</sup> Elinor W. Gadon. *The Once and Future Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 172.

Asherah: goddesses with prominent breasts, snake and bird goddesses, and tree goddesses. The role and iconography of the menorah, the seven-branched lampstand that stood in the tabernacle and later in the temple, and the role of the Torah, which also has a strong association with trees, are discussed here as well.

The photographs that accompany this paper were taken in the following museums: Hecht Museum, Haifa, Israel; Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel; Eretz-Israel Museum, Ramat-Aviv, Israel; the permanent exhibition in the Archaeology Department of Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel; Wilfrid Museum, Kibbutz Hazorea, Israel; Hazor Museum, Hazor, Israel; Archaeological Museum of Heraclion, Crete; Louvre, Paris, France; British Museum, London, UK; Harvard Semitic Museum, Boston, MA, USA; and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, USA. Other images are from the online WorldArt Kiosk. Dr. Cohen of San Jose State University graciously gave her permission for publishing them here.

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<sup>19</sup> Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 34–52.

## Chapter I

### Asherah in the Ancient Near East

Asherah's name appears in different variants throughout the ancient Near East.<sup>20</sup> In Hebrew, she is *šrh* (= אֲשֶׁרֶת); in Ugaritic, her name is spelled *aprt*, and usually pronounced as “Athirat(u);”<sup>21</sup> and in Egypt, she has been identified as “Qudshu,” meaning “the holy one.” In Philistia, she appears as *šrh*, and in South Arabian inscriptions, as in Ugarit, she is *aprt*. Originally a West Semitic goddess, her cult was brought by the Amorites to Mesopotamia,<sup>22</sup> where she was called *Ašratu(m)*, *Aširatu*, and *Aširtu*, and her epithet was “Lady of the Steppe,” corresponding to the Syrian region of the Amorite land where she is considered to have originated.<sup>23</sup> Later her cult spread to the coastal area of what are now Syria and Lebanon, and she became associated with the sea. The earliest Mesopotamian reference to Asherah is in a Sumerian inscription from the eighteenth century BCE, in which her epithets are “Bride of the king of heaven,” “Lady of voluptuousness and happiness,” and “Lady with patient mercy.”<sup>24</sup> Another of

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<sup>20</sup> For a detailed discussion of the etymology of the word “asherah,” see Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 49–53; Marjo C.A. Korpel, “Asherah outside Israel,” in *Only One God? Monotheism in Ancient Israel and the Veneration of the Goddess Asherah*, by Bob Becking et al., 127–150 (London and New York: Sheffield Academic Press, a Continuum Imprint, 2001), 129.

For a comprehensive list of all related words in Akkadian, Ugaritic, Hebrew, and Aramean see Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit*, 142–48.

<sup>21</sup> Hadley notes: “It is commonly accepted that *šrh* is the Hebrew form of the Ugaritic *aprt*. The transformation of the early ‘th’ (ṯ) to the later ‘sh’ (š) is a well attested change. Similarly, the final *h* is a typical Hebrew feminine singular suffix, and is to be considered a normal adaptation of the Ugaritic feminine name.” Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 49.

<sup>22</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 44–45.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>24</sup> N. Wyatt, “Asherah,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible: Second Edition*, eds. Karel Van der Toorn, Bob Becking and Pieter Willem van der Horst (Leiden, Boston, Cologne: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 101.

her epithets is “Mistress of fates.”<sup>25</sup> The latest allusion to Asherah and El as a couple is found in an Aramaic document from Lebanon dating between the fourth century BCE and the second century CE.<sup>26</sup>

### 1. Asherah in Ugarit

The material found in Ugarit, or modern Ras-Shamra, an ancient Canaanite city located on the central Syrian coast that was discovered in 1929,<sup>27</sup> is a primary source concerning the goddess Asherah. The Ugaritic cuneiform tablets, dating from the fourteenth century BCE, are written in a West Semitic language closely related to ancient Hebrew and contain various documents, including administrative and legal records as well as outlines of rituals and narrative poems.<sup>28</sup> According to the Ugaritic myths, Asherah (Athirat in Ugaritic) was the mother of seventy gods, referred to as “the seventy sons of Athirat.” She was the wet nurse of the gods<sup>29</sup> and the consort of El, the head of the pantheon. Athirat and El are depicted in statuettes from Ugarit as aging, respectable

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>26</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Ugarit flourished in the Bronze Age and was destroyed in the 12<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. For a detailed description of the exciting discovery of Ugarit, see James B. Pritchard, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958), 106–110.

<sup>28</sup> Korpel, “Asherah outside Israel,” 127.

There are many parallels between the Ugaritic and the Israelite religions: The main god of the Ugaritic pantheon was El, and *El* in Hebrew means God. *El* or *Elohim* is also another name for YHWH in the Bible. *El* appears 3,350 times in the Bible, and *YHWH* appears 6,832 times, according to Arthur Frederick Ide, *YHWH's Wife* (Las Colinas, Texas: Monument Press, 1991), 10. The Canaanites worshipped El in the shape of a bull, and his son Baal in the shape of a calf. The story of the golden calf in Exodus 32 that was probably written as a polemic against the installing of the calves described in 1 Kings 12 reveals that the Israelites worshipped a deity, either Baal or YHWH, in the shape of a calf. Bronze figurines of calves that were found in Israel support this. Other similarities between the Israelites and the Canaanites include the worship at high places (Bamot - במות) and the use of pillar stones (Matzevot - מצבות). However, when we come to Ugarit to learn about ancient Israel, we must bear in mind that Bronze Age Ugarit is not the same as Iron Age Judah.

<sup>29</sup> Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 37, 54.

humans, wearing long robes that were probably worn by elders of high rank at that time.<sup>30</sup> Although these statuettes are very different from the pillar figurines, it is worthy of note that in some of them Athirat is depicted with her breasts uncovered.

The goddess has an important part in two Ugaritic myths, the Baal cycle and the Keret epic. In the Baal cycle, Athirat appears in the role of a mediator. Baal is upset because he has no palace like Athirat's children, so he goes with his consort/sister Anath to appeal to Athirat. They bring her gifts of gold and silver and ask her to intercede with El to let Baal have a palace for himself.<sup>31</sup> When she goes to El:

She penetrates El's field and enters  
The pavilion of King Father Shunem.  
At El's feet she bows and fall down,  
Prostrates her and does him reverence.  
As soon as El espies her,  
He parts his jaws and laughs.  
His feet upon the footstool he puts  
And doth twiddle his fingers.  
He lifts up his voice and cries:  
"Why is come Lady Asherah of the Sea?  
Why hither the progenitress of the Gods?"

(Here El offers her food and drink)

See, El the King's love stirs thee,  
Bull's affection arouses thee."<sup>32</sup>

After this warm welcome, El listens to her request and approves it. Later, when Baal goes to the underworld, El consults with Athirat regarding which of her sons should

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<sup>30</sup> Korpel, "Asherah outside Israel," 131.

<sup>31</sup> The temple was considered the "house" or "palace" of the god, so perhaps this story meant to legitimize the building of a temple for Baal. Baal does not seem to be one of Asherah's sons. He is usually called the son of Dagan, although at times El appears to be his father. Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 39.

<sup>32</sup> Pritchard, *Archaeology*, 101. Also see Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 37.

replace Baal.<sup>33</sup> In the above poem, the entrance of Athirat is described in a formulaic way. The author, Illimalik the high priest, uses exactly the same words to describe the appearance of other gods before El,<sup>34</sup> but the difference here is El's response: he is very happy to see her,<sup>35</sup> and thus more receptive to her request. In this poem we can observe that El is connected with the bull, a traditional male fertility symbol, and that the goddess Athirat is connected with water—her epithet is “Lady Athirat of the Sea.” Patai suggests that her domain was the sea, while El ruled the heavens.<sup>36</sup>

In the Keret epic, El reveals himself to King Keret and promises him a bride that will bear him many children. On his way to find the bride, Keret passes by a sanctuary of Athirat:

After sunset on the third,  
He reached the sanctuary of Athirat of Tyre,  
Yes, (that) of the goddess of Sidon.  
There Keret, the nobleman, pronounced a vow:  
“As surely as Athirat of Tyre exists,  
Yes, the goddess of Sidon:  
If I take Hariya into my house,  
Make the lass enter my residence,  
I will give twice her (weight) in silver,  
Yes, three times her (weight) in gold!”<sup>37</sup>

Keret gets his wife and many children, but he does not fulfill his vow to Athirat, who consequently punishes him with a mortal disease that almost kills him. From this story

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<sup>33</sup> Pritchard, *Archaeology*, 111.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Anat and Baal's visits to El at Pritchard, *Archaeology*, 111, 93.

<sup>35</sup> Patai compare it to the relationship between an Oriental queen and her master. Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 37.

The theme of the queen who goes to her husband to ask for a favor occurs also in the story of Esther in the Bible and appears to be a common Near Eastern motif, probably based on reality to a certain degree.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>37</sup> Korpel, “Asherah outside Israel,” 137.

we can see that Athirat was the goddess (or one of the goddesses) men turned to with requests for a wife and children. To the modern reader, she appears in this epic as dangerous and unforgiving,<sup>38</sup> but one should remember that in the ancient Near East a person who did not fulfill his or her vow to a deity was expected to be justly punished.

The heir to Keret, Prince Yassib, is described as the one “who will drink the milk of Athirat.”<sup>39</sup> Wyatt suggests that human kings were made quasi-divine by suckling from her.<sup>40</sup> A similar idea is expressed on an ivory bed panel from Ugarit in which a winged goddess with Hathor’s headdress and horns is depicted suckling two boys. There is no inscription identifying the goddess, but some scholars think she may be Athirat or Anath, who also served as wet nurse for the gods.<sup>41</sup> As with the statue of Athirat as an aged woman, the only similarity to the pillar figurines is the uncovered breasts.

## 2. The Etymology of the Word “Asherah”

The etymological possibilities for the word “asherah” or “athirat” are considerable, thus opinions differ with regard to the meaning of the goddess’s name. In Hebrew, the word *osher* (אִשֶׁרָה) means “happiness,” and it corresponds with her Sumerian epithet, “Lady of voluptuousness and happiness.” The tribal name “Asher” was originally

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<sup>38</sup> Korpel suggests that this negative description of Asherah shows that she was falling out of favor with the people of Ugarit at the end of the second millennium BCE. He believes that she was merged with Anat more and more. One example he gives for this process is from the Keret epic. Keret’s son is foretold to drink the milk of Asherah, and to suck the breast of Anat. Korpel, “Asherah outside Israel,” 138. However, Greenstein puts forth new evidence that the above text does not mention the name of Asherah, but actually refers to Ashtart. E.L. Greenstein, “New Reading in the Kirta Epic,” in *Israel Oriental Studies* 18 (1998), 105–123.

<sup>39</sup> Wyatt, “Asherah,” 100.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Korpel, “Asherah outside Israel,” 138.



connected with the deity of good fortune and may be a masculine form of Asherah, according to Burney.<sup>42</sup> Her Ugaritic title is *rbt aṣrt ym*, with *ym* meaning either “sea” or “day.”<sup>43</sup> Binger therefore suggests it can mean “she who organizes the day.” Binger notes that in Akkadian the word *aširtum* means “overseer,” “care,” and “guidance,” and thus she translates the word *asherah* as “she who watches over us” or “she who maintains order.” Binger believes that in her role as a protector, Asherah maintains order and brings good luck.<sup>44</sup>

Another explanation suggested by Albright is that the word *asherah* means “holy place” or “sanctuary,”<sup>45</sup> since the noun *aṣr*, meaning “(sacred) place,” is most widely attested in the Semitic languages.<sup>46</sup> This etymology agrees well with another name of the goddess in Ugarit, *Oudsh*, which in the Canaanite languages means “sanctuary.”<sup>47</sup> De Moor follows Albright and translates *aṣrt ym* as “sanctuary near the sea.”<sup>48</sup> It is interesting to note that much later in Jewish tradition the female manifestation of God is called *Shekhina* (שכינה), which is related to the root *ShChN* (שכנ), meaning “reside,” and

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<sup>42</sup> C. F. Burney, *The Book of Judges* (London: Rivingtons, 1920), 197–8, quoted in Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 50. Burney discusses Gen. 30:13 where Leah exclaims *be’oshrie* (“in my happiness” or “in my good luck”) and names the son of her maid Asher. He suggests that the expression *be’oshrie* is an intentional alteration of an original *ba’asherah* (“with the help of Asherah”).

<sup>43</sup> The Arabic word *aṣr* means “shining,” and thus makes another connection between the goddess and the light, as in the word *ym* (“day”). Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 51.

<sup>44</sup> Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit*, 145.

<sup>45</sup> William F. Albright, “The Evolution of the West-Semitic Divinity An-Anat-Atta,” *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature* 41 (1925), 73–101, quoted in Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 50.

<sup>46</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 49–53.

<sup>47</sup> Korpel, “Asherah outside Israel,” 129.

<sup>48</sup> J.C. De Moor “Asherah,” *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 1 (1973): 473–81, quoted in Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 50.

that a synonym for God in Hebrew is *Hamakom*, meaning “the place.”<sup>49</sup> Why would a deity be named after a place? It seems that the distinction between the deity and the place where it resided was not as clear as it is today. The attributes of deities shifted in accordance with their place of worship. Asherah, for example, is described as related to the sea or to the steppes, and in the inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud we find YHWH both as “YHWH of Samaria,” and “YHWH of Teman,” revealing that the deity and his place of worship have merged to some degree. Korpel notes that deification of holy places was common in the Semitic world, and that holy objects and places were seen as animated. For this reason, he believes, it was natural to name a goddess after a place.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to her connections with happiness and a holy place, we find that Athirat is closely related to the sea, which is called Yam. The connection to the sea was suggested by Albright, who revised his earlier opinion that *asherah* meant “sanctuary,” and later saw the name as part of the longer title *rbt aṯrt ym*. Yam is also an ancient dragon, and in Ugaritic *aṯr* means “to walk.” Thus, Albright interpreted *rbt aṯrt ym* as “The Lady Who Treads on the Sea (Dragon)” or “The Lady Who Traverses the Sea.”<sup>51</sup> Yam was her son,<sup>52</sup> and a number of Ugaritic texts designate the goddess as “Athirat of the Sea” or “Athirat of Tyre.”<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, when Baal and Anath come to talk to Athirat, they find her by the sea, spinning and laundering, and later she sends her servant

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<sup>49</sup> Later midrash (biblical commentary) struggles with this notion and tries to explain it: “Why do we call the Lord *Makom*? Because he is the existence of the world, but the world is not his existence.” (מפני מה מכנין שמו של הקדוש ברוך הוא וקוראים אותו מקום? מפני שהוא מקומו של עולם ואין עולמו מקומו.) Reuben Alcalay. *The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary*. Jerusalem: Massada, 1984.

<sup>50</sup> Korpel, “Asherah outside Israel,” 129.

<sup>51</sup> William F. Albright, *Archaeology and the religion of Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1953), 77.

<sup>52</sup> Hadley notes that Yam was called “El’s darling,” and thus “it is not surprising to discover that the consort of El, Athirat, has the honor of tending El’s beloved domain, the sea.” Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 41.

<sup>53</sup> Korpel, “Asherah outside Israel,” 130.

Qadesh wa-Amrur (identified with her servant *dgy*—“fishy” or “fisherman”) to cast a net into the sea to catch a fish.<sup>54</sup>

Some scholars believe that the meaning of the original name might have been lost by the time the Ugaritic myths were written, and therefore one should read *atrt* merely as the personal name of the goddess.<sup>55</sup> This suggestion practically eliminates all meaning from the name Asherah. On the other hand, there is the possibility that all the etymologies mentioned above, and perhaps even more, were in use at different times and places, or even coexisted side by side. Wyatt argues: “We may be sure that all possible wordplays were entertained by the ancients in exploring her theology, so that ruling an etymology out of account on philological grounds does not rule out possible mythological and theological developments or cult-titles...”<sup>56</sup>

### 3. The Importance of Child Bearing in the Ancient Near East

In order to understand the vast popularity of the goddess Asherah, one has to comprehend the extreme importance for a woman in the ancient Near East to successfully bear children, particularly sons. The financial situation of the family was directly related to the number of sons it had, and usually only sons could inherit the land. When infertility occurred, the man was only rarely blamed for it; and although both men and

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<sup>54</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 40.

In light of the above, Hadley believes that the word *ym* should be translated as “sea,” not “day.”

<sup>55</sup> A. L. Perlman, “Asherah and Astarte in the Old Testament and Ugaritic literature” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1978), 78, quoted in Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 51.

<sup>56</sup> Wyatt suggests that among those other possibilities is the word *yashar* (ישר), meaning in Hebrew “upright,” which can be related to the cultic pole called *asherah* (אשרה) mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. Wyatt, “Asherah,” 99. *Yashar* also means “honest” or “righteous” in Hebrew, and it could be another etymology of her name.

women were pitied when they were childless, a man could take another wife, but a woman could not take another husband. In addition, the woman's social status and her image as a moral person depended on her fertility, since barrenness was perceived as a punishment from the gods for some wrongdoing, and not as a mere misfortune.<sup>57</sup>

Barrenness was portrayed as disastrous not only for individuals but on the national level as well. When the prophet Hosea asks God to punish the tribe of Ephraim, he says:

Give them, O YHWH, give them what?  
Give them a womb that miscarries  
And shriveled breasts!<sup>58</sup>

Even in the afterlife barrenness can affect the poor soul. In the Sumerian version of the epic of Gilgamesh,<sup>59</sup> Enkidu tells Gilgamesh what he saw in the underworld:

“Did you see the man who has one son?”  
“I saw.”  
“What is he doing?”  
“His house is pledged – Ho, he calls bitterly.”

[Then comes a description of men who have an increasing number of sons; according to this part, the more sons a man has, the better. Eventually Gilgamesh reaches the sacred number of seven. —YK]

“Did you see the man that has seven sons?”

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<sup>57</sup> Karel Van Der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 78.

R. Alter, analyzed the six barren woman narratives in the Bible and determined that all of them share a basic structure: indication of the woman's barrenness, followed by a divine messenger promising the barrenness will be ended, followed by the conception and birth of the promised son. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Book, 1981), 75–98.

<sup>58</sup> Hosea 9:14. Translation by Biale. David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 12–13.

Biale identifies the connection between fertility and nationality in the Bible, but he interprets it from a modern Jewish perspective, and suggests that the reason for this connection is the Israelites' "sense of their origin as a small, weak people" and their demographic concerns. Actually, the wish for fertility and the fear of barrenness was common in the ancient Near East, regardless of the size of the nation, and was not specific to the Israelites. It was important on the personal level, on the extended family level (beit av = בית אב), and on the tribal level, but probably not as much on the national level.

<sup>59</sup> This was the origin of the more famous Akkadian version.

“I saw.”

“What is he doing?”

“Among the young gods he sits as a judge.”

“Did you see the man who has no heirs?”

“I saw.”

“What is he doing?”

“Bread like bricks he eats.”

“Did you see the woman who did not give birth?”

“I saw.”

“What is she doing?”

“Like a broken jar thrown on her side – she will not cheer a man.”<sup>60</sup>

In this poem, as in the story about the palace for Baal that describes the meeting between Asherah and El, the importance and influence of a woman is directly related to her ability to cheer her husband, and that ability is related to the number of sons she has. The number seven as a desirable number appears in the Bible as well, and a woman who had seven sons was considered extremely lucky. Hannah sings a song of praise to YHWH, saying he determines the fate of humans in every moment: “Those who were full hire themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry cease to hunger. Even the barren gives birth to seven, but she who has many children languishes.”<sup>61</sup> Asherah, being a goddess, had ten times the number seven: the incredible number of seventy children!

