

Asherah and Yahweh: An Inconclusive Engagement

In Diana Edelman's artistic work, "Proving Yahweh Killed His Wife (Zechariah 5:5-11)," she places herself, as prosecutor, into a divine court of law in which Yahweh plays both judge and defendant. She then eloquently presents her case:

"We allege, your Highness, that you were so overburdened by your guilt at killing your wife Asherah and by the ensuing loneliness that you have experienced as Elohim, the sole deity, that you felt compelled to share your gnawing secret with others. At the same time, we allege that you did so in a way that maintained your superior status by using obscure and deliberately multivalent imagery on the assumption that mortal minds would not really understand (2003, 335-336)."

Edelman's accusation presents some interesting questions to both religious scholars interested in Abrahamic belief and also to those who consider themselves practitioners of these monotheistic traditions. These questions are two-fold. First, who is this 'Asherah' that Edelman speaks of and what is her relationship with Yahweh? Is she really, as Edelman claims, his wife or consort? Secondly, if she is, or was at one time, considered Yahweh's wife why is this not reflected in the religious traditions and cultures that have evolved from early Hebrew culture? Was she somehow 'killed,' as Edelman suggests? The purpose of this paper is to ponder these questions. As such, it will take an in-depth look at both Asherah and at the relationship that may have existed between her and Yahweh. This exploration will focus on the connections that these two deities had to one another, as informed by archeology and literature of both Biblical and extra-Biblical sources. It is hoped that this exploration will help to show that, while it is not conclusive that Yahweh had a consort, the goddess Asherah, she and her cult needed to be done away with in order for him to become enthroned as the monotheistic deity of today's Abrahamic traditions.

It may prove beneficial for this exploration to be broken down into three distinct phases. The first phase will involve an exploration of the goddess Asherah. The second phase will center specifically on the relationship that Yahweh and Asherah may have had within Hebrew culture and religious practices. The third phase will look at why Asherah and her cult, regardless of her relationship with Yahweh, would need to disappear from Hebrew worship in order for monotheistic perspective to take hold amongst Yahweh's followers.

Before moving forward to address Asherah's place in Hebrew religious belief, one thing must be noted about the sources available for this exploration. The resources that refer to early Hebrew religious practices are often both open to multiple interpretations and are incomplete (Patai 1965, 38). As Rapheal Patai reflects in "The Goddess Asherah," the majority of materials that can be found referring to the early periods of Hebrew religious practice fall under to categories: "literal and archeological" and both of these present difficulties for contemporary scholarship (1965, 37). The literary material available, and by that Patai seems to be addressing specifically Biblical texts, began first as an oral tradition that was later written down and, afterwards, was often subject to revisions based upon newfound perspectives or moral understandings that previous generation may not have known or held to (1965, 37). As Patai explains,

References felt to be too offensive [to the later monotheistic tendencies of the Hebrew monarchy] were toned down or abridged ... so that all non-monotheistic forms of popular religion are consistently and unrelentingly referred to only with derision, condemnation, and reproach of idolatrous backsliding (1965, 37).

When turning to archeological sources of information these are found to suffer from other difficulties. According to Patai, ancient sites identified as belonging to the early Hebrew period often do not “contain any clear cut evidence as to the identity of the deity to whom they were dedicated” (1965, 37). Compounding the problem is the fact that the rites which took place at the various places of worship were often identical, or, as Patai puts it, “followed the same pattern,” regardless of the deity that they were addressing and this adds to the difficulty of assigning a specific place to a specific deity (1965, 37).

The difficulty of researching the early Hebrew religious practices does not necessarily mean that the project of this paper is inherently impossible. Patai makes this clear when he talks about the evidence available which deals with the early Hebrew popular culture. He offers four distinct categories of evidence. These will only briefly be mentioned here, but it is important for the reader to keep them in mind. The categories of evidence Patai presents are: biblical evidence, which regardless of the revisionist tendencies of later monotheistic Yahwists offers clues to popular religion; archeological evidence around areas inhabited the early Hebrews, while currently lacking, is increasing daily; archeological and mythological finds of Canaanite, Syrian, Mesopotamian etc. which refer to the same deities mentioned within the Bible; and “Literary sources of post-Biblical Judaism” which were considered less sacred and therefore contain information that might contain more heterodoxical tendencies (1965, 37-38). As such, these sources do offer scholars glimpses upon which to base a description of early Hebrew religious practices, even if it is not necessarily a definitive or normative one.

