

FEMALE PILLAR FIGURINES OF THE IRON AGE: A STUDY IN TEXT AND ARTIFACT

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Introduction

However polemic its intent, and not without a certain irony, the Hebrew Bible testifies eloquently to the manufacture and use of cultic images of wood, stone, and precious metal in ancient Israel. Biblical history documents the existence and tenacity of this phenomenon beginning in the days of the judges—in the tale of Micah and his house shrine complete with metal image, ephod, and teraphim (Judges 17-18)—to the sanctioned violence of king Josiah's attempted extirpation of it on the brink of Judah's end time (2 Kings 23). Second only to this are the prophets who rail against the divine images of Judah and Israel and mock those of the nations (Isa 10:10-11). Not including the references to *āšerah* and *āšerim*, there are over 200 occurrences of some 12 terms that signify cultic images. So far, this textual indication of the use of images must remain a general, even tentative observation, depending on a reading between the lines.

The archaeological record of Syria-Palestine has yielded a variety of cult effigies from several sites (e.g., Beth-Shan, Gezer, Jerusalem, Lachish, Megiddo and Tel-Beit Mirsim) and periods (Middle Bronze to Hellenistic). These are chiefly of terracotta and female in sex. Metal and male are in a distinct minority.¹ The female terracotta figurines and plaques most frequently depict the entire nude female emphasizing the breasts and the pubic triangle (*abb.* 44-48). Some females are touching one breast (*abb.* 49, 52, 55), while others support both (*abb.* 22-24, 29; see figure 1). Still another group, the object of this study, consists of pillar figurines. These emphasize prominent and heavy breasts, encircled and supported by the arms, and the head is usually sharply and arrestingly defined. The pubic

¹U. Winter, *Frau und Göttin* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 53; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1983), 96. The majority of references to the iconography of the goddess and the figurines are taken from Winter's extensive *Abbildungen*, "illustrations," designated as *abb.* in this article.

area has been replaced by the pillar base (*abb.* 30-33; see figure 2). Though such figurines occur as early as the tenth century B.C.E., they are most common from the eighth to seventh centuries (Iron IIC), especially in Judah where there are some 2000 from Jerusalem alone.² P. Bird notes that these figurines have baffled interpreters because of their anomalous distribution; she further asserts that they "cannot be connected with certainty to anything in the biblical text."³ W. G. Dever remarks that, in terms of linking artifact to text, they continue to be neglected.⁴ This study will endeavor to remedy that neglect and to attempt, *pace* Bird, to achieve some kind of *rapprochement* between text and artifact in the case of these figurines.

Terminology and Text

ʾāšērāh/ʾāšērīm

This term is found 40 times, eighteen in the feminine singular, nineteen in the masculine plural, including six times, with suffixes and as a feminine plural (*ʾāšērôt*) in three instances. The words are frequently preceded by a definite article. The word occurs mainly in the historical books, appearing a scant four times in the Pentateuch and only four times in the prophets. Although, as J. C. De Moor remarks, "neither the definite article, nor the plural necessarily excludes an interpretation of *ʾāšērāh* as a divine name," the majority of references would appear to indicate a cultic object rather than the goddess herself.⁵ The figure was made (1 Kgs 14:15) of wood (Judg 6:26), planted/driven into the ground or erected (Deut 16:21), often beside an altar (Judg 6:25). Thus it could be cut down (2 Kgs 18:4; 23:14), broken into pieces (2 Chr 34:4), burnt (2 Kgs 23:6,15), and pounded into dust (2 Kgs 23:6). In the light of the textual evidence and in view connection of the goddess' with a tree, *ʾāšērāh* was most likely an artificial and stylized sacred tree.⁶

²Winter, 107; Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Göttinnen, Götter und Gottesymbole*, QD 134 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1992), 322, 370; W. G. Dever, "Ancient Israelite Religion: How to Reconcile the Differing Textual and Artifactual Portraits?" in *Ein Gott Allein*, ed. W. Dietrich and M. A. Klopfenstein (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1993), 121.

³P. A. Bird, "Israelite Religion and the Faith of Israel's Daughters," in *The Bible and Poetic Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald*, ed. D. Jobling, P. L. Day, G. T. Sheppard (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1991), 103.

⁴Dever, 105.

⁵J. C. de Moor, *ʾāšērāh*, TDOT 1, 439.

⁶J. Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature," *JBL* 105 (1986): 403-406; R. Hestrin, *The Lachish Ewer and the 'Asherah*," *IEJ* 37 (1987): 212-217, 220; S. Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah*, HSM 46

There are, however, some six verses in which the goddess Asherah herself seems to be indicated (1 Kgs 15:13//2 Chr 15:16 [see below on *miplešet*]; 18:19; 2 Kgs 21:7; 23:4,7). In 1 Kings 18:19, whether the phrase “prophets of Asherah” is a derogatory gloss or not, it is a clear reference to a goddess. Sacred vessels and garments “for (the) Asherah” are spoken of in 2 Kings 21:7 and 23:4, 7. Hadley makes the shrewd observation that the reading of the definite article with Asherah in the latter two verses is a matter of Masoretic vocalization only.⁷ Moreover, De Moor and Hadley both note that in the ancient Near East deities and their cult objects of the same name were not routinely differentiated.⁸ In summary, these words, in the majority of instances, refer to a wooden stylized tree that represented the goddess and in six verses refer to the goddess Asherah herself.

Pesel

This is the most frequent term (54 times in nominal form). It is usually used with the verb *ʿāšāh*, indicating something that is made (Exod 20:4; Lev 26:1; Deut 4:16). *Pesel* mainly appears in the construct form as the *nomen regens*, e.g., *pesel hā ʿāšērāh*, “the image of Asherah” (2 Kgs 21:7). When the word stands alone, the NRSV, for instance, routinely translates “carved image;” the root *psl* denoting the hewing or carving of wood or stone. Moreover, it occurs 5 times with *massēkēh* in hendiadys, “a molten/metal casting,” as in Judges 17:3 *lē ʿāsôt pesel ûmassēkēh*, “to make a cast image.” Therefore, the *pesel* can be of wood or metal, often precious metal: silver (Judg 17:3; Isa 30:22) or gold (Isa 30:22; Jer 10:14). It is listed in Judges 17:4; 18:14 along with the ephod and teraphim as a constituent part of a house(hold) shrine. In the “idol” texts in Isaiah, though Babylonian divine images are intended, the *pesel* can be a cast image of cheap metal or wood overlaid with gold (Isa 40:19-20). In texts of condemnation the *pesel* is often paired with the *massēbôt* and the *ʿāšērīm*, symbols of the presence of male and female deity (Deut 7:5; 12:3; Micah 5:13). The *pesel* might have represented a small image, especially in a household shrine. At times it was clearly large, as in the *pesel* of Asherah that Manasseh put in YHWH's temple (2 Kgs 21:7). There do seem to

(Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 61; J. M. Hadley, “Yahweh and ‘His Asherah’: Archaeological and Textual Evidence,” in *Ein Gott Allein*, 238. S. Schroer, who indicates that the asherah was a stylized tree in the time of the kings, possibly without branches, further refers to a 7th-6th century B.C.E. model from Cyprus of eight women dancing round a tree (In *Israel Gab es Bilder* *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 74 [Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1987], 23 n. 9), 513.

⁷Hadley, 241 n. 31.

⁸De Moor, 441-442; Hadley, 239.

have been quite a number of them, of differing sizes shapes and forms. Unlike *šelem*, *pesel* is confined to a purely religious context. In the plural it tends to refer to the images of foreign gods; there is no neutral mention of the word.⁹

Gillûlîm

Occurring 48 times, *gillûlîm* is the next most frequent term; it appears only in the plural and belongs to a cluster of words used in the Hebrew Bible in the context of polemic against idols. H. D. Preuss notes that the word first appears in the late pre-exilic and exilic period.¹⁰ Its context simply suggests "idols." Leviticus 26:30 mocks them as *pigrê gillûlêkem*, "the carcasses of your idols," associating them with the uncleanness of the corpses of the Israelites piled upon them; the translation "lifeless idols" of the REB is a paraphrase that misses the point. Ezekiel uses the word 39 times, chiefly to characterize the sin of idolatry in Israel's pre-exilic past and exilic present: it has been suggested that he might have coined it.¹¹ A precise etymology is difficult to establish, the most popular being *gll*, "to be dirty."