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<sup>60</sup> Jacob Klein and Shin Shifra, *In Those Distant Days: Anthology of Mesopotamian Literature in Hebrew* (Tel Aviv, Israel: Am Oved, 2002), 318–319. In this text we can see that one of the roles of women was “to cheer a man.” This state of affairs corresponds well to the relationship between Asherah and her husband El.

Binger explains a difficult passage in the Ugaritic myths as a description of all the things Asherah, as the ideal wife, can do: “She can spin, wash, cook, or make pottery, and ... she knows how to deal with El, and make him agree to what she wants.” Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit*, 71. This explanation is supported by Proverbs 10:31, which describes the ideal woman.

<sup>61</sup> 1 Samuel 2:5 *New American Standard Bible*. Here the number seven is the desirable number of children, as in the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

In 1 Samuel 1: 27–28 Hannah names the boy Samuel and explains the meaning of the name which derives from the double meaning of the root *ShAL* (שאל) as both request and lend. Samuel is the one who was asked from god and also the one who she will lend to god. It is interesting to see that often it was the woman who named the child in the Bible. Considering the fact that the name of the person often determined his future, this is not a small thing as it might seem to the modern reader.

Hadley believes that the number seventy merely “appears to be conventional for a large number,”<sup>62</sup> but this interpretation overlooks the magical qualities of the number seven.<sup>63</sup>

The way to attain fertility described in the Bible is not essentially different from the one described in the Ugaritic myths. Hannah, who was barren, goes to the temple in Shiloh, prays bitterly to God, and makes a vow to dedicate her son to YHWH if YHWH grants her wish for a child.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, King Keret goes to the temple of Athirat and makes a vow to give her precious gifts if she fulfills his wish to establish a family, showing it to be a common practice in the region. The main difference is that the Bible portrays YHWH as the only god that people turn to in this matter. The question is: If YHWH is the only one who decides with regard to child bearing, then what is the role of the goddess or goddesses, whose popularity among the Israelites and Judeans is demonstrated by the many fertility figurines found in Israel and Judah? One must keep in mind that the Bible was heavily edited, so perhaps Hannah came to the temple to pray to other gods as well as YHWH, but that information did not get recorded in the Bible. Another explanation is that by that time YHWH had already taken over many of the goddess functions.<sup>65</sup> Karel van der Toorn, a distinguished Bible scholar, believes that the

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<sup>62</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 39.

<sup>63</sup> Attributing special powers to letters and numbers is an ancient tradition in the Near East. Seven is considered one of the most powerful numbers – according to the Bible the seventh day of the week is holy since God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day. Seven is made of three and four which are also considered important numbers and their multiplication create the number 12, which is another special number.

<sup>64</sup> Usually the sons who were born from those miraculous births became important leaders – Samuel, Samson and Joseph in the Bible, as well as Moses that his survival as a child is questionable. This tradition is reflected in the New Testament: Mary miraculously is giving a birth to Jesus, whose life is threatened as a baby. Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 188.

<sup>65</sup> Chapter II.3 of this paper will discuss this topic further.

goddess Asherah served as a mediator for the chief male god—El/YHWH—and that the popularity of the Asherah pillar figurines results from that role.<sup>66</sup> This explanation fits well with her role as a mother in the Ugaritic myths and with the archaeological evidence. In this sense, Asherah is similar to the Virgin Mary, who mediates between God and the worshipper, thus fulfilling the human need for a closer relationship with the deity, as well as the need for motherly protection.

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<sup>66</sup> Van der Toorn, *Israelite Figurines*, 60–61.

## Chapter II

### Asherah and YHWH in the Bible

#### 1. The Position of the Deuteronomistic Literature Regarding Polytheism and Iconic Representations of Deities

The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) is the most hostile source to the Asherah cult since it promotes the worship of YHWH alone, and the text was heavily scrutinized and edited by pro-monotheistic redactors.<sup>67</sup> Almost all the biblical references to Asherah belong to the deuteronomistic (Dtr) literature or later.<sup>68</sup> The Dtr literature was composed between 650 and 500 BCE, but incorporates older sources that are woven together to describe Israel's history from its emergence in Canaan in the twelfth century BCE to the fall of Jerusalem and the beginning of the Exile in the early sixth century.<sup>69</sup> The core of its works stems from a circle of religious reformers in the days of Josiah in the late seventh century, and it was meant to give theological legitimacy to the "Yahweh

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<sup>67</sup> There is a group of Bible scholars whom Dever named "revisionists" or "minimalists" that argues that the Bible should be read only as literature and not as a historical document. Dever disagrees with them, claiming that the Hebrew Bible, which is heavily edited, cannot be considered "history" in the modern sense, though it contains much history, and those bits and pieces of history can be dug out of the text. Dever acknowledges that the books of the Bible that cannot be trusted as historical sources are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, since no archaeological evidence of the stories of the patriarchs and the exodus from Egypt has been found. Dever examines the books that should be considered as historical sources, which are of the "Deuteronomistic history." In contrast to the claims of the "revisionists," Dever notes that the daily life described in these books does not fit in the Persian or Hellenistic era, but only in the Iron Age II period in ancient Israel (1000–586 BCE), and therefore originated in real and not fictional history. William G. Dever, *What did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It: What Archeology Can Tell us About the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 97–101.

<sup>68</sup> Twenty-four out of forty references to Asherah in the Bible are in the Deuteronomistic literature. Wyatt, "Asherah," 102.

The deuteronomistic literature includes all books from Deuteronomy to II Kings.

<sup>69</sup> This gap between the period covered and the time the Deuteronomistic literature was written calls for extreme caution in reading it as a description of historical events.



alone” view.<sup>70</sup> The religious turmoil of the time is illustrated in II Kings 22–23. These chapters describe the finding of a sacred law book by King Josiah<sup>71</sup> during renovations in the temple, probably in the year 622 BCE.<sup>72</sup> Upon finding the book, Josiah declared a major religious reform that included renewing the covenant with YHWH, centralizing the cult in Jerusalem, and dedicating the temple to YHWH alone:<sup>73</sup>

And the king ordered the high priest Hilkijahu and the priests of the second order and the keepers of the door to bring out from Yahweh’s Temple all the vessels that had been made for Baal and for Asherah and for all the host of heaven, and he burned them outside Jerusalem at the valley of Kidron, and he carried their dust to Beth-El.<sup>74</sup> (II Kings 23:4)

The battle against the polytheistic and iconic tradition described here is reflected throughout the Dtr literature. Perhaps its most clear statement is the second commandment, which has had extraordinary influence on Jewish art to this day:

You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I YHWH your God am a jealous God.<sup>75</sup> (Exodus 20:4–6)

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<sup>70</sup> Dever, *Biblical Writers*, 97–101.

<sup>71</sup> Some scholars identify the book that was found with Deuteronomy – Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 49.

<sup>72</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 14. Kletter notes that according to II Chron. 34 the reform of Josiah occurred earlier in his reign, but most scholars discredit this description and see it as a later adaptation of II Kings 23.

<sup>73</sup> Two earlier attempts to centralize the cult took place in the days of Hezekiah and perhaps in the early period of Menasseh. Ephraim Stern, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, Volume II* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 200.

<sup>74</sup> Translation by Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit*, 116.

Some scholars believe the religious reforms of Josiah and before him of Hezekiah were political in their nature—their purpose was to throw off the Assyrian religion that was imposed upon the land. Others argue that Baal and Asherah were local deities and not Assyrian, and that the Assyrians did not force their religion on their defeated subjects. Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 58–59.

<sup>75</sup> Revised Standard Version (RSV).

The Dtr writers portray the cult of Asherah and the other gods that were worshipped in ancient Israel as a foreign influence on the original monotheistic and aniconic Hebrew cult. They projected Israel's exclusive monotheism, which finally took shape after the Babylonian exile, into the life of earlier generations, as if it had already begun in the days of Abraham. The biblical writers were so convincing, and their editing job so thorough, that their approach was accepted as historical and was adopted by Judaism and Christianity, and it still prevails in orthodox circles<sup>76</sup> as well as in popular thought. Even scholars are not immune to it: "The Deuteronomistic historians have done their work so well that scholars are prone to talk of the asherah and other cultic elements as evidence of syncretism, or of (extraneous) "Canaanite" elements in the Israelite and Judahite cults,"<sup>77</sup> notes Wyatt. However, scholars now are reexamining religion in ancient Israel, and there is growing agreement that in spite of the efforts of the Bible to mask its true nature, it was originally polytheistic and only gradually became monotheistic later.<sup>78</sup> The leading Israeli archaeologist, Ephraim Stern, writes: "Regarding the quantity of the remains of the cult objects related to Yahwistic paganism from this period in Judah, it seems that the success of efforts to promote the monotheistic central cult was not very great. This pagan cult was very common in Jerusalem and the

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<sup>76</sup> Dijkstra, "El, God of Israel," 81.

<sup>77</sup> Wyatt, "Asherah," 102.

<sup>78</sup> Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 25-26. Dijkstra, "El, God of Israel," 81. Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit*, 53. Gadon. *Once and Future*, 170. Wyatt, "Asherah," 102. See also Ackerman concerning how to extract information about the popular religion of Israel from the Bible. Susan Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press/Harvard Semitic Museum at Harvard University, 1992), 1-3.

rest of Judah during this entire period until the very end of the monarchy, in marked contrast to the impression obtained by reading the Bible alone.”<sup>79</sup>

The gradual centralization and “monotheisation” of the cult was accompanied by aniconic tendencies. According to Lewis, the majority of scholars now date the prohibitions on making cult images late.<sup>80</sup> Lewis quotes Albertz, who dates the beginning of the battle against divine images with the prophet Hosea, probably at the end of the eighth century, while Dohmen has set the date of the programmatic aniconism as late as the sixth century BCE.<sup>81</sup> The implications of this late dating are that in the time of the united monarchy and for at least part of the time of the divided monarchy, the anthropomorphic and other representations of deities were considered a legitimate part of the religion in ancient Israel and Judah, contrary to what the biblical writers would like us to believe.

## 2. Asherah in the Bible

Given that the Bible’s view of Asherah was distorted, one must read it cautiously; however, it is also the most important source of information about her cult among the Hebrews. The term “asherah” is mentioned forty times in nine books<sup>82</sup> of the Bible, usually in a negative context—a description of how a sinful king installs it, how a

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<sup>79</sup> Stern, *Land of Bible*, 200–201.

<sup>80</sup> Theodore J. Lewis, “Divine Images and Aniconism in Ancient Israel,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118, no. 1 (January–March 1998): 36–54.

Christoph Uehlinger refers to several recent books which agree that monotheism was a late feature of Israelite religion. They also agree that the polemic against “Canaanite” and other “pre- or non-Israelite” customs and beliefs actually reflects later tensions in shaping the identity of the post-exilic community. Uehlinger, “Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary,” 97–98.

righteous king (or judge) destroys it, or in a warning not to set up an asherah (and, in plural, “asherim” and “asherot”). A few times the word “asherah” appears as the name of the goddess, but more commonly the word refers to some cultic object.<sup>83</sup> The biblical writers assume the familiarity of their readers with the term, and thus do not describe this object in detail, but the verbs used with tell something of its nature: This object can be “set up,” “planted,” “made,” “built,” “cut down,” “burnt,” or “made into dust,” and therefore it is not the same as the clay figurines of Asherah, but rather a wooden object, either a tree or a stylized wooden pole.<sup>84</sup> Some scholars have argued that because the verb *nata* (“planted” = נָטַע) is sometimes used, the asherah must be a living tree, but Hadley notes that this verb can also mean “establish,” and therefore does not necessarily refer to a living tree.<sup>85</sup>

The asherah pole is found, according to the Bible, both near the altar of YHWH and (more frequently) near the altar of Baal, his rival. In Deut. 16.21 we find:

Do not plant for yourself an asherah, any wood (or tree), at the altar of YHWH your god, which you will make for yourself.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Lewis, “Divine Images,” 39.

<sup>82</sup> The Bible contains twenty-four books in total.

<sup>83</sup> Wyatt, “Asherah,” 101.

Lipinski believes that *asherah* refers to a sacred grove or shrine and not to a goddess. E. Lipinski, “The Goddess Athirat in Arabia, in Babylon, and in Ugarit,” *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 3 (1972), 101–19, quoted in Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 5. However, Hadley discusses the various objections that were raised by other scholars and concludes that Asherah was more than merely an object—Asherah was both a goddess and her image. Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 4–11.

<sup>84</sup> For a full list of the verbs attached to the word *asherah* in the Bible, see Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 54–55.

<sup>85</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 60.

For a further discussion of this question, see chapter IV.3 of this paper.

Whereas in Judges 6:30 we read:

The men of the town demanded of Joash – Bring out your son. He must die, because he has broken down Baal's altar and cut down the asherah beside it.<sup>87</sup>

A problem that arises is that although in the Ugaritic myths Asherah is the consort of El<sup>88</sup> and antagonist of Baal, who is described as a direct threat to her children,<sup>89</sup> in the Bible she is associated primarily with Baal and less frequently with El/YHWH. In I Kings 18:19, Elijah calls 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah for a contest, but when Elijah wins the contest, he slaughters the prophets of Baal while the Asherah prophets are not mentioned anymore. This led Patai to conclude that Elijah did not have a quarrel with Asherah—only with Baal.<sup>90</sup> Olyan suggests that the cult of Asherah was an integral part of the cult of Yahweh, and not a foreign element. He points to the odd fact that pre-exilic radical Yahwist prophets like Elijah, Amos, and Hosea did not object to the cult of Asherah explicitly, and concludes that during their time the cult of Asherah was still a legitimate part of the cult of YHWH, in which she was considered YHWH's consort, not Baal's. Thus, the prophets who objected to the cult of Baal did not have a dispute with Asherah.<sup>91</sup> Olyan's critics argue that the pre-exilic prophets did not condemn Asherah because she was unknown to the Israelites at that time. But Hadley

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<sup>86</sup> My translation. —YK

<sup>87</sup> New International Version (NIV).

<sup>88</sup> In the Bible, El and YHWH are names for the same deity.

<sup>89</sup> The only source outside the Bible that associates Asherah with Baal is a Hittite myth in which she is portrayed as having love-hate relationships with him. In that story, Asherah tries to seduce Baal, but he approaches her husband Elkunirsha (identified with El—the equivalent for this name in Hebrew is El-Koneh-Eretz) and tells him about this. In return, Elkunirsha encourages Baal to punish her. Baal then kills many of her children, and eventually she returns to Elkunirsha, and they plot together against Baal. Wyatt, "Asherah," 102.

<sup>90</sup> Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 40–1.

argues that in other places in the Bible Asherah is mentioned as a goddess, and not just as a wooden pole, and therefore likely was known to the prophets.<sup>92</sup> In addition, the el-Qom and Ajrud material connect Asherah to YHWH,<sup>93</sup> and therefore many scholars now believe Asherah was primarily the consort of YHWH, and not of Baal,<sup>94</sup> as the biblical authors would have their readers believe, so as to discredit her cult by associating her with Baal.

The cult of Asherah was not restricted to the outdoor altars mentioned above, or to the lower classes, since her image was found in the religious center of the united Israelite kingdom and later of Judah, the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>95</sup> Patai suggests it was King Solomon who introduced the worship of Asherah to Jerusalem, because according to I Kings 11:5, Solomon worshipped “Ashtoret Goddess of the Sidonians.” Patai notes that Asherah was the goddess of the Sidonians, and argues that it was a case of confusion or of merging the identities of the two goddesses.<sup>96</sup> Patai thinks it was the queen mother Maacha who introduced Asherah worship to the temple in Jerusalem<sup>97</sup> toward the end of the tenth century. The Bible describes several occasions in which the image of Asherah is either installed or removed from the temple. For example, in II Kings 21:3–7, there is a report of the installment of an image of the goddess in the temple by King Manasseh:

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<sup>91</sup> Saul Olyan, *Asherah*, 38.

<sup>92</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 75.

<sup>93</sup> See chapter III.2 of this paper for a discussion of these findings.

<sup>94</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 78.

<sup>95</sup> Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 39–40.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 41. Patai suggests that the confusion between the two goddesses is not unique to the biblical writers and was found already in the Amarna letters from the 14<sup>th</sup> c. BCE.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

7. And he placed the picture of Asherah that he made, in the house of which YHWH said to David and to his son Solomon: “In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen from all the people of Israel, I will place my name in eternity.”<sup>98</sup>

What did this representation of the goddess look like? There is no detailed description of the image, but it was probably a more elaborate statue than the wooden poles or the clay figurines.<sup>99</sup> Uehlinger believes, based on the anthropomorphic shape of the clay figurines of Asherah, that this elaborate image of the goddess took an anthropomorphic shape as well.<sup>100</sup> The statue was perhaps dressed with clothes that were changed from time to time. The account of Josiah’s reform at II Kings 23:7 refers to the *battim* that the women weave for Asherah. Literally, *battim* means “houses,” but it has been suggested that this is a typographical error and actually should be read *baddim*—“fabrics” or “garments.”<sup>101</sup> Some scholars think these were clothes that the women prepared for the statue of Asherah, similar to the tradition in neighboring regions.<sup>102</sup>

On more than one occasion the Bible associates women primarily with the worship of goddesses, while the men are blamed for following their wives: King Solomon and King Ahab allowed their foreign wives to build temples for their gods and spread idolatry among the Hebrews. The biblical authors look favorably on King Asa, who has “deposed his grandmother Maachah from her position as queen mother, because

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<sup>98</sup> Translation by Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit*, 114.

<sup>99</sup> Patai suggests the statue that Jezebel had in Samaria was “probably much more elaborate and impressive than the wooden images simple villages could afford.” Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 45. Therefore, her statue in the temple in Jerusalem was probably an elaborate one as well.

<sup>100</sup> Uehlinger, “Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary,” 123.

<sup>101</sup> 2 Kings 23:7. Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 72.

<sup>102</sup> Wyatt, “Asherah,” 102.

she had made an obscene thing (mifletzet) for the Asherah.”<sup>103</sup> Susan Ackerman suggests, based on this and other passages, that the *gebira* or “queen mother” carried out official religious and political functions, of which the most important were leading the cult of Asherah in the court and influencing royal succession.<sup>104</sup> In a later period, the prophet Jeremiah accuses women of worshipping the “queen of heaven,” who is probably Ishtar or Astarte.<sup>105</sup> However, the women reply: “Is it that we alone burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and pour her libation? Is it without our husbands that we make her cakes in her image?”<sup>106</sup> In chapter 7:17–18, Jeremiah describes how the children and the husbands as well participate in the worship of the “queen of heaven.”<sup>107</sup> Perhaps, as Ackerman suggests, women had a special role in goddess worship, but it was done in full agreement with the other members of the family.

### **3. YHWH Assumes the Roles of the Goddess and Takes Her Feminine Characteristics**

When YHWH became the sole and exclusive god of Israel, he took over the roles of the goddess as a mother and a midwife, thus fulfilling the need of the worshippers for motherly protection. In the Mesopotamian tradition, the gods are involved in deciding who will have children and who will not, and they were thought to come to help in the delivery of the baby in the form of birth goddesses.<sup>108</sup> Van der Toorn notes that in the

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<sup>103</sup> 1 Kgs 15:13 (=2 Chr 15:16)

<sup>104</sup> Suzan Ackerman, “The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112, no. 3 (Fall 1993), 388.

<sup>105</sup> Ackerman, *Under Green Tree*, 8–35. Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 63.

<sup>106</sup> Jeremiah 44:15–19. Translation by Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 63.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>108</sup> Van Der Toorn, *From Her Cradle*, 86.



