

Ashes in Bethel:
Bearings of Second Millennium BCE Ugaritic Mythology upon
First Millennium BCE Israelite Religion

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Chapter I: INTRODUCTION

This study addresses the problematic relationship between Israelite religion of the first millennium BCE and Ugaritic mythological literature from the second millennium BCE. Since the discovery of the tablets of Elimelek in the 1920s and 1930s at Ras Shamra, scholars have sought connections between Israel and Ugarit due to similar deities in the literature of the two regions. While Baal and El have received a fair share of attention, scholars have also focused on the relationship between the Hebrew term *asherah* and the Ugaritic mother goddess Athirat. However, what is largely lacking is an analysis of the mode through which cultural exchange could have occurred between Ugarit, in modern day northern Syria, and ancient Israelite society to the south (see Figure 1).

Using *asherah* as a case study, this thesis will describe the literary landscape of the Levant, starting with Athirat in the Baal Cycle and the Keret Epic of the north, moving through epigraphic remains found at Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet 'Ajrud in the southern Levant, and finishing with an analysis of texts from the Hebrew Bible that contain references to *asherah*. The study will then synthesize the evidence in order to clarify the nature of *asherah* in the Hebrew Bible and the potential influence of the Ugaritic Athirat on Israelite religious practice.



Figure 1: The gold labels and stars mark relevant cities/sites for the present study, while white borders and text show modern political designations.

Chapter one will review the most significant scholarship that has been produced on the nature of *asherah* in the Hebrew Bible. Within this chapter I will identify the strengths and weaknesses of each author, how each author addresses Ugaritic comparanda (when applicable), and the questions left unanswered in order to establish a starting place for the present study.

Chapter two will examine the role played by Athirat in the major texts of Ugaritic literature in order to discern the nature and function of the goddess in Ugaritic religion and society. Primary emphasis will be placed on the two cycles from the Elimelek tablets in which Athirat plays a key role: (1) The Keret Epic, in which the king makes a vow to Athirat to ensure the acquisition of an heir and is then punished for not fulfilling his end of the bargain; and (2) The Baal Cycle, in which she plays the role of divine matriarch and is present throughout the official proceedings within the pantheon. I will also briefly examine the fragmented ritual texts from Ugarit that mention the goddess in order to present a thorough depiction of Athirat in her Ugaritic context.

Chapter three will focus on southern Levantine epigraphic remains that contain the word *asherah* and the inscriptions' archaeological contexts in order to clarify the cultic practices and/or beliefs that were actually a part of southern Levantine culture at the time of their composition. The central goal of this chapter will be to examine epigraphic allusions to *asherah* that may indicate wider-spread customs involving the goddess/relic than elite texts suggest. A linguistic study of the term *asherah* at the sites of Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom and the sites' archaeological contexts will be the primary case studies for this chapter, focusing particularly on the archaeological data, iconography, and epigraphy mentioning *asherah* at Kuntillet 'Ajrud.

Chapter four will discuss the term *asherah* in the Hebrew Bible. Beginning with an overview of the language used to describe *asherah* (*asherah* pole, *asherim*, *asheroth*, etc.) and a discussion of the nature of *asherah* in the Hebrew, this chapter returns, in part, to preliminary research I completed for a seminar in Early Judaism that originally generated my interest in this larger topic. I will approach the biblical texts in chronological order with emphasis placed upon the Deuteronomistic tradition and theories about *asherah* as textual gloss, particularly in Kings and Chronicles, ultimately demonstrating that the understanding of *asherah* shifted over time.

Chapter five will seek to answer the question, “is the Hebrew *asherah* related to the goddess Athirat?” This chapter will synthesize the information presented earlier in this study in order to provide a cohesive theory about the nature of the *asherah* in Israelite religion and any lingering associations with Ugaritic literature. Though I will touch on alternative explanations for *asherah*’s presence in the biblical texts and Israelite religion in general, the main goal of this chapter is to evaluate the common argument that the Hebrew *asherah* is, in fact, a remnant of the Ugaritic Athirat

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Chapter II: REVIEW OF EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP

In order to establish a starting point for further discussion of Ugaritic Athirat and the Hebrew *asherah*, a review of relevant scholarship is required. In what follows, I have focused on scholars that represent the various approaches adopted by the field as a whole. By analyzing each scholar's work and identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments, my hope is to provide a solid background for the study of *asherah* so that we may move forward with a more thorough understanding of which questions have been answered adequately and which require further investigation.

Mark Smith – *The Early History of God*

Mark Smith's *The Early History of God* focuses on Yahweh and his relations to other deities in ancient Israel, including Baal and Asherah. Smith maintains a healthy amount of skepticism, acknowledging the lack of abundant evidence for the nature and role of *asherah*. He specifically addresses the problematic "argument from silence."¹ What Smith fails to do, however, is to remain as skeptical when assuming a link between Ugaritic Athirat and the *asherah* of the Hebrew Bible. He does not fully acknowledge the large geographic and temporal divide that separates the two cultures, a position which has been criticized by scholars, such as Wiggins.²

Rooted in analysis of texts rather than archaeology, Smith synthesizes secondary literature to describe ancient Israelite religion in terms of a Canaanite heritage. Though Smith is

¹ Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), xxxv.

² Steve A. Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah with Further Considerations of the Goddess* (Piscataway, NJ: Georgias Press, 2007), 19.

primarily concerned with Yahweh and the convergence and differentiation of Canaanite traits of divinity to create a monotheistic Israelite tradition, his discussion of Yahweh and Asherah provides insight into a primary question surrounding *asherah*: What is the nature of *asherah* in the Hebrew Bible?

Smith concludes that the references to *asherah* in the Hebrew Bible do not refer to a goddess. He finds that for the vast majority of instances where there are arguments about *asherah* referring to a goddess, there are several alternative explanations. Consequently, Smith considers the interpretation of *asherah* as goddess to be optimistic, and thus the question becomes, how and why did the Deuteronomistic tradition become so antagonistic toward the *asherah*? For Smith, this could be due to lingering associations between the cultic relic and Ugaritic Athirat or because of the relic's purported association with fertility ritual.³

Judith Hadley – *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*

Judith Hadley's *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah* provides a comprehensive analysis of the evidence relating to *asherah*, divided into sections on Athirat in the Ugaritic material, references to *asherah* in the Hebrew Bible, and archaeological finds, primarily those from Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet 'Ajrud. Hadley focuses on the analysis and criticism of past scholarship rather than forming one cohesive argument or hypothesis throughout the publication. The main setback for Hadley's work is that she does not return to the Ugaritic goddess after discussing the Israelite material to evaluate the role that Canaanite religion may have played in forming Israelite tradition.

³ Smith, *The Early History of God*, 125-32.

Hadley does, however, come to the conclusion that the *asherah* pole, which is represented in the Hebrew Bible, was developed after the goddess of the same name. She thinks that *asherah* was a term in transition – that what began as a reference to a deity over time came to refer to the cultic relic alone, perhaps at one time referring to a generic goddess or a relic used to worship the goddess Asherah exclusively. Using biblical evidence, she also posits that the relatively commonplace reverence of the relic was continuous up until the late first millennium BCE.⁴

When discussing the archaeological remains, Hadley is very thorough. She had firsthand access to the Khirbet el-Qom material and provides her own sketch of the inscription – one that has since been used by many other scholars.⁵ She evaluates several possible contexts in which the epigraphic remains could have been created, including critiquing the connections between certain lines of text and the drawings on Pithos A from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud.⁶

Steve A. Wiggins – *A Reassessment of Asherah*

Much like its predecessors, Steve Wiggins’ *A Reassessment of Asherah* explores the question of the nature of *asherah* through discussion of textual, epigraphic, and archaeological material, with consideration of past scholarship. Unlike many other scholars, Wiggins includes not only Ugaritic and Hebrew material, but incorporates evidence from Mesopotamian, Hittite, South

⁴ Judith M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 206-209.

⁵ See, for instance, Baruch Margalith (“Some Observations on the Inscription and Drawing from Khirbet el-Qom,” *Vetus Testamentum* 39 [1989]: 371-78), whose analysis of the inscription speculates about the possibility of a tree carved on the stone. This has been deemed unlikely by Hadley, who only included in her drawing scratches that interfered with the reading of the texts. See also Tilde Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit, Israel, and the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

⁶ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 121-24.

Arabian, Phoenician, and Aramaic sources, providing two chapters specifically on these subjects. Therein lies the strength of Wiggins' argument – by not isolating the discussion to Ugarit and Israel, it is more believable that large-scale cultural exchange could have occurred. Rather than a deity from the north simply appearing (based on our current evidence) in Israelite tradition at least half a millennium later, the goddess of Wiggins' speculation is a product of rampant cultural borrowing and interaction.⁷

The primary focus of Wiggins' work is the Ugaritic material, because he correctly believes the Ugaritic tablets to provide the most information on the goddess Athirat we currently possess. Wiggins' hypothesis is that the relevant goddesses represented by all of these cultures, including Athirat and Asherah, are regional adaptations of the same deity.⁸ He supports this hypothesis with textual, rather than archaeological, evidence. The breadth of his approach is the strength of Wiggins' analysis (as he specifically addresses materials that are excluded in most discussions of *asherah*), but it results in conclusions that are too broad for the extant historical and literary evidence.⁹

⁷ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 217-20.

⁹ This is one reason I have chosen to focus specifically on the Ugaritic literature. Casting a wide net in the search for similarities among Near Eastern deities may yield a plethora of possibilities, but most lack evidence to suggest a historically plausible link. This approach can lead to taking too lightly and generally any apparent connections. The Ugaritic corpus, an isolated example that revolutionized related studies, has fallen into this trap of convenience and is too often taken for granted as an example of such cultural exchange. This is the reason for the present study – to provide an in-depth look at the material responsible for these assumptions and assess the actual likelihood of these relationships.

Saul M. Olyan – *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel*

Olyan's *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel* argues that cultic practices involving the *asherah* were commonplace within Israelite society. Unlike some of his peers, Olyan stands firmly on the idea that the goddess Asherah was inseparable from the cultic relic. Furthermore, Olyan directly addresses whether Asherah had a relationship to Baal in Canaanite religion, as she seems to have in biblical literature,¹⁰ rejecting the idea that at some point her loyalty transferred from El to Baal. He then claims that the *asherah* of ancient Israel was not connected to Baal, assuming that Asherah/asherah-worship was an acceptable practice during the divided monarchy in contrast with illicit Baal worship.¹¹ The study goes on to discuss the author's stance that the "sacred tree" and other *asherah* imagery were inserted into the Hebrew Bible alongside Baal by the Deuteronomistic tradition in an attempt to purge Israelite society of Asherah.¹²

Following this, Olyan turns to epigraphic and material evidence for the goddess and her relic found at Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom. He believes that the pronominal suffix on "*asherah*" at inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud (more on this below) indicates that the inscriptions were not referring to the goddess Asherah, but a cultic implement. Yet, his aforementioned stance that the relic *asherah* and the goddess Asherah are inseparable means that even if the inscriptions refer to a cultic implement, they are symbolizing the goddess as well. By dint of this, Olyan is convinced that the *asherah* of the inscriptions is indicating the same *asherah* of 2 Kgs 13:6.

¹⁰ See, for instance, 2 Kgs 23:4, 2 Chr 33:3.

¹¹ I suggest that this is erroneous, not because I believe Asherah to be connected to Baal, but due to the conceivable scenario in which two factions vehemently opposed to the other's cult could have developed different conventions regarding Asherah and her relationships, especially if one is going on the assumption that she is the main mother-goddess in the parent tradition.

¹² Saul M. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 5-6.

The strength of Olyan's book lies in its attempt to address not only official and documented religion of the Israelites, but popular religion. He believes that the Asherah of the Hebrew Bible is a reflection of the goddess appearing in the inscriptions at Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom, the consort of Yahweh in Israelite religion, and that the biblical tendency to place her alongside Baal is an attempt to discredit her cult by the Deuteronomist. The Ugaritic corpus is largely used to argue this point by showing that in these texts she does not waiver in her relationship with El. This analysis suggests Olyan assumes some cultural continuity between Late Bronze Ugarit and Iron Age Israel.¹³ He does not, however, define key terms such as "Deuteronomistic" and "Canaanite," possibly assuming prior knowledge, without regard to the fact that the meaning and date of such terms is still debated and remains relevant for the identification of Asherah worship and the rise of any cultural prohibitions targeting related practices.¹⁴

Walter A. Maier – *Ašerah: Extrabiblical Evidence*

Walter Maier's *Ašerah: Extrabiblical Evidence* approaches the topic of Asherah primarily through the analysis of the Ugaritic material. Maier also looks at evidence from Phoenician and Syrian texts in an attempt to show that the Israelite Asherah, the Ugaritic Athirat, the Phoenician Rhea and Dione, and the Syrian Atargatis are all variations of the same deity across time and

¹³ Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 51.

¹⁴ The term "Deuteronomist" was coined by Martin Noth in 1943 in reference to the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Scholars have since argued over the number of redaction phases under the Deuteronomistic school and their date. "Canaanite" is sometimes used to refer to a unified culture and other times to a region of related groups with distinct cultural markers. Martin Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien: Die Sammelnden und Bearbeitenden Geschichtswerke im Alten Testament* (Schriften der Königsberger gelehrten Gesellschaft 18, 1943). For an overview of this and varying opinions, see Smith, *The Early History of God*, 19-32.

geographic space.¹⁵ He also associates the goddess “Qetesh” with Asherah, a connection which has been argued by many scholars in discussions of the Qudshu-Astarte-Anat Triple-Goddess stelae.¹⁶ However, Maier forgoes analysis of the latter two goddesses, Astarte and Anat.

One remarkable choice made by Maier is that he omits any discussion of the biblical text, which is curious given the wide variety of opinions on the subject. Perhaps ignoring the nature of the possible goddess-allusions in the Hebrew Bible assumes prior knowledge, or perhaps it serves his purpose of illustrating a universal goddess with regional differences. While Maier’s inclusive textual approach to the identity of Asherah provides a more comprehensive view than some of his colleagues, his eagerness to label any deity sharing a characteristic with Asherah as one of her incarnations is optimistic at best, falling to the same pitfalls of Wiggins’ analysis.

Ziony Zevit – The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches

Ziony Zevit’s *The Religions of Ancient Israel* effectively synthesizes primary and secondary texts on the subject of Israelite religion and expends considerable energy discussing Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom. He finds evidence for strong Phoenician presence at the former and suggests that it was primarily a place visited by individual travelers throughout the region; significant ritual activities occurred there as well.¹⁷ Zevit also challenges the well-established theory that the Israelites and their religion have descended from the Late Bronze Age Canaanites. He looks primarily at settlement patterns and material culture, such as ceramics, to arrive at this

¹⁵ Walter A. Maier, *Ašerah: Extrabiblical Evidence* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 60.

¹⁶ Maier, *Ašerah: Extrabiblical Evidence*, 78; cf. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 40; Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 228-33. Maier considers “Qudshu” to be an epithet of Athirat and synonymous with Qetesh.

¹⁷ Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 376-78.

conclusion, suggesting that the Israelites instead arrive as foreigners during the Iron I and have no ethnic relation to the earlier Canaanites.¹⁸ While this information is useful in considering geographical relationships between the groups, Zevit's own work neglects substantial consideration of Ugaritic texts and therefore offers no alternatives for the similarities between Israelite religion and the preexisting "Canaanite" cultural landscape.

Summary

The majority of sources discussed here, and indicative of the field as a whole, successfully analyze the biblical text. In general, I agree with the ideas of Hadley and Wiggins – that *asherah* in the Hebrew Bible refers most often to a cultic relic with lingering associations to a goddess (see my own analysis in Chapter 4). What I find to be problematic with most of these authors is the prevalent assumption that the Hebrew *asherah* is related to the Ugaritic Athirat, with little attempt to actually compare the characteristics between the two as presented in the relevant primary texts. Nor do most studies describe the mode of transmission through which Athirat could have found her way into Israelite religion across hundreds of miles and hundreds of years.

¹⁸ Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel*, 85, 116-21.

Chapter III: EVIDENCE IN THE UGARITIC TEXTS

Because the most abundant and oldest source of information we have regarding Athirat is the Ugaritic texts, it makes sense to use them as a starting point for discussion. Athirat plays a significant role in both the Keret Epic and the Baal Cycle and is referenced in passing or in fragmentary fashion in several other Ugaritic sources. Both the Keret Epic and the Baal Cycle are part of the corpus known as the Tablets of Elimelek, which were uncovered at Ras Shamra in 1929 in a building known as the Library of the High Priest, which featured typical domestic architecture for Late Bronze Age Ugarit. In addition to the tablets, the library contained 74 weapons and several bronze tools featuring inscriptions and was found among a strip of poorly preserved buildings between the city's two temples, the Temple of Baal and the Temple of Dagan (see Figure 2).¹⁹ These texts are unique, and the stories within are not attested elsewhere. This, combined with their provenience in this cultic area of the city and the likelihood of low literacy rates in Late Bronze Age Levant, renders the function of their contents uncertain. In other words, we cannot be sure whether these texts reflect popular religion/myth in Ugarit or rather an elite literary movement.

