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ASHERAH AS AN ISRAELITE GODDESS: DEBUNKING THE CULT OBJECT MYTH

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I. Introduction

Asherah¹ is a mysterious word mentioned 40 times throughout the Hebrew Bible, primarily found in the Book of Kings and Chronicles. When Asherah is mentioned, the people are usually condemned for “making” or “planting” Asherah(s) and commanded to “chop” or “burn” them.² But why is Asherah condemned? The judgment of the Hebrew Bible, its writers, and editors seems clear, but there is no explanation of why God hates (the) Asherah(s). While nearly universally condemning Asherah, the Hebrew Bible avoids describing anything about Asherah, besides connecting the term to wood or trees and suggesting that it was forbidden; yet used in worship. Furthermore, the hated Asherah is often found side by side with Ba’al. While Ba’al literally translates as “lord,” the word is widely accepted to be the epithet of a Semitic deity that the Bible’s monotheistic narrative decried as the main other, the main “false god.”³

To begin to demystify Asherah, it is helpful to turn first to translations because scholars use early translations to help understand mysterious words. However, this method is inherently flawed because no translation can be a true translation, but each is rather an interpretation of the original text. The first translation of the Bible, the Septuagint, often translates Asherah as “alsos” or grove, treating Asherah not as a proper noun, but as a word to be translated. The Latin Vulgate similarly uses the translation “lucos,” a sacred grove.⁴ Even the King James Bible, a popular English Christian translation still used today, translates Asherah as “grove.”⁵ Even the prestigious Jewish Mishnah or “Oral Tradition” understands Asherah as connected to trees.⁶ Although some early modern Biblical scholars such as G. A. Barton and Abraham Keunen sought to understand Asherah as a goddess, most scholars thought Asherah was a variation of Astarte, the Hellenized name for Ishtar; a Babylonian goddess (of Sumerian origin) that presided over love, war, and fertility.⁷ Notably, W. Robertson Smith was one of the early few scholars to argue that Asherah meant no more than a wooden pole, lacking any divine associations.⁸

However, this interpretation was challenged when a local of Ras Shamrah, Syria in 1929 stumbled on the ruins of the powerful North Canaanite city-state, Ugarit.⁹ In many of the tablets uncovered at this revolutionary site, particularly the Ba’al cycle, Athirat is portrayed as the queen and consort of the chief deity El, “Mother of the Gods” and “Lady of the Sea/or Day.”¹⁰ When scholars realized that Asherah is the Hebraization of the Ugaritic Athirat, it shattered previous

¹ There is great scholastic debate over whether to capitalize the initial a Asherah, as Hebrew does not capitalize letters. Typically, when Asherah is perceived as a deity, the A is capitalized and when asherah is perceived as not a deity, but an object, the “a” is not capitalized. Because of my thesis, I shall use the capital Asherah spelling except when discussing other scholars’ opinions.

² Steve A. Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2007), 112.

³ Yehezkel Kaufmann, “The Bible and Mythological Polytheism,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 70, no. 3 (September 1951) : 180.

⁴ William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Ederman Publishing, 2005), 102.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Judith Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press 2000) 4.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hadley, “The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah,” 7; Dever, *Did God Have a Wife*, 209.

¹⁰ Hadley, “The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah,” 39-40; Dever, *Did God Have a Wife*, 186; Tilde Binger, *Asherah*, (Sheffield; Sheffield Academic Press 1997), 43-63.

misconceptions of Asherah.¹¹ The Asherah of the Hebrew Bible was severed from the goddess Astarte because in Ugarit, both had different names, personalities, and domains.¹² Furthermore, how could Athirat, a powerful Ugaritic goddess, become Asherah, a mere wooden pole or tree? Modern scholars argued that between the fall of Ugarit (1200 BCE) to the canonization of the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites forgot her divinity and began to only worship her symbol, this so called sacred pole or tree.¹³

This interpretation was once again challenged by strikingly similar inscriptions found at Khirbet el Qom in modern Israel/Palestine and Kuntillet 'Ajrud in the Sinai near modern Israel.¹⁴ These ask "YHVH and his Asherah" for blessing.¹⁵ Even when the evidence was increasingly stacked against them, many conservative Biblical scholars preferred the traditional Biblical explanation and refused to recognize Asherah.¹⁶ Instead, they explained this undeniable connection between YHVH and Asherah by suggesting that Asherah(s) were venerated as part of the YHVH cult and represented YHVH's fertility aspects.¹⁷ But how do we draw the line between veneration and worship?

In what follows, I will argue that Asherah is a Goddess who was worshipped by the Israelites in the Iron Age II (10th-6th century BCE). Through a synthesis of archeological and textual analysis, as well as examining many scholars' opinions, I will debunk the myth of Asherah as a cult object of YHVH and will reconstruct a more historically Asherah. I will examine the archaeological evidence that proves Asherah was worshipped as a goddess in the Southern Levant, and I will analyze biblical references to Asherah to conclude that the language that discusses "burning" or "chopping" Asherah is the later biblical writers' attempt to objectify the Goddess Asherah with her symbols and artistic representations.

II. Archaeological Finds

Other than Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet 'Ajrud, most Asherah scholarship tends to ignore clear archaeological evidence that Asherah was worshipped as a goddess by the ancient Israelites.¹⁸ This seems to be a combination of an unwillingness to acknowledge Asherah's divinity in Iron Age II Israel and a bias against material culture, as many of the scholars rely predominately on textual sources like the Hebrew Bible.¹⁹ There is a bias among traditional

¹¹ Hadley, "The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah," 7, 49.

¹² Dever, *Did God Have a Wife*, 186.

¹³ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 7.

¹⁴ Binger, *Asherah*, 94; Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 189

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 196., 208

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Exceptions including Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah* and Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

¹⁹ Binger, *Asherah*, 39-40.

historians that art historians read whatever conclusion they want into the art.²⁰ While this is typically untrue, it can be seen in the controversy of the Judean Pillar Figurines, seen below.²¹

Hand-made Head

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Molded Head

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Hundreds of these mysterious Pillar Figurines have been found all over Judah dating to the Iron Age II.²² These freestanding handmade figurines, sporting either hand-made or molded heads, ranged from 13-16 cm and depict the upper body of a female holding her breasts.²³ The Judean Pillar Figurines have puzzled scholars; people are not sure if they are representations of women, goddesses, or if they served as idols, votives, or children's toys.²⁴ While Keel and Uehlinger, Dever, and others believe these to be manifestations of Asherah, their evidence is tangential at best.²⁵ Therefore, I agree with Hadley and others that their identity cannot be determined because they is no accompanying inscription claiming they are Asherah or any Asherah symbols.²⁶ The Judean Pillar Figurines are a warning sign of the dangers of liberal interpretations archaeology: they demonstrate the temptation to see every artifact as evidence for an argument.

To avoid this temptation, I will rely exclusively on accepted Asherah iconography. Common symbols that seem to represent Asherah the goddess include the double ibexes feeding of the sacred tree, lions, and the Hathor wig, a styling derived from an Egyptian mother goddess that is often associated with Asherah in Levantine Archaeology.²⁷ This iconography is reflected

²⁰ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 199-200, 240, 263-268.