Massêkêš

A cast metal image from the root *nsk*, "pour," *massêkêš* is parallel to (Nah 1:14; Hab 2:18) and, as noted above, in hendiadys with *pesel*. In YHWH's speech to Jeroboam's wife, he accuses that first northern monarch of making "other 'ēlōhîm and "metal images" (1 Kgs 14:9, cf. 2 Kgs 17:16). The metal images "for" (of?) the Baalim" that Ahaz commissions (2 Chr 28:2) are among the casualties of Josiah's reform (2 Chr 34:3), at least according to the Chronicler. C. Dohmen believes that, like *pesel*, *massêkêš* might be a statue with a wood or base metal core overlaid with gold or silver.¹² However, the accent is clearly on metal and, therefore, *massêkêš* could not refer to terracotta images.

Selem

The word appears 17 times; it is used in the sense of representation, *šalmê massêkêšim*, "representations of their metal images" (Num 33:52). There is no specific Hebrew root, but its cognates in most Semitic

⁹C. Dohmen, "pesel," *TWAT*, 6:691-694.

¹⁰H. D. Preuss, *gillûlîm*, *TDOT* 3:1.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²C. Dohmen, *massêkêš*, *TWAT*, 4:1011.

languages are widely recognized as designating a statue or image. Its semantic field comprises *dēmūt*, *semel* and *pesel*.¹³ In the wake of the revolt against Athaliah, the temple of Baal was demolished and *šēlāmāyw*, “his images,” smashed (2 Kgs 11:18). It is a curious plural and may signify images of other deities or even votive statues. Ezekiel (16:17) accuses the faithless Jerusalem of manufacturing gold and silver male images, representations of masculinity, presumably of Baal. Amos 5:26 seems to imply representations of foreign deities, Babylonian astral divinities.

‘āṣabîm

From *šb* I, to form or shape, *‘āṣabîm* refers principally to foreign idols made of cast metal. In 1 Samuel 31:9//1 Chronicles 10:9 the idols of the Philistines are meant. The word appears four times in Psalms (106:36, 38; 115:4; 135:5) and denotes the “foreign” idols of Canaan. However, in Isa 10:11 the *‘āṣabîm* belong to Jerusalem and in Hos 4:17; 8:4; 13:2 and Mic 1:7 the idols are those of the northern kingdom. A. Graupner contends that even in these occurrences, idols are to be understood as a foreign custom, copied from Israel’s neighbors and not indigenous.¹⁴ This is a nice distinction that may not bear close scrutiny, if indeed the difference between Israelite and Canaanite is literary rather than ethnic or archaeological.¹⁵ There is also a derogatory word-play on *‘āṣab*, “to afflict or weaken.”

Tērāpîm

This word has been well-served by recent studies, it always occurs in the plural even when a singular is clearly meant.¹⁶ The most recent studies

¹³F. J. Stendebach, “*šelem*,” *TWAT*, 4:1048-1049.

¹⁴A. Graupner, “*asab*,” *TWAT*, 6:302-304.

¹⁵A useful discussion of the origins of Israel that airs the various competing theories is found in H. Shanks, W. G. Dever, B. Halpern, and P. K. McCarter, Jr., *The Rise of Ancient Israel* (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992). It is likely that at least some of Israel’s ancestors derived from Canaanite farming stock settling in the hill country west of Jordan in Late Bronze II/Iron I (cf. The mention of an entity “Israel” on the pharaoh Merneptah’s stele ca. 1207 B.C.E.). The Deuteronomistic agenda needed a clear distinction between Israelite and Canaanite, but the prophet Ezekiel could sharply remind his audience that their ancestry was Canaanite, Amorite, and Hittite (16:3). Thus, the use of idols might not be so much copied as inherited from part of Israel’s past. However, the strong Biblical tradition that other ancestors of Israel entered the country from Egypt bringing with them the worship of a deity who rejected images cannot be discounted either. The Hebrew Bible is a witness to the tension between these two traditions and to the ultimate victory of those who rejected any Canaanite past.

¹⁶K. van der Toorn, “The Nature of Biblical Teraphim in the Light of Cuneiform

are inclined to understand the *tērāpîm* as images of the ancestors rather than household deities. They were “small” enough to be carried in a saddle-pouch as when Rachel stole them (Gen 19:34-35), or “large” enough to pass for a body in a bed in a dark bedchamber in Michal’s successful deception of Saul’s agents (1 Sam 19:13,16). They “stood” alongside the ephod in Micah’s shrine (Judg 17-18) and two are mentioned in Hos 3:4. Like the ephod they were used for divination (2 Kgs 23:24; Zech 10:2). In Ezek 21:26 (Heb) the king of Babylon is depicted as using them for purposes of divination. The *tērāpîm* seem to have been human-like figures, perhaps of varying sizes.

Yet it is not impossible that images of household deities might be subsumed into this category. Van der Toorn himself remarks on the prevalence of reverence for household gods during the monarchy. He further comments that every self-respecting Mesopotamian household had its deities, the *il(i) bāi/ištar bāi*.¹⁷

Semel

Semel is an uncommon word that surfaces a mere five times. Deut 4:16 places it in parallel with *pesel* and, rather like *šelem*, it signifies some kind of representational image, male or female. In 2 Chr 33:7 *hassemel* in the phrase *pesel hassemel*, “idol of the image,” replaces *hāššērāb*, in the parallel passage in Kings; either the tradent did not know who Asherah was or could not bring himself to write her name. The “image of jealousy” in Ezek 8:3, 5, though located at the north gate of the inner court, may well indicate an image of Asherah.¹⁸

Other Words

The remaining words that refer to idolatrous images are pejorative in sense, deriving from roots that denote horror, loathing or weakness.

’ēlil occurs 15 times: Preuss argues that this word is a deliberate word-
Evidence,” *CBQ* 52 (1990); K. van der Toorn and T. J. Lewis, *teraphim*, *TWAT* (forthcoming), read by kindness of T. J. Lewis; T. J. Lewis, “Teraphim”, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* ed. K. van der Toorn, R. Becker, P. W. van der Horst (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 1588-1600. These studies include extensive bibliographies.

¹⁷K. van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave* (Sheffield: Academic, 1994), 35, 38.

¹⁸Opinion is fairly divided on the identity of the “image of jealousy.” W. Zimmerli thinks that it might have been a well-known guardian image at the north gate of the Temple and J. W. Wevers rejects the possibility of precise identification but considers it an idol of some kind (*Ezekiel 1-24*, Hermeneia [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979], 239; *Ezekiel*, Century Bible [London: Nelson, 1969], 79. *Per contra*, W. Eichrodt and M. Greenberg believe that the reference is undoubtedly to Asherah (*Ezekiel* OTL [London: SCM, 1970], 79; *Ezekiel 1-20*, AB [Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1983], 168).

play on the sound of *'ēlōhîm*, created as a disparaging pun, “godling”¹⁹ In Lev 19:4, 26:1, such “godlings” of metal and stone are contrasted with the real god YHWH. Its earliest occurrences are in the early chapters of Isaiah, so that some think that the writer of that book coined the term.²⁰ The word in Isa 2:8, 18(?), 20; 10:10, 11; 19:7 ridicules the “little gods” manufactured in both Judah and Israel and, in 19:1, 3, the idols of the Egyptians. Clearly the overall intent is to contrast such images unfavorably with YHWH. Other similar words are *'ēmah*, a word of indeterminate origin appearing in the plural and *'ēmîm* parallel to *pēsîlîm* in Jer 50:38 where Babylonian idols induce a religious frenzy.²¹ Another, *'āwen*, is a well-known root denoting trouble or sorrow characterizing a cultic act directed at idols.²²

Šiqqûš. In piel the root *šqs* means to pollute or contaminate, and is intended to caricature idols as filthy things and their veneration as defiling: abominable idols of the nations (Deut 29:16, Heb). The gods of Ammon, Milcom, and Moab, Chemosh, are dubbed “abominations” in 1 Kgs 11:5, 7 and in 2 Kgs 23:13. This term probably connotes the statues of these gods in the shrines that Solomon erected for them. In v. 24 of the same chapter the *šiqqûšîm* are listed with the mediums, warlocks, teraphim, and *gillûlîm* that Josiah removed from the land (cf. 2 Chr 15:8 and Asa in 1 Kgs 15:12).