¹⁹ Marguerite Yon, *The City of Ugarit at Tell Ras Shamra* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 111.

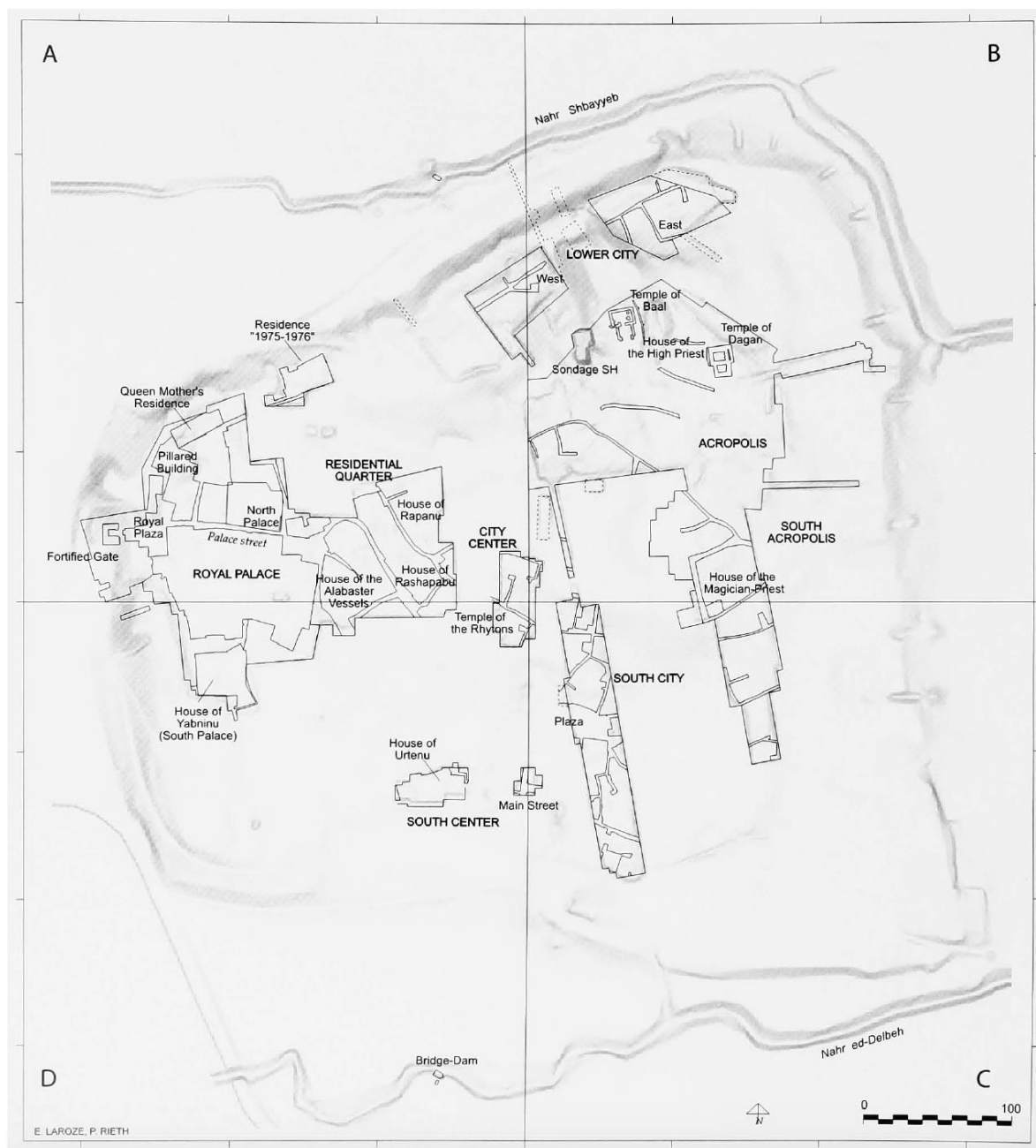


Figure 2: Excavated Areas at Ugarit, after E. Laroze and P. Rieth 2003 and Yon 2006 , 6

As we begin to explore the texts of the Elimelek tablets, it will be pertinent to remember Simon B. Parker's assertion that each text needs to be understood within its own genre.²⁰ Though there is debate among scholars regarding what constitutes specific genres within Ugaritic literature, it is clear that the nature of a given text has a significant impact on the role that characters play within the text. Thus, to make claims about the nature of a character based on their actions within a solitary text would be misguided. Rather a character's attributes are best determined by examining them across many texts where we can look for common traits and the way that claims within texts are understood by their audiences.

Athirat in the Keret Epic

Within the Keret Epic, Athirat's role is not readily apparent. Keret makes a brief visit to her sanctuary on his way into battle in order to make a bargain with her – that she will provide him with a wife in exchange for an offering of gold and silver. Athirat appears only once more in the narrative, when she realizes that Keret's vow has been broken. Most commonly, scholars have characterized the Keret Epic as a myth, albeit a much more grounded myth than the Baal Cycle. This latter point has left some scholars referring to the text as an epic, as I have done here. Wiggins asserts that when looking at the text closely, as we are now, the distinction becomes less significant; the text will speak for itself, as will the characters within it.²¹ For this reason, we will focus on Athirat's character in context and why she would have been understood as a proper choice for the function that she serves in Keret's narrative.

²⁰ Simon B. Parker, "Some Methodological Principles in Ugaritic Philology," *Maarav* 2.1 (1979): 7-41.

²¹ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 25.

The Keret Epic tells of the efforts of king Keret of Hubur, a “son of El,” who, through a series of unfortunate events, lost seven wives to disease, childbirth, and misfortune. This resulted in no heir to the throne. The story within the tablets describes his quest to find a solution to this problem, when he is granted a vision from El, who is upset with his lack of children. El instructs him to declare war on the king of Udum. If Keret goes to battle he will request the marriage of the daughter of the king who will bear him an heir. Thus, Keret gathers an army and sets off for battle.

Athirat’s first appearance in this cycle occurs when Keret and his army make a stop on their way to Udum at her sanctuary (CTA 1.14.IV.194-206). This place is described as “the sanctuary of ‘Athiratu of Tyre, at (the sanctuary of) the goddess of Sidon.”²² Here, Keret makes a vow to the goddess, offering gold and silver if Athirat will provide him with a wife. Wiggins has interpreted this passage as a literary message about obedience and the social implications of a dynasty’s end. Keret stops at the house of Athirat to make a “precautionary vow” without the instruction of El; and, later, when he does not fulfill his obligation to the goddess, she punishes him.²³ By approaching Athirat to ensure the success of his endeavors rather than giving his sole obedience to El, Keret makes a statement about the desperation of his predicament; and ultimately, when his acts result in the same predicament in which he began, a statement about obedience and submission to the gods.

Part of this reasoning is based on a redundancy that Wiggins and other scholars have observed. They have asserted that the vow was unnecessary because El had already instructed

²² Translations of the Ugaritic literature, unless otherwise noted, are courtesy of Dennis Pardee, “The Kirta Epic” and “The Ba’lu Myth,” *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, Vol. 1; Edited by William W. Hallo (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 241-72, 333-42.

²³ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 27.

Keret on how to gain an heir – a feat that presumes the acquisition of a wife.²⁴ This fact has been used to argue that the passages referring to Athirat originated later than the epic itself.²⁵ This is a compelling argument and is entirely within the realm of reason, but forgoes a rationale within the story itself -- the remembrance that Keret had lost seven wives before the epic begins. Though El grew angry and desired an heir to the throne, Keret had known loss and thus might not equate the acquisition of a wife and/or a child with their continued survival. The vow to Athirat would then function as a “hail Mary” to ensure the success of his endeavors.

Furthermore, as El’s own son, Keret would have every reason to doubt his favor in El’s eyes being that he had previously lost multiple wives and children without the interference of El. Making a vow to Athirat, then, is a way of ensuring that he will not be overlooked again – an assurance that if El lets him down he has an alternative (which he does not need to act on in the end and is thus forgotten, resulting in retaliation on the part of Athirat). This is not to negate the possibility of Athirat’s sanctuary being a later addition to the text. Rather, it is merely a suggestion that perhaps it is not as redundant as it seems at first glance, thus rendering such a discussion as an explanation for Athirat’s presence in the text moot. I would argue that, even if added after the composition of the original text, the role of Athirat functions to further the original obedience narrative rather than merely to explain Keret’s sudden illness and misfortune within the text.

Keret, in doubt of El, makes a promise to Athirat. This then becomes unnecessary when the promise of El is successful, reaffirming the power of El. Athirat’s retaliation against Keret still then serves the purpose of arguing for obedience – both by fulfilling one’s promises and by

²⁴ Ibid., 29; Parker, Simon B. Parker, “Historical Composition of KRT and the Cult of El,” *Zietschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 89/2 (1977): 164.

²⁵ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 29.

not doubting the vows made by others (more specifically, the gods). Relying on El was enough. This is not at the expense of the power of Athirat, but rather of the doubt towards El or the wavering allegiance to the gods in general. Following this explanation, the vision of El represents the will of the gods, while the vow to Athirat is a literary device representing any attempt to ascertain one's fate outside of the plan given by the gods and is thus not necessarily representative of the nature of Athirat as a deity. It would seem, then, that whether part of the original text or added later, this plotline furthers the intent of the original obedience narrative, and, as Parker suggests, Athirat's actions here are not indicative of her general nature.²⁶

Alternatively, it is possible that Athirat is tied to a particular region. We know that Keret has to travel vast distances to reach both the goddess and the kingdom of Udim.²⁷ If Athirat's domain were connected to the region where Keret is being called upon to travel, it is possible that the visit to Athirat's sanctuary was an attempt to ensure Keret's safety and victory in a far-off location. Though we do not know where the mythical kingdom of Udim is located, we do know that Athirat is connected to Tyre in CTA 1.14.IV.194-206, which could lend credence to an Athirat who plays a hand in the fate of travelers in this region and/or whose cult was more active in there. This, combined with a biblical verse that mentions the prophets of Asherah alongside Jezebel (1 Kgs 18:19), could add support to a goddess who was brought to northern Israel by way of Phoenician royalty rather than Ugarit.

Regardless of the role that Athirat is playing in this narrative, in order for the tale to be effective, it would have had to have been within the realm of belief for readers at Ugarit (who

²⁶ Simon B. Parker, "Historical Composition of KRT," 164. Parker argues for three historical sources for the text and assumes that the Athirat gloss is added to foreshadow Keret's later sickness.

²⁷ I reiterate here that in the Ba'al Epic (see below) the goddess must travel great distances to seek out El, who is supposedly her consort. This could be a plot device to establish the greatness and untouchable nature of El or it could be indicative of an Athirat of foreign lands.

were likely exclusively royal elites) to attribute some power to Athirat in the birth of kings.²⁸

This would explain why Elimelek chose Athirat to function as a literary device within this epic.

Thus, the takeaway of Athirat's character is not her role as punisher for breaking vows but rather as wet-nurse and bearer of gifts pertaining to birth, particularly royal births.

In K 1.15.III.25-?,²⁹ after Keret's children have been born, Athirat recalls the vow that Keret has made to her. The text, which is unfortunately fragmented, reads

*Then 'Atiratu thinks of his vow, the goddess [...].
She raises her voice and [cries out]:
O Kirta [...]
Or has repeated the vow [...] ?
I'll annul [...]*

Here, Pardee notes that the verb *annul* ('*apr. i...*') is equated with that used in Ps 89:34, which indicates the violation of a covenant. Wiggins translates the passage as saying "I will break," from the root *pwr*. Parker believes that here lies the reasoning for Athirat's insertion into the story. Assuming that the earlier passage was added to set up this latter one, the passage would have been added to explain the illness of Keret that immediately follows. This is supported by the fact that Athirat seems to have no bearing on the story after this, and the passage itself is apparently a break in the narrative.

Wiggins argues that the punishment of Keret by Athirat is not only his illness (which is then cured by El) but the cursing of Yassib later in the story – a more lasting punishment and an example of situational irony in which Keret no longer has an heir. Rather than simply punishing him for not holding up his end of the bargain by making him ill, she takes away what he was given – an heir. For Wiggins, this is supported by the suckling of the milk of Athirat by Yassib in

²⁸ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 30. Given the information provided in the preceding paragraph, this could be either an established trope in Ugaritic literature or one provided by the Keret Epic.

²⁹ The final line number for this section is uncertain as the text becomes unreadable.

KTU 1.15.II.26-28.³⁰ Thus, Parker's explanation of three sources is not necessary to reconcile the seemingly diverse events of the narrative, and, as previously stated, the presence of Athirat and her divine retribution play into the assumed intent of the original narrative.

I have argued here that Athirat's presence in the Epic of Keret is primarily to further the text's original message. Whether written at the date of composition of the text or added by a later redactor, Athirat serves as both a reason for the events and misfortunes later in the narrative and as the enactor of cosmic justice, arguing that humans should be obedient to the gods and not take their vows lightly. As for the nature of Athirat's actual character, it should be regarded as pertaining in some way to birth (in particular, royal births).

Athirat in the Baal Cycle

Athirat appears most frequently in Ugaritic literature within the Baal Cycle, particularly during Baal's request for a palace and after Baal's death when the search for a new monarch has begun. Within the Baal Cycle, she is primarily described in relation to El, her consort. Throughout the narrative, Athirat is seen acting as an intermediary between El and other deities. Since Athirat's role in the Baal Cycle is much more extensive and interwoven into the primary narrative than in the Keret Epic, providing a systematic overview of the passages in which she is mentioned will be the most effective avenue for exploring her role.

The first possible mention of Athirat in the Baal Cycle occurs in KTU 1.1.IV where there is a reference to the general term *ilt* for "Goddess."³¹ The text itself reads *šm.bny.yw.ilt*

³⁰ Ibid., 31.

³¹ The Baal Cycle is generally divided into three sections beginning with "Baal and Yam," followed by "Baal's Palace" and "Baal and Mot."

[]/wp' r.šm.ym [.wilt.w]. Johannes C. De Moor, who identifies the opening of the text as a complaint delivered to El from Athirat, translates the passage as "My son [shall not be called] by the name of Yawwu, o goddess/[but Yammu shall be his name!]"³² The remainder of the scene is apparently a ceremony for the naming of Yam. Given Athirat's role as mother-goddess, it makes sense that she would be present at such a ceremony.³³

Further, being that the title *ilt* is used to refer to Athirat in other instances and that Athirat is generally connected to the epithet *rbt atrt ym* (Lady Athirat of the Sea),³⁴ it is reasonable to think that she would play a role in the coronation of Yam himself.³⁵ In fact, some scholars' translations give her a more active role in this process. John Gibson, for example, reads the text "the name of my son is Yaw, O Elat [and]/so do you proclaim a (new) name for Yam."³⁶ Other scholars have posited translations that take the goddess out of the text completely. G.R. Driver, for instance translated *ilt* as simply "god,"³⁷ while Cyrus Gordon understands it to be a title attached to Yaw (thus, Yaw-El[at]).³⁸ These translations, however, have no evidence to

³² Johannes C. De Moor, *Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987), 25. De Moor also suggests that the "house of your lord" from line 6 refers to Baal, resulting in a different order for the texts from the standard interpretation, which understands it to be referring either to Yam (Gibson) or to be unsubstantial in its condition for affecting the order of the tablets (Wiggins). For discussion on variations of this translation, see Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 39.

³³ Such notions will play an important role in later discussions of Athirat's presence at divine proceedings.

³⁴ There remains still some discussion on whether *ym* in the goddess's epithet connects her to the sea or to the day. These concerns will be addressed below using evidence provided throughout the Baal Cycle.

³⁵ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 34.

³⁶ John Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, second edition (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 39.

³⁷ G.R. Driver, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1956), 75.

³⁸ Cyrus H. Gordon, *Poetic Legends and Myth from Ugarit* (American University of Beirut, 1977), 88.

substantiate them. Gordon's explanation in particular seems improbable being that Yam is represented as a male deity.

