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ASHERAH IN THE HEBREW BIBLE AND NORTHWEST SEMITIC LITERATURE *

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The late lamented Mitchell Dahood was noted for the use he made of the Ugaritic and other Northwest Semitic texts in the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. Although many of his views are open to question, it is indisputable that the Ugaritic and other Northwest Semitic texts have revolutionized our understanding of the Bible. One matter in which this is certainly the case is the subject of this paper, Asherah.¹ Until the discovery of the Ugaritic texts in 1929 and subsequent years it was common for scholars to deny the very existence of the goddess Asherah, whether in or outside the Bible, and many of those who did accept her existence wrongly equated her with Astarte. Since the discovery of the Ugaritic texts, however, no one can deny that there was a Canaanite goddess Asherah, independent of Astarte, and it is generally accepted that this same goddess appears a number of times in the OT—though even today there are still a few scholars who refuse to face the facts, as we shall see below. In treating the subject of Asherah I shall discuss first Asherah in Northwest Semitic literature and then Asherah in the Hebrew Bible.

I. Asherah in Northwest Semitic Literature

The earliest references to the goddess Asherah are alleged to be in the Ebla texts (ca. 2350 B.C.), where P. Matthiae claims that she appears as a “lesser but well-attested” deity,² but it should be noted that she does not

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¹ M. J. Dahood himself touched on various matters concerning the goddess Asherah in his essay “Ancient Semitic deities in Syria and Palestine,” in *Le antiche divinità semitiche* (ed. S. Moscati; Rome: Centro di Studi Semitici, 1958) 65–94 passim.

² P. Matthiae, *Ebla: An Empire Rediscovered* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980) 187. See also G. Pettinato, “The Royal Archives of Tell-Mardikh-Ebla,” *BA* 39 (1976) 48. It is surprising that Pettinato makes no mention of this in his book *The Archives of Ebla* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981).

appear in any of the texts published so far.³ Until such documentation exists, therefore, this claim needs to be treated with caution. In the second millennium B.C. we find the goddess under the name Ašratum in cuneiform texts from the period of the first dynasty of Babylon (ca. 1830–1531 B.C.), where she appears as the consort of the god Amurru.⁴ Although these texts are in Akkadian rather than a Northwest Semitic language, they are of interest for our present purpose: it is likely that her cult was brought to Mesopotamia by the Amorites. She is usually called “the Lady of the steppe” (*bēlet šēri*) and in an inscription dedicated to Ašratum on behalf of Hammurabi she is described as *kallat šar šamī* “bride of the king of heaven” and *bēlet kuzbi u ulši* “mistress of sexual vigor and rejoicing.” Her name appears in old god lists but occurs only in one personal name, *Ašratum-ummī* (“Ašratum is my mother”).

Two further items in Akkadian cuneiform deserve to be noted before we return to Northwest Semitic texts, since they relate to Palestine and Syria. The first is a text from Taanach, near Megiddo in northern Palestine, dating from the fifteenth century B.C., and addressed by Guli-Adad to Rewašša (previously read as Ištar-wa-šur), the Prince of Taanach. Part of the tablet reads, “Further, and if there is a wizard of Asherah, let him tell our fortunes, and let me hear quickly (?); and the (oracular) sign and interpretation send to me.” The reading “wizard of Asherah” (*u-ma-an^d A-ši-rat*) was suggested by W. F. Albright, but F. Hrozný originally read “finger of Asherah” (*u-ba-an^d A-ši-rat*).⁵ Whichever reading is correct, the allusion is tantalizing: if Albright’s rendering is correct the reference would call to mind the prophets of Asherah mentioned in 1 Kgs 18:19 in the time of Ahab. The second item to be noted here concerns the king of Amurru named Abdi-Aširta “servant of Aširta” (Asherah), mentioned a number of times in the el-Amarna letters, dating from the first half of the fourteenth century B.C. The name is most often spelled *abdi-a-ši-ir-ta*, but we also find *abdi-a-ši-ir-ti (te)*, *abdi-aš-ra-tum*, *abdi-^daš-ra-tum*, *abdi-aš-ra-ti*, *abdi-^daš-ra-ti*, and *abdi-aš-ra-ta*.⁶ Both the Taanach and el-Amarna tablets were discovered before the Ugaritic texts, but many scholars at that time refused to accept that they testified to the existence of a goddess Asherah. All this was changed with the discovery of the Ugaritic texts in 1929 and subsequently, to the

³ E.g., G. Pettinato, *Catalogo dei testi cuneiformi di Tell Mardikh-Ebla* (Naples: Istituto universitario orientale di Napoli, Seminario di Studi Asiatici, 1979) 267 contains no reference to Asherah in its list of divine names.

⁴ See P. Jensen, “Die Götter Amurru(ū) und Ašratu,” *ZA* 11 (1896) 302–5; E. Ebeling, “Ašratu,” *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 1 (Berlin and Leipzig: de Gruyter, 1928) 169; J.-R. Kupper, *L'iconographie du dieu Amurru dans la glyptique de la 1^{re} dynastie babylonienne* (Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1961) 61–63, cf. 59, 68, 70, 85.

⁵ W. F. Albright, “A Prince of Taanach in the Fifteenth Century B.C.,” *BASOR* 94 (1944) 18; F. Hrozný, “Keilschrifttexte von Ta’annek,” in E. Sellin, *Tell Ta’annek* (Vienna: Carl Gerold’s Sohn, 1904) 113–14.

⁶ See O. Weber in J. A. Knudtzon, *Die El-Amarna-Tafeln* 2 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1915).

discussion of which we must now turn.

The Ugaritic texts from Ras Shamra on the Syrian coast, written in alphabetic cuneiform, are our single most important Northwest Semitic source about the goddess Asherah. She is there referred to as *'atrt*, which is generally vocalized as Athirat, and appears as the consort of the supreme god El. As befits El's consort, she is sometimes called *'ilt* (Elat), literally "goddess" (CTA 3.V.45, 14.IV.198, 15.III.26, etc.). She is the mother of the gods and as such is referred to as *qnyt 'ilm* "the procreatress of the gods" (see CTA 4.I.23, 4.III.26, 30, 32, 35, etc.). Less well known is a fragmentary text that refers to *'um. 'il[m]* "the mother of the gods" (PRU II.2.43), which presumably also refers to Athirat. Athirat therefore shared at least to some extent in her consort El's work of creation. El is referred to as *bny bnwt* "creator of creatures" in the Ugaritic texts (see CTA 4.II.11, 6.III.5, 17.I.25, etc.) and *'l qn 'rs* "El creator of the earth" in other texts.⁷ The gods are referred to on one occasion as *šb 'm. bn. 'atrt* "the seventy sons of Athirat" (CTA 4.VI.46). It is not as widely appreciated as it should be that there is a direct line of connection between this concept and the later Jewish idea of the seventy guardian angels of the nations (see *1 Enoch* 89:59; 90:22–25; *Tg. Ps.-J.* on Deut 32:8).⁸ Since the idea of the guardian angels of the nations clearly goes back to the concept expressed in Deut 32:8, whereby the Most High "fixed the bounds of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God,"⁹ and since the sons of God reflect the Canaanite idea of sons of El (*bn 'il*), there must surely be a direct connection with the seventy sons of Athirat referred to at Ugarit.

Athirat is frequently called *rbt. 'atrt. ym* "Lady Athirat of the sea" (see CTA 4.III.27, 4.V.64, 6.I.47, etc.). In keeping with this epithet it is appropriate that we read of Athirat's fisherman Qodesh-and-Amrur (*qdš. w 'amrr*) (see CTA 3.VI.11, 4.IV.8, 13, 16) and in the Keret epic we hear of her shrines at the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon: *'atrt. šrm w 'ilt. šdny*

⁷ The expression *'l qn 'rs* occurs in the Phoenician inscription of Azitawadda from Karatepe (KAI 26 A III. 18) and in a neo-Punic inscription from Leptis Magna, Tripolitania (KAI 129.1). In addition, the form *'lqwnr'* occurs in a bilingual text from Palmyra, where he is equated with Poseidon (J. Cantineau, "Tadmorea. No. 31: Un Poséidon palmyrénien," *Syria* 19 [1938] 78–79; see also G. Levi della Vida, "El 'Elyon in Genesis 14 18–20," *JBL* 63 [1944] 8). N. Avigad, "Excavations in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, 1971," *IEJ* 22 [1972] 195–96, refers to a seventh-century B.C. inscription which he reads [*'l*] *qn 'rs*, but there is no certainty that this reconstruction is correct. See Elkunirša, discussed below.

⁸ I noted this independently only to find that attention had already been drawn to it by W. F. Albright, "Some Remarks on the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy XXXII," *VT* 9 (1959) 343. For more on this see the discussion in my book *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: University Press, 1985) 174–75.

⁹ Reading *bēnē 'el* (or *'ēlōhīm*) "sons of God/El" with the support of the Qumran fragment 4QDeut, the LXX, OL, and the Syro-Hexaplaric ms Cambr. Or. 929, rather than MT's *bēnē yisrā 'el* "sons of Israel," which was manifestly a scribal alteration in order to eliminate the polytheistic overtones of *bēnē 'el* (or *'ēlōhīm*).

