

Asherah: Goddess of the Israelites
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In 1975-76, at Kuntillet 'Ajrud in northern Sinai, an archaeological team from Tel Aviv University uncovered the remains of what is believed to be an early Iron Age religious centre. Inscriptions found on jars at this site contain blessing formulae that include the astounding phrase "Yahweh and his Asherah." A few years earlier, an inscription was found in a burial cave at another site, Khirbet el-Qom, near Hebron, which may also refer to "Yahweh's Asherah" (Judith Hadley, "The Khirbet el-Qom Inscription"; "Some Drawings and Inscriptions of Two Pithoi from Kuntillet 'Ajrud," *Vetus Testamentum* 37 (1987): 57, 180). These findings present us with material that dates from around the beginning of the eighth century bce, well into the monarchical period and after the establishment of the Solomonic Temple in Jerusalem, but from sites which were far from the centers of orthodoxy and the watchful eyes of the Jerusalem establishment (William Dever, "Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet 'Ajrud," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 255 (1984): 31). In light of these discoveries, the Israeli historian Amihai Mazar suggests that it might be possible to assume that the two pillars and two altars found in a small temple in the fortress of Arad might reflect a similar theology, the larger standing stone symbolizing "the God of Israel and the smaller one his consort, Asherah" (Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, 1990: 496-97). When examined along with the frequent references to Asherah in the Hebrew Bible, these discoveries may throw new light on an hitherto unsuspected aspect of Israelite theology.

Is it possible that the God of Israel, in the popular religion of tribal and monarchical times, had a consort? The Israelite religion unequivocally represents itself as a strict monotheism that began with Yahweh's original revelation to Abraham, although many scholars date the origin of Hebrew monotheism a few centuries later, during the days of the great prophets (Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 1967: 20). In defense of this austere monotheism, the Hebrew Bible contains considerable counsel against the veneration of Canaanite deities; particularly Asherah, whose worship by the Israelites is condemned on forty different occasions. In spite of this, Asherah is often associated (Deut 16:21; Ezek 8:5) with the altar of Yahweh, and a

long series of reformations was apparently required to remove her cultic paraphernalia from the Jerusalem Temple (1Kgs 15:13; 2Kgs 18:4; 21:7; 23:4, 6, 7).

In this article we will first identify the goddess Asherah, examining the references to her in Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Classical material. We will define her place in the Canaanite pantheon, and attempt to separate her identity from those of other related goddesses. Turning then to the Hebrew Bible, we will chronicle the progress of Asherah among the Children of Israel, comparing prophetic condemnations with archaeological findings. In the light of all this material, we will then return to a closer examination of the Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom material. Finally, we will attempt to understand the reasons behind both the hostility displayed by the Hebrew Prophets toward the cult of Asherah, and the apparently persistent popularity of her worship among the Israelites.

Asherah first appears in Akkadian cuneiform texts of the second millennium (c 1830-1431) as a goddess named Ashratum, the consort of the chief god Amurra. She bears the titles “bride of the king of heaven” and “mistress of sexual vigor and rejoicing.” Another 15th century text in Akkadian cuneiform from Taanach, near Megiddo in northern Palestine, contains a tantalizing reference to a “wizard of Asherah,” which calls to mind the prophets of Asherah mentioned in 1Kgs 18:19 in the time of King Ahab (John Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105 (1986): 386). Twelve hundred years later, during the Hellenistic period, Asherah is mentioned in the Phoenician History by Philo of Byblos, and she also appears in Lucian’s *The Syrian Goddess* as a syncretistic deity named Atargatis who encompasses Astarte, Anath and Asherah (Walter Maier, *Asherah: Extrabiblical Evidence*, Harvard Semitic Monographs, 1986: 68).

By far the largest body of orderly and consistent references we have to Asherah and the other deities of Northwest Semitic religion, which include the Phoenician as well as the Canaanite, are the Ugaritic manuscripts of the mid-second millennium. Ugarit was a thriving Mediterranean port and cosmopolitan trading centre until its destruction in the early 12th century bce, and it was there that the world’s oldest alphabet, a cuneiform alphabetic script, was invented, apparently for the specific purpose of setting ancient religious narratives in writing (Alan Cooper, “Canaanite Religion: An Overview,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1987: 35-36). In Ugaritic mythology, the two preeminent male deities are the remote and transcendent

El and his immanent and active son (sometimes nephew), the storm-god Baal. Asherah is the wife of El, and Baal's consort is the goddess Anath.