Athirat is mentioned more explicitly in KTU 1.3.I.15 at a banquet following a battle between Baal and Yam, in which Baal is victorious. The text, which is in relatively good condition reads *ks. qdš /l tp hnh.att. krpn /l t'n.atrt*. Containing an apparent parallel structure, the text is translated, "A cup of holiness (which) no woman could see, a carafe (which) Athirat might not regard."³⁹ The cup in question is referring to the vessel from which Baal is depicted as consuming an incredible amount of wine. Upon inspection, there are two primary observations to be gleaned concerning Athirat: (1) The goddess is being invoked parallel to the generic *att* (woman); and (2) the text is referencing some connection between female beings and the consumption of alcohol.

Regarding the parallelism used in lines 14 and 15, it seems curious that the author would choose to invoke a comparison between Athirat and mortal women. Athirat, being a mother-goddess and El's consort, does display more conventionally feminine traits than does Anat, such as the aforementioned role in birth narratives and a potential connection to laundry that will be discussed below. However, nowhere else in the Ugaritic corpus do we see Athirat directly invoked alongside *att*. Baruch Margalit has suggested that, in this context, *atrt* could be a stand-in for "woman,"⁴⁰ though again, there is no existing evidence to suggest that this is an understood literary device in Ugaritic literature.

Moving to the consumption of alcohol, the passage seems to suggest that there is something societally forbidden about women being present for the celebration and the drinking

³⁹ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 43.

⁴⁰ Baruch Margalit, "The Meaning and Significance of Asherah," *Vetus Testamentum* 40 (1990): 272-74.

of wine. Wiggins points out that the patriarchal society may well have excluded women from certain proceedings, but that exclusion from such a celebration does not make sense because both Athirat and Anat are present at the proceedings of Yam's arrival. He goes on to argue that an alternate correct translation of the text could read "indeed" rather than "not," an affirmation that *att* and *atrt* witnessed the indulgence.⁴¹ This would seem to make sense given the actual events described in the text and would align more strongly with comparable myths wherein women are described as being tavern keepers (See, for example, the Mesopotamian Ishtar in the Epic of Gilgamesh – a goddess who scholars have often compared with Athirat).⁴²

The next mention of Athirat occurs in a passage in 3.IV.48-52 – a section which has been badly damaged. Fortunately, parallel passages throughout the "Palace of Baal" section exist, and the text can be recreated. However, the speculative nature of these texts must be kept in mind. The parallel passages occur in KTU 1.3.V.3-4; 1.3.V.35-44; 1.4.I.4-18; and 1.4.IV.62-V.1. The passage, which seems to be a plea for a house for Baal, contains ambiguous grammar (the lack of the preposition *l*), rendering the speaker of the text unclear. De Moor translates the beginning as "The Bull Ilu, his father, groaned (and) cried out, Ilu the King who had created him,/Athiratu and her sons cried out, the Goddess and the troop of her kin."⁴³ Thus, it is a prayer from Baal. However, alternate translations leave the subject vague, and it is unclear if the gods are speaking themselves. Of note is the structure of the passage, which parallels Athirat with El, denoting her spot alongside him as mother of the gods.

⁴¹ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 43.

⁴² See, for example, Tadanori Yamashita, "The Goddess Asherah" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1964), 3-30; Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 156-57, 167-68.

⁴³ De Moor, *Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit*, 18.

The text in KTU 1.3.VI.9-11 mentions the “Fisherman of Athirat,” “Qodesh-wa-Amrur”⁴⁴ being called upon to send a message for Baal. The presence of a fisherman with allegiance to Athirat is significant as it supports the translations of Athirat’s epithet as “Lady Athirat of the Sea.” Also worthy of note is the fact that it is Baal utilizing Athirat’s fisherman, rather than employing his own messenger. If this is because the message is in response to a previous message Athirat had sent to Baal, the context has been lost (and this is the last part we have of Tablet 3), leaving ambiguity surrounding the role of the fisherman.

The following tablet picks up with the Fisherman of Athirat delivering a message to Baal’s usual messenger Kothar-wa-Khasis. The text features a request of Kothar-wa-Khasis to prepare a gift for Athirat (*rbt.atrt ym*) and refers to her as the “Bearer of the gods.” Kothar-wa-Khasis then prepares gifts for Athirat, including “a divine bowl whose handle (was shaped) as Amurru /appearing like the beasts of Yman/in which were wild oxen by myriads.”⁴⁵

When the gifts are delivered to Athirat, we find her again at the water, as she appears to be engaged in some sort of laundering activity. The text reads:

to the stone []
She grasped her spindle [in her hand,]
Her spindle whorl in her right hand.
Her garment of covering she let loose,
She carried her clothes into the sea,
Her two garments into the river.
She placed a cauldron on the fire,
A pot on top of the coals.
She fluttered her eyelids (at) Bull El the Compassionate
*She winked (at) the Creator of Creatures.*⁴⁶

⁴⁴ For a discussion on the significance of the name “Qodesh-wa-Amrur,” see A. L. Perlman, “Asherah and Astarte in the OT and Ugaritic Literatures” (PhD diss., University of California Berkeley, 1978), 83; Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 49.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 51-52.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 52-53.

Much debate exists among scholars over the exact nature of the activities being done by Athirat. Gibson and De Moor see it as some sort of chore by the sea, likely laundry (Gibson uses the phrase “woman’s work” – I do not believe that there is substantial textual or archaeological evidence to support the idea that laundry was exclusively the domain of women in Ugarit).⁴⁷ Other scholars have attempted to read the text euphemistically, citing Athirat’s fluttering eyelids and the parallels with KTU 1.23, which contains more explicit references to sexual activity by El.⁴⁸

While I find the similarities with KTU 1.23 to be compelling, it seems unlikely that they, in themselves, are meant to convey sexual acts, especially being that KTU 1.23 is not part of the tablets of Elimelek. Rather, it seems likely that the passage itself refers only to laundering activity, with the assumed flirtatious behavior at the end meant only to *invoke* sensuality associated with this trope in Ugarit. It is also possible that the line reading “Her garment of covering she let loose” indicates that the goddess was either partially or fully nude upon approaching the river to do her chore. Were this the case, the behavior within the passage may be better contextualized. Regardless, the takeaway from this passage should be further associations of Athirat with domestic chores such as laundry.

KTU 1.4.II.12-21 describes Athirat’s reaction to being approached by Baal in great detail, including the stamping of her feet, breaking out in sweat, convulsing to the point of weakness, and crying out. Some scholars have interpreted this as a fear response.⁴⁹ If this is the case, then the plethora of gifts prepared for Athirat would make sense as a way to appease her. Wiggins

⁴⁷ Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, 10; De Moor, *Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit*, 48.

⁴⁸ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 53-54.

⁴⁹ A. Caquot, M. Sznycer, and A. Herdner, *Textes Ougaritiques* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1974), 197-98.

asserts that this response of fear or anger (and the necessary gifts) is not necessarily characteristic of Athirat but is rather an established trope in the Ugaritic text; he cites similar examples featuring Aqhat and Keret in KTU 19.II.45-49 and KTU 14.II.52-53, respectively.⁵⁰

The following passage, KTU 1.4.II.29-36, reads:

*Moreover to her squire indeed [she called]
 'see the cunning work, moreso[]
 O Fisherman of Lady Athir[at of the Sea]
 Take a net in your hand[]
 A great one upon both hands[]
 Into the beloved of El, Ya[m]
 Into the divine Yam, who[]
 The divine [r]uler of the s[ea]*

The remaining texts in this column have not survived and thus the context of this conversation is ambiguous. De Moor interprets this as indicating the beginning of the fishing season.⁵¹ Gibson and Wiggins interpret the scenario as a continuation of the threat of Yam, with Athirat's power over the sea making her the natural choice with which to negotiate in order to combat him (and restrain him with the fisherman's net).⁵²

The next passage that clearly mentions Athirat is KTU 1.4.III.23-36. The passage features Baal and Anat approaching Athirat and requesting something of her. Athirat inquires as to why they would approach her rather than El, whose permission they would need, to which Anat responds that they will go to him after their dealings with her. Previously, Anat had attempted to negotiate with El and was not successful. Thus, what may be gleaned from this passage is that in order to successfully petition El, favor must first be gained in the eyes of Athirat. Though the

⁵⁰ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 58.

⁵¹ De Moor, *Seasonal Pattern in the Ugaritic Myth of Ba'lu According to the Version of Ilimilku* (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1971), 144; De Moor, *Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit*, 48.

⁵² John Gibson, "Theology of the Baal Cycle," *Orientalia* 53 (1984): 215-16; Wiggins, *A Reassessment*, 61.

next segment of the text is unreadable, KTU 1.4.IV.1-19 picks back up with Athirat travelling upon her beasts of burden prepared by Qodesh-wa-Amrur to make an appeal to El on behalf of Baal, meaning that the gifts and negotiation with Athirat must have been fruitful. Her journey is apparently a long one, which has caused much dispute among scholars who call the supposed marriage of El and Athirat into question. However, Wiggins (and I agree with this sentiment) suggests that this does not necessarily indicate anything about the actual nature of Athirat or her relationship with El. Rather, it highlights the holiness of El.⁵³

When Athirat arrives at the dwelling of El (“the tent of El”), he is amused, and with laughter, shouts,

*Why has Lady Athirat of the Sea arrived?
 Why has the Bearer of the G[ods] come?
 Are you indeed hungry and journey [worn?]
 Or are you indeed thirsty and weary?
 Eat, indeed, drink!
 Ea[t] food from the tables!
 Drink wine from carafes!⁵⁴
 From a cup of gold the blood of trees,
 or does the hand of El the King tempt you?
 The love of the Bull arouse you?*

When Athirat tells him of Baal’s desire for a house, El’s reaction is ambiguous, as he responds, “so, a servant am I, a lackey of Athirat?” This response seems full of irritation or an otherwise displeased emotion, and yet he immediately declares that a house for Baal should be constructed. Again, though the circumstances surrounding the request and relationship between Athirat and El are uncertain, it is clear that going to Athirat in order to persuade El was the right decision.

Within the next section of the Baal Cycle (“Baal and Mot”), Athirat is mentioned only in the sixth text. After the death of Baal, in KTU 1.6.I.39-55, Anat suggests that Athirat offer up a

⁵³ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 70.

⁵⁴ This line seems to contradict the possibility mentioned in Wiggins (above) that Athirat was not permitted to partake in drink at ritual gatherings.

new son as his successor. Interestingly, Anat suggests that “Athirat and her sons will rejoice” at the death of Baal. This seems odd at first, but the inclusion of “and her sons” suggests that the passage foregoes mourning and instead focuses on the excitement of choosing a new king.⁵⁵ Though Athirat apparently has the authority to suggest the successor to Baal, she is not without obstacles, as El rejects her suggestion of he “who knows (and is) intelligent.”

The final mention of Athirat in the Baal Cycle comes with the return of Baal in KTU 1.6.V.1-6, in which he apparently seizes the sons of Athirat. What he does with them is uncertain, as some translations render the following line “the big ones he will slay” while others read it as “the big *one* he will slay.”⁵⁶ Regardless, the reason that Baal kills Athirat’s son(s) is unclear, and necessitates revisiting earlier passages. The passage makes KTU 1.6.I.39-55 seem more sinister when Athirat and her sons should “rejoice” at the death of Baal. If for some reason Athirat had a feud with Baal, then his death would mean presumed safety for Athirat’s sons. This explanation would also contextualize Athirat’s earlier fear response when being approached by Anat and Baal at the river, and why they needed to offer her gifts in order to make her amenable to their requests.

Thus, Athirat of the Baal Cycle reaffirms many of the same characteristics of the goddess that we examined in the Keret Cycle. Most significantly, she is described here as the mother of the gods, possessing seventy sons from whom she has the power to appoint a successor to the kingship after the death of Baal. It is also in these tablets where we find her now-commonly-associated epithet *rbt atrt ym*, which, in combination with her “fisherman” messenger and apparent connection with water, seems to give her some connection to the sea, most likely

⁵⁵ For more on this, see Walter A. Maier, *Ašerah: Extrabiblical Evidence*, 36.

⁵⁶ De Moor (*ARTU*, 94) and Wiggins (*A Reassessment of Asherah*, 79) translate the victim in the plural, while Gordon (*Poetic Legends and Myths from Ugarit*, 79) translates it in the singular, making it uncertain who is smote.

translating to “Lady Athirat of the Sea.” While these tablets have been useful in illustrating an official character for Athirat, their mythological nature and probable elite status do little to provide evidence for her actual worship in the city of Ugarit.

Ritual Texts Mentioning Athirat

While the information gleaned about Athirat from the mythological texts of the tablets of Elimelek is useful for gaining a picture of Athirat’s relationships and “official” (for lack of a better term) characteristics, we must bear in mind that they were written by an elite scribe and do not necessarily reflect the realities of Ugaritic cultic practices. For this reason, examining fragmentary and ritual texts from Ugarit that mention Athirat is necessary in order to gain an accurate picture of how widespread worship of the goddess was. Ultimately, this may have some bearing on the mode and extent of transmission of Ugaritic religious practice to Israel across space and time. However, the texts we have at our disposal were also found in the Library of the High Priest,⁵⁷ meaning that we are yet again left with no evidence whatsoever that Athirat was worshipped outside of the elite literate class at Ugarit.

Athirat is mentioned in KTU 1.39, an offering list where her name appears in the sixth line. The order of the deities in this text is El (in the first two lines), Tkmn-and-Šnm, Resheph, Baal, Athirat, Tkmn-and-Šnm again, Anat, and Resheph, the family of El, and the assembly of Baal. While this list does in fact provide us with evidence of actual Athirat-worship, the fact that Tkmn-and-Šnm, a minor deity (or double-god) is mentioned twice in the first six lines while major deities such as Athirat and Anat are only mentioned once means that either this offering-

⁵⁷ Dennis Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 78. All translations used in this section are courtesy of Pardee, unless otherwise noted.

list is meant for a specific context and we cannot use it to make broad claims about ritual life in Ugarit, or alternatively that ritual life in Ugarit was significantly different from what is presented in the official mythologies.

A similar case comes in KTU 1.41, which is fragmentary but seems to have a sister passage in KTU 1.87 from which it has been partially restored. Athirat is mentioned twice in KTU 1.41 (and possibly a third lost time based on KTU 1.87). Her first mention, in the fifteenth line, parallels the aforementioned list of deities in KTU 1.39. Her next mention comes in line 35, which is badly damaged and is often left unrestored. De Moor has proposed the translation, “a ram for Ba’lu of Ugarit/a ram for Il’ibu/ ...[] for Ilu/a ram for Athiratu/and two birds for Ri’thu.”⁵⁸ The final mention of Athirat in KTU 1.41 comes in line 40. De Moor reads this line as “[] for Athiratu, two birds for the Most Amiable of the gods.”⁵⁹ It is uncertain whether the qualifier “Most Amiable of the gods” applies to Athirat or another understood deity, and the surrounding lines do not contain a similar structure of a deity name followed by an epithet and thus provide no further evidence.

Another text that refers to Athirat comes with much controversy. KTU 1.46 contains a line (8) that features Baal and Athirat receiving a joint offering. Early interpretations of the text attempted to use this as evidence for a relationship between Athirat and Baal (which has been a common problem likely tied to the desire to explain the presence of *asherah* alongside the *baal* in the Hebrew Bible).⁶⁰ However, we must not be tempted to follow these explanations, as the presence of one deity alongside another in an offering list has no inherent mythological implication. Rather, it could indicate an offering occurring on a particular day on which worship

⁵⁸ De Moor, *Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit*, 163.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ See A. Kapelrud, *Baal in the Ras Shamra Texts* (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad, 1952), 77; Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 41-42, 47.

of both deities happened to coincide, personal interest tied to the deities' attributes, or "personal piety."⁶¹

A final offering-list that mentions Athirat is KTU 1.112. Line 24 features Athirat as the recipient of two sheep. In this text, El, Baal Zephon, and the Baal of Ugarit all receive only one sheep. As with the conversation on KTU 1.46, we cannot assume that this says anything about the nature of Athirat, such as being viewed as superior in Ugarit, especially only being featured on one known tablet. The most we can say is that she is held in high esteem at some point by someone.

In addition to offering lists, a relevant deity list has been found. Interestingly, RS 20.24 contains both Ugaritic and Akkadian forms of the names. As a result, in line 19, we see Athirat paralleled with the Akkadian Ašratum. There does not appear to be any known ranking in the order of the names included.