“Athirat of the Tyrians and Elat of the Sidonians” (see *CTA* 14.198–99, 201–2). (The presence of prophets of Asherah in association with the Tyrian princess Jezebel in 1 Kgs 18:19 has been compared, though this reference is probably a gloss [see below].) However, the proposal was made by Albright that *rbt. 'atrt. ym* means “the Lady who traverses the sea” or “the Lady who treads on the sea (dragon),” and this view has been followed by such scholars as F. M. Cross and M. H. Pope.¹⁰ Nevertheless, in spite of the wide support that this view has attained in some circles, the following points need to be raised. First, the view that *rbt. 'atrt. ym* means “the Lady who traverses the sea” or “the Lady who treads on the sea (dragon)” presupposes that this was the original full name of the goddess and that her common designation as Athirat was a later abbreviation of the longer form. Against this, however, it may be noted that already in the first dynasty of Babylon the goddess was simply known as Ašratum, which suggests that the shorter form was original. Second, this view seems to presuppose that the goddess Athirat took part in a conflict with the sea, but we have no evidence of this in the Ugaritic texts. Accordingly, it seems more natural to assume that *rbt. 'atrt. ym* means simply “Lady Athirat of the sea.” We now have abundant evidence that personal names could appear in the construct state in Ugaritic, for example, *'atrt. šrm w 'ilt. šdnyim* “Athirat of the Tyrians and Elat of the Sidonians” mentioned above. Many other examples could be cited. If, then, the name *'atrt* is probably not the feminine participial form of *'atr* “to traverse,” “to tread,” what is its etymology? An earlier suggestion of Albright was that the name Athirat means “holy place,” “sanctuary,” and this view is held today by such scholars as H. Gese and J. C. de Moor.¹¹ In support it is noted that the Semitic root *'tr* “place” came to denote “holy place,” “sanctuary,” and this meaning is attested for Akkadian *aširtu, ešertu, iširtu, išertum, ašru*, and *ašratu*, Phoenician *šrt*, Aramaic *'tr* and *'trt*, and Ugaritic *'atrt*. The goddess Athirat is called on a number of occasions Qudšu (*qdš*; see *CTA* 16.I.11, 22, etc.), a name meaning “holiness” or “sanctuary,” and so it is argued that it would be very fitting if the name Athirat bore a similar meaning. The personification of sanctuaries in divine names is well attested among the Semites, it is pointed out, as for example in the

¹⁰ W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1942) 77–78; idem, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (London: Athlone, 1968) 105–6; F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973) 31; M. H. Pope, “Athirat,” in *Wörterbuch der Mythologie* (ed. H. W. Haussig; Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1965) 1. 247. Pope interestingly notes that Nachmanides had already associated the name Asherah with *šr* “to go” in his explanation of the Asherah passage in Deut 16:21.

¹¹ W. F. Albright, “The Evolution of the West-Semitic Divinity ‘An-‘Anat-‘Attā,” *AJSL* 41 (1925) 99–100; H. Gese in H. Gese, M. Höfner, K. Rudolph, *Die Religionen Altsyriens, Altarabiens und der Mandäer* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1970) 150; J. C. de Moor in *TWAT* 1. 473–74 (Eng. trans. *TDOT* 1. 438).

name of the god Bethel, literally “house of El.” Although one clearly cannot be dogmatic, it seems to me that this view has certain attractions.

As was pointed out above the goddess Athirat is sometimes called Qudšu (*qdš*). When we find the gods referred to as the *bn qdš* (see *CTA* 2.I.21, 38, 17.I.4, etc.) it is therefore natural to suppose that this should be rendered “sons of Qudšu” and not simply “sons of holiness” as some scholars translate it, given the fact that the gods were regarded as the sons of Athirat. This supposition is further reinforced by the close parallelism of the following two passages, one of which has *bn. 'atrt* and the other *bn qdš*: in *CTA* 3.V.46–47 Anat laments *wn. 'in. bt[.] lb 'l. km. 'ilm hẓr. kb[n. 'a]trt* “But there is not a house for Baal like the gods (nor) a court like the sons of Athirat,” and in *CTA* 2.III.19–20 Athtar declares *'ank. 'in bt[.]l]y [.km.] 'ilm[. w]hẓr [.kbn qd]š* “I myself have not a house like the gods [nor] a court [like the sons of Qud]šu.” This name Qudšu is noteworthy in that it not only is attested in the Ugaritic texts but also is known in Egypt as the name of a goddess. She is well known from depictions on Egyptian reliefs and amulets of the New Kingdom,¹² especially the Ramesside era, where she is characteristically depicted naked, wearing a Hathor wig, and standing on a lion, holding snakes in one hand and flowers in the other, and sometimes snakes in both hands. She is often depicted together with the gods Resheph and Min and her erotic character is clearly emphasized. The most remarkable representation is on a relief that was discovered at Thebes and is now in the collection of Winchester College in England. The goddess is called *qdš-'strt-'nt*, which indicates a fusion of Qudšu (Athirat) with the other major Canaanite goddesses Astarte and Anat.¹³ Plaques and figurines of the Qudšu type are known from Syria and Palestine from ca. 1700–1200 B.C.,¹⁴ so that we may be confident that we have here representations of the goddess Athirat. It is very interesting that all these depictions make her function as a fertility goddess abundantly clear. This aspect of her character is played down in the Ugaritic texts in favor of her role as a mother goddess, but it reappears in the OT, where she is constantly associated with Baal and is clearly associated with sacred prostitution in 2 Kgs 23:7. This Astarte-like aspect of her character was therefore not a later, first-millennium development but was an original part of her nature, even though it is not emphasized in the Ugaritic texts.

What are the major occasions in which Athirat appears in the Ugaritic texts? Most prominently she appears in the text concerning Baal's desire for

¹² See *ANEP*, pls. 470–74.

¹³ See I. E. S. Edwards, “A Relief of Qudshu-Astarte-Anath in the Winchester College Collection,” *JNES* 14 (1955) 49–51.

¹⁴ See J. B. Pritchard, *Palestinian Figurines in relation to certain goddesses known through literature* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1943) 33–42; O. Negbi, *Canaanite Gods in Metal* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Institute of Archaeology, 1976) 99–100, figs. 117–19 and pls. 53–54.

a house (palace/temple) in CTA 4. A king must naturally have a palace, and Baal, having defeated the god of the chaos waters Yam and assumed the kingship in CTA 2, is in need of one. First, Anat goes to El to demand a house for Baal, employing a mixture of threats and flattery (CTA 3.V), but she is unsuccessful. Later Baal and Anat importune Athirat to intercede with El to grant Baal a house, and this time the request is successful because of Athirat's intervention (CTA 4.III-V).

Another Ugaritic text in which Athirat plays a prominent role is the myth in CTA 23 about the birth of Shaḥar and Shalim, the gods begotten of El who symbolize dawn and dusk. In this text El seduces two women in a scene that has been described by Albright as "one of the frankest and most sensuous in ancient Near-Eastern literature."¹⁵ The two women are Athirat and *rhmy*. There is dispute over the identity of *rhmy*. The most popular view is that she is to be equated with Anat, who is called elsewhere *rhṃ* "maiden" (see CTA 6.II.5, 27). It would be surprising, however, for one named the Virgin Anat to be a mother goddess, and there are no other indications in the Ugaritic texts that this goddess, who figures there frequently, was a wife of El. The suggestion has been made that *rhmy* might simply be another name for Athirat (compare the name of the composite deity Kothar-and-Ḥasis). However, the text certainly reads as if they were two separate women. It may be, therefore, that *rhmy* is the name of a completely independent goddess, to be equated neither with Anat nor with Athirat. It has been suggested that *rhmy* might be equivalent to the Akkadian goddess *^dsa-sú-ra-tum*, a word that means "womb" (cf. Heb. *reḥem* "womb"). This view may now be rejected, since *^dsa-sú-ra-tum* was equated rather with *ktṛt*, the birth-goddess, as we now know from parallel god lists.¹⁶

In the Ugaritic texts Athirat is mentioned as receiving a sheep in various sacrificial offering lists (CTA 34.6, 35.I.15, 36.I.6, 37.3, App. II. 16, *Ugaritica* V.9.7). In a more recently discovered text in *Ugaritica* VII (RS 24.256, verso 23-24) she receives two sheep. In the Akkadian version of the Ugaritic pantheon (*Ugaritica* V.18=RS 20.24, 19) Athirat is represented under the name *^daš-ra-tum*, the deity known from the first dynasty of Babylon mentioned earlier.

It is the view of M. H. Pope that El and Athirat were estranged.¹⁷ Whatever view we take on this question there are certainly signs of

¹⁵ W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, 73, cited by M. H. Pope, *El in the Ugaritic Texts* (VTSup 2; Leiden: Brill, 1955) 35.

