

## THE GREAT GODDESSES OF THE LEVANT

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### Abstract

During the Bronze Ages, circa 3100 to 1200 BCE, the people of the Levant worshipped many goddesses, but only three “great” ones; Anat, Astarte and Asherah. These goddesses were worshipped well into the Israelite period and Asherah may have been the consort of the god Yahweh. Evidence for goddess veneration comes from the written mythical and cultic material from Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible, as well as the myriad of visual images excavated all over the Levant and the evocative images they display. Possibly the most significant is the “sacred tree,” which almost certainly represented a female deity, perhaps even the great goddess Asherah. Over time, the three Levantine great goddesses gradually merged into one another, but their worship persisted well into the Greco-Roman period, during which time they continued their existence as the composite “Syrian Goddess” Atargatis.

### Key Words

religion, Near East, Asherah, Anat, Astarte, Yahweh, Ugarit, Baal, Mot, Hathor Locks, Lions, snakes, sacred tree, naked goddess, pubic triangle, “Astarte plaques,” consort, Tyre, Taanach, Inanna, Canaanite, Qudshu

During the Bronze Age, from about 3100 BCE to 1200 BCE, polytheism was the norm in the ancient Levant.<sup>1</sup> The peoples of this region worshipped a number of goddesses, but only three, Asherah, Anat, and Astarte, fit the category of powerful or “great goddesses.” Their worship was prevalent before, during, and after the settlement by the Israelites in southern part of the area, the land of Canaan (Dever 1996: 207,208; Finkelstein 1988: 16; Dever 1987: 233; Ahlström 1963: 25). There is some evidence that the Israelites may have revered Asherah, possibly as consort of their special god Yahweh (Toorn 1998: 88-91; Binger 1997: 125-126; Pettey 1990: 220-221; Olyan 1988: 33; Dever 1984: 255). Furthermore, the worship of the three goddesses continued, in one form or other, well into our era.

In presenting these great goddesses, I write both as a Religious Studies scholar, with a particular interest in comparative religion and comparative mythology, and as a Women’s Studies scholar. Indeed, feminist theory informs all my work. In this paper, I examine the two main textual sources for the ancient Levantine goddesses: mythic poetry and cultic texts from the ancient Syrian city of Ugarit, as well as Hebrew and Christian scriptures. I also explore important Levantine artifactual material pertaining to ancient goddesses.

### Problems and Assumptions

Before surveying the great goddesses of the ancient Levant, I want to point out three major problems, as well as two often unexamined assumptions. The first problem lies in the fact that goddesses were integral to male-dominated cultures and religions that had both male and female deities. Goddesses were definitely not the principal deities in such cultures, nor can we speak, with anything approaching certainty, of ‘goddess religions’ or ‘goddess

cultures' as having existed in ancient times (Tringham and Conkey 1998: 37; Westenholz 1998: 63; Frymer-Kensky 1992: vii).

Second, most of the written evidence about ancient goddesses comes from elite sources and usually refers to state and temple deities and practices, not those of the general populace, though there is normally some overlap (Bowker 1997: 350). Religious scholars generally agree that there usually exists in a given culture two kinds of religion: 'elite' or 'official,' religion comprising state and temple cults, and 'folk' or 'popular,' religion that embodies the practices of the common people. However, what they describe as popular or folk religion can be, in actuality, the way that many who think of themselves as "belonging to mainstream religion" practise it. Such practices sometimes vary greatly from those of 'official' religion (Bowker 1997: 350).

Typically, scholars have investigated the elite religious forms of a culture, since there is usually substantial documentary evidence for them. Often they have dismissed popular religion as a corrupted form of religion (Toorn 1998: 88). The result has been that we know little about the religious practices of a general populace, despite the fact that they were the majority of a culture's worshippers. Another problem has been that, with rare exceptions, popular religion leaves little documentary trace, but can be detected in archaeological evidence, particularly artifacts (Holladay 1987: 268-269).

A third problem is that students of religion, and especially of ancient Levantine or Syria-Canaan religions, have a tendency to concentrate on texts almost to the exclusion of the vast body of visual material now available: "Anyone who systematically ignores the pictorial evidence that a culture has produced can hardly expect to recreate even a minimally adequate description of the culture itself. Such a person will certainly not be able to describe the nature of the religious symbols by which such a culture oriented itself" (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: xi).

A concomitant problem is the often careless way in which many non-scholarly writers on goddesses, as well as, regrettably, some goddess scholars, use such visual material. As to assumptions that are rife in ancient-goddess studies, the first is what I call the 'myth of the fertility cult.' Both scholars and non-scholars seem satisfied to describe most ancient goddesses as fertility deities, 'Mother Goddesses,' the implication being that goddesses all fit into the same category (Westenholz 1998: 64, 81; Day 1992: 181; Hackett 1989: 65). The usual understanding is that they represent earth or are firmly fixed in 'Nature' and, often, that they are the focus of sexually based 'fertility' cults (Day 1991: 141; Hackett 1989: 65). Indeed, the "designation 'fertility goddess' ... has allowed predominantly male scholars to dismiss ... the role of goddesses in ancient religions" (Fontaine 1999: 163-164). Close examination of the evidence, however, shows ancient goddesses to have been complicated entities with their own powers and realms and with functions just as often pertaining to culture as to nature (Goodison and Morris 1999: 16, 18). Further, though many ancient goddesses functioned as channels of fertility (Day 1992: 185), actual responsibility for fertility, especially in the male-dominated cultures of the ancient Levant, normally lay with male deities (Hackett 1989: 68; Miller 1987: 59; Perlman 1978: 85).

Another assumption is that goddesses are all aspects of a single great goddess, 'the Many in the One, the One in the Many' (Stuckey 1998: 141-143; Eller 1993: 132-135). This position seems to be the result of their examining both ancient and modern polytheistic

traditions through monotheistic lenses and overlooking the marvellous and liberating diversity that polytheism offers (Stuckey 1998: 151; Westenholz 1998: 63). Ancient goddesses were all very different one from the other, while still, occasionally, overlapping in functions and powers and even blending into one another. The great goddesses of ancient Syria-Palestine appear to be a case in point (Hadley 2000: 42; Miller 1987: 55; Moor 1965: 228). These Levantine great goddesses appear to their full glory in the textual and visual material from ancient Ugarit (modern Ras Shamra) on the coast of Syria.

### Great Goddesses of Ancient Ugarit

In the Ugaritic documents of the second-millennium BCE, Anat, Astarte, and Asherah seem, for the most part, to have been separate goddesses, though there “is a great fluidity in [their] characteristics...” (Hadley 2000: 42). Their names occur in tablets containing mythic poetry and also in cultic texts, that is, in records of rituals and offerings and in deity lists (Coogan 1978: 10). The cultic texts deal with contemporary ritual practices, but the mythic material probably dates from an earlier period (Tarragon 1980: 184). While numerous, the Ugaritic tablets are often badly damaged and fragmentary (Binger 1997: 27-28; Coogan 1978: 75). Added to the fragmentary nature of many of the tablets, there are problems with their decipherment (Binger 1997: 27; Maier 1986: 45). Even specialists in the Ugaritic language and script often have considerable difficulty in understanding the texts, and some of them have tended to overindulge in textual emendation and reconstruction, a practice that Tilde Binger calls “the scourge of Ugarit scholarship” (Binger 1997: 27). Consequently, interpreters of Ugaritic texts regularly differ on the material they *are* able to read. The result is that the scholarly literature presents varied and sometimes opposed pictures of the deities. For instance, the opinions of specialists on whether the goddess Anat was sexually active vary, depending, primarily, on the interpretation of one or at most two very fragmentary texts (Day 1999: 37; Day 1992: 184; Hvidberg-Hansen 1986: 173; Coogan 1978: 108; Lipinski 1965: 45-73; Eaton 1964: 90-93; Ginsburg 1938: 1-11).