²¹ Sketches from Raz Kletter, "Between Archaeology and Theology: The Pillar Figurines from Judah and the Asherah," in *Studies in the Archaeology of the Iron Age in Israel and Jordan*, ed. by Amihai Mazar and Ginny Mathias, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2001), 182.

²² Ian Douglas Wilson, "Judean Pillar Figurines and Ethnic Identity in the Shadow of Assyria," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36, no. 3 (March 2012) : 262.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Notably Kletter, "Between Archaeology and Theology: The Pillar Figurines from Judah and the Asherah," 179; Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 333-6; Dever, *Does God Have a Wife*, 194; Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Goddess 3rd Edition*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1990), 35.

²⁶ Hadley. *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 204-5; Ryan Byrne, "Lie Back and Think of Judah: The Reproductive Politics of Pillar Figurines," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 67, no. 3 (Sep., 2004) :138.

²⁷ Ruth Hestrin, "The Lachish Ewer and the 'Asherah,'" *Israel Exploration Journal* 37, no. 4 (1987) : 215; Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 9.

in drawings and sculptures, often paired with informative inscriptions. They demonstrate that Asherah was worshipped as a goddess by Israelites and Judahites.

1. Late Bronze Age Lachish

In Lachish, a site in the Shephelah region of Israel, in 1934, British excavations found a temple with artifacts depicting Asherah that date to the late thirteenth century BCE.²⁸ While the Lachish artifacts predate the bounds of this paper, the following ewer (large water jug) and goblet demonstrate the existence of Asherah worship in this land. Scholars believe the drawings predate the inscription of the ewer because the words are spaced out by the art, as seen below.²⁹

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The inscription found on the ewer seems to reference Asherah. It is commonly reconstructed as “mtn.šy [l][rb]ty ‘lt” which is usually translated as “Mattan. An offering to my Lady ‘Elat.”³⁰ Scholars believe the “offering” referenced in the inscription is this ewer and that it was presented at the temple of Elat by a man named Mattan.³¹ “Lady Elat” is a suggested epithet for Asherah and also literally means “the lady goddess,” suggesting that this inscription mentions

²⁸ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 156.

²⁹ O. Tufnell, C. H. Inge, and L. Harding, *Lachish II: The Fosse Temple* (London: 1940), as quoted in *Ibid.*, 157.

³⁰ F.M. Cross, “The Origin and Early Evolution of the Alphabet,” *El* 8 (1967) : 16, as quoted in Hestrin, “The Lachish Ewer and the 'Asherah” : 214. Other reconstructions and translations of the inscription in Hadley , *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 157-9.

³¹ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 157; Hestrin, “The Lachish Ewer and the 'Asherah” : 214.

Asherah.³² Asherah's hypothesized epithet, paired with an offering, clearly demonstrates that Asherah is worshipped as a Goddess in the region in the Late Bronze Age.

The animal drawings provide further evidence that the ewer represents Asherah as a goddess. Among the animals, the prominent ibexes and sacred tree and the more hidden lion are most certainly symbols of the goddess Asherah.³³ Even a scholar that subscribed to the Hebrew Bible's monotheistic Ancient Israelite narrative would have to concede that during the 13th century, this ewer represented the Goddess Asherah.

There are other artifacts from Lachish that seem to reference the Goddess Asherah. A goblet depicts the same double ibexes feeding of a sacred tree motif, four times, with one small replacement; the tree is replaced by a pubic triangle, seen in a reconstructed drawing below.³⁴

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While this goblet lacks an inscription, the art is a direct representation of Asherah. Hestrin argues convincingly that the interchangeability of the tree and the pubic triangle in art of the Southern Levant demonstrates that the tree represents the fertility goddess Asherah.³⁵ However, classifying Asherah as a "fertility goddess," an archetype that has a long history of oversimplifying many pagan deities, seems too broad and based on sexist tropes.³⁶ However, the blatant pubic triangle definitely echoes the Ugaritic Asherah's mothering nature, as "the procreatress of the gods" or "the mother of the gods," more so than her Ugaritic connection to either the sea or the day.³⁷ In conjunction with the similar ewer with the goddess inscription, the goblet must also represent Asherah the Goddess.

It seems clear from the ewer and the goblet that Asherah was worshipped at Lachish as a goddess in the Late Bronze Age.

³² Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 157; Hestrin, "The Lachish Ewer and the 'Asherah'" : 220; Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 72.

³³ Hestrin, "The Lachish Ewer and the 'Asherah'" : 220.

³⁴ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 157.

³⁵ Hestrin, "The Lachish Ewer and the 'Asherah,'" 220.

³⁶ Jo Ann Hackett, "Can a Sexist Model Liberate Us? Ancient Near Eastern "Fertility" Goddesses," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, no. 1 (Spring, 1989) : 67.

³⁷ John Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105, no. 3 (Sep., 1986) : 387.

2. The Pella Cult stands

The earliest evidence for the goddess Asherah in the Southern Levant during the Iron Age II comes from Pella, an ancient city in Jordan, 17 miles south of the Sea of Galilee. In 1984, two cultic stands were uncovered in strata (layers of earth) from the tenth-century BCE.³⁸ Both stands seem similar to stone horned altars found at cultic centers and Israelite temples.³⁹ While the first stand is better preserved, but less decorated, the second stand is poorly preserved, but highly decorated.⁴⁰

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The goddess Asherah does not seem present on the first stand. Hadley believes this stylized tree branch is a symbol of Asherah, but I disagree.⁴¹ The mere tree branch differs greatly from the traditional Asherah sacred tree iconography. Therefore this cult stand cannot alone directly represent Asherah.

However, the Asherah iconography on the second stand suggests that both stands represent Asherah. On the second stand, there are two naked female figures, one missing a head, standing on a lion, and one wearing a Hathor-style headdress.⁴² While some interpret these as Astarte, Hadley points to the lion as sufficient evidence that this woman is Asherah.⁴³ Keel and Uehlinger seem to agree, noting that “the goddess could either be shown anthropomorphically or by using her attribute symbols.”⁴⁴ Because both stands are found together, the iconography of the

³⁸ Ibid., 165.

³⁹ Ibid., 165-8.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 169.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 160.

second stand seems to confirm that the stylized tree branch from the first stand is a symbol of Asherah. Therefore, both stands were used for worshipping Asherah the Goddess at Pella.

