

The Ottawa School of Theology & Spirituality

The Bible: Archaeological and Historical Perspectives

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Lecture 5

Israelite Religion - Official vs. Folk Religion

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Available at <http://www.houseofdavid.ca/lecture5.pdf>

To Learn More

- ***Did God Have A Wife? Archaeology And Folk Religion In Ancient Israel***
William G. Dever, 2005
- ***Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey***, Richard S. Hess, 2007 (in OPL)
-
- ***Life in Biblical Israel (Library of Ancient Israel)*** by Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, 2002
- ***The Lives of Ordinary People in Ancient Israel: When Archaeology and the Bible Intersect*** by William G. Dever 2012
- ***Women's Lives in Biblical Times*** by Jennie R. Ebeling, 2010 (In OPL)
- **Wikipedia articles**
 - Yahweh
 - Canaanite religion
 - Covenant (biblical)

Alternative Views on Origin and History of Israelite Religion

- 1. *The biblical claim of a unique revelation of the unique and only god making ritual and ethical demands in the context of covenants first with Abraham and then with Moses.***
- 2. *That biblical ethical monotheism was a unique creation of the Israelite people. This view is best developed by Yehezkel Kaufmann in his *The Religion of Israel, from Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile* (1960), (following from Wikipedia) –***

“Among Kaufmann's opinions expressed in this work are that neither a symbiotic nor syncretistic relationship obtained between the ancient Canaanites and Israelites. ... Monotheism – which on Kaufmann's view began at the time of Moses – was not the result of influences from any surrounding cultures, but was solely an Israelite phenomenon. After the adoption of Monotheism, Israelite belief is found to be free from mythological foundations, to the extent that the Scriptures do not even *understand* paganism.... Kaufmann summed up his position in these words: "Israelite religion was an original creation of the people of Israel. It was absolutely different from anything the pagan world knew; its monotheistic world view has no antecedents in paganism."... Kaufmann sees the classical "apostle-prophet" or "messenger-prophet" of the Prophetic literature as a uniquely Israelite phenomenon, the culmination of a long process of religious development not in any way influenced by surrounding cultures.”

“The occasional worship of Baal was never an organic movement of the people, but instead was only promoted by the royal court, mainly under Ahab and Jezebel. What idol-worship the Scriptures speak of was only "vestigial fetishistic idolatry," and not a genuine attachment of the people to such forms of worship, or the influence of foreign culture.”
- 3. *That the range of religious beliefs and practices grew out of their Canaanite precursors. At the folk level these changed little during the Iron Age c. 1200-586 BCE. At the level of official religion, Canaanite temples were replaced by regional open air high places which during the monarchy were supplemented by royal temples (Jerusalem, Arad, Dan, Bethel etc.). The Deuteronomic Reform resulted in the suppression of all high places and temples except that in Jerusalem, the worship of any deity other than Yahweh and the establishment of the first book-based religion in history***

Alternative Views on Origin and History of Israelite Religion

Overwhelming current scholars consider option 3 to be historically correct

Monolatry vs. Monotheism

Isaiah 44:6 contains the first clear statement of monotheism:

"I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god".^[35]

In Isaiah 44:09–20 this is developed into a satire on the making and worship of idols, mocking the foolishness of the carpenter who worships the idol that he himself has carved.

While Yahweh had shown his superiority to other gods before, in Second Isaiah he becomes the sole God of the world. **This model of monotheism became the defining characteristic of post-Exilic Judaism, and became the basis for Christianity and Islam**

Some Requirements of Folk Religion

- 1. Survival as a family and individual which require protection against demons, drought etc.** (see next slide)
- 2. Aligning oneself with the universe**
- 3. Placating the deities and securing their favor – care and feeding of the gods – accepting their myths, inquiring re what the gods want us to do which might include ethical and/or ritual behavior**

Dever on Marginality of Palestine

Ancient Palestine's poor natural environment, precarious geopolitical situation, unreliable subsistence, fractured social structure, and political instability mean that we must keep constantly in mind one fact. Ancient Israel was a truly *marginal* economy and society. The country was always poor compared to its prosperous neighbors; always powerless compared to their might; always on the verge of extinction (as finally happened). It may be unsettling to some readers, but the fact is that ancient Israel was an obscure cultural and historical backwater of the ancient Near East. It would have been long forgotten except for its one memorable contribution to civilization: the Hebrew Bible, and the memory of Israel's faith and vision of human destiny that it enshrines.

How did you determine God's Will before there was Scripture?

- 1. Enquire of the elders regarding traditions that are relevant**
- 2. Knuckle bones/Urim and Thummim mainly for binary questions**
- 3. Ask a prophet**
- 4. Enquire of the ancestors or other respected ancients – see Witch of Endor (prophetic tradition denounced this)**

Witch of Endor – 1Sam 28

When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. When Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, not by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets.

Then Saul said to his servants, "Seek out for me a woman who is a medium, so that I may go to her and inquire of her." His servants said to him, "There is a medium at Endor." ... he said, "Consult a spirit for me, and bring up for me the one whom I name to you." ... "Bring up Samuel for me."