#### *The “Virgin” Anat*

In Michael Coogan’s translation of most of the mythic texts, *Stories from Ancient Canaan*, the young and impetuous Anat (Ugaritic *nt*) has a very active role in the aspirations of Baal, the “Master.” As the god of storm and rain, he seems to have been Anat’s half-brother (Coogan 1978: 94; Eaton 1964: 79). To help Baal acquire his own palace/temple, Anat does not hesitate to threaten even the venerable ruler of the cosmos El: “I’ll smash your head, / I’ll make your gray hair run with blood, / Your gray beard with gore (Coogan 1978: 95). El refuses to give in to her threats and pronounces that “there is no restraint among goddesses” (Coogan 1978: 95).

After Mot, the god of drought, sterility, and death, has swallowed Baal (Coogan 1978: 14, 107), Anat, with the assistance of the sun goddess Shapash, searches for Mot, finds him, and then ruthlessly destroys him (Coogan 1978: 112). Soon afterwards, Baal returns to earth, and, as El predicts, “the heavens rain down oil, /... the wadis run with honey” (Coogan 1978: 112). This story clearly indicates that at Ugarit, it was the male storm deity Baal, not a goddess, who had responsibility for fertility (Olmo Lete 1999: 28). Despite her seemingly masculine nature, Anat did have a soft, almost motherly side, especially with regard to Baal.

When she pleads with Mot to return Baal to her, the poem describes her as very maternal in feeling: “Like the heart of a cow for her calf, /like the heart of a ewe for her lamb, /so was Anat’s heart for Baal” (Coogan 1978: 111). Such supportive motherliness might suggest that her role as warrior originated in a function as a protector deity.<sup>2</sup> In the Ugaritic text *Kirta*, El blesses a king so that he will have a son and promises: He “... will drink the milk of Asherah, /suck the breasts of the Virgin Anat, /the two wet nurses of the gods” (Coogan 1978: 66). The fact that the prince was to suckle at Anat’s breasts does not imply that Anat was a mother. Rather it refers to her close connection with royalty (Day 1999: 37; Walls 1992: 154). Anat might have been taking the potential royal heir to her breast to validate him, as, in Egypt, Isis was wont to do with the new pharaoh (Winter 1983: 396-397, #408, #410). Excavations at Ugarit, produced some beautiful ivory panels. One of the panels depicts a winged female figure suckling two male figures (Pritchard 1969: Supplement, #829; Pope 1977: Plate XI). Anat may have been “the only Ugaritic goddess known as ailed [winged]” (Loewenstamm 1982: 121; Walls 1992: 155; Fensham 1966: 159). Thus, the suckling goddess on the panel is probably Anat (Day 1992: 190, note 63; Ward 1969). Another Ugaritic image of a winged goddess, again possibly Anat, occurs on a sealing which shows both a clothed female deity seated on a bovine and a naked goddess standing on lions (Patai 1990: Plate24; Barrelet 1955: 250). The naked goddess is a figure that is very prevalent in the iconography of the ancient Eastern Mediterranean, and, throughout the same area, the lion is often associated with goddesses (Marinatos 2000: Chapter1; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 47, 86).

At Ugarit, Anat was certainly a warrior goddess. In a passage from one of the mythic tablets, Anat wades deep in the blood of the battlefield. Like the Hindu goddess Kali, she suspends severed hands and heads about her person (Walls 1992: 54-59; Pope 1968). Enthusiastically, the poem records her exultation in fighting and killing.

She battled violently, and looked /Anat fought, and saw: /her soul swelled with laughter, /her heart was filled with joy, /Anat’s soul was exuberant, /as she plunged knee-deep in the soldiers’ blood, /up to her thighs in the warriors’ gore ... (Coogan 1978: 91).

On an impressive image from Ugarit that may depict Anat as warrior, the “Anat Stela,” a gowned and enthroned goddess, wearing the royal Egyptian crown, wields weapons and a shield (Cassuto 1971: frontispiece; Wyatt 1985: 328). Not only did Anat delight in warfare, but she also liked hunting (Coogan 1978: 50; Day 1991: 143). In one of the poems, Anat asks a young prince, Aqhat, to give her his beautiful hunting bow in return for riches and “eternal life” (Coogan 1978: 36-37). It is possible, as some argue, that the prince denies Anat his bow because the weapon represents his manhood: “... the bow is a common, practically unequivocal symbol of masculinity in ancient Near Eastern texts ...” (Hillers 1973: 73; Hoffner 1966: 330). However, Aqhat refuses Anat the bow in such an insulting way that she has the foolhardy youth killed. Indeed, his refusal may offer a clue to Anat’s nature and function in Ugaritic myth: “... bows are for men! / Do women ever hunt?” (Coogan 1978: 37). But Anat does hunt! In doing so, as the poem makes clear, she acts as if she were male, not female. It is no wonder that her usual epithet was “Virgin,” Ugaritic *btlt* (Coogan 1978: throughout; Day 1991: 144). However, Anat was not a virgin in our

sense, for the Ugaritic word does not refer to her lack of sexual experience. Rather, as Peggy Day argues, it indicates that she was a young, nubile, and marriageable woman who had not yet borne a child (Day 1991: 145). Thus, she was a perpetual member of late adolescence (Day 1991: 144; Walls 1992: 48). Adolescence is a transitional period in which “... male and female are not fully distinct” (Day 1992: 183). As a teenager who was approaching the brink of adulthood, Anat could delight in activities “that [were] culturally defined as masculine pursuits” (Day 1991: 73). More important, she could cross sex-role boundaries precisely because she was not “a reproductive ‘fertility’ goddess” (Day 1991: 53).

The cultic texts make clear that Anat was still venerated at Ugarit in the Late Bronze Age (about 1550-1200/1150 BCE). She was clearly one of the great goddesses of ancient Ugarit and of the north-west Semitic speaking area (Day 1999: 36). She also had a later, if a somewhat ambiguous role in other areas of the ancient Levant (Toorn 1998: 85-88; Patai 1990: 65-66; Bowman 1978: Part V; Oden 1976: 32; Porten 1969: 116-120; Eaton 1964: 42-52).