3. The Taanach Cult Stands

Taanach, an archaeological site in the Northern West Bank, was excavated by E. Sellin in 1902 to 1904 and then by P. W. Lapp in 1963, 1966, and 1968.⁴⁵ Each excavator discovered a cultic stand from the late tenth-century BCE that has art worth examination. Sellin's stand is the more poorly preserved of the two and is depicted below.⁴⁶

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Because of the familiar lion and ibex/tree iconography, Sellin's stand was involved in the worship of Asherah. The stand has five vertical rows that alternate between three-dimensional pairs of winged sphinxes (cherubs) and lions.⁴⁷ Near the base, a familiar scene of ibexes and a tree appears. However, unlike every other appearance of the scene documented so far, the ibexes are on a different level than the tree, and their legs face away from the tree. Because they are still feeding on the tree, this can be considered an example of the ibexes and tree motif symbolic of the goddess Asherah. Keel and Uehlinger note that ibexes facing away from and/or not feeding on a tree is a common motif that generally does not represent Asherah, and they have been found on an obsidian scaraboid from Tell el Far'ah (in the south) and seal impression from Tell Jemmeh and Jericho dated to the Late Iron Age.⁴⁸ Keel and Uehlinger suggest that Sellin's stand is a hybridization of these two motifs, but they believe it still represents the goddess Asherah.⁴⁹

Not all the iconography on Sellin's stand is clearly representative of Asherah. The stand contains a male strangling a snake on the side of the stand that seems out of place among the otherwise Asherah-saturated imagery. While some scholars identify the figure as merely man or

⁴⁵ Paul W. Lapp, "The 1968 Excavations at Tell Ta'annek," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, no. 195 (Oct., 1969) : 2, 42.

⁴⁶ Image courtesy of Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 156.

⁴⁷ Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 155; Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 178.

⁴⁸ Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 155, 215-17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

boy, Keel and Uehlinger identify him as Baal the youthful warrior and storm god depicted fighting snakes elsewhere.⁵⁰ Because there is no other explicit Baal iconography and Asherah and Baal do not have a close relationship with her, he probably would not be featured on this Asherah dominated cult stand.⁵¹ Therefore, while we can speculate about the identity of this mysterious youth, the prominent imagery of the stand suggests it was used to worship Asherah.⁵²

Lapp's stand, more elaborate and better preserved, is pictured below.⁵³

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The Lapp stand is more ornate than Sellin's, depicting a host of animals and people that definitively represent Asherah. However, like Sellin's stand, the levels of the stand alternate between lions and cherubs. The third level from the bottom of the stand is the easiest to interpret; again it features the ibexes and the tree and is surrounded by lions, clearly symbolic of the goddess Asherah.⁵⁴ Because they have the same guard animals, both levels with the lions must represent the same goddess.⁵⁵ Therefore, the first level of the stand, the nude woman also flanked by lions, must be the same goddess, Asherah. Unlike Lapp's identification of the nude woman as Astarte and Keel and Uehlinger's identification as a vague "Mistress of the Lions," Hestrin, Hadley, Dever, and others see this woman as the goddess Asherah.⁵⁶

The second and fourth levels probably represent another deity, but there is debate over its identity. Different zoologists identify either a bull or a horse under a sun on the fourth level and the identification can help determine the deity represented: the bull as Baal and the horse as

⁵⁰ Ibid; Hadley. *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 178.

⁵¹ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 179.

⁵² Ibid., Hestrin, "The Lachish Ewer and the 'Asherah,'" 220.

⁵³ Image courtesy of Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 156.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 157; Hadley. *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 172; J. Glen Taylor, "Was Yahweh Worshipped as the Sun?," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 20, no. 3 (1994) : 55.

⁵⁵ Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 157; Hadley. *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 172; Taylor, "Was Yahweh Worshipped as the Sun?" : 55.

⁵⁶ Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 157; Hadley. *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 172; Taylor, "Was Yahweh Worshipped as the Sun?" : 55; Lapp, "The 1968 Excavations at Tell Ta'annek" : 44; Dever, *Did God Have a Wife*, 220.

YHVH.⁵⁷ Hadley argues that regardless of the animal, it is more likely representative of YHVH, noting that Asherah and Baal are not close like Asherah and YHVH are, as demonstrated in the inscriptions from Khirbet el Qom and Kuntillet Ajrud.⁵⁸ On this cult stand, the iconography of Asherah and possible iconography of YHVH are the circumstantial evidence to suggest Dever's claim that God did have a wife and she was Asherah.

The second level has cherubs with a mysterious, but seemingly intentional space between them that has left scholars guessing at conclusions.⁵⁹ Hestrin argues that the blank space depicts the entrance to a shrine where one could place a figurine, a thesis Keel and Uehlinger partially endorse. They agree that is an entrance, but note that such a figurine is unfounded in Iron Age II.⁶⁰ Other scholars suggest the space is a representation of an aniconic YHVH, one that could not be represented anthropomorphically like Asherah.⁶¹ Nonetheless, the cultic stands at Taanach clearly demonstrate the divinity of Asherah and the connection of her common symbols, the ibexes and the tree, the lions, and the nude woman.

The finds at Lachish, Pella, and Taanach confirm that Asherah was worshipped as a goddess by Israelites because of the repetition of iconography linked to Asherah, the ibexes feeding off a sacred tree, the lions, and the Hathor wig. While the artifacts from Lachish predate the scope of this study, they demonstrate that Asherah worship was endemic in the land. Because the cult stands were used in religious worship, they would typically only depict the god or goddess that was being worshipped. Therefore the Pella and Taanach cult stands demonstrate that Asherah was worshipped as a goddess by the Israelites.

III. Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet 'Ajrud

Other than Ugarit, the two most substantial finds that have revolutionized the way scholars think about Asherah are the archaeological sites of Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet 'Ajrud. Both sites include artistic representation of Asherah and Epigraphic Hebrew⁶² inscriptions that mention Asherah in conjunction with YHVH in a blessing.⁶³ While these finds initially appear promising to unlocking what/who Asherah was during Iron Age II (the 10th-6th centuries BCE), a host of complications raises more questions than answers; accompanying art coupled with nearly illegible inscriptions and complicated grammar make the finds difficult to comprehend.⁶⁴ Scholastic interpretations are further flawed because they often ignore the accompanying art that may shed light on the inscription, such as Binger or Wiggins's short chapter, or fail to give an unbiased analysis, such as Dever's brief 2005 analysis.⁶⁵

⁵⁷ Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 157-8; Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 172; Taylor, "Was Yahweh Worshiped as the Sun?" : 55; Lapp, "The 1968 Excavations at Tell Ta'annek" : 44.

⁵⁸ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 173.

⁵⁹ Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 157; Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 174; Taylor, "Was Yahweh Worshiped as the Sun?" : 55-9.

⁶⁰ Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 157.

⁶¹ Taylor, "Was Yahweh Worshiped as the Sun?," 58.

⁶² The alphabet that predates the modern Aramaic block/square Hebrew alphabet.

⁶³ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 189.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Binger, *Asherah*, 96-109; Dever, *Did God Have a Wife*, 160-167; Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 189-207.

Regardless of the struggles involved in the interpretation of these sites, they provide a crucial perspective on Asherah in popular religion. While unable to honor the entire host of scholastic opinions because of limited space and scope, I will first analyze the art in detail before discussing the inscriptions together to demonstrate that Asherah was worshipped and thought of as a goddess in Iron Age II.