Conclusions

This chapter has covered the references to Athirat within the Ugaritic corpus. Though not an exhaustive list, I have attempted to highlight sections that add to an overall picture of Athirat's character. As mentioned above, it is important to remember the role that genre plays in interpreting character, role, and function within the text, and we must avoid the temptation to connect each of Athirat's actions with sweeping generalizations about her attributes. Rather, we must contextualize her presence within the mythological texts and only attempt conjecture after proper cross-analysis of the Ugaritic texts. For this reason, I have attempted to showcase the (unfortunately sparse) breadth of texts mentioning Athirat at Ugarit, from the tablets of Elimelek

⁶¹ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 101.

to fragmentary and ritual references that may point more towards her actual role in Ugaritic religion.

From the tablets of Elimelek (which are royal texts consumed most likely by the elite at Ugarit), we can glean three main things about Athirat. First, her primary function is as Bearer of the Gods. She is consistently described in her role as “mother-goddess,” in situations both where it is directly relevant and where it seems to function as a title. Though she also seems to play a role in royal births such as in the Keret Cycle, there seems to be no evidence for her modern association with more generalized fertility cults. Her maternal role is restricted to the gods and human royalty (though in the latter case, rather than be directly involved, it seems that her will must be in favor of royal child bearing).⁶²

The second thing that can be gleaned about Athirat from the tablets of Elimelek is her connection to the sea. Her epithet *rbt atrt ym* seems most likely to translate as Lady Athirat of the Sea. She plays a significant role (compared to her presence in other mythological texts) in the struggle against Yam, she often appears near the water, and her main messenger appears in the form of a fisherman to do her bidding. These factors lead to a likely association between the goddess and the Sea. Though we cannot be certain about this epithet, *rbt atrt ym* is an important and consistent name for Athirat, and it is worth noting that a connection to the sea (and even of the alternate translation “day”) is absent in the Hebrew texts that have been used to connect *asherah* to Athirat, as we shall see below.

Third, Athirat can be characterized by her relationship to El, her consort. As we shall see below, modern scholars have attempted to connect *asherah* to sexuality, but as we have shown above, the only instances of Athirat engaging in flirtatious or sensual behavior is ambiguous at

⁶² This also serves the function of validating those in power by creating a direct link between royalty and divinity.

best and specifically targeted towards El. Further, as illustrated in the Baal Cycle, Athirat is the mode through which Baal and Anat must persuade El to construct a house for Baal. It is only upon acquiring Athirat's approval that they can achieve their goal. This, combined with the ambiguous language surrounding Athirat's response to Baal's death, is significant and should be kept in mind when considering the texts of the Hebrew Bible, which have caused a lot of speculation by modern readers in an attempt to connect Athirat and Baal.

The references to Athirat outside these elite sources do not add much to the discussion of Athirat's specific attributes as they are mostly comprised of fragmentary and ritual lists, which must be understood in their own context. However, they do reveal that Athirat was actively being worshipped in Ugarit. Unfortunately, these tablets, which were found in the same area as the Tablets of Elimelek at Ras Shamra do not provide enough archaeological context to say whether these lists are representative of popular religion in Ugarit or if she was a goddess worshipped exclusively by the elite.⁶³ In addition to this, KTU 1.23 features Athirat suckling mythological creatures, which does support her maternal aspect in the popular religion of Ugarit. This, combined with parallelisms between Athirat and human women in the tablets of Elimelek, may reveal that she was viewed as a model for human women (including domestic activities, such as laundering her clothes.) With these attributes of Athirat in mind, we can continue our discussion with epigraphic remains that mention *asherah* in Israel.

⁶³ This would make sense if, as mentioned above, she was more prominent near Tyre than in Ugarit and appears in Ugaritic texts to serve a specific role in ritual and myth.

Chapter IV: EVIDENCE FOR ASHERAH IN THE FIRST MILLENNIUM

Inscriptions concerning *asherah*, much like the literary references, are never quite clear about the meaning of the term. Finds from two sites in the southern Levant, Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, mention *asherah* alongside Yahweh, but they could be interpreted as either “Yahweh and also his Asherah (the goddess)” or *asherah* as an object used in prayer to Yahweh. To further complicate matters, preservation of the materials has not been ideal. Some are fragmentary and others contain several stray markings and cracks. However, much scholarship has attempted to interpret the inscriptions and illustrations. While scholars have argued that many of the finds from these sites had a religious function, this chapter will focus on the most prominent finds concerning *asherah* in particular.⁶⁴

Inscription at Khirbet el-Qom

Khirbet el-Qom is an archaeological site located in the Shephelah directly to the west of Hebron (see Figure 1). Illegally excavated from a pillar in a burial cave, the third inscription found at the site of Khirbet el-Qom is on a fragmented stone that is 36 cm wide and 30 cm high. Reading this inscription is problematic due to naturally-occurring cracks that pre-date the inscription. In addition to these cracks, portions of the stone feature very heavy markings that are difficult to distinguish from the cracks in the stone. Dever, who did the initial studies of the inscription, has

⁶⁴ For details on other finds and more detail on the finds discussed in this section, see Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah* and William G. Dever, “Iron Age Epigraphic Material from the Area of Khirbet el-Kom,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 40 (1970): 139-204. Hadley provides an overview of varying opinions on the data, while Dever presents his own opinions, which are not heavily supported but do feature an in-depth look at the artifacts.

posited that the inscription and markings on the stone may be graffiti done with a sharp stick rather than an official inscription.⁶⁵ At some point, someone traced over the inscription, leaving “ghost images” on the stone. These markings further complicate the reading of the inscription (see Figure 3).⁶⁶ Based on paleographic evidence, the inscription dates to about 750 BCE.⁶⁷ It features a drawing of what appears to be a right human hand facing downward and contains four main lines of text, as well as two lines in the bottom corner of the stone. It is uncertain whether the sets of text were written by the first person. The bottom portion may be written by a later author, and even the last line from the top portion of text is debatable.

As stated, the text is difficult to decipher. The most obvious letters read ‘*ryhwh?šrktbh / ?rk?ryhw?ywh / w???ryhl?šrt???š’lh / l?yhw / lšrth / wl??rth*.⁶⁸ There are no clear dividers between words in the inscription, and there are various opinions on where the dividers should be, resulting in various interpretations of the text. Ziony Zevit, for example, does not believe that there are any dividers to be found in the inscription.⁶⁹ Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger identify two word dividers each in lines one and two and one in line three,⁷⁰ and André Lemaire has posited that there may perhaps be an additional divider in line three.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Dever, “Iron Age Epigraphic Material,” 62.

⁶⁶ Hadley, “The Khirbet el-Qom Inscription,” 52.

⁶⁷ André. Lemaire, “Les inscriptions de Khirbet el-Qom et l’Asherah de YHWH,” *Revue Biblique* 84 (1977): 603.

⁶⁸ Binger, *Asherah*, 92. In this study, unless otherwise noted, the “/” will be used to distinguish lines of texts, and the “?” will be used where the inscription is uncertain.

⁶⁹ Ziony Zevit, “The Khirbet el-Qom Inscription Mentioning a Goddess,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 255 (1984): 39-47.

⁷⁰ Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 34.

⁷¹ Lemaire, “Les inscriptions de Khirbet el-Qom,” 598.

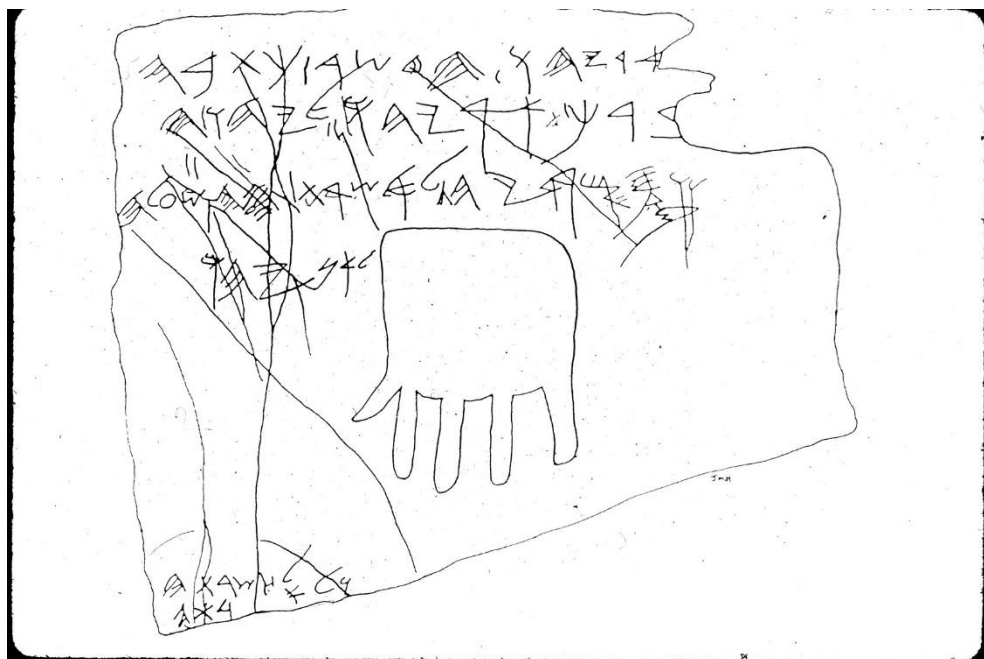


Figure 3: Qhirbet el-Qom inscription, after Judith Hadley, "The Khirbet el-Qom Inscription," *Vetus Testamentum*, 37/1 (1987), 52.

Beyond the difficulty in deciphering separate words, there is a discrepancy in the identification of individual letters, resulting in various translations of the inscription. Hadley and Davies transcribe the inscription as 'ryhw.h'šr.ktbh / brk. 'ryhw.lyhwh / wmsryh l'šrth hws'lh / l'nyhw / l'šrth / wl'??rth.⁷² Hadley translates the inscription as "Uriyahu the Rich wrote it. / Blessed be Uriyahu by Yahweh/for from his enemies by his *asherah* he has saved him/by Oniyahu/by his *asherah*/and by his a[*she*]rah."⁷³ Based on finds at Tell Arad, Uriyahu was a common Hebrew name.⁷⁴ However, O'Conner has questioned if the *ktb* of the first line could indicate a heading, thus making the inscription read "Uriah the prosperous: his message."⁷⁵

⁷² Philip R. Davies, *In Search of Ancient Israel* (New York: Continuum, 1991), 106

⁷³ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 86. For more detailed descriptions and various interpretations of the inscription see Zevit, "The Khirbet el-Qom Inscriptions;" Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*; Davies, *In Search of Ancient Israel*; and Dever, "Iron Age Epigraphic Material."

⁷⁴ Davies, *In Search of Ancient Israel*, 106.

⁷⁵ M. O'Conner, "The Poetic Inscription from Khirbet el-Qom," *Vetus Testamentum* 37 (1987): 224-30.

Other lines are also interpreted in a variety of ways. An alternate translation of line two is based on a supposed faint *taw* after the *brk*. This *brkt* would translate as “I blessed,” which Zevit believes would indicate that Abiyahu (Zevit’s alternative translation of Oniyahu) is praying on behalf of Uriyahu,⁷⁶ which Hadley asserts would be consistent with the evidence at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud.⁷⁷ In Zevit’s interpretation, Abiyahu/Oniyahu would likely be responsible for the inscription. Another interesting thing about the second line of text is the lack of geographical name in reference to Yahweh. Keel and Uehlinger have suggested that this absence could be due to the date of the inscription after the fall of Samaria – meaning that Yahweh was no longer a god of several different states.⁷⁸ This idea will be supported, as we will see, by the findings at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud.

Line three (the line that possibly mentions *asherah*) is the most difficult to read and interpret. Dever translated this line as “and cursed shall be the hand of whoever (defaces it),” although he admitted that this was a problematic interpretation and has since advocated for other translations.⁷⁹ Spronk’s transliteration of line three is as follows: *wmmšr dyh hl’ lšrth hwš’ lh*, which he translates as “and from the distress as much as comes to him over there may He deliver them, Uriyahu, because of his service.”⁸⁰ This translation leaves out mention of *asherah* completely and is doubled in length when compared to other common translations, but works well with the purported ghost letters.

It is uncertain whether the fifth and sixth lines are part of the same inscription or separate from the original four lines of text. It is likely that much of this part of the inscription is missing,

⁷⁶ Zevit, “The Khirbet el-Qom Inscription,” 43

⁷⁷ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 89.

⁷⁸ Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 271-72.

⁷⁹ Dever, “Iron Age Epigraphic Material,” 161.

⁸⁰ K. Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (AOAT 219; Kevelar and Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1986), 308.

probably chipped away when the inscription was being removed from the pillar. Without the rest of the stone, it is difficult to ascertain the nature of these lines of text. Margalith has asserted that the fifth line could be a correction to a dedication of Yahweh beginning in the sixth line, most of which would be missing due to the fragmented nature of the stone. Margalith has also suggested the possibility of extra scratches on the stone being a simple sketch of a tree, interpreting the two lower lines of text as a dedication to Yahweh at the base of the tree illustration.⁸¹ Hadley believes that this idea is unlikely due partially to the fact that Margalith's hypothesis is based on drawings of the stone done by Hadley, which only include scratches that interfere with the reading of the lines of text. These other scratches have no interpretation in this context, and thus Hadley believes the vague appearance of a tree to be merely a coincidence.⁸²

Regarding the nature of *asherah* in this description, Zevit discusses the possibility of the term being used to refer to a cultic object. If *asherah* is referring to the cultic object, the interpretation "by his *asherah*" could mean that the dedication is to Yahweh via the *asherah*. In other words, *asherah* is being used as a means of prayer to Yahweh, possibly through the use of the *asherah* at the altar.⁸³ Furthering this idea, it has often been assumed that in this inscription, *asherah* refers to the object rather than the goddess as "the pronominal suffix is not attested on personal names in Hebrew."⁸⁴ Some scholars have asserted that while this is not the case in Hebrew, Ugaritic does allow for the pronominal suffix on personal names and thus, based on the possible relation between an Israelite Asherah and an Athirat of Ugaritic tradition, this could be

⁸¹ Margalith "Some Observations on the Inscription and Drawing from Khirbet el-Qom," 371-78.

⁸² Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 102.

⁸³ Zevit, "The Khirbet el-Qom Inscription," 46.

⁸⁴ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 104.

an example of a borrowed word in Hebrew.⁸⁵ However, it must be noted that there are no other examples of this occurring.

Inscriptions at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud

The site of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud is found atop a hill on the Sinai Peninsula, roughly 50 kilometers to the south of the archaeological site Kadesh-barnea (see Figure 1). Kuntillet ‘Ajrud dates to the late Iron Age II, based on Carbon-14 dating of wood at the site⁸⁶ and the relative dating of pottery found on-site.⁸⁷ Most likely, we can say that it was inhabited in the eighth century and abandoned by 750 B.C.E.⁸⁸ Meshel believes that, due to the geography of the site (conveniently located at the cross roads of several common routes between cities), and the presence of Phoenician inscriptions, the site could have been a religious sanctuary for Phoenician merchants and travelers, or alternatively a place of pilgrimage.⁸⁹ The traveler theory is supported by the fact that none of the pottery at the site was crafted locally,⁹⁰ with most vessels being Judean or else

⁸⁵ Manfred Dietrich and Oswald Loretz, *‘Jahwe und seine Aschera’: Anthropomorphes Kultbild in Mesopotamien, Ugarit und Israel* (Ugaritisch Biblische Literatur 9; Munster: Ugarit Verlag, 1992), 42.

⁸⁶ D. Segal, “C-14 Dates from Horvat Teiman (Kuntillet ‘Ajrud) and their Archaeological Correlation,” *Tel Aviv* 22 (1995): 208-12.

⁸⁷ E. Ayalon, “The Iron Age II Pottery Assemblage from Horvat Teiman (Kuntillet ‘Ajrud) Pottery,” *Tel Aviv* 22 (1995): 141-205.

⁸⁸ Israel Finkelstein, “Notes on the Historical Setting of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud,” *Maarav* 20/1(2013): 15-16.

⁸⁹ Z. Meshel, *Kuntillet ‘Ajrud: A Religious Centre from the Time of the Judaean Monarchy on the Border of Sinai* (Jerusalem: IMC, 1978), throughout; Herbert Niehr, “Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and the Networks of Phoenician Trade,” *Maarav* 20/1 (2013), 38. Niehr hypothesizes that the Phoenician presence at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud was the predecessor to the Phoenician traders in Ezekiel 27, which mentions them in connection with Dedan (which, as mentioned below, is referenced in Jeremiah in connection to Teman). Phoenician interaction with Israelite communities may have played a role in the shaping of the Israelite Asherah.

⁹⁰ J. Gunneweg, I. Perlman, and Z. Meshel, “The Origins of the Pottery of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 35 (1985): 270-83.