#### *Astarte, “Baal’s Other Self”*

Another equally important goddess from the ancient Levant was, Astarte. Her name was written as Athtart, *ttrt*, and appears forty-six times in Ugaritic texts, but relatively rarely in the mythic material (Wyatt 1999b: 110; Hvidberg-Hansen 1986: 171). These texts hold the goddess up as a model of beauty (Coogan 1978: 61,65) and usually associate her closely with Baal, often designating her “Name-of-Baal” or, as Coogan puts it, “Baal’s Other Self” (Coogan 1978: 74, 116). When she speaks, it is to support Baal (Coogan 1978: 89). At least five times the mythic texts pair her with Anat, perhaps an indication that the two goddesses were already beginning to meld into one another (Wyatt 1999b: 110; Walls 1992: 113, note 36). Nevertheless, her name occurs quite often in the cultic material, which makes clear that she had an important, if not central place in ritual and sacrifice (Olmo Lete 1999: 71; Perlman 1978: Chapter 4; Tarragon 1980). To date, no scholar has identified any of the many female images from Ugarit as undoubtedly representing Astarte. Though a deity of note at Ugarit in the Bronze Age, Astarte was to become a much more significant goddess in the ancient Levant of later periods (Wyatt 1999b: 111-112; Patai 1990: 56).

#### *Lady Asherah of the Sea*

The most important goddess in the Ugaritic cultic texts was Asherah, but her name does not occur in texts “as often as one would expect” (Binger 1997: 88). However, when it does appear, it usually comes near the top of deity and offering lists (Binger 1997: 89; de Tarragon 1980). Further, one of the largest statues found at Ugarit was probably of Asherah (Caquot and Sznycer 1980: 25). In both mythic and cultic texts from Ugarit, the goddess’s name takes the form Athirat, *trt*. In the poems about Anat and Baal, Asherah does not have the central role that Anat has. Nonetheless, in the Ugaritic mythic texts as a group, Asherah plays a critical part and has “sufficient power for El to be willing to take her advice concerning Baal’s successor” (Hadley 2000: 39; Coogan 1978: 111).

Most scholars of Ugaritic agree that her usual title meant “Lady Asherah of the Sea” or “She Who Treads the Sea” (Coogan 1978: 97, 116; Hadley 2000: 50; Pettey 1990: 7). There are, however, other plausible interpretations of the title (Hadley 2000: 49-51; Binger 1997: 43-50). Asherah is certainly the most likely candidate of all the Ugaritic

goddesses for the role of mother goddess, since one of her epithets was “Creatrix, or Progenetrix, of the Gods” (Coogan 1978: 97) and she had seventy sons (Coogan 1978: 104). However, the “only goddess explicitly called *um*, ‘mother,’ in Ugaritic myth was [the sun goddess] Shapsh [sic]” (Walls 1992: 89, note 10). Indeed, there is one serious suggestion that Asherah was a solar deity and might have been identified with Shapash (Wyatt 1985: 337). The generally accepted view is that Asherah was a goddess of fertility. She was one of two goddesses with whom the god El had sexual intercourse as is indicated in a strange text usually referred to, from its first line, as “The birth of the gracious and beautiful gods” (Hadley 2000: 43; Tubb 1998: 74; Lipinski 1986: 210; Pettey 1990: 15-16; Segert 1986: 217; Gaster 1946: 49-76). That Asherah is one of the two goddesses is indeed possible, for, in her roles as “Creatrix” and “wet nurse” of the gods, Asherah was “somehow related to birth and fertility” (Hadley 2000: 43). However, given her authority and her sometime role as power broker in the poems, it is unlikely that she was primarily a fertility goddess.

The Ugaritic texts do not explicitly name Asherah as El’s consort (Yamashita 1963: 80). However, the usual assumption is that she was wife of El (Hadley 2000: 38; Pettey 1990: 10, 11; Coogan 1978: 116). As Elat, “Goddess,” one of her epithets at Ugarit, she was, arguably, the female counterpart of El, the head of the pantheon. In the mythological texts, Asherah and El seem to function as a “supreme couple,” whose offspring include “all the other deities *in the first generation*” (Olmo Lete 1999: 47). A bronze female figurine from Ugarit may represent Asherah (Negbi 1976: 114-115, #129, #1630). One of the reasons for this identification is analogy: Like some figures usually interpreted as El, the dignified bronze lady holds her arm up in a gesture of blessing. Like El, Asherah was primarily a figure of authority, not of action (Wiggins 1995: 94-95). However, in her secondary role, Asherah wielded only the authority that a patriarchal culture accords to the feminine. It is significant that she, alone of Ugaritic goddesses, carried and used that very feminine of implements, the spindle (Coogan 1978: 97; Hadley 2000: 39; Binger 1997: 68-69; Hoffner 1966: 329; Yamashita 1963: 65-68).

One of Asherah’s functions seems to have been to act as mediator between the other deities and El. Indeed, in the poems, the approach of the brother-and-sister pair Anat and Baal terrifies her at first (Coogan 1978: 98). However, after they bestow sumptuous gifts on her, Asherah undertakes to persuade El to let Baal build a palace/temple (Coogan 1978: 99-101). Despite her initial fear of the half-siblings, Asherah is clearly higher in rank than they and condescends to approach El on their behalf (Hadley 2000: 39; Pettey 1990: 9).

Asherah could also be fierce in defence of her prerogatives. In one poem, her punishment of a human vow-breaker, the king Kirta, is both swift and severe (Coogan 1978: 67; Hadley 2000: 41). It is the *Kirta* poem that mentions her supreme position at two other major cities of the ancient Levant, cities that she seems to have ruled well into the Roman period (Hadley 2000: 42). The pertinent passage in *Kirta* calls her “Asherah of Tyre” and “the goddess [*elat*] of Sidon” (Coogan 1978: 63). It also uses the word *qdsh*, usually vocalised as *Qudshu*, which some translators render as “shrine” (Coogan 1978: 63; Hadley 2000: 47), but others give as “Holy One.” The latter interpret the word as an epithet of Asherah (Hadley 2000: 47; Maier 1986: 37). The fact that El promises Kirta that Asherah will join Anat in suckling the royal heir suggests that Asherah too was a “divine guarantor of the throne” (Pettey 1990:16). Both the mythic and cultic documents provide ample evidence that Asherah was the highest in rank of the Ugaritic goddesses and next to El in

authority (Olmo Lete 1999: 47-48; Maier 1986: 43-44). Unquestionably, Asherah was a great goddess of Ugarit and she was also revered in other parts of the eastern Mediterranean (Wyatt 1999a: 100-101).

### **Images and Symbols of the Great Goddesses**

A vast amount of iconographic material from the ancient Levant depicts females, many of whom are probably goddesses. Much of this evidence shows varying degrees of influence from the great powers of Mesopotamia, Egypt and Hittite Anatolia. Although writers identify large numbers of these images as representing the great goddesses of the area, there is normally no indication on the artifacts as to whom they portray. Unless we know that the object came from a temple or shrine clearly dedicated to a certain goddess, we need to be very cautious in assigning particular images to specific deities. Of the many images of females from Ugarit, most are undoubtedly of goddesses, for they are often surrounded with symbols of deity. However, which goddess they depict is usually impossible to ascertain. Some writers have identified as Astarte certain naked female figures that occur on pendants from Ugarit and elsewhere in the Levant. They make this identification mainly because they consider Astarte to have been a “fertility” goddess (Marinatos 2000: 89; Tubb 1998: 65, #31; Patai 1990: 60, Plate 16). Others classify the naked figures as examples of the “Holy One,” *Qudshu*, which was more likely to have been an epithet of Asherah than of Astarte or Anat (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 68; Negbi 1976: 99).