1. Discussion of the Art

While Dever's analysis of Khirbet el-Qom in *Did God Have a Wife* is forcefully interpreted to prove his thesis without real scholarly analysis, he was the first scholar to publish photographs, sketches, and analysis of the Khirbet el-Qom site in 1969, making him an invaluable resource on the find.⁶⁶ In the ancient Judean Hills, the homeland of the early Israelites, and close to the modern West Bank cities of Lachish and Hebron, Khirbet el-Qom is a site with two tombs and various inscriptions within them, dating to the 8th century.⁶⁷ One inscription mentions Asherah, and it is displayed below.⁶⁸

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The hand of Khirbet el-Qom is almost as controversial as the accompanying inscription (which will be discussed below), but it may be linked to Asherah. It is generally believed to be an amulet and to have an apotropaic function, to ward off evil forces.⁶⁹ Dever compares the hand to the "Hand of Fatima," a Hamsa, an apotropaic symbol in the Muslim and Jewish world, and

⁶⁶ William G. Dever, "Iron Age Epigraphic Material From Khirbet El-Qom," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 40/41 (1969-1970): 139-204.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 139-140; Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 84.

⁶⁸ Photo courtesy of Dever, "Iron Age Epigraphic Material From Khirbet El-Qom," 204.

⁶⁹ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 104; Baruch Margalit, "Some Observations on the Inscription and Drawing from Khirbet el-Qôm," *Vetus Testamentum* 39, 373; Dever, "Iron Age Epigraphic Material From Khirbet El-Qom," 169.

later suggests that the hand is a depiction of the hand of YHVH.⁷⁰ Binger similarly concludes, “the hand is a symbol of Asherah in her role as a protective goddess.”⁷¹ Whether the hand is merely an amulet or the hand of a deity, it has an apotropaic function that seems to relate to the inscription, although the art of Khirbet-el Qom is not definitively linked to Asherah.

However, the art of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud depicts both standard Asherah iconography and other religious art that suggests Asherah was worshipped as a goddess. Excavated six years after Khirbet el-Qom and dated to the end of the ninth/beginning of the eighth-century BCE, there are two buildings, pottery fragments, and the plethora of drawings and inscriptions found at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud in the northern Sinai.⁷² The excavator, archaeologist Ze’ev Meshel, concluded that the abundance of references to deities found demonstrate that the site must have served as a wayside shrine.⁷³ However, Hadley argues that site could not be a shrine, which “usually implies the local residence of the deity,” because the inscriptions of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud mention other locations and are in both Hebrew and Phoenician.⁷⁴ She concludes that the site is instead a desert way station.⁷⁵ Regardless of the nature of the site, two large pithoi (storage jars) covered with Hebrew inscriptions and drawings and a plaster-based inscription demonstrate the presence of Asherah by early Israelites.

A fragment of Pithos A with drawing and inscription is below.⁷⁶

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Unlike the hand at Khirbet el-Qom, Pithos A has fragments with many different drawings that may further elucidate what Asherah means in this inscription. The inscription above is found in the midst of the three figures (seen in the image above) and many scholars therefore argue that

⁷⁰ Dever, “Iron Age Epigraphic Material From Khirbet El-Qom,” 169; Dever, *Did God Have a Wife*, 132-3.

⁷¹ Binger, *Asherah*, 100.

⁷² Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 106.

⁷³ Ze’ev Meshel, “An Israelite Religious Center in Northern Sinai,” *Expedition* 20, 54.

⁷⁴ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 108-9.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Photo courtesy of Ze’ez Meshel, “An Israelite Religious Center in Northern Sinai,” *Expedition* 20, 53.

the inscription or the drawings are “commentary” on each other.⁷⁷ Although tempting, it is impossible to confirm so it is more beneficial to analyze the art and inscription separately.

The identity of the three figures is the most debated element among the scholarly community. Many scholars identify the two standing figures as YHVH and Asherah, viewing the animalistic faces as bovine and therefore linked to YHVH and Asherah worship in Samaria.⁷⁸ However, Keel and Uehlinger refute this point by stating that bovines are almost never portrayed from a frontal view in Near Eastern two-dimensional artistic works.⁷⁹ Supported by many other scholars, Keel and Uehlinger suggest instead that both figures are the minor Egyptian deity Bes⁸⁰, because the god was often represented with both male and female sexual organs.⁸¹ Meshel identifies them as a seated woman playing a lyre on the right, Bes in the center, and an unidentified deity on the right, but also suggests that two of the figures represent “Yahweh and his consort,” without specifying which figure is which.⁸² While Dever is among the scholars who see the pair as Bes figures, he sees the lyre player as Asherah, the goddess and consort of YHVH, an argument hotly contested by Hadley, who interprets the figure as male, and Keel and Uehlinger, who argue that the figure must be human.⁸³ While it is tempting to read Asherah into this puzzling drawing, I believe that, without her standard iconography, it is impossible to say this is definitive evidence of her worship.

On the other hand, the art cannot be ignored. Wiggins appears to dismiss the drawings as merely Bes figures, arguing that “they are not high art” and states they lack sufficient detail for analysis.⁸⁴ Wiggins’ comment demonstrates a common trend among many Asherah scholars: focusing more on the limited textual based evidence and ignoring the rich host of art that can inform the identity of Asherah. While I disagree with Wiggins’ opinion on the drawing, I agree that there is not sufficient detail to confirm any of the figures’ identities. However, I believe that the two frontal figures are representations of the Egyptian deity Bes because of their

⁷⁷ Ibid., 120.

⁷⁸ M. D. Coogan, “Canaanite Origins and Lineage: Reflections on the Religion of Ancient Israel,” *AIR*, 119, quoted in Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 136; M Gilula, “To Yahweh Shomron and his Asherah,” *Shnaton* 3, 129-135; K. Koch, “Aschera als Himmelskönigin in Jerusalem,” *UF* 20, 100, quoted in Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 136; B Margalit, “The Meaning and Significance of Asherah,” *VT* 40, 275-7, quoted in Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 136; P. K. McCarter, “Aspects of the Religion of the Israelite Monarchy: Biblical and Epigraphic Data,” *AIR*, 146-7, quoted in Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 136-7; W. D. Whitt, “The Divorce of Yahweh and Asherah in Hos 2,4-7.12ff,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 6/1, 47, quoted in Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 136.

⁷⁹ Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 218.

⁸⁰ Bes is a minor Egyptian household protective god who often served an apotropaic function to drive off evil.

⁸¹ Ibid.; Beck, “The Drawings from Horvat Teiman (Kuntillet’Ajrud),” *TA* 9, 29, quoted in Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 137; William G. Dever, “Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet ‘Ajrūd,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 255 (Summer, 1984), 25; Lemaire, “Who or What was Yahweh’s Asherah?,” *BAR* 10/6, 46, quoted in Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 137.

⁸² Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 120.

⁸³ Dever, “Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet ‘Ajrūd,” 21-2; Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 148-9; Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 224.

⁸⁴ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 199.

androgynous and similar appearance. I am swayed by Dever's assertion that the seated figure is a depiction of Asherah because of the throne-like chair, but it cannot be counted as a representation of Asherah because it lacks Asherah's typical iconography as discussed above.