Bible YHWH acquires the traditional role of the birth goddesses as an active participant in the conception.<sup>109</sup> It appears that a couple cannot have a child without the help of YHWH, the “third partner”: “And YHWH visited Hannah, so that she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters.”<sup>110</sup> Moreover, YHWH “weaves” the fetus in the mother’s womb and is witness to his “formless beginning” (Ps.139:13-16). At birth, YHWH acts as a midwife, “pulls” the child, and puts him on his mother’s breasts:<sup>111</sup>

Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you  
even at my mother's breast. From birth I was cast upon you; from  
my mother's womb you have been my God. (Ps. 22:9-10)

The modern reader is accustomed to interpreting biblical poetry such as the above in metaphorical terms, but just as the expression “the house of God” was understood literally, so were the references to YHWH as a midwife and a mother. However, the Bible also uses metaphors as well, in which YHWH takes feminine roles. On more than one occasion YHWH is compared to a mother. For example, in Isaiah 42:14–15, YHWH appears as a mother in the middle of childbirth:

For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held  
myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp  
and pant. I will lay waste the mountains and hills and dry up all  
their vegetation...

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> 1 Samuel 2:21. King James (“the Lord” changed to YHWH after the original text). Biale notes that “God’s role as a partner in fertility is attested in virtually all the patriarchal stories, as well as in the stories of the births of Samson and Samuel.” David Biale, “The God with Breasts: El Shaddai in the Bible,” *History of Religions* 20 (1982): 240–256.

<sup>111</sup> Van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle*, 88.

The relationship between Israel and YHWH is similar to the relationship between a child and his mother. In Isaiah 66:13, YHWH says: “As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you,” and in Deuteronomy 32:18, YHWH blames Israel for being unfaithful:

You deserted the Rock [God], who has delivered you;  
you forgot the God who gave you birth.<sup>112</sup>

Asherah was portrayed as a “super mother” who gave birth to seventy sons; now YHWH becomes the “super mother.” While human mothers can fail, YHWH will never fail his children:

But Zion said, YHWH has forsaken me, the God has forgotten me.  
Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion  
on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not  
forget you!<sup>113</sup> (Isaiah 49:14-15)

Some of YHWH’s titles originate from a feminine semantic field. He is described as merciful or compassionate—in Hebrew, *rachoom*, which is related to the word *rechem*, which means womb.<sup>114</sup> “Raham” is also one of the epithets of the goddess Anat in the Ugaritic myths.<sup>115</sup> The word *Shaddai*, which is one of the epithets of the male god El, is from the same root as *shaddayim*—“breasts” in Hebrew. In Akkadian, the word *shadu* describes “high places” or “mountains,”<sup>116</sup> and that was probably the origin of the Hebrew word. The god El Shaddai appears to be the god that the patriarchs originally

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<sup>112</sup> My translation. —YK. The title *Tzur* (rock) for God might be reminiscent of the worship of Matzebot (pillar stones) that is condemned in the Bible.

<sup>113</sup> My translation. —YK

<sup>114</sup> Phyllis Tribble has suggested that Hebrew references to God’s compassion could be translated as “God’s womb love.” Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 64.

<sup>115</sup> Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*. 1990. Second ed., (Dearborn, Michigan: Dove Booksellers, 2002), 50.

<sup>116</sup> Biale, “The God with Breasts,” 240–256.

worshipped, before YHWH emerged as the leading Israelite deity. In Exodus 6:3, YHWH says to Moses, “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as El Shaddai and they did not know that my name is YHWH.”<sup>117</sup> Biale suggests that the use of the name El Shaddai in fertility blessings that were bestowed on the patriarchs in Genesis is not accidental, and that this name was understood as “El with breasts” or “the breasted El.”<sup>118</sup>

The important role of the goddess—securing fertility for the land, the people, and the livestock—is now taken by YHWH, as, for example, in his promises that:

If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit. Your threshing will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting, and you will eat all the food you want and live in safety in your land. (Leviticus 26:3–5)

I will look on you with favor and make you fruitful and increase your numbers, and I will keep my covenant with you. You will still be eating last year’s harvest when you will have to move it out to make room for the new. (Leviticus 26:9–10)

But if they fail to follow his commandments and worship idols, then his punishment will soon come:

Your strength will be spent in vain, because your soil will not yield its crops, nor will the trees of the land yield their fruit.<sup>119</sup>  
(Leviticus 20)

The Yahwist cult takes over the symbols of the goddess as well. The menorah is designed as a stylized tree, which traditionally represented the sacred tree of life. It was

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<sup>117</sup> My Translation. —YK

<sup>118</sup> Biale, “The God with Breasts,” 240–256.

<sup>119</sup> NIV.

taken from goddess worship and incorporated into the Yahwist cult, but its shape reveals its origin. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between the menorah, the sacred tree, and goddess worship, see chapter IV of this paper. Another goddess symbol that enters the male canon is the lion. Keel and Uehlinger note that, “Even though lions had belonged to the sphere of the goddess since the Middle Bronze Age, they were brought into the sphere of the male chief gods in Iron Age I (1200–1000 BCE). In the Solomonic Temple, depictions of lions appear only on the cultic stands. The lions are much more important in the palace, where they appear by the royal throne.”<sup>120</sup> The snake, a traditional consort of the goddess, entered the temple as well. For a detailed account of the snake in relation to goddesses, and its function in the Hebrew tradition, see chapter IV.2 of this paper.

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<sup>120</sup> Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses*, 169.

## Chapter III

### Asherah and YHWH – The Archaeological Findings

#### 1. Clay Figurines of Asherah

The Asherah clay figurines are pillar figurines that represent a standing woman holding her hands under her prominent breasts, showing them proudly as if offering them to the viewer. In some figurines the hands are carrying the breasts, and in others the hands are located a little under the breasts, either separated or joined together.<sup>121</sup> The hands were added to the body by application,<sup>122</sup> and the fingers are not marked, except in some rare figurines in which they were painted.<sup>123</sup> Other types of female figurines were found in ancient Israel, but the Asherah type is the most prevalent.

Pillar figurines, by definition, do not have legs or genitalia, but a schematic round body with a flaring base so the figurine is self-supporting. They have been found in many regions of the ancient world—Cyprus, Syria, Mycenae, Mesopotamia, and more—but the Asherah figurines have typical distinguishing characteristics. Unlike female figurines from nearby areas, which often have hollow bodies, long braids, ears, decorative application of clay, carvings, and punctures, the Asherah figurines have solid bodies and are simple and more schematic.<sup>124</sup> The clay from which they were made was not well sifted, which added to their crude appearance.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 85.

<sup>122</sup> Stern, *Land of Bible*, 206.

<sup>123</sup> Kletter, , *Selected Material Remains*, 85.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

The number of Asherah pillar figurines that have been found in archaeological excavations of ancient Israelite sites is impressive. However, the ongoing archaeological work and the different ways in which scholars defined the type have resulted in various totals reported over the years. Pritchard, the first to publish, in 1943, and the first to have studied the figurines in a systematic way, mentions only 52 pillar figurines;<sup>126</sup> Holland, in 1975, mentions 573;<sup>127</sup> while Kletter, in 1995, counted 854 figurines from known archaeological sites and at least 100 from unknown sites.<sup>128</sup> This paper will follow Kletter's definition of the type, since his dissertation is the most recent and contains the most up-to-date data. Nonetheless, the total number of pillar figurines is expected to increase with further excavations in Israel in the future.<sup>129</sup>

In the past, scholars believed that these figurines dated from as early as the tenth century BCE.<sup>130</sup> However, most scholars now believe that the majority of them date from the eighth to the early sixth century BCE.<sup>131</sup> During that time, the Israelite monarchy was divided between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Kletter notes that ninety-six percent of the Ashera figurines have been found in Judean towns and villages, suggesting that there was very little trade in the figurines outside the

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<sup>126</sup> Pritchard, *Palestinian Figurines*, 56.

<sup>127</sup> Thomas A. Holland, "A Typological and Archeological Study of Human and Animal Representations in the Plastic Art of Palestine," (Ph.D. diss., Oxford University, 1975), 76, quoted in Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 81.

<sup>128</sup> Kletter, *Between Archaeology and Theology*, 181.

<sup>129</sup> Ephraim Stern notes that, "Since Kletter's study, many more figurines from Mesopotamia have been published: female and male, some found a very short distance from the Temple Mount itself." Stern, *Land of Bible*, 207.

<sup>130</sup> Pritchard, *Palestinian Figurines*, 55.

<sup>131</sup> Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible 10,000-586 BCE* (NY: Doubleday, 1992), 502. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses*, 325. Kletter, *Between Archaeology and Theology*, 185.

borders of Judah.<sup>132</sup> Of all the Asherah figurines, almost half have been found in Jerusalem, which was the political and religious center of Judah. The figurines apparently went out of use in the early sixth century, with the Babylonian invasion and the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE.<sup>133</sup>

Kletter identifies two major types of Asherah figurines, based on the shape of the head:

Type One: “Bird/Snake Head.” These figurines have a simple bird- or snake-like head that is of one piece with the body; the head is small, and the neck is the same size as the head. The head is handmade and has a beak-like shape that was created by pinching the clay between the thumb and forefinger (Pl. 1, Pl. 25). There are no incisions and no pupils, but often they have “turbans”<sup>134</sup> or “side locks.” The height is between 10 and 16 cm.<sup>135</sup>

Type Two: “Human Head.” The face has been made in a mould, and the head is connected to the body with a peg<sup>136</sup> (Pl. 2, Pl. 3, Pl. 4, Pl. 5). Kletter believes that the neck was thickened to strengthen the connection point between the head and the body,<sup>137</sup> though perhaps the reason for that is not merely functional.<sup>138</sup> The height is between 14 and 21 cm, and thus they are a little taller than the “Bird/Snake Head” type. The face is usually round and wide with an archaic-style smile and enlarged eyes, which are

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<sup>132</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 122.

<sup>133</sup> Kletter, “*Between Archaeology and Theology*,” 185.

<sup>134</sup> Some of the Judean horsemen wear turbans as well, and Ephraim Stern notes that similar turbans appear in Ammonite male deity statuettes and can be interpreted as those of a divinity. Stern, *Land of Bible*, 251.

<sup>135</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 85.

<sup>136</sup> Pritchard, *Palestinian Figurines*, 56.

<sup>137</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 85.

<sup>138</sup> Chapter IV.2 will explore the resemblance of these figurines to ancient snake and bird goddesses that had elongated, thickened necks as well.

emphasized by the rounded eyebrows above them. Over the forehead there are between one and six lines of curls that continue to the sides of the head to mouth or chin length. This may represent hair, a wig, or some kind of elaborate netted headdress. The shape of the head can be round or conical, and in some cases it protrudes upwards like a hat, but it is not a separate item like the hats of the “Bird/Snake Head” figurines<sup>139</sup> (Plate 4). Keel and Uehlinger note that the emphasis on the face in “Human Head” figurines “personalizes the goddess and allows her to appear close and approachable” to the devotees.<sup>140</sup>

It is tempting to understand the “Bird/Snake Head” figurines as related to the ancient cult of the snake or bird goddess, and those with the moulded human heads as representing the more contemporary goddess Asherah. The difficulty with this explanation is that the figurines with the bird/snake heads were more popular in the seventh century BCE, while the human face type were more popular earlier, in the eighth century BCE. Kletter suggests that it was cheaper to manufacture the “Bird/Snake Head” figurines, and for that reason they became more popular after the destruction caused by the Assyrian invasion of Judea in 701 BCE.<sup>141</sup> However, this explanation overlooks the different cultic meanings that were likely attached to the different types of figurines. Perhaps after the disaster of the Assyrian invasion, the Judeans felt the need to return to the more ancient forms that had been abandoned earlier. Another possibility is that the religious reforms of Josiah in the seventh century affected the shape of the figurines, with

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<sup>139</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 85.

<sup>140</sup> Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses*, 332.

<sup>141</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 114.



the result that the “Bird/Snake Head” type was considered less offensive to aniconic tendencies than the “Human Head” figurines.

Do both types of heads represent the same goddess, or did they represent different goddesses, or perhaps a Mother Goddess in general? Heads from both types have been found in each excavation site, although the number of figurines of each type varies from site to site. In Jerusalem, for example, there is a preference for the “Bird/Snake Head” type—78 figurines of that type were found there, compared to only 27 figurines of the “Human Head” type.<sup>142</sup> There are no major differences between the two types with regard to their painted decorations; thus, the question of whether they represented the same goddess or two different ones cannot be answered based on current data.

Both types are made of simple solid clay that was originally covered with a whitewash (Plate 4). The purpose of the whitewash, according to Kletter, was to give the figurines a smooth look, to make their surface easier for application of paint, and to make the painting on top of it more pronounced.<sup>143</sup> It is possible that the white color also carried a cultic meaning in some of the figurines. Gimbutas connected the white color with grave figurines,<sup>144</sup> and more than twenty Asherah figurines were found in burial sites. However, they were found in other locations as well, so there is no exclusive connection to death.

It is hard to tell if the whitewash was always covered with paint because the majority of the figurines are in a deteriorated condition. Some of the figurines were

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>144</sup> Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess* (San Francisco, California: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989), xix.

certainly decorated with painted anatomical details like eyes and fingers. In addition, simple lines appear on the neck, shoulders, upper chest, and arms of some of the figurines. The paint does not cover the breast area, which appears naked. The most common color that survived was red, which often covers the entire face, but yellow, brown, and black were also used, as well as combinations of red and yellow or red and black.<sup>145</sup> Barber mentions the use of red embroideries among Slavic peoples as a protection from demons,<sup>146</sup> and perhaps a motivation of this kind was behind the extensive use of the red color. Red is also the color of blood and particularly menstrual blood, thus connecting the figurines to fertility. On nine figurines there is a combination of red and yellow, and on two figurines there are remains of red and black.<sup>147</sup> Some researchers have suggested that the yellow color represented golden jewelry or a golden mask when it covers the face.<sup>148</sup> Another possible interpretation connects the yellow color with the saffron that was used in ancient times in the Aegean Islands as a medicine for menstrual ills. Barber discusses the use of this color for that purpose on clothes,<sup>149</sup> and if it were used on clothes it could have been used on a figurine of a protective female goddess. A good example of the use of color is figure 109 in Kletter's catalog, which belongs to the "Human Head" type. It is well preserved; its hair/headdress is yellow, the forehead and the face are red, and the eyes and eyebrows are black.<sup>150</sup> Another example

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<sup>145</sup> Kletter, "Between Archaeology and Theology", 130.

<sup>146</sup> Elizabeth W. Barber. *Women's Work: the First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* (N.Y & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 162.

<sup>147</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 130.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Barber. *Women's Work*, 181.

<sup>150</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains Vol. 2*, 40.

from Kletter's catalog is figure 42, which has a "Bird/Snake Head." On the neck and upper chest there are red and yellow horizontal lines. Four yellow lines represent fingers of the right hand. The face is yellow except for the eyes and nose.<sup>151</sup> Some "Bird/Snake Head" figurines have lines of color under the nose. From these examples we can see that the coloring was not uniform, and that there was some freedom in the application of color, just as in the shape and size of the figurines. Some scholars have suggested that the painted lines represent jewelry and body parts,<sup>152</sup> but perhaps they also carried various symbolic meanings. Gimbutas attributes certain patterns of coloring in prehistoric figurines to goddess cults.<sup>153</sup> For example, she believes that parallel lines represent streams of water; perhaps that was the case in some Asherah figurines as well. The color in most cases was not applied to the back of the Asherah figurines, thus leading scholars to believe that they were supposed to be viewed from the front (Plate 5).<sup>154</sup> This conclusion is further supported by the fact that the back of the moulded heads is often left crude,<sup>155</sup> and by the lack of sculptural detail on the back of the figurines in general. It is possible they were placed in a niche in a wall (Pl. 6, Pl. 7).

Who created the figurines? Were they locally made or imported? Moorey and Fleming believe that women created them in their homes for private use,<sup>156</sup> but Kletter notes that the use of a mould for the face, and the lack of extreme differences between the

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>152</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 130. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses*, 325.

<sup>153</sup> Gimbutas, *Language of Goddess*, 47.

<sup>154</sup> James B. Pritchard, *The Water System of Gibeon*, (Philadelphia: University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1961), 15 quoted in Kletter, *Between Archaeology and Theology*, 189.

<sup>155</sup> Kletter "Between Archaeology and Theology", 189.

<sup>156</sup> P.R.S. Moorey and S. Fleming, "Problems in the Study of the Anthropomorphic Metal Statuary from Syro-Palestine before 330 B.C.," *Levant XVI* (1984):77, quoted in Kletter, *Between Archaeology and Theology*, 188.

figurines suggest mass manufacturing,<sup>157</sup> which was probably done by men.<sup>158</sup> Mass production of female figurines is not unique to ancient Israel. It was practiced in the ancient Near East before (Plate 8): the use of moulds for creating plaque figurines started as early as the third millennium in Mesopotamia. Scholars believe that the technique of producing the heads in a mould started in the Levant, later spread to the Aegean world, and then to Italy and the western Mediterranean.<sup>159</sup> Only three moulds of Asherah heads have been found<sup>160</sup> (Plate 3), but based on the different moulded heads that have been found, Kletter has calculated that there were a few dozen head moulds from which “mould series” were created, and that only a small part of this extensive manufacturing has been discovered.<sup>161</sup>

Patai quotes Albright, who believes that “the clay moulds were doubtless made by a few potters who were good sculptors, and these men [non-Israelites]<sup>162</sup> would sell their moulds to ordinary Israelite potters scattered throughout the land.”<sup>163</sup> Kletter points to the fact that the figurines from Jerusalem were made from a local terra-rosa soil typical of that area, while figurines that were found in the Negev area were made of local loess clay

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<sup>157</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 129.

<sup>158</sup> Van Der Toorn, *From Her Cradle*, 103. Van der Toorn does not refer specifically to the figurines but to the gender of potters in ancient Israel. He notes that the Hebrew Bible refers to potters only a few times, and in those cases it describes a man. For example, the prophet Jeremiah describes a visit to a potter's house in chapter 18:1: “This is the word that came to Jeremiah from YHWH: Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message. So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.”

<sup>159</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 137.

<sup>160</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 203.

<sup>161</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 136.

<sup>162</sup> The words in the brackets are part of the original quote.

<sup>163</sup> William F. Albright, *The Excavations of Tell Beit Mirsim III: The Iron Age*, (Annual of the American School of Oriental Research, vols. XXI-XXXII, 1943), 139, quoted in Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 60.

typical of the Negev.<sup>164</sup> The few figurines from the Negev that have been checked had heads made from the same local clay as the bodies. The implication of these findings, according to Kletter, is that they were created in local centers and not imported, even inside Judah. However, it is possible that only the moulds were imported, and then the figurines were created in the local manufacturing centers.

The locations in which the figurines were found are especially important because they can tell us much about the way in which they were used. However, the Asherah figurines were found in all parts of Judah: in large settlements and in small ones; in fortresses such as Khirbet el-Tuwein and in the palace in Ramat Rachel,<sup>165</sup> inside settlements and outside them; in public places like storehouses and streets and in domestic locations; in graves and caves as well as pools and cisterns. Yet it is possible to draw some general conclusions based on the number of figurines that were found in each location. Very few figurines were found in places of public worship, though that may result from the fact that only a few temples from Iron Age II (1000–586 BCE) in Israel have been found.<sup>166</sup> On the other hand, more than half of the figurines were found in domestic locations like a room in a house or in a courtyard (Pl. 6, Pl. 7), indicating a

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<sup>164</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 129.

<sup>165</sup> For a list of sites, see Stern, *Land of Bible*, 207–208.

<sup>166</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 155.