Miplešet. In the hithpael, *plš*, to cause to tremble or shudder, is used of the “horrible/revolting thing” that the queen-mother, Maacah, made for Asherah in 1 Kgs 15:13//2 Chr 15:16. It seems that some shuddered with horror contemplating an image of Asherah, even as a concept rather than a fact.

The above survey of word and text discloses a surprising assortment of terms for images. The context, with few exceptions one of condemnation, indicates by its very nature that the use of these images was persistent and, to those loyal to YHWH-only, profoundly troubling. Images were commissioned and owned by householders and monarchs alike. They were erected in household shrines and temples. Such images were made of stone, of wood, carved or forming a core covered with precious metals, cast of silver or gold or a cheap metal overlaid with the former. They represented divine beings or, in the case of the teraphim,

¹⁹H. D. Preuss, *'ēlîl*, TDOT 1:285.

²⁰Ibid., 286.

²¹H. J. Zobel, *'ēmah*, TDOT 1:219. It should be noted, however, that Vg reads *in portentis gloriantur*, “they take pride in omens,” a reading which BHS prefers, *yithalalû*, to *yithdalû*, “they go mad over (their images).”

²²K. H. Bernhardt, *'āwen*, TDOT 1:143.

perhaps the deceased ancestors. Terracotta clay images are not directly mentioned, but this does not mean that such images cannot be included in one or more of the general categories of images alluded to above, notably the *'ēllîlîm*, “godlings,” or the *tērāpîm*, if they include household gods. Thus, the text points to a material reality; archaeology has turned up some three thousand female pillar figurines.²³

Artifact

Even an initial and uniformed examination of the pillar figurines shows that they exhibit both continuity and discontinuity with preceding terracotta figurines and plaques from the Middle Bronze Age forward (*abb.* 11-69). They are female, the breasts are pronounced and encircled and supported by the hands and arms. The heads of the pillar figurines are clearly emphasized, with prominently outlined eyes and tightly curled hair, which seems to mimic an Egyptian-style wig, or denote the head-dress of a divine being. Occasionally, the heads are simply pieces of pinched clay, giving a rather bird-like appearance; these, however, may represent a less expensive variety (*abb.* 32).

The discontinuity occurs in the lower part of the body where the legs and sharply defined pubic triangle of the earlier terracotta and metal plaque figurines are missing, replaced by the conical pillar base, upon which the statue stands. Evidently the makers of the pillar figurines were, for reasons that will be explored below, much more interested in the symbolism of head and breast in their creations (*abb.* 30-33 provide good examples of this preoccupation, from Lachish, Beersheba and Jerusalem). So much may be said at this level, but a discussion of the identity and purpose of the figurines and possible textual referents, must await a survey of the relevant scholarly literature. The survey will confine itself in the main to the Judahite pillar figurines, bearing in mind that, for reasons of interpretation, it is neither possible nor desirable to detach them entirely from those that surrounded or preceded them.

Although W. F. Albright identified the Late Bronze/Iron I pottery plaques from Tel Beit Mirsim with the goddess Asherah, he identified the pillar figurines from the same site as “amulet figurines of the *dea nutrix*.” The flaring out of the pillar might represent the tree symbolism usually

²³In terms of the focus of this paper on the terracotta female pillar figurines, it is worth reemphasising their large numbers, notably from Iron IIC, the lack of scholarly consensus on their identification and purpose and the existence of a body of texts, whose origins lie in the same period, condemning the use of divine images, with which the figurines have not been connected. See W. G. Dever, “Material Remains and the Cult in Ancient Israel,” in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman*, ed. C. L. Meyers and M. O’Connor (Philadelphia: ASOR, 1983), 574.

associated with the Asherah cult.²⁴

T. A. Holland produced a close study of the pillar figurines found in Jerusalem, focusing on Cave I. In it he demonstrated that the vast majority of the figurines stood on a solid base that had been shaped by hand. Some of the faces were of the pinched clay, "bird" type. The majority had carefully moulded heads, added after the drying process had begun, that emphasized the eyes and the wig, of which Holland identified seven repeating types, along with some miscellaneous ones.²⁵ On some are traces of paint—black, red, red-orange, and whitewash.²⁶ While Holland referred to them as "Astarte"-type figurines and believed that, along with the "sun-disc" horses, animal figurines, and cult vessels, they were outward expressions of popular Israelite piety, he was unwilling to make a precise identification. By far the largest concentration was found in Jerusalem and most of the that material came from what he believed were *favissae* or repositories for nearby sanctuaries.²⁷

O. Negbi, whose work dealt chiefly with datable metal figurines from sites including Ras Shamra, Megiddo, and Gezer, refrained from identifying such statues with any known divinity.²⁸ J. R. Engle, with greater boldness and having examined the text of the Hebrew Bible, identified them with the goddess Asherah and concluded that they were, in fact, the *ʾāšērīm*. He cited parallels from the Graeco-Aegean world where small replicas of the great divine statues in the main temples were

²⁴W. F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine* (London: Pelican, 1960), 104-107, 133. These observations are based on earlier studies in AASOR 21-22, 1941-1943. R. A. Henshaw, *Female and Male: The Cultic Personnel*, PTMS 31 (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1994), in a short appendix on naked Palestinian figurines, including the pillar variety, Henshaw cites studies earlier than Albright, notably those of H. G. May (*Material Remains of the Megiddo Cult*, 1935) who pointed out that these figurines were not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible unless under the categories of *pesel* or *massēbāh*, K. Galling (*Biblisches Reallexikon*, 1937) for whom the pillar figurines represented the consort of YHWH, but that they were part of a domestic cult, and J. B. Pritchard (*Palestinian Figurines in Relation to Certain Goddesses Known Through Literature*, 1943) whose study of 294 examples of plaques and figurines indicated that they expressed fertility, sexuality, or motherhood and could have portrayed Asherah, Ashtart, or Anat.

²⁵T. A. Holland, "A Study of Palestinian Iron Age Baked Clay Figurines with Special Reference to Jerusalem Cave I," *Levant* 9 (1977): 121-122. Albright shows two examples of heads with stems that would be inserted into the pillar base (132 figs. 1-2).

²⁶*Ibid.*, 139.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 126, 154; K. M. Kenyon, *The Bible and Recent Archaeology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978), 76, 77 fig. 82.

²⁸O. Negbi, *Canaanite Gods in Metal: An Archaeological Study of Syro-Palestinian Figures* (Tel Aviv: University Institute of Archaeology, 1976).

made.²⁹ Unfortunately, the contexts in which the word *'ăšērîm* appears, do not bear this out. As noted above, the latter are routinely connected with altars and *massēbôt* at "high places" and their destruction involved cutting down, not something likely to be associated with small clay figurines (2 Kgs 23:14). In a similar vein, R. Patai viewed the figurines as clay counterparts of the Asherah poles that were set into the ground. In light of the above, this is hardly a plausible explanation.³⁰

M. Tadmor contended that the pillar figurines could not be considered direct descendants of the plaque figurines as they were sculpted in the round. Since they appear after a lapse of several centuries, she believed that they were a throwback to earlier Phoenician figures and point to Phoenician influence on Judah in the last centuries before the destruction.³¹ Tadmor gave no examples of the supposed earlier Phoenician figurines and overlooked that fact that many terracotta plaque figures hold their breasts (*abb.* 27-29). Further, the move from plaque figures, that are almost three-dimensional to sculptures in the round need not suggest a break in the tradition of representation, perhaps only a change in fashion and in emphasis on attributes.

G. Ahlström considered that the figurines probably represented Asherah and that they belonged to royal as well as popular circles. He derived this from the excavations at Ramat Rachel, a royal palace just south-west of Jerusalem.³² There, a considerable number of them were found, according to Y. Aharoni who dubbed them after the manner of the day, "Astartes of the 'pillar class.'" ³³ The figurines closely resemble the ones pictured by Holland. In the light of this there would seem, in the case of the figurines at least, to have been no dichotomy between "popular" and "official" (royal) religion. Their "considerable number" possibly demonstrates the extent of their use among the women who must have inhabited the palace.

In his lengthier study of women and the goddess, Winter remarked on the long tradition of the terracotta pillar figurines in Palestine, primarily in Judah. Most were found in domestic areas, in tombs and in

²⁹J. R. Engle, *Pillar Figurines of Iron Age Israel and Asherah-Asherim* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1979), 34-35.