The king said to her, "... what do you see?" The woman said to Saul, "I see a divine being coming up out of the ground." He said to her, "What is his appearance?" She said, "An old man is coming up; he is wrapped in a robe." So Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground, and did obeisance.

Then Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" Saul answered, "I am in great distress, for the Philistines are warring against me, and God has turned away from me and answers me no more, either by prophets or by dreams; so I have summoned you to tell me what I should do."

Samuel said, "Why then do you ask me, since the LORD has turned from you and become your enemy? The LORD has done to you just as he spoke by me; for the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand, and given it to your neighbor, David. Moreover the LORD will give Israel along with you into the hands of the Philistines; and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me; the LORD will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines."

Magic in folk Religion Attested by the Bible

- 1. Demonology and exorcism (angelology in late texts)**
- 2. Divination**
- 3. Oracles (prophetic or other)**
- 4. Soothsaying**
- 5. Wise men and wise women**
- 6. Magicians**
- 7. Medicine men**
- 8. Sorcerers, witchcraft**
- 9. Interpretation of dreams**
- 10. Astrologers**
- 11. Priestly blessings and curses**

Deities of Peasant Israel – One Suggestion

- 1. Yahweh the divine father. Creator. Giver of the land. Basis of Israelite identity. War leader.**
- 2. Asherah, consort of Yahweh, the divine mother. Modeled role of women and motherhood. Fertility. Special relationship with women.**
- 3. Baal the divine son. Giver of rain and ground water (springs, wells).**

Examples from

- Garden of Eden**
- Gideon**
- Elijah on Mt. Carmel**

Some Aspects of Folk Religion that Keep on coming Back Regardless of the Official Theology

- 1. Family paradigm projected into heaven – father, mother, child and remaining in contact with ancestors (visits to tombs, memorial meals, asking ancestors for advice), in ancient times intermediating deities later praying to saints**
- 2. Recreation of the “goddess”/ divine mother – ancient Israel Asherah, Christian virgin Mary, Jewish Shekhina**
- 3. Accessible places of contact with the divine – ancient Israel “high places, house and roof shrines for incense burning; Christian shrines in home, churches; Jewish synagogues**
- 4. Life cycle events**

Official Story 1
Religion of the Ancestors

Biblical literature includes the following motifs or theological propositions.

- The revelation of God ("El") to Abraham in Mesopotamia, his call for the ancestors to journey to Canaan in faith, and his promise to make their descendants a great multitude.
- The promise of the Land repeated to Patriarchs and Matriarchs by God (now named "Yahweh"), who has chosen Israel as his own exclusive people.

Distinctive features of religion depicted in Gen. 12-50, especially in contrast to the Mosaic Yahwism of Exodus through Deut. -

- **It is open and inclusive.** Everyone relates to the same God and there is **no discussion of multiple deities. God speaks to all – Abraham, Pharaoh, Abimelech etc.**
- **No antagonism between patriarchs and the religious practice of the Canaanites. No destruction of alters of other gods or contests between Yahweh and other gods and goddesses.**

Official Story 2
Religion of the Ancestors cont.

- **Abram and his descendants worship in a manner that includes mention of trees and pillars (where he placed alters), but not of prescribed places of worship, Sabbath, food laws. Circumcision is practiced on Ishmael as well as those in the line of Israel.**
- **No prophets or priests – Abraham fills both of those roles.**
- **The Patriarchs live as sojourners (*gerim*) and they live peacefully with their neighbours – Canaanites, Hittites, Jebusites etc. Their role in the promised land is not to purify of any or all of those already occupying it.**

(Except for the last point, these features show similarity to aspects of Iron Age folk religion.)

Official Story 3
Moses and After

- Liberation from Egyptian bondage as a sign of Yahweh's power and grace.
- The giving of the Torah at Sinai and the peoples' **covenant** with Yahweh; obedience as "holiness" (ritual purity) and sacrifice.
- The conquest and inheritance of the Land of Canaan as the fulfillment of promise and the symbol of Israel's destiny among the nations.
- Jerusalem ("Zion") as the eternal abode of Yahweh, the seat of the Davidic line of kings on the throne, and the locus of the Levitical priestly authority.
- **The primacy of faith in and loyalty to Yahweh alone, enshrined in the keeping of the "Torah" and the teachings of the prophets.**
- **The people keep backsliding bringing on disaster.**

Official Religion High places, royal temples (Jerusalem, Arad, Dan, Bethel etc.)	Folk Religion
Literate	Popular
Priesthood, complex ritual, founder traditions, eventually texts	Artifacts
Canon	Improvisation
Overt belief drives practice	Practice with implied belief
Mythology	Magic
Verbal	Symbolic
Theology	Cult
Ideology	Action
Intellectual	Emotive
Dogma	Praxis
Rational	Mystical

State Religion Women probably no role	Folk Religion Women probably main role
Ceremonial	Ritual
Public	Private
Social	Individual
National	Local
State	Family
Ethics	Piety
Political order	Right relations
“Sacred”	“Profane”
Orthodoxy	Customary practice

Deuteronomistic Denunciation of Folk Religion 1

The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger. Jeremiah, chapter 7: 18

Jeremiah 44:15-27

Then all the men who knew that their wives had offered incense to other gods, and all the women who stood by, a great assembly, all the people who dwelt in Pathros in the land of Egypt, answered Jeremiah:

"As for the word which you have spoken to us in the name of Yahweh, we will not listen to you. We will do everything that we have vowed, burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and pour out libations to her, as we did, both we and our fathers, our kings and our princes, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; for then we had plenty of food, and prospered, and saw no evil. But since we left off burning incense to the Queen of Heaven and pouring out libations to her, we have lacked everything and have been consumed by the sword and by famine."