#### *Hathor Locks*

One gold pendant from the port of Ugarit shows a naked goddess standing on a damaged lion and holding an animal (a ram?) in each hand (Negbi 1976: 99, #118, #1700). Her hair is in the style which scholars have named “Hathor locks,” a coiffure such as the Egyptian goddess Hathor wore, consisting of shoulder-length hair or a wig with two large, spiral curls at the ends (Hadley 2000: 191; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 66). The Ugaritic figure bears horns on each side of her Egyptian crown-like headdress, and there is a star above it. She is flanked by tree-like plants. The symbols accompanying her undoubtedly designate her as a deity, but which one? A bronze pendant, also from Ugarit, shows a goddess holding plants (lotuses?). Below her feet are a crescent and two stars (Negbi 1976: 99, #118, #1699). She too wears the Hathor curls, which, in the Late Bronze Age, may have become one of the attributes marking a female figure as a goddess (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 97).<sup>3</sup>

#### *Accompanying Lions*

In the Levant and elsewhere in the ancient Eastern Mediterranean, one of the symbols that often marked a figure as a deity was an accompanying lion. Certain kinds of goddesses were regularly associated with lions, which they sometimes appeared to be dominating (Hestrin 1987a: 67-68). Indeed, Keel and Uehlinger go so far as to identify the lion as belonging “exclusively to the sphere of the [Levantine] goddess” (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 86). In many sealings, pendants, and plaques, a goddess stands on a lion. On yet another pendant from Ugarit, a female figure with Hathor locks uses a lion as a pedestal and clutches two small animals (gazelles?) in her hands, while two snakes cross behind her waist

(Negbi 1976: 100, #119, #1701; Pritchard 1969: 161, #465). This figure looks very like the goddess the ancient Greeks called “Mistress of the Wild Animals,” *potnia theron* (Marinatos 2000: 112; 141 note 23). William F. Albright and others have identified the goddess standing on a lion as Asherah, from an epithet which possibly refers to her, “Lion Lady” (Wiggins 1991: 385; Maier 1986: 167; Cross 1973: 33-34; Albright 1968: 121-122; Albright 1954: 26).

### *Snakes*

The snake is another symbol that often accompanies goddesses. As on the Ugaritic pendant discussed above (Negbi 1976: 100, #119, #1701), snakes often curl behind, wind around, or flank goddesses’ bodies. On what may have been a cult standard from Hazor, discussed below, snakes flank a female figure and curl sinuously above her head (Negbi 1976: 192, Plate 55, #1706). It is not surprising that, throughout the ancient Eastern Mediterranean, snakes had close connections with goddesses (Stuckey 2001: 96-97). First, in their self-renewing sloughing of their skins, snakes epitomise the mystery of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (George 1999: 99; Neumann 1970: 30; Campbell 1965: 9). Seemingly immortal, they accompany the immortal goddess who supervises the eternal cycle of nature. Second, snakes symbolise perfection, for, in being able to bite their own tails, they form a circle, a symbol of totality and completion (Handy 1992; Jung 1964: 38). Third, in many ancient cultures, snakes were the companions of earth goddesses (Jung 1964: 154). Capable of moving easily from the earth’s surface to the underworld and also at home in the waters, they functioned as mediators (Jung 1964: 152). As such, they represented the transformation and change that many goddesses supervised (Handy 1992; Neumann 1970: 30). Fourth, snakes were oracular, their behaviour interpreted in answer to queries and as guide to action. Snakes often inhabited earth-goddess shrines to which worshippers applied for oracles. The best known such oracle is, of course, Delphi on the Greek mainland; the site was originally sacred to the earth goddess Gaia, whose snake, Python, Apollo had to destroy when he took over the shrine (Campbell 1965: 20). According to the Hebrew Bible, one of the cult objects removed from the Jerusalem temple by Hezekiah during his reform was a bronze serpent, Nehushtan (II Kings 18: 4). There is general agreement among scholars that this snake was “a hated symbol of Canaan’s Baal religion” (Buttrick 1991: III, 534; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 274), but some interpreters of the Nehushtan passage suggest that the bronze serpent may have been sacred to Asherah (Binger 1997: 44, 124; Patai 1990: 48; Pettey 1990: 128-130; Olyan 1988: 70-71).

### *The Sacred Tree*

Throughout the ancient Eastern Mediterranean, a focally important goddess symbol was the sacred tree, which may also have symbolised the World Tree or World Axis (Campbell 1965: 486-489). In iconography, the tree is described as “sacred” when “it is set upon a base or elevation or placed in a position of prominence” (Hestrin 1987b: 214). It is usually flanked by feeding animals (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 51, 126). An elaborate Mesopotamian example occurs on an “Assyrian seal-impression (ninth or eighth century B.C.)” (Gray 1982: 56). It depicts “the fertility-goddess Ishtar, characterised by her lion,” and a sacred tree “flanked by two griffin-genii and two caprids [goat-like beasts]” (Gray 1982: 57). A Syrian seal dating from early in the second millennium BCE depicts two goat-

like creatures stretching up as if to feed on its leaves (Keel 1998: Part I, #13). Another second millennium Syrian seal shows two figures standing on either side of a palm-like sacred tree. One is a goddess wearing a Mesopotamian flounced garment and high, horned crown of deity. The other figure is probably a king (Muscarella 1981: 245).

Othmar Keel argues that, in the Levant, people worshipped both living trees and “artificial trees” as manifesting “a single female deity or of a number of different ones” (Keel 1998: 16). Pendants from Ugarit display a simple, but stylised tree as growing from the pubic area of a goddess (Weiss 1985: 285). One of these pendants, in gold, has a roughly sketched tree flourishing between the navel and pubic triangle of a highly stylised image consisting only of a head with Hathor locks, breasts, navel, and pubic triangle (Weiss 1985: 285, #131; 314, Plate 131). On yet another gold pendant from Ugarit, a simply drawn tree grows out of a prominent pubic triangle, the focal point of a stylised figure with breasts (Negbi 1976: 96, #108, Plate 53, #1661). In both cases, the goddess’s body contains the tree.

### *The Naked Goddess*

Despite local differences, artifacts exhibiting female images from elsewhere in the Levant demonstrate similar patterns and use many of the same symbols as those found at Ugarit and the “naked goddess” is much in evidence (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 26-29; Winter 1983: 93-134). Sometimes she holds her breasts, sometimes draws back her robes to expose her pubic area, and sometimes just stands with arms at her sides (Marinatos 2000: 1-7, #1.3, #1.8, #1.5).

From early in the second millennium BCE three nude goddesses holding their breasts appear on a schist mould from Syria (Muscarella 1981: 238, #208). Two of the three figures wear a Mesopotamian style of multi-horned crown, in this case topped with birds. The birds support a crescent-disc symbol that rests on the headdress of the small, middle figure. One suggestion is that they represent the storm god Baal’s three daughters or wives (Muscarella 1981: 240; Coogan 1978: 94). Interpretations of the holding or offering of the breasts by nude goddesses vary from its being a motherly, nurturing gesture (Gadon 1989: 50) to its serving as either a sign of fertility or erotic enticement (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 35). Whatever the meaning of these intriguing goddesses, it is clear that “the three figures constitute an indissoluble triad” (Muscarella 1981: 238). Could they be the three Levantine great goddesses?