³⁰R. Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3d ed. (Detroit: Wayne State, 1990), 39.

³¹M. Tadmor, "Female Cult Figurines in Late Canaan and Early Israel," in *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon*, ed. T. Ishida (Tokyo: Yamakawa-Shuppansha, 1982), 172.

³²G. W. Ahlström, "An Archaeological Picture of Iron Age Religions in Ancient Palestine," (*StudOr*; Helsinki, 1984), 136.

³³Y. Aharoni, *Excavations at Ramat Rachel: Seasons 1961 and 1962* (Rome: Centro di Studi Semitici, 1964), 29.

cultic repositories, the vast majority female.³⁴ Their iconography accentuated the head and the breasts, which were heavy, tight, and bursting. He believed that the figurines were intended for women in the sphere of personal religion where the distinctions blur between sacred and profane. The statuettes represent a goddess in the act of intercession and protection, though precisely which goddess cannot be extrapolated from the literature.³⁵

Few voices have been raised against attributing any religious significance whatever to pillar and other figurines. One such was A. R. Millard who concluded that they may well have been toys.³⁶ M. D. Fowler opted also for a *via negativa*, asserting that we cannot know what these figures were, nor what purpose they served, if any. Material remains from Achzib yielded terracotta figurines of pregnant women made from the same mold and, from storerooms of public buildings, figures of women kneading dough or bathing in an oval bathtub. Fowler dubbed these "secular" and resolved that they therefore cast doubt on the nature of the other figures, including the pillar figurines. The animal figurines may have been no more than toys. If any had cultic significance that must remain shrouded in darkness.³⁷

While caution is appropriate, Millard and Fowler err in lumping all the figures together and ignoring the cultic and tomb locations of some of the finds. Moreover, Achzib is a Phoenician site on the Lebanese border, some 14 kilometers north of Acco, far removed from Judah. Also, the pregnant and kneading statuettes have been dated to the sixth century B.C.E., so distance and date militate against a direct connection with the Judahite pillar figurines.³⁸ Women kneading and bathing are, admittedly, difficult to categorize as divine. However, statuettes of pregnant women were doubtless charms to assist in childbirth and these could only have been the parturient goddess. Small representations of the Egyptian birth-goddess, Taweret, in the striking guise of a pregnant hippopotamus, were used to aid the ancient Egyptian woman in labor.³⁹ Besides, Millard and

³⁴Winter, 128.

³⁵Ibid., 124, 134, 194-198.

³⁶A. R. Millard, "Review of *A Primer of Old Testament Archaeology*," *PEQ* 95 (1963): 139.

³⁷M. D. Fowler, "Excavated Figurines," *ZAW* 97 (1985): 335-343.

³⁸E. Stern, A. Levinson-Gilboa, J. Aviram, eds, *The New Encyclopedia of Excavations in the Holy Land*, (Jerusalem: Carta, 1993), 1:32-34.

³⁹M. Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 11.

Fowler take no account of the long tradition of the presentation of the "goddess" from which the pillar figurines derive in terms of the vivid delineation of eyes and hair and the prominently supported breasts. J. S. Holladay emphatically countered that they were not childrens' playthings, since they do not appear as such in countries bordering Israel.⁴⁰

Skepticism about equating the plaque or pillar terracotta figurines with goddesses, let alone a specific one, e.g., Asherah, was also expressed by C. L. Meyers. She contrasted the maternal aspects of the Israelite figurines with the more explicit sexuality of the Canaanite plaques and suggested that the first were votive objects designed to enhance and propagate the role of motherhood in a domestic cult.⁴¹ However, it is worth asking who was ultimately responsible for female fertility if not the goddess. They can hardly be statues of YHWH, though the few fragments of male pillar figurines that have been found raise a tantalizing if evanescent possibility.

By far the most comprehensive current study of deities and their images in Syria-Palestine, which includes the pillar figurines, is that of Keel and Uehlinger. After examining the archaeological evidence, they argue that the figurines are a characteristic expression of Judean piety in the late monarchy (Iron IIC). Due to a lack of complete cataloging of the figures from most of the sites, they admit that their observations are provisional and made with reservation. The figurines were found primarily in private houses and secondarily in graves—one to each house and grave.⁴²

Like Tadmor, Keel and Uehlinger argue for Phoenician influence, but in a rather different way. They cite a seventh century Phoenician scaraboid from Lachish which demonstrates what they call the new "blooming" anthropomorphic representation of the goddess of the Levant, who here presents her breasts with encircling arms. The face and parted hair are much more developed than the remainder of her body. A worshipper stands on the left on a rostrum, so we know that the figure holding her breasts is a goddess.⁴³ This brings them to the pillar figurines with their arresting heads, whose arms support and present their breasts.

⁴⁰J. S. Holladay, "Religion in Israel and Judah under the Monarchy: An Explicitly Archaeological Approach," in *Ancient Israelite Religion*, ed. P. D. Miller, P. D. Hanson, and S. D. McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 291 n. 109.

⁴¹C. L. Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), 162.

⁴²Keel and Uehlinger, 370-376.

⁴³Ibid., 377.

The full breasts, they assert, are symbolic of blessing. Erotic aspects are not completely lacking, but obviously play a subordinate role. They argue also for continuity of representation with shifts in emphasis. The model beds, lamps, and rattles found with the pillar images are symbolic of the peace, light, and maternity that the goddess brings.⁴⁴

Keel and Uehlinger finally ask whether these figurines can be identified with Asherah. Rejecting any possibility of identification with Astarte, whom they regard as a Sidonian import under royal protection and thus with a correspondingly narrow sphere of influence, they opt for Asherah. They submit that there was a movement from the stylized tree symbol of the goddess to an anthropomorphic image, citing Manasseh's idol of Asherah in 2 Kings 23:7. This suggests to them a revival of family piety in the "Canaanite" tradition and explains why the pillar figurines were so popular in many of the homes of seventh-century Judah, i.e., the state-promoted cult of a female form of Asherah.⁴⁵ This is an appealing thesis; however, it has weaknesses including the lack of any evidence of a state-fostered cult or knowledge of the exact shape or style of Manasseh's *pesel*.

E. Bloch-Smith, who examined the figurines in an analysis of archaeological discoveries from Iron Age burials, firmly rejected the idea that they were playthings or domestic objects of no real worth.⁴⁶ The figures were found in houses in Israel and Judah, in Judah they were also discovered in tombs. The prominent breasts and heads suggested to her that their symbolic function was to beseech adequate lactation to sustain newborns and infants and that such powers were invoked on behalf of the living and the dead. Bloch-Smith sides with those who are unwilling to classify the figurines as representative of one goddess in particular, though she seems inclined to the notion that the conical stands evoke the *'āšērāh*.⁴⁷

Discussion

In sum then, scholarly critique of the pillar figurines presents a spectrum of opinion, ranging from those who reject any cultic or votive identification and purpose (Millard, Fowler), to those who uncompromisingly identify them with Asherah (Engle, Hestrin, Pettey), with the majority view inclining towards at least a votive significance, at most a

⁴⁴Ibid., 380-381.

⁴⁵Ibid., 382-385.

⁴⁶E. Bloch-Smith, *Judabite Practices and Beliefs about the Dead* JSOTSS 123, JSOT/ASOR Monograph Series 7 (Sheffield: Academic, 1992), 94.

⁴⁷Ibid., 98-99.

cultic use and often reserving any final judgement on the precise identification of the figures.⁴⁸ This viewpoint is summarized by R. Albertz who is prepared to allow a religious or cultic context for some of the images, especially the figurines found in Jerusalem Cave I. He also maintains that they represent the continuance of an old Syrian religious tradition in Israel; precisely what tradition he does not say.⁴⁹

Even adopting a minimalist view of the cultic and votive significance of the pillar figurines, it can be acknowledged that they are surely candidates for inclusion in the group of terms for idols/images surveyed above. The mere embodiment of the female capacities of maternity and fertility in votive form to aid in the evocation of such powers, maybe through sympathetic magic, would be sufficient to incur the condemnation of those who adhered to the aniconic YHWH-only party. This group, who strictly observed the second commandment, regarded all human activity, including fertility and reproduction, as under his sole control.