Israelite or Phoenician.⁹¹ However, the architecture found at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud seems more akin to a small fortress rather than a religious structure.⁹² Na’aman has suggested that perhaps this location was identified by travelers in the region as the “Mountain of God,” and established the structure in order to mark it (though the placement of the structure on top of the hill rather than at the base is unconventional and, Na’aman notes, could have been viewed as forsaking the sanctity of the site).⁹³

Kuntillet ‘Ajrud contains several inscriptions relating to deities including mentions of Yahweh, Ba’al, El, and Asherah. According to Meshel, these inscriptions seem to be ritual-related and were probably once located on the walls and doors of the structure. The site has been identified by some as religious due to the fact that the inscriptions are ritual in nature and they appear to have fallen from doorways, which is in accordance with the biblical command of writing blessings on doorframes (Deut. 6:9, 11:20). This is an intriguing thought but seems entirely based on speculation rather than archaeological context, and as such, I will not base my arguments on this hypothesis. The two main inscriptions mentioning the word *asherah* (on Pithoi A and B) are most likely to be official inscriptions, rather than graffiti, possibly playing a similar role as inscriptions in Egyptian tradition wherein the text and iconography were responsible for “ritually activating divine power.”⁹⁴

⁹¹ Nadav Na’aman, “The Inscriptions of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud Through the Lens of Historical Research,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 43 (2011): 300.

⁹² Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 109-110.

⁹³ Na’aman, “The Inscriptions of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud Through the Lens of Historical Research,” 316. Na’aman also puts forth the idea of the site commemorating the existence and location of a fantastic tree, citing biblical associations with trees, particularly in relation to the iconography of a goddess Asherah.

⁹⁴ Brian B. Schmidt, “Kuntillet ‘Ajrud’s Pithoi Inscriptions and Drawings: Graffiti or Scribal Artisan Drafts?” *MAARAV* 20/1 (2013): 56. Schmidt cites characteristics such as the lack of personal elements, the combination of text and image, and the location, to suggest that the likelihood of the inscriptions at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud being graffiti is low.

Because inscriptions at the site refer to “Yahweh of Samaria,” and because Israel controlled trade in the region during the early eighth century, the site has often been linked to the Northern Kingdom, and specifically the monarch Jeroboam II.⁹⁵ However, there are also inscriptions from the site that mention “Yahweh of Teman.” In the biblical texts, Teman appears in the context of both Edom and Dedan, and the first part of Jer 3:3 reads, “God came from Teman.”⁹⁶ This tells us that the site predates the concept of Yahweh as a universal deity (and strengthens Na’aman’s theory that travelers established the site in honor of the home of Yahweh). Given the timing and the aforementioned associations, most probably the site was an Israelite outpost positioned in order gain control over the Arabian trade network.⁹⁷

While many inscriptions have been found at the site of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, only the ones relating to *asherah* will be discussed in depth here. The first inscription relating to *asherah* was found upon a pithos (designated A), which was discovered in the bench room (Figure 3).⁹⁸ The inscriptions reads *’mr ... h ... k. ’mr. lyhl [l’l] wlyw ’šh. w ... brkt. ’tkm. lyhwh. šmrn. wl’šrth*, which Hadley translates as “‘? says: say to Yehal[l’el] and to Yo’asah and ?: I bless you by Yahweh of Samaria and by his *asherah*.”⁹⁹ Again, this inscription seems to indicate an object rather than the goddess, with *asherah* being a means of blessing. Lemaire, among other scholars, believes *asherah* in this instance to be referring to a sanctuary (possibly a word loaned from

⁹⁵ Nadav Na’aman, “A New Outlook at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud,” *Maarav* 20/1 (2013): 50.

⁹⁶ Finkelstein, “Historical Setting of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud,” 15-17. Finkelstein goes into more detail about how the Northern Kingdom may have become involved in the region before addressing the function of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud.

⁹⁷ Na’aman, “A New Outlook at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud,” 50.

⁹⁸ Brian B. Schmidt, “Kuntillet ‘Ajrud’s Pithoi Inscriptions and Drawings,” 54.

⁹⁹ Ibid. Note the use of a geographical name in relation to Yahweh that was absent in the inscription at Khirbet el Qom.

Phoenician, as most inscriptions found at the site are of Phoenician origin).¹⁰⁰ Olyan believes that this *asherah* could be referring to the same *asherah* mentioned in II Kings, which indicated that the “*asherah* remained in Samaria.”¹⁰¹ Obviously this cannot be proven, but it is interesting to note the correlation.

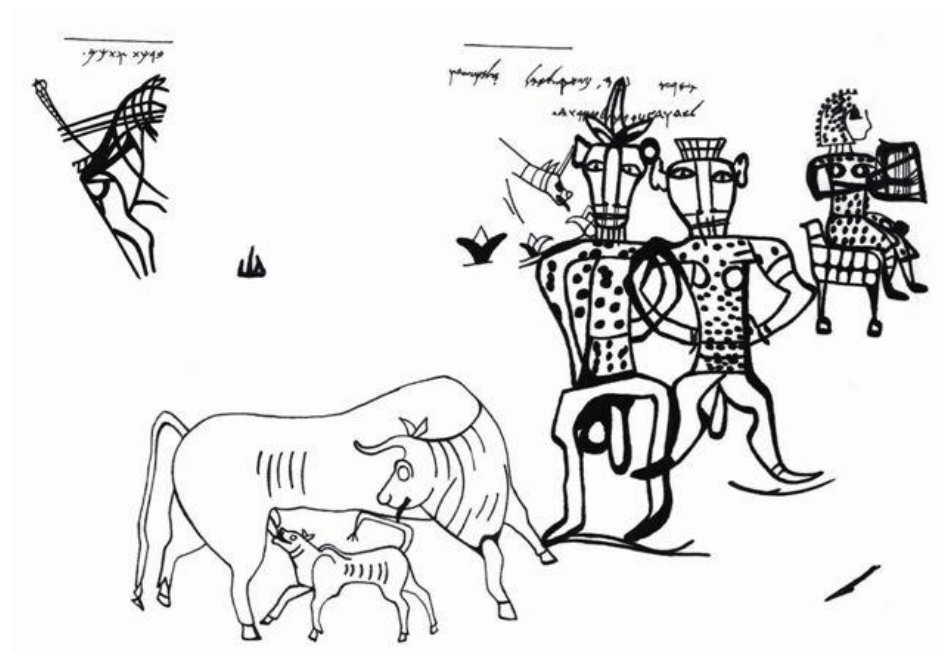


Figure 4: Pithos A, Kuntillet 'Ajrud, Israel. after Keel and Uelinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God*, 213

Beneath this inscription on Pithos A, there is an illustration of what appears to be three figures (see Figure 4).¹⁰² Two of these figures are standing and one appears to be seated, playing the lute. There is also an illustration of what appears to be a cow or calf. There have been several

¹⁰⁰ André Lemaire, “Déesses et dieux Syrie-Palestine d’après les inscriptions (c. 1000-500 av. n.é.),” in *Ein Gott allein?: JHWH-Verehrung und biblischer Monotheismus im Kontext der israelitischen und altorientalischen Religionsgeschichte* (ed. Walter Dietrich and Martin A. Klopfenstein; OBO 139; Fribourgh and Göttingen: Universitätsverlag, 1994), 127-58.

¹⁰¹ Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 32-33. 2 Kgs 13:6 (NRSV): “Nevertheless they did not depart from the sins of the house of Jeroboam, which he caused Israel to sin, but walked in them; the sacred pole also remained in Samaria.”

¹⁰² Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods and Goddess*, 213.

interpretations of this illustration. Meshel has interpreted the seated figure to be a female human and the two standing figures as deities, one of which he identifies as the god Bes. He makes a connection between the deities and the golden calf at Bethel and Dan based on the bovine-like ears the standing figures in the illustration display.¹⁰³

Gilula sees the image as a depiction of Yahweh and Asherah. He interprets Yahweh as the cow and believes that this illustration identifies Asherah as the consort of Yahweh.¹⁰⁴ In contrast, McCarter also believes the drawing to include Yahweh and Asherah, though he believes the Asherah to be a “personification of a cult object as a goddess,” rather than an illustration of an actual goddess.¹⁰⁵ Hadley believes *asherah* to be depicted on Pithos A but represented as a sacred tree rather than a humanoid figure.¹⁰⁶ There are other illustrations found at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, but they will not be considered here as they do not relate to *asherah*.¹⁰⁷

Pithos B, which was found in a courtyard but is believed to have shared space with Pithos A at some point during the site’s active years,¹⁰⁸ features two inscriptions that feature *asherah*. The first inscription on Pithos B reads, “Message of ‘Amaryō: Say to my lord. Are you well? I have blessed you by YHWH of Teman and Asherata. May he bless you and may he keep you, and may he be with the lord of your house.”¹⁰⁹ The pithos also features a three line inscription reading “y[b]rk lyhwh htmn wl šrth kl ‘šr š’l m’š hnn h’b w’špth wntn lh yhw klbbh,” which

¹⁰³ Meshel, *Kuntillet ‘Ajrud*, 31.

¹⁰⁴ M. Gilula, “To Yahweh Shomron and his Asherah,” *Shnaton* 3 (1978): 129-37.

¹⁰⁵ P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. “Aspects of the Religion of the Israelite Monarchy: Biblical and Epigraphic Data,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (ed. Patrick D. Miller Jr., Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 137-55.

¹⁰⁶ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 150-55.

¹⁰⁷ For more on these, see Hadley *The Cult of Asherah* or Dever, “Iron Age Epigraphic Material,” although Dever’s analyses are outliers.

¹⁰⁸ Schmidt, “Kuntillet ‘Ajrud’s Pithoi Inscriptions and Drawings,” 54.

¹⁰⁹ Translation by Na’aman, “The Inscriptions of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud Through the Lens of Historical Research,” 303.

Na'aman translates as “May he bless you by Yahweh of Teman and Asherata. Whatever the ‘favourer of the father and his quiver’ asked from a man – YHW(H) shall give him according to his wish.” Ahituv reads these lines, “Whatever he asks from a man, that man will give him generously. And if he would urge YHW will give him.”¹¹⁰

Na'aman sees this usage as evidence for borrowing Asherah from Ugaritic culture, with Athirat becoming Asherat in Israel, before, at some point, dropping the final *t* and becoming Asherah in Judah.¹¹¹ This is an interesting concept, but because of the lack of evidence in the Northern Kingdom and in the Hebrew Bible (and because of the phrase, in Na'aman's translation, “May *he* bless you and may *he* keep you” as opposed to “May *they*”), I will forego further speculation surrounding the goddess Asherat, instead favoring the translation of *asherat* as “his asherah.”

Further finds at Kuntillet 'Ajrud include inscriptions on plaster. The transcriptions of these read as follows: ... *'rk. ymm. wyšh 'w...* / ...*hyth. yhwh...wý...*” and “*ytnw.l... 'šrt*, which Hadley translates as “May their day be long and may they be satisfied (swear)/Yahweh, prosper (them)/do good to (them)...” and “They will celebrate unto/give to...*asherah*/Asherata,” respectively.¹¹² These inscriptions are quite fragmentary and have not been preserved well. In fact, the one with the reference to *asherah* is missing an *heh* at the end that is found in all other references to *asherah* at the site, but it is unknown whether that is due to the fragmentary nature of the plaster or if it was intended by the writer. Ahituv translates the plaster inscription as “May he lengthen their day and they will be satisfied. They will recount to Yahweh of Teman and to

¹¹⁰ S. Ahituv, *Echoes from the Past: Hebrew and Cognate Inscriptions from the Biblical Period* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2008), 318-19.

¹¹¹ Na'aman, “The Inscriptions of Kuntillet 'Ajrud Through the Lens of Historical Research,” 305.

¹¹² Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 130.

his *asherah*. Do good, O Yahweh.”¹¹³ Meshel ‘s translation reads, “...your days may be prolonged and you shall be satisfied/give YHWH of Teman and his ASHERAH/YHWH of Teman and his ASHERAH favored...”¹¹⁴ These translations are more ambiguous as to the role of *asherah* in the blessing.

Conclusions

In sum, the epigraphic remains found at Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet ‘Ajrud pose problems for the role of *asherah* in broader Israelite religion. The inscription at Khirbet el-Qom is too fragmented to make any conclusive remarks, while Kuntillet ‘Ajrud cannot be identified with certainty as referring to the goddess Asherah. While I find the evidence too inconclusive to support the existence of a Hebrew goddess, both these cultic sites are probably referring to the cultic object by which Yahweh is carrying out his actions; any confusion stemming from the inscriptions is a result of the ambiguity in the form “*asherat*,” which likely simply translates to “*his asherah*.”

With this in mind, the larger problem of so few Hebrew cultic mentions to *asherah* is apparent. Though it is always possible that we have yet to uncover further evidence (and here I point to the revelatory discovery of Ugarit as an example of the limits of archaeology), the current evidence is too scarce to draw conclusions about *asherah*-worship in popular religion in Israel. Also striking is the lack of similarity between these Levantine archaeological sites’

¹¹³ S. Ahituv, *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions from the Period of the First Commonwealth and the Beginning of the Second Commonwealth*, (Jerusalem: Keter, 1992.), 156.

¹¹⁴ Zev Meshel, “Two Aspects in the Excavation of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud,” in *Ein Gott allein?: JHWH-Verehrung und biblischer Monotheismus im Kontext der israelitischen und altorientalischen Religionsgeschichte* (ed. Walter Dietrich and Martin A. Klopfenstein;OBO 139; Fribourgh and Göttingen: Universitätsverlag, 1994), 99-104.

asherah and the Ugaritic Athirat. If *asherah* at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom refers to a deity, she bears little resemblance to the northern goddess who is the mother of the gods and has a strong connection to the sea (with both sites landlocked, this could either be an adaption of goddess who had lost her connection to the sea or else a goddess and/or relic not directly inspired by the Ugaritic pantheon). Most probably, I find it likely that the *asherah* of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom refers explicitly to a cultic relic by which Yahweh enacts his blessings. Further, I agree with Na’aman that the sites themselves were not exclusively religious in nature, but were rather storage sites and, in Kuntillet ‘Ajrud’s case, an outlet of Israelite involvement in the Arabian trade network. However, I cannot, based on the evidence given thus far, rule out the possibility that the cultic relic itself had its historical basis in the worship of a goddess bearing its namesake or that it may have had lingering associations with said goddess. In order to approach a more nuanced answer to this problem, we must turn to the highly-debated texts of the Hebrew Bible which mention the goddess.

Chapter V: ASHERAH IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Within the Hebrew bible, the language used to describe *asherah* is ambiguous. The term occurs forty times. Nineteen of those times are in the masculine plural; three are in the feminine; 13 are in the pure form; and 6 times it is used with suffixes. Most of these passages almost certainly refer to the cultic relic *asherah* as opposed to the goddess Asherah. Beyond this, in all but one of the passages where it is possible that the deity was being mentioned, the definite article is used, which makes the function of the term even less certain. The ambiguity of the *asherah* (which I here use to encompass all related terms regardless of gender and number – *asherim*, *asheroth*) in the Hebrew Bible creates several problems at the interpretative level. In order to discern the nature of the term and its potential relationship to Israelite cultic practice and polytheism, I shall systematically discuss each of the forty occurrences of the term. Within this analysis, I will assess the surrounding language in order to gain a clearer picture about the context in which the term was used.

First, I will clarify the noun-class (gender and number) of the term. I will then discuss the verbs used in each scenario including the *asherah* to discern the physical form of the *asherah* and the imagery contained in the passage that could be linked to *asherah* iconography. Finally, I will discuss the authorship and dating for each of these passages, time and space for its production (for example, in relation to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah), and whether the authorship indicates a representation of popular or official as well as realistic or idealistic religious practice. Following this analysis, I will synthesize this data and posit some possible explanations for the trends that occur throughout the Hebrew Bible in order to attempt a cohesive explanation for the use of these terms within Hebrew scripture and thus allow for evaluation of

the proposed connection between the Hebrew *asherah* and the mother goddess of the Ugaritic pantheon.

In analyzing the individual occurrences of *asherah* in the Hebrew Bible, I will attempt to organize them by their broader literary movements. Prophetic references to *asherah* will be discussed first due to their small number and relatively (in general) early date. I will then move on to the much wider body of Kings and Chronicles and a larger discussion of the role of the Deuteronomistic tradition in developing these texts/singling out *asherah*. The references to *asherah* in the Pentateuch will be discussed individually and considered for their Deuteronomistic influence. Though the order of this discussion will not be strictly chronological based on my readings of the text, as stated above, each subsection will include a brief explanation of its placement both in this study and in the development of the Hebrew corpus so that a broad overview of references to *asherah* over time and space can be reached.