While there is intense analysis of the admittedly perplexing scene above, there is less scholastic analysis of the other images found on this same pithos including the drawing below.⁸⁵

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Many scholars and I agree that the above drawing depicts Asherah because of the ibexes feeding on a sacred tree and lion iconography. Hestrin says this drawing and the symbols of the ibexes, sacred tree and lion echoes many similar representations of Asherah in Egypt and Ugarit, but notes the grammatical issues that will be discussed below.⁸⁶ Although Keel and Uehlinger do not believe the artist is an Israelite, they note, in support of Hestrin, the lion's tail hangs in this drawing and that is therefore not a roaring guard lion, but part of the "*transparent* reference to the goddess."⁸⁷ Even Hadley, who otherwise does not see Asherah the goddess represented on this pithos, agrees.⁸⁸ While Wiggins argues that Asherah has no link to lions, he is in the minority and has never published a scholastic opinion on this drawing or analyzed the archaeology of Asherah closely.⁸⁹ I do not believe that a lion alone can be identified as a definite symbol of Asherah because many other Near Eastern goddesses, such as the Babylonian Ishtar/Levant Astarte, have more concrete links to lions. However, in the context of the double ibexes and the sacred tree, I subscribe to Hestrin, Hadley, and Keel and Uehlinger's and others' belief that the entire drawing, including the lion, is a representation of the goddess Asherah,

⁸⁵ Beck, "The Drawings from Horvat Teiman (Kuntillet'Ajrud)," *TA* 9.

⁸⁶ Hestrin, "The Lachish Ewer and the 'Asherah,'" 220-221.

⁸⁷ Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 217.

⁸⁸ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 153.

⁸⁹ Steve A. Wiggins, "The Myth of Asherah: Lion Lady and Serpent Goddess," *UF* 23, 389.

which I see as further support of reading the accompanying inscription as a reference to Asherah as a goddess.⁹⁰ An analysis of pithos A must include this third drawing.⁹¹

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In the context of the other Asherah imagery, it is possible that this too is a representation of the Goddess. While some scholars believe that this motif represents Asherah as a goddess, Keel and Uehlinger believe that this motif is more strongly a symbol of other Levantine goddesses, Anat and/or Astarte, than Asherah.⁹² It is widely accepted that the drawings on Pithos A are unconnected and probably drawn by different people, perhaps of different nationalities, as paintings overlap and are not all in the same orientation.⁹³ Regardless, Keel and Uehlinger suggest that Pithos A does have “a kind of ‘*asherah* atmosphere.’”⁹⁴ I agree that Asherah is represented here because her standard iconography covers the rest of this Pithos A. Perhaps this is an Asherah pithos.

Pithos B has even more mysterious art that can be found below.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Dever, “Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet ‘Ajrûd,” 27.

⁹¹ Beck, “The Drawings from Horvat Teiman (Kuntillet’Ajrud),” *TA* 9.

⁹² Dever, “Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet ‘Ajrûd,” 27; S. Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder: Nachrichten von darstellender Kunst im Alten Testament*, OBO 74, 30, quoted in Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 154; Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 241.

⁹³ Dever, “Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet ‘Ajrûd,” 26; Beck, “The Drawings from Horvat Teiman (Kuntillet’Ajrud),” 43, quoted in Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 154; Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 212.

⁹⁴ Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 241.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 214.

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Pithos B has a host of seemingly unrelated images though it appears to have an air of divinity. Dever sees the people in a line as a procession of worshippers, a classification that many scholars use without providing greater detail, although Keel and Uehlinger add that it does not adhere to a Syro-Phoenician artistic canon like the other drawings on Pithos B do, like the archer.⁹⁶ Furthermore, they argue that it is the closest drawing to the meaning of the inscriptions, as it is undeniably religious.⁹⁷ The only parallel between the two pithoi is the suckling cow motif, albeit incomplete on these pithoi, that represents Asherah. The other animals and archer belong to the Assyrian royal iconography, which Hadley suggests is more reminiscent of hunting or battle than religious practice.⁹⁸ However, I believe the procession of worshippers and the suckling cow images, as symbols of ancient Semitic religion, demonstrate a religious atmosphere. In the context of the site, the inscriptions, and the other art, they must represent Asherah.

2. Discussion of the Inscriptions

The art of Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet Ajrud may be hard to interpret, but it is preserved much better than the accompanying inscriptions that mention Asherah. The Khirbet el-Qom inscription is challenging to read due to natural cracks in the stone, the mixed quality of letter incisions, retraced letters sometimes referred to as “ghost images;” essentially, a surplus of lines other than the actual words.⁹⁹ Furthermore, while Dever suggests the inscription may not be a true inscription, but merely ancient graffiti somebody carved with a pointed stick, it still can

⁹⁶ Dever, “Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet ‘Ajrūd,” 29; Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 225.

⁹⁷ Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 242.

⁹⁸ Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 215; Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 154.

⁹⁹ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 84-85.

help illuminate religious beliefs of the time.¹⁰⁰ Because it is so difficult to read, many scholars read the inscription differently. For instance, Dever's first interpretation of the inscription does not include Asherah at all.¹⁰¹ Seven years after the find, Lemaire's reexamination and translation is the first to find Asherah in the inscription.¹⁰² Many scholars well versed in Classical Hebrew have debated the translation of the inscription without reaching a consensus.¹⁰³ Instead of debating reconstructions and translations, I would rather examine translations that significantly differ from one another, particularly in their interpretation of Asherah. While over fifteen translations exist, Hadley's translation is the only I have found that is used by other scholars, and I will therefore base my analysis around hers depicted below.¹⁰⁴ Hadley's reconstruction, using the Latin alphabet, and translations are below:

“ryhw. h 'šr. ktbh brk. 'ryhw. lyhwh wmsryh l 'šrth hwš'lh l 'nyhw l 'šrth wl' []rth
Uriyahu the rich wrote it. Blessed be Uriyahu by Yahweh. For from his enemies by his
(YHWH's) **asherah** he (YHWH) has saved him by Oniyahu and by his **asherah** his
a[she]rah”¹⁰⁵

Khirbet el-Qom's inscription is eerily similar to the inscriptions at Kuntillet 'Ajrud that discusses the debated “šrth.” Hadley's widely used interpretation and translation of Pithos A, the text that overlaps the largest figure above reads:

“mr. '...h...k. 'mr. lyhl wlyw 'šh. w... brkt. 'tkm. lyhwh. šmrn. wl 'šrth”
X says: say to Yehal[l'el] and to Yo'asah and [to Z]: I bless you by Yahweh of Samaria and
his **asherah**”¹⁰⁶

The inscription on Pithos B from Kuntillet 'Ajrud is longer and importantly mirrors the inscription on Pithos A. Hadley's reconstruction and interpretation is:

“mr 'mryw 'mr l. 'dny hšlm. 't brktk. lyhwh tmn wl 'šrth. ybrk. wyšmrk wyhy 'm. 'd[n]y...k
Amaryau says: say to my lord: Is it well with you? I bless you by Yahweh of Teman and by his
asherah. May he bless you and keep you and be with my lord...”¹⁰⁷

A third inscription from Kuntillet 'Ajrud that was found on very poorly preserved plaster may mention Asherah. The initial tentative reconstruction from Meshel in 1978 is:

“...rk. ymm. wyšb 'w...hyth. yhwh.... wy...ytnw.l... 'šrt
“May their day be long and may they be satisfied/swear... Yahweh, prosper (them)/do good to
(them) They will celebrate unto/ give to... **asherah/Asherata**.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁰ Dever, “Iron Age Epigraphic Material From Khirbet El-Qom,” 162.