Anath, who is the daughter of Asherah and El, is by far the most active goddess in the Ugaritic pantheon. Like the Sumerian Inanna and the Akkadian Ishtar, her attributes incorporate many opposites: she is the goddess of love and of war, she is virginal and yet wanton, amorous and yet given to uncontrollable outbursts of rage and appalling acts of cruelty. Anath manifests what are often cited as the four basic traits of Near Eastern goddesses: chastity and promiscuity, motherliness and bloodthirstiness (Patai 1967: 187). No ancient Near Eastern goddess was more savage and more easily provoked to violence than she. These attributes of Anath, as well as her lineage, will play a part in our subsequent arguments.

Asherah, in the Ugaritic texts, is referred to as 'atrt, which is assumed to be pronounced Athirat. She bears other titles as well: she is called 'ilt, pronounced Elat, which literally means "goddess"; and she is referred to as qnyt 'ilm, "Progenitress (or Mother) of the gods" (Day 1986: 387). She was associated with the sea from a very early time and, at her shrines in the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon, Athirat is called rbt 'atrt ym, "Lady Athirat of the sea," and one of her servants is Qodesh-wa-Amrur, "the Fisherman of Lady Asherah of the sea" (Maier 1986: 195). Asherah sometimes bears the epithet "Qudsu," which means "holy" or "sanctuary." This is also the name of a nude female figure wearing a Hathor headdress which is found on Egyptian scarabs of the Second Intermediate Period (Day, "Canaanite Religion," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1990: 831). The figure is often winged, and frequently holds lotus blossoms or a branch in her hands. However, full frontal nudes — especially those of divinities — were almost completely unknown in Egypt, but plaques and figurines of this type are have been found in Syria and Palestine from throughout the second millennium (Day 1986: 389). The prayers inscribed on these stelai show that Qudsu was considered to be primarily a goddess of fertility, eroticism and sexual vigor. In a broader and more secondary sense, she was also seen as a welfare- and life-giving goddess, and according to one of the prayers, as a goddess of the dead (Maier 1986: 86).

Already the discerning eye may have noticed some important differences between the Ugaritic Athirat/Elat and the Palestinian Asherah/Qudsu. In 14th century Canaanite mythology, Athirat is essentially a mother goddess and her daughter Anath is the deity of erotic fertility. Furthermore, in a number of the references to Asherah in the Hebrew Bible, she is associated

with Baal. By this line of reasoning, the biblical Asherah might better be equated with the lusty Anath rather than with the nurturing Athirat. On the other hand, Dever points out that at Ugarit, in addition to the epithet “Elat” that she bears as the consort of El, Athirat is also called “Baalat,” and in the Taanach tablets Asherah, not Anath, appears with Baal (Dever 1984: 29). Day states that Athirat is definitely identified in the Ugaritic texts with Qudsu, “a fertility goddess of marked erotic character,” and he further directs our attention to a Hittite myth from the second millennium which shows us that Asertu (Athirat), the consort of Elkunirsa (El), was already attempting to seduce the storm god Baal — the allusions to Asherah alongside Baal in the Hebrew Bible “may imply that she eventually got her man!” (Day 1986: 399).

Further confusion may result from the fact that many of the references to Asherah and Baal in the Hebrew Bible are in the plural, the implication being that they may have been generic terms for a multitude of local pagan deities. However, these passages are clearly polemical in nature, and we should certainly wonder if the Canaanites would themselves have described their deities in the same way. Even writers as early as Philo of Alexandria have noted that, because of its polemic character, biblical witness to Canaanite religion must be considered unreliable. Philo recognized that Canaan was the biblical symbol of ‘vice,’ which the Israelites were naturally bidden to despise. However parochial the biblical writers may have been, it is clear from their accounts of pagan cult among the Israelites that the nature of those practices, as well as the names of the deities worshiped, were many and varied. One theory holds that the “Baals” and the “Asherim” of the Bible refer to the cultic paraphernalia of the local “high places,” or sanctuaries, where the worship of Asherah, combined with that of a Baalized Yahweh, was practiced (see Exod 34:13) from the days of tribal Israel (Day 1990: 835). The evidence for the persistence of such cultic activities is contained in the frequent calls by the Hebrew Prophets for their abrogation.