Deuteronomistic Denunciation of Folk Religion 2

And the women said, "When we burned incense to the Queen of Heaven and poured out libations to her, was it without our husbands' approval that we made cakes for her bearing her image and poured out libations to her?"

Then Jeremiah said to all the people, men and women, all the people who had given him this answer:

"As for the incense that you burned in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, you and your fathers, your kings and your princes, and the people of the land, did not the LORD remember it? Did it not come into his mind? The LORD could no longer bear your evil doings and the abominations which you committed; therefore your land has become a desolation and a waste and a curse, without inhabitant, as it is this day. It is because you burned incense, and because you sinned against the LORD and did not obey the voice of the LORD or walk in his law and in his statutes and in his testimonies, that this evil has befallen you, as at this day."

Deuteronomistic Denunciation of Folk Religion 3

Jeremiah said to all the people and all the women, "Hear the word of the LORD, all you of Judah who are in the land of Egypt. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: You and your wives have declared with your mouths, and have fulfilled it with your hands, saying, 'We will surely perform our vows that we have made, to burn incense to the queen of heaven and to pour out libations to her.' Then confirm your vows and perform your vows!

...

Behold, I am watching over them for evil and not for good; all the men of Judah who are in the land of Egypt shall be consumed by the sword and by famine, until there is an end of them.

Typical Contents of Family Shrine

Dever (*Did God...* p. 117) – “family shrines, serving either a single nuclear family, or, more likely, a larger extended family compound. These shrines were for private worship, in which there were no regular fixed services, no priestly supervision, no prescribed theology.... (M)embers of the family probably stopped briefly at these convenient shrines daily, singly or in groups ... as they felt the need. And here women played a significant role.”

- Standing stones (symbol of divine presence? Of ancestors?)
- Alters, some “horned” (larger ones of animal sacrifice; smaller ones of incense – horns may have originated in “bull” or “fertility” motifs)
- Stone tables and basins
- Offering stands
- Benches
- Jewelry
- Ceramic vessels
- Animal bones and food remains
- Astragali (knucklebones) – probably for divination
- Terra cotta female figurines

“Horned” Altar



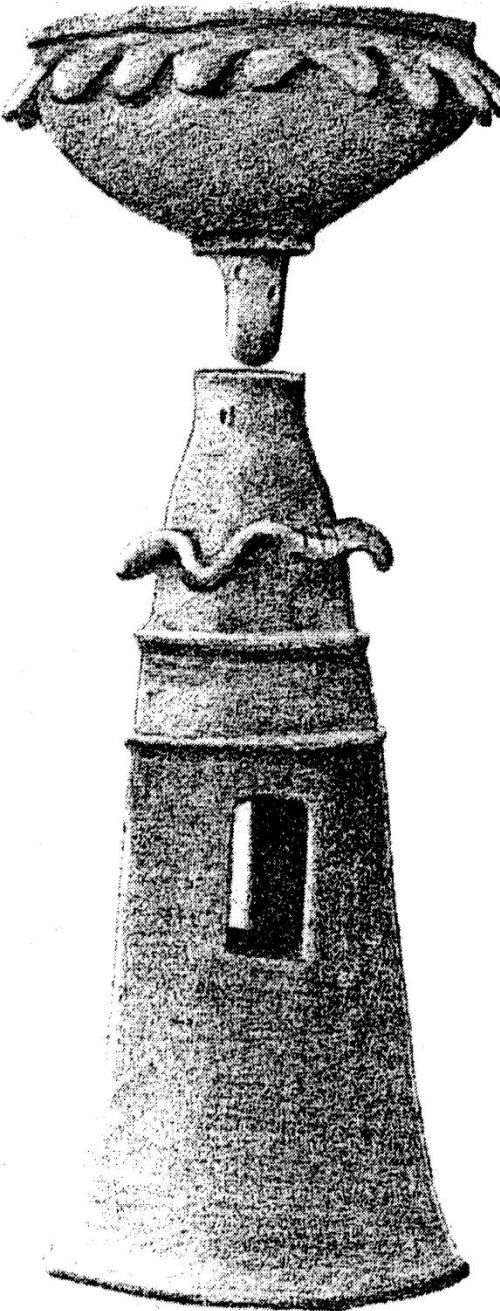
Cult or Offering Stands N.b. though commonly found they are never mentioned in the Bible!! – nb musicians