¹⁶ See line 12 of the Ugaritic god list RS 24.264+280, which has *kt[r]t* with line 12 of the parallel Akkadian god list RS 20.24, which has *^dsa-sú-ra-tum*. See *Ugaritica* VII (Paris: Mission Archéologique de Ras Shamra, 1978) 2. Already P. Xella was inclined to reject the equation of *rhmy* with *^dsa-sú-ra-tum*, a possibility which he had raised. (*Il mito di Šhr e Šlm* [Rome: Istituto di studi del vicino oriente, 1973] 121).

¹⁷ Pope, *El*, 35-42.

estrangement in the Hittite Elkunirša myth.¹⁸ Although this myth, which dates from the second half of the second millennium B.C., is in Hittite, it clearly has a Northwest Semitic background, which is why it will be considered here. In this myth the protagonists are Elkunirša, which seems to correspond to the form *'l qn 'rš* “El creator of the earth” known from Phoenician and neo-Punic texts (see n. 7); Ašertu, his wife, who is clearly equivalent to Athirat (Asherah); and the storm god, whom we may suppose to be Baal-Hadad. The myth recounts that the storm god came to the house of Elkunirša and there Ašertu attempted to seduce the storm god to lie with her. When he refused she threatened him with her spindle. After this rejection the storm god went to Elkunirša, who was living in a tent at the Mala (=Euphrates) River, and told him of Ašertu’s attempt to seduce him. Elkunirša’s response was that the storm god should go back to Ašertu and humiliate her: “Go, sleep with her! Lie with my wife and humble her!” This the storm god accordingly went and did and also told her that he had slain seventy-seven/eighty-eight of her sons. On hearing this Ašertu lamented for seven years. A second fragment narrates that the goddess Ištar (probably = Astarte) overheard a bedroom conversation of Elkunirša and Ašertu and recounted it to the storm god. Whatever the conclusion of this myth, it does suggest estrangement between Elkunirša (El) and Ašertu (Athirat) and helps shed some light perhaps on the background of the OT allusions that associate Baal and Asherah. Perhaps she was eventually successful in getting her man!

In recent years interest in the subject of Asherah has been revitalized as a result of the discoveries at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud (“the solitary hill of the water-wells”), a site about fifty miles south of ‘Ain el Qudeirat (often equated with Kadesh-Barnea) in northeast Sinai. One of the inscriptions on a pithos contains the words *brkt. 'tkm. lyhw. šmrn. wl'šrth*, “I have blessed you by Yahweh *šmrn* and his Asherah.” The translation of *šmrn* is disputed. The excavator Z. Meshel originally proposed reading “our guardian,” since the verb *šmr* “to keep, guard” occurs in another text from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud involving the Asherah. In that text someone named *'mryw* says *brkkt. lyhw [. . .] wl'šrth. ybrk. wyšmrk wyhy 'm. 'dny* “I have blessed you by Yahweh [. . .] and his Asherah. May he bless and keep you, and be with my lord.”¹⁹ On the other hand, the rendering “Yahweh of Samaria,” first proposed by M. Gilula, can claim the support of an analogous text that alludes to *yhwh tmn w'šrth* “Yahweh of Teman and his

¹⁸ See H. Otten, “Ein kanaanäischer Mythos aus Boğazkoy,” *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung* 1 (1953) 125–50. For a convenient translation by A. Goetze, see ANET 519.

¹⁹ Z. Meshel, *Kuntillet ‘Ajrud: A Religious Centre from the time of the Judaean Monarchy on the border of Sinai* (Catalogue No. 175; Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1978). The pages are not numbered!

Asherah" and is now supported by J. A. Emerton among others.²⁰

What is significant for us is the fact that all these texts refer to "Yahweh and his Asherah." What exactly is meant by "his Asherah"? Three views have been suggested as possibilities: a cella or chapel, the goddess Asherah, or a cultic object. The first meaning cella or chapel, though attested in other Semitic languages, is not found elsewhere in Hebrew and should therefore be rejected. The second view, that it is simply the goddess Asherah, should also be rejected, since in biblical Hebrew (unlike some other Semitic languages) personal names are unknown with a pronominal suffix.²¹ This leaves us with the third and most probable view, namely, that Asherah denotes the name of a cult object.²² As is well known, this meaning is well attested in the OT (see Exod 34:13; Deut 7:5; 12:3; 16:21; Judg 6:26, 28, 30; 1 Kgs 14:15, 23, etc.). Although there is some dispute about precisely what kind of cult object it was, we shall see below that the evidence is strong that the Asherah in the OT was a wooden pole symbolizing the goddess Asherah. If this were the case, we can understand how the Asherah can be invoked as a source of blessing in the Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscriptions alongside Yahweh, since it symbolized the goddess. It seems therefore that these texts reflect a religious syncretism in which Asherah was closely related to Yahweh, presumably as his consort. That this should be so ought not to surprise us when we recall such allusions as Deut 16:21–22, "You shall not plant any wooden thing as an Asherah beside the altar of the Lord your God which you shall make. And you shall not set up a pillar, which the Lord your God hates." The presence of the symbol of the goddess Asherah next to Yahweh's altar most naturally suggests that she was regarded in syncretistic circles as Yahweh's consort. The Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscriptions date from about 800 B.C. and thus give us a direct insight into the nature of the popular religion so scathingly condemned by Israel's preexilic prophets. It is natural to recall the later Aramaic papyri from Elephantine in Egypt, in which the god Yahu (i.e., Yahweh) appears to have a consort in the form of

²⁰ M. Gilula, "To Yahweh Shomron and His Asherah," *Shnaton* 3 (1978–79) 129–37 (Hebrew); J. A. Emerton, "New Light on Israelite Religion: The Implications of the Inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud," *ZAW* 94 (1982) 2–20. Z. Meshel himself now recognizes that this is a possibility; see "Did Yahweh have a consort?" *BAR* 5 (1979) 31.

²¹ A. Angerstorfer seeks to find the name of the goddess here in another way by vocalizing it as Aširtah (cf. el-Amarna Abdi-Aširta) ("Ašerah als 'Consort of Jahwe' oder Aširtah?" *Biblische Notizen* 17 [1982] 7–16). However, since Kuntillet 'Ajrud was within Judah's territory and the vocalization of the name is attested as 'āšērā in later Judahite (i.e., biblical) Hebrew, we should reasonably expect the vocalization 'āšīrat rather than 'āširtā. Z. Zevit suggests vocalizing Asherata ('āšērātā) in the Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscriptions (as well as in the Khirbet el-Qom inscription), but this vocalization is nowhere else attested ("The Khirbet el-Qom Inscription Mentioning a Goddess," *BASOR* 255 [1984] 45–46).

²² In this conclusion I agree with J. A. Emerton, "New Light," 13–18.

Anat-Yahu.²³ It is understandable that in certain circles Yahweh should have Asherah as a consort, since Asherah was originally El's consort and we know that El and Yahweh were equated in ancient Israel. Similarly, the fact that Yahweh has Anat as a consort at Elephantine presumably goes back to an equation of Yahweh with Baal, since Anat was Baal's consort originally.

At this point it should be mentioned that the pithos mentioning Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah has a drawing depicting three figures underneath the inscription. On the far right is a figure playing a lyre and to the left are two similar figures, generally thought to represent the god Bes. Gilula, however, has argued that the drawing relates directly to the inscription and that the figure on the left represents Yahweh in the form of a bull and the figure in the middle depicts the goddess Asherah.²⁴ There is, however, no certainty that the inscription was intended to describe the drawing. If it was, it would be odd, as Emerton pertinently notes,²⁵ for there to be three figures in the drawing when only two are mentioned. P. Beck, who has undertaken the most detailed comparative study of the Kuntillet 'Ajrud drawings known to the writer, concludes that there is no doubt that the two similar figures do represent the god Bes.²⁶ She notes that if the two vertical lines below the nose are intended to depict his characteristic square-cut beard, an equation with the female deity Asherah would certainly be ruled out. It may also be noted that Bes was associated with music, which might account for the figure of the lyre player. Accordingly, it may be concluded that the onus of proof is on those who would see a depiction of Asherah here.²⁷

²³ See A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923) no. 44, 3 (p. 147). W. F. Albright sought to explain 'nt in 'ntyhw and also in 'ntbyt'l (Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri*, 22, 125) as simply meaning "providence" ("The Evolution," 92-97), and later he suggested "sign" (*Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, 174). However, the presence of a deity Anat-Bethel in the Akkadian treaty of ca. 676 B.C. between Esar-haddon of Assyria and Baal, king of Tyre, renders Albright's interpretation of 'ntbyt'l unlikely, and the same is true with regard to 'ntyhw (see R. Borger, "Anath-Bethel," *VT* 7 [1957] 102-4). Albright himself seems to have recognized this later; see *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*, 197.

²⁴ Gilula, "To Yahweh Shomron," 129-37.

²⁵ J. A. Emerton, "New Light," 10.

²⁶ P. Beck, "The Drawings from Horvat Teiman (Kuntillet 'Ajrud)," *Tel Aviv* 9 (1982) 27-31.