It is clear from these biblical references that the worship of Asherah had penetrated Jerusalem itself at least by the time of Solomon’s son Rehoboam. His wife Maacah, the daughter of Absalom (2Chr 11:20-21), was the mother of Abijah, Rehoboam’s heir. Maacah apparently used her influence as queen-mother to introduce Asherah, who was already worshiped in Jerusalem since the days of Solomon, into the Temple itself (Patai 1967: 45). Abijah was succeeded by Asa, who after reigning for fifteen years, came under the influence of a prophet named Azariah the son of Oded, at which

time (the late 890s) Asa carried out the first religious reform in the history of Jerusalem. Not only did he remove the sacred male prostitutes and all the idols, altars and images from the Temple, but he deposed Maacah herself from her exalted position of queen-mother because, according to 1Kgs 15:13, she had “made an obscenity for Asherah.” In the Vulgate Latin translation, “obscenity” reads *sacris Priapi*, and as such it was understood, at least by St Jerome, the Vulgate’s translator, to be a phallic device — apparently one of no small stature, since it had to be hewn down and taken to the Kidron River to be burned. The task of removing the Asherim first from Jerusalem and the Temple, and then from all of Judea, was continued into the middle of the 9th century by Asa’s son Jehoshafat. However, since nowhere in the biblical sources do we read of the setting up of these Asherim, this may lead us to the conclusion that this popular form of Asherah worship was a heritage from the pre-monarchic period. Upon the death of Jehoshafat, Asherism was reestablished in Judah (2Chr 21:6). A new reform movement began in 715 under King Hezekiah and the Prophet Isaiah, but Hezekiah’s heir Manasseh allowed the re-establishment of altars for Baal and Asherah, and he is recorded (2Kgs 21:3-7) as having set a carved image of Asherah in the Temple. Manasseh did not reestablish the Brazen Serpent of Moses that his father has removed from the Temple, perhaps because “with the passage of time the worship of a deity symbolized by a serpent had become obsolete. Not so Asherah whose motherly figure must have been dear to many worshippers and whose restoration to her traditional place in the Temple was therefore considered a religious act of great importance” (Patai, 1967: 48).

It seems possible that the veneration of Asherah in the Jerusalem Temple may have been one of the contributory causes for the breakup of David and Solomon’s Kingdom. In 1Kgs 11:29-39, the Prophet Ahijah encourages Jeroboam to rise against Solomon, telling him that Yahweh will “tear the kingdom from Solomon’s hand” because he had forsaken Yahweh to worship “Ashoreth the goddess of the Zidonians.” If Ahijah hoped that splitting the kingdom would allow at least ten of Israel’s tribes to become untainted by Canaanite religious practices, he was badly mistaken — geography conspired against him. From the very beginning of the Northern Kingdom, its survival depended on close political ties with the Phoenicians — ties which finally led to Ahab’s marriage to Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon. Although this alliance primarily produced political results, it assured the infiltration into Israel of Phoenician (read High Canaanite) artistic concepts and religious styles as well. Ahab, clearly under the

influence of his Phoenician wife, “put up a sacred pole” (1Kgs 16:33) in the capital city of Samaria that continued to be a center of Asherah worship until the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 721.

It is possible that, even though the strict Yahwists considered Baal to be a dangerous rival of Yahweh, the goddess Asherah was regarded as his inevitable, necessary, or at any rate tolerable, female counterpart. 1Kgs 18:19 tells us that 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah ate at the table of Jezebel, but when all 450 prophets of Baal were slaughtered at the River Kishon — and twenty years later when Jehu and the Rechabites slew all the priests and worshippers of Baal in Samaria (2Kgs 10:28-29) — no harm befell the supporters of Asherah, nor was her sacred pillar removed from Samaria. In 2Kgs 13:6, we read that Asherah’s sacred pole, presumably the one erected by Ahab in the 870’s, was still standing in Samaria during the reign of King Jehoahaz (814-798).

In spite of their polemics, both Jeremiah and Ezekiel supply us with the only glimpses we have of the actual details of pagan rites both in the towns and in the Temple. In Jeremiah 7:17-18 the children gather wood, the fathers kindle the fire, and the women make cakes and pour libations. In Ezekiel 8:1-18, Yahweh takes Ezekiel on a tour of the pagan rituals being performed by “the house of Israel” in Yahweh’s own sanctuary, including women weeping for the Tammuz, men performing obeisance to the rising sun, seventy elders worshipping idols, and the “idol that provokes jealousy” — apparently that image of Asherah which Manasseh had set up in the Temple.