Asherah in the prophets

Within the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, the first reference to *asherah* comes in Isa 17:8, following a vision of Damascus. *Asherah* here is found in its plural masculine form *asherim* with the definite article. The original text of the verse reads, “He will not gaze upon the altars the work of his hand, and he will not look upon what his fingers made even the asherim and incense altars.” The term here does not directly follow a verb, but rather is included as a qualifier. Hadley asserts that though the verb associated with the *asherim* in this verse (*asah*, to make) is more general than the verbs used with other instances of *asherah*, the fact it is paired with incense altars heavily implies that the verse is referring to physical objects.¹¹⁵ Regarding the dating of the

¹¹⁵ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 55.

passage, many commentators have asserted that the phrases “the altars” and “the *asherim* and the incense altars” seem to be disconnected from the rest of the sentence and are likely later additions to the text, perhaps being linked to the expansion of Isaiah in the sixth century BCE.¹¹⁶ This is supported by the Deuteronomistic nature of the phrases in question (as will be demonstrated below).

Asherah is mentioned again in Isa 27:9, which is generally regarded as not being written by Isaiah (see below). The reference is contained in the prophecy following Yahweh’s punishment of Leviathan and reads, “Therefore by this the guilt of Jacob will be expiated, and this will be the full fruit of the removal of his sin: when he makes all the stones of the altars like chalkstones crushed to pieces, no *asherim* or incense altars will remain standing.”¹¹⁷ The term here appears as *asherim* and, as in Isaiah 17, is paired with incense altars, furthering justification for the former verse being edited during the period that Isaiah 27 was authored. Also comparable to the previous occurrence of *asherah* is the use of a general verb not taking action directly upon the *asherim*. The verb *qum* (to arise), however, again applies to both the *asherim* and the incense altars, rendering it likely to be cultic relic *asherim*.

Though disagreement about the dating for Isaiah 27 abounds, it most certainly dates to the Babylonian Exile at the earliest.¹¹⁸ Using the evidence of Leviathan’s defeat and Yahweh’s show of favor towards Israel in the text, Wiggins suggests that, “[Verse] 9 appears to provide the conditions of Israel’s repentance, already fulfilled by the exile.”¹¹⁹ Paired with the evidence for

¹¹⁶ Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39: A Commentary* (Transl. R. A. Wilson; OTL: Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 83-84; Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 145.

¹¹⁷ Isa. 27:9, NRSV. The translation of *asherim* as “sacred poles” in the NRSV has hereafter been restored to its original “*asherim*” for the sake of simplicity and ease of discussion.

¹¹⁸ Some scholars date it to the Hellenistic period. (See Ronald E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 221.

¹¹⁹ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 146.

late redaction in Isaiah 17 and chapter 27's apparent adamance of Jerusalem as the single location for cultic activity, this information very likely points to a Deuteronomistic author for the *asherah* material.

The next prophetic mention of *asherah* comes in Jer 17:2. The text reads, "While their children remember their altars and their *asherim*, beside every green tree, and on the high hills..."¹²⁰ *Asherah* here is in its plural possessive form and is once again paralleled with *mizbehotam* (their altars). Again, for the third time in the prophetic sources, it is used with a generalized verb (*zakar*, to remember) and yet again, it occurs in a section of the text that is not easily attested as part of the original composition. Jeremiah 17:1-4 is omitted from the Septuagint, and while this on its own does not necessarily imply that they are later additions to the text, the masculine plural suffix is in accordance with its exilic usage.¹²¹ Furthering this, Carroll takes the "sins of Judah" to be a reference to fertility rituals and hypothesizes that the first verse could have been original, while the second verse, including the mention of *asherah*, would have been added at a later date by Deuteronomistic sources.¹²² At the very least, it must be noted that the usage of *asherim* in Jeremiah is consistent with the patterns found thus far in the prophetic use of the term, which, as I have noted, also seem to be Deuteronomistic.

The final instance of *asherah* appearing in the prophetic books comes in Micah 5:13 and reads "I will root out your *asherahs* from your midst, and I will destroy your cities."¹²³ The reference comes during the oracle of the ruler of Bethlehem who will emerge to restore Israel. The term is here used in the singular masculine possessive form and contains an unusual *yod*

¹²⁰ NRSV.

¹²¹ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 146. Wiggins acknowledges that the omission of the verses in the Septuagint could be a result of haplography rather than a late date.

¹²² Robert Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (OTL, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986), 349.

¹²³ Translation by Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 146.

placement between the *shin* and the *resh*. Here, for the first and only time in the prophets, we have a direct action being taken upon the *asherim* with the verb *karath* (to cut down). The passage as a whole is exilic, focusing on the return and restoration of the land of Israel, but, once again, the composition of the section that contains the *asherim* is contested. Within verses 9-13, a parallel structure is used to illustrate the retribution Yahweh will usher in. Verse 9 sees the cutting off of horses and the destruction of the chariots; verse 10 sees the cutting off of the land and the destruction of the strongholds; verse 11 sees the cutting off of the witches and the end of soothsayers; verse 12 sees the cutting off of images and pillars and the end of the worship of human-made relics. Thus, each verse in the sequence features an essential part of something being taken away followed by the obliteration of the entire thing. Why, then, does verse 13 parallel the plucking up of the *asherim* with the destruction of the cities?

Mays has suggested that Verse 13 could be illustrating the destruction of cultic and military institutions addressed throughout the section. He also proposes that verses 9-12a came first and that the parallel structure becomes broken in 12b, suggesting that verse 13, which does not fit within the main sequence structurally, could have been a later addition.¹²⁴ Another possible explanation, which I find to be more likely, is that the passage contains an emendation. For example, Wolff suggests that the *asherim* could have been a substitution for the original text, which may have instead contained a word such as “enemies.”¹²⁵ An alternative scenario replaces “cities” with “idols” as the original term.¹²⁶ Finally, even if the *asherim* was original to the passage, it seems unlikely that it was penned originally by Micah, as the passage contains a

¹²⁴ James Mays, *Micah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1976), 127.

¹²⁵ H. W. Wolff, *Dodekapropheton 4: Micha* (BKAT; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982), 132.

¹²⁶ Leslie Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (NIC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 359.

“purging” rhetoric rather than the emphasis on judgment that is present in the remainder of the book.¹²⁷

In sum, in all of the prophetic books, the *asherim* are mentioned only four times. In each case, the context and the plural masculine form of the term make it apparent that the individual references are referring to a cultic object rather than a goddess by the name of Asherah. Of interesting note is the fact that three out of four of these references are used alongside verbs that do not clearly delineate an action done upon the *asherim*. Because of this, there is not sufficient evidence to make claims about the nature of the *asherim* described in the prophetic books (except in the case of Micah, which clearly references an object or plant firmly rooted in the ground). Furthermore, every verse containing the *asherim* in the prophets presents problems for dating the term to the original composition of the text. This, when combined with the absence of the term elsewhere in the prophets, leads to the conclusion that it was added by a later author with Deuteronomistic opinions.

Thus, it appears that the prophetic authors were unconcerned with *asherah*-worship. The absence of the term in other prophetic books, particularly in Hosea and Amos, which pertain to eighth century northern Israel where we would expect to find the goddess, seem particularly problematic since (a.) the first millennium evidence we have so far at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom seem to be connected to the northern kingdom, and (b.), as we will see, the Deuteronomistic history would have us believe *asherah*-worship was rampant in the northern kingdom. One possible explanation for this is that *asherah* worship was acceptable and common in Israelite religion, and thus was not widely questioned or commented upon.

¹²⁷ Mays, *Micah*, 127.

Alternatively, it is possible that *asherah*-worship was *not* widespread and remained a trend among the elite who absorbed the practice from outside sources such as Phoenician royalty (see discussion above on 1 Kgs 18:19). Given that the socioeconomic status of those who occupied Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom is uncertain, this would explain the relative absence of the term at archaeological sites and in early Hebrew texts. Still, the lack of occurrences of *asherah* in the prophetic books is puzzling and would only make sense alongside later texts if *asherah*-worship gained a place in popular religion over time. For this reason, an in-depth analysis of the Deuteronomistic history, where the majority of the references to *asherah* appear (and are exclusively negative) becomes necessary.

Asherah in Judges and Kings

Asherah first appears in the Book of Judges in chapter 3 to explain the misdeeds of the Israelites while living in Canaan that angered Yahweh. Verse 7 reads, “The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, forgetting the LORD their God, and worshiping the Baalim and the Asheroth.”¹²⁸ Here we find *asherah* in its definite plural feminine form *ha-asherhoth*, which is far rarer than *asherim*. Whether the text is referring to cultic relics or deities is less obvious here. First, the *baalim* and the *asheroth* are paralleled directly with Yahweh. Second, the verb used in verse 7 (*abad*, to serve) is generally found in the context of serving deities.¹²⁹ However, the use of *abad* to refer to cultic relics is not unattested as we shall see in 2 Chr 25:18 (below). For this reason, it must here be noted that, in the ancient world, making an offering to a deity’s likeness was not unlike offering to the deity himself or herself, and thus the two are not mutually exclusive. It seems entirely possible that, in this case, the terms *baalim* and *asheroth* are referring

¹²⁸ NRSV.

¹²⁹ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 63.

to a generalized set of male and female deities (or their likenesses) and that the author, in standard Deuteronomistic fashion, is explaining the sins of the Israelites in terms of these deities.¹³⁰

At the same time, the likelihood that this sentiment reflects popular religion in the seventh or sixth centuries is slim. In two separate Hebrew manuscripts, the Syriac and the Vulgate, *asheroth* is replaced with *ashtaroth*, and it is unclear which was the original form in this passage. This error, which must have occurred relatively early in the life of the text, combined with the fact that all other occurrences of the form *asheroth* are complex subjects alongside the *baalim*, makes it apparent that, at least for the scribes writing down this passage, the concept of *asherah*-worship was not well known.¹³¹

Asherah then appears more extensively in Judges 6:25-30, specifically in verses 25, 26, 28, and 30. The text in this section appears to be badly corrupted and thus is difficult to decipher. Again in this passage, *asherah* appears alongside *baal*, each time in its definite singular form, *ha-asherah*. In each of these verses, the verb *karath* (to cut down) is used. Verse 26 is of particular note, as it reads, “And build an altar to Yahweh your God on the top of the stronghold here, in proper order; then take the second bullock and offer it as a burnt-offering with the wood of the *asherah* that you shall cut down.” From this, it is indisputable that Judges 6 is referring to

¹³⁰ Smith, *The Early History of God*, 86.

¹³¹ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 63-64. Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 118. Hadley goes on to suggest that, if *Ashtaroth* is the original form, it could have been referring to *Astarte* (which is more commonly paired with *Baal* – see Alberto J. Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1981), 45-46. Soggin is taking *Ashtoreth* and giving it the feminine plural ending (though this is not elsewhere attested and, again, would have had to occur early in the life of the text.)

a cultic relic made of wood called an *asherah*. The *baals* in this chapter also specify the altar of the *baal*.¹³²

The first reference to *asherah* in Kings comes in 1 Kgs 14:15, wherein Ahijah is describing to Jeroboam the punishments that will befall Israel for its sins, including the construction of *asherim*. Specifically, the verse reads, “Yahweh will smite Israel, as a reed in the water he will waver, and he will root out Israel from upon this good land which he gave to their fathers, and he will scatter them beyond the river because they made their *asherim*, provoking Yahweh to anger.” The form of *asherah* here used is the plural masculine possessive *asherim*, and it is used with the verb *asah* (to make). Wiggins asserts that, if the text here is not exilic, it would go against his theory that the use of *asherim* is employed by late Deuteronomistic sources.¹³³ Regardless, this verse does show the polemic against the *asherah*. According to Gray, the reference to “scattered beyond the river” likely indicates that the passage dates at least after the northern exile.¹³⁴

Asherah is again mentioned in 1 Kings 14 in verse 23, which reads, “For they also built for themselves high places, pillars, and *asherim* on every high hill and under every green tree.” The verb that corresponds to the high places, the pillars, and the *asherim* in this verse is *banah* (to build). The reference comes in describing the evils of the inhabitants of Judah under Rehoboam. This, combined with the description of Israel under Jeroboam, seems to insinuate that *asherah*-worship was occurring in both the northern and southern kingdoms since the united

¹³² For more on this, see Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 118-21.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹³⁴ John Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1971), 306.

monarchy split.¹³⁵ It must here be noted that this exilic perspective may not realistically reflect popular religious practice, but it does reveal the polemic against *asherah* in Judah.

The next occurrence of *asherah* in 1 Kings comes in chapter 15, verse 13. Chapter 15 details the reign of Asa in Judah, who sought to purge Judah of idolatry. Verse 13 reads, “He also removed his mother Maacah from being queen mother, because she had made a horrid thing for the *asherah*; Asa cut down her horrid thing and burned it at the Wadi Kidron.” *Asherah* here is in the definite singular form with the prepositional possessive *lamed*.¹³⁶ The term *miphletseth*, often translated as “image,” is only attested in this verse and in a parallel verse in 2 Chronicles (see below).¹³⁷

Interestingly, the “horrid thing” that Asa destroys is denoted in the singular feminine form (the horrid thing), and the verse reads as though it belongs to the *asherah*. This would make sense if the *asherah* in question was meant to refer to the deity rather than the relic, but it does not negate the possibility that the author intended that the horrid thing belonged to Maacah.¹³⁸ The possession of the image by Asherah is less likely because, if we read the term as definite (following the Masoretic pointing) instances of *asherah* occurring with the definite article generally seem to indicate the relic.

Interestingly, in the parallel passage in 2 Chronicles *asherah* does not have a definite construction. Discussion on this verse (and its relationship to 1 Kgs 15:13) will occur below. Further questions surround the burning of the “horrid thing.” If *asherah* in this context refers to a cultic object against Asa’s (and the author’s) beliefs, why would he not order the removal of both

¹³⁵ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 124.

¹³⁶ Here I must assert that the definiteness of this reference to *asherah* is determined by the Masoretes due to the *lamed*, rendering the original meaning uncertain. The most that can be said is that the Masoretes, at least, seemed to interpret this verse as referring to a relic.

¹³⁷ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 64.

¹³⁸ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 126.

the horrid thing *and* the *asherah*? Thus, the dilemma remains: either *asherah* refers to the relic, which was an acceptable practice, and it was only the “horrid” nature of Maacah’s creation that Asa deemed unacceptable, or the term is invoking the goddess Asherah, and thus removing the horrid thing effectively takes a stance against Asherah-worship.

1 Kings 16:33 reads, “And Ahab made the *asherah*, and Ahab increased the acts to provoke Yahweh the God of Israel more than those before him.” This verse comes in a passage that concerns Ahab’s marriage to Jezebel and his worship of Baal. *Asherah* here is in the definite singular form, and the verb used is *asah*. I agree with Wiggins sentiments on this verse, when he notes, “[A]mong all the sins for which Ahab was infamous, the erecting of an altar for the *baal* and the making of the *asherah* are singled out as the ones which particularly provoked Yahweh.”¹³⁹ He goes on to argue that the passage was most likely to have been composed after the fall of Israel during the reign of Josiah.¹⁴⁰

One of the more highly discussed and debated mentions of *asherah* in the Hebrew Bible comes in 1 Kgs 18:19 within the narrative of Elijah on Mount Carmel. The verse, which is contained in the speech of Elijah, reads, “Now send, gather to me all Israel to Mount Carmel and the four hundred fifty prophets of the *baal* and the four hundred prophets of the *asherah* who eat at Jezebel’s table.” The remainder of the passage goes into further detail regarding the prophets of the *baal* and excludes further mention of the *asherah*. A likely explanation for this verse and the presence of *asherah* (given the absence of the term in the rest of the narrative) is that the phrase “and the four hundred prophets of the *asherah*” is a textual gloss added by a

¹³⁹ Ibid., 127.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Deuteronomistic redactor.¹⁴¹ However, as Hadley points out, if the phrase is a late addition, one would expect to find plural forms of the terms in accordance with later tradition (i.e. ‘*asherim*’ as opposed to ‘the *asherah*’).¹⁴²

A further problem arises when one considers the possibility of the definite article interfering with the interpretation of the *baal* and the *asherah* as proper nouns. As Wiggins asserts, the verse also mentions “the Carmel,” which seems to refer quite clearly to Mount Carmel (which is referred to both with and without the article throughout the Masoretic Text), rendering it impossible to determine if the *baal* and the *asherah* are meant to be proper names.¹⁴³ Further, Hadley has pointed out that the definite article on divinities is attested elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, citing Ezek 8:14 where the name of the Mesopotamian deity Tammuz appears with the definite article, though I would suggest that this late example is not enough evidence to support this view. Though it is impossible to ascertain the exact nature of the *asherah* in this passage, we at the very least cannot rule out the possibility of a female deity being invoked here.

