A

SHERAH IS ARGUABLY the most important goddess in the Canaanite pantheon. The prototypical mother of gods and humans and consort of the chief god, El, she is also the mistress of the sea and the land, and protector of all living things. We have long

known Asherah from the immense library of thirteenth-century cuneiform tablets found in Syria at the site of Ugarit. But there are also more than 40 references to

Asherah in the Old Testament. What could she have meant to the people of mono-

theistic ancient Israel?

A bit too much, apparently, at least according to the authors of the biblical texts, who

attack her relentlessly. They praise Asa, king of Judah (911–870 B.C.), for removing his mother

Ma‘acah from official duties after “she had an abominable image made for Asherah” (1 Kings

15.13, II Chronicles 15.6). They condemn the long-reigning Manasseh of Judah (688–642)

for doing “what was evil in the sight of the Lord” in “making an Asherah” (II Kings 21.7). And

they trumpet the achievements of Josiah (639–609), including the destruction of offerings

made to Asherah at the temple in Jerusalem, the abolition of “the Asherah from the house

of the Lord,” and demolition of a shrine there in which women “did weaving for Asherah”

(II Kings 23). These passages reflect both the worship of Asherah and efforts to stamp out

her cult during in the Iron Age. But it was only in the succeeding Persian period, after the

fall of Judah in 586 B.C. and the exile in Babylon, that Asherah virtually disappeared.

The Lost Goddess

of

Israel

by SANDRA SCHARM

And [the king] set a graven image of Asherah, that he

had made, in the house of which the Lord said to David

and Solomon his son, “In this House, and in Jerusalem,

which I have chosen out of all tribes of Israel, will I put

my name for ever.”

—II KINGS 21:7

Ultimately, the campaign to eliminate the goddess has failed. “Asherah was buried long

ago by the Establishment,” declares respected biblical scholar William H. Dever. “Now,

archaeology has excavated her.” Dever is quite certain that he knows who the Asherah of

ancient Israel and of the biblical texts is—she is the wife or consort of Yahweh, the one god

of Israel. Many of his colleagues would agree.

The origin of Yahweh, the god of Israel, has been a matter of speculation among archae-

ologists and biblical scholars for generations. The biblical narrative of the covenant of the

one god with the descendants of Abraham and later Jacob, the Exodus from Egypt, and the

subsequent conquest of the “Holy Land” is now viewed as legend by most scholars—albeit

one that has some basis in fact. Those facts, most scholars would concur, have a lot to do

with a basic culture change that can be detected in the archaeology of the region in the early

Iron Age, around 1100 B.C. In the central hill country of Palestine, in what is now considered

the heartland of Israelite settlement, we suddenly find numerous small rural settlements and

simple houses of sheep and goat herders, who seemed to reject the raising of pigs.

What we do not find is any conclusive evidence that this change was in any way rooted in

a religious movement. Rather, what we see is a rural resettlement of people who may have

formerly dwelt on the margins of urban Canaanite society. When these people “took to the

hills,” for whatever reason, they seemed to have brought many of the old Canaanite gods

with them. One of those gods may have been Yahweh. There is certainly an argument as to

whether Yahweh is simply a version of the Canaanite great god El or a new god incorporating

some traits of several different gods. Regardless of his origin, it does seem that he came to

the hills replete with that most important accoutrement of Canaanite deities—a consort.

Even a cursory reading of the Books of I and II Samuel and I and II Kings demonstrates
that the worship of Yahweh’s wife, Asherah, did not die out but remained a part of ritual and cult throughout the monarchies and until the conquest of Judah, that is, from circa 1000 to 586 B.C. The writers of the Bible, many living in the period after the exile and in the midst of a religious reform movement, sought to give monotheism greater authority by ascribing it to the period of the kings. They then had to determine what to do with God’s wife. There was nothing unusual in their desire to subordinate or eradicate the influence of goddesses—it was a process that had occurred in many different places. As a result, Asherah was relegated to the status of the wife of the reviled Ba’al—the god of the evil Queen Jezebel and other villainous biblical figures, because, as Dever says, the writers wanted to discredit her. The Hebrew and Aramaic texts preserve the word “Asherah,” but there is nothing to suggest that she was once the queen of the gods of Canaan and, later, Israel.

Only the numerous artifacts found in biblical contexts all over Israel indicate her importance, and Dever’s new book, provocatively titled *Did God Have a Wife?*, details these finds. Yahweh and Asherah are directly associated on artifacts known from sites such as Khirbet El-Kôm, Ta’anach, and Kuntillet Ajrud (Horvat Terman in Hebrew). The last, in particular, is famous for both the number of its images that link Yahweh and Asherah as well as the clarity with which their association is depicted. In the 1970s, excavations at Ajrud in the northern Sinai revealed what most scholars now believe was a fort, one of many such ninth-to-eighth-century B.C. structures built on the edges of the small kingdoms that had arisen in the region a century or more previously. Some of the rooms within the fort contained fragments of plaster walls, and it was this surface upon which the first of the famous inscriptions was found, invoking the blessing of “Yahweh by his Asherah.” Other inscriptions on the walls speak of blessings by the gods Ba’al and El.