It is clear from these accounts of pagan cult among the Israelites that, in spite of the fact that they were attacked by prophets from Azariah to Ezekiel, those who worshiped Asherah in rural groves and high places (or in the Temple itself) surely thought of themselves as loyal members of the Israelite religion, and considered the goddess Asherah to be an important part of their religion. This may be difficult for us to understand today, when religions are organized by coordinating and sanctifying central authorities, but it is important for us to remember that although Israelite, and later Jewish, religious doctrines and practices have always derived from one ultimate source — the Bible — they have differed greatly over time and from place to place. Lacking a coordinating and sanctifying central authority, their precise formulation was left to local religious leadership and that except for a brief period when the Great Sanhedrin exercised central authority in Jerusalem, heterodox practices were able to flourish simply because there was no organized religious body from which to secede or which might have

cut off the offending limb. For example, “European Jews, in obedience to a certain medieval rabbinical authority, accepted the religious ban on marrying two or more wives, while their brethren in the Middle East continued to consider plural marriages legal, and to practice polygyny to the present time” (Patai 1967: 19).

In addition to biblical evidence for the prevalence of goddess worship among the Israelites, further confirmation may be derived from the archaeological data. Hundreds of terra-cotta plaques and figurines of nude female figures have been found throughout Palestine. Some are figures of pregnant women, others are pillar-like figurines showing a female figure from the waist up with a cylindrical base below. Those found in the Northern Kingdom are more naturalistically styled than the ones from Judah, possibly due to the Phoenician artistic influence. In Israel the figure’s hands hold her breasts — or sometimes a round object, possibly a tambourine. In Judah the pillar figure, again usually with the hands to the breasts, was more common, and the finest examples of these were found in Jerusalem, dating from the 8th and 7th centuries (Mazar 1990: 501-02). There can be no doubt that these figurines played a prominent role in daily religious practice, but it is still an open question as to whether they represented the goddess herself, a priestess of the goddess, a cultic prostitute, or were talismans used in sympathetic magic to stimulate the reproductive processes of nature. In a 7th century Hebrew incantation, found in Arslan Tash in Upper Syria, the aid of Asherah is sought by a woman in delivery. Such an invocation of Asherah may have been contained in the original form of the exclamation made by Lea (Gen 30:10-13) at the birth of Zilpah’s son — whom she named Asher (Patai 1967: 3536).

In the light of this evidence, both biblical and archaeological, for the persistence of goddess cult in monarchical and, perhaps, tribal Israel, we can now return to a closer examination and evaluation of the material found at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom. Pithos A from ‘Ajrud, on which the phrase “Yahweh Lord of Samaria and his Asherah” was found, includes a drawing of three cryptic figures under, and intersecting, the inscription. Two of the figures are standing, while on the right, a smaller seated figure is shown playing the lyre. The two standing figures are both distinguished by large nether appendages which could be taken for tails or exaggerated genitalia. The two standing figures are said to represent the Egyptian ithyphallic dwarf god Bes, an apotropaic figure popularly associated in Palestinian folk religion with the erotic aspects of the Canaanite fertility

cults (Pirhiya Beck, “The Drawings from Horvat Teiman (Kuntellet ‘Ajrud),” *Tel Aviv* 9 (1982): 28), and Dever identifies the seated lyre player as “Yahweh’s Asherah” by the similarity of her garments and coiffure to the almost identically enthroned representations of Canaanite goddesses found on Ugaritic plaques and other examples of well-known Canaanite cultic art (Dever 1984: 25-26).

Both the ‘Ajrud and the el-Qom inscriptions refer to “His Asherah” and “Yahweh’s Asherah.” Is the implication that Asherah belonged to Yahweh in the sense of being his wife or consort? The Hebrew *asherah*, or more commonly the masculine plural *asherim*, can refer to an object associated with the goddess Asherah (W.J. Fulco, “Athirat,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1987: 492). In fact, most of the references in the Deuteronomic corpus (eg, Deut 16:21-22 and 2Kgs 21:3) imply that the Asherah was a manmade object. Day believes that “the Asherim were wooden poles sacred to the goddess Asherah,” but he argues that although it seems clear that they symbolized the goddess, the fact that they are frequently mentioned (Deut 7:4; 2Chron 43:3-4; Mic 5:12-13) alongside “graven images” as being distinct objects may imply that although they were idolatrous, they may not have been actual representational images (Day 1986: 403-04). Given the association of the goddess Asherah with the ubiquitous terra-cotta figurines of the period, it is certainly possible to agree with Fulco and Day that the Asherim were phallic stelae, symbols of human and agricultural fertility.