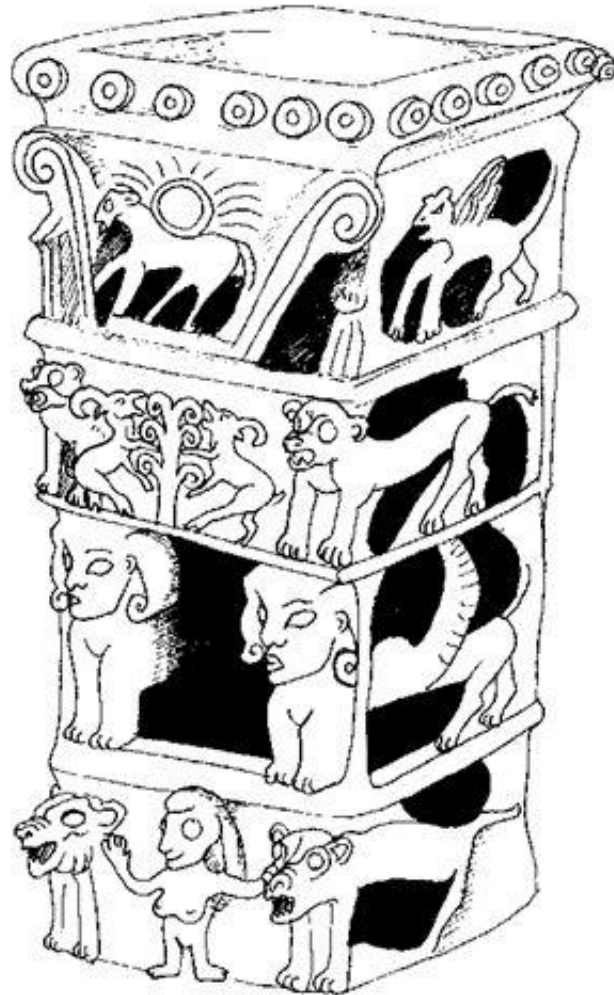
Cult or Offering Stand– nb feet



Offering Stand with Removable Bowl

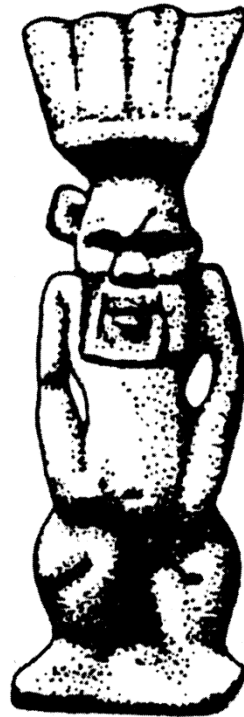


Cult or Offering Stand– nb Asherah, empty space for aniconic god?



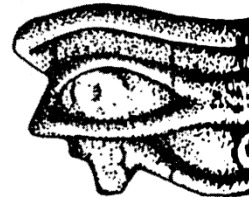
Amulets Found Frequently in Judean Tombs

DID GOD HAVE A WIFE?



“Eye-of-Horus” faience amulet
Lachish tombs, 8th-7th cent. B.C.
Adapted from Tufnell 1953, Pl. 34:8, 10

Faience figurines of the
Egyptian “good luck”
deity Bes; Lachish tomb,
7th cent. B.C.
Adapted from Tufnell 1953,
Pl. 34:14



Local Versions of Yahwism

- Qom- “Blessed was Uriah by Yahweh, and from his enemies by his (Yahweh’s) Asherah he has delivered him.”
- Ajrud
 - Longevity, and may they be sated... be granted by Yahweh of Teman and by (his) Asherah
 - I hereby bless you by Yahweh of Samaria and by his Asherah

Asherah

Asherah in the Bible is variously:

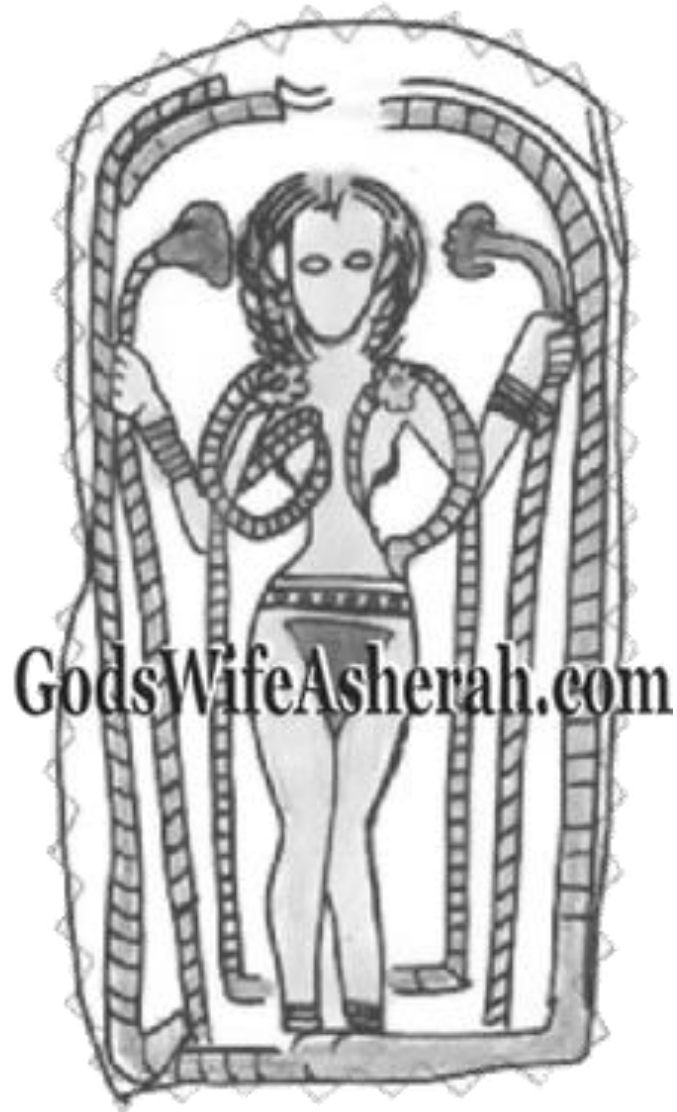
- A wooden post put up beside an altar (symbolizing possibly a goddess or possibly the female aspect of the deity)
- A figure of the goddess Asherah