Biblical scholars were at first reluctant to accept the pairing of Yahweh and Asherah. Those who were wont to take the biblical narrative at face value were incensed by the image of a polytheistic Israel that worshipped a divine couple. Other scholars were slow to accept artifacts as a refutation of the Bible because they looked upon archaeological evidence as secondary when it was in conflict with the text. Any number of people disputed the find, the translation, and the interpretation of the translation. But after two large storage jars with similar inscriptions, and what may be a depiction of Asherah on one, were found at the site, mainstream scholars began to “pay attention,” according to Dever. As he recalls in his book, Dever himself was originally “stunned, both by the scene and by the Hebrew inscription above it.” He then remembered finding a similar inscription at Khirbet El-Kôm in 1969, which read “Yahweh by his Asherah.” Only after the Ajrud discoveries, however, did he fully believe that this interpretation of his earlier find was not only correct but signaled a significant and hitherto unrecognized cult.

That the storage jars have both words and pictures illuminates the relationship between the male and female deities far better than do a host of other unillustrated inscriptions or illustrations with no text. The expression “Yahweh and his Asherah” is unmistakable. Equally unambiguous are the painted scenes on the jars of stylized animals and trees, by then age-old Near Eastern fertility imagery, and an unusual frontal depiction of two possibly male figures (one resembling the Egyptian dwarf-god Bes, who protected women in childbirth) and a curious seated female figure playing a lyre. Dever and others believe that the last, based upon her attire, headgear, and seated position, is none other than the goddess Asherah, since most Near Eastern goddesses of this and
earlier periods are shown seated. But some biblical scholars, like Diana Edelman of the University of Sheffield, dispute this identification of the figure, though they agree with the interpretation of the inscription.

What we have with these inscriptions, according to Dever, is evidence of the worship of Asherah as part of what he calls popular religion. "We don't know about popular religion in ancient times," he says. "What was the ultimate concern of most people in the ancient world? To get the theological formula correct? I don't think so. I think it was reproduction. The graffiti don't discuss rituals. The texts are all about blessings and they don't prescribe any actual worship." For his interpretation, Dever relies heavily upon the traditional anthropological distinction between "folk" and "official" religion, a distinction, it should be added, not upheld by many cultural anthropologists today.

Edelman, along with Dartmouth's Susan Ackerman and Duke's Carol Meyers, takes issue with the characterization of Asherah worship by Dever as "folk tradition" or "little tradition" in contrast to the "official religion" of monotheistic worship. They see it as widespread and including the highest ranks of society. "When we have queen mothers who are making images of Asherah, you just can't make that distinction," says Edelman. "It's ridiculous to go against the inscriptive evidence to say it's not the official cult, it's just the people messing up and doing the wrong thing." Ackerman adds, "The biblical texts speak of an Asherah in Jerusalem and in the temple of Jerusalem—now, that's not a little tradition."

Meyers rejects the entire concept of official versus unofficial religion. "I don't like the term popular religion," she says. "If the kings themselves have Asherah in the Temple, then what is more official than that?"

Despite their differences, all question whether Israelite monotheism ever truly existed in the pre-Exile period. These days, says Dever, "It's hard to find a mainstream scholar who believes that early Israel was monotheistic." As Edelman notes, "When God said, 'You shall have no other gods before me,' what do people think he meant—that there weren't any other gods? Then why bother to mention them?" And there is no shortage of polytheistic ritual artifacts from sites in the Holy Land. Although the ritual symbolism from many of these finds is a matter of interpretation, it is difficult to ignore the great similarities between archaeological finds from the Holy Land to those found elsewhere in the ancient Near East.

There is, for example, virtually no evidence of a monotheistic religious cult at Shiloh, the biblical location of the resting place of the Ark, site of the early Israelite sanctuary, and seat of the judges and prophets Eli and Samuel. But levels at the site from the time of the Israelite settlement have produced a cult stand showing a lioness, a ram's head, and a leopard attacking a deer. And artifacts depicting bulls, rams, and ibex, as well as ibex flanking trees, have been found at surrounding sites. Individually, none of these images necessarily indicates a polytheistic cultic practice, but all of them are repeated, sometimes even duplicated, in clear cultic associations elsewhere in the region.