Such clues hint to the fact that at least at the beginning of early Hebrew culture monotheism was not the norm. While this will be dealt with in more detail later, and in specific regards to the relationship between Asherah and Yahweh, it may prove useful for the reader to assume that the early Hebrew tradition embraced a henotheistic perspective when dealing with their divinities. Henotheism, as defined by Stephen L. Harris and Robert L. Platzner in The Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible, is “allegiance to one god while conceding that others exist” (60). Such a perspective may allow for clearer understanding of Asherah and her cult’s place within early Hebrew religion.

As mentioned above, the first phase of this project is to look at the goddess Asherah, and attempt to understand who she was to her religious followers and the role that she may have played within their culture, Hebrew or otherwise. With the above discussion in mind, it shouldn’t come as a surprise to find that when trying to describe Asherah, her attributes, symbols or the religious practices of her cult, scholars offer a variety of understandings. These confusions arise for a variety of reasons. Two of which are the similarity of Asherah to other deities and scholarly zeal which tries to attribute just about anything to Asherah. These will be looked at only briefly below.

The difficulty of understanding Asherah and her place within early Hebrew traditions and the traditions of their neighbors is that she is often confused with other goddesses, such as Astarte or Athirat¹, who bare similar aspects or attributes. For instance, Patai states, “In the

¹ It should be noted that Day believes that Asherah is the same deity as Athirat and his argument for this connection, as well as arguments against this association, can be found on pages 398- 399 of the article cited.

Amarna tablets (fourteen century B.C.) the names Asherah and Astarte interchange, which may indicate a lack of clear distinction between the functions and personalities of these two goddesses” (1965, 39). Furthermore, John Day in “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature,” states that until the Ugaritic texts were found “... it was common for scholars to deny the very existence of the goddess Asherah... and many who did accept her existence wrongly equated her with Astarte” (385). This has often led to Asherah’s presence being ignored in early and even contemporary scholarship. Of course, this difficulty is not insurmountable because as more archeological and literary data surfaces, scholars are able to return to previous findings and ask whether or not they reflect current knowledge. An instance of this can be found in John Wilson Betlyon’s article “The Cult of Asherah/Elat at Sidon.” Betlyon argues that while the “Temple of ʿEšum²,” a Neo-Babylonian style temple that dates back to the sixth century B.C.E., was previously associated with Astarte by early scholars but should actually be associated with Asherah (53). He bases his argument off of the current understanding of Asherah which emphasizes her association with the sea. He states that his interpretation of the temple makes it fit better with Asherah than Astarte because of the presence of the “pool and throne” motif of the temple (53-54). While this summary cannot do full justice to Betlyon’s discussion, the importance here is that the original association of the temple with Astarte was based upon excavations in 1924 and Betlyon argues current scholarship allows for greater illumination for whom the temple was actually dedicated (53, 56).

The discovery of Asherah as a separate and unique deity has given rise to a second issue perhaps best seen as resulting from scholarly zeal. In other words, scholars seemed to go from ignoring the presence of Asherah to seeing her everywhere. For instance, in “Of Asherahs and Trees: Some Methodological Questions,” Steve A. Wiggins argues that in many ways Asherah has become a ‘catch all’ goddess (160). As an example of this phenomenon, Wiggins compiles many of his sources and presents the following:

Her [Asherah’s] growing associations are such that, using the standard method of modern researchers, one could easily compile the following equation: Asherah = goddess = tree = male deities = fish = caprids = lion = cow and calf = monkey = snake = musician = female pudenda = ‘mistress of beasts’ = ‘the one of the beast’ = tree of life = menorah = divine divorcee (160-161).