Setting aside those words that mark cast metal idols, *massékāh* and *'āsabīm*, and assuming, for argument's sake, that *tērāpīm* is limited to ancestral images, there is not one other category to which the figurines could not belong; the all-embracing *pesel*, the "dirty" *gillūlīm* or the *'ellilīm*, "godlings." Household shrines were a fact of life in ancient Israel and Judah whether at the door, in a special chamber or in the darkened *heder*, bedchamber. Many of the figurines were found in just such a domestic setting and at one per house. Those unearthed from tombs and *favissae* near cultic sites confirm their religious usage.

Images of the "goddess" or not, they were without doubt in breach of the second commandment. To a group who, according to the text (Deut 18:9-14), abhorred all forms of magic and divination, the possession of even votive images would have been worthy of censure. J. A. Dearman points out that references to any of the "other gods" are typically general and polemical rather than specific.⁵⁰ That is, while the terracotta pillar figurines are not referred to in so many words, there is no reason to suppose that they would not be included in a blanket denunciation of images.

However, (the Hebrew Bible and other inscriptional data to be

⁴⁸R. Hestrin, "Understanding Asherah," *BAR* 17 (1991): 50-59; R. J. Pettey, *Asherah: Goddess of Israel*, (American University Studies Series 7 (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 174.

⁴⁹R. Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 87, 275 nn. 114-116.

⁵⁰J. A. Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 41.

examined below) artifact/iconography taken together do permit a more precise classification of the figurines and make their inclusion even more certain. In recent scholarship a strong case has been made for the worship of the goddess Asherah alongside YHWH in the period of the figurines. As has been observed, she was represented both as symbol, the asherah, and by an anthropomorphic image that stood in the Temple.

The inscriptions from Khirbet el-Qôm and Kuntillet 'Ajrud which mention YHWH and "his Asherah" have been subjected to much scholarly scrutiny. Without rehearsing that debate again in detail, some points need to be made. The text from el-Qôm is the less well-preserved of the two and is dated to the mid-eighth cent. B.C.E. Initially, its translation and interpretation were vigorously disputed.⁵¹ However, the transliteration and translation of the first two lines are now agreed upon by a majority of scholars: they read, (1) *'ryhw. h'sr. ktbh*, "Uriyahu the rich wrote it" (2) *brk 'ryhw. lyhw*, "blessed be Uriyahu by YHWH." A number of doubled letters along with some erosion in line 3 caused the confusion. However, if the doubled letters are removed, leaving those dubbed "lexically significant" by Z. Zevit, a reading can be obtained, *wmsryh. l'srth hws'lh*, "and from his enemies by his asherah he has saved him."⁵² The *h* pronominal suffix at the end of *'srt* would indicate a common noun rather than a proper name, "his asherah."⁵³ Given the

⁵¹This inscription was first published by W. G. Dever, "Iron Age Epigraphic Material from the Area of Khirbet el-Kom," *HUCA* 40/41 (1970): 139-204. Summaries of the relevant scholarship for this and Kuntillet 'Ajrud at various stages in the ongoing debate are found in Z. Zevit, "The Khirbet el-Qôm Inscription Mentioning a Goddess," *BASOR* 255 (1984): 39-47; J. M. Hadley, "The Khirbet el-Qôm Inscription," *VT* 37 (1987): 50-62; S. M. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel* SBLMS 34 (Atlanta; Scholars, 1988), 23-35; Hadley, "Yahweh and 'His Asherah,'" 261-268. A recent article by T. Binger does not advance the discussion of Asherah nor the inscriptions very much, ("Asherah in Israel," *SJOT* 9 [1995]: 3-18).

⁵²Zevit, "The Khirbet el-Qôm Inscription," 39-47. The transliteration of this and the Kuntillet 'Ajrud texts are taken from G. I. Davies, *Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), 106, 80-81.

⁵³Olyan, 28 and n. 27; Hadley, 244 and n. 43. In the latter note Hadley summarizes the discussion of this grammatical issue, including the very few scholars who vocalize *'srth* as *Aširtah* or *Asherata*, the name of the goddess. No one has observed that in Hosea 2:18(H) *ba'ali*, "my baal," could be construed as a PN name with a suffix (see NRSV/REB, "my Baal"), given the wordplay inherent in the verse and the intent of the entire passage to contrast YHWH and Baal, cf. also v. 10(H) where Baal is a PN. This is only a possibility, but if correct would invalidate the common grammatical observation that in Biblical Hebrew a pronominal suffix is *never* attached to a PN. This conclusion is supported by T. Binger who, in her recent book, *Asherah Goddesses in Ugarit Israel and the Old Testament* JSOTSup 232 (Sheffield: Academic, 1997), 106-107, furthers the discussion by questioning the notion that the grammar of spoken and written Hebrew in the eighth and seventh centuries was so rigid that the final suffix *h* was never attached to a PN. She does not mention Hosea 2:18(H), but

observations on *'āšērāh* above, this would be the stylized wooden tree, the symbol of the goddess. Deities and their cult symbols were closely associated in the ancient Near East and the asherah invoked the goddess and her power.

The plausibility of this reading is borne out by the three more easily read inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud, dated to the beginning of the eighth century B.C.E. They are written on two pithoi, large stone storage jars. The shortest text reads, *lyhwh. htmn. wl 'srth*, "by YHWH of Teman, and by his asherah." This phrase also occurs in a longer inscription from Pithos B where someone invokes the blessing, protection and presence of "YHWH of Teman and his asherah" *l'dny*, "for my lord."

However, the inscription that has provoked most discussion is the one on Pithos A accompanied by a drawing of three figures (see figure 3).⁵⁴ This inscription contains the phrase, *brkt 'tkm lyhwh smrn wl 'srth*, "I bless you by YHWH of Samaria and by his asherah." The phrases "YHWH of Teman" and "YHWH of Samaria" suggest that YHWH, like other deities in the ancient Near East, had well-known regional manifestations, e.g., Asherah of Tyre, Hadad of Sikan, Ishtar of Arbela.⁵⁵ The asherah invoked alongside YHWH of Samaria was, doubtless, the famous or notorious one erected by Ahab (1 Kgs 16:33a). There has emerged general agreement on the above translation of the phrase.⁵⁶ However, the presence of the drawing of the three figures at first led some to believe that inscription and drawings were connected

M. Gilula argued that Asherah, consort of YHWH, was intended. Of the two figures in front the larger was YHWH and the smaller, with tiny breasts, Asherah to whom someone had added later a penis or tail. Gilula ignored the third figure.⁵⁷ Though this view of the two figures was

recalls Wellhausen's somewhat cavalier reconstruction of Hosea 14:9(H), *'ny 'nyty w'swrnw*, "I myself answer and observe him," to *'ny 'ntw w'srtw*, "I am his Anat and his Asherah."

⁵⁴Z. Meshel, *Kuntillet-Ajrud: An Israelite Religious Center in Northern Sinai* (Expedition 20, 1978), fig 12.

⁵⁵P. K. McCarter, Jr., *Ancient Israelite Religion*, 140-142. Dagan of Tuttul is another well-known example. In this context it is worth noting that in Amos 8:14, the prophet condemns those who swear by *'āšānat šōmrōn*, often translated "guilt of Samaria." They are most likely swearing by *'āšērat*, "Asherah of Samaria" (cf. BHS). NRSV, REB and NJB, the latter in a footnote, create the otherwise unknown goddess Ashimah of Samaria. The emendation of a single letter allowed the disapproving scribe to reduce Asherah to "guilt," as Baal was frequently reduced to "shame."

⁵⁶Binger provides all the different versions and translations of these texts including her own (164-172).