²⁷ Other important discussions of the Kuntillet 'Ajrud material in addition to those cited above include F. Stolz in *Monotheismus im alten Israel und seiner Umwelt* (ed. O. Keel; Fribourg: Schweizerisches Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1980) 167-72; M. Weinfeld, "Kuntillet 'Ajrud: A Sacred Site of the Monarchic Period," *Shnaton* 4 (1980) 280-84 (Hebrew); A. Lemaire, *Les Ecoles et la formation de la Bible dans l'Ancien Israël* (Fribourg: Editions universitaires; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981) 25-33; W. G. Dever, "Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet 'Ajrud," *BASOR* 255 (1984) 21-37. Dever proposes to see the lyre player as Asherah. However, he accepts that the two figures to the

According to the French epigrapher A. Lemaire, a further reference to Yahweh's Asherah is to be found in inscription (3) from grave II at Khirbet el-Qom, a site about nine miles west of Hebron.²⁸ Dated to about 750 B.C. by Dever and Lemaire²⁹ and to about 700 B.C. by Cross,³⁰ the text reads as follows in Lemaire's transcription: *'ryhw. h'šr. ktbh brk. 'ryhw. lyhwh. wmsryh. l'šrth. hwš' lh*. He translates it as follows, "Uriah the rich has caused it to be written: Blessed be Uriah by Yahweh and by his Asherah; from his enemies he has saved him." It will be noted, however, that Lemaire achieves this translation only by rearranging the position of *l'šrth* from after *wmsryh.* to before it, which he himself admits may seem "une solution désespérée." In a more recent study S. Mittmann has argued that the reading *l'šrth* is itself to be rejected.³¹ He detects an *l* after the *'* and reads *l'l šrth* "to the god of his service." Mittmann's overall transcription and translation are as follows: *'ryhw. hšr. ktbh brk 'ryhw. lyhwh. wmmšr ydh. l'l šrth. hwš' lh* "Uriah the singer has written it. Uriah is blessed by Yahweh and out of distress he praises the God of his service, who helps." However, set apart from the main inscription noted above Lemaire found below it the isolated words *l'nyhw* "by Oniah" and *wl'šrth* "by his Asherah" on separate lines, but Mittman fails to discuss this.³² Even more recently, Z. Zevit has examined the Khirbet el-Qom text at first hand rather than relying simply on photographs, as earlier scholars had apparently done.³³ According to him lines 1–3 read as follows: *'ryhw h'šr ktbh brkt 'ryhw lyhwh wmmšrryyh/r hl'lš'rtrrhhwš'lh*; in line 4 he reads *l'byhw*, in line 5 [] *d/r/b'g/p' will'šrth*, and in line 6 [] *'?rth*. This he renders, "Uryahu, the prosperous, his inscription: I blessed Uryahu to YHWH. And from his enemies, O Asherata, save him. By Abiyahu [?]?? and to Asherata [?] A[she]rata." As Zevit observes, no sense can be made of the letters in line 3 as they stand. Moreover, he notes that we have a number of doubled or repeated letters and with one exception the second letter was either incompletely or lightly inscribed (the exception being the *t-t* sequence, where the first letter seems to be secondary). There also appears to be a doubled *l* in line 5. Zevit understands this doubling to be either a form of erasure or more probably a way of giving magical emphasis.

left denote Bes, not Yahweh; it would therefore be odd for the lyre player to represent Asherah and more natural to suppose that the depiction and the inscription are not directly related.

²⁸ A. Lemaire, "Les inscriptions de Khirbet el-Qôm et l'Ashérah de Yhwh," *RB* 84 (1977) 595–608.

²⁹ Dever, "Iron Age Epigraphic Material from the Area of Khirbet el-Kôm," *HUCA* 40–41 (1969–70) 165–67; A. Lemaire, "Les inscriptions," 602–3.

³⁰ According to Dever, "Iron Age Epigraphic Material," 165 n. 53.

³¹ Mittmann, "Die Grabinschrift des Sängers Uryahu," *ZDPV* 97 (1981) 143–44.

³² Lemaire, "Les inscriptions," 599.

³³ Zevit, "The Khirbet el-Qôm Inscription," 39–47.

Whether this view of things will be accepted remains to be seen.³⁴

Another text where some scholars have alleged that Asherah is mentioned is the first plaque from Arslan Tash in Syria. F. M. Cross and R. J. Saley state that the script of this inscription is Aramaic but the orthography is Phoenician.³⁵ Its date is the seventh century B.C. The following is a transliteration of the relevant passage (from the end of line 8 to line 12): *krt. ln. 'lt 'lm 'šr. krt ln. wkl bn 'lm wrb. dr kl. qdšn.* The first seven words were translated by Albright as “the goddess of eternity, Asher(at?) hath made a covenant with us, hath made a covenant.”³⁶ It will be noted that Albright has to emend the text from *'šr* to *'šrt*, which seems unjustified, since we should not emend the text unless absolutely necessary. Cross and Saley present a view that does not involve emendation, seeing *'šr* as an allusion to Asherah, which they vocalize *'āšīrō* and take to be an isogloss with Hebrew.³⁷ They render the first part of the passage cited above as “The Eternal One has made a covenant with us, Asherah has made (a pact) with us.” However, it seems more natural to agree with what is probably a majority of scholars in regarding *'šr* as an allusion to the god Asshur rather than the goddess Asherah.³⁸ This has the advantage that we do not have to postulate an anomalous spelling of the name, since it must be admitted that *'šrt* is what we should most naturally expect if it was Asherah, whereas *'šr* is attested as the Phoenician spelling of Asshur (the place) in *KAI* 24:8. It should be borne in mind that at the time of the inscription’s composition Arslan Tash (Ḥadattu) was an Assyrian province, so that an allusion to the supreme Assyrian god Asshur at this point would not be totally surprising. If *'šr* is not Asherah, there is then less attraction in seeing *'lm* as “the Eternal One” (*'Ölām* = El), and it seems more probable that we should render *'lt 'lm* rather as “eternal covenant” (cf. *b'ērīt 'ölām* in Gen 9:16; 17:7; 13; 19; Exod 31:16; Lev 24:8; Ps 105:10). The passage cited above could then be rendered, “An eternal covenant was made with us, Asshur made it with us,

³⁴ Might one render the crucial words “I blessed Uriah by Yahweh, and by his Asherah he delivered him from his enemies”? See P. D. Miller, who translates, “Blessed is Uriyahu by Yahweh; Yea from his adversaries by his asherah he has saved him” (“Psalms and Inscriptions,” in *Congress Volume: Vienna, 1980* [VTSup 32; Leiden: Brill, 1981] 317). If so, one could obtain a reference to Yahweh’s Asherah without Lemaire’s emendation of the text. On Zevit’s reading *Asherata*, see n. 21.

³⁵ F. M. Cross and R. J. Saley, “Phoenician Inscriptions on a Plaque of the Seventh Century B.C. from Arslan Tash in Upper Syria,” *BASOR* 197 (1970) 42.

³⁶ W. F. Albright, “An Aramaean Magical Text in Hebrew from the Seventh Century B.C.,” *BASOR* 76 (1939) 8.

³⁷ Cross and Saley, “Phoenician Inscriptions,” 45.

³⁸ See T. H. Gaster, “A Canaanite magical text,” *Or* 11 n.s. (1942) 44, 58; *KAI* 2 (Wiesbaden, 1968) 45; F. Rosenthal in *ANET* (3d ed. with suppl.; Princeton: University Press, 1969) 658; J. C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions* (Oxford: University Press, 1982) 3. 83, 85; D. S. Sperling, “An Arslan Tash Incantation: Interpretations and Implications,” *HUCA* 53 (1982) 6–7.

as did all the gods and the mighty of the circle of all the holy ones.”

In Punic inscriptions the chief goddess was *Tnt*, apparently vocalized Tinnit. The precise identity of this goddess is disputed, and each of the three major Canaanite goddesses—Asherah, Anat, and Astarte—has been suggested. Tinnit seems to be distinguished from Astarte in an inscription from Carthage that reads *lrbt l'štrt wltnt blbnn* “To the Ladies, Astarte and Tinnit in Lebanon” (KAI 81.1). At the same time she was clearly associated with Astarte, and it is interesting that a seventh-century B.C. inscription from Sarepta in Phoenicia reads *hsml 'z p'l šlm bn mp'l bn 'zy lnt 'štrt* “The statue which Shillem, son of Map'al, son of 'Zai made for Tinnit-Astarte.”³⁹ This is interesting in showing that the cult of Tinnit was already known in Phoenicia in the seventh century B.C. and suggests that she may not necessarily have originated in North Africa but may have been a native Phoenician goddess. This therefore renders questionable the view of F. O. Hvidberg-Hansen that the name *tnt* contains a Libyan-Berber prefix *t* added to the name of *'nt* (Anat).⁴⁰ She may nevertheless have been a form of Anat, as Albright and others have argued.⁴¹ Her close association with Astarte would suit this, as would her title *Virgo Caelestis* (cf. “Virgin Anat”). Cross, however, has argued that Tinnit is to be equated with Asherah.⁴² He thinks the name *tnt* is related to *tnn* “dragon,” so that she would be “the One of the dragon” or “the Dragon Lady” (cf. *'atrt ym* understood as “She who treads on the sea”). Since her consort is Baal-Ḥammon, who is commonly equated with El, it would be natural for her to be Asherah. It may be argued, however, that if *tnt* really is derived from *tnn* “dragon,” the name should mean “female dragon” rather than “the One of the dragon,” and in any case the translation of *'atrt ym* as “She who treads on the sea” is open to question, as has been shown above. As for Baal-Ḥammon, although he is commonly supposed to be El, it is more natural to believe that he is a form of Baal. Baal-Ḥammon is frequently called simply Baal (see KAI 137.1) in the Punic inscriptions, which suggests that this was his name and not simply an epithet meaning “the lord (of Ḥammon).” Nor is he ever called El in Punic texts. Any deity containing the element *b'l* in his name is most naturally interpreted as a form of the god Baal unless there is strong evidence to the contrary. Moreover, in Latin inscriptions Baal-Ḥammon bears the epithet *frugifer* and *deus frugum*, indicating a fertility god, which does not suit El very well but fits Baal admirably. Even the fact that classical sources often refer to Baal-Ḥammon as Kronos is not decisive, since in Hannibal's oath in his treaty with Philip V