The “goddess who lifts her skirt” has pride of place on numerous seals, where she usually exhibits her genitals to a god or a king. Although it does appear elsewhere in the ancient Eastern Mediterranean, this “type of representation is mostly found in Syria” (Marinatos 2000: 5). A typical example occurs on a Syrian seal, again dating from the second millennium BCE. Between a male deity and a worshipper, the goddess stands on a bull and opens her robes to reveal her genital area. Since the male deity is probably the storm god Baal/Hadad or his local equivalent, this enticing goddess may be Anat or Astarte (Marinatos 2000: 6, #1.10).

On other seals, a naked goddess stands, frontally displayed, with arms folded across her chest or at her sides, and on one Syrian seal from the second millennium BCE, she stands between two males, one of whom is a worshipper, the other probably a deity. She is the same size as the males and so is their equal. Further, she is obviously the focal point of the scene. Her pubic triangle is her most significant feature, and her head is turned toward the

god (Marinatos 2000: 4, #1.5). It is as if she were confronting the god, as well as the viewer, with her femaleness. Some seals depict both types of naked goddess (Marinatos 2000: 7), so that we may conclude that they represent two different goddesses or, possibly, two aspects of the same goddess. These naked goddesses in their different manifestations may be fertility figures, but they do not appear motherly. Rather the deity either crosses her arms beneath her breasts or holds her breasts in a gesture of display. She is sexually inviting, or she is simply confrontational, femaleness deified (Marinatos 2000: 5; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 26). The naked goddess could represent any of the three great goddesses or some other Levantine goddess.

#### *Other Similar Images*

Almost all Canaanite archaeological sites in modern Israel have yielded female figurines, as well as objects displaying female images, that look, in general, much like those from further north. From Megiddo of the Middle to Late Bronze Age (about 2000-1200/1150 BCE) came a moulded clay figure of a crowned goddess with a prominent pubic triangle and hands cupping her breasts (Patai 1990: Plate 11). Various sites, such as Megiddo and Hazor, have produced stylised pendants in gold and bronze, dating mainly to the Late Bronze Age (Negbi 1976: 95-99, Plate 52). Most of them are similar to either the pendants from Ugarit or the sheet-metal figures from Nahariyah (see below), and at least one of them sports a small sacred tree between pubic triangle and navel (Negbi 1976: 98, Plate 52, #1680).

A cult object from the thirteenth-century BCE temple area at Hazor takes the form of a plaque “cast in solid bronze and coated with sheet silver” (Negbi 1976: 192, Plate 55, #1706). Since it has a “tang for attachment at the bottom,” it was probably used as “a cult standard” (Negbi 1976: 101, 192) that was attached to a pole to be displayed in the shrine or carried in a procession. Though there has been considerable damage to the plaque, it is possible to discern a frontally posed female figure flanked by two snakes, with a crescent and another snake over her head and yet another snake near her pubic region (Negbi 1976: 192). Which goddess the image on the Hazor plaque represents is, of course, an enigma.

#### *“Astarte Plaques”*

“Astarte plaques,” as they are called, are clay artifacts dating to Late Bronze Age (about 1550-1200/1150 BCE) and have been unearthed in large numbers. Typically, they take the form of a flat oval of clay “bearing the impress (from a pottery of [sic] metal mold)” of a naked female figure standing in what seems to be a doorway (Patai 1990: 59). As she is depicted on a plaque from Beth Shemesh in Israel, she often holds plants in outstretched arms and wears Hathor locks (Patai 1990: Plate 13). An ornate version from the same site in Israel shows her holding and festooned in plants or, possibly, snakes (Patai 1990: Plate 12). These images may picture Astarte, but they could be of another goddess all together. The Astarte plaques disappeared in the southern Levant by the early Iron Age about 1200 BCE, the period to which the emergence of the Israelites is usually assigned (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 97-108; Finkelstein 1988: 352; Tadmor 1982: 171-172).

Other Astarte plaques (Patai 1990: Plates 14, 17) do not feature plants, nor is it clear that the figures in them are wearing Hathor locks. Further, the arms of the figures are at their sides. Since this type of plaque has little or no evidence of divine symbolism, Miriam

Tadmor has argued that they represent human women on beds and are the Canaanite equivalent of Egyptian images known as “concubine figures.” She interprets them as associated with mortuary beliefs and funerary practices and points out that they continued to be used into the early Israelite period (Tadmor 1982: 144, 149, 170-171).

#### *Nahariyah, a Goddess Shrine*

South of Tyre lies Nahariyah, possibly an open-air Canaanite goddess sanctuary, situated near a fresh-water spring (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 29-33). The shrine was established in the Middle Bronze Age and used into the Late Bronze (Tubb 1998: 76; Dothan 1981: 74-81). At the cult installation, archaeologists found a large number of naked female figurines in silver and in bronze, some on the “high place” of the shrine, many more in a pottery jar under the plaster pavement (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 31; Negbi 1976: #1525-1534). One of these exciting finds was a soap-stone (steatite) mould for casting metal figurines (Patai 1990: Plate 9; Negbi 1976: 64, #78, Plate 39, #1532). The slim figure is naked, with small breasts and protruding navel. With hair flowing to her shoulders, she stands with her arms at her sides and hands framing her pubic area. She wears a tall, conical hat, with a horn sticking out on each side. To date, no figurine that was produced from this mould has come to light (Negbi 1976: 178). The other female images from Nahariyah, “were poured solid, of the type that one could produce using the steatite mold” [Negbi 1976: 65, #77, #79], while others were cut out using sheet-silver or sheet-bronze” (Keel & Uehlinger 1998: 31; Negbi 1976: 81-82). Although one of the cut-out metal figures, intended to be worn as a pendant, wears a short skirt, the others are naked. The figurines were probably made in the workshops at the shrine (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 29, 31). The figurines indicate that the shrine was dedicated to a goddess, but to which one? Those who argue for Asherah base their case on Nahariyah’s “seacoast location near Tyre and Sidon, where Asherah was the local deity” (Petty 1990: 179; Dothan 1981: 80). Others think, because of the mould figure’s horns (Patai 1990: 65) or because of the Hathor locks of many of the figurines (Gray 1982: 81), that she was Astarte. At least one scholar claimed she was Anat (Cross cited in Dothan 1981: 80).

#### **Great Goddesses in the Hebrew Scriptures**

Another major body of textual evidence for the Levantine great goddesses is the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament).<sup>4</sup> Despite their negativity about Canaanite religion and polytheistic practices, the Hebrew Scriptures make a number of useful references to Canaanite deities, shrines, and patterns of worship. Although all three Levantine great goddesses receive mention in the Hebrew Bible, the texts are, in general, hostile witnesses that either vilify the goddesses or obscure them. Nonetheless, the Hebrew Bible constitutes a valuable source of information on the great goddesses.