In 2 Kings, the *asherah* is first mentioned in chapter 13, verse 6, wherein the author is describing the sins of the people of Israel under the rule of Jehoahaz. The verse reads, “Indeed they did not cease from the sins of the house of Jeroboam with which he caused Israel to sin, he walked in it; and still the *asherah* stood in Samaria.” *Asherah* here appears in the definite singular form. It is the *asherah* mentioned in this verse that Olyan believes is mentioned in the inscription from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud (see above). While I find evidence to support this view lacking,

¹⁴¹ The other possible explanation for the lack of continued discussion of the *asherah* is that *asherah* worship was not opposed by Elijah and was therefore not further addressed, though this seems unlikely. It is also of interest to note that the Septuagint also contains the prophets of the *asherah* in verse 22, suggesting that the inclusion could have been lost to the Masoretic Text. See William L. Reed, *The Asherah in the Old Testament*, (Forth Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1949), 55.

¹⁴² Hadley, *Yahweh’s Asherah*, 97.

¹⁴³ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 128.

this is a compelling argument for the use of singular form of *asherah* in this verse. Even if the clause containing the *asherah* was a late redaction (which seems likely),¹⁴⁴ Wiggins asserts that “[e]ven the later editors, who tended to disguise the meaning of asherahs with a masculine plural, would have recourse to the singular if only one specific object were being discussed.”¹⁴⁵ This verse does seem to convey the idea that *asherah*-worship was a severe sin that people were willingly committing; they ignored Yahweh and continued to commit the sinful acts, specifically leaving the *asherah* erected. It is difficult to determine if the strong stigma against the placement of an *asherah*-pole represented in Kings accurately reflects Israelite religious life (nor is it clear whether the text reflects the opinion of a vocal minority). Nevertheless, the presence of the verse and the insistence of the Deuteronomist of the *asherah*’s sinful nature still suggest that practices involving an object known as an *asherah* were occurring.

2 Kings 17:10 is reminiscent of 1 Kgs 14:23, describing the presence of the *asherim* “on every high hill and under every luxuriant tree.” Again, *asherah* is used without the definite article, taking the masculine plural form *wa-asherim*. Verse 10 is commonly determined to be a late redaction of the text, which Wiggins uses as evidence that the masculine plural *asherim* was a product of late redactors.¹⁴⁶

2 Kings 17:16 again sees *asherah* referred to alongside *baal* within a detailed discussion of transgressions against Yahweh. The verse reads, “And they left all the commandments of Yahweh their God, and they made for themselves a molten image, two calves, and they made an *asherah* and they did obeisance to all the hosts of heaven and they served the *baals*.” In this

¹⁴⁴ Gwilym H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings: Volume 1* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 497-500.

¹⁴⁵ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 129.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

verse, *asherah* takes the singular form with no suffix, and the verse seems to have a late date.¹⁴⁷

The mention of the bulls is of interest due to the similarities with 1 Kgs 18:19 and the account of Mount Carmel. Though this does not likely suggest a direct connection in worship practices between *asherah* and bulls, it does reveal a rhetorical move on the part of the author in which certain cultic objects (i.e. the *asherah*, bulls, the *baals*) are categorically linked and associated with sin and actions against Yahweh.¹⁴⁸

The remaining references to *asherah* in Kings occur within the religious reformations of Hezekiah and Josiah. These are perhaps the most well-known and often-discussed references to *asherah* in the Hebrew Bible. The first occurs in 2 Kgs 18:4 within the reform of Hezekiah. The verse reads, “He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the *asherah*. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan.” *Asherah* in this verse occurs in the definitive singular form *ha-asherah*, which suggests that there is a specific *asherah* being invoked here. She is listed among other cultic items (the high places, the pillars, etc.), which both places the *asherah* categorically in the realm of cultic ritual and is consistent with other passages that mention *asherah* in the Hebrew Bible. However, unlike several similar passages, this one does not appear to have been the subject of late redaction, which points to the possibility that the use of *asherah* in the plural was a product of late redactors.¹⁴⁹

Following the religious reform of Hezekiah, King Manasseh re-creates the cultic environment that his father destroyed. Verse 21:3 reads, “And he turned and he built the high

¹⁴⁷ Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, 543.

¹⁴⁸ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 130.

¹⁴⁹ Olyan has attempted to connect Asherah with the mention of Nehushtan, the bronze serpent, relying on the assumption of the deity Asherah’s connectedness with fertility (see Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 70.)

places which his father Hezekiah destroyed and he erected the altars to the baal, and he made an *asherah* just as Ahab king of Israel made and they bowed to all the hosts of heaven and he served them.” *Asherah* here appears in the indefinite feminine singular form. This verse is likely a late addition to the Book of Kings, which is inconsistent with our earlier observation à la Hadley that the feminine singular form of *asherah* was used in early manuscripts and was over time phased out in favor of the masculine plural *asherim*.¹⁵⁰ However, I think it is likely that this verse reflects a time when the meaning of the word *asherah* had blurred from its original context and the authors of verses such as this one were in fact unaware of the history it invoked. The alternative to this explanation is that this verse did in fact refer to a specific, singular *asherah*,¹⁵¹ though this seems unlikely given the relative date and context of the verse.

The *asherah* is next mentioned again under the rule of Manasseh, when the king is said to place the “image of the *asherah*” in the house of Yahweh in 2 Kgs 21:7. The feminine singular form of *Asherah* here appears in the a construct relationship with “image” rendering it possible that this verse refers to a deity called Asherah (or more aptly, the image of Asherah). However, I find this unlikely given the presence of the definite prefix in this verse – which, as we have seen, likely denotes a reference to a relic rather than a personified deity. Interestingly, the verse in 2 Chronicles (33:7) which parallels 2 Kgs 21:7 omits mention of *ha-asherah* entirely, instead using the phrase “image of the *sml*” the meaning of which is uncertain. Christian Frevel has used this as evidence to support his idea that the Chronicler was intentionally purging the text of

¹⁵⁰ Hadley, *Yahweh’s Asherah*, 88.

¹⁵¹ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 133.

references that invoked the deity Asherah,¹⁵² which I find compelling even given my stance that the verse likely does not invoke the goddess.

The remaining references to *asherah* in the Books of Kings come in 2 Kgs 23:4-15 within a lengthy description of the religious reforms of King Josiah. These verses are some of the most compelling and often-discussed references to *asherah* in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, verse 4 features Josiah ordering priests to “remove from the temple of the Lord all the articles made for Baal and Asherah and all the starry hosts.” *Asherah* here appears in its singular form, and it seems as though this verse is referring to a personified deity rather than an object. However, (as the account was likely documented later) this may reflect a gradually blurring line between the goddess and her image. It is interesting to note that in 2 Kgs 23:5, Baal and the heavenly hosts are mentioned again, but *asherah* is not (similar to the case discussed with I Kings 18). There are two possible explanations for this. One explanation is that *asherah* here was a later edition by a redactor, which seems unlikely given the singular form of *asherah* employed here.¹⁵³ The other option is that the *asherah* being referred to here is a specific relic rather than a deity and thus its inclusion alongside Baal and the starry hosts is merely circumstantial. If this were the case, it is possible that the omission of the *asherah* in a similar list makes sense.

The *asherah* next appears in verse 6, wherein the *asherah* (appearing in the definite singular form) itself is removed from the temple. If viewed in conjunction with the previous verse, this verse seems to alleviate the issue of the *asherah*’s nature in the context of the Josianic reform, because it reveals the king taking the *asherah* to the Wadi Kidron where he is said to

¹⁵² More on this below. See Christian Frevel, “Die Elimination der Götten aus dem Weltbild des Chronisten,” *Zeitschrift Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 103 (1991): 263-71. Here “*sml*” appears with the definite prefix.

¹⁵³ This is also in line with Jones’ commentary which finds at least two phases of redaction in this verse. See Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, 605, 616-17.

burn it, beat it to dust, and throw the dust upon the graves of common people. The verbs used with *asherah* in this verse are *yatsa* (to remove), *saraph* (to burn), *daqaq* (to crush), and *shalak* (to cast), respectively. This verse clearly indicates a material *asherah*, presumably made of wood. It may well be understood that the *asherah* in question here may be the same one placed in the temple by Manasseh, the only aforementioned king to have done so.¹⁵⁴

Verse 7 features Josiah expelling women weaving *battim* for the *asherah* and reads, “He broke down the houses of *qedeshim* that were in the house of the Lord, where the women were weaving *battim* for the *asherah*.”¹⁵⁵ There is a prepositional prefix added to *asherah* in this verse, and the Masoretes have designated it as the definite prefix, making this another instance where *asherah* could conceivably refer to either a goddess or a relic. Further speculation comes with the interpretation of the action being performed by the women in the temple. *Battim*, usually meaning “houses,” is not without controversy. Gray and Jones translate it as “clothes,” while Wiggins translates it as “shrines.”¹⁵⁶ It seems that, either way, the women were weaving something that would encase the *asherah*. Wiggins uses examples from the Psalms that describe Yahweh as living in a tent as support for his view.¹⁵⁷ I would suggest that, given this interpretation, the standard translation of *battim* as “houses” is conceivable.

¹⁵⁴ Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 9.

¹⁵⁵ The translation of *qedeshim* is highly disputed with some translations rendering it “male prostitutes.” With little evidence to point to an accurate translation, I have chosen to leave it in its Hebrew form.

¹⁵⁶ Gray, *I & II Kings*, 668; Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, 619; Wiggins, *A Reassessment*, 136. De Moor popularized a euphemistic interpretation wherein “weaving *battim*” is a stand-in for sexual activity (See De Moor, “Asherah,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, editors. Vol. 1. Translated by John T. Willis. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 441). This, however, is backed by no substantial evidence and is likely influenced by the aforementioned translation of *qedeshim*.

¹⁵⁷ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 136. He here cites Pss 61:5; 78:60; 15:1; 27:5-6.

Asherah next appears in verse 14, which reads, “He broke the pillars in pieces, cut down the *asherim*, and filled their places with the bones of men.” The verb used with *asherah* is *karath* (to cut down). Based on the definite masculine plural usage of *asherah* in this verse, it was likely a later addition to the text. This is further evidenced by verb usage in the passage, which utilizes primarily imperfect verbs with the *waw*-consecutive, while verse 14 features the *piel* perfect verb.¹⁵⁸

Finally, verse 15 reads, “Moreover, the altar at Bethel, the high place erected by Jeroboam son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin – he pulled down that alter along with the high place. He burned the high place, crushing it to dust, and he burned *asherah*.” *Asherah* here appears in its pure form, and the verb *saraph* (to burn) is used. It is clear from the wording of the verse itself that there is a particular *asherah* being discussed here, though no definite article appears. Wiggins has used the mention of Bethel to suggest a late date of authorship for this verse, suggesting that this final mention of *asherah* omits the definite article because the verse is meant to summarize the preceding description of the Josianic reform and emphasize the obliteration of *asherah* and her worship from Israel entirely.¹⁵⁹

Asherah in Chronicles

The first mention of the *asherah* in Chronicles comes in 2 Chr 14:2.¹⁶⁰ It concerns Asa reforming the cult in Judah, and reads, “He turned from the foreign altars and the high places, and he shattered the pillars and hewed down the *asherim*.” The verb here used with *asherah* is *gada* (to hew down). In accordance with our earlier observations, *asherah* appears primarily in the plural

¹⁵⁸ Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, 617; Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 137.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ This is equivalent to verse 3 in English translations.

form (and in this case with the definite article) in late passages. Frevel has posited that the Chronicler intentionally foregoes mention of *asherah* in the singular in an attempt to mask the presence of a goddess in the text,¹⁶¹ but if this were the case, why would verses such as 2 Chr 14:2, which has no parallel passage in Kings, add additional references to the *asherah*? Rather, I find it much more likely that this trend in Chronicles suggests the actual meaning of the term had been forgotten.

2 Chr 15:16 is a parallel verse to 1 Kgs 15:13 discussed above. The verse in Chronicles reads, “And also Maacah, mother of Asa the king removed from being queen his mother because she made for Asherah a horrid thing; Asa cut down her horrid thing and pulverized and burned it in the Wadi Kidron.” Most of the discussion of the 1 Kings verse is applicable here as well. However, the most striking difference between the two verses is that in Chronicles, the *kamatz* of the prefixed *lamed* on *asherah* in 1 Kgs 15:13 is replaced with a *patakh*, indicating an indefinite form of the term rendering the most likely translation “Asherah” as a proper noun. This understanding comes from the Masoretic rendering of the texts, but if their interpretation of the text is correct, it results in an interesting problem in the reading of the text. This is also the only instance of *asherah* in its singular form in the Chronicles. Thus, it is possible that by the time the Chronicler was writing (possibly mid to late fourth century BCE),¹⁶² *asherah* was a more generalized term referring to a goddess or the physical representation of a nonspecific deity rather than a distinct deity or cultic object itself,¹⁶³ or alternatively that the Chronicler was actually uninformed about the circumstances about which he wrote and was therefore unaware of the precise meaning of the term. This latter explanation is supported by the fact that the word

¹⁶¹ Frevel, “Die Elimination der Götten aus dem Weltbild des Chronisten,” 263-71.

¹⁶² Sara Japhet, *I and II Chronicles: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1993) 27-28.

¹⁶³ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 64-66.

order is slightly rearranged in this version of the verse, moving *la-asherah* in front of the “horrid thing” – evidence that the Chronicler was as confused as we are by this verse and was attempting to clarify.¹⁶⁴

2 Chronicles 17:6, which occurs in a passage describing the reign of Jehoshaphat, reads, “His heart was courageous in the ways of the Lord; and furthermore he removed the high places and the *asherim* from Judah.” As expected, the definite masculine plural form of the noun is employed. The verb here used is *sur* (to remove). The problems addressed with 2 Chr 14:2 again appear here, as there is no parallel verse in Kings. As before, I suspect that the understanding of the term by this time came to be understood exclusively as a cultic relic to be removed from contemporary religious sites.¹⁶⁵

Jehoshaphat’s actions are further addressed in 2 Chr 19:3, which reads, “Certainly good matters are found with you because you burned the *asheroth* from the land setting your heart to seek God.” This is the first instance of the Chronicler using the feminine plural form of *asherah*, and only the second instance in the Hebrew Bible of the term appearing (the first being a Deuteronomistic reference in Judges 3:7). In the Judges passage, it seemed as though the *asheroth* may have referred to generalized female deities alongside the *baalim*. While this verse does not have the same insinuations, it is interesting to note that the definite article also appears on God (*ha-elohim*), indicating unconventional usage in general, which could support an argument for further confusion in the use of an antiquated term *asheroth*. Regardless of the exact intentions behind the use of the term *asheroth*, this verse does appear to indicate that they were

¹⁶⁴ I have to thank my advisor, Dr. Erin Darby (University of Tennessee) for this observation (personal correspondence).

¹⁶⁵ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 140-41.

an issue of the past, presumably expelled with finality by Jehoshaphat, and were only a distant reminder of the causes of the Exile.¹⁶⁶

However (if we assume the masculine and feminine plural forms of *asherah* to be related), according to 2 Chr 24:18, *asherah*-worship did not remain in the past for long. During the rule of Joash, “they forsook the house of Yahweh the God of their fathers, and they served the *asherim* because of this offence.” The verb here is *abad* (to serve). Again, the masculine plural form with the definite article is employed, and again, there is no parallel case in Kings for this passage. The Chronicler paints a picture in which, without constant moderating and reforming done by strong leaders, the people fall to cultic practices which are frowned upon by Yahweh.¹⁶⁷

Roughly correlating with the reform of Hezekiah in 2 Kgs 18:4, 2 Chr 31:1 reads,

Now when all this was finished, all Israel who were present went out to the cities of Judah and broke down the pillars, hewed down the *asherim* and pulled down the high places and the altars throughout all Judah and Benjamin, and in Ephraim and Manasseh, until they had destroyed them all. Then all the people of Israel returned to their cities, all to their individual properties.