However, Nakhai surveyed all places of worship in the Iron Age and earlier and found that despite royal and priestly efforts, religion in Judah and Israel was not fully organized yet. Worship took place not only in the official sites in Jerusalem Dan and Beth El, but also in less formal sites with some degree of public access, such as in Kuntillet Ajrud, in caves, and in private domestic locations. Unfortunately, she did not survey the pillar figurines that were found in those locations, so it is hard to incorporate them into the chart. Beth A. Nakhai, *Archaeology and the Religions of Canaan and Israel* (Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2001), 191.

strong connection with household worship. Kletter shows the distribution of the figurines in the different types of sites (Table 1).

Location (context)	Number of Figurines
Burial	19
Cave/ cave?/ grave?	17
Domestic	70
Domestic?	42
Sacred	5
Public	9
Public?	11
Total	173

Table 1. Distribution of Judean pillar figurines. Reprinted, by permission, from Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 148.

Nevertheless, the distribution chart is misleading because it divides the pools and the cisterns between the public and the domestic, instead of showing them in a special column. Just as graves were often centers of cultic activities, water sources were considered sacred for the Great Goddess, and Asherah was a goddess related to the sea. Out of 255 figurines with known locations, 16 were found in cisterns and 27 in pools; together, 17% of the figurines were found in water sources. Unlike the figurines from burial sites, where half of them were found complete, the majority of the figurines from sites related to water are broken. The archaeologists who worked in Gibeon, where 26

broken figurines were found in a pool, believe that they were broken in a cultic ritual before they were thrown in the water, since otherwise we would expect to find some intact.<sup>167</sup> However, Kletter notes that broken regular household ceramic items were also found in the pool, so it is not known if the figurines were accidentally broken and later thrown into the pool, or were broken on purpose.<sup>168</sup>

What was the use or uses of the figurines? The least probable suggestion is that they were displayed in temples as major cult objects. Not only the domestic context but the cheapness and the size of the figurines contradict this. Important cult statues were usually made of more precious materials like gold, silver, or bronze, and were often quite sizable.<sup>169</sup> The suggestion that the figurines represented actual women is also improbable because of their impersonal and typical nature. A few more plausible explanations for the uses of the figurines have emerged over the years; one suggestion that has never been very popular among scholars is that the figurines served as children's toys. Kletter argues that their fragility, their frontal orientation, and the fact that they were not found specifically in children's graves suggest that they were not used as toys.<sup>170</sup> The problem with these arguments is that they analyze the figurines through the limited definition of children's toys in our time; even today, in more traditional societies, sometimes "toys"

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<sup>167</sup> Pritchard, *Water System of Gibeon*, 24, quoted in Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 150.

<sup>168</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 150.

<sup>169</sup> In Judges 17–18 there is a story about a man named Micha who made a domestic shrine (Beit Elohim, "house of God") and supplied it with a precious cult statue. He asks a boy who is of Levite descent to serve as a priest in this sanctuary; all goes well until the warriors of the tribe of Dan appear and convince the priest he will be better off serving a whole tribe rather than only one family. The priest takes his regalia as well as the statue and joins them. Van der Toorn believes the statue was of YHWH. Van der Toorn, *Israelite Figurines*, 51.

Lewis thinks that the "lack of figurines made of precious metals could be due to technological and/or utilitarian reasons," so one should not put too much weight on that argument. Lewis, "Divine Images," 41.

<sup>170</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 179.

are perceived and operate in a different way. African play dolls, for instance, are later used to ensure fertility when the girls grow up.<sup>171</sup> During the Renaissance in Italy, a doll was often listed as part of the bride's dowry, and the woman was encouraged to take care of the doll in order to encourage the birth of a "pleasing" child.<sup>172</sup> In the Bible, the women are described as knitting *battim* for the Asherah in the temple, which is understood as preparing garments for her cult statue,<sup>173</sup> and therefore perhaps one use of the figurines was for girls to practice this ritual.

Van der Toorn considers the idea that the figurines were votive gifts,<sup>174</sup> brought to local shrines when people asked the gods for help, or in order to give thanks to the gods. But he concludes that "there is not one example of a figurine demonstrably donated as a votive gift."<sup>175</sup> Nevertheless, the location in which they were found can help determine the purpose of the figurines. The figurines found in the cult cache<sup>176</sup> in Jerusalem probably served as votive gifts to the temple, while the rest served other purposes. When found in graves, they may have served as concubines for the dead, though perhaps they were buried in order to continue providing the protection and good fortune they provided while the person was alive. Another idea that Van der Toorn considers is that the figurines were cheap replicas of the cult's official images for the purposes of devotion

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<sup>171</sup> Elisabeth L. Cameron, *Isn't s/he a doll? Play and Ritual in African Sculpture* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1996), 106.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>173</sup> See footnote 102.

<sup>174</sup> Van der Toorn, *Israelite Figurines*, 58.

In Sumerian and other temples, figurines that represented the worshippers were found; however, this is probably not the case here, since the Asherah figurines do not raise their hands in prayer.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>176</sup> A cult cache or "favissa" is an underground treasury of a temple where cultic items were usually deposited after the end of their use (like the Jewish "geniza," where old sacred texts are kept).



and protection.<sup>177</sup> However, he says this description actually fits the earlier plaque figurines, which have a greater variety of details, while the Asherah figurines “are an iconographic type of very great antiquity and do not correspond to a specific localized cult image.”<sup>178</sup> Therefore, Patai’s description of the figurines as “counterparts” of the larger wooden *asherah* poles rather than “replicas” is more suitable.<sup>179</sup>

Were the figurines a part of the official religion of the time, or a part of the popular religion alone? Many scholars believe that the domestic context, along with the aniconic tendencies in ancient Israel, suggest that the figurines belong to the popular realm.<sup>180</sup> Rose holds that the figurines served as a house goddess once the deity had been banned from the official cult, and Holland sees the figurines as an “outward expression of popular Israelite religion.”<sup>181</sup> Lewis thinks that perhaps there were people who worshipped YHWH as a national deity and Asherah as a local one; others used the mythic symbol of Asherah for the cult of YHWH, and still other circles objected to the use of any references to goddesses.<sup>182</sup> Van der Toorn argues that in reality the Israelite cult, until the Deuteronomic reform, was not aniconic, and therefore the pillar figurines could

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<sup>177</sup> Van der Toorn, *Israelite Figurines*, 59.

<sup>178</sup> Van der Toorn, *Israelite Figurines*, 59-60. However, Hadley believes that there is a possibility that the figurines were smaller copies of the asherah poles. Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 205.

<sup>179</sup> Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 39.

<sup>180</sup> T.N.D Mettinger, “The Veto on Images and the Aniconic God in Ancient Israel,” in *Religious Symbols and Their Functions*, ed. H. Biezais (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1979), 15–29, quoted in Van der Toorn, *Israelite Figurines*, 47.

<sup>181</sup> Martin Rose, *Der Ausschliesslichkeitsanspruch Jahwes* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1975), 186, quoted in Karel van der Toorn, “Goddesses in Early Israelite Religion,” in *Ancient Goddesses: the Myths and the Evidence*, edited by Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 91, quoted in Van der Toorn “Goddesses,” 91.

Holland, “A Typological Study,” 121, quoted in Van der Toorn “Goddesses,” 91.

<sup>182</sup> Lewis, “Divine Images,” 43.

be related to the official cult as well.<sup>183</sup> Other scholars who reject the attempts to see the figurines as belonging merely to the popular religion are Ahlstrom, who comments that some figurines were found in the royal palace in Ramat Rachel and therefore belonged to the elite,<sup>184</sup> and William Dever, who stresses the fact that many Asherah figurines were found in a cult cache “not a hundred yards from the Temple Mount,”<sup>185</sup> which was the center of the official religion in Judah.

Since the distribution of the Ashera figurines was so widespread and they were found in such central locations, it seems the official cult at Judah did not object to their existence, and may even have fully embraced it. Keel and Uehlinger even consider the figurines an expression of “Judaite Piety.”<sup>186</sup> Unlike the figurines that were found in houses and belonged to the domestic realm, the ones that were found in pools might indicate some official use of the Asherah figurines in cult ceremonies. On the other hand, some scholars have argued that the fact that so many of them were found broken—only about 5% of the figurines are intact—might be related to religious reforms the Bible mentions, during which the figurines were deliberately broken by religious reformers who objected to their existence.<sup>187</sup> Kletter presents a more prosaic explanation for the

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<sup>183</sup> Van der Toorn determines that the original Israelite cult was iconic based on five arguments: 1. The prohibition against graven images first appears in Deut 5:8, and it is dated to the late 7<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. The mere existence of the prohibition attests to the images' popularity. 2. The temples in surrounding nations were considered the houses of the gods, while aniconism was associated with simple cults conducted in open air sanctuaries. 3. There is evidence in the Bible of worship of theriomorphic images representing deities. 4. Both the Samaritan and Judahite YHWH had a consort called Asherah, and her image was present in the temple. 5. If there was a statue of Asherah, perhaps there was also a statue of YHWH. Certain cultic actions require a statue in order to be performed. Van der Toorn, *Israelite Figurines*, 48.

<sup>184</sup> Gosta Ahlstrom, “An Archaeological Picture of Iron Age Religions in Ancient Palestine,” *Studia Orientalia* 55 (1984): 117–45, quoted in Lewis “Divine Images,” 44.

<sup>185</sup> Dever, *Recent Archeological*, 159.

<sup>186</sup> Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses*, 325.

<sup>187</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 138.

extensive breakage pattern: because the figurines were not created for heavy use, but for display only, they were fired at a relatively low temperature of 600–700 degrees Celsius, which explains their fragility and why most of them were found broken.<sup>188</sup>

## 2. Other Artifacts from Ancient Israel

### a. The Findings from Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet Ajrud

Among the neighbors of the Hebrews we commonly find pairs of male and female gods such as the Ugaritic El and Asherah and Baal and Anat, the Egyptian Isis and Osiris, and the Mesopotamian Innana/Ishtar and Dumuzi, as well as Sin and Ningal, to name just a few. Although the Bible portrays YHWH as an eternal bachelor, a patriarchal aniconic god who rules alone, some inscriptions from ancient Israel that connect the name of Asherah with the name of YHWH suggest that perhaps YHWH was not always alone—he might have had a consort: Asherah.

In Kuntillet Ajrud, a caravanserai site in Northeast Sinai, some inscriptions in Hebrew were found on two large *pithoi* – “storage jars.”<sup>189</sup> There seems to be agreement among researchers about the meaning of the inscriptions. One inscription says, “I bless you by YHWH of Samaria and by his Asherah.”<sup>190</sup> Another inscription reads, “I bless you by the YHWH of Teman and by his Asherah, may he bless you and keep you and be

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>189</sup> Hadley argues that this is not a religious site, as suggested by some researchers, but rather a “way station” or caravanserai. For discussion of the structure and purpose of the site, see Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 106–116.

<sup>190</sup> Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit*, 102–103.

with [you] my lord.”<sup>191</sup> The disagreement among scholars is largely about the question of whether the goddess Asherah is referred to here or only her cultic pole.<sup>192</sup> The inscriptions are intriguing not only because of the connection they make between YHWH and Asherah, but also because they mention YHWH in association with topographical names, thus exposing the early pagan origins of Yahwism, when YHWH was perceived as a local deity of certain places and not as a national deity. The inscription also hints at the hierarchy between the two gods. YHWH seems to own Asherah, and therefore he is the major god while she holds a secondary position. The shreds of the *pithoi* also contain various drawings: The Egyptian god Bess, a lyre player, a procession of worshippers, a cow and a calf, a stylized tree flanked by caprids with a lion beneath them, and more. The stylized tree perhaps represents the wooden cultic object of the Asherah mentioned in the Bible.<sup>193</sup> Hadley has suggested that the people who drew these illustrations were herdsmen, since many of the scenes are considered fertility motifs.<sup>194</sup>

There is less agreement among scholars regarding the meaning of a Hebrew inscription dated to the eighth to seventh century BCE, which William Dever found while excavating a burial place near Khirbet el-Qom, a small village between Lachish and Hebron<sup>195</sup> (Plate 9). The inscription, which is chiseled out on a pillar, is difficult to read,

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<sup>191</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 108.

<sup>192</sup> Dijkstra, “El, God of Israel,” 29. Some scholars have also suggested that Asherah here should be interpreted as “sanctuary,” so the blessing is in the name of YHWH and his sanctuary. However, Hadley disputes this interpretation, arguing that this was a rare Phoenician word, and it is more likely the writer used it the way it appears in the Bible—as a wooden cultic object. Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 124.

<sup>193</sup> For a detailed discussion of the symbol of the tree in relation to Asherah, see chapter IV.3 of this paper.

<sup>194</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 155.

<sup>195</sup> Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit*, 94.

and as a result, quite a few different translations have been suggested. Here is Lemaire's reading,<sup>196</sup> which was later accepted by Dever and others:

1. Uryahu the wealthy man had it written
2. Blessed be Uryahu by Yahweh
3. and by his asherah; from his enemies he saved him!
4. [written] by Onyahu
5. and by his asherah
6. [and by] his [ashe]r[ah]

The most interesting and controversial line is line three. It mentions Asherah in relation to YHWH, but because it has many "shadow letters" (faint duplications of the letters),<sup>197</sup> it is hard to decipher and quite a few alternative readings have been suggested by scholars. In most readings this line connects YHWH, mentioned in line two, and "his" Asherah, either the goddess or her cultic pole, but the disagreement among researchers about the precise meaning of the text compromises its validity.

Below the main part of the inscription there is a drawing of a hand pointing down. Lewis notes that the hand (*yad*) is associated in the Bible with fertility and death.<sup>198</sup> Hadley determines that since the hand appears here in a grave, it is likely that it symbolized a memorial for the deceased, a protection from evil, or both, and that it served to guard the tomb.<sup>199</sup> Margalit and Hess have interpreted the hand as being open-palmed, in the sense of bestowing life and nourishment from the hand of Asherah.<sup>200</sup> The

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<sup>196</sup> A. Lemaire, "Who or What Was Yahwe's Asherah?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 10.6 (1984): 42–51.

<sup>197</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 90.

<sup>198</sup> Thodore J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit*, (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989), 149–50.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>200</sup> B. Margalit, "Some Observations on the Inscription and Drawing from Khirbet el-Qom," *Vetus Testamentum* 39 (1989): 371–8, quoted in Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 104.

orientation of the hand is rather unique, given that hands in prayer or hands that symbolize protection or memorial for a deceased person are usually depicted as raised upwards. Puech has suggested that the hand's orientation underscores its function as an amulet,<sup>201</sup> and his suggestion may be supported by the fact that the open palm shape is popular to this day on protective amulets in the Middle East. Another question that arises is whether the inscription is related to the hand carved below it, or whether they are unrelated. A comparison between the al-Qom hand and the sign of the raised hand that appears on many Carthaginian steles along with the names of the goddess Tanit and Baal Hammon (Pl. 10, Pl. 11) shows that the occurrence of the names alongside the hand was not a coincidence, but that there was probably some connection between the drawing of the hand and the male and female deities mentioned in the inscription. Carthage was founded by Phoenicians who spoke a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew, and Tanit has been identified by some scholars as identical with Asherah.<sup>202</sup> She was the consort of Baal Hammon, and Wilson suggests that Baal Hammon corresponds to the Ugaritic god El, Asherah's husband.<sup>203</sup> Perhaps in Carthage as well as in ancient Israel the combination of the two divine names and the hand was considered a strong protection to the tomb.

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<sup>201</sup> E. Puech, "Palestinian Funerary Inscriptions," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5, ed. David N. Freedman (NY: Doubleday, 1992), 126–35, quoted in Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 103.

<sup>202</sup> Hadley summarizes the arguments for and against this identification and concludes that it is "far from proven." Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 24–25, 28.

<sup>203</sup> Leslie S. Wilson, *The Serpent Symbol in the Ancient Near East: Nahash and Asherah; Death, Life, and Healing* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 57. However, since Asherah is mentioned in the Bible as associated both with Baal and YHWH, even if Baal Hammon is actually Baal, it does not preclude the identification of Tanit with Asherah.

## b. Iconic Representations of YHWH?

One of the unshaken assumptions in the research of the religion of ancient Israel is that the cult of Yahwism was originally an aniconic one, and that it constantly had to struggle with the iconic traditions introduced from neighboring religions. The fierce objection of the biblical prophets to iconic representations of God had a great impact on popular thought as well as on generations of scholars throughout Western history. Even today, it seems inconceivable to think of a cult image representing YHWH, the God for whom the mere pronunciation of his explicit name is forbidden. In recent years, however, there have been more voices calling for a reconsideration of this perception. Herbert Niehr compares the Israelite cult to neighboring nations and examines biblical evidence for the existence of a cult statue of YHWH in the first temple in Jerusalem. He observes that the expression “to see the face of god” that appears in the Bible was used in the ancient Near East to describe a visit to a place where the divine statue was displayed.<sup>204</sup> Van der Toorn suggests that if Asherah was represented in Jerusalem in an anthropomorphic image, as the description in the Bible of the female staff weaving garments for her suggests, then “there is reason to suspect that YHWH himself was also anthropomorphically present.”<sup>205</sup> Christoph Uehlinger considers all the biblical

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<sup>204</sup> Niehr also notes that the Temple in Jerusalem is referred to as “the house of God” or “the house of YHWH.” YHWH commands the powers of heaven, but resided in the Temple until the exile; only after the exile does heaven become his dwelling place. Herbert Niehr, “In Search of YHWH’s Cult Statue in the First Temple,” in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, edited by Karel van der Toorn (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1997), 73–95. Van der Toorn notes that several cultic actions, like the entry of God during the enthronement festival procession described in Psalm 24, could not have been performed without a statue. Van der Toorn, *Israelite Figurines*, 50.

For a summary of all biblical references to an anthropomorphic cult statue of YHWH, see Uehlinger, “*Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary*,” 148.

<sup>205</sup> Van der Toorn, *Israelite Figurines*, 50.

references to an anthropomorphic cult statue of YHWH and concludes that “the cumulative weight of these hints supports the general hypothesis that Yahweh worship in the first temple probably focused upon an anthropomorphic cult statue.”<sup>206</sup>

Unfortunately, no major cult image from a Near Eastern temple has ever been discovered. Those statues were made of wood and covered with precious materials,<sup>207</sup> and it is no wonder they did not survive. In addition, one has to keep in mind that the smaller male figurines were often made of metal, and therefore were often melted down later for other purposes.

In contrast to the absent major cult statue, archaeologists are discovering a growing number of male clay figurines from ancient Israel and Judah.<sup>208</sup> Stern notes that the clay figurines have been found “by the dozens” at all sites of Judah, although they are not well represented in the scholarly literature.<sup>209</sup> He divides the male figurines into two major types. The more complete type depicts horses and riders. The second type, of which only the heads have survived, Stern compares to Ammonite examples that were

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<sup>206</sup> Uehlinger, “*Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary*,” 147. For example, the epithet of YHWH, *yoshev hakkruvim* (יושב הכרובים), “the one who sits on the cherubs,” implies a physical presence of the god.

<sup>207</sup> What is called in Hebrew *pesel wmasecha*. Van der Toorn suggests that the Torah took the place of the iconic image as representing god’s presence for the Israelites. He compares the special customs related to the Torah with Babylonian and other non-Israelite practices. For example, the Philistines and the Babylonians carried the statues of their gods when they marched to war, while the Israelites carried the ark with the tablets of the law to war. Another example is that the Babylonians took the statue of the god for processions, and people would try to touch and kiss its feet, while Jews take the Torah out of the ark for processions and kiss their prayer books or prayer shawl and then the Torah as it passes by them. Van der Toorn concludes that the Torah served as a divine image for the Israelites. Karel van der Toorn, “The Iconic Book: Analogies between The Babylonian Cult of Images and the Veneration of the Torah,” in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Karel van der Toorn (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1997), 229–248.

<sup>208</sup> Uehlinger, “*Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary*,” 121. He notices that “the number of terracotta figurines dating to the Iron II B-C periods and representing male deities has increased considerably over the last few years.”