While Wiggins only addresses the association of Asherah with trees in biblical and other sources, he does state that those scholars who choose to offer associations between Asherah and specific phenomena must present ‘extraordinary’ evidence that will support their claims. Furthermore, he defines this ‘extraordinary’ evidence as “a systematic demonstration that a given trait was consistently applied, in many cultures, for a reasonable amount of time” (161). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer such ‘extraordinary’ evidence for the associations of Asherah discussed, this criticism is important for viewing the data presented. Given the fact that both archeological discoveries and literary materials continue to give new knowledge of the early Hebrew period, the attributes of Asherah offered in this paper may have to be returned to at a later date and compared with the data then available.

With the above discussion in mind, the question of who Asherah is still must be addressed. One of the best ways to achieve a picture of Asherah is to look at her from at least two separate, although connected, perspectives. The first perspective stems from the myths,

² Sadly, I do not have the ability to copy the exact accents that are offered in the original text.

beliefs and archeological records of the neighbors of the early Hebrews. The information will mainly be addressed Canaanite in origin. The second perspective that will be focused upon will be the Hebrew perspective. It is hoped that these two perspectives will show a congruity of Asherah's worshippers, whether they be Hebrew or otherwise.

As presented earlier, Asherah's appearance in the archeological record, and the subsequent rethinking of her as a deity in her own right, was the result of the discovery of the Ugarit texts in 1929 (Day 385). These texts, along with other archeological and literary discoveries, offer an image of Asherah as she appeared within the Canaanite pantheon. Patai argues that the status of Asherah within the Canaanite pantheon was so great that it was inevitable that she would somehow be adopted into the early Hebrew religious practices (1965 39). Therefore, part of the answer to who Asherah may have been lies in finding out who she was according to the Canaanites, the neighbors of the early Hebrews. Sadly, not all of the characteristics offered by scholars can be addressed within this paper. Therefore, the following section will focus on Asherah's place within the Canaanite Pantheon, her motherly role, and her connection with the sea. Where relevant, her place within other cultures, such as where her characteristics are similar, will be offered.

According to the Canaanite Pantheon, Asherah is the major goddess, wife of El. The relationship between Asherah and El is an interesting one. Patai describes it as follows: "Her relationship to her husband El was like that of an Oriental queen to her master: when she entered his presence she would prostrate herself, whereupon El would kindly enquire upon her desire" (1965, 38). Interestingly this wife or consort relationship with El is mirrored in Asherah's relationships to other high gods in other regional Pantheons. For instance, according to Patai, in Amorite tradition Asherah is called Ashratum and she is the wife of Anu, a god whose attributes match that of the god El (1965, 39). Furthermore, in Syria, according to Edelman, she was partnered with the head god of that pantheon, Amurru (2002, 184). From just these three examples, it appears to be the case that Asherah never reigns alone but rather is always paired with the highest god of any pantheon in which she is involved. This shouldn't come as any real surprise because, as Patai states, "In all Near Eastern religions the principle goddess is considered the consort of the principal god (1970, 72)."

Asherah is not only considered the wife of the head god El but is also seen as the mother of the gods themselves. According to Betlyon, Asherah is called "she who gives birth to the gods" (55). Patai supports Asherah's motherly role when he describes her as "wet nurse to the gods" and states that she was the "progenitress of the Gods": all the other gods, numbering seventhly, were her children, including Baal, Anath, Mot, etc. (1965, 38)." This gives rise to her being seen as the goddess responsible for the fertility of humankind (Edelman 2002, 184). There are even myths which mention that she "suckled even human princes" who were found worthy (Patai 1965, 38). This motherly role may be further emphasized when Edelman describes her as "a homemaker who spins and cooks" (2002, 184). However, if the image of the 'homemaker' that Edelman describes conjures up images of Asherah as merely passive in creation it should be noted that she played an active role in the creation myths by destroying the Sea Dragon which enabled El to create the world (Betlyon 55).

The myth of Asherah's triumph over the Sea Dragon also speaks to another characteristic that she has within the Canaanite pantheon: her intimate connection with the sea. According to Patai, her full name as a Canaanite deity is "Lady Asherah of the Sea" (1965, 38). Betlyon supports this connection with the sea but offers a slightly different translation of her name, "... she who treads upon the sea," and argues that she may have been the patron deity of sailors in

port cities such as Tyre and Sidon (54-55.) This characteristic, the connection with the sea, seems to be the main characteristic that helps scholars, such as Betlyon, to distinguish Asherah from other goddesses, such as Astarte.