⁵⁷M. Gilula, "To Yahweh Shomron and his Asherah," *Shaton* 3 (1978-79): 129-137 (Hebrew), as cited in J. A. Emerton, "New Light on Israelite Religion: The Implications of

accepted by some, e.g. McCarter, it did not achieve lasting acceptance.⁵⁸ However, in an essay investigating the place of images in the pre-exilic cult of YHWH, B. B. Schmidt has once more espoused the theory that the larger figure is YHWH, but in the guise of a *Mischwesen*, a monstrous being. YHWH, he concludes, might be represented in certain Israelite areas of society by inanimate objects, floral forms, as part animal or as part human.⁵⁹ It has to be said that his evidence for this is flimsy. More satisfying is the identification of the two figures as localised representations of Bes, the immensely popular Egyptian god of good fortune, patron of the family, sexuality, and childbirth. A squat dwarf-like figure with leonine features, he wore a lion-skin cape, a plumed headdress and had a beard, tail or penis and, as Beset (female), breasts.⁶⁰

P. Beck was the one who first moved towards this identification, suggesting that the two figures were by different artists and, importantly advancing the debate, that the inscription and the drawings were totally unrelated. Beck believed that the drawing of the figures came first; for reasons given below it is likely that the reverse is true.⁶¹ Nevertheless, her insight goes far to solving the seemingly intractable problems in the unequal struggle to make figures and text correspond, not the least of which is the scarcely flattering portrayal of YHWH (cf. Schmidt above). It was adopted by Hestrin and Hadley; the latter also proposes that it is "just possible" that Asherah is depicted on the other side of the pithos (see figure 4).⁶² There two caprids (ibex-like creatures) feed from a stylized tree above a lion. There is no doubt that the tree represents the goddess and that tree and anthropomorphic figure were interchangeable. In one depiction the goddess is shown alongside a tree flanked by two caprids and in another the goddess has the caprids with the tree nearby (*abb.* 143, 144, see above also the comments on *abb.* 38-43). Noone has remarked on the fact that the first branches of the tree curve initially inwards, resembling

the Inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud," *ZAW* 94 (1982): 2-20; Olyan, 27-29; Hadley, 246.

⁵⁸McCarter, 147.

⁵⁹B. B. Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition," *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms*, ed. D. V. Edelman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 102-103.

⁶⁰J. F. Romano, "The Origin of the Bes Image," *Bulletin of the Egyptological Seminar* 2 (1980) 30-56; J. D. Bourriau, *Pharaohs and Mortals* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press), 110-113.

⁶¹P. Beck, "The Drawings From Horvat Teiman (Kuntillet 'Ajrud)," *Tel Aviv* 9 (1982): 31-47. Dever agrees with this but suggests that the third figure, the female(?) lyre player is Asherah, "Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kumtillet Ajrud" *BASOR* 255 (1984): 30. This is extremely unlikely.

⁶²Hadley, 248-250; Hestrin, 212-223.

very closely the arms embracing and supporting the breasts in the pillar figurines. There is also a thirteenth-century Lachish ewer where the word 'lt, "goddess" (Elat, another name for Asherah) is written directly above a stylized tree.⁶³

Furthermore, those who have commented on the inscription and drawings have ignored the caprid's head and blossoms, just visible to the left of the larger Bes figure. I wish to propose that these were part of a drawing begun to accompany the inscription, similar to the one on the other side of the pithos, later either abandoned or erased. The caprid's head and the blossom are at a very awkward angle to the inscription. The completed drawing was made on the other side of the jar and the Bes figures later filled the vacant space. So Hadley's "just possible" becomes very probable. The asherah, the stylized and familiar tree symbolizing the goddess was in fact designed to illustrate the inscription, but, perhaps after a false start, was only completed on the reverse side. These inscriptions and illustrations from el-Qôm and 'Ajrud, therefore, cannot do other than attest to the close connection between YHWH and Asherah, manifesting herself in her symbolic tree.

Excavations at Tel-Miqne (Ekron) discovered a large stone jar dated to the seventh century and inscribed *lqdš, l'šrt*, "for the Holy One," "for Asherah."⁶⁴ However, the *t* at the end of *'šrt* points to Phoenician rather than the Hebrew of the period as the language of the inscription. Also, both *qdš* and *'šrt* in Phoenician are also terms for sanctuary, i.e., "for the sanctuary." On the other hand, Tel-Miqne has produced a seventh-century silver medallion with a figure praying to a goddess standing on a lion, which points to the cult of Asherah. Since Astarte was the principal goddess of the coastal regions, Ekron's relative distance from there and proximity to the border of Judah make it conceivable that Asherah at Ekron came from Judah where she continued to be revered. Though the evidence from Tel-Miqne is not completely certain, the inscriptional data and iconography taken together make it apparent that the worship of Asherah was an important part of religion in Israel and Judah from the ninth century to the dissolution of both kingdoms and beyond.⁶⁵

The Hebrew Bible which names the goddess and her symbol only to censure them, certainly does not tell us much about her function. While

⁶³Hestrin, 212-223.

⁶⁴Seymour Gitin, *Recent Excavations in Israel* (Archaeological Institute of America; Kendall Hunt Publishing, 1992), 73.

⁶⁵E. Stern remarks on the discovery of Astarte pillar figurines in the Persian Period which continue the tradition of the Iron Age in *Material Culture of the Land of the Bible in the Persian Period 538-332 B.C.* (Warminster England: Aris & Phillips, 1982), 168.

the Ugaritic Texts concentrate on the maternal and domestic aspects of Athirat/Asherah, they must be used with circumspection owing to cultural and temporal distance. There are, notwithstanding, occasional glimpses into the world of divine maternity in the Hebrew Bible. One that has been much discussed is Genesis 49:25b, *birkā šādayim wārāham*, "the blessings of breasts and womb." This is a perplexing text and T. J. Lewis quite rightly cautions against interpreting "breasts and womb" as *epithets* of Asherah: she is nowhere called "breasts and womb" or "she of breasts and womb." Lewis does concede that the goddess might be *associated with* breasts and womb.⁶⁶ It is not an unexpected association and the goddess might yet be discerned behind the blessing.

The book of Hosea, which provides much insight into the religion of the northern kingdom, affords glimpses of a compassionate and bountiful maternity which is, of course, ascribed to YHWH (Hos 11:1, 3-4). Conversely, YHWH threatens the women of Samaria with miscarrying wombs and dry breasts (9:14). Some scholars have seen Hosea referring here to Asherah in view of female attributes. Over against the Asherah cult, Hos 14:9(Heb), YHWH chides Ephraim for its use of images and tells them that *he* is a luxuriant and fruitful tree.

Isaiah 66:11 perpetuates images of a rich maternity. Jerusalem is likened to a nursing mother with "breasts of comfort" and a "glorious bosom," the root *kbd* signifies weightiness or heaviness and one is reminded of Winter's "heavy and bursting" breasts. The image behind the text is quite clear; vv. 12b,13 expand the maternal image. There are, accordingly, hints of divine maternity in the Hebrew Bible that must stem from "his" Asherah, despite the minimalist approach of S. A. Wiggins who simply ignored the iconographic evidence in his study.⁶⁷

The iconography furnishes more evidence for a goddess and one whose origins are clearly traceable. Gratitude is due to the Egyptians of the New Kingdom for identifying the goddess on the back of the lion and holding either serpents or lotus-stems as Qadesh, Qudshu//Asherah, the lion lady. One inscription describes her as "Qadesh beloved of Ptah" (*abb.* 36,37).⁶⁸ Ptah was the ancient creator god of Memphis, like the Canaanite El, husband of Athirat. It is worth noting that Ptah's wife Sekhmet was usually portrayed as a lioness or a woman with a lion's head. Examples of this image are found in Late Bronze Age Canaan (Lachish, Tel Bet Mirsim,

⁶⁶T. J. Lewis, "A Review of Mark Smith's *The Early History of God*," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 18 (1990/1991): 4.

⁶⁷Stephen A. Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah*, AOAT 235 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 1993), 19, 130.

⁶⁸Pettey, 180-181.

Minet el Beida), the goddess holding serpents, lotus stems, or sometimes caprids, and standing on a lion, Asherah (*abb.* 38-43 - see Appendix).

A late Bronze Age terracotta plaque from Gezer indicates a shift in imagery, due to theological considerations or local interests. The goddess, whose head is unfortunately missing, has relinquished her hold on the lotus blossoms and is holding her breasts with her hands (*abb.* 54). However, in this and other representations of the goddess holding her breasts, the pubic triangle and legs are still depicted (*abb.* 28-29). Serpents, lion and lotus-stems are absent, but the highlighting of the eyes and the elaborate headdress/wig are evidently still very important. The "mistress of the beasts" manifestation of Asherah is less vital in these plaques. It is not possible to establish an exact linear pattern for these images. At Lachish a fifteenth-century relief shows the goddess holding her breasts (*abb.* 27). However, the thirteenth and twelfth centuries adopt a more elaborate lotus-holding posture and one gold medallion shows the goddess *à cheval* (*abb.* 38, 39a). Moreover breast-holding goddesses go back as far as the seventeenth century B.C.E. (*abb.* 34, 35). This is why the differences in representation may be either a question of local emphases or alterations in theological preoccupations.

