

Chapter 2

YAHWEH AND ASHERAH

Asherah as a Goddess in the Old Testament

In the previous chapter I considered the impact of the supreme Canaanite god El on Yahweh, with whom he became equated. For the most part the Old Testament was happy to appropriate elements of El religion to Yahwism, though it rejected the symbolism of El as a bull, which some Israelites associated with Yahweh. Another aspect of El religion which the Old Testament rejected was his wife. The Ugaritic texts reveal that El's consort was a goddess named Athirat. In equating Yahweh with El it would not be surprising if some Israelites appropriated El's wife to Yahweh. As we shall see, this seems to have taken place, and the name Athirat occurs as Asherah in the Old Testament, but understandably the Yahweh-alone party which compiled the Old Testament rejected the notion that Yahweh had a wife Asherah.

The word 'Asherah' occurs forty times in the Old Testament, sometimes in the singular and sometimes in the plural.¹ As I shall argue below, although most of these refer to a wooden cult object symbolizing the goddess Asherah, there are several passages where Asherah refers directly to the goddess herself: Judg. 3.7; 1 Kgs 14.13, 18.19; 2 Kgs 21.7, 23.4. Prior to the discovery of the Ugaritic texts in 1929 onwards, however, it was common for scholars to deny that Asherah was ever the name of a goddess in the Old Testament,² or when this was conceded it was often thought that she was the same as Astarte.³

1. The name occurs in Exod. 34.13; Deut. 7.5, 12.3, 16.21; Judg. 3.7, 6.25, 26, 28, 30; 1 Kgs 14.15, 23, 15.13, 16.33, 18.19; 2 Kgs 13.6, 17.10, 16, 18.4, 21.3, 7, 23.4, 6, 7, 14, 15; 2 Chron. 14.2 (ET 3), 15.16, 17.6, 19.3, 24.18, 31.1, 33.3, 19, 34.3, 4, 7; Isa. 17.8, 27.9; Jer. 17.2; Mic. 5. 13 (ET 14).

2. E.g. W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1st series; London: A. & C. Black, 2nd edn, 1894), p. 188.

3. E.g. W.W. von Baudissin, *Studien zur semitischen Religionsgeschichte*, II (Leipzig: Georg Reimer, 1878), pp. 218-19; P. Torge, *Aschera und Astarte: Ein*

The view generally held today that Asherah in the Old Testament occurs both as the name of an independent goddess and as the name of her wooden cult symbol had already been put forward by A. Kuenen⁴ in the nineteenth century, but this remained a minority view and did not become widely accepted till the discovery of the Ugaritic texts, which refer to the goddess Athirat (Asherah) as the consort of El.

As I mentioned earlier, one can make a good case that Asherah is the goddess and not merely her cult symbol, in Judg. 3.7; 1 Kgs 15.13, 18.19; 2 Kgs 21.7, 23.4. The fact that Asherah frequently has the definite article in Hebrew (*hā'āšērâ*) does not matter, since we likewise find Baal referred to regularly as 'the Baal' (*habba'al*) in the Old Testament, and similarly even 'the Tammuz' (*hattammûz*) for Tammuz (Ezek. 8.14).

The first passage to be considered is 2 Kgs 23.4. Here, as part of the account of Josiah's reform, we read that 'the king commanded...to bring out of the temple of the Lord all the vessels made for Baal, for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven'. Since Asherah is referred to in between allusions to Baal and the host of heaven, both of which were worshipped as divinities (cf. v. 5, for example), it would be extremely forced not to understand Asherah here as the name of a deity likewise.⁵ The fact that 2 Kgs 23.6 refers to 'the Asherah' cult object does not detract from this, since the latter was clearly a symbol of the former, as the fact that they both occur in comparable contexts in the Old Testament indicates.

Josiah's reform measures very much stand in contrast to the religious policies adopted a little earlier by King Manasseh. Interestingly, Asherah features there too. 2 Kgs 21.7 condemns Manasseh's putting in the Temple 'the graven image of Asherah that he had made'. Here it makes excellent sense to understand *pesel hā'āšērâ* as 'the graven image of [the goddess] Asherah'. Although it would be theoretically possible to

Beitrag zur semitschen Religionsgeschichte (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1902); W.F. Albright, 'The Evolution of the West-Semitic Divinity 'An-'Anat-'Attâ', *AJSJL* 41 (1925), pp. 73-101 (100).

4. A. Kuenen, *The Religion of Israel*, I (trans. A.H. May; London: Williams & Norgate, 1874), pp. 88-93.

5. *Contra* Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 91; J.M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (UCOP, 57; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 71-72.