Evidence for the Role of Asherah in Israelite Religion
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ABSTRACT
In the early days of Israelite religion, cultic practices and icon worship were common. One example of such practice involves the term asherah. In the Ancient Near East, asherah likely referred to a type of idol or object crafted from wood that was located near places of religious gathering. It is also possible that the term asherah is a reference to the ancient goddess Asherah worshipped in Canaanite and Aramean cultures. A third possibility, evidenced by the tendency of cultures in the ancient Near East to have little to no separation between deities and their physical representations and the non-static nature of religion, is that the asherah existed originally as a means to invoke the goddess Asherah from another location. Over time, the line between deity and cultic object would have become more defined, simultaneously creating literary confusion for ancient sources such as the Deuteronomist.

Whether an entity or an object, asherah was eventually purged from Israelite society. Evidence of attempts to do so lie in the reforms of King Josiah laid out in the second book of Kings. This presentation will explore the possibilities of the nature of asherah through the analysis of ancient texts and the language within used to describe the asherah and their function in Israelite society. It will synthesize the arguments for common perception of asherah and describe the role of the deity and/or relic in non-Israelite cultures of the Ancient Near East. Beyond literary description and analysis, this presentation will focus on material culture remains to describe the actual presence of asherah in Ancient Israel cultural practice, drawing on data from the excavations of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom.

BACKGROUND
Most scholars never considered the possibility that the asherah of the Hebrew Bible could be referring to a goddess of the same name as the names of Asherah that could not be reconciled as referring to cultic relics were assumed to be speaking of the goddess ‘Astarte) until Ugaritic texts were analyzed and found to contain passages describing a goddess known as Athirat (the linguistic equivalent to Asherah) - "ideal woman," creator of the other gods, goddess of fertility, and one whom other gods go to for permissions.2 Because of the presence of Athirat (Asherah) in other cultures of the Ancient Near East, it is tempting to think there is a connection with the ashera of the Hebrew Bible. It is especially noteworthy because of Athirat’s place in the Ugaritic pantheon alongside El and Baal, two deities that were certainly recognized by ancient Israelite religion. This study will attempt to synthesize existing evidence for Asherah in Israelite sources to determine the nature and function of the term.

ASHERAH IN THE HEBREW BIBLE
Within the Hebrew bible, the language used to describe asherah is ambiguous. The term is referring to forty times. Nineteen of these is a connection with the asherah of the Hebrew Bible. It is especially noteworthy because of Athirat’s place in the Ugaritic pantheon alongside El and Baal, two deities that were certainly recognized by ancient Israelite religion. This study will attempt to synthesize existing evidence for Asherah in Israelite sources to determine the nature and function of the term.

EVIDENCE OF ASHERAH IN EPIGRAPHIC SOURCES
Illegally excavated at the site of Khirbet el-Qom in Judah, this find features what appears to be an engraving of a downward facing humanoid right hand, 36 cm wide and 30 cm high, paleographic evidence dates the inscription to about 750 BCE. Due to naturally occurring cracks and breakage that occurred during removal, reading the inscription is difficult. It features six lines of text, which Judith Hadley has translated as "Yahweh the rich wrote it. I blessed be Uriyahu by Yahweh / for from his enemies by his asherah he has saved him / by Oniyahu / by his asherah / and by his ashelah.” Alternatively, scholars such as Sprock have omitted reference to Asherah altogether in the third lines of text, translating it as, "and from the distress as much as from the king.8

Given the Asherah translation, it seems that the phrase “by his Asherah” could mean that the dedication is to Yahweh, the asherah, the cultic object. It also features a suffix not attested on personal names in Hebrew, though this is allowed in Ugaritic, so if Asherah was a borrowed word, it is possible that it carried over. However, there is insufficient evidence to support this.

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REFERENCES

CONCLUSIONS
Asherah likely refers to a cultic object, perhaps one with lingering connections to a goddess(es) it once represented. This may reflect the continuing shift in Israelite culture from polytheistic tendencies to Yahweh’s sole place of power. In the Hebrew bible, regardless of whether Asherah is a goddess or an object, the function of Asherah is ultimately the same — to rid authority and significance from religious objects and distractions that didn’t tie to Yahweh worship. Though no definitive conclusions can be reached, it can at the very least be said that Israelite religion was not a static concept, undergoing changes and evolution of practices and beliefs throughout the course of literary and material history.

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