³⁹ See J. B. Pritchard, *Recovering Sarepta, a Phoenician City* (Princeton: University Press, 1978) 105.

⁴⁰ F. O. Hvidberg-Hansen, *La Déesse TNT* (2 vols.; Copenhagen: Gad, 1979).

⁴¹ Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*, 42–43 n. 86; 130, 134–35.

⁴² Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 28–33.

of Macedon, recorded in Polybius 9.2–3, Kronos is not mentioned at all and the chief Punic deity is called Zeus, which must be Baal-Ḥammon.⁴³ Possibly it was the fact that Kronos devoured his own children that encouraged his equation with Baal-Ḥammon, since this god was especially associated with child sacrifice. Anyway, if Baal-Ḥammon is a form of Baal there is accordingly no necessity to regard Tinnit as Asherah. She is perhaps most naturally a form of Anat or an independent deity.

Finally, before turning to Asherah in the Hebrew Bible, it should be noted that 'Ašīrā is mentioned in an Aramaic inscription from Tema (see KAI 228A, lines 2–3, 16–17) alongside Ṣalm zī Maḥram and Šin-gallā as one of the three “gods of Tema.” Athirat is well known from ancient Arabian sources as a sun-goddess, the consort of the moon gods 'Amm and Wadd.⁴⁴

II. Asherah in the Hebrew Bible

Having considered Asherah in Northwest Semitic literature we shall now turn our attention to Asherah in the Hebrew Bible. I shall begin by noting how it was understood by the ancient versions. The LXX rendered Asherah by ἄλσος (plural ἄλση) “grove,” whence comes the well-known rendering in the KJV. The only exceptions are Isa 17:8 and 27:9 where the LXX rendered δένδρα “trees” and 2 Chr 15:16 and 24:18, where it understood Ἀστάρτη and Ἀστάρταις respectively. The Vg likewise understood Asherah to mean “grove,” translating it as *lucus* in all cases except Judg 6:25, 26, 30, where it has *nemus* “wood” or “grove,” and Judg 3:7, where it read Ashtaroth for MT Asheroth. The targum offers no enlightenment, simply transliterating the word Asherah. When we come to the Peshitta we find a variety of renderings. It has *dehlātā* “object of reverence,” “fearful thing” nineteen times, *šetlētā* “trees” twice, *hešlātā* “molten images” twice, *šalmē* “images” twice, *pētākērē* “idols” twice, *ālāwātā* “high places” once, *nemrē* (meaning uncertain) three times, *andriantē* (possibly a Greek word meaning “statue”) once, and in Judg 3:7 it renders *astārtē* (note initial aleph).

According to the Mishna the Asherim were living trees that were worshiped, for example, grapevines, pomegranates, walnuts, myrtle, and willows (see *m. 'Or.* 1:7, 8; *m. Sukk.* 3:1–3; *m. Abod. Zar.* 3:7, 9, 10;

⁴³ See now the discussion in M. L. Barré, *The God-list in the Treaty between Hannibal and Philip V of Macedonia* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983) 40–57. At this point I should also like to point out that even if Cross's proposal that El's dwelling was on Mount Amanus (Ḥamānu) should prove to be correct, this would not offset the natural interpretation of the Punic deity Baal-Ḥammon as a Baal rather than an El deity.

⁴⁴ See D. Nielsen, *Handbuch der altarabischen Altertumskunde* (Copenhagen: Nyt nordisk, 1927) 1. 226–27, 233; G. Ryckmans, *Les noms propres sud-sémitiques* (Louvain: Bureaux du Muséon, 1934) 1. 7; idem, *Les religions arabes préislamiques* (2d ed.; Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1951) 44; A. Jamme, “Le panthéon sud-arabe préislamique,” *Muséon* 60 (1947) 109.

m. Me'il. 3:8). The same idea persists in the medieval Jewish commentators. Thus, Kimḥi states, "Every tree which is worshiped and is planted in honor of a deity that they worship idolatrously is called Asherah." Luther's "Haine" and the KJV's "groves" perpetuate the rendering of the LXX and Vg. In 1685 the learned Cambridge scholar John Spencer wrote a work entitled *De Legibus Hebraeorum Ritualibus*, which attempted, using the limited resources of the time, to understand the Hebrew Bible from the standpoint of comparative religion. He detected several meanings: frequently, he admitted, it meant a grove, but it could also denote an image of a grove, an individual tree, a temple, or the goddess Astarte. When we come to the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth, the period when the critical approach to the Bible was being accepted but the Ugaritic texts had not yet been discovered, we can detect three main views. First, there were those who equated Asherah with the goddess Astarte or her symbol.⁴⁵ Second, there were those who maintained that the Asherah was a cult object but not the name of a deity. W. Robertson Smith was one noteworthy defender of this view, claiming that Asherah always denoted a wooden pole,⁴⁶ but some others thought in terms of an image, a tree, or a phallic symbol. Finally, there were those such as the Dutch scholar A. Kuenen who argued that Asherah denoted both a goddess and a cult object symbolizing her, though the goddess was not to be equated with Astarte.⁴⁷ This last view is the one still most widely accepted today and is, as I shall argue, the one most consistent with a natural interpretation of the biblical data and makes sense in the light of the ancient Near Eastern evidence.

As I noted at the beginning of this paper, it was the discovery of the Ugaritic texts in 1929 and subsequent years that proved to everyone's satisfaction that there was a Canaanite goddess Asherah (Athirat) and that she was distinct from Astarte. Most scholars have also accepted that this same goddess is referred to a number of times in the OT, namely, Judg 3:7; 1 Kgs 15:13; 18:19; 2 Kgs 21:7; 23:4; 2 Chr 15:16. There have, however, been a few dissentients. K.-H. Bernhardt, apparently followed by A. Caquot, argues that there was a goddess Asherah in the OT but that she is not to be equated with the Ugaritic Athirat: they have nothing in common except their names, even though possibly there might ultimately have been some connection.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Those adopting this view included W. W. von Baudissin, *Studien zur semitischen Religionsgeschichte* (Leipzig: Reimer, 1876) 2. 218–19; M. Ohnefalsch-Richter, *Kypros, die Bibel und Homer* (Berlin: Asher, 1876) 218–19; P. Torge, *Aschera und Astarte: Ein Beitrag zur semitischen Religionsgeschichte* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1902); Albright, "The Evolution," 100.

⁴⁶ W. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites* (London: A. & C. Black, 1889) 188.

⁴⁷ A. Kuenen, *The Religion of Israel* (London and Edinburgh: Williams & Norgate, 1874) 1. 88–93.

⁴⁸ K.-H. Bernhardt, "Aschera in Ugarit und im Alten Testament," *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung* 13 (1967) 163–74; A. Caquot, M. Sznycer, and A. Herdner, *Textes ougaritiques* (Paris: Cerf, 1974) 1. 71.

A. Lemaire accepts that there are a few apparent references to Asherah as a goddess in the OT but seeks to explain them away simply as the work of Deuteronomic redactors who wished to root out the Asherim (understood as sacred trees) by attributing idolatrous status to them.⁴⁹ E. Lipiński finds two passages that might appear to refer to a goddess Asherah in the OT but claims that both are textually dubious.⁵⁰ However, none of these views is convincing.