<sup>209</sup> Stern, *Land of Bible*, 207.



depicted with their hands at their sides or with one hand raised in blessing.<sup>210</sup> However, some of these heads have no clear facial hair, and it is possible that they belonged to the pillar figurines of Asherah, or another type of figurine, and thus are not necessarily male.<sup>211</sup> The first type that Stern mentions, which are more decisively male, are the complete horse-and-rider figurines. Holland, who has catalogued Iron Age figurines from Israel, considers the horse-and-riders as animal figurines; he found that they were the most prominent and widespread among the animal figurines.<sup>212</sup> Similar depictions of horses and riders were found in many nearby regions, but like the Asherah figurines, the Judean horse-and-rider figurines are stylistically unique to Judah: The horse's head is long and cut straight at its end, the bodies of the horse and rider are solid and handmade, and the head of the rider is sometimes modeled like the "Bird/Snake Head" figurines of Asherah (Plate 12).

There is no agreement among scholars regarding who or what these figurines represent. Some of the clay figurines of horses excavated by Kenyon in Jerusalem bore clay disks between their ears, which led Kenyon to speculate that they are related to the "horses of the sun" that, according to the Bible, were removed from the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>213</sup> Ephraim Stern determines that "there was hardly any difference" between Judah and other nations in Palestine, such as Edom Ammon and Phoenicia, in the

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>211</sup> Some Asherah figurines wear a similar turban, and Kletter admits that the heads of the "Bird/Snake" type of Asherah figurines and the horse rider heads are almost identical, and therefore when they are found without any part of the body, the only way to distinguish between them is based on size, because the horse-and-riders are smaller than the Asherah figurines. Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 99.

<sup>212</sup> Holland, "A Typological Study," 195, Quoted in Terry W. Eddinger, *Social Setting for Judahite Terracotta Figurines of the Late Iron Period* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 1995), 73.

<sup>213</sup> Kathleen M. Kenyon, *Royal Cities of the Old Testament* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1971), 120.

function of cultic artifacts like high places, altars, and figurines.<sup>214</sup> He suggests that in nearby regions horse riders represented the local god as a warrior, and concludes that since the local god in Judah was YHWH, the figurines represent him in his war god role.<sup>215</sup> Wenning claims that the figurines of Asherah and the horse riders represent a divine couple,<sup>216</sup> but Kletter argues that the archaeological findings do not support this, because the Asherah pillar figurines and the horse rider figurines were found in different locations and frequently do not appear with each other.<sup>217</sup> However, Stern notes that more male figurines were discovered after Kletter published his dissertation,<sup>218</sup> so perhaps there is room for reassessment of the relationship between these two types of figurines.

Another element that contradicts the suggestion that the horse riders and the pillar figurines represent the couple Asherah and YHWH is the size of the figurines. Because YHWH was the major god and Asherah had a secondary role as his consort, according to both the Bible and the findings of Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet Ajrud, the horse rider figurines should be bigger than, or at least the same size as, the Asherah pillar figurines. But they are actually smaller. Therefore, the question of the identity of the horse rider is still open, and further information is needed in order to establish a connection between those figurines and the pillar figurines.

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<sup>214</sup> Stern, *Land of Bible*, 200.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 202. Van der Toorn also points out that the horse-and-riders might represent YHWH. Van der Toorn, *Israelite Figurines*, 61.

<sup>216</sup> R. Wenning, "Wer war der Paredos der Aschera?" *Biblische Notizen* 59 (1991): 89–97, quoted in Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 161.

<sup>217</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 161.

<sup>218</sup> Stern, *Land of Bible*, 208.

Another interesting but stylistically unique finding is a pair of terracotta figures that Jeremias, the archaeologist who purchased them, identified as the god Baal Hammon and a possible female beside him. The couple is either sitting on a throne or riding a chariot decorated with sphinxes or lions. Another interpretation, suggested by Christoph Uehlinger, is that the couple is actually none other than “Yahweh and his Asherah.” He argues that the difference in status between the figures is implied by their relative positions—the male sitting in the center while the female stands beside him. Moreover, Uehlinger claims, the lions belong to the cult of the goddess in the Near East, while sphinxes and cherubim were traditionally the carriers of YHWH’s throne.<sup>219</sup> Regardless of whether or not male figurines of YHWH have actually been discovered, it is significant that scholars are finally starting to look in this direction, open to the possibility of such iconic representation, and thus exposing the pagan roots of the religion of ancient Israel.

### **c. The Cultic Stand from Taanach**

Another important artifact comes from tenth-century-BCE Taanach in northern Israel. It is an elaborate terracotta cult stand (Plate 13) that contains motifs related to goddess worship alongside motifs related to male god worship. Taylor believes that in the tenth century BCE Taanach was Israelite,<sup>220</sup> and if his view is correct, then it is possible

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<sup>219</sup> Uehlinger, “Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary,” 151–2. An early example of the connection between goddesses and lions is from Neolithic Catal Huyuk in Anatolia, where a figurine of a goddess giving birth while sitting on a throne of lions was found.

that the cult stand portrays the Israelite male deity YHWH along with his Asherah. The stand is in excellent condition, and one can easily observe four scenes depicted on its four registers. On the bottom layer stands a front-facing naked female with hands stretching up to grasp two flanking lions by their ears. The lions are associated with the goddess Qudshu, who has been identified as the Egyptian representation of the goddess Asherah. On the second register, two sphinxes with Hathor headdress are represented; they may be similar to the cherubim that protected the ark in the temple. Taylor speculates that the empty space between the sphinxes represents the aniconic aspect of YHWH, given that one of his epithets is *yoshev hakkruvim*—“the one who sits on the cherubim.”<sup>221</sup> But Hadley notes that this argument is not based on substantiating evidence,<sup>222</sup> and therefore not very compelling. On the third level, the lions appear again. Here, they are flanking two ibexes nibbling on a tree. The tree has six curled branches and a trunk, similar to the menorah, which has six branches and a central post. Another famous tree that comes to mind is the tree of life in Genesis 3, which is guarded by cherubim.<sup>223</sup> This scene is flanked by two volutes, which represent an entrance to a sanctuary.<sup>224</sup> Taylor believes that the only goddess that can be identified both as a nude female and a sacred tree, and also have lions as her companion animal, is Asherah.<sup>225</sup> On the top register, there is an animal carrying a sun disk. Some scholars have suggested that the animal is a calf that

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<sup>220</sup> J. Glen Taylor, “Was Yahweh Worshipped as the Sun?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 20/3 (1994): 52–61. Also Mazar supports this date. Mazar, *Land of the Bible 10,000-586 BCE*, 333.

<sup>221</sup> J. Glen Taylor, “Yahweh and Asherah at Tenth Century Taanach,” *Newsletter for Ugaritic Studies* 37 (1987): 16–18, quoted in Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 174.

<sup>222</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 174.

<sup>223</sup> For a detailed discussion of the symbol of the tree and the goddess, see chapter IV.3.

<sup>224</sup> Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses*, 155.

serves as a pedestal for the deity, represented by the sun, but Taylor notes that the animal does not have horns and therefore is probably a horse.<sup>226</sup> Taylor identifies the deity as YHWH and draws a comparison with the description in II Kings 23:11 of the removal of the “horses of the sun” from the temple in Jerusalem by Josiah.<sup>227</sup> Hadley adds that if the animal is actually a horse, then it can also be related to the horse rider figurines that were discussed above.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> J. Glen Taylor, “The Two Earliest Known Representations of Yahweh,” in *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie*, eds. Lyle Eslinger and Glen Taylor (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 557-566.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid. Taylor consulted two experts in zoology who supported his conclusion.

<sup>227</sup> Taylor, “Was Yahweh Worshipped,” 58.

<sup>228</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 172-3.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Asherah in the Context of Goddess Worship**

We cannot comprehend the meaning of the cult of Asherah without referring to the context of goddess worship in which it emerged. Some scholars<sup>229</sup> argue that one should not compare artifacts from very different times and locations. However, when the similarity between them is so clear, and there is support from written texts such as the Bible or the Ugaritic myths, there is good reason to assume some connection. In addition, the pace of technological and cultural changes was much slower in ancient times, and therefore comparing artifacts separated by thousands of years is not necessarily fruitless. Nevertheless, the attempt to incorporate Asherah into the larger context of goddess worship introduces a tremendous amount of related material. In order to avoid the temptation to endlessly expand, this chapter focuses on the connections between the other material and Asherah, and does not explore the entire scope of the ideas that emerge.

#### **1. The Breast**

##### **a. Goddesses with Prominent/Bare Breasts**

The Asherah pillar figurines belong to a very long tradition of female figurines with enlarged breasts prevalent in the ancient Near East and Europe. They represent the Mother Goddess who gave life to all and nourishes all. She appears as Gaia in Greek

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<sup>229</sup> Such as Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 135.

mythology, as Terra Mater in Roman sources, as Eve, “the mother of all that live” in the Bible, and in countless other traditions. The mother who gives life to her children is compared to the earth that gave birth and nourishes “her children”—all humans. Gimbutas provides ample archaeological evidence to support her claim that in Neolithic Europe the cult of the Great Goddess was the chief religion. She believes that in spite of the lack of written history, the artifacts, combined with “comparative mythology, early historical sources, and linguistics as well as... folklore and historical ethnography,” provide sufficient evidence.<sup>230</sup> She suggests that the breasts represent “the divine source of life-giving moisture”<sup>231</sup> in the context of the Mother Goddess cult.

Female figurines with enlarged breasts appear first in the Upper Paleolithic, when the connection between fathers and their offspring was perhaps not yet fully understood, but the matrilineal link was clear. During pregnancy, the breasts swell up to provide milk for the newborn, and the survival of the child depended on the ability of the mother to nurse. “It takes no great stretch of the imagination to picture a distraught Stone Age mother begging one of those buxom idols for an ample supply of milk,” says Marilyn Yalom, who has researched the history of the breast.<sup>232</sup> Many prehistoric figurines with prominent breasts have been found in various locations, of which the most famous example is the Venus of Willendorf (Plate 14), created more than twenty thousand years ago. Instead of a face, she has seven lines of round curls that resemble the headdress of the “Human Head” type of Asherah figurine. The hands of the Venus of Willendorf,

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<sup>230</sup> Gimbutas, *Language of Goddess*, 15.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>232</sup> Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 9.

however, do not carry the breasts but rest on top of them, almost invisible. “Venus” has traces of red ochre pigment that have been interpreted as representing the menstrual blood. Interestingly, the most common color on the Asherah figurines, on top of the whitewash, was red.

In the Neolithic period, the motif of the breasts as representing the goddess continues. They appear on vases and figurines (Plate 15),<sup>233</sup> but now the hands of the figurines are often depicted under them.<sup>234</sup> Sometimes they carry the breasts, and at other times they rest on the abdomen. In later periods, the figurines were in such demand that they began to be mass produced in various regions. In Crete, the cult of the goddess flourished, and many female figurines that are thought to represent either goddesses or priestesses have been found, as well as vases with breasts (Plate 16) and decorative spiral reliefs, which have the unique form of multiple breasts made out of snakes (Plate 17). Often the Minoan female figurines have bare breasts (Plate 24), similar to the Asherah figurines breasts, which were not covered with paint.

In Bronze Age Israel (and nearby areas), the time period just preceding the appearance of the Asherah figurines, the most common representations of goddesses are plaque figurines that were mass produced and are referred to as the “Naked Goddess.” They were thought to represent Ishtar, Anat, or Asherah. Mazar suggests that they were probably used by women, as demonstrated by the story of Rachel and the Teraphim she stole.<sup>235</sup> The female figure often appears standing with her arms uplifted from the sides

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<sup>233</sup> Gimbutas, *Language of Goddess*, 33–41.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>235</sup> Mazar, *Land of the Bible 10,000–586 BCE*, 273. For the story of how Rachel stole the Teraphim (“gods” or “idols”) from her father, see Genesis 31.



of her body in the shape of the letter V, or with arms at the side of the body, with one hand on or under the breasts and the other pointing to the pubic triangle, or with both hands under the breasts like the Asherah pillar figurines (Pl. 18, Pl. 19, Pl. 20). The theme of the goddess who provides and nourishes repeats in both the Astarte plaque figurines and the Asherah figurines. Some scholars think that the Asherah figurines are more “motherly” in their nature because they have only their breasts uncovered, and the pubic triangle is not accentuated as in the plaque figurines. However, the position of the hands under the breasts can indicate both meanings, and in erotic scenes of men and women on beds that were found throughout the Near East, often the woman puts one hand under her breasts in a gesture that is similar to the pillar figurines (Plate 21). Perhaps the same figurine could represent a motherly blessing in the context of domestic use and a concubine for the dead when located in a grave.

Theodore Lewis believes that the Asherah figurines “are surely associated with the nurturing of offspring.”<sup>236</sup> Another question that has been considered by scholars is whether the Asherah figurines function merely as a magical aid for mothers, meant to increase milk supply and perhaps help with other aspects of mothering, or whether they are a representation of the goddess which has the power to influence other matters in people’s lives. Regardless, there is no contradiction between the function of the figurines as magical aids for mothers and their larger function as representing the Great Goddess in one of her many aspects.

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<sup>236</sup> Lewis, “Divine Images,” 40.

## b. The Breast in the Bible

In ancient art, the goddess is represented by her body parts (Pl. 16, Pl. 17),<sup>237</sup> whereas in the Bible, we find the verbal equivalent. The body parts of the goddess that represent success and fertility are the breasts and the womb, and thus when Jacob blesses his son Joseph, he asks for the blessings of the breasts and the womb. These body parts of the goddess are equal in importance to the sky above and the deep below, both of which provide water, the source of life:

And El Shaddai will bless you with the blessings of the heavens above, blessings of the deep (*tehom*) lying below, blessings of breasts (*shadayim*) and womb (*rahem*).<sup>238</sup> (Genesis 49:25)

Possibly this is a formulaic ancient blessing that originally was requested from a goddess, since it echoes an Ugaritic text that mentions “the divine breasts, the breasts of Asherah and Raham.”<sup>239</sup> Cross notes that Genesis 49 “betrays knowledge of the epithet of El’s consort *Rahmay*, as well as of other Canaanite mythological characters such as the *tehom*.”<sup>240</sup> *Tehom* is the Hebrew adaptation of the Babylonian *Tiamat*, a female monster that personified the ocean and the chaos. In addition, she was the mother of all that exists, including the gods themselves. Thus, it appears that this blessing to Joseph is connected in more than one way to the cult of the goddess.

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<sup>237</sup> Gimbutas, *Language of Goddess*, XXII.

<sup>238</sup> Translation by Biale, “The God with Breasts,” 240–256.

<sup>239</sup> Biale, “The God with Breasts,” 240–256. Biale notes that *Raham* in Ugarit was another name for the goddess Anat.

<sup>240</sup> Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic, Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 55, quoted in Biale “The God with Breasts,” 240–256.

The breasts and the womb are associated with god's blessing,<sup>241</sup> which brings salvation and prosperity to his people:

Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice greatly with her, all you who mourn over her. For you will nurse and be satisfied at her comforting breasts; you will drink deeply and delight in her overflowing abundance. (Isaiah 66: 10–11)<sup>242</sup>

In the Song of Solomon, which is similar to Mesopotamian erotic poems, the lover compares the breasts of his beloved to twin gazelles, the fruit of the palm tree, and the fruit of the vine—all of which are related to the cult of the Mother Goddess:

Your stature is like that of the palm, and your breasts like clusters of fruit. I said, "I will climb the palm tree; I will take hold of its fruit." May your breasts be like the clusters of the vine... (Song of Solomon 7:7–8)<sup>243</sup>

The image of the lover who climbs to eat from the fruit of the tree brings to mind the depiction of the goddess as a tree and the animals feeding from it (Pl. 32, Pl. 33, Pl. 34).

The breasts distinguish between the girl and the mature woman who is ready to be married:

Friends:  
We have a young sister,  
and her breasts are not yet grown.  
What shall we do for our sister  
for the day she is spoken for?  
If she is a wall,  
we will build towers of silver on her.  
If she is a door,  
we will enclose her with panels of cedar.

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<sup>241</sup> Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses*, 332.

<sup>242</sup> NIV.

<sup>243</sup> NIV.

Beloved:  
I am a wall  
and my breasts are like towers.  
Thus I have become in his eyes  
like one bringing contentment.<sup>244</sup> (Song of Solomon 8:8)

The imagery of the breasts as towers brings to mind the Asherah figurines with their erect breasts (Plate 22).

## 2. The Serpent and the Bird

Snakes live on earth, in trees, or in water; they shed their skin; their poison can be fatal; their movement and their shape resemble water and the phallus, respectively. Those attributes generated the belief that snakes have supernatural power, and turned the serpent into a powerful symbol of death, regeneration, and healing.<sup>245</sup> In some cultures the serpent was thought to be in touch with the power of the earth and was considered the guardian of the household.<sup>246</sup> The motif of the serpent, which is usually associated with goddesses, appears in Europe, India, Mesopotamia, Egypt, the ancient Near East, and as far west as ancient Carthage.<sup>247</sup> Gimbutas traces this motif from its origin in the Upper Paleolithic through its peak in Neolithic time, when composite figurines with the head of a snake and a woman's body first appeared (Plate 23), and later in figurines from Bronze Age Aegean culture (Plate 24).<sup>248</sup> The association between serpents and goddesses occurs in many mythological narratives as well. In early Sumerian mythology, Nammu

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<sup>244</sup> NIV.

<sup>245</sup> Gadon, *Once and Future*, 93. Gimbutas, *Language of Goddess*, 121. Wilson, *Serpent Symbol*, 3.

<sup>246</sup> Gadon, *Once and Future*, 94. Gimbutas, *Language of Goddess*, 134.

<sup>247</sup> Wilson, *Serpent Symbol*, 3. Gimbutas, *Language of Goddess*, 121–137.

<sup>248</sup> Gimbutas, *Language of Goddess*, 121–137.

is described as the serpent goddess of the Deep.<sup>249</sup> In Greece, the goddess Hera is associated with snakes and vegetation,<sup>250</sup> and the Bible describes the special relations that Eve had with the talking snake. According to some midrashim (Jewish commentary about the Bible), the serpent seduced Eve, and it was he who fathered Cain and Abel, not Adam.<sup>251</sup>

The serpent has the power to take life, and Wilson believes snakes were used as agents of death in human sacrifices.<sup>252</sup> However, the serpent also has the power to protect and cure. In Egyptian art, the snake sometimes accompanies a young god instead of a goddess, but unlike the goddess, who usually holds the snake up, the god holds his arms down while holding the snakes. He also grasps scorpions and lions in his hands. According to Robins, the function of this type of image was to protect people from animal attacks and cure the victims of such events.<sup>253</sup>

Is there a connection between the serpent and the Asherah pillar figurines? Although the enlarged breasts are common to all the Asherah figurines, only the Type One figurines have faces that resemble snake or bird faces (Plate 25). Thus, if both Type One and Type Two figurines represent the same goddess, then the shape of the head is not as essential for the figurines as the enlarged breasts. Another possibility is that they do not represent the same goddess, or perhaps it is the same goddess but slightly different

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<sup>249</sup> Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (London: Viking Arkana/Penguin Books, 1991), 223.

<sup>250</sup> Gimbutas, *Language of Goddess*, 134.

<sup>251</sup> Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 98.

<sup>252</sup> Wilson, *Serpent Symbol*, 3.