Mark Smith argues in “God Male and Female in the Old Testament: Yahweh and His ‘Asherah’” that the biblical view of Asherah is supported by the Canaanite view of Asherah presented in the Ugarit texts (Smith 334.) If the question is asked about how much of the Canaanite perspective of Asherah is incorporated in the Hebrew understanding of Asherah, then Smith offers an informative answer:

The biblical view seems to be supported by the Canaanite (Ugaritic) texts, which describe Asherah as a goddess. According to these texts, Asherah was the mother of the gods. She was the spouse of El, the older judge, patriarch, and father of the pantheon. Asherah was a nurturing mother goddess. The religious symbol of the goddess, the asherah, was in Israel a wooden pole, or perhaps a tree, representing the ‘tree of life’ (334).

From Smith’s comments, it becomes clear that the main understanding of the Canaanites regarding Asherah was incorporated into the Hebrew culture. The latter part of Smith’s statement also gives some indication of how Asherah was seen amongst the early Hebrews.

However, before moving onto describe Asherah as she might appear in biblical sources it should be mentioned that:

As far as the Biblical sources are concerned, the anti-polytheistic attitude of the Biblical authors and editors manifests itself in, among other things, a pronounced reluctance to allow any detail of pagan worship to enter their references to Israel’s religious transgressions (Patai 1965, 38).

This makes it difficult to find information pertaining to just exactly how this concept of Asherah played out within early Hebrew culture. Adding to this difficulty is the ambiguity of the terms ‘Asherah’ and ‘asherah’ as they are used throughout the Bible. For instance, one may suggest that a description of Asherah could be found by compiling all references that exist of the term ‘asherah,’ or its derivations within biblical sources. However, the appearance of the term itself doesn’t necessarily mean that the authors of the work were referring to the goddess known as Asherah. Day presents several possible definitions of the term: a mundane grove of trees or a single tree; a grove of trees sacred to the goddess Asherah or within her temple complex; a ritual object, such as a pole, which is sacred to Asherah (402-403). These multiple meanings have been the cause of much confusion amongst scholars and sometimes the specific meaning of the term chosen reflects more of the scholar’s standpoint than that of the actual text. In his discussion of the possible meanings of the term, Day presents various defenses that have been put forth by other scholars and dismisses those that do not take into account the description within the biblical text that refer to the ‘asherah’ as being made or constructed (402.) Similarly, scholars such as Wiggins and J.A. Emerton in “‘Yahweh and His Asherah’ the Goddess or Her Symbol?” have explored the various ways that the ‘asherahs’ have been described, the former, and the way in which the text is used and deciphered, the latter.

This confusion seems to support Edelman’s accusation of Yahweh’s deliberate muddling of any information that might suggest either Asherah’s presence amongst the early Hebrews or her connection with him. Regardless of any action on Yahweh’s part, there are scholars that are willing to look at the information available and hazard a guess as to what Asherah and her cult

may have done within the Hebrew cultural sphere. For instance, Susan Ackerman argues in “The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel” that the “queen mother did have an official responsibility in Israelite religion: it was to devote herself to the cult of the mother goddess Asherah within the king’s court” (338). Ackerman argues that this devotion to Asherah contained a cultic component and, when linked with the Queen Mother’s responsibility to choose the next heir of the kingdom, this places the succession king at least partially into the hands of Asherah (388, 400). This may point to the level of prestige that Asherah and her cult held for the Hebrew ruling class.

However, it is not only in the royal courts where Asherah is adopted into Hebrew culture. She is often considered part of the popular religion of the Hebrews. Of this Day states:

The Asherim [ashera]; along with the other appurtenances of the high places, ... the altars and the pillars, ... the latter apparently symbols of the male deity, where a feature of the popular religion in Israel, but as a Canaanite accretion to the cult of the God of Sinai ... [and] that it is clear that over a long period of time they formed a feature of Israel’s popular religion (Day 406.)

