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 Hebrew, asherah could refer to a wooden object carved 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, worshiped in conjunction with deities and their physical representations and the non-static nature of religion, that the asherah existed originally as a means to invoke the goddess Asherah and its ancient nature. 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 ashraham through the analysis of ancient texts and the language within used to describe the asherah and its function in Israelite society. It will synthesize the arguments for common perception of asharah 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 Israelite cultural practice, drawing on data excavated 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 name (or the memory of asherah that could not be reconciled as referring to cultic relics were assumed to be speaking of the goddess Athirat) 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. Because of the presence of Athirat (Asherah) in other cultures of the Ancient Near East, it is tempting to think that there 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.

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 are a connection with the asherah (which are plural; there are three in the feminine; 11 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 definitive article is used, which makes the function of the term even less certain. 6 B. Halpern has asserted that the term asherah should be treated as a generic term for a female goddess similar to the way ba’al was generalized to refer to a nonspecific male deity.4 Following this idea, instances containing the definitive article would refer to a goddess, while instances with no article would indicate a cultic object.

Interestingly, in various places where the Asherah is referred to (I Kings 18, II Kings 23), it is used alongside Baal. In these passages, Baal is referenced many times, whereas Asherah is only referenced once in connection with Baal. A possible explanation for this is that Asherah was not originally present in the text and was a textual gloss added by a Deuteronomist author at a later date in an attempt to discredit Asherah-worship. In addition to this, I Kings 18 illustrates that the definitive article can indeed be used in conjunction with a deity, as is the case with Baal.7

Traditionally, scholars have interpreted asherah to mean a carved, wooden object based on the language used in the Hebrew Bible. The corresponding verbs, k’tz (to cut), y’d (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’t (to pluck up), s’h (to make), bnh (to build), m’d (to stand up), and s’ (to set up) (1921) have been pointed to as evidence for this idea (although use of the verb mt (to plant) has led to some debate). II Kings 23 features Josiah ordering priests to “remove from the temple of the Lord all the articles made for Baal and Asherah and all the stary hosts”. It seems as though this verse is referring to a personified deity rather than an object.

ASHERAH IN EPIGRAPHIC SOURCES

As written in Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, roughly 50 kilometers south of Kodash-Baana 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: say to Yahweh[el] and to Yo’sash and I: bless you by Yahweh of Samaria and by his asherah.” - Inscription at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud

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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 aid 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.

REFERENCES


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