Thus, by the seventh century in the Judahite heartland, the legs and pubic triangle had given way to the conical base of the pillar figurine. The elaborate head, the impressive eyes, and the pronounced breasts confirm that she is still the goddess. The loss of the pubic triangle undeniably diminishes the erotic aspect, but it is probably an inclination towards accentuating maternity rather than any innate Israelite tendency towards modesty. Ruth Hestrin, who harbored no doubts that the figurines were images of Asherah, suggested that the pillar mimicked the trunk of the goddess' symbolic tree. Keel and Uehlinger disagree that the pillar base recalls the tree trunk; they may well be correct.⁶⁹ However, there is a seventh-century stone relief from Karatepe in Cilicia that depicts a fully clad, rather trunk-figured woman holding one exposed breast to a nursing male infant, with a flourishing palm tree in the background (*abb.* 411). Certainly the figures emphasize maternal nourishment.

Meyers makes the observation that if the Canaanite figures cannot be related to deities, neither can their Israelite counterparts. Certainly, some figurines may be votive in intent, like her women with tambourines or children nursing at the breast, but it is hard to detach the maternal terracotta figurines from their place in the abundant iconography of the goddess, whose extensiveness and pervasiveness she seems to overlook.⁷⁰

⁶⁹Hestrin, 57; Keel and Uehlinger, 378.

⁷⁰Meyers, 162-163; "Of Drums and Damsels: Women in Performance in Ancient Israel,"

To contradict Meyers, the breast-feeding figures do represent the goddess rather than some unnamed female. There is a bronze statuette of a majestic crowned female, clearly the goddess, giving suck and *standing atop a lion*, a position that leaves no doubt as to her divine nature (*abb.* 59; see figure 2). In addition, there exist a large number of cylinder seals, mostly Old Babylonian (1850-1750 B.C.E.) though a few are from Syria or Asia Minor, that depict the nude goddess, holding her breasts, sometimes standing on an animal or a pedestal and participating in a variety of offering and mythological scenarios (*abb.* 70-119). The caveat is, again, the time and distance that separates these depictions from the Judahite figurines, but they do point to an astonishing uniformity of representation of the goddess, whatever her name, in Mesopotamia and the Levant. In a similar vein, Bloch-Smith's description of the figurines as votive statues invoking sympathetic powers of lactation and nourishment seems to beg the question as to who was the divine source of that power if not Asherah, the *dea nutrix*, a title which also begs the question in another way.

Most commentators overlook the vital fact that some of the heads were intended to be worn as amulets. They have a small clay loop on the top of the head through which a thong would be threaded for wearing round the neck. It is inconceivable that either "toys" or images of an average Israelite woman were worn as amulets. This adds to the evidence that the pillar figurines were indeed images of the goddess.

The presence of the Judahite statuettes in a domestic context, one to a house, argues for their role in aiding the supplication of the power that lay behind them, Asherah, the *ištar b'ni*. Like the ancestral teraphim, the figurine probably stood in the family shrine as an object of a domestic piety in which all members of the household participated. Doubtless the female members of the family were mainly concerned with her, but Jer 44:15-19 confirms that males willingly participated in the cult of the goddess.

The figurines in tombs are not particularly difficult to explain. Again, Bloch-Smith's suggestion that they were to beseech adequate lactation for deceased infants seems to go too far.⁷¹ One of the functions of Phoenician Astarte was to be protectress of the royal dead, as can be read on the inscription of king Tabnit of Sidon (ca. 500 B.C.E.). The disturbing and plundering of his sarcophagus is *t 'bt 'šrt*, "an abomination to Astarte."⁷²

BA 44 (1991): 17-19.

⁷¹Bloch-Smith, 98.

⁷²J.C.L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 3:103.

In Prov 9:18 Folly presides over the banquet of the *rephaim*, the dead. The characterisation of "Lady" Folly/the foreign woman in Proverbs 1-9 derives from those aspects of the goddess that disturbed the YHWH-only group and was intended not only to warn against sexual promiscuity and adultery, but against the goddess and her cult.⁷³ Thus, as her statuette invoked protection and nourishment (prosperity) in life, so she protected and nourished the family dead. Those found in *favissae* confirm a cultic usage.

Before reaching a conclusion, it is worth taking one more look at the figurines. The full breasts, supported and proffered by the encircling arms and hands are symbols of a divine maternity that nourishes and protects, a true "blessing of breasts." Nonetheless, to concentrate on the breasts does no justice to the heads which, apart from the "bird" faces, are elaborate and striking, though the latter are vivid in their own way. The heads with their arresting almond-shaped eyes and careful coiffures are reminiscent of the "woman at the window" motif found in the ivories from Arslan-Tash, Nimrud and Samaria.⁷⁴ Like all divine images in the ancient near east they were intended both to mediate the deity in question and to attract and awe the worshipper. It has been mooted that the faces are intended to evoke wisdom and, therefore, that the portrait of Wisdom in Proverbs might derive from Asherah.⁷⁵ It is an attractive notion, but it seems rather more sophisticated than the reality can bear. J. Day notes that Asherah is not associated with Wisdom in the Ugaritic texts, the Hebrew Bible, or other sources.⁷⁶ The figurines evoke and invoke female deity.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it can be inferred that the terracotta pillar figurines were intended to portray Asherah as a protecting and nourishing mother, who presided over the household in life and death, and to invoke her blessing. The rich iconography, the material remains, and the somewhat sparser textual evidence taken together argue for the worship of Asherah as a vital part of the cult of YHWH for a significant number of Judahites and a large portion of the population of Jerusalem from the

⁷³J. B. Burns, "Proverbs 7, 6-27: Vignettes from the Cycle of Astarte and Adonis," *SJOT* 9 (1995): 33-35.

⁷⁴For a discussion of the woman at the window and a bibliography, see Burns in "Proverbs 7, 6-27," 22-26.

⁷⁵This idea was suggested to me by Professor T. J. Lewis, to whom I am indebted for this and other comments and suggestions.

⁷⁶J. Day, "Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan," *Ein Gott Allein*, 186.

eighth through the sixth centuries B.C.E.

Since they depicted and were part of the veneration of a goddess utterly abhorrent to the YHWH-only party, they were doubtless included in the sweeping condemnations of idols that are found in historical books, and some of the Prophets. It is most unlikely that the YHWH-only party did not know exactly who and what they were up against; witness their use of pejorative terminology for images, "filthy things" and "puny godlings" and their artfully contrived ignorance of Asherah, her image and her symbol. Taken together the textual references to idols, to Asherah and her symbol, biblical and extra-biblical, and the pervasive presence of the pillar figurines do testify to the worship of Asherah in public and private as a maternal figure from the eighth through the sixth centuries. It is quite possible, consequently, to achieve a *rapprochement* between text and artifact.

* The topic was chosen and the first draft of this paper written at an NEH Summer Seminar, "Imagining the Past: Texts, Artifacts and Ancient Israelite Religion," University of Arizona in Tuscon, June 12-July 21, 1995, led by Professor William G. Dever. I am deeply grateful to him for his keen interest in the subject, his great generosity of scholarship and his gracious hospitality. I am also appreciative of the invariably helpful criticisms and insights I received from others in the seminar.