On forty occasions in nine books, the Hebrew Bible mentions the goddess Asherah. However, a number of these references occur either as a singular form with the definite article, *ha'asherah* “the asherah,” or as a Hebrew masculine plural form *asherim*, also with the definite article, “the asherahs” (Binger 1997: 110; Petty 1990: 41; Pritchard 1944: 110). As for Astarte, aside from references in place-names, the Hebrew Bible mentions the goddess nine times, both in the singular *ashtereth*, “Astarte,” and in the plural *ashteroth*, and usually with the definite article, “the Astartes.” On the other hand, the texts almost ignore

the goddess Anat, who “is never directly mentioned by name” as a deity, but appears rarely in place and personal names (Day 2000: 132; Buttrick 1991: I, 125; Patai 1990: 62; Bowman 1978: Part V, Chapter II).

*Anat, Goddess of Warriors*

It seems very likely that, in the Iron Age in the southern part of the Levant, Anat was not worshipped. Only three “place names record ‘Anatu’s presence in Israel, ‘Anathoth, Beth ‘Anath, and Beth Anoth [sic]” (Bowman 1978: 209). The Hebrew Bible refers, at least once, to each of the three (Day 2000: 132-133; Buttrick 1991: I, 125, 387; Bowman 1978: 209-211). In all probability, these names indicate that, in the well-known city Anathoth, meaning “Anats,” and perhaps in the town Beth Anath, meaning “house of Anat,” may have been important Canaanite temples to the goddess Anat (Day 2000: 133; Buttrick 1991: I, 125), and the village Beth Anoth, meaning “house of Anats,” may have contained a noted shrine to the goddess (Day 2000: 133; Buttrick 1991: I, 387). Anathoth also occurs in the Hebrew Bible possibly as a personal name (Bowman 1978: 209-210) and as a clan or tribal designation, meaning “the Anathothite, the one from Anathoth” (Day 2000: 133).

The Hebrew Scriptures also record another personal name, that of the “judge” Shamgar ben Anat, “a champion in Israel” (Judges 3: 31). The name occurs a second time in the “Song of Deborah” (Judges 5: 6). The scholarly literature contains much discussion of the meaning and significance of the phrase “ben Anat” (Day 2000: 133-135; Buttrick 1990: IV, 306-307; Bowman 1978: 214-216). At least one theory has it that Shamgar was “the son of a sacred prostitute of an ‘Anat cult in Palestine” (Graham and May in Bowman 1978: 216). Another writer is tempted to conjecture that “... in the brief notice [about Shamgar] there is a residue of an old myth about a son of the goddess Anath who inherited his mother’s warlike qualities” (Patai 1990: 63). Most convincing, however, is the hypothesis that “ben Anat” was “an honorific military title,” since a number of Canaanites, “known to have been warriors,” also carried the title “*bn ‘nt*, ‘son of Anat,” who, as warrior goddess, was probably their tutelary deity (Day 2000: 134; Day 1999: 38; Milik 1956: 6).

*Astarte of the Two Horns*

The Hebrew form of Astarte’s name *ashtereth*, which occurs only three times in the Hebrew Bible, resulted from the deliberate replacement of the vowels in the last two syllables of the goddess’s name with the vowels from the Hebrew noun *bosheth*, “shame” (Day 2000: 128; Buttrick 1990: I, 255; Holladay 1987: 242-243, note 40). The plural *ashteroth*, meaning “Astartes,” is a normal Hebrew form. In statements about Canaanite religion, the Biblical texts often couple the *ashteroth*, “the Astartes” with the *baalim*, “the Baals,” an indication that the writers knew that many local versions of these deities existed. This repeated connection of Astarte and Baal has led some to conclude that Astarte was Baal’s consort (Day 2000: 131; Patai 1990: 57). If she were his consort, she too should have associations with fertility. According to Patai, the “original meaning of the name Astarte (‘Ashtoreth) was ‘womb’ or ‘that which issues from the womb,’” an appropriate title for a fertility goddess (Patai 1990: 57). He cites several passages in Deuteronomy that use the phrase “the *ashtaroth* of your flock,” the word *ashteroth* being translated “the young” (Day 2000: 131). He remarks that it normally occurs in parallel with the phrase “the increase of your kine” (Patai 1990: 302, note 24). The appearance of the goddess’s name in a context

referring to fertility probably indicates that the phrase is “a hangover” from a time when Astarte was responsible for the fecundity of sheep (Day 2000: 132; Delcor 1974: 9).

Astarte’s name also occurs in the Hebrew Bible as part of a place name, Ashteroth Karnaim, *karnaim* meaning “of the two horns” (Genesis 14: 5). Ashteroth Karnaim may be the “full old name of the city” Ashtaroth (Patai 1990: 57), the home of one of the legendary, “giant” kings of Canaan and later “one of the Israelite cities of refuge” (Buttrick 1991: I, 254, 255). The city was probably a cult centre where Astarte was worshipped as a two-horned deity. In support of this suggestion, Patai points to at least one female figurine, represented by a mould from the cult site of Nahariyah in Israel, that depicts a goddess with two horns, discussed above. Dated between the eighteenth and the sixteenth centuries BCE, the mould shows a naked goddess in a high, conical hat and with two horns, one protruding from each side of her head (Patai 1990: 57, Plate 9).

#### *The Asherah of Early Israel*

Until the discovery and deciphering of the tablets from Ugarit solved the problem, scholarly controversy raged about the nature of the *asherah/asherim* mentioned so often in the Hebrew Bible (Buttrick 1991: I, 250; Pettey 1990: 42-43). The general conclusion was that they were either wooden poles, cult objects from the worship of Baal, or groves of trees (Reed 1949: 37; Danthine 1937: #862; Ward 1902-1903: 33). Further, there was general scholarly denial that the Hebrew Bible knew anything at all of a deity called Asherah (Day 2000: 42; Hadley 2000: 4). The brave few claiming that the Hebrew Bible recognised that a goddess Asherah existed appealed to one or two instances in the Scriptures that present Asherah as a deity (Day 2000: 42-43; Binger 1997: 111; Yamashita 1963: 126). The clearest refers to the “prophets of Asherah” who were supported by Queen Jezebel (I Kings 18). The first detailed study of Asherah in the Hebrew Bible after the Ugaritic discoveries concluded that the *asherim/asherah* of the Hebrew Bible were/was both a cult object and a goddess (Reed 1949: 37, 53), a position that many have held since (Hadley 2000: 4-11; Binger 1997: 111; Hestrin 1991: 50; Smith 1990: 16; Yamashita 1963: 126-129).

With few exceptions (Lipinski 1972: 111-112), modern scholars have abandoned the “grove” explanation. However, many of those writing after the deciphering of the Ugaritic tablets have continued to understand “the *asherah*” as some form of wooden “cult pole,” whatever the phrase means, or tree trunk, both presented as symbol of, but distinct from the goddess (Hadley 2000: 77; Wyatt 1999a: 99, 101-102; Frymer-Kensky 1992: 155; Perlman 1978: 184; Hestrin 1991: 52; Bernhardt 1967: 170). Mark Smith thinks that the *asherah*, though “named after the goddess,” did not represent her, but was “a wooden object symbolising a tree” (Smith 1990: 16, 81-85).<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, as the Hebrew Bible makes evident, both the *asherah* and the *asherim* were usually wooden; they were erected and stood upright, often beside altars and in the company of standing stone pillars. In at least eight instances, they are described as carved (Pettey 1990: 45) and thus, instead of being merely wooden “cult poles,” they were probably quite large, carved images (Kletter 1996: 79).