Both of these views support Smith’s contention that Asherah was adopted into the religious worldview of the early Hebrews.³

From the data presented above, it could be argued that Asherah had at one time become fully adopted into the early Hebrew religious practices. She seems to have had cultic practices devoted to her at both the level of the elite as well as that of the common people. If this is the case then another interesting question appears. If Patai is correct that within most Near Eastern religions the highest goddess is usually the consort of the highest male deity, did Asherah become the consort of Yahweh? Did Yahweh, as Edelman proclaim, have a wife?

It appears that in some circles it is indeed the case that Asherah did become the consort of Yahweh. There seems to be three different theories put forward that support this conclusion. The first theory is founded upon the reasoning that importing Asherah would require a direct one-to-one correspondence between the relationships that she held with one god to be reflected in a relationship with the new one. Patai supports this standpoint by reasoning that because Asherah was El’s consort within Canaanite culture, she would then become Yahweh’s when she was adopted into the Hebrew pantheon (1970, 72). Day also supports this by stating:

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 (393.)

The second theory that links Asherah and Yahweh together outside of biblical references is archeological. Sandra Scham discusses in “The Lost Goddess of Israel” one profound piece of data that has illuminated this fact came not from biblical literary sources but from archaeological data in the form of an inscription upon storage jars found in the 1970’s at Ajurd (⁴) The inscription reads: “Yahweh by his Asherah” this seems to indicate for Scham that there is an

³ It should be noted that there is a debate as to whether or not she really was an adoption form the Canaanites or whether, in fact, she had existed alongside Yahweh for quite sometime before the Hebrews moved into the area inhabited by the Canaanites. I could find very little on this view but it is put forward by Mark Smith in the article cited.

⁴ Page numbers not available for the Scham article.

intimate relationship between the two. This mirrors another inscription put forth by Smith which reads “May Uriyahu be blessed by Yahweh, may guardian..., and his/its asherah/Asherah” (334).

The third theory is based upon biblical evidence. Day presents Deuteronomy 16:21-22 as evidence for the link between Yahweh and Asherah. It reads: “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, your Lord your God hates” (Day 392.) Day argues that texts such as these point to a religious syncretism that existed within specific circles and that within these syncretistic circles Asherah was Yahweh’s consort (392.) These are supported by Edleman when she concludes that: “... before the exile, the official religion was not monotheistic; a divine couple was worshipped as the source of fertility and blessing” (184, 2002.) All of these theories support the argument that Asherah was indeed Yahweh’s consort.

However, the arguments are in no way conclusive. It might be suggested that arguments and data supporting the conclusion that Asherah was indeed the wife of Yahweh are rather weak especially when considering the resources available and Wiggin’s suggestion of the need for extraordinary evidence to support extraordinary claims. While the data does strongly suggest for the acceptance of Asherah within the Hebrew religious paradigm, the belief that Asherah was necessarily his consort rests upon a shaky reasoning. In regards to the theory that argues that that one group of religious practices, (i.e. Canaanite religion) will have a direct correlation within a different one (i.e. Hebrew), this assumption, while interesting, is not totally convincing especially when considering the various number of instances where religious practices of one group are not embraced fully by those of another. There are numerous instances of this phenomena described throughout the field of religious studies. When looking at the theory based upon archeological evidence pertaining to inscription which name Asherah and Yahweh together the evidence is found to be just as inconclusive because it doesn’t really give the context in which the relationship between Asherah and Yahweh was conceived. Furthermore, in Scham’s article she mentions that those same inscriptions mentioned earlier were also found amongst inscriptions that called upon ‘Ba’al and El’⁵. As such, this lack of context seems to confuse things rather than offer unambiguous evidence of a link between Asherah and Yahweh. The final theory offered, the one based upon biblical verse, is perhaps one of the more interesting given the discussion earlier about how revisions have affected the text. However, it is unclear as to what exactly Day means as syncretism. If it is possible for there to be a syncretic relationship between the Canaanites and Hebrews that does involve Asherah becoming Yahweh’s consort then this doesn’t offer any stronger conclusion than the other evidence put forth.