Asherah



Z. Radovan, Jerusalem

Asherah

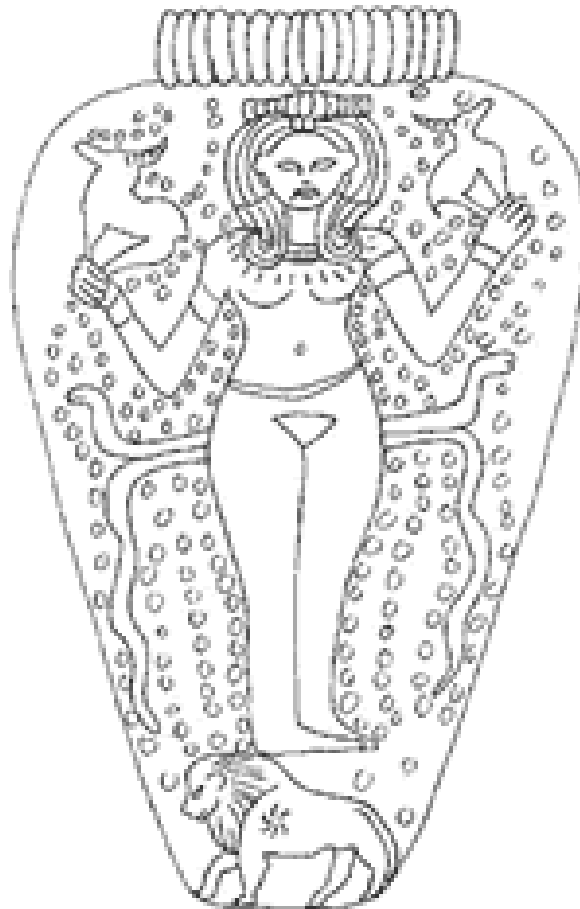


GodsWifeAsherah.com

Asherah



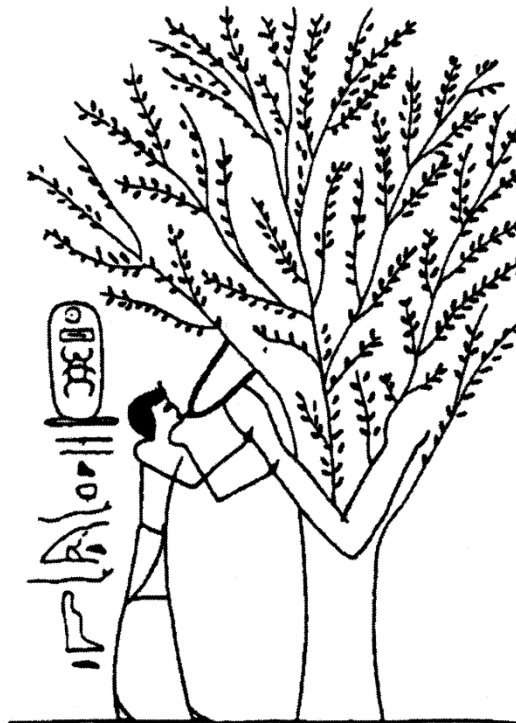
Asherah



Asherah

Electrum pendant of a stylized Asherah,
with Hathor wig, and a tree growing
from the vulva; 14th-13th cent. B.C.