With regard to Bernhardt, it may be noted that he puts forward the following arguments against the view that the OT goddess Asherah is to be equated with the Ugaritic goddess Athirat. First, he notes that in the Ugaritic texts Athirat's role is essentially that of mother of the gods, whereas in the OT Asherah has the character of a fertility goddess. Second, he points out that in the Ugaritic texts Athirat is the consort of El, whereas in the OT she is associated a number of times with Baal, which suggests that she is regarded as his consort. Third, he reminds us that Athirat is associated with the sea in the Ugaritic texts but there is no sign of this in the OT in connection with Asherah. To these arguments the following replies may be made. First, as was noted earlier, Athirat is sometimes called Qudšu in the Ugaritic texts, and representations of Qudšu have been found in Egypt that reveal her as a fertility goddess of marked erotic character. Comparable representations of the Qudšu type are also known from Syria and Palestine dating from the second millennium B.C. It is therefore clear that Athirat at that time did have the character of a fertility goddess, even though this aspect is not emphasized in the Ugaritic texts. Second, it is true that Athirat is the consort of El in the Ugaritic texts yet appears to be associated sometimes with Baal in the OT. However, as we have already seen above, the Hittite Elkunirša myth from the second millennium B.C. shows us that Ašertu (Athirat), the consort of Elkunirša (El), was already going awhoring after the storm god (Baal). The OT allusions to Asherah alongside Baal may imply that she eventually got her man! Third, the absence of reference to an association of the OT goddess Asherah with the sea is an argument *e silentio* and hardly of great weight, especially when we consider how little the OT really tells us about Asherah anyway. Finally, I would note that just as the Ugaritic goddess Athirat was the mother of the gods, so the OT goddess Asherah was closely associated with the host of heaven (cf. 2 Kgs 17:16; 21:3; 23:4). Bernhardt notes this but says that we have no idea what the relation of Asherah to the host of heaven was exactly in the OT. To this I would reply that the fact that Asherah appears to have been regarded as Yahweh's consort in syncretistic circles (see Deut 16:21 and the Kuntillet 'Ajrud material) and that the sons of God (deriving from the Ugaritic *bn 'il*) are

⁴⁹ A. Lemaire, "Les inscriptions," 606.

⁵⁰ E. Lipiński, "The Goddess Athirat in ancient Arabia, in Babylon, and in Ugarit," *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 3 (1972) 114.

clearly the sons of Yahweh in the OT, it follows that the sons of God were regarded as Asherah's offspring in syncretistic circles. Since the sons of God clearly correspond with the host of heaven (cf. Job 38:7), it appears that we may hold that the host of heaven were probably regarded as the offspring of Asherah. We thus have evidence that Asherah could be regarded as the mother of the gods in ancient Israel just as at Ugarit. In conclusion, therefore, Bernhardt's attempt to dissociate OT Asherah from Ugaritic Athirat is unsuccessful.

Lemaire's attempt to dismiss the apparent references to a goddess Asherah in the OT as simply the work of Deuteronomic redactors wishing to root out the Asherim (understood as sacred trees) by attributing idolatrous status to them is also unconvincing. Nowhere does he present any evidence for this view. It appears to be simply a desperate attempt to deal with the problem that, having argued that the Asherim in the OT generally are sacred trees, he finds a few references that do not seem to fit this hypothesis (he cites Judg 3:7; 1 Kgs 18:19; 2 Kgs 23:4; 2 Chr 24:18). However, quite apart from the fact that it is unlikely that the Asherim were actual living trees (as we shall see below), Lemaire nowhere comes to terms with the fact that it would be a remarkable coincidence for the Deuteronomic redactors to create a Canaanite goddess Asherah in such a haphazard way when there actually was a prominent Canaanite deity with the very same name, as we know from the Ugaritic texts. Surely it is far more natural to suppose that the OT allusions to a goddess Asherah actually reflect the goddess of that name known from the Ugaritic texts and elsewhere. The Asherim would then be her cult symbols.

Next it is necessary to consider the views of Lipiński. He finds only two places in the Hebrew Bible where Asherah might appear to be the name of a goddess, Judg 3:7 and 1 Kgs 18:19, but he rejects them both. In Judg 3:7 the Israelites are accused of having served "the Baals and the Asheroth," but since the parallel passages in Judg 2:13; 10:6; 1 Sam 7:4 and 12:10 allude rather to "the Baals and the Ashtaroth," Lipiński prefers to regard Asheroth as a scribal error for Ashtaroth in Judg 3:7. In 1 Kgs 18:19 he thinks the reference to the four hundred prophets of Asherah is an intrusion since they play no role in the subsequent story of the ordeal on Mount Carmel and the words are marked with an asterisk in the Hexapla, which implies that they were not an original part of the LXX text. In any case, he thinks that the words should be better translated "the four hundred prophets of the shrine." With regard to Judg 3:7 it may be argued against Lipiński, however, that even if "Asheroth" is not the original reading, the parallelism with "the Baals" still testifies to the understanding of Asheroth as an expression of divinity that certainly predates the Septuagint. The fact that Asheroth is the *lectio difficilior* suggests that it is the original reading; probably both Asheroth and Ashtaroth were general expressions for Canaanite female deities in the OT. As for 1 Kgs 18:19, it is indeed quite likely that the

reference to “the four hundred prophets of Asherah” is a gloss, for the reasons stated by Lipiński, and this is accepted by most commentators. Here again, however, the parallelism with the name of Baal strongly suggests that Asherah was understood as a divine name by whoever added the gloss; the meaning “shrine” is not attested for *’āšērā* in biblical Hebrew, although such a meaning is attested for words in cognate Semitic languages, as has been noted above. Moreover, such a rendering is open to other objections (see discussion below).

A further weakness in Lipiński’s position is that he fails to discuss 2 Kgs 23:4, where we read of “vessels made for Baal, for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven.” Once again Asherah is mentioned alongside Baal but also in this case together with the host of heaven. The context makes it impossible to understand Asherah as anything but the name of a divinity. Asherah also seems to be a goddess in 1 Kgs 15:13, where we read that Asa “removed Maacah his mother from being queen mother because she had an abominable thing made for Asherah, and Asa cut down her abominable thing and burned it in the brook Kidron.” We do not know exactly what the abominable thing (*miplešet*) was. Could it have been a nude image of the goddess? The Vg says in this verse that Asa removed his mother *ne esset princeps in sacris Priapi, et in luco ejus, quem consecraverat*, thereby implying that it was a phallic symbol; but there is no evidence to support this understanding. Finally, it may be noted that Asherah is probably the name of the goddess in 2 Kgs 21:7, where we read that “the graven image of Asherah (*’et-pesel hā’āšērā*) that he [Manasseh] had made he set in the house. . . .” Lipiński, however, thinks that *’et-pesel hā’āšērā* refers to the shrine (Asherah) and the idol within it,⁵¹ but as Emerton has commented, it is difficult to see why the Deuteronomist did not write *’et-happesel wēt-hā’āšērā* if that were the case (assuming *’āšērā* could mean “shrine” anyway).⁵² It may be concluded, therefore, that Lipiński’s attempts to eliminate the deity Asherah from the Hebrew Bible are unsuccessful.

In addition to being the name of a goddess, the word Asherah frequently denotes the name of a cult object in the Hebrew Bible. We are never told exactly what it was, and it is only by examining carefully the data in the text that we can gain some idea of what it was. Various views have been put forward.

First, there is the view that the Asherim were groves or living trees. As I have already noted, this view has the support of the LXX, which generally renders Asherah by “grove” (ἄλσος, plural ἄλση) and in two places has “trees” (δένδρα) for Asherim, and the Vg similarly almost always has “grove” (*lucus*) and in Judg 6:25, 26, 30 *nemus* “wood” or “grove.” According to the Mishna (see *m. ’Or.* 1:7, 8; *m. Sukk.* 3:1–3; *m. ’Abod. Zar.* 3:7, 9, 10; *m. Me’il.* 3:8)

⁵¹ Lipiński, “The Goddess *Atirat*,” 113.

⁵² Emerton, “New Light,” 17.

the Asherim were living trees. As is well known the KJV regularly translates Asherah as “grove” and Asherim and Asheroth as “groves.” There are still some scholars today who think that the Asherim could on occasion be living trees, and Deut 16:21 is generally appealed to: “You shall not plant any tree as an Asherah beside the altar of the Lord your God which you shall make.”⁵³ However, so far as I am aware, Lemaire is the only scholar today who maintains that the Asherim were always living trees.⁵⁴ He assumes that the Asherim are to be equated with sacred trees like the tamarisk planted by Abraham at Beer-Sheba (Gen 21:33) and the oak in the sanctuary at Shechem (Josh 24:26). Against this, of course, stands the fact that the OT often refers to the making (*’āsâ*) of Asherim (1 Kgs 14:15; 16:33; 2 Kgs 17:16; 21:3, 7; 2 Chr 33:3) and also of the building (*bānâ*, 1 Kgs 14:23) and erection (*nāšab*, 2 Kgs 17:10) of Asherim, which does not seem appropriate for trees. Lemaire’s attempt to counter these arguments is distinctly weak, for he claims on the one hand that the usage of the verb *’āsâ* is very broad. He appeals to 1 Kgs 12:32, where *’āsâ* is employed of a feast, the golden calves, and the high places. On the other hand he claims that the use of the verbs *bānâ* and *nāšab* was motivated by the other objects mentioned alongside the Asherim in these passages, namely, the high places (*bāmôt*) and the pillars (*maššēbôt*). However, it is difficult to see how 1 Kgs 12:32 offers any support for Lemaire’s case, since the golden calves and the high places clearly were manufactured objects and there is nothing surprising about the use of *’āsâ* in connection with a feast. None of these is comparable to a tree. Furthermore, if *bānâ* and *nāšab* were only really appropriate for use in connection with the high places and pillars and not the Asherim, one would expect a different verb to have been employed in connection with the latter. The only natural conclusion is that the Asherim were genuinely manmade objects, and this is widely accepted. A further point that may be made is that we read in Jer 17:2 of “their Asherim, beside every luxuriant tree,” which would be odd if the Asherim were themselves trees. What then of Deut 16:21? Does this refer to the Asherah as a tree? Since all the other allusions in the OT that I have just noted imply that the Asherah was a manmade object, this would be surprising, especially since they come from the same body of literature—the Deuteronomic corpus. It is therefore more natural to translate *’ēš* in Deut 16:21 as “wood, wooden thing” rather than “tree,” a meaning that is amply attested elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (see Exod 15:25; 31:5; Deut 4:28; 1 Kgs 6:15; 2 Kgs 19:18, etc.). We may accordingly translate, “You shall not plant any wooden thing as an Asherah beside the altar of the Lord your God which you shall make.”