However, if Edelman’s thesis is returned to, it may allow for another type of argumentation that would support her conclusion that Asherah was Yahweh’s consort. As she states in the quotation offered, the purpose for Yahweh killing Asherah was so that he could become the lone god. So, perhaps, if there were special measures taken to do away with Asherah, this would point to a special status or relationship she had with Yahweh. According to Patai, the fact that all forms of idolatry only the cult of Asherah is mentioned specifically by Ahijah must mean at least that the one offense of which people were more guilty than any other pagan worship was the cult of the goddess Asherah (1965, 45). Of course, this could mean that either there were a large number of followers of Asherah, more than any other deity besides Yahweh, or that she was greater than that of the deities besides Yahweh. This in turn could possibly point toward Asherah’s having an intimate relationship with Yahweh. Patai himself suggests that latter. According to him, when Asherah’s religious artifact was destroyed during

⁵ Page numbers not available for the Scham article.

Hezekiah's reforms, along with other ritual objects which were seen as abominations in the temple, religious objects relating to Asherah were mentioned twice in the list of artifacts destroyed. Furthermore, after Hezekiah's reforms "the only idol introduced into the Temple in Manasseh's counter-reformation was that of Asherah" (1965, 50). This Patai believes points to both these situations in order to underscore Asherah's prominence in the religious practices of the Hebrews.

However, the latter conclusion is called in to question because Patai later explores the incident on Mount Carmel where Elijah challenges the "450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah" (Patai 1965, 45). During this encounter Yahweh smites the 450 prophets of Baal but nothing is said to have happened to the 400 prophets of Asherah. Patai concludes that this was most likely due to the fact that "the Phoenician Baal was the real rival of Yahweh, not the goddess Asherah" (Patai 46-47, 1965.) This calls into question the conclusion that later revisions necessarily rewrote the relationship between Asherah and Yahweh and, therefore, presented her cult play a much less prominent role in Hebrew culture than earlier presented.

It should be emphasized here that there is a distinct possibility that Asherah could be very important to the Hebrew culture without being Yahweh's consort. Ackerman gives such an example when exploring the relationship between the queen mother and Asherah. While she suggests that the link between Asherah and Yahweh may be an interesting one, it does not lessen the importance of Asherah within the belief system of the Hebrews (400.) Therefore, the argument over whether or not Asherah was truly Yahweh's consort might not have any real impact upon whether or not he killed her. If she was powerful, if she was truly another deity, then she would have to be done away just as all other gods of the early Hebrews.

In returning to Edelman's accusations against Yahweh, the latter part of her statement seems to hold true. Yahweh, or rather his cult, seemed to go to great lengths to do away with Asherah, as they would have any other deity as they moved away from a henotheistic metaphysics to one in which Yahweh was the supreme and only god. Edelman herself states in "The Disappearance of Mrs. God," that it was most likely during the return from exile in Persia that the Hebrews. She states of the ruling class, whom she thinks may have already turned to a more monotheistic mindset, that:

... they were able to impose their set of beliefs upon the province [Judah]. Those who returned from exile would have accepted the new religion but those who remained would have continued their traditional worship of the divine couple [or even Asherah alone] would have had to have been forcefully 'converted' to the worship of YHWH alone (185).

It is clear from biblical sources and the way that they present Asherah, or fails to represent her, that the campaign to eradicate her from the lives of the Hebrews was successful.

In conclusion, were the case that Edelman brings against Yahweh actually to take place in the divine court, Yahweh would have to be acquitted for lack of evidence if the charge were that he simply killed his wife and disposed of her story. However, if Edelman were to broaden her accusation and charge Yahweh with killing his fellow deity, in hopes of becoming the end all and be all to his chosen people, then it appears that she could make her case. This exploration has shown that Asherah was indeed a deity valued by the Hebrew culture. She held domain over both the elite and the general population who seemed to adore her. It was only with the later

shift of the Hebrews from a henotheistic to a monotheistic worldview that she needed to be done away with, not because she was Yahweh's wife but perhaps because she was his equal.

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