

Judith M. Hadley. *The Cult of the Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess*. University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 57. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. xv, 262 pp.

Did the God of Israel have a wife? Posed in the context of monotheistic Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity this is, of course, a nonsensical question. However, even in the heavily edited Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible there remain traces of an earlier stage of belief in which Yahweh was accompanied by other beings. Among these para-human figures is Asherah, the form of whose name clearly indicates her feminine gender. In recent years numerous scholars have addressed the ticklish question of the original relationship between this lady and the Lord of Hosts, a problem that involves probing into the prehistory of the Hebrew scriptures.

The volume here under review, a reworked 1989 Cambridge dissertation, thoroughly considers the textual and archaeological evidence bearing on the matter of Asherah. The author commences with an exhaustive review of earlier work on the topic, presenting the arguments of contributors to the discussion in such specificity that she even reports the number of footnotes that appear in a certain work! While this excessive detail constantly reminds the reader of the book's origins as a doctoral thesis, it nonetheless gives one an excellent basis on which to decide whether to consult a particular secondary source.

There can be little doubt that Asherah of the Hebrew Bible was originally the goddess known at Ugarit as Athirat and in cuneiform sources of the second millennium as Ashratum, and that she once stood in a close relationship to the God of Israel. Later editors of the scriptures, however, so thoroughly depersonalized her that she appears in the received text as an inanimate wooden pole, part of the furnishings of a shrine.

Asherah's earlier identity could be recovered only after the documents of Israel's ancient neighbors—both contemporaries and predecessors—had become accessible to scholars in the twentieth century. Several archaeological discoveries, capably discussed by Hadley, have added support to the work of the philologists. The most sensational of these was the unearthing at Kuntillet 'Ajrud in the northern Sinai of the ruins of a caravanserai from the ninth-eighth centuries B.C.E. (see Chapter Five).

Among the graffiti incised into storage jars at this site are blessings by "Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah" (on pithos A) and by "Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah" (on pithos B). Also present on the first vessel are crudely drawn figures that some authorities have sensationally interpreted as images of the divine couple. Hadley carefully sifts the iconographic evidence and demonstrates convincingly that the drawings in fact represent the Egyptian fertility/jester god Bes and a musician, and have no necessary connection to the benedictions.

However, the problem remains: was the Asherah evoked here a deity or merely a cultic object? While this matter may be of great moment theologically, from the viewpoint of the historian of religion it is a distinction without a difference. If a symbol—in this case a shaft of wood representing the ancient Near East's sacred tree of vitality and fertility—may be invoked to provide boons, then it is imbued with both a personality and para-human powers. Functionally, therefore, it

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stands for a divinity, if perhaps a minor one, whether or not labeled with the term "god(dess)." One is reminded of the optional use of the divine determinative with various pieces of temple equipment in Mesopotamian and Hittite rituals. As for the pairing of Yahweh with a goddess, Tikva Frymer-Kensky (*In the Wake of the Goddesses* [New York: Free Press, 1992]) has emphasized the difficulties that arise when a monotheistic religion assigns humanlike character and gender to its sole god. Aspects of life more naturally attributed to beings of the excluded gender (e.g., motherhood in the case of the God of Israel) can be accommodated only awkwardly in conceptions of the universal deity. The evidence from ancient Israel strongly suggests that this problem had not yet arisen in the pre-exilic period.

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