Evidence for the Role of Asherah in Israelite Religion

Taylor Thomas

University of Tennessee, Department of Religious Studies, Advisor: Dr. Erin Darby

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 is a word found in connection with the female figure of Asherah that could not be reconciled as referring to cultic relics (which were being spoken of the goddess Astarte) until Ugaritic texts were analyzed and found to contain passages describing a goddess known as Ashirah (the linguistic equivalent to Asherah) – “ideal woman,” creator of the other gods, goddess of fertility, and one whom other gods go to for permission.2 Because of the presence of Ashirah (Asherah) in other cultures of the Ancient Near East, it is tempting to think that there is a connection between the asherah of the Hebrew Bible. It is especially noteworthy because of Ashirah’s place in the Ugaritic pantheon alongside Baal and Astarte, that 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. Ninety percent of these instances are connected with the asherah of the Hebrew Bible. It is especially noteworthy because of Ashirah’s place in the Ugaritic pantheon alongside Baal and Astarte, that 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

Asherah likely refers to a cultic object, perhaps one with lingering connections to a goddessess (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 relate to Yahweh worship. Though no definitive conclusions can be reached, it can all 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.

ASHERAH IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

The context of the biblical text, the language used in the Hebrew Bible. The corresponding verbs, kr’ (to cut), go’ (to cut down), s’p (to burn), b’t (to consume), s’hr (to break into pieces), m’d (to pull or break down), m’s (to pluck up), s’h (to make), bnh (to build), m’d (to stand up), and s’ot (to set up) have been pointed as evidence for this idea (although the use of the verb m’d (to plant) has led to some debate.)

Excavated from the site of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, roughly 50 kilometers south of Kadesh-Barnna and dating to the late Iron Age II, this pithos was found in what appeared to be a fort-like structure that was scattered with religious relics. The inscription reads, “I say: so say to Yeha[ller] and to Yo’ash and 1 bless you by Yahweh of Samaria and by his asherah.”

Inscription at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud

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REFERENCES


CONCLUSIONS

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Taylor Thomas
tthoma33@vols.utk.edu