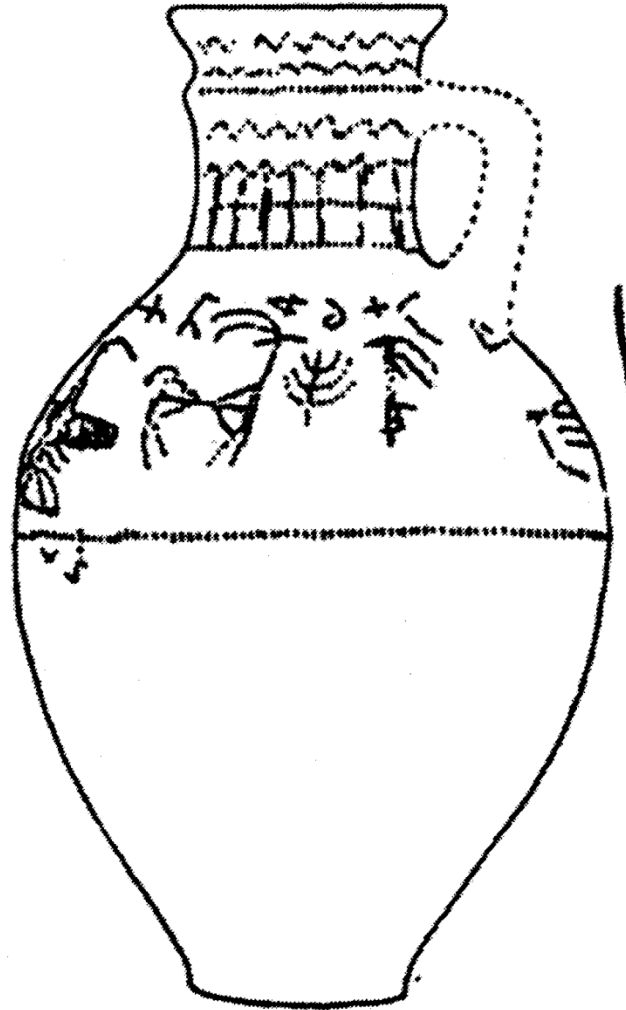
Keel 1998, Fig. 18



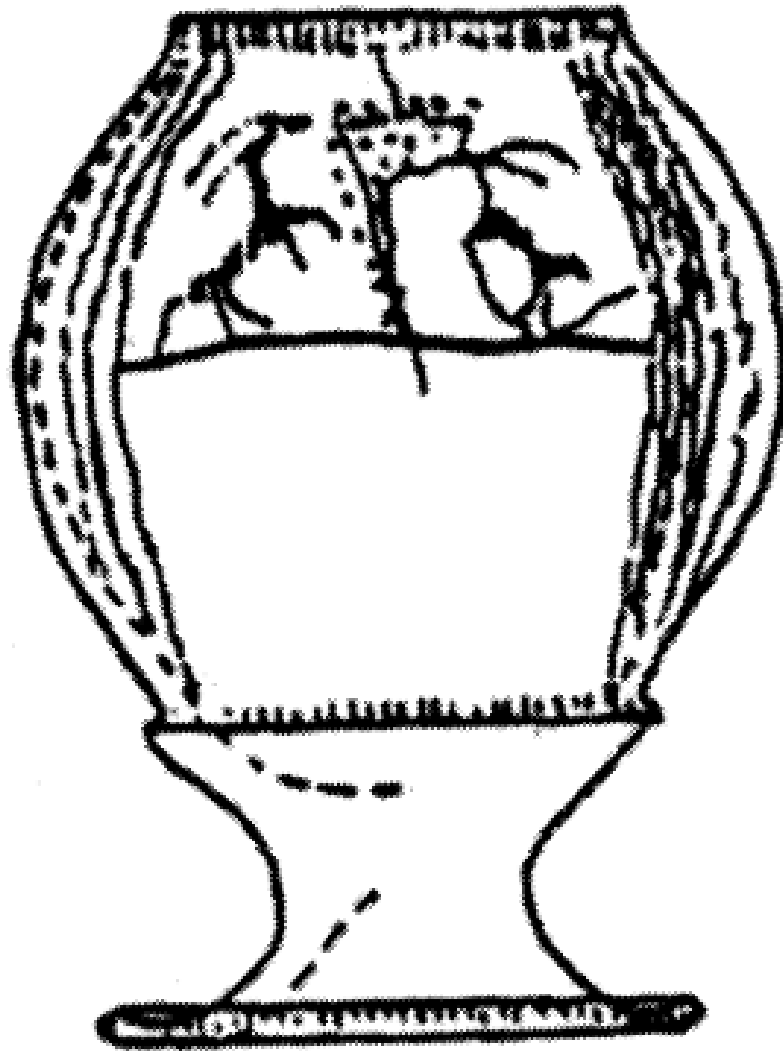
Egyptian 18th Dynasty tomb painting,
showing a son of Pharaoh Thutmose III
being nursed by a tree-goddess

Keel 1997, Fig. 253

Asherah - Manorah



Asherah



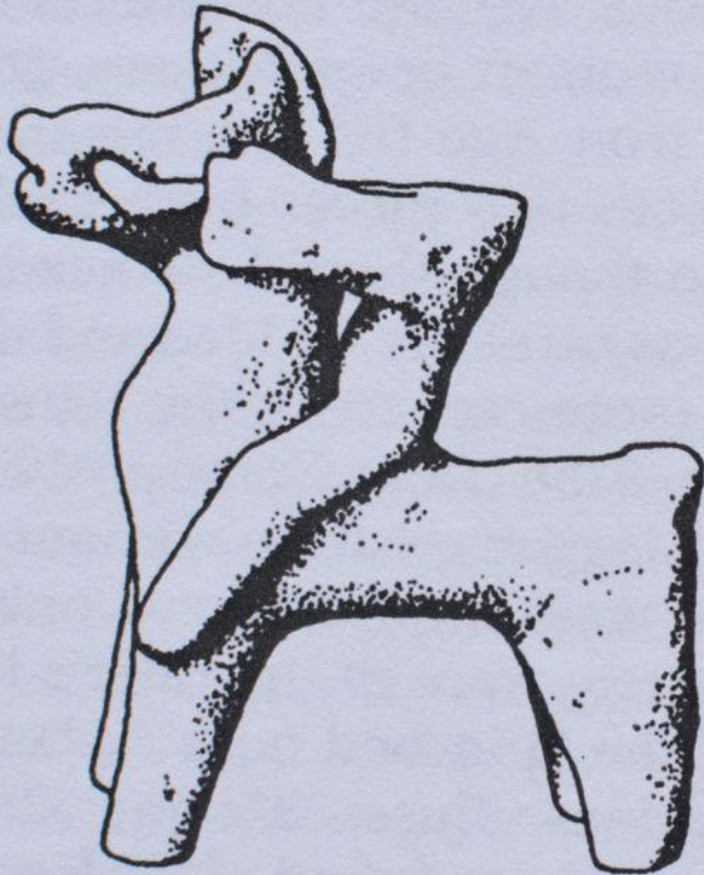
Pillar figurines - Israelite Asherah???