Many scholars prefer to understand “Yahweh’s Asherah” as a wooden image closely associated with the altar of Yahweh (cf. Deut 16:21). Yahweh would then remain the subject of the blessings, but the supplications would have been performed “before the *asherah* in the shrine,” the prayers offered to Yahweh “by means of the *asherah*,” and Yahweh’s blessings “carried out by his *asherah*” (Hadley 1987: 59). Thus although the inscriptions could refer to “his (wife) Asherah,” they might be thought of as meaning “his *asherah*”: the wooden image. This understanding fits the inscriptions from Kuntellet ‘Ajrud which might then be said to read: “blessed by Yahweh and the wooden symbol of the goddess Asherah.”

Dever, on the other hand, takes exception to what he refers to as the “minimalist” interpretation of the biblical references to Asherah as a sacred tree or an enigmatic cult-image. He believes that the inscriptions and pictorial representations from ‘Ajrud (and possibly those from el-Qom) clearly identify Asherah as “a hypostatization of the Great Goddess” whose worship in ancient Israel as the consort of Yahweh was more than just a

persistence of Canaanite religious practices. According to Dever, both the confusion of Asherah's names, and the ambiguity in the references to her attributes, are the result of "the near-total suppression of the cult by the 8th-6th century reformers" which resulted — Asherah's original identity having been forgotten, "not to be recovered until the goddess emerged again in the texts recovered from Ugarit" — in the references to Asherah in the Masoretic text being "misunderstood by later editors" or reinterpreted "to suggest merely the shadowy image of the goddess" (Dever 1984: 21-31).

It is clear that a great deal of prophetic energy was spent in polemic against these predominately material, and thus relatively superficial, aspects of popular Israelite cult activities. To our modern sensibilities, the most significant difference between Yahweh and the other deities of ancient Palestine lay neither in ritual nor in the physical trappings of shrines and altars (almost none of which, Israelite or Canaanite, has survived into our time), but in the "ideology and morality, which was developed in Yahweh's name by the great Hebrew prophets" (Patai 1967: 37). Far more constructive, in the development of a deity with sufficient staying power to survive into modern times (Nietzsche notwithstanding) are those biblical polemics directed against the characteristically Canaanite idea of a god like Baal, who was by nature primarily immanent in humanity and therefore subject to its flux. In contrast, Yahweh was comfortably assimilated to the more transcendent El, and continued thereafter to develop into an even more consummate deity. Consider 1Kgs 19:12: a god that doesn't have to shout may be considered to have serious longevity potential.

Why then were the Hebrew Prophets so hostile towards Asherah? Perhaps they considered the worship of Asherah an abomination because, if for no other reason, it was a cult that originated with their Canaanite neighbors, and any and all manifestations of Canaanite religion were, for these stern Yahwists, strictly anathema. Another reason, and one that seems especially unfortunate from our perspective in this age of psychological insight, was that the prophets seemed determined to stamp out those religious practices that involved or implied sexual behaviour. Apparently, ritual license was a common element of Canaanite religious life. We know from the incident of the Golden Calf (Exod 32:6) that sexual rioting was the traditional response to the exhibition of statuary symbolizing Canaanite deities. Pilgrimages by women to holy places for the purpose of removing the curse of barrenness, a popular biblical activity, seems innocent enough until we read the prophetic condemnation of the *qedeshim*, the sacred male prostitutes belonging to the

fertility cult which centered on the goddess Asherah. It certainly seems possible that the services of these *qedeshim* were made use of by childless women who visited their sanctuaries in order to become pregnant (See 1Sam 1:9-20 for a possible example).

Cultural competition and a fear of sexual misbehaviour aside, there may have been a more serious reason for the aversion that the prophets felt toward the cults of Asherah and Baal. The Hebrew Prophets frequently denounced the practitioners of Canaanite religion for sacrificing their own children as votive offerings to their gods. It is certainly possible that these accusations were only an ancient manifestation of the universally persistent, if paranoid, belief that rival societal elements practice inhuman rituals. In fact, no physical evidence of human sacrifice has been found in Palestine, and what actually occurred may have simply been a dedication in fire (M. Weinfeld, "The Worship of Molech and of the Queen of Heaven and Its Background," *Ugaritic-Forschungen* 4 (1972): 141-42). Biblical references to human sacrifice, among both the Israelites and the Canaanites, are not uncommon. Although Jephthah's daughter (Judg 11:30-40), was probably not literally sacrificed, but committed to some sort of life-long dedication in the service of Yahweh, we also have the ritual slaying by Samuel of King Agag "before Yahweh at Gilgal" (1Sam 15:33) as an admonishment to Saul, and the sacrifice of the eldest son of the king of Moab upon his city wall in order to turn the tide of battle against the Israelites: "Alarmed at this, the Israelites withdrew" (2Kgs 3:27).