¹⁰¹ Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 191.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ See Binger, *Asherah*, 164-6 for a compilation of most of the translations side by side.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 86.

¹⁰⁶ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 121.

¹⁰⁷ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 125.

¹⁰⁸ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 130.

Scholars use the grammatical problems involving “’šrth” in the inscriptions from Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet Ajrud to suggest that it cannot represent a goddess. The most problematic issue in reading the šrth as the divine name of the Israelite goddess Asherah is that appears to be the divine name Asherah with a “his” pronominal suffix (’šrth) attached.¹⁰⁹ This is not normally attached to personal names in Biblical Hebrew.¹¹⁰ Because Biblical Hebrew does not allow for pronominal suffixes on personal names, scholars who deny Asherah’s divinity interpret ’šrth here as the cult objects that Asherah was translated to many times in the Bible.¹¹¹

However, it seems clear to me that the goddess Asherah is invoked and worshipped in these inscriptions. Some explanations only apply to one or two of the inscriptions and therefore do not solve the question of the pronominal suffix. I do not like Margalit’s controversial reconstruction of Pithos A’s inscription, reading the inscription instead as “’šrt,” because it feels like an attempt to avoid this same problematic pronominal suffix “h.”¹¹² I prefer to reconstruct and interpret the inscription on Pithos A as ’šrth because it is parallel to the other inscriptions. For the Kuntillet Ajrud inscriptions, Hadley suggests that the pronominal suffix could be translated as “asherah of it,” i.e. of Samaria or Teman.¹¹³ While an interesting and clever fix, it does not solve the problem of the pronominal suffix at Khirbet el-Qom, which does not mention a geographical location, and therefore is not a preferable fix. In general, the problem of the pronominal suffix on ’šrth is not resolved by these simple fixes that only apply to one or the other inscription, not all three.

There are four theories, championed by different supporters of Asherah’s divinity, that allow for ’šrth to be interpreted as the divine name of the goddess in all of the inscriptions. I find Zevit’s argument most convincing because it is technically based and well liked.¹¹⁴ He argues ’šrth is not “his Asherah,” but “Asherata” a “double feminization of the noun ’šrth,” a phenomenon found in Hebrew Bible place names, pointing out that it would be strange for a cult object to be parallel to YHWH.¹¹⁵ Essentially, Zevit solves the problem of pronominal suffix by suggesting there is no suffix to cause problems; instead ’šrth, Asherata is the nickname of Asherah here.¹¹⁶ Hess supports Zevit’s “double feminization” of the goddess’s name in his reconstruction and translations of the inscription.¹¹⁷ Another scholar, Angerstorfer instead suggests that ’šrth should be interpreted as Ashirtah, the name of a goddess that appears in a Syrian ruler’s personal name, though this is not as convincing, based on discrepancies in

¹⁰⁹ J. A. Emerton, “New Light on Israelite Religion: The Implications of the Inscriptions from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud,” *ZAW* 94: 14-15.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Binger, *Asherah*, 106; Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 124.

¹¹⁴ Ziony Zevit, “The Khirbet el-Qôm Inscription Mentioning a Goddess,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 255 (Summer, 1984) : 45.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Richard S. Hess, “Yahweh and His Asherah? Epigraphic Evidence for Religious Pluralism in Old Testament Times,” in *One God, One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism*, ed. by Andrew D. Clarke and Bruce W. Winter (Cambridge: Tyndale House), 14, quoted in Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, 196.

chronology and is not reflected in the other material culture.¹¹⁸ Margalit instead suggests that Asherah can take a suffix because 'šrth is actually a title, "his consort."¹¹⁹ Responding to the problematic pronominal suffix at the end of a proper name, Dever merely states "there are some occurrences of such constructions in the parent Canaanite language, and also in late Hebrew and Aramaic," an elegant, albeit unsupported response to the grammatical problem.¹²⁰ Binger appears to reference some of the "occurrences" Dever hints at while arguing that 'šrth may well be a grammatically acceptable, contrary to popular scholastic conclusion.¹²¹ Subscribing to the double feminization theory because of its wide acceptance and its technical basis, I believe these are all reference to Asherah as a goddess.

Even though the last inscription breaks this trend with "'šrt," lacking the final h unlike the other three inscriptions, I believe strongly that it is still a clear reference to Asherah. Hadley suggests that this is either the result of poor preservation of the plaster or that the "h" was never written.¹²² Either way, I read this as a reference to Asherah the goddess. If the inscription initially said "'šrth," it would parallel the other attested inscriptions, which I have interpreted to reference the goddess. If not, and the final h was never present, Hadley notes that it may support the double feminization theory of Zevit and Hess, Asherata.¹²³ If the final h was never present, it would also parallel the inscriptions at Ekron that also have the word "'šrt".¹²⁴ Unfortunately, Ekron is a Philistine city and is therefore not in the scope of this study.¹²⁵ Regardless, when subscribing to the double feminization theory in conjunction to the convincing art, Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet 'Ajrud demonstrate that Asherah was worshipped as a goddess in Iron Age II Israel.

IV. Hebrew Bible

After examining the clear archaeological evidence that Asherah was a goddess in Iron Age II Israel, we can examine the primary source that has caused the most scholastic controversy, the Hebrew Bible.

Before delving into Asherah in the Hebrew Bible, we need to ask if we can read a religious document, the Hebrew Bible, as a primary source. Ignoring the problem of dating, it is impossible to analyze the Hebrew Bible without recognizing two polar extremes: conservative religious figures view it as truth and history, the postmodern historians see it as fiction and a

¹¹⁸ Emerton, "New Light on Israelite Religion: The Implications of the Inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud" : 315; Binger, *Asherah*, 105.

¹¹⁹ Binger, *Asherah*, 106; Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 124.

¹²⁰ Dever, *Did God Have a Wife*, 167.

¹²¹ Binger, *Asherah*, 106-7. Binger's argument for 'šrth as a grammatically correct construction including Asherah's personal name is based in the idea that the modern understanding of Biblical Hebrew grammar is based on observation of sources, like the Bible. Instead of using the Bible to rule negatively against other contemporaneous Biblical Hebrew sources, like the above inscriptions, all sources should be privileged as helping expand the scholastic study of the language.

¹²² Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, 133.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 180-1.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

narrative.¹²⁶ In my analysis, I will be “reading the Bible against the grain,” reading between the lines, because I believe that, as Dever so succinctly notes, “despite the admittedly propagandistic intentions of the final redactors of the Hebrew Bible, it contains many allusions to a real past in the Iron Age, both deliberate and inadvertent.”¹²⁷ There is archaeological and extra-biblical textual evidence from the Iron Age II Near East that confirms kings, cities, and conquests of the Bible. Essentially, the Hebrew Bible, even though parts were composed and/or edited hundreds of years later, can be regarded as a historical source, albeit one with an agenda that requires stringent analysis.