<sup>253</sup> Gay Robins, *The Art of Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 244. This also brings to mind the story of the young Hercules struggling with the snakes that Hera sent to his crib, and strangling them, one in each hand, before they could bite him.

aspects of her cult. Another problem is that the pinched face is not restricted to female figurines: a comparison with the horse-and-rider figurines shows that their faces were pinched as well (Plate 12). Is it possible, then, that the bird/snake face is just a cheap technique without a special meaning behind it, as Kletter believes?<sup>254</sup>

Some evidence suggests that there may be a connection between Asherah and the serpent. The Bible, in spite of its heavy censorship, reveals that the serpent was part of the official Hebrew cult until the first religious reform. According to Numbers 21:6, Moses made a copper serpent and put it on a pole. If someone was bitten by a serpent, that person would look at the copper serpent and be saved, much like the Egyptian practice. That copper snake was later taken out of the Temple by King Hezekiah, along with the pole of Asherah:

He [Hezekiah]... cut down the asherah. He also broke into pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until that time the Israelites had been offering sacrifices to it; it was called Nehushtan. (2 Kings 18:4)<sup>255</sup>

Wilson suggests that the mentioning of Asherah together with the snake here and on other occasions in the Bible<sup>256</sup> is not accidental, but rather that the pole of Nehushtan was a form of caduceus that symbolized Asherah.<sup>257</sup> Taking into account the traditional connection between goddesses and serpents, this suggestion is not unreasonable.

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<sup>254</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 114.

<sup>255</sup> NIV.

A copper snake with gilded head that was found in the Holy of Holies of a Midianite meeting tent in Timna brings to mind the copper snake that was worshipped in the Temple. Moses stayed in Midian for forty years before he encountered the burning bush, and it was his father-in-law, the Midianite priest Jethro who helped Moses install judges over Israel (Exodus 18), so perhaps there was a religious influence of the Midianites on the Hebrew cult as well.

<sup>256</sup> 2 Kings 17:7–17, 21:6–7.

However, Wiggins argues that the mention of Nehushtan and Asherah in the same verse does not necessarily mean they are associated with each other.<sup>258</sup> Binger agrees with Wiggins, and adds that the text uses different verbs for each act of destruction, thus treating each object as separate.<sup>259</sup> To this Wilson replies that there is a poetic parallelism between Nehushtan and Asherah in this verse, a device the Bible uses frequently for artistic purposes.<sup>260</sup> She points to another connection in the Bible between the snake and Asherah: in the story of Adam and Eve, the snake is described as “cunning” (in Hebrew “arum” – ערום); the meaning of the word in Hebrew is also “naked,” and thus is possibly related to the nakedness of the goddess.<sup>261</sup>

In addition to the biblical hints of a possible connection between Asherah and the snake, certain archaeological findings suggest it as well. A cultic stand found by Sellin in Taanach, from about the same time as the Taanach stand discussed earlier, also contains symbols related to goddess worship. It shows four tiers of lions, a tree flanked by ibexes on the front, some figures that might represent sphinxes, and a youth in relief holding a snake on the upper left panel.<sup>262</sup> Hadley compares this stand to the other Taanach stand,<sup>263</sup> and asks if it is possible that both cultic stands were dedicated to YHWH and

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<sup>257</sup> Wilson, *Serpent Symbol*, 215. She suggests that since the suffix of *nechushtan* is “an” that was used to refer to a pair of things, it means that there were two snakes on the pole.

<sup>258</sup> Steve Wiggins, “The Myth of Asherah: Lion Lady and Serpent Goddess,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 23 (1991): 383–394, quoted in Wilson, *Serpent Symbol*, 107.

<sup>259</sup> Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit*, 124.

<sup>260</sup> Wilson, *Serpent Symbol*, 107.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>262</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 177.

<sup>263</sup> This stand was described in chapter III.2.c. of this paper.

Asherah.<sup>264</sup> On the other hand, Keel and Uehlinger point out that the figure holding the snake is not on the front, which shows that he is subordinate to the goddess.<sup>265</sup>

Therefore, it probably does not represent YHWH. Perhaps this stand is dedicated to the goddess, and the youth with the snake personifies her healing power. Even so, there is no clear proof that the goddess to which the stand is dedicated is Asherah.

Another possible connection between the goddess Asherah and the snake is found on Egyptian relief steles showing a naked Canaanite goddess standing on a lion and holding lotus blossoms in her right hand and two serpents in her left. She is flanked by Min, the Egyptian god of fertility, and Reshef, the Canaanite-Phoenician god of lightning and plagues who was turned into a war god in Egypt.<sup>266</sup> The goddess on the lion gives the flowers to Min and the snakes to Reshef, thus emphasizing her dual nature as giver of life and death. This is not a unique representation; Pritchard describes nine similar examples from Egypt.<sup>267</sup> On one of these plaques, three names appear: Qudshu, Anat, and Astarte. Based on this stele and other evidence from Ugaritic literature, most scholars agree that Qudshu is the Egyptian name for Asherah,<sup>268</sup> and therefore the goddess depicted on the steles represents either Asherah or a combination of all three goddesses.

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<sup>264</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 179. In addition, the word for snake in Hebrew is *nachash*, which means both serpent and divination; it might be related to women witches as described in the story of Saul and the witch from Endor in 1 Samuel 28.

<sup>265</sup> Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses*, 153.

<sup>266</sup> Manfred Lurker, *Dictionary of Gods and Goddesses Devils and Demons* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), s.v. "Min," "Reshef."

<sup>267</sup> Pritchard, *Palestinian Figurines*, 33–4.

<sup>268</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 192.



In Carthage, a Phoenician colony, the snake appears as a symbol of the goddess Tanit, who was associated with human sacrifice.<sup>269</sup> Numerous steles that carry Tanit's sign and are dedicated to her, or to her along with Baal Hammon, depict the symbol of the caduceus—two snakes entwined around a pole (Pl. 10, Pl. 11). As mentioned earlier, these steles have the sign of the hand, similar to the drawing of the hand at Khirbet el-Qom that appears along with the names of YHWH and his Ashera. Thus, perhaps the couple Tanit–Baal Hammon was one and the same with Asherah and YHWH in ancient Israel.

Another element that connects the Type One figurines with the snake is the phallic shape of the head, which results from the thick and elongated neck and the small size of the face—elements that do not occur in the pinched-head male figurines. As mentioned above, the phallus is traditionally associated with the serpent, and goddesses with snake heads tend to have their necks thick and elongated. (Plate 26). It appears that the Type One figurines create a mixture of the masculine (the phallus-shaped head) and the feminine (the breasts). The androgynous nature of the figurines might correspond to the androgenic nature of El Shaddai, the male god with breasts, who appears in the Bible in fertility contexts. Biale notes that the Jewish midrash thought the first man was both male and female, based on Genesis 1:27: “God created Adam in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.” Biale concludes that if the first man was androgynous and he/she was created in the image of God, then

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<sup>269</sup> See chapter III.a for a discussion of the relation between Asherah and Tanit.

this god has to be androgynous as well.<sup>270</sup> One can argue that the people who created and used the figurines were just imitating the forms of ancient figurines, without accepting or even knowing the ideas that lay behind them. However, if the form was not very important, we would expect a greater variety of shapes, and this does not occur.

The head of the Type One figurines bears a resemblance not only to a snake but also to a bird. Birds have important roles in mythological narratives throughout the world. In Egypt the Ba, a bird with a human face, represents the soul of the deceased. An Egyptian myth describes the phoenix, a mythical bird that represents immortality or the rebirth of hope. The dove appears in the Mesopotamian version of the story of the flood, and later in the Bible as the one who brings the good news of the recession of the water and hope for a new beginning. Later, in Christianity, the dove represents the Holy Spirit.

As with the snake, the symbol of the bird has a long history of association with the goddess. Gimbutas shows that female figurines with bird-masked heads and large breasts appear as early as the Upper Paleolithic.<sup>271</sup> During the Neolithic Age in Europe, figurines with beaked faces and enlarged breasts are commonly found. They have “a beak or pinched nose, long neck, hairdo or crown, female breasts... no mouth, but sometimes a round depression in its place.”<sup>272</sup> Goddesses appear in association with birds in many regions and cultures. In Crete, goddesses appear with birds on their heads (Plate 27) and at times with wings. On shrine models from Jordan, the goddess appears as a bird at the top of the shrine, while the palm-shaped pillars may represent trees of life

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<sup>270</sup> Biale, “The God with Breasts,” 240–256.

(Pl. 28, Pl. 29). Many clay figurines of doves have been found in Hebrew settlements (Pl. 30, Pl. 31), as well as Canaanite ones, and they may be related to the cult of Asherah, but there is no clear evidence to support it.

#### 4. The Tree

Beginning with the Neolithic Age, goddesses are often depicted in art and myth in association with trees and vegetation. It appears that goddesses, who were perceived as a source of life, as well as food to sustain life, became synonymous with trees, and specifically with the tree of life that is found in several ancient mythologies, including Genesis 3. Two caprids flanking a palm tree and feeding on it is a common motif in Near Eastern art. The ancient Near East scholar John Gray suggests that goddesses and trees are interchangeable, based on a comparison between this common motif and the lid of an ivory box from Minet el Beida dated from the thirteenth century BCE, on which a goddess is depicted as a woman feeding two goats<sup>273</sup> (Plate 32). Frankfort, referring to the same artifact, observes that “such an explicit statement that the goddess is a personification of the vital force of nature can be found in Mesopotamian art from Protoliterate times onwards.”<sup>274</sup> The caprids are at times flanking a triangle, an ancient symbol of the pubic triangle, and on other occasions a tree branch appears on pendants

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<sup>271</sup> Gimbutas, *Language of Goddess*, 31.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 34, 326.

<sup>273</sup> John Gray, “Ugarit,” in *Archaeology and Old Testament Study*, ed. David W. Thomas, 32–53 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

<sup>274</sup> Henry Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*. (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1954), 155.

and seals above the pudenda of the goddess.<sup>275</sup> Yarden suggests that goddesses were often perceived as dwelling in trees, and that the appearance of YHWH in the burning bush is reminiscent of that tradition.<sup>276</sup> Keel examines the interchangeability of goddesses and trees on terracotta shrine models. He notes that while the entrances of the models from the eleventh and tenth centuries are flanked by naked goddesses, the entrances of similar models from the ninth century show stylized palm trees.<sup>277</sup> He determines that “both real and artificial trees were objects of worship in Syria and Palestine for centuries because they were seen as manifestations of a single female deity or of a number of different ones.”<sup>278</sup>

Trees hold special significance in the Bible. Keel observes that YHWH or his messengers’ appearances often occur under trees, and that leaders are described sitting beneath trees and dead dignitaries are buried under trees. He notes that these were real trees that grew at specific sites but also had some religious significance.<sup>279</sup> The cult of Asherah as described in the Bible assumes strong associations with trees. The cultic object *asherah* is made of wood and probably had the shape of a stylized tree. It is found “on every high hill and under every green tree” (1 Kings 14:23, 2 Kings 17:10). Some scholars have noted that the use of the verb *nata* (“planted”), suggests that the *asherah*

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<sup>275</sup> Othmar Keel, *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh: Ancient Near Eastern Art and the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 25.

<sup>276</sup> Leon Yarden, *The Tree of Light; A Study of the Menorah, the Seven-Branched Lampstand* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), 39.

<sup>277</sup> Keel, *Goddesses and Trees*, 41.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 49. Also see Carol L. Meyers, *The Tabernacle Menorah: A Synthetic Study of a Symbol from the Biblical Cult* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976), 143.

was actually a living tree.<sup>280</sup> The early Greek translation of the Bible, the LXX, translates *asherah* in almost every case by *alsos* (“grove”).<sup>281</sup> The Mishnah, which is the oldest Jewish commentary to the Bible, describes the Asherah as a living tree that is used for the purpose of idolatry. Rabbi Akibah said, “Wherever you find a high mountain or a lofty hill and a green tree, know that an idol is there.”<sup>282</sup> Another connection between Asherah and the tree is the sign of the tribe of Asher, which was an olive tree.<sup>283</sup> Interestingly, Aharoni, who excavated an Israeli sanctuary and high place from the eleventh to tenth century BCE, found there a large stone that he identified as *massebah* (cultic pillar stone), and directly in front of it the ashes of an olive tree trunk, which he identified as *asherah*.<sup>284</sup>

When YHWH took over Asherah’s role as a provider of fertility and abundance, her cult symbol, the *asherah* pole, was incorporated into his cult and was placed near his altars. Yashimata traces a process of evolution of the term *asherah* from a goddess to

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<sup>280</sup> Lemaire believes it was a living tree. A. Lemaire, “Who Was Yahwe’s Asherah?,” 42–51. However, as discussed in chapter II of this paper, Hadley disputes this, showing that at times Asherah is described as a goddess and not as an object, and that the verb *nata* can also mean “established” as well as “planted.” Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 5–6, 60. Patai also thinks that “plant” means actually implanting the pole of *asherah* in the ground, not a living tree. Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 296. For a detailed discussion of the nature of *asherah* in the Bible, see chapter II of this paper.

<sup>281</sup> Other times it translates it as follows: in two verses it translates *asherah* as “tree” and twice as “Astarte.” Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 82.

<sup>282</sup> *The Mishnah*, translated from the Hebrew by Herbert Danby, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 441.

<sup>283</sup> In Genesis 49:20, we find Jacob’s blessing to his son Asher: “Out of Asher, his bread shall be fat, and he shall yield royal dainties” – מאשר שמנה לחמו, והוא יתן מעדני מלך. The Biblical commentator A. S. Hartom explains this verse as, “Everyone who is a descendant of Asher, his bread will be fat, meaning his land will be fertile; and thus this tribe can provide foods that are delicious enough for royalty.” A. S. Hartom, *Tanach (the Bible) Commentary: Genesis*, ed. M. D. Cassuto (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1960), 179. This interpretation associates Asher with the abundance of the land, which can be achieved by the blessing of Asherah.

<sup>284</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 164. Another possible connection between Asherah and the olive tree is that the oil that was used to light the menorah in the temple was pure olive oil.

merely a cultic symbol, either a living tree or a wooden cultic object.<sup>285</sup> The scripts from Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet Ajrud demonstrate this process: even if one interprets them as referring to the goddess herself and not merely to a cult object, she is described as “his Asherah,” and therefore she is YHWH’s possession rather than an independent goddess. Another example of the shifting of the symbol of the tree from the goddess to the male god is found on ancient seals. Keel observes that while early depictions of trees usually appear along with goddesses, at the end of the eighth century and during the seventh century the stylized tree often appears along with enthroned male figures.<sup>286</sup> However, he describes a rare scaraboid from Lachish that shows an anthropomorphic goddess standing between a worshipper and a tree or tree branch, and suggests that “even at this time there was some awareness of the age old connection between goddess and tree.”<sup>287</sup>

While the association between Asherah and trees in the Bible is sound, the connection between the Asherah figurines and trees is less so. Does the lower part of the Asherah figurines represent a tree trunk, as some scholars have suggested,<sup>288</sup> or is it merely a practical solution to support the figurines? Some horse rider and bird figurines have a pillar base as well (Pl. 30, Pl. 31), and it is likely that in those cases the pillar did not represent a tree. In addition, if the figurines were replicas of the larger *asherah* poles, which were probably stylized trees, we would expect to find on seals and other artifacts

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<sup>285</sup> The process has four steps, according to Yamashita: 1. Asherah, consort of El, is almost forgotten by the Israelites. 2. Asherah, the goddess paired with Baal, is in the process of being forgotten, because the word *asherah* often refers to the cult object alone, and because Ashtoret is now Baal’s consort. 3. Asherah is a wooden cultic object representing the goddess. 4. Asherah is a wooden cult object. T. Yamashita, “The Goddess Asherah,” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1963), 137, quoted in Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 83.

<sup>286</sup> Keel, *Goddesses and Trees*, 45.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 44. Keel argues that the fact that the goddess depicted here holds her breasts in a gesture similar to the pillar figurines supports the identification of the pillar figurines with Asherah.

such representations of trees with female upper bodies. Although we find various representations of stylized trees, such as the one on the pithos from Kuntillet Ajrud, no images of stylized trees with breasts similar to the figurines have been found in Israel.<sup>289</sup> Another argument against the association of the pillar of Asherah with a tree trunk is that female pillar figurines from other areas, like Crete and Phoenicia, have painted decorations on a bell-shaped pillar body that show it to represent a skirt. To summarize, it appears that the evidence we have does not support the claim that the Asherah figurines represent a combination of a woman and a tree trunk.

Perhaps the most striking example of the incorporation of the symbol of the tree—originally associated with the realm of the goddess—into the Yahwist cult is the menorah, which is considered to this day the most ancient and well-known Jewish symbol and was chosen to be on the emblem of the state of Israel in the modern era. Most scholars agree that the shape of the menorah is formed after the shape of a stylized tree. Considering the close association between goddesses and trees, it is reasonable to assume that the menorah could have been perceived, at least in early times, as representing a goddess, possibly Asherah, whose cult was related to trees. Meyers demonstrates through numerous Near Eastern artifacts that the menorah was shaped after the motif of a stylized tree with six branches, three on each side of the central axis and arranged in a straight line. One famous example is an ewer from a temple in Lachish that shows two ibexes flanking a menorah-shaped tree (Plate 33). The inscription above the

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<sup>288</sup> Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 39.

<sup>289</sup> There are Egyptian paintings of tree goddesses in which the goddess appears out of a tree, but Keel and Uehlinger claim that these are unrelated examples, because they are from the Bronze Age and are limited exclusively to funerary contexts. Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses*, 331.

drawing reads: “Mattan. An offering to my Lady Elat,”<sup>290</sup> suggesting that the ewer was a gift to a goddess. *Elat* means “goddess,” and in several places in the Ugaritic myths “Elat” appears as an epithet for Athirat (Asherah).<sup>291</sup> Meyers establishes that the motif of the menorah-shaped tree was mostly popular during the late Bronze Age, about the time of the Tabernacle.<sup>292</sup> Moreover, she notes that the biblical writer uses vegetal terminology to describe the various parts of the menorah, further connecting it with tree imagery.<sup>293</sup> Some scholars believe the menorah originally represented the tree of life.<sup>294</sup> Yarden describes the extent of the myth of the tree of life in the ancient Near Eastern world as well as in the biblical text, and suggests that “the cosmic tree or World Tree is usually conceived at the centre of the earth... with its roots in the Underworld (realm of the dead) and crown in Heaven (realm of the gods)... a sort of imaginary *axis mundi* or World Pillar,”<sup>295</sup> and the person who eats from it becomes immortal. Meyers suggests that the sanctuary in the ancient Near East “exists as an earthly replica of a heavenly model,” in which the link between heaven and earth is created by certain figures such as “pillar, ladder, tree, pole, vine, etc.”<sup>296</sup> In the temple, the menorah was the object that created that connection between heaven and earth, (Plate 35) while in the open sanctuaries it was the asherah stylized tree. Pure olive oil was used to light the menorah,

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<sup>290</sup> Translation by Cross. Frank M. Cross, “The Origin and Early Evolution of the Alphabet,” *Eretz Israel* 8 (1967), 16.

<sup>291</sup> Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*, 43. However, Hadley determines that *Elat* does not always refer to Athirat, and in other occurrences it refers to other goddesses.

<sup>292</sup> Meyers, *Tabernacle Menorah*, 182. However, Plate 37 demonstrates that the “Menorah Tree” motif (with four branches on each side instead of three,) appeared much earlier.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 39. Meyers suggests that the artistic style of the menorah was influenced by Egyptian art.