The second view of the nature of the Asherah to be discussed has been proposed by W. L. Reed in the only full-length book devoted to the subject

⁵³ See K. Galling in *Biblisches Reallexikon* (2d ed.; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1977) 13.

⁵⁴ Lemaire, “Les inscriptions,” 603–8.

of Asherah since the discovery of the Ugaritic texts, *The Asherah in the Old Testament* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1949). Reed argues that the Asherim were simply wooden images of the goddess Asherah. That the Asherah cult object symbolized the goddess Asherah seems clear enough, but this does not necessarily require it to have been an actual image. Indeed, the fact that Asherim are frequently mentioned alongside *pēšîlîm* “graven images” (a term including images of wood) as distinct objects (see Deut 7:5; 12:3; 2 Chr 33:19; 43:3, 4, 7; Mic 5:12–13, [Eng. 13–14]) suggests that, though idolatrous, they were not actually images.

Third, E. Lipiński has put forward an original point of view according to which Asherah in the Hebrew Bible denotes sometimes a sacred grove and sometimes a chapel or cella.⁵⁵ He finds the former meaning in Exod 34:13; Deut 7:5; 12:3; 16:21; Judg 6:25–30; 2 Kgs 23:15; 2 Chr 14:2; 31:1; Mic 5:13 (Eng. 14) and the latter meaning in 1 Kgs 14:15, 23; 16:33; 18:19; 2 Kgs 17:10, 16; 21:3, 7; 2 Chr 19:3; 33:4, 7, 19; Jer 17:2. The arguments used against Lemaire’s interpretation of the Asherim as sacred trees cannot be used against Lipiński, since those passages employing the verbs *‘āsâ*, *bānâ*, and *nāšab* in connection with the Asherim are assigned by Lipiński to the latter group, where he finds the meaning “shrine.” However, his interpretation of the Asherim is seriously open to criticism. Thus, it is most improbable that we should distinguish the Asherah in 2 Kgs 18:4; 23:14, 15 from the Asherah in 1 Kgs 14:23; 2 Kgs 17:10, the former being the name of a grove and the latter the name of a shrine, since both groups of passages mention the Asherah in the context of high places (*bāmôt*) and sacred pillars (*maššēbôt*). The Asherah must refer to the same object in both groups of passages. Now the former group of passages alludes to the Asherah being cut down and Lipiński himself agrees that a shrine cannot be meant and that the latter group of passages refers to Asherim under every luxuriant tree, which rules out the likelihood that the Asherim were themselves trees. Since both groups of passages must refer to the same object, as we have seen, it follows that the Asherah can be neither a shrine nor a grove.⁵⁶

The fourth and most natural view—and, incidentally, the most widely held opinion—is that the Asherim were wooden poles sacred to the goddess Asherah. That there was a definite connection between the Asherah cult object and the goddess Asherah is clearly suggested, for example, by a comparison of 2 Kgs 21:3, where we read that Manasseh “erected altars for Baal, and made an Asherah, as Ahab king of Israel had done, and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served them,” with 2 Kgs 23:4, where we read of “all the vessels made for Baal, for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven.” In the former verse the Asherah is clearly a cult object, since it is said to have been made, whereas in the latter verse Asherah is certainly a deity, as

⁵⁵ Lipiński, “The Goddess Atirat,” 112.

⁵⁶ So, rightly, Emerton, “New Light,” 16–18.

is indicated by the context. Yet in both cases (the) Asherah is mentioned alongside Baal and the host of heaven, which indicates a close connection between them. We may assume that the Asherah cult object symbolized the goddess Asherah. Yet it has already been noted that the Asherah was neither a living tree, since it is manmade, nor simply an image of the goddess, since it is clearly distinguished from images on several occasions. It therefore seems most natural to suppose that the Asherah was some kind of wooden pole symbolizing the goddess Asherah. If so, it is interesting to note that this would harmonize with a little-noticed passage in Philo of Byblos which states that the Phoenicians “consecrated pillars and staves (ῥάβδους) after their names [of their gods]” (Eusebius *Praep. ev.* 1.10.11).

Is it possible to say more about the nature of these sacred poles? Unfortunately, we do not have any enlightenment from archaeological discoveries in Syria and Palestine, because of the perishable nature of wood. We do have a number of artistic representations of sacred poles and stylized trees from the ancient Near East, but it is impossible to know which, if any, of these represent the Asherah.⁵⁷ R. A. Oden has proposed that the caduceus, whose origin he finds in the palm tree and which was the symbol of the Punic goddess Tinnit, is to be equated with the OT Asherah.⁵⁸ This identification rests on the equation of the Punic goddess Tinnit with the Canaanite goddess Asherah, but the identity of these two deities is far from being universally agreed and is, as we have seen above, open to question. It may be, nevertheless, that the sacred Asherah pole had the form of a stylized tree. The evidence for this I would seek in Hos 14:9 (Eng. 8). There the prophet makes Yahweh declare, “Ephraim, what has he⁵⁹ still to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after him. I am like a luxuriant cypress, from me comes your fruit.” The bold comparison of Yahweh with a tree, unique in the Hebrew Bible, juxtaposed with the condemnation of idolatry here, has suggested to many scholars that Hosea is polemicizing against idolatry associated with Canaanite tree symbolism. Could this be polemic against the Asherah? A number of scholars have believed that it is. It was this that led J. Wellhausen to emend the Hebrew *’ānī ‘ānīṭī wa’āšūrennū* “It is I who answer and look after him” to *’ānī ‘ānātō wa’āšērātō* “I am his Anat and his Asherah,” a suggestion that has been followed by G. Fohrer and E. Jacob.⁶⁰ This, however, has been rightly described by E. Sellin as

⁵⁷ See W. L. Reed, *The Asherah in the Old Testament* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1949) 97–101 for depictions and descriptions of various objects that have been equated with the Asherah.

⁵⁸ R. A. Oden, *Studies in Lucian’s De Syria Dea* (HSM 15; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977) 149–55.

⁵⁹ Reading *lō* for MT *lī*, since it is Ephraim, not Yahweh, who is joined to idols (cf. Hos 4:17).

⁶⁰ J. Wellhausen, *Die kleinen Propheten* (3d ed.; Berlin: Reimer, 1898) 134; G. Fohrer, “Umkehr und Erlösung beim Propheten Hosea,” *TZ* 11 (1955) 171 and n. 18 (reprinted in

more ingenious than correct. Though abstaining from emendation of the text, I believe that we have in the words 'ānî 'ānîti wa 'āšûrennû a play on the names of the goddesses Anat and Asherah. That this is no merely fanciful suggestion can be supported, I believe, from the following circumstance. As I have argued in detail elsewhere, Hos 13:4–14:10 (Eng. 9) has eight passages with remarkable parallels in Isa 26:13–27:11, all of which, with one partial exception, come in the same order.⁶¹ The parallelism is such that it is reasonable to suppose that the latter is dependent on the former. A number of the parallels are never or only rarely attested elsewhere in the OT, so it is difficult to put them down to sheer coincidence. Rather we have here a piece of inner scriptural interpretation. The proto-apocalyptic Isa 26:13–27:11 was inspired to a considerable extent by Hos 13:4–14:10 (Eng. 9), just as other proto-apocalyptic texts were inspired (in part) by other prophetic texts. The series of eight parallels to which I have alluded may be set out in tabular form as follows:

- (i) Israel knows no lords/gods but Yahweh.
Hos 13:4. Cf. Isa 26:13 (LXX).
- (ii) Imagery of birthpangs but child refuses to be born.
Hos 13:13. Cf. Isa 26:17–18.
- (iii) Deliverance from Sheol.
Hos 13:14 (LXX, etc.) Cf. Isa 26:19.
- (iv) Imagery of destructive east wind symbolic of exile.
Hos 13:15. Cf. Isa 27:8.
- (v) Imagery of life-giving dew.
Hos 14:6 (Eng. 5). Cf. Isa 26:19.
- (vi) Israel blossoming and like a vineyard.
Hos 14:6–8 (Eng. 5–7). Cf. Isa 27:2–6.
- (vii) Condemnation of idolatry, including the Asherim.
Hos 14:9 (Eng. 8). Cf. Isa 27:9.
- (viii) The importance of discernment; judgment for the wicked.
Hos 14:10 (Eng. 9). Cf. Isa 27:11.