There are around forty times Asherah’s name can be found in the Bible, but her name is often altered from the traditional spelling and found in a negative context.¹²⁸ Because of the metaphoric language used to condemn and destroy Asherah worship, generations of translators and scholars mistakenly concluded that Asherah was a sort of a cultic object, a mere pole or tree used in worship of YHVH. “Reading the Bible against the grain,” the repeated condemnations of Asherah can demonstrate the popularity of her worship and how much she scared the Biblical writers and editors. I intend to disprove that Asherah was a cult object and demonstrate that Asherah was popularly worshipped as a goddess in Iron II Israel based on early Biblical sources that refer to her as a goddess. Through comparing how earlier texts use her real name and neutral language to later texts which shift to obscuring her name and using negative language, I will demonstrate that the later Biblical writers, in an attempt at a revisionist monotheistic history, objectified Asherah through her very symbols of power, creating this false idea of an asherah cult object.

In I Kings 18.19, Asherah’s real name is used, and the neutral language provides a glimpse into the cult of Asherah. Elijah the prophet invites “the four hundred and fifty prophets of the Baal and the four hundred prophets of the Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table” to Mount Carmel (in Northern Israel) and then challenges the prophets of Baal to a theological showdown. After YHVH demonstrates power and Baal does not, Elijah has all the prophets of Baal killed. While both Baal and Asherah are associated with Jezebel, King Ahab of Israel’s pagan Phoenician wife, Elijah only targets the worship of Baal, suggesting that worship of Asherah as a goddess, with prophets like YHVH, was tolerated and perhaps seen as an inevitable part of Israelite religion.¹²⁹ While there is the direct article “the” in front of Asherah, Hadley notes that in Ezekiel 8, the only mention of the Babylonian god Tammuz also uses the direct article, proving that Asherah can be viewed as a goddess here.¹³⁰ It is widely accepted that the Deuteronomistic History, the pseudo-historic narrative from Joshua to II Kings, is one of the earliest Biblical sources and the theological showdown at Mount Carmel belongs to this earlier composition because it mentions Asherah by her true name, and not a variation of it like later

¹²⁶ Dever, “Revisionist Israel Revisited: A Rejoinder To Niels Peter Lemche,” *Currents in Research* 4 (1996) : 48.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ The name of Asherah are found at Deuteronomy 16.21, Judges 6.25, I Kings 15.13, 16.33, 18.19, II Kings 13.6 18.4, 21.3, 21.7, 23.4, 23.7, 23.14, 23.15 and in II Chronicles 15.1. Altered versions of her name can be found at Exodus 34.13, Deuteronomy 7.5, 12.3, I Kings 14.15, 14.23, II Kings 17.10, 17.6, and Jeremiah 17.2, Micah 5.13, and II Chronicles 14.2, 17.6, 19.3 24.18, 31.1, 33.3, 33.9, 34.3-7.

¹²⁹ Rafael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 43.

¹³⁰ Hadley, *The cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 66; Wiggins, *A Reexamination of Asherah*, 128.

sources (among other factors).¹³¹ The scene at Mount Carmel helps illustrate the tolerance and pervasiveness of Asherah worship, at least in the 9th century BCE northern kingdom of Israel.

In other instances, early Biblical writers mentioned Asherah by her real name and used neutral language to describe restrictions on her worship. In Judges 6.25, YHVH instructs Gideon to “break down the altar of the Baal which is your father’s and the Asherah which is next to it you will cut down.” While this is traditionally accepted as a depiction of an asherah cultic object,¹³² if read as “the altar of the Baal (which is your father’s) and the Asherah,” the Bible paints a picture of two altars of two gods, one of Baal and of Asherah, next to each other. The repeated references to “cutting down the Asherah” in Judges 6 are often interpreted by scholars as a reference to a cultic object,¹³³ but this is an example of the Biblical writers using Asherah’s association as a tree metaphorically to describe suppressing her cult. When the townspeople find out, in line 30, they want to kill Gideon for his destruction, demonstrating that worship of Asherah was popular among the people of Israel. In Deuteronomy 16.21, “do not plant Asherah, any tree near the altar of YHVH,” biblical scholars argue the asherah is a tree or a cultic object because of the verb and the association with trees.¹³⁴ However, the verb is not used exclusively for trees, but also for tents and people,¹³⁵ demonstrating that the verb is better translated as “to set up or establish.” Furthermore, if “any tree” is metaphorically comparing Asherah to her icon, a tree, this commandment is best understood as “do not establish Asherah near an altar of YHVH.” This interpretation suggests that the establishment of the worship of Asherah is permitted as long as it remains distanced from YHVH. Instead of demonstrating that Asherah is best interpreted as a cultic object, these verses demonstrate that worship of Asherah was popular in Israel and could not be eliminated easily, so the early Biblical writers opted for restriction and destruction in case by case instances.

Often, the Hebrew Bible simultaneously uses Asherah’s real name and negative language to criticize both the Northern Israelite royalty and the persistence of her worship. In I Kings 16.33, the writer notes, “And Ahab made/worshipped the Asherah, and Ahab increased the acts to provoke YHVH the God of Israel.” While the verb is typically translated as “to make” in both Biblical and Modern Hebrew, it can in an abstract or metaphoric sense be understood as celebrating or worship in Biblical Hebrew.¹³⁶ Combined with the natural form of Asherah’s name, Ahab must be celebrating and worshipping the goddess Asherah. In II Kings 13.6, a later Israelite king, Jehoahaz, is condemned for the sins of his house, Jeroboam, because “the Asherah stands in Samaria” and her worship continues.¹³⁷ Among the Israelite royalty, Asherah was often worshipped, but the Bible begins to condemn her, demonstrating the beginning of her objectification.

¹³¹ Martin Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien* (1943), 12-18, as quoted in Hadley, *The cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 56; Hadley, *The cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 66.

¹³² Wiggins, *A Reexamination of Asherah*, 118.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 117; Binger, *Asherah*, 122.

¹³⁵ W. L. Reed, *The Asherah in the Old Testament* (Fortworth: 1949), 32, as quoted in Binger, *Asherah*, 123.

¹³⁶ Binger, *Asherah*, 128.

¹³⁷ Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 43; Binger, *Asherah*, 128.

Asherah, while condemned, is even worshipped among Judean royalty. In both I Kings 15.13 and the narrative parallel in II Chronicles 15.16,¹³⁸ King Asa removes his mother because either “she made a horrid thing for the Asherah” or “she made Asherah a horrid thing” (respectively). Besides the discrepancies over the direct article, the fact that both texts say “Asa cut down her horrid thing [the Chronicler adds ‘and pulverized it’] and burned it in the valley of Qidron” suggests that Asherah worship was prominent, even among the early Davidic Judean royal family.¹³⁹ But what is this “horrid thing” made for Asherah? Many proponents of asherah the cultic object recognize that this verse references the goddess and this “horrid thing” cannot be their beloved cultic object; the description and reaction is far more extreme, leading to speculation as varied as a phallic symbol to an explicit image of the goddess.¹⁴⁰ Later in II Kings 18.4, King Hezekiah reforms Jerusalem and purges it of pagan symbols, including “cutting down the Asherah,” but his son Manasseh reversed his removal of Asherah: in II Kings 21.3 “he made/worshipped Asherah just as Ahab king of Israel made/worshipped” and in II Kings 21.7, King Manasseh even “puts the image of Asherah” in the First Temple. The Biblical writer connects verse 21.3 to Ahab in I Kings 16.33 and because of the linguistic similarity, it is clear that Asherah was worshipped once more, not literally made. Furthermore, line 21.7 specifies how the worship of Asherah referenced in 21.3 occurred; her image is placed in the Temple. While the Hebrew Bible still recognizes Asherah as a goddess, the strongly negative connotations demonstrate a further shift towards objectification.