<sup>294</sup> Yarden, *Tree of Light*, 40.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>296</sup> Meyers, *Tabernacle Menorah*, 171.



and Yarden notes that in the vision of Zechariah there are two olive trees, one on each side of the menorah, supplying it with oil that Yarden refers to as “the life power.”<sup>297</sup>

Along with its symbolic meanings, it appears that originally the menorah also had some functional roles as well. It stood with the incense altar and the showbread table outside the veil to the Holy of Holies in the Mishkan, and initially it was only lit at night.<sup>298</sup> While the table of showbread supplied the deity with loaves of bread, and the incense altar offered burned incense, the menorah probably provided light for the deity. In addition, another important role of lamps in ancient Near Eastern temples was to make the divine image shine.<sup>299</sup> Van der Toorn quotes a Mesopotamian text that demonstrates how the messages from the gods were conveyed through the faces of their statues: “When Marduk has a somber face, famine will take hold of the countries. When Marduk has a face that shines, Enlil will make the land shine forever.”<sup>300</sup> This text bears a remarkable similarity to the blessing that was recited by the priests in the Temple each day: “YHWH bless you and keep you; YHWH make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; YHWH lift up his face toward you and give you peace” (Numbers 6:24–26). If there was a statue of YHWH in the Mishkan and in the first Temple, and the role of the menorah was to keep its face shining even at night, it becomes clear why the menorah is so

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<sup>297</sup> Yarden, *Tree of Light*, 43. The possibility that the olive tree might have been used as an *asherah* was discussed earlier in this chapter.

<sup>298</sup> Yarden, *Tree of Light*, 13.

<sup>299</sup> Niehr, “YHWH’s Statue,” 90.

<sup>300</sup> Van der Toorn, “The Iconic Book: Analogies between the Babylonian Cult of Images and the Veneration of the Torah,” in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Karel van der Toorn (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1997), 234.

important, even in comparison to the other holy vessels,<sup>301</sup> because a misuse of the menorah could bring a great disaster to the land.

The menorah which shone light on the face of the male statue eventually started to represent the feminine aspect of YHWH as it appears to the worshipper. Niehr suggests that the menorah replaced a cult statue of YHWH that was destroyed or removed with the destruction of the first temple in 586 BCE. To demonstrate this, he surveys the prophetic visions of YHWH: although the pre-exilic prophets saw him on his throne, the early post-exilic prophet Zechariah sees only the cultic symbol of the menorah, which the angel then interprets as a representation of YHWH. Zechariah describes the seven branches of the menorah as “YHWH’s eyes” (Zechariah 4:1–12).<sup>302</sup> Further support for this argument might be an enigmatic epithet of the Carthaginian goddess Tanit: “Tanit Pene Baal,” meaning “Tanit, the face of Baal.” This epithet, which has puzzled scholars, expresses the same relationship between the goddess and the male god as that which existed between YHWH and the menorah. The role of the goddess as the representative of the male god on earth fits well with her position as a mediator between him and his followers. Patai notes that later in the Jewish tradition the *Shekhina* took a similar role:

*Shekhina* is the frequently used Talmudic term denoting the visible and audible manifestation of God’s presence on earth... The Shekhina concept stood for an independent, feminine divine entity prompted by her compassionate nature to argue with God in defense of man. She is thus, if not by character, then by function and position, a direct heir to such ancient Hebrew goddesses of Canaanite Origin as Asherah and Anat.<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> Meyers, *Tabernacle Menorah*, 83.

<sup>302</sup> Niehr, “YHWH’s Statue,” 81.

<sup>303</sup> Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 96.

Although Shekhina is not mentioned in the Bible, she has something in common with Asherah: both of them mean “dwelling,” referring to the dwelling of the deity on earth.

Along with the menorah, the Torah is another sacred object that has a strong association with the tree and is found at the center of Jewish worship. The Torah, traditionally called “the Tree of Life” (עץ חיים – *Etz Hayim*), is the scroll of the first five books of the Bible. In the Bible, the wisdom is called *Etz Hayim*: “She is a tree of life to those who embrace her, and the person who supports her is happy.”<sup>304</sup> However, later this verse was attributed to the Torah, and is traditionally chanted during a service in which the Torah is being read. In many midrashim there is a connection between the Torah and the tree; for example, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yiohai says, “Every tree represents the Torah.”<sup>305</sup> Not only is the Torah called “the tree of life,” but also the wooden rods around which the torah scroll is rolled are called *atzey chayim* (“trees of life”). The rods are often decorated with two finials on top that are called *rimonim*, meaning pomegranates, an ancient symbol of abundance and fertility. Through the Torah and the menorah, the tree, originally associated with the goddess, became an important part of the monotheistic Jewish religion.

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<sup>304</sup> Proverbs 3:18. My translation. —YK

<sup>305</sup> *Genesis Rabbah: the Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis: a New American Translation*, V. 1, trans. Jacob Neusner (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1985), 12:6.

## Conclusion

Examining the available sources on Asherah and her figurines and assembling all the pieces of the puzzle is crucial for shedding light on her cult. It enables us to trace the changes in her status, and to follow the relationship between her cult and the cult of YHWH. In the most detailed source, the Ugaritic myths, she is the mother of seventy gods and wet nurse for gods and kings—a motherly figure who serves as a mediator between her children, the minor gods of Ugarit, and their father El. The etymology of her name reveals connections with happiness as well as with holy places and a strong association with the sea. The importance of successful child bearing in the ancient Near East makes her roles as a protector of birth and as a mediator between the worshipper and the male god significant.

Another source, which requires a careful reading, is the Bible. The biblical writers promoted the “Yahweh alone” agenda and portrayed Asherah as a foreign idol that tainted Hebrew worship. However, in spite of their efforts to portray paganism as a foreign influence, it appears that the Hebrew cult was originally polytheistic and iconic, and that only gradually did it turn into a monotheistic and aniconic religion. Asherah appears in the Bible as a goddess, but also and more frequently as a wooden cultic pole, probably in the shape of a stylized tree, which was found next to the altars of both YHWH and Baal. Some sources show that goddess cults in ancient Israel were led by women, but with the approval of their husbands.

Another important source that sheds light on Asherah are the archaeological findings from ancient Israel, where many female figurines have been excavated. Two

major types of female pillar figurines have been discovered—those with human faces and those with snake or bird faces. It is not clear whether they represented different goddesses or different aspects of Asherah; however, it is unlikely that the difference is only for practical reasons, as Kletter suggests.<sup>306</sup> The figurines were mass produced in Judah, and their crudeness and simplicity are unique to Judah. Originally the figurines were painted, and their colors and patterns may have conveyed symbolic meanings. Many figurines were found in domestic contexts, and their design and coloring show that they were displayed frontally, perhaps in a niche in a wall. Some, however, were found in public places and in pools, which might suggest cultic activity uses. It is possible that some were broken on purpose as part of a ceremony or as part of an anti-iconic act. Their occurrence in the palace in Ramat Rachel and near the temple in Jerusalem shows that the cult of Asherah was not restricted to popular religion and domestic uses, but was part of the official cult as well. The relationship between the pillar figurines, the asherah stylized poles, and Asherah's representation in the temple is still not clear. Patai has suggested that the figurines were “counterparts” of the larger asherah poles that were found next to altars,<sup>307</sup> but it is also possible they were counterparts of her image in the temple, which was more likely to be in a human shape than the stylized poles.

Other types of archaeological evidence are the inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom, which show that YHWH and Asherah were closely related in ancient Israel, contrary to the impression the Bible tries to convey. Comparison between

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<sup>306</sup> Kletter, *Selected Material Remains*, 114.

<sup>307</sup> Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 39.

the drawing of the hand found in Khirbet el-Qom and drawings of hands from Carthage reveals that in both cases the hand appears alongside a dedication to a pair of male and female gods, showing it was not uncommon to turn to a pair of gods instead of one god or goddess, and to ask for “double” protection. The idea that, as a couple, Asherah was represented in an iconic way but YHWH was never depicted is now being challenged. Scholars are examining the possibility that YHWH was represented as human/calf/horse rider,<sup>308</sup> both in the temple and in domestic contexts. Artifacts that could represent a god and goddess pair are being considered as possibly representing YHWH and Asherah together. Perhaps even more important than the findings themselves is the fact that scholars are finally open to considering such a possibility.

Researching Asherah in the context of goddess worship and goddess attributes helps in understanding the iconography of her figurines. Goddesses with prominent breasts can be found in many cultures beginning in prehistoric times. It has long been accepted that breasts represent nourishment and abundance, and female figurines with enlarged breasts are identified as “Great Mother” and/or “Earth Goddess.” In the Bible, the breasts are a source of blessing, abundance, and pleasure, and they often appear with other goddess-related imagery such as palm trees. Although the breasts are the most prominent aspect associating the Asherah figurines with goddess worship, there are other elements as well. The face and neck of the Type One Asherah figurines, as well as other archaeological and Biblical evidence, hint at a connection between Asherah and the snake

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<sup>308</sup> Perhaps he was also represented as the sun, which may be the case in the Taanach stand and the biblical reference to the “horses of the sun.”

and/or the bird, two well-attested consorts of goddesses from early times. Because of the prominence of the breasts as a symbol of fertility and abundance in the figurines, the most relevant interpretation of the snake motif here is probably the phallic shape of the head and neck of the figurines, which also associates them with fertility. In addition to the breasts, trees are also an ancient symbol for abundance, and the cult of Asherah as described in the Bible has strong connections with trees.

When YHWH takes over Asherah's role as the provider of fertility to the land, he absorbs the symbol of the tree into his cult, and her status deteriorates from an independent goddess to a wooden cultic object that serves by the side of his altar. YHWH assumes her traditional attributes: the breasts of the goddess appear in his name, El Shaddai—"the god with breasts"—and the lion of the goddess becomes the symbol of the tribe of Judah and the Jewish people. Often in Jewish art one can find two lions flanking the tablets of the Ten Commandments, or the crown of the Torah, in much the same way the ibexes originally flanked the tree of the goddess (Plate 36). However, in a twist of history, the goddess has not been forgotten, nor has she disappeared. Instead, she became the "face of God" through the menorah, which has the shape of a stylized tree; through the Torah, which takes the place of the iconic image of God and is now called "tree of life," and through the notion of the Shekhina, the feminine manifestation of God. The transformation of the goddess from a mediator between the worshipper and YHWH into his feminine aspect on earth—an aspect more accessible to the believer—is then complete.

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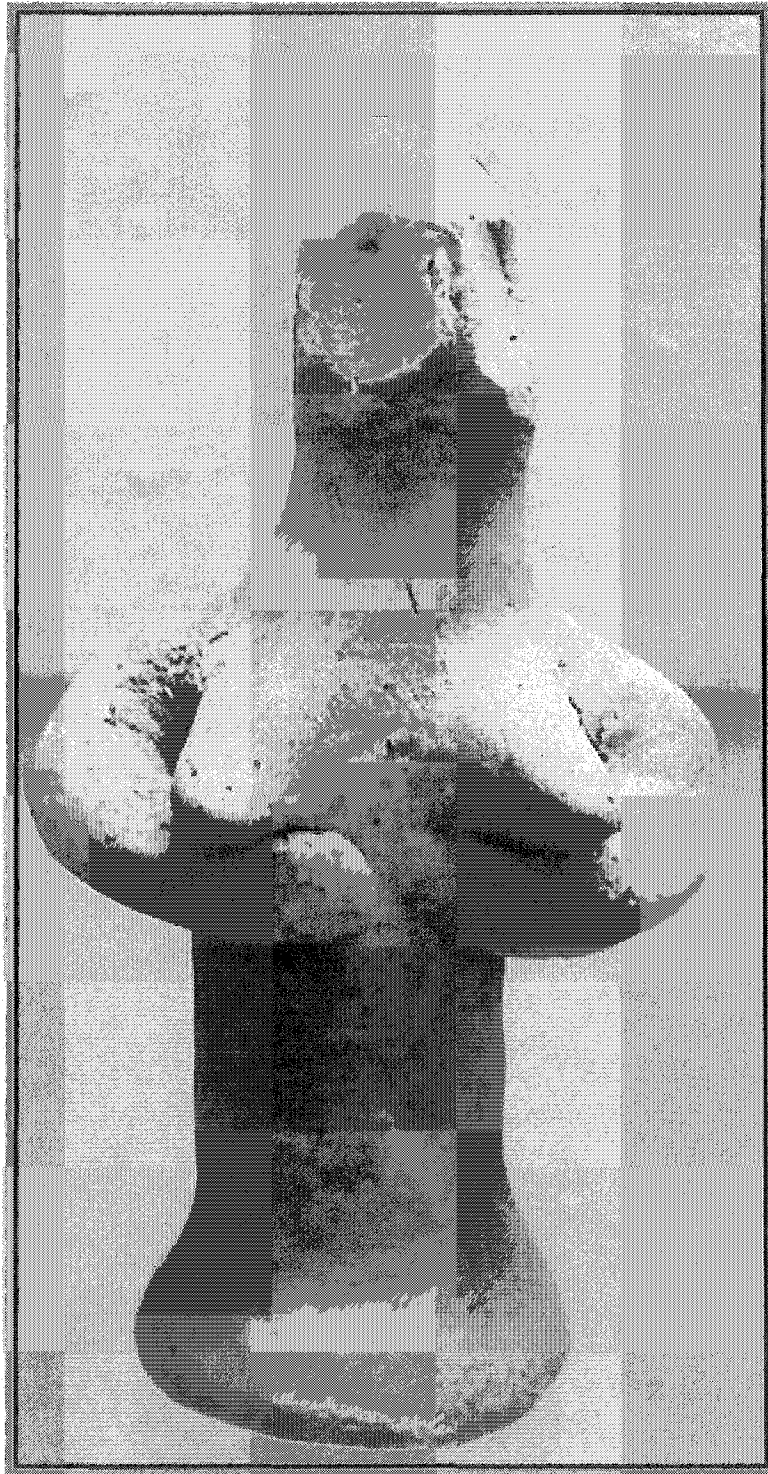
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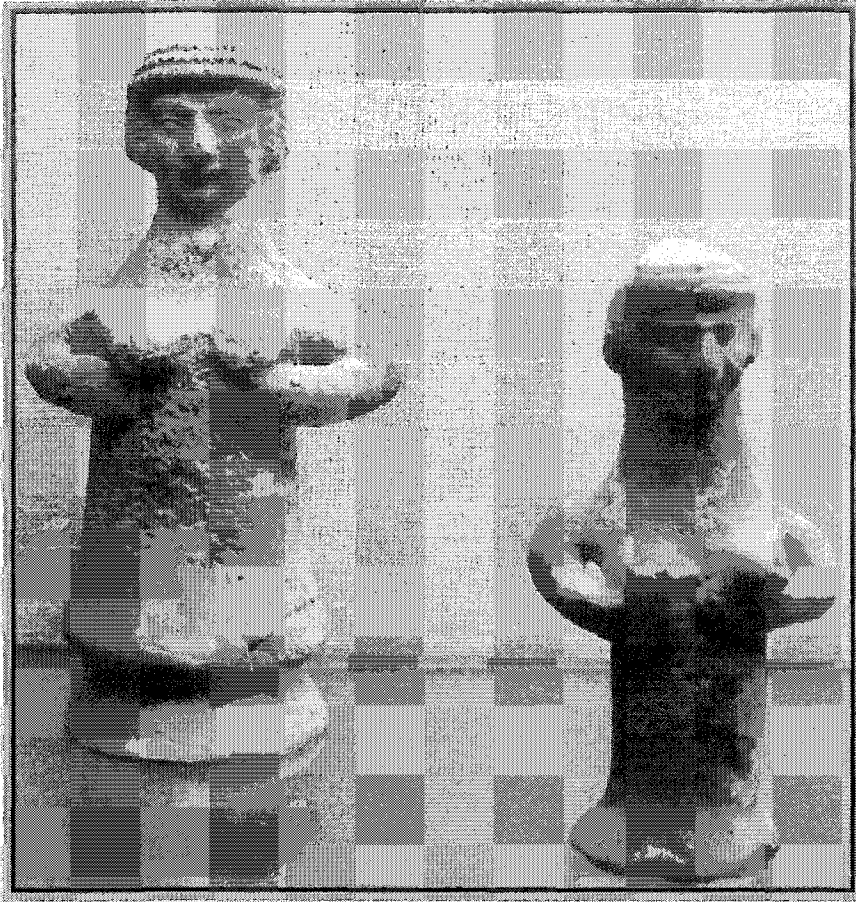
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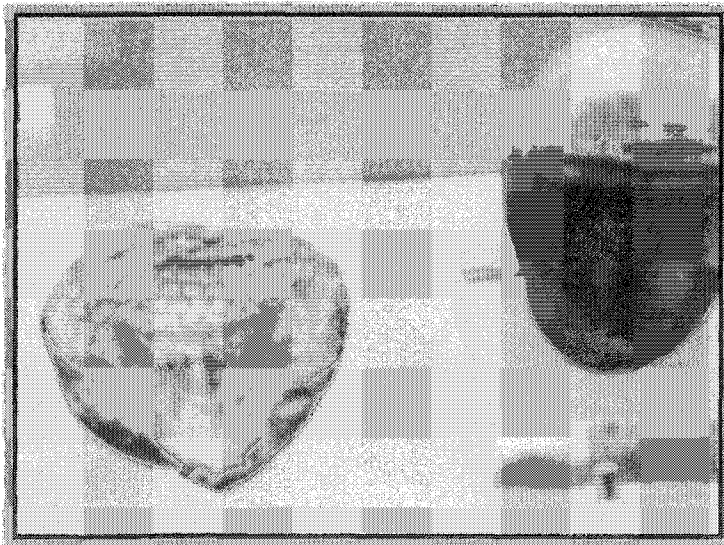
Plates



1. Type One Asherah figurine



2. Type Two Asherah figurines.

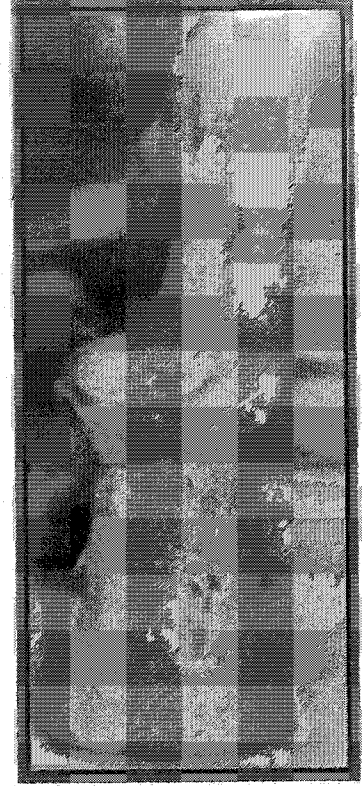


3. Head and mould.





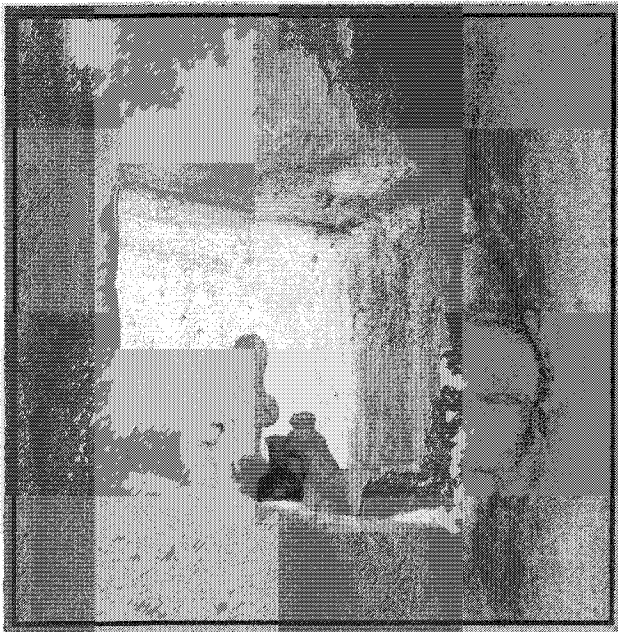
4. Asherah figurine with a conical head  
8<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE.