Pillar figurines - Israelite Asherah???



Baal, Sun God – Sun Samson, Beth Shemesh???



333a



333b

Lamelekh Royal Seals



Lamelekh Royal Seals



Asherah in New Dress 1

One of my women friends reminds me that in Russian and Greek Orthodox traditions there is an ancient service featuring the “Akathist Hymn,” sung in praise and devotion to the “Theotokos,” or “Holy Mother and Ever-Virgin Mary.” Among the epithets of the Holy Mother are these (all direct quotes):

Star revealing the Sun

Seer of the ineffable will

She of the fruitful womb, a fertile meadow

Branch of the unwithering Vine

Land yielding the untainted Fruit

One from whom flow milk and honey

Well-shaded Tree; tree of delectable Fruit

Table full-laden

Ever-flowing River

Wine-bowl overfilled with joy

Shekinah as Sabbath Bride

This is a recurrent theme in Judaism :

"I sing in hymns to enter the gates of the Field of holy apples.

"A new table we prepare for Her, a lovely candelabrum sheds its light upon us.

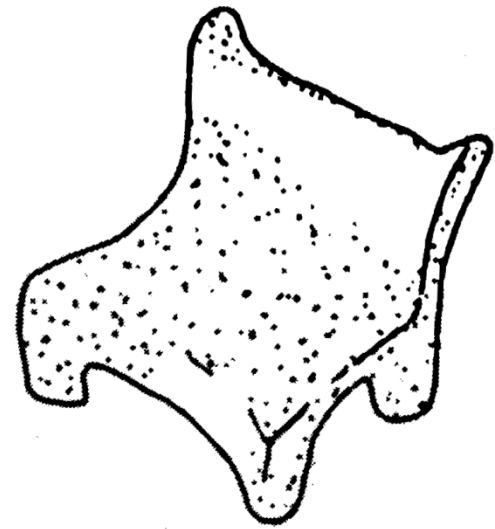
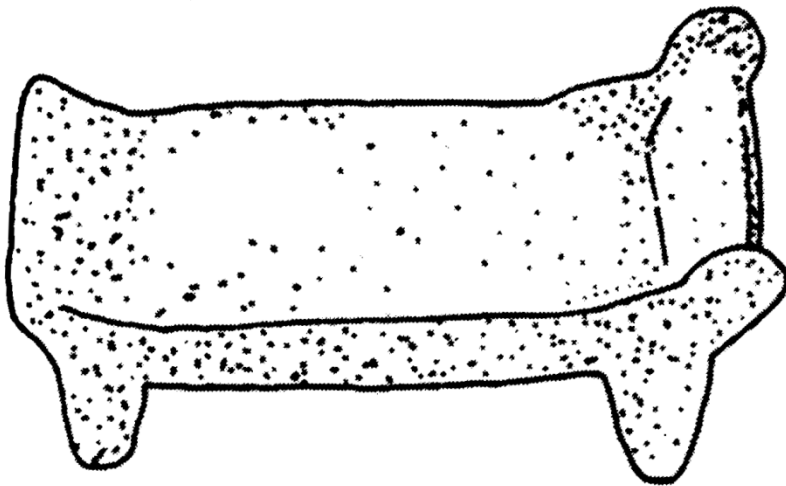
"Between right and left the Bride approaches, in holy jewels and festive garments..."

Marzeah-Cult of the Dead?

- **There is evidence of sacral meals possibly = *Marzeah***
- ***Zevah* sacrifices were effectively sacral meals in the Bible**
- **Were the dead members of the family included in *Marzeah* meals?**

Model Furniture for the Dead to Use in the Afterlife?

Archaeological Evidence for Folk Religions in Ancient Israel



Model bed and chair, Lachish tombs 8th cent. B.C.

Adapted from Tufnell 1952, Pl. 29:21, 22

Views on the Emergence of Israelite State Religion 1

Primary Sources

- Rare fragments of writing that have survived against all the odds – e.g. Dead Sea Scrolls, Arad and Lachish ostraca;
- Equally rare inscriptions and graffiti; and,
- Other archaeological evidence.