Once again, the masculine plural form of *asherah* is used with the definite article, which is at odds with the version in Kings, which features *asherah* in its singular form with the definite article. The verb employed is *abad* (to serve). As before, it could be an avoidance of invoking the goddess (a lá Frevel) causing this or the aforementioned blurring of the meaning of the term. This verse seems to complicate the latter explanation, however, which I have hitherto found to be the most convincing. Since it is undoubtedly based on the account in 2 Kings 18, one would

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 141.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

expect to find *asherah* in the singular here if the meaning behind it had been forgotten.¹⁶⁸ Since the verse replaces the singular with the plural, the Chronicler (who in previous verses introduced the unlawful worship of the *asherim* in places where the author of Kings had omitted it) here was apparently aware of the meaning of the term and intentionally purged the text of the singular form in favor of the plural.¹⁶⁹

Asherah is again mentioned in the feminine plural in 2 Chr 33:3. Paralleling 2 Kgs 21:3 and describing the sins of Manasseh, it reads, “For he rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had pulled down, and erected altars to the Baals, made (*asah*) *asheroth*, worshipped all the hosts of heaven, and served them.” This is another example of the Chronicler making the Kings’ feminine singular noun plural.¹⁷⁰ However, in this case, Wiggins has asserted the possibility that the Chronicler was unsure of how to deal with the use of *asherah* in 2 Kgs 21:3, which was without the definite article, and as a result defaulted to the “more natural feminine plural.”¹⁷¹ This would seem to make the most sense given that the Chronicler usually employs the masculine plural unless prompted by a Deuteronomistic source text, along with the fact that they use masculine and feminine forms of the same word in such close proximity to one another.

2 Chronicles 33:19 reads, “And his prayer and the supplication by him, and all his sins and treachery and the places in which he built high places and he erected the *asherim* and the images before his humbling, behold they are written in the words of Hoza.” The verb used in this verse is *amad* (to stand), which appears only here alongside *asherah*. Since the Deuteronomistic account did not feature the redemption of Manasseh, this verse is unique to the Chronicler’s

¹⁶⁸ Interestingly, the Septuagint, Syriac, Targum, and Vulgate versions of the text utilize the feminine plural form *asheroth* in this verse.

¹⁶⁹ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 142.

¹⁷⁰ Again, later manuscripts employ the form *asheroth*.

¹⁷¹ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 142.

account, and, as expected, utilizes the masculine plural form of *asherah* with the definite article, which Frevel sees as evidence of an intentional omission of references to the goddess.¹⁷²

Asherah is mentioned three more times in Chronicles, each confined to the shortened version of the reform of Josiah. Each of these occurrences (2 Chr34:3, 4, and 7) appears in the expected form of masculine plural. Of note is the fact that the parallel account in Kings contains five remaining references to *asherah*, whereas the Chronicler uses only three. In particular, the verses that have been omitted are the ones with ambiguous meaning in which a goddess Asherah may have been invoked (2 Kgs 23:4 and 23:7.) As with the case of 2 Chr 33:7 changing the word following the phrase “image of” to omit the word *asherah*, this has been used as evidence for Frevel’s theory that the Chronicler knowingly altered the text in order to erase the existence of the goddess Asherah.¹⁷³

Asherah in the Pentateuch

The first reference to *asherah* in the Pentateuch comes in Exodus 34 wherein Yahweh provides Moses with instruction for the Promised Land. Verse 13 reads, “You shall tear down their altars, break their pillars, and cut down his *asherim*.”¹⁷⁴ The term here is in its masculine plural form, and scholars have generally attributed it to Deuteronomistic sources.¹⁷⁵ It would seem that in general, the passage is referring to inhabitants of the Promised Land – the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites mentioned by name in Verse 11. However, the context of the *asherim* is rendered uncertain due to the singular

¹⁷² Frevel, “Die Elimination der Göttin,” 267-68.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 265-66.

¹⁷⁴ NRSV.

¹⁷⁵ See James P. Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus*, (London: Oliphants, 1971), 301; Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh*, 18.

possessive ending, and it is unclear whose *asherim* are being discussed. The verb paired with the *asherim* in this case is *karath* (to cut), making it likely that the author of this passage is understanding *asherim* to refer to wooden relics.

What, then, can be said about the presence of the *asherim* in this verse? Since the ownership of the *asherim* is ambiguous, it seems unlikely that this information is significant to the agenda of the verse. Further, the odd singular possessive language used with the *asherah* is not unique in this passage. Martin Noth has noted that verses 11-13 contain what appear to be Deuteronomistic language which contains both strong anti-cult practice sentiments and inconsistencies in the way that the text addresses people.¹⁷⁶ Indeed, if the text were to have been edited by Deuteronomistic sources, the presence of the *asherim* as cultic relics would fall in line with our larger understanding of the Deuteronomist's opinion on *asherah*.

A similar *asherah* reference comes in Deut 7:5 in another series of instructions for the Israelites in the Promised Land. The text reads, "But thus you will do to them; their altars you will pull down, and their pillars you will shatter, and their *asherim* you will hew down and their images you will burn with fire." Interestingly, the form that *asherah* takes here is *wa-asherehem*, a spelling only attested in 2 Kgs 17:16 and Micah 5:13, both dating to at least the exilic period.¹⁷⁷ The verb used here with the *asherim* is *gada*. Mayes has suggested that the similarities between Deut 7:5 and Exod 34:13 point to a possible shared author. Were this the case, it would seem that by this point, the origin of the term *asherim* had been confused.¹⁷⁸

Deuteronomy 12:3 reads, "And you will pull down their altars, and you will shatter their pillars, and their *asherim* you will burn (*saraph*) with fire, and the images of their gods you will

¹⁷⁶ Martin Noth, *Exodus, a Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1962), 262.

¹⁷⁷ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 115.

¹⁷⁸ A.D.H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 184.

hew down, and do away with their name from that place.”¹⁷⁹ This verse is part of a series of instructions given to centralize Yahwism in Jerusalem. It is of interest to note that the preceding verse contains the phrase “upon the hills and under every leafy tree” that was found in 1 Kgs 23:14 in reference to non-Yahwistic deity worship.¹⁸⁰

The final reference to *asherah* in the Pentateuch comes in Deut 16:21. The verse reads, “You will not plant (*nata*) for yourself an *asherah*, any tree beside the altar of Yahweh your God which you will make for yourself,” upon which two significant observations may be made. First, *asherah* is juxtaposed with the phrase “any tree,” which seems to indicate that they have a similar function and nature. Traditionally, the phrase “any tree” has been interpreted as a textual gloss added in order to make sense of the verse in which the meaning of *asherah* may have changed or been forgotten.¹⁸¹ Secondly, some scholars have assumed this verse to be pre-Deuteronomistic, based partially on the inclusion of the singular *asherah* whereas the other verses in the Pentateuch have employed the masculine plural form.¹⁸² Another explanation for this could be that the verse is only condemning the planting of an *asherah* at a place of Yahwistic worship. This is supported by the fact that, by all given evidence, Yahwists did not specifically or generally oppose *asherah*-worship until the accounts of religious reform in Kings.¹⁸³ This is especially significant given that the Deuteronomist drew inspiration from the book of Deuteronomy, and one would expect to find clues for the strict aversion to *asherah*-worship. This verse, with its unique verb usage and introduction to tree imagery, could pre-date the

¹⁷⁹ The Septuagint version of this verse foregoes the lines referring to the *asherim* and the images.

¹⁸⁰ Holladay, “On Every High Hill and Under Every Green Tree,” *Vetus Testamentum* 11 (1961): 170-76; Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, p. 116.

¹⁸¹ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 117.

¹⁸² Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, 263-65.

¹⁸³ Iain Provan, *Hezekiah and the Books of Kings: A Commentary* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter), 57-90; Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 117.

majority of references to *asherah* in the Hebrew Bible, providing a template for Deuteronomistic communities who were frustrated with popular religion and attempted to erase *asherah* completely from Israelite society.¹⁸⁴

Conclusions

This chapter has focused on each of the forty occurrences of *asherah* in the biblical texts (see Table 1 below). By and large, the text does not seem to refer to a goddess, with the exception of a few verses, which are inconclusive. It seems that the earliest references to *asherah* in the Hebrew Bible do occur in the singular form. While this could indicate the presence of the goddess, I find it more likely that the earliest references were only concerned with specific *asherah* or *asherah* in specific places (such as at sites of Yahwistic worship.) It seems that during and after the Babylonian Exile, biblical authors, particularly the Deuteronomist (who likely used it as blame for the fall of Judah), became obsessed with ridding the society of *asherah*-worship, which may reflect a reality in which strong reformers were struggling as people continued to betray Yahweh and construct *asherim*. I find the most likely explanation to be that *asherah*-worship was widespread during the exilic period and that the Deuteronomist was using *asherah* to explain the downfall due to apostasy. This makes sense with the strong anti-*asherah* rhetoric in reference to the northern kingdom, wherein *asherah*-worship could be used to explain their fall as well. This would especially make sense if the popularity of *asherah*-worship continued into the post-exilic period, resulting in a rampant campaign to demonize the practice. If this was this case, the Deuteronomist must have been at least somewhat successful in

¹⁸⁴ This would rely on an assumed connection by the Deuteronomistic authors between the singular *asherah* and the plural masculine *asherim*.

this endeavor, because by the time the Chronicler writes, the exact nature and context of the *asherah* seems to have been forgotten, and, whether intentional or due to confusion, the grammar surrounding *asherah* in Chronicles is unique.

Table 1: Verses mentioning *asherah* in the Hebrew Bible

Verse	Form	Verb	Definite article?	Notes
Isaiah 17:8	<i>asherim</i>	<i>asah</i> (to make)	Yes	Redaction
Isaiah 27:9	<i>asherim</i>	<i>qum</i> (to arise)	No	Redaction
Jeremiah 17:2	<i>asherim</i>	<i>zakar</i> (to remember)	No	Redaction
Micah 5:13	<i>asherim</i> (with a yod placed between the <i>shin</i> and <i>resh</i>)	<i>karath</i> (to cut down)	No	Possible redaction
Judges 3:7	<i>asheroth</i>	<i>abad</i> (to serve)	Yes	
Judges 6:25-30	<i>asherah</i>	-	Yes	
1 Kings 14:15	<i>asherim</i>	<i>asah</i> (to make)	No	
1 Kings 14:23	<i>asherim</i>	<i>banah</i> (to build)	No	
1 Kings 15:13	<i>asherah</i>	-	Yes	Potential reference to the goddess
1 Kings 16:33	<i>asherah</i>	<i>asah</i> (to make)	Yes	
1 Kings 18:19	<i>asherah</i>	-	Yes	Potential reference to the goddess
2 Kings 13:6	<i>asherah</i>	<i>amad</i> (to stand, as in “the <i>asherah</i> stood”)	Yes	
2 Kings 17:10	<i>asherim</i>	-	No	Redaction
2 Kings 17:16	<i>asherah</i>	<i>asah</i> (to make)	No	
2 Kings 18:4	<i>asherah</i>	<i>karath</i> (to cut down)	Yes	
2 Kings 21:3	<i>asherah</i>	<i>asah</i> (to make)	No	Redaction
2 Kings 21:7	<i>asherah</i>	<i>sum</i> (to place)	Yes (in the Masoretic texts)	
2 Kings 23:4	<i>asherah</i>	-	No	Potential reference to the goddess
2 Kings 23:6	<i>asherah</i>	<i>yatsa</i> (to remove); <i>saraph</i> (to burn); <i>daqq</i> (to crush); <i>shalak</i> (to cast)	Yes	
2 Kings 23:7	<i>asherah</i>	-	Yes (in the Masoretic texts)	
2 Kings 23:14	<i>asherim</i>	<i>karath</i> (to cut down)	Yes	
2 Kings 23:15	<i>asherah</i>	<i>saraph</i> (to burn)	No	
2 Chron. 14:2	<i>asherim</i>	<i>gada</i> (to hew)	Yes	
2 Chron. 15:16	<i>asherah</i>	-	No	Potential reference to the goddess
2 Chron. 17:6	<i>asherim</i>	<i>sur</i> (to remove)	Yes	
2 Chron. 19:3	<i>asheroth</i>	<i>saraph</i> (to burn)	Yes	
2 Chron. 24:18	<i>asherim</i>	<i>abad</i> (to serve)	Yes	
2 Chron. 31:1	<i>asherim</i>	<i>gada</i> (to hew)	Yes	

2 Chron. 33:3	<i>asheroth</i>	<i>asah</i> (to make)	No	
2 Chron. 33:19	<i>asherim</i>	<i>amad</i> (to stand)	Yes	
2 Chron. 34:3	<i>asherim</i>	<i>taher</i> (to purge)	Yes	
2 Chron. 34:4	<i>asherim</i>	<i>gada</i> (to hew)	Yes	
2 Chron. 34:7	<i>asherim</i>	<i>nathats</i> (to break down)	Yes	
Exodus 34:13	<i>asherim</i>	<i>karath</i> (to cut)	No	
Deut. 7:5	<i>asherehem</i>	<i>gada</i> (to hew)	No	
Deut. 12:3	<i>asherim</i>	<i>saraph</i> (to burn)	No	
Deut. 16:21	<i>asherah</i>	<i>nata</i> (to plant)	No	

Chapter VI: ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

Overall, there does not seem to be a connection between the Athirat described in the texts of Ugarit and the Hebrew texts referring to *asherah*, and my final project can best be described as a critique of the theories that attempt to link the Ugaritic goddess to Israelite religion. Beyond the obvious ambiguities in the Hebrew texts (in both the term *asherah* itself and the various contexts in which it is used), there seems to be no connection between *asherah* and the defining characteristics of Athirat, which include a connection to the sea, a role in royal births, and a relationship with the god El. The only similarities between the two as described are their role in religion and ritual, as evidenced by Athirat's inclusion in ritual lists, and the mention of *asherah* at cultic sites in Judah (and possibly at Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet 'Ajrud.) However, these texts lack necessary evidence to indicate that *asherah*-worship was a facet of popular religion in Ugarit, Israel, or Judah, and may well have been a goddess of the elite class by way of interaction between royalty (recall the reference to the prophets of *asherah* alongside Jezebel and the references to Athirat of Tyre). This would also further contextualize the Deuteronomist's aversion to *asherah*-worship, as she would have been a reflection of foreign cultic worship.

While I do not believe that there is a solid connection between Athirat and the *asherah* of the Hebrew Bible, it is possible that the ambiguities of the biblical text may still be described by the presence of a Semitic goddess, with associations forgotten over time. It is possible that the name itself was associated with its linguistic equivalent in Ugarit by way of their shared Canaanite heritage (which I do not find substantial evidence to dispute), but that the characteristics of the goddess were altered to fit local needs. This could be supported by the fact that the Israelite context would have much less need for a "Lady of the Sea," being much more landlocked than Ugarit. At Ugarit, none of our existing information about Athirat outside of

royal elite mythologies contains the aforementioned identifying characteristics of Athirat. Instead, she appears in ritual lists, and her worship seems to have been independent of these factors, perhaps tied to seasonal offerings or specific wishes on the part of the person or community doing the offering. Similarly, the *asherah* of Israel and Judah seems to have been at odds with the desired perception by biblical authors, for why would the Deuteronomist consistently have to write that *asherah*-worship was forbidden and a sin (and therefore reintroduce the topic if it was not a concern) if *asherah* were not actively being worshiped?¹⁸⁵

If this is the case, it is possible that the *asherah* of Israelite society (based primarily on linguistic similarities and not necessarily any actual occurrence in the Hebrew Bible) originally invoked the goddess Asherah, but that over time the meaning faded, perhaps becoming a generic term for goddess (as in the *baalim*), and/or (as it is difficult to separate a deity-worship from the worship of its likeness and representation in the ancient world) a more generalized term for the relic meant to invoke her or other deities. Following this, our analysis of the biblical text would make the most sense, with the earlier passages suggesting that *asherah*-worship should not take place in places of Yahwistic worship, while later verses take a more generalized position of anti-*asherah* practice.

This could also potentially explain the lack of similarities between the Hebrew Asherah and the Ugaritic Athirat. It is possible that by the time the Deuteronomist was concerned with wide-spread *asherah*-worship (which is unclear as to whether it is due to a previously *acceptable* practice or a previously *rare* practice), the deity behind the relic use could have taken on more attributes of the Phoenician Astarte following the advent of intermarriages and cultural exchange

¹⁸⁵ Again, I iterate that this is likely to the elites who would actually have access to the texts.

between the Israelites and the Phoenicians.¹⁸⁶ This idea is further supported by etymological studies surrounding Athirat, which reveal that the name Ashratu appeared in Mesopotamian texts at least half a millennium before Athirat appears at Ugarit,¹⁸⁷ meaning that variations of the name seem to have been a common goddess name in the Near East regardless of actual connections between the identities of these deities.

¹⁸⁶ This is a large topic which will not be further fleshed out here as my intent was to specifically address the common issues associated with connecting Ugaritic and Israelite religion. For more on the concept of a generalized Semitic goddess who absorbs local traits of “receptor cultures,” see Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 217-20. For an introduction to the idea of Asherah as Astarte, see Smith, *The Early History of God*, pp. 126-130.

¹⁸⁷ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 221.

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