If, as seems likely, the *asherim* were wooden cult statues in temples and shrines, devotees would have understood and worshipped such images as the goddess herself, as her potent presence in her sacred place. Almost certainly, as was the case with cult statues in other areas of the Eastern Mediterranean, the *asherah/asherim* that stood in sacred places had been “animated” ritually and thus did not just represent, but actually manifested the

presence of Asherah herself (Walker and Dick 1999: 57). Indeed, a statue of Asherah stood in the Solomonic temple in Jerusalem for about two-thirds of its existence or for around 236 of its 370 years (Patai 1990: 50). Therefore, Asherah “must have been a legitimate part of the cult of Yahweh” in both Israel and Judah (Olyan 1988: 13).<sup>6</sup>

It is significant that forms of Asherah’s name, especially *asherim*, were often paired with Baal’s, a fact that has set some scholars to wondering whether Asherah was also Baal’s consort (Perlman 1978: 187; Yamashita 1963: 47). In the 1960s, Tadanori Yamashita was the first to note that most of the references to Asherah in the Hebrew Bible, including the texts that paired Asherah with Baal, came from, or were influenced by, only one source, but he did not carry the idea further (Yamashita 1963: 123-137) and it fell to Saul Olyan to examine the significance of this observation.

In his book *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel*, Olyan argues very convincingly that the Biblical attacks on Asherah are “restricted to the Deuteronomistic History” or to texts which exhibit the influence of “deuteronomistic language and theology.” For instance, the numerous pairings of Baal with Asherah’s “cult symbol,” which he calls “the asherah,” are part of this reformist, monotheistic “anti-asherah polemic” (Olyan 1988: 1, 3). He thinks that the passages meant to discredit “the asherah” by associating it with Baal and Astarte (Olyan 1988: 13-14). As a result, a number of writers concluded that, despite the fact that, in Canaanite religion of the Iron Age, Astarte was Baal’s “major consort” (Olyan 1988: 10), Asherah had, in the Hebrew Bible, become the consort of Baal (Olyan 1988: 38). The polemic against Asherah was necessary, Olyan says, because the goddess was actually a legitimate element in the worship of Yahweh: Asherah “had some role in the cult of Yahweh . . . not only in popular Yahwism, but in the official cult as well” (Olyan 1988: 74). Even though the reformist polemic might lead us to think so, Olyan argues, Asherah was definitely not the consort of Baal, but rather she was part of the veneration of Yahweh, though he stops short of stating that Asherah was Yahweh’s consort (Olyan 1988: xiv, 74).

#### *“The Queen of Heaven”*

Before leaving the Hebrew Bible, we should examine its testimony, in two passages in the Book of Jeremiah (Jer.7: 17-18; 44: 15-19), as to the worship by the ancient Israelites of “the Queen of Heaven,” one of the many titles of the Mesopotamian goddess Inanna-Ishtar. The texts under discussion provide very rare glimpses of ritual practices in Judahite popular religion. Israelite exiles in Egypt celebrated the rituals in question around the turn of the seventh century BCE, and, according to the passages, so did their ancestors, kings, and officials in Jerusalem, as well as “the people of the land,” that is, elsewhere in Israel (Jer.44: 21). Whole families, with women in the lead, were involved in making offerings, pouring libations, building fires, and baking “cakes for the Queen of Heaven” (Jer.7: 18). When Jeremiah warned them that, if they continued in these practices, they would bring disaster upon themselves, “all the women present . . . and all the people” who lived there refused to listen to him and vowed to go on sacrificing to the “Queen of Heaven” (Jer. 44: 15-17). Who was this “Queen of Heaven”? Perhaps she was Anat, Astarte, Asherah, or a new goddess who incorporated two or all three of them (Toorn 1998: 83-88; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 338-341; Brenner 1992: 53; Patai 1990: 64; Ackerman 1989: 109-124; Olyan 1987: 174; Tigay 1987: 182, note 20; Weinfeld 1972: 133-154)?

## Goddesses in Ancient Israel: Images and Inscriptions

### *Israelite "Pillar Figurines"*

Over the years archaeologists have found an appreciable number of small, clay, female statuettes, called "pillar figurines," which date from the late Iron Age II period, 900-539 BCE, the period of the Israelite monarchy (Tubb 1998: 116, 122; Kletter 1996: 4). They first appear in eighth-century archaeological sites, a little earlier in sites of the northern kingdom Israel than in those of the southern kingdom Judah (Holladay 1987: 280). They continue in early seventh-century sites (Kletter 1996: 40-41).<sup>7</sup> Further, "they have been found in almost every Iron Age II excavation" (Kletter 1996: 10). They have come from several types of sites: a minority from graves, many from domestic areas of buildings, and others from varied contexts (Kletter 1996: 27, 58; Holladay 1987: 257, 259). So many have been excavated in the heartland of what was ancient Judah that they are often regarded as "a characteristic expression of Judahite piety" (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 327; Kletter 1996: 45).

Pillar figurines were made in the round and have a lower half which is either hand formed and solid or, rarely, "turned on a wheel and hollow" (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 325). Usually described as a pillar or a pedestal, the lower part is shaped somewhat like a flared skirt, with no indication of legs or genitals (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 332; Mazar 1990: 501, #11.25). Despite the shape, the lower half of the figurine is regularly described as "schematic" and "pole-like" (Kletter 1996: 28; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 332). The heads are of two kinds (Kletter 1996: 29): mould made and quite sophisticated, attached to the body by a pin (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 330, #325; Kletter 1996: #4.2; Patai 1990: Plate 1; Gadon 1989: 172, #96) or simple and hand made as part of the solid body, with a face pinched by the potter to indicate eyes and prominent nose (Kletter 1996: 86, #4.1; Patai 1990: Plates 6, 7). The pillar figurine depicts a female naked to the waist with prominent, usually heavy breasts, which she supports or cups with her hands. The nakedness of the pillar figurines, though striking, is considerably more decorous than that of the earlier "Naked Goddess" images (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 332-333). The backs of most of pillar figurines are rough, and their unfinished look perhaps indicates that they were to be viewed from the front, maybe in a household shrine (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 332).

Pillar figurines are usually explained as either toys, as representations of human women, as "magical artifacts," or as cult objects (Toorn 1998: 91-94; Kletter 1996: 27). The "toy" explanation is rare, though strongly defended (Toorn 1998: 92; Goodison and Morris 1998: 206, note 31). Archaeologist Carol Meyers is one of a few experts who argue that they represent humans not deities (Meyers 1988: 162). She does, however, count the figurines as evidence of "female religious expression" (Meyers 1988: 163). Another scholar, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, sees them as non-divine and calls them "a kind of tangible prayer for fertility and nourishment" (Frymer-Kensky 1992: 159). In addition, Meyers describes them as probably "some sort of votive objects expressing the quest for human fertility" and so appears also to be putting them into the third category, "magical objects" (Meyers 1988: 162). Other experts who take a similar position interpret them as having been used in sympathetic magic or as talismans (Bloch-Smith 1992: 100; Dever 1983: 574).