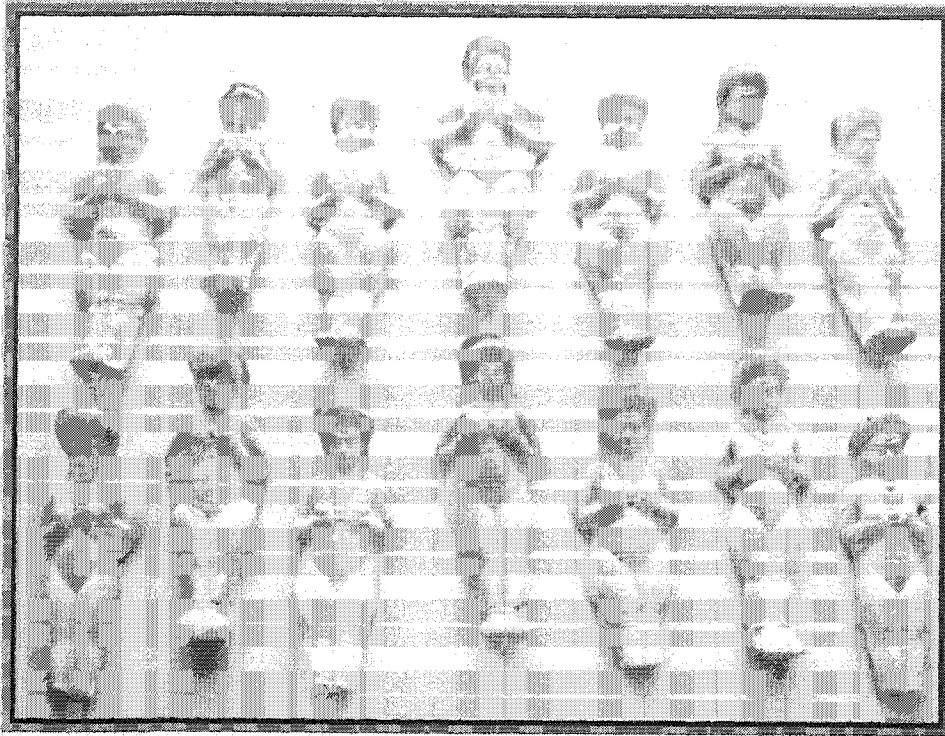
5. Back and side views of Asherah figurine



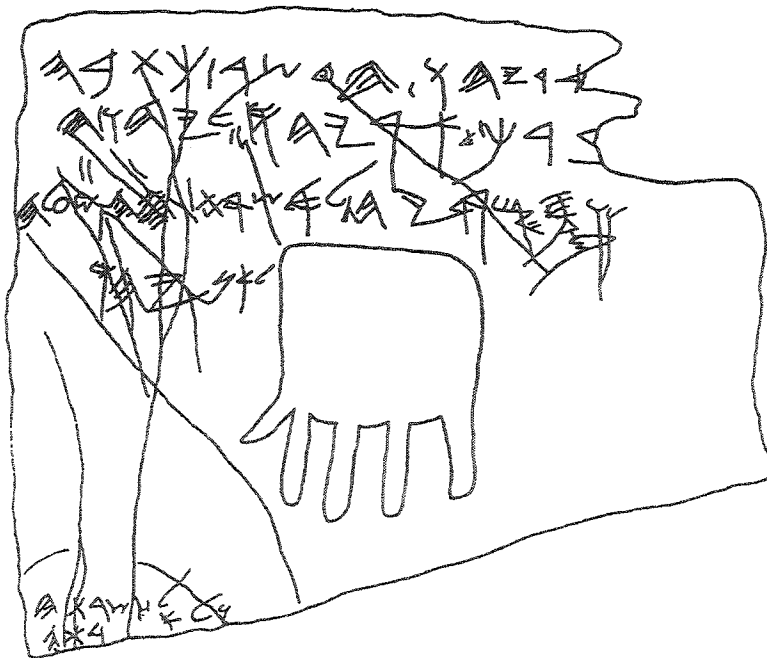
6. Full-scale replica of a two-storey village house from Iron Age Israel



7. Detail of plate 6. Ceramic artifacts in the niche: a rattle, bottles, saucer lamp, model bed and Asherah figurine. 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> c. BCE.



8. Middle Elamite ceramic figurines  
Susa, Iran, 1500–1000 BCE.



9. Inscription no.3 from Khirbet el-Qom



10. Detail from stele to Baal Hammon and Tanit with caduceus, hand and Tanit sign. Constantine, Tunisia, 199–100 BCE.



11. Votive stele with caduceus, hand and Tanit sign. Hal Hofra sanctuary, Constantine, Algeria, 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE.

Inscription: “to Lord, to Baal Hammon and to Tanit, Baal’s face, vow taken by Arish the officer, son of Kinito. He offered a sacrifice, he heard his voice, he blessed him.”



12. Horse and rider. Israel  
1000–586 BCE.



13. Cult stand from Taanach  
Israel, 10<sup>th</sup> c. BCE.



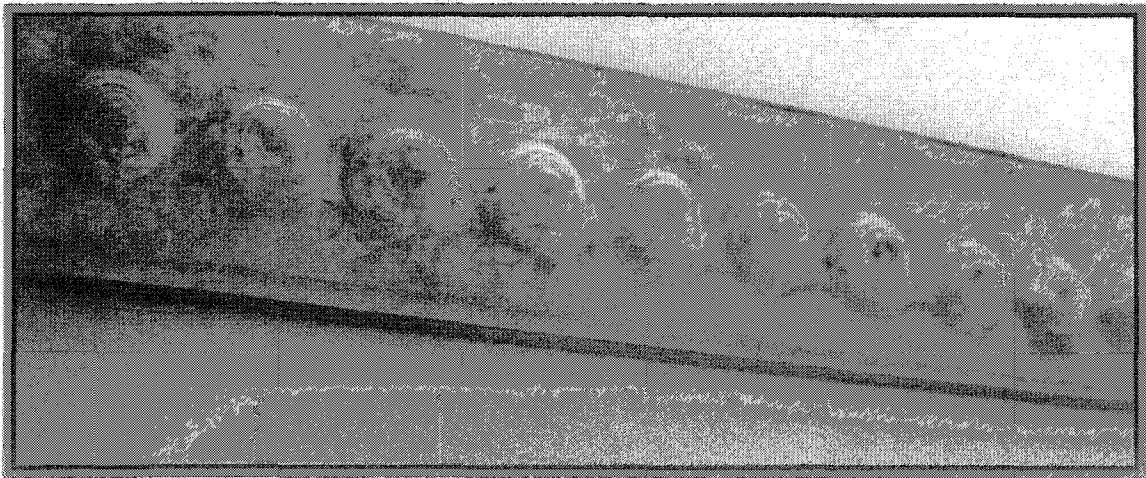
14. Venus of Willendorf  
Austria, c. 22,000–21,000 BCE. Limestone



15. Grain or Bird Goddess. Sha'ar-  
Hagolan, Israel, 7<sup>th</sup> mill. BCE. Clay



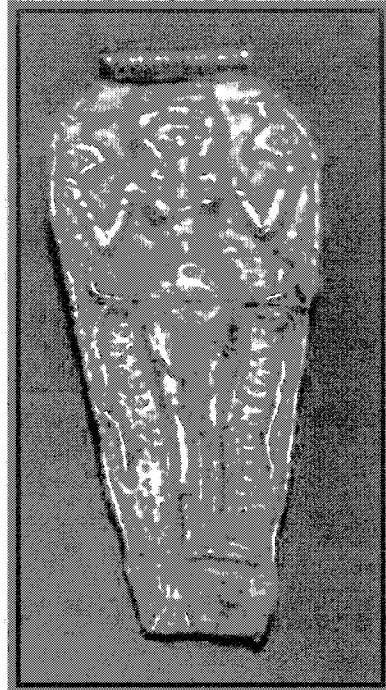
16. Early Minoan Vase with beak, wings and nipples that serve as spouts. Malia, Crete, 3<sup>rd</sup> mill. BCE.



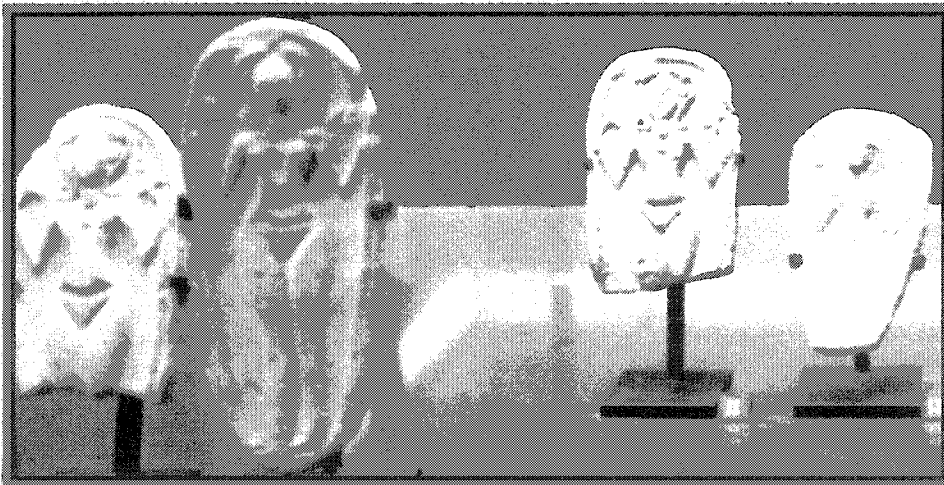
17. Relief of protruded spirals, Crete



18. Goddess amulet  
1500–1250 BCE

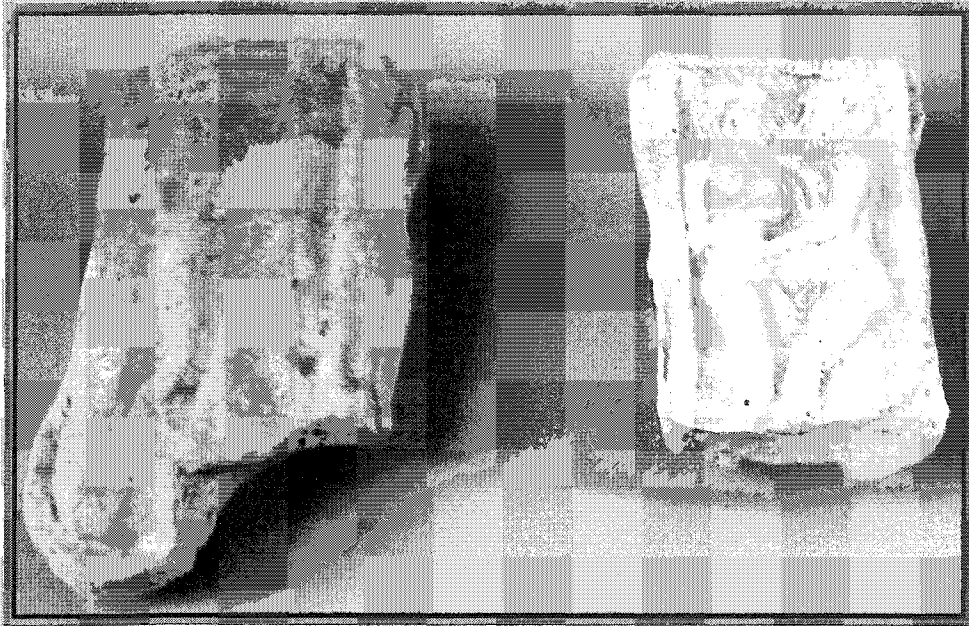


19. Goddess stands above a lion,  
holds an ibex in each hand and a  
pair of snakes cross behind her at  
waist level.  
Ugarit, 13<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. Gold plaque



20. Goddesses with “hathor” hairstyle holding lotus buds  
Israel, 1550–1200 BCE

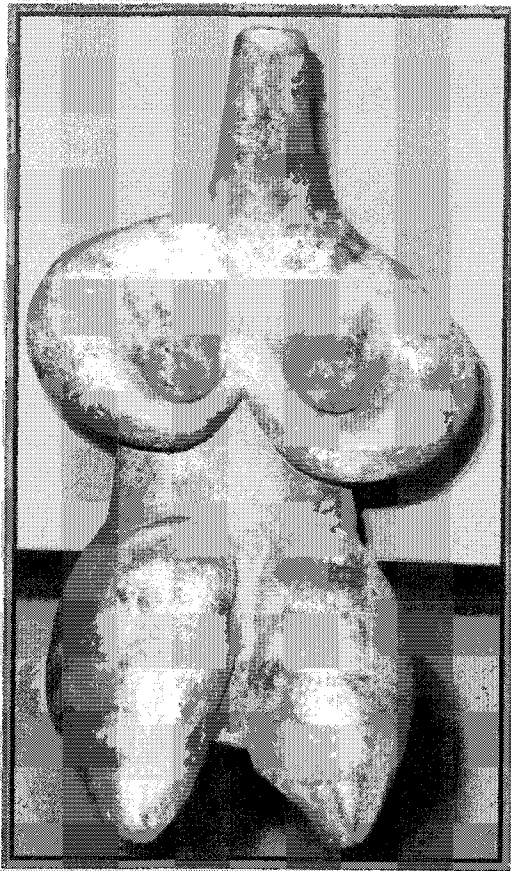




21. Elamaite figurines of couples on beds  
Susā, 14th–12th c. BCE. Terracotta



22. Asherah figurines



23. Snake Goddess with arms in the shape of snakes.  
Halaf style. Mesopotamia or North Syria, 6000–5200 BCE. Terracotta



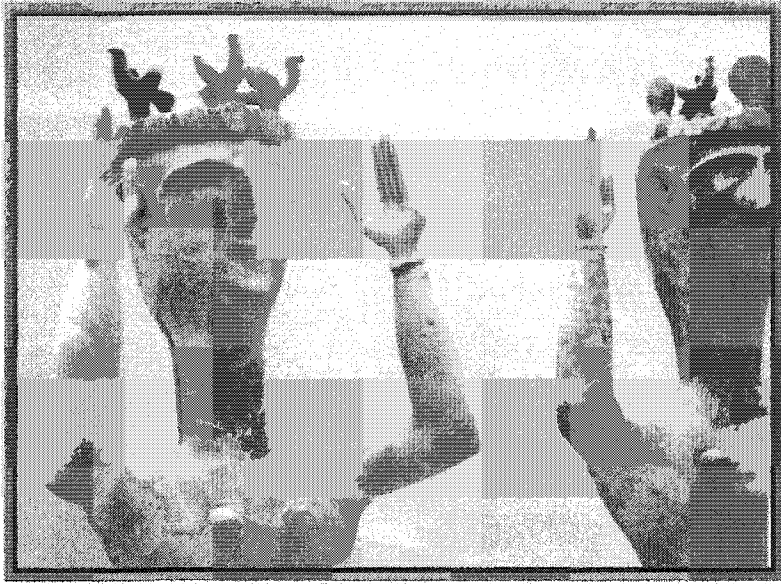
24. Snake Goddess  
Crete, ca. 1700–1550 BCE. Faience



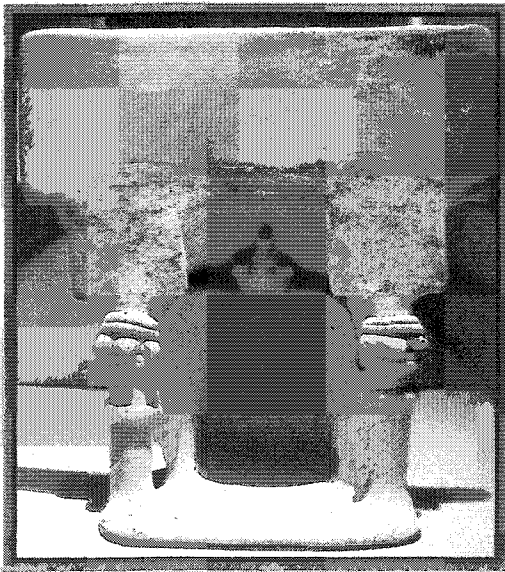
25. Bird or Snake Head Asherah  
8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> c. BCE.



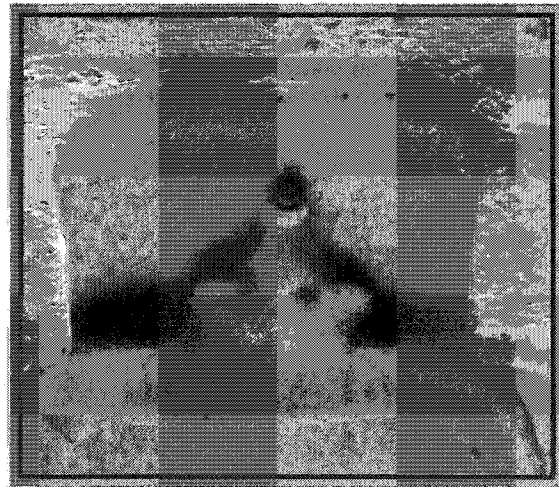
26. Goddess with phallus head  
Iran, 9<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. Clay



27. Goddesses with crown of birds  
Crete. 1400–1100 BCE.



28. Temple model  
Jordan, 10<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. Clay



29. Detail of Plate 28  
Bird Goddess with breasts



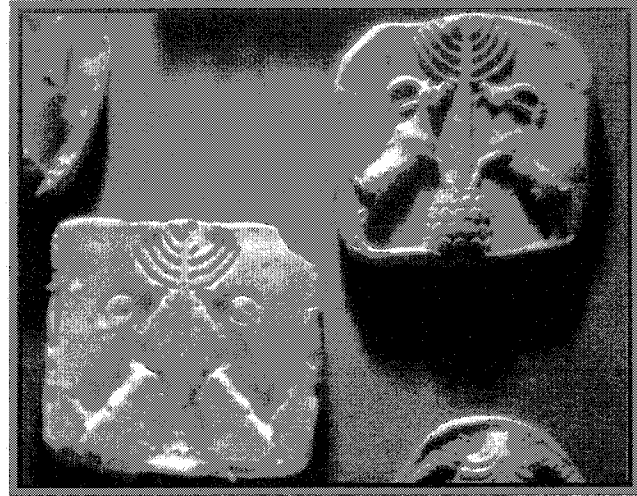
30 (top), 31 (left). Bird pillar figurines  
Judea, Iron Age. Terracotta



32. Goddess feeding goats. Minet el Beidah (port  
of Ugarit), Syria, ca. 1250 BCE. Ivory



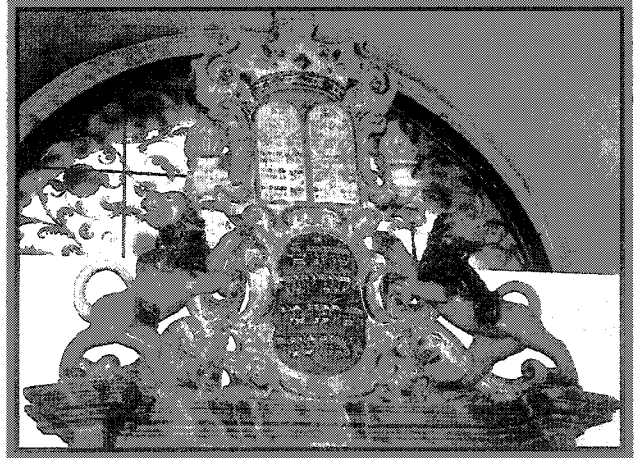
33. Ewer from Lachish  
Israel, 1550–1200 BCE  
Inscription: “Mattan. An offering to  
my Lady Elat.”



34. Tree of Life with goats  
Sumerian, ca. 3000 BCE. Earthenware



35. Menora. Priene, Asia Minor,  
Turkey, 200–400. Limestone



36. Detail of torah shrine with lions, shiviti  
plaque, tablets of the law and crown.  
Hamburg, Germany, 1770.

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