Archaeological findings do exist of votive child sacrifice in the Punic outpost of Phoenician culture in North Africa (Day 1990: 834), and a connection, admittedly tenuous, exists between the cultic practices of Carthage and those of the Canaanite world. That link depends in part on the equation of the Punic goddess Tannit with the Canaanite goddess Asherah, but the identity of these two deities is far from being universally agreed (Day 1986: 404). Maier, however, does equate Tannit with Asherah. He states unequivocally that Tannit is Asherah/Qudsu and identifies her as a Semitic divinity who is older than Punic civilization (Maier 1986: 115).

Tannit's name is related to the word for "dragon," so that she would be "the One of the dragon" or "the Dragon Lady"; an epithet similar to a meaning of Asherah's title: "the Lady who treads on the sea (dragon)." Because of these "marine connections" Tannit could be identified with Asherah, "The Lady of the Sea" (John Betlyon, "The Cult of Asherah/Elat at Sidon," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44 (1985): 54). According to Day, however, Tannit has

more in common with Astarte than with Asherah, but at least one inscription from Carthage clearly differentiates the two, so Day concludes that Tannit is either “a form of Anath or an independent deity” (Day 1986: 397-98). At any rate, the question of Tannit’s equation with Asherah may be moot in this regard because, according to P. Mosca, Tannit’s name appears only sporadically in Punic sacrificial inscriptions, and that “It was Baal Hamon who was . . . the head of the Punic pantheon, and it was primarily to him that children were sacrificed” (see Maier 1986: 159-60n282). So although it is possible that children were sacrificed to Canaanite deities in ancient Palestine, no supporting archaeological evidence has been found, and the theories of identity that link actual evidence of sacrifice with the goddess Asherah are weak.

In spite of whatever reasons the Yahwists had for condemning her, be it inter-cultural rivalry, sexual prudery, or the (possibly paranoid) fear of diabolic ritual slaughter, the worship of Asherah, “which had been popular among the Hebrew tribes for three centuries” before the establishment of the monarchy, continued to be celebrated with such persistent enthusiasm that, during the 370 years in which the Solomonic Temple stood in Jerusalem, the statue of Asherah was present in the Temple for no less than 236 of those years, “opposed only by a few prophetic voices crying out against it at relatively long intervals” (Patai 1967: 49-50). Although Athirat/Elat/Asherah had played a relatively minor role in classical Ugaritic mythological texts, she went on to become an extraordinarily popular and durable deity. The diffusion of the cult of Asherah (from Hierapolis and the Near East to Spain) and its endurance (from the second millennium to the Christian Era) are remarkable enough, but even more impressive is its basic consistency over the centuries (Maier 1986).

Whether the Asherah referred to the Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom inscriptions is the consort of Yahweh or a cultic object associated with his worship, it seems clear that, in spite of the intensity and increasing frequency of the prophetic demand for the worship of Yahweh as the one and only god, the Israelites combined the worship of Yahweh with that of Asherah — along with other, originally Canaanite, gods and goddesses — in many places and times from the earliest days of Israel in the land of Canaan down to the destruction of Jerusalem, and thereafter, at least, in Egyptian exile. A small remnant of Judah, languishing in exile in Egypt after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, delivered the most poignant defense of Asherism recorded in the Hebrew Bible. When Jeremiah

attempted to convince them that the national catastrophe which had befallen them was a punishment for their love of idolatry, and that they would perish in Egypt if they did not repent (Jmh 44:15-19), a great crowd of men and women rejected Jeremiah's admonition, saying that as long as they had offered libations and made cakes for the Queen of Heaven that their lives had been safe and full, but since the rites they celebrated had been outlawed they had been destitute and had "perished either by sword or by famine."

If we are to apply Newman's standard of "chronic vigour" as one of the marks that distinguishes a genuine religious practice from a corruption, the ancient Hebrew veneration of Asherah would certainly pass the test. The recent culture-wide increase in the appreciation of the feminine and the resulting insights have gone a long way to explain the persistence of Asheran devotion in ancient Palestine: the intrinsic value of the feminine in our image of the divine.