Views on the Emergence of Israelite State Religion 2

Secondary Sources

- These are documents prized by groups having direct cultural descendants (Jews, Christian cultural tradition etc.) Since it was very laborious to copy books, normally only a small selection could be copied and these would be the items that the community, at the time of copying, considered important.
- The best example of the biblical historical tradition is the Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy- 2 Kings). This is not history, as we would understand it, and was not meant to be. Rather it was salvation-history designed to illustrate a paradigm (when Israel obeyed the Torah it prospered and visa versa). What did not fit was dropped or changed to fit the paradigm. It is very instructive to examine, in 1 and 2 Chronicles how Samuel and Kings are adapted to a modified paradigm in the late fifth or early fourth centuries BCE.

Divine Characteristics 1

Canaanite God	Characteristics	Absorbed into YHWH?
EI	Creator, wise, judge, kindly, guardian of cosmic order, healing, giving children and accepting their sacrifice	Yes except that child sacrifice was rejected at the end of the First Temple period.
Asherah	Universal mother – human fertility	Mainly
Baal-Hadad	Controls rain, and hence agricultural fertility, and war god	Yes

Divine Characteristics 2

Canaanite God	Characteristics	Absorbed into YHWH?
Ashtart-Anat	Violent sexuality, manly woman	No
Eshmun	Healing and health	Yes
Reshef	God of plague and mass death	Plague is a standard punishment sent by YHWH and is completely under his control

Divine Characteristics 3

Canaanite God	Characteristics	Absorbed into YHWH?
Mot (name= “death”)	God of death and senility	Death and senility are by the will of YHWH
Yam (name= “ocean”)	Represents forces of chaos	Chaos can only come by the will of YHWH

Crisis – the Driving Force 1

Crisis	Impact
Philistines etc. press from the west (12th-11th centuries BCE)	Development of Israelite consciousness and possibly formation of a league of El and YHWH worshipers identifying the two gods

Crisis – the Driving Force 2

Crisis	Impact
<p>Imposition by Ahab of Tyrian Baal (mid-9th century BCE)</p>	<p>The prophetic movement demanded the rejection of the native weather deity Baal-Hadad (likely with his consort the native <u>Ashtart</u>/Ashtoreth) as un-Israelite and disloyal to YHWH. Baal's characteristics are appropriated by YHWH. (see Elijah on Carmel).</p>

Crisis – the Driving Force 3

Crisis	Impact
Assyrian Pressure 8th- mid-7th centuries BCE	Crisis of confidence in YHWH – was He weaker than the gods of Assyria? This may have led to the wide- spread worship of Astarte-Ishtar-Queen of Heaven and perhaps astral deities

Crisis – the Driving Force 4

Crisis	Impact
Decline of Assyria late 7th century BCE	<p>The Deuteronomic reformers demanded the exclusive worship of YHWH – all other deities were rejected as un-Israelite. To ensure uniformity of practice and concentration of resources all sacrifice was to be centralized in Jerusalem. Outside of Jerusalem, prayer starts to replace sacrifice in popular worship</p>

Crisis – the Driving Force 5

Crisis	Impact
<i>Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, exile and temporary cessation of sacrifice</i>	YHWH could not be said to have been defeated by the gods of Babylon. Instead, it was claimed that He was lord of the world and the author of the just destruction of Jerusalem. Prayer replaces sacrifice in popular worship

Canaanite El to Israelite El = Yahweh 1

- According to the Canaanite tradition El is "the One", the "Creator of all Created Things." This, however, must be seen in the context of El himself being the son of Sky (father) and Earth.
- In this regard, the Israelite El is quite different from the Canaanite El. The Bible pointed starts with the phrase – “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth” i.e. the first objects God (*elohim=el*) created in the biblical tradition were El’s parents in the Canaanite tradition! The verb translated “created” (Hebrew *br’*) as used in the Hebrew Bible, unlike the verb *qnh* used in the following quote from Genesis chapter 14, is a specifically theological term, the subject of which is invariably God.

Canaanite El to Israelite El = Yahweh 2

- We can notice the, perhaps intended ambivalence in Genesis chapter 14
 - 18 And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God/El Most High (*'el 'elyon*). He blessed him and said, '**Blessed be Abram by God Most High, creator/maker/purchaser/possessor of heaven and earth** (*qoneh shamaim wa'areš*) 20 and blessed be God/El Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!' And Abram gave him one tenth of everything.... Abram said to the king of Sodom, 'I have sworn to the **YHWH, God/El Most High, (YHWH 'el celyon qoneh shamaim wa'areš) creator/maker/purchaser/possessor of heaven and earth....**
- Abram clearly accepted the Canaanite King Melchizedek as a legitimate priest of God since he sacrificed with him and paid him a priestly tithe. However note the ambiguity of the Hebrew word *qoneh* which can mean either maker/creator OR purchaser/possessor/owner. I.e. Abram could interpret the expression as meaning that El was the creator of heaven and earth while Melchizedek could interpret the same words as meaning that El had won control of heaven and earth.

Biblical Texts (as preserved)	Archaeological Artifacts (as preserved)
Selective, elitist by nature	Broadly representative, "populist"
Heavily edited in transmission	Constitute random sample
Reflect principal ideology	Reflect common practice
Closed corpus	Dynamic, expanding source of data
Continuous tradition	"Broken" tradition
Literature	"Real" life