King Josiah in II Kings 23 ends the worship of the goddess Asherah. In v. 4 he removes and burns “the vessels that had been made for . . . Asherah,” in 6 he removes “the Asherah from the house of YHVH,” in 7 he “tore down the houses of the priests that were in the house of YHVH, where the women were weaving, where the houses of Asherah were,”¹⁴¹ in 14 “he cuts down the asherahs (male plural)”, and in 15 “he burned the Asherah” of Bethel. In v. 23.14, Asherah’s name is treated like a noun and given the masculine plural ending demonstrating the beginnings of true objectification. However, v. 14 is a textual gloss, a later addition to an earlier narrative, because of the stark contrast in language compared to the surrounding verses.¹⁴² Regardless of these later edits, much of the early sources in the Deuteronomistic history describe Asherah as a goddess.

Later Biblical writers alter the spelling of Asherah’s name and condemn her, objectifying her and leading scholars to misinterpret her name as a cultic object. Asherah’s name is commonly changed from Asherah to Asherim or Asherot, essentially objectifying Asherah as something that is masculine plural or feminine plural in an attempt to strip her of her divinity (respectively).¹⁴³ The masculine plural, Asherim, is incorporated in a variation of the Hosea formula, “they even built for themselves high places and pillars and Asherim upon every high

¹³⁸ It is widely accepted that Chronicles is a much later abridged and edited version of the Deuteronomistic History, with many quotes that are tweaked from the original Kings. Therefore, Kings serves as the source material for the Chronicles quote.

¹³⁹ Binger, *Asherah*, 113-4.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., Hadley, *The cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 66; Wiggins, *A Reexamination of Asherah*, 126.

¹⁴¹ Borrowing Binger’s excellent reconstruction and translation from her *Asherah*, 116-8.

¹⁴² Wiggins, *A Reexamination of Asherah*, 137.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 137-8.

hill and under every luxuriant tree.”¹⁴⁴ Within I Kings 14.23, II Kings 17.10, and Jeremiah 17.2, these can be considered textual glosses that are as late as exilic.¹⁴⁵ Another spelling variation is adding a Hebrew letter, a yod, like Ashyrh or plural forms, as seen in Exodus 34.13, Deuteronomy 7.5, Deuteronomy 12.3, I Kings 14.15, II Kings 17.16, and Micah 5.13. This spelling is also evidence of later authorship.¹⁴⁶ In II Chronicles, widely accepted to be post-exilic because it ends with Cyrus of Persia ending the exile, Asherah’s identity is completely obscured with the masculine or feminine plural form in 14.2, 17.6, 19.3 24.18, 31.1, 33.3, 33.9, 34.3-7, every time Asherah is mentioned except for 15.16 (an exception discussed above). Scholars have argued that “the chronicler deliberately masked any references to the asherah which would admit to the presence of a goddess.”¹⁴⁷

The Bible objectifies Asherah, stripping of her divinity and treating her as a tree to be chopped down, but we are at a point in biblical scholarship at which we can “read the bible against the grain.” Early parts of the Bible treat Asherah more neutrally, but later biblical editors treat her increasingly more negatively. By obscuring her name and condemning her worship, later biblical editors turned Asherah into a tree and created this perception of poles based on her iconography, but we cannot be sure if this was done for their own propagandistic purposes of creating a more monotheistic Biblical Israel or as an ignorant accident. Ignoring the latter, why would later editors bother to mention her? Because she was a force to be reckoned with. These later biblical writers and editors needed to simultaneously obscure and condemn such a powerful and popular goddess who challenged the very notion of priest-temple driven Israelite monotheism. Therefore, they ran a “mudslinging campaign against [Asherah] in order to dissociate the goddess from the cult of [YHVH].”¹⁴⁸ An examination of the context, language, and way Asherah’s name is used in the Bible demonstrates that Asherah was a goddess of Biblical Israel that understandably may have frightened a later caste of a priestly patriarchy that edited the Bible to condemn a once beloved Israelite goddess.

V. Conclusion

When we put the archaeological remains in conversation with a critical analysis of the Bible, we can remember Asherah as she really was: a powerful goddess worshipped and beloved by the Israelites. Relying on the imagery outlined by Hestrin and Keel and Uehlinger, the artifacts and inscription from Lachish demonstrates that Asherah was worshipped as a goddess before the Israelites coalesced into a true nation. Because of the prominent Asherah iconography covering the cult stands of Pella and Ta’anach, we can conclude that early Israelites used the stands to worship their goddess Asherah. The close analysis of the art and inscriptions from Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet ‘Ajrud suggest not only that Asherah continued to be worshipped by later Israelites as a goddess, but that her worship was connected to the veneration of YHVH. Through analyzing the Hebrew Bible, earlier sources discuss Asherah positively as a goddess, while later sources, either because of ignorance or prejudice, condemn and objectify Asherah. In

¹⁴⁴ William L. Holladay, “On Every High Hill and under Every Green Tree,” *Vetus Testamentum* 11, no 2 (Apr., 1961) : 170-176; Wiggins, *A Reexamination of Asherah*, 122-3, 124, 129, 146.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Wiggins, *A Reexamination of Asherah*, 115.

¹⁴⁷ C. Frevel, “Die Elimination der Göttin,” as quoted in Wiggins, *A Reexamination of Asherah*, 1388.

¹⁴⁸ Binger, *Asherah*, 125.

summation, Asherah lived in Ancient Israel as a goddess beloved by the Israelites.

While Asherah is objectified in later sources of the Hebrew Bible, Asherah only began her life as a cult object a little more than a hundred years.¹⁴⁹ The idea that Asherah was only a cult object is absurd. Why would the Israelites maintain a wooden object when they forgot what it represented? If there even were Asherah cult object that Israelites venerated, they would still be recognizing and worshipping the goddess represented. As Binger succinctly notes, “the cultic representation—whatever form it took—was identical to the goddess in the minds of her worshipers.”¹⁵⁰ The history of Asherah as a cult object does not reflect a past reality; it merely reflects a century of Biblical scholars misinterpreting the word, refusing to value the archaeology that challenged their opinion, and ultimately attempting to preserve the traditional, religious reconstructions of a monotheistic, Jerusalem, and Jewish-centered Israel. In fact, the goddess Asherah demonstrates that Ancient Israel was a polytheistic, decentralized, pre-Jewish Israel.

¹⁴⁹ Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in ancient Israel and Judah*, 4.

¹⁵⁰ Binger, *Asherah*, 141al.

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