It will be observed that one of the Hoseanic verses paralleled in Isaiah is the verse that formed the starting point of the present discussion, Hos 14:9 (Eng. 8), “Ephraim, what has he still to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after him. I am like a luxuriant cypress, from me comes your fruit.” The corresponding verse in Isa 27:9 reads, “Therefore by this the

Fohrer, *Studien zur Alttestamentlichen Prophetie* (1949–65) [BZAW 99; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1967] 230 and n. 18); E. Jacob, in E. Jacob, C.-A. Keller, S. Amsler, *Osée, Joël, Abdias, Amos* (Neuchâtel and Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1965) 95, 97.

⁶¹ J. Day, “A Case of Inner Scriptural Interpretation: The Dependence of Isaiah xxvi. 13–xxvii. 11 on Hosea xiii. 4–xiv. 10 (Eng. 9) and Its Relevance to Some Theories of the Redaction of the ‘Isaiah Apocalypse,’” *JTS* 31 n.s. (1980) 309–19.

guilt of Jacob will be expiated, and this will be the full fruit of the removal of his sin: when he makes all the stones of the altars like chalkstones crushed to pieces, no Asherim or incense altars will remain standing.” The fact that Isa 27:9 specifically refers to the Asherim tends to support the view that Hos 14:9 (Eng. 8) really did have the Asherim in mind in its play on words and in its comparison of Yahweh with a tree while rejecting idolatry. The removal of the Asherim (*inter alia*) constitutes the “full fruit” of the removal of Jacob’s sin, just as Hos 14:9 (Eng. 8) makes it clear that Israel’s fruit comes from Yahweh and not the (implicitly tree-like) idols. The net result of all this is that we seem to have here new supporting evidence for the view that the Asherah had the form of a stylized tree.⁶²

Having established the nature of Asherah as both a goddess and a cult object, we are now in a position to offer a general survey of the OT’s allusions to this cult. The Asherim, along with the other appurtenances of the high places (*bāmôt*), the altars and the pillars (*maṣṣēbôt*), the latter apparently symbols of the male deity, were a feature of popular religion in Israel, but as a Canaanite accretion to the cult of the God of Sinai (see Judg 5:3–4) they came to be disapproved of by the “Yahweh-alone party” (to employ a phrase of Morton Smith). As such they were condemned to destruction by Exod 34:13 (commonly ascribed to J) as well as by the Deuteronomist (Deut 7:5; 12:3; cf. 16:21). However, it is clear that over a long period they formed a feature of Israel’s popular religion. Those who are accused of worshiping Asherah or constructing Asherim include the people in the time of Judg 3:7, Jeroboam I (1 Kgs 14:15), Rehoboam (1 Kgs 14:23), Asa’s mother Maacah (1 Kgs 15:13), Ahab (1 Kgs 16:32; cf. 1 Kgs 18:19), Jehoahaz (2 Kgs 13:6) the northern kingdom prior to its fall in 722 B.C. (2 Kgs 17:10, 16), and Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:3, 7). Those who took steps to remove this cult included Gideon (Judg 6:25–30), Asa (1 Kgs 15:13), Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:4), and Josiah (2 Kgs 23:4, 6, 7, 14, 15). The historicity of Hezekiah’s reform has been doubted by some scholars, reminiscent as it is of Josiah’s reform. There seem no reasonable grounds for doubting it, however, since Hezekiah’s reform included the removal of the snake Nehushtan (2 Kgs 18:4), which had no part in the reform of Josiah. This suggests that Hezekiah’s reform is not to be viewed as simply a back-projection of that of Josiah. One interesting allusion in the account of Josiah’s reform states that “he broke down the houses of the male cult prostitutes which were in the house of the Lord, where the women wove garments for Asherah” (2 Kgs 23:7). I have already drawn attention to the fact that the context here clearly indicates the nature of Asherah as an erotic fertility goddess, comparable to that suggested by the second-millennium B.C. Qudšu figurines. An additional point that deserves comment is the reference to the women weaving garments for Asherah. The

⁶² For a more detailed presentation of the case for the dependence of Isa 26:13–27:11 on Hos 13:4–14:10 (Eng. 9), see Day, “A Case of Inner Scriptural Interpretation.”

word here rendered “garments” is Hebrew *bāttîm*, which surely cannot have its usual meaning “houses” but rather, as originally suggested by A. Šanda, is probably cognate with Arabic *batt* “woven garment.”⁶³ We may compare too the Lucianic recension of the LXX, which has *στολάς* “garments.” Apart from the Lucianic recension, the LXX has *χεττι(ε)ω* or *χεττιεμ*, which is probably an error for *βεττιεμ* rather than an indication that the Hebrew text had *kuttōnîm* “tunics.”

In the prophets, the only explicit references to the Asherim are in Isa 17:8; 27:9; Jer 17:2; and Mic 5:13 (Eng. 14). It is on the last of these passages that I wish to comment here. The verse reads, “and I will root out your Asherim from among you and destroy ‘*ārēkā*.” What is the meaning of ‘*ārēkā* here? The normal meaning of such a form would be “your cities,” but this does not provide a very good parallel to “your Asherim.” We have already had a condemnation of “your cities” (‘*ārēkā*) in v 10 (Eng. 11), there appropriately paralleled by “your strongholds.” Moreover, v 13 (Eng. 14) forms part of a section in vv 9–13 (Eng. 10–14) where we find a whole series of parallel terms describing things that are to be cut off or destroyed, and all of these parallels are very close: horses/chariots (v 9 [Eng. 10]), cities/strongholds (v 10 [Eng. 11]), sorceries/soothsayers (v 11 [Eng. 12]), images/pillars (v 12 [Eng. 13]). When we come to v 13 (Eng. 14) we really do need a closer parallel to Asherim than cities. Various suggested emendations of ‘*ārēkā* have been put forward, including ‘*āšabbêkā* “your idols,” ‘*ēšêkā* “your trees,” ‘*širêkā* “your carved images,” ‘*šārêkā* “your enemies,” ‘*bē‘ālêkā* “your Baals,” and ‘*ammûdêkā* “your pillars.”⁶⁴ It has also been suggested that ‘*ārēkā* means “your blood-spattered altars,”⁶⁵ but, as E. W. Nicholson has shown, the philological basis of this rendering is highly dubious.⁶⁶ The fact is, as A. S. van der Woude has noted, followed by E. W. Nicholson, the word ‘*îr* is attested once elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible in a context that makes parallelism with Asherim in Mic 5:13 (Eng. 14) perfectly understandable.⁶⁷ This is in 2 Kgs 10:25. Taken with the following verse, the passage reads, “. . . and (they) went into the ‘*îr* of the house of Baal and they brought out the pillar that was in the house of Baal, and burned it.” The word ‘*îr* must mean something like “inner shrine” of a temple, as most modern versions of the Bible recognize. Since it was the place where the pillar (*maššēbâ*) of Baal was kept, it was presumably the site also of the Asherah, in view of the close association of pillars and Asherim in the Hebrew Bible. We may accordingly render ‘*ārēkā* in Mic 5:13 (Eng. 14) as “your inner shrines” and translate the passage as follows: “and I will root out your Asherim from among you and destroy your inner shrines.”

⁶³ A. Šanda, *Die Bücher der Könige* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1912) 2. 344.

⁶⁴ I cite these examples from A. S. van der Woude, *Micha* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1977) 187.

⁶⁵ See *NEB*.

⁶⁶ E. W. Nicholson, “Blood-spattered Altars?” *VT* 27 (1977) 113–17.

⁶⁷ Van der Woude, *Micha*, 187; Nicholson, “Blood-spattered Altars?” 116.

There are a number of other places in the OT where allusions to Asherah or the Asherah have been detected by various scholars, even though the word Asherah itself is not explicitly mentioned, namely, Hos 4:12; Jer 2:27; Ezek 8:3, 5. In addition, scholars have occasionally emended the text in order to find an explicit reference to Asherah or the Asherah in Gen 30:13; Isa 6:13; and Amos 8:14. Unfortunately, limitations of space make it impossible to discuss these passages here. Suffice it to say that with the exception of Hos 4:12, where an allusion to Asherah is possible, these passages do not contain a reference to the goddess Asherah or her symbol.

I come, at last, to the end of my survey of Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic literature. There are still problems that beset the interpreter in both sets of material, but it is now certainly clear that Asherah was the name both of an important Canaanite goddess and of the wooden cult object that symbolized her. Thanks to the Kuntillet 'Ajrud material we now have extrabiblical testimony to the cult object as well as the goddess, who was previously known from Ugaritic material, etc. There can be no doubt that in the matter of Asherah the Ugaritic and other Northwest Semitic texts have been extremely valuable in enabling us to elucidate this subject and to reject earlier mistaken views.