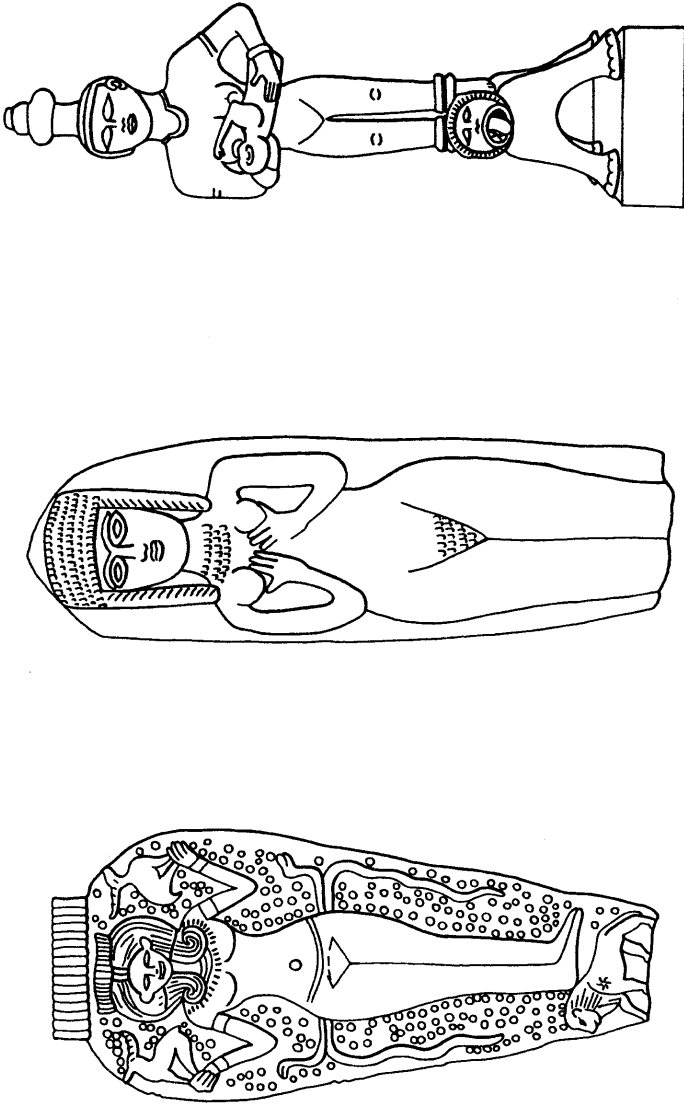


Figure 1. Various female figures, probably of goddesses. A. Gold pendant from Minei-el Beida, Late Bronze (Winter, *abb.* 42). B. Terracotta relief from Neirab, seventh/sixth century B.C. (Winter, *abb.* 29). C. Bronze figure, Middle Syrian (Winter, *abb.* 59).

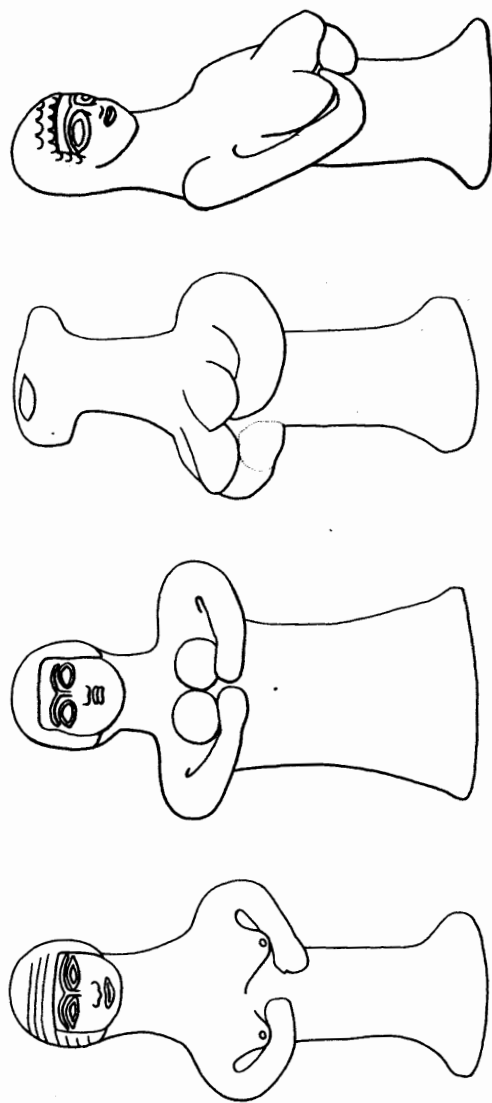


Figure 2. Female clay "pillar" figurines. A. Figurine from Lachish, seventh century B.C. (Winter, *abb.* 30). B. Figurine from Lachish, seventh/sixth century B.C. (Winter, *abb.* 31). C. Painted clay figurine from Beersheba, eighth century B.C. (Winter, *abb.* 32). D. Clay figurine from Jerusalem, eighth century B.C. (Winter, *abb.* 33).

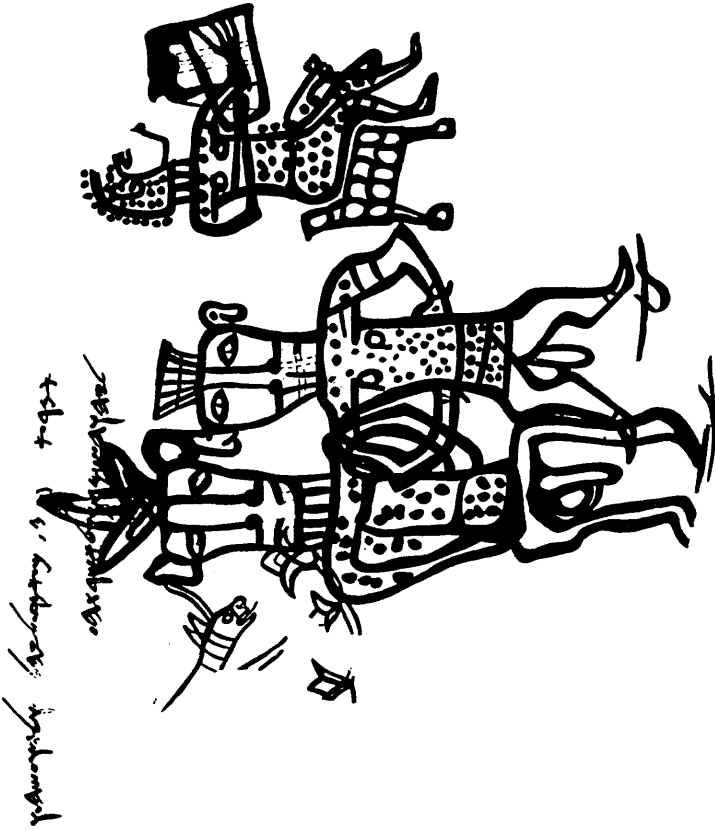


Figure 3. Three figures on Pithos A from Kuntillet 'Ajrud; the inscription names YHWH and his *asherah*. Source: Zeeb Meshel, *Kuntillet 'Ajrud: A Religious Centre from the Time of the Judaean Monarchy on the Border of Sinai* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1978), 12.

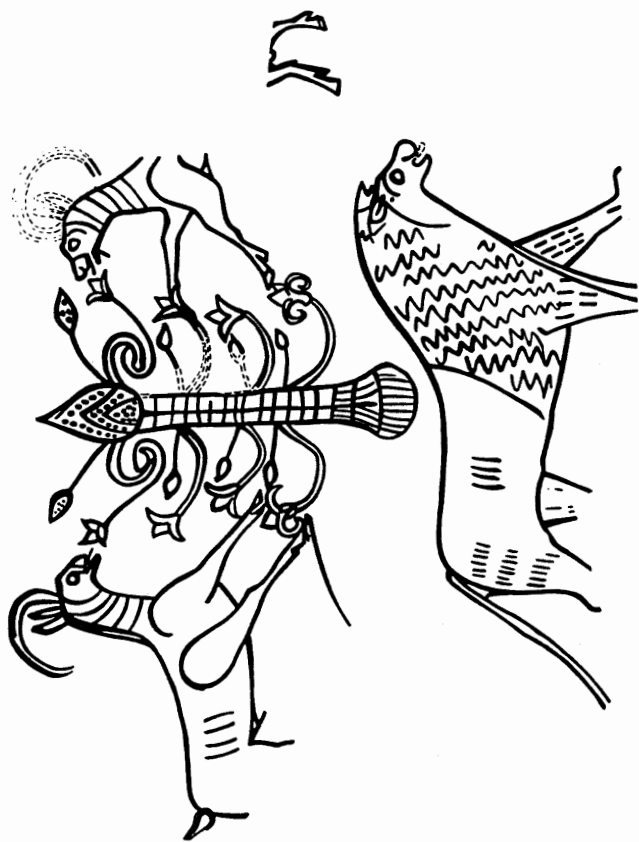


Figure 4. Tree of life or Asherah pole over a "roaring lion" figure on Pithos A from Kuntllet 'Ajrud. Source: Meshel, 15.