Other important Israelite cult centers, Shechem and Ta'anach, have yielded cult stands featuring lions and winged sphinxes, ibex with trees, and a rare human image of a youth strangling a serpent. These sites have Canaanite occupations followed by Israelite ones, but not so the "Bull Site" near Dothan with its statuettes of bulls and standing stones, and a site on Mt. Ebal, which the excavator dubbed "Joshua's altar." Scholars

An ivory plaque from Ugarit shows a goddess flanked by animals, a common motif in the ancient Near East. A pottery sherd from Ajrud, below right, shows a seated female figure (drawing, below left). A blessing written on the sherd names both Yahweh and Asherah.

www.archaeology.org
were skeptical regarding the interpretation of the rectangular open-air altar on Mt. Ebal, but agree today that the site was certainly cultic, although an association with Joshua cannot be demonstrated. Cult sites coinciding with the emergence of Israel without Canaanite antecedents may provide important evidence for the origins of Israelite religion. At neither the Bull Site nor Mt. Ebal, however, do we detect any traces of developing monotheism.

In the later Iron Age, from 900 to 586 B.C., the archaeological evidence suggests even more strongly that the people worshiped many gods. Jerusalem and its environs—center of state and cult, site of the Temple, and seat of the divinely ordained king—has yielded cultic stands, inscribed animal bones used in divination, seals bearing the symbols of Mesopotamian and Egyptian gods, and hundreds of figurines of large-breasted women that many people associate with either Asherah herself or the Asherah cult. These finds, mainly from Judean households, depict only upper bodies, with the lower bodies encased in a "pillar." The pillar has been interpreted as exemplifying a tree, but it may be just a stylized way of representing the goddess.

It has been several decades since most archaeologists have come to accept that the Israelites of the Iron Age were no less "pagan" than their Canaanite neighbors. In doing so, they have slowly brought biblical scholars toward the same conclusion. It is, in fact, despite any desire to adhere to the monotheistic spirit of the Bible, difficult to interpret many of the prophetic messages without postulating the worship of other gods among the Israelites. The real question, and one that is far from resolved, is whether this worship resulted from "backsliding" into the ways of the other peoples of the region or simply was a stubborn, established, and often officially sanctioned cultic practice.

Archaeologists have also brought the religious practices of the Canaanites into the sphere of biblical studies and have opened up the field for the exploration of the origins of the god of Israel. Philologist Mark Smith, author of The Early History of God, has tried to determine why the Israelites turned away from the Canaanite gods. He believes that all of the Canaanite practices that the biblical writers condemned were part and parcel of the native Israelite cult—including child sacrifice. The last is a provocative thought, since many theologians maintain that Isaac was saved from being sacrificed in order to precisely make the point that child sacrifice was disapproved of as part of the Yahwistic cult.

This is the dark side of Canaanite religion and one more associated with Ba'al than Asherah. Meyers argues that such sacrifices are not of the kind demanded by a cult focusing on life and the life-giving properties of the female deities. Whether or not the cult of Asherah was a women's cult or a popular cult for both sexes is a matter of conjecture.

Dever seems to suggest that it is a cult of particular interest to women, but Edelman, Ackerman, and Meyers disagree. Ackerman says plainly that Asherah was "equally as appealing to men as to women" and that "even if we see Asherah as a goddess associated with women's reproduction there is no reason to suppose that it isn't as crucially a men's issue as it is a women's issue."

All of this begs the question of what happened to the cult, which does not seem to have lasted as long as that of Ba'al, the violent sacrificial rites of which were practiced even into Roman times. If the cult satisfied needs of both men and women and did not threaten—and even enhanced—the status of the main deity, why did it disappear? Archaeology offers a clue. Edelman notes that the Asherah household figu-

rines, if indeed that's what they are, become "severely limited in number and virtually disappear by the Persian period." She speculates that in the elite circles, toward the end of the monarchy, there may already have been recognition of the usefulness of monotheism in the same way that the emphasis on the worship of Amon in Egypt during the New Kingdom (circa 1540-1070 B.C.) and Marduk in Babylon during the Neo-Babylonian Empire (circa 629-539 B.C.) arose. That is, it enabled the development of a powerful priesthood in support of a state religion and divinely inspired monarchy. Then came the fall of Judah and exile in Babylonia from 586 to 538 B.C. "Priests didn't want to be out of a job," she proposes. "It was easier during the exile to say 'Our god has defeated us, he is punishing us.'"

Dever agrees that the Exile was critical in the ascendency of monotheism. He writes in Did God Have a Wife? that the Bible is revisionist history, revised according to the lessons that the authors "presumed to have drawn from their own stormy history. The fundamental lesson for them was that Yahweh was indeed a 'jealous god,' punishing those who flirted with other gods. The conclusion? Don't do this again! And many of the exiles in Babylon, as well as the remnant left back in Judah, learned that lesson."

Sandra Scham, the editor of Near Eastern Archaeology and a contributing editor to Archaeology, teaches biblical archaeology at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.