In the past twenty-five years, a number of researchers have suggested that the pillar

figurines may depict the goddess Asherah (Toorn 1998: 95; Kletter 1996: 81; Hestrin 1991: 57; Holladay 1987: 278; Dever 1983: 573-574). Some of them base their arguments on seeing the lower part of the figurine as resembling a pole, a description which suggests that they understand the figurines as “small clay counterparts of the larger wooden Asherah poles which were set up by implanting them in the ground” (Patai 1990: 39). However, such a suggestion seems unlikely, since the flared bases of the figurines are not “pole-like,” but look more like long skirts. Still, the clay figurines could have been “popular, domestic copies of some larger Asherah image” from an important shrine (Hadley 2000: 202).

Archaeologist John Holladay, Jr., also thinks that the pillar figurines probably represented Asherah (Holladay 1987: 278). In his important and thorough review of known and probable cultic sites from the monarchical period in Iron Age Israel and Judah, he singles out two locations -- a cave outside the walls of Jerusalem and “a moated island of rock” outside the capital city of Israel, Samaria – as standing “significantly apart” from the others he discusses. Holladay theorises that both locations had been focal points of Israelite popular religion, what he called “tolerated nonconformist worship” (Holladay 1987: 269). Both are characterised by female figurines mainly of the pillar type, as well as other kinds of artifacts not usually occurring “in statistically significant numbers” in the rest of the surveyed sites (Holladay 1987: 251, 265). These two excavations yielded sixteen and twenty-three female figurines, respectively (Holladay 1987: 290, note 105) and it is possible that both shrines were dedicated to a goddess, perhaps to Asherah.

#### *Asherah, Consort of Yahweh?*

Was Asherah the consort of Yahweh, either in popular or in official religion or in both? Recently, a few startling discoveries in Israel have strengthened the arguments that she was. Several early Hebrew blessing inscriptions seem to be mentioning Yahweh in close, even intimate connection with Asherah. Even more exciting are drawings, full of rich symbolism, that accompany some of the inscriptions (Toorn 1998: 88-89; Dever 1983: 576). The blessings contain the controversial phrase *Yahweh w'srth*, possibly to be translated “Yahweh and his Asherah.” For our investigation, the pertinent inscriptions, both accompanied by drawings, originate from two different locations. One was excised from a pillar in a family burial cave at Khirbet el-Qôm (750-700 BCE) in the heartland of Judah (Zevit 1984: 39-47), while the potsherds displaying the others were recovered from the remains of a structure at Kuntillet 'Ajrud (800-750 BCE) in the northern Sinai (Meshel 1986: 237-240).

The Khirbet el-Qôm inscription is accompanied by a crude drawing of what looks like a hand (Hadley 2000: 85, #1; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 238, #236; Binger 1997: 94-101). The Early Hebrew text is fragmentary and “has eluded a completely satisfactory decipherment” (Hadley 2000: 84; Binger 1997: 94; Maier 1986: 173). Nevertheless, it appears to contain the phrase: “Yahweh and his [its] asherah” (Hadley 2000: 86; Toorn 1998: 88; Olyan 1988: 23-24). To whom or what does the pronoun “his[its]” refer, and what or who is the “asherah” mentioned? Judith Hadley provides a detailed survey of the various arguments in the controversy (Hadley 2000: 86-102) and an increasing number of scholars now accept that the pronoun refers to Yahweh. Many also agree that “asherah” means the goddess and that she belongs with or to Yahweh (Zevit 1984). The hand drawing below the inscription may have served as a guardian or fulfilled a “warding-off” function (Hadley

2000: 85, #1; 102-104). Several interpreters have seen it as the hand of the goddess Asherah, generous and life giving (Hadley 2000: 104). Binger combines the two ideas and suggests that it is “a symbol of Asherah in her role as a protective goddess” (Binger 1997: 100).

Unearthed at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, pieces of broken pottery from two large storage jars, also called “pithos,” bore not only similar and equally shocking inscriptions, but also several possibly relevant, but exceedingly controversial drawings (Hadley 2000: 116-119, #4, #5, #6, #7). Archaeologist William Dever describes the material context of the inscriptions as “Israelite-Judean” (Dever 1983: 576), but most writers think that the Kuntillet ‘Ajrud site probably belonged to the northern kingdom, Israel (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 247; Toorn 1998: 89). Explanations of its function vary from a religious centre (Meshel 1986: 237; Dever 1983: 576); a fortress-like structure (Chase 1982: 63); a travellers’ inn (Hadley 2000: 112; Frymer-Kensky 1992: 156; Dever 1982: 37); to “a trading post” (Toorn 1998: 89). Whatever its function, Kuntillet ‘Ajrud appears to have been used by “a diversity of peoples” (Hadley 2000: 111, 119).

The general scholarly consensus is that the writing in the three inscriptions is Early Hebrew script (Hadley 2000: 108; Meshel 1986: 238). One of them reads: “I bless you by Yahweh of Samaria and his[/its] Asherah,” while the two others use the formula: “I bless you by Yahweh of Teman (the South) and his[/its] Asherah” (Toorn 1998: 89). Discussion of the meaning of the phrase “by his/its Asherah” has led to much of the same type of disagreements as with the Khirbet el-Qôm inscription.<sup>8</sup> In the Kuntillet ‘Ajrud inscriptions, the phrase’s meaning is complicated by two place names, which make the pronominal reference ambiguous and the reading “its” quite possible. Therefore, some translators argue that the pronoun should be translated “its” and read as referring, respectively, to Samaria and Teman. Thus, the blessings would be appealing both to Yahweh, possibly in his manifestations at Samaria and Teman (Binger 1997: 107-108), and to the famous cultic installations, the “asherahs” of Samaria and Teman (Binger 1997: 108; Frymer-Kensky 1992: 155, 157). Others translate the pronoun as “his,” and understand its antecedent as Yahweh, and so render the phrase as either “Yahweh and his asherah [cult object]” (Hadley 2000: 124; Frymer-Kensky 1992: 158; Olyan 1988: 33; Maier 1986: 171, 172) or “Yahweh and his Asherah [goddess]” (Toorn 1998: 90; Binger 1997: 108; Patai 1990: 53; Freedman 1987: 248; Dever 1984: 255). However, it is important to note that, whatever the translation of the phrase, the writer(s) did not present “his/its asherah” as an autonomous entity, but as dependent on, or secondary in status to Yahweh (Toorn 1998: 91; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 236; Frymer-Kensky 1992: 158).

When we turn to the drawings associated with the Kuntillet ‘Ajrud blessings, some of them provide support for understanding “asherah” as a goddess. Although drawings appear on both sides of pithos A and on one side of pithos B (Beck 1982: 4), they do not appear to constitute “a coherent composition.” Rather they present “a series of motifs,” many of which are already familiar to us (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 212). One of the pictures, occurring on pithos A, depicts a cow suckling a calf, two standing figures, and one seated figure playing a lyre (Hadley 2000: 115, #3; Beck 1982: 9, #5). The blessing “by Yahweh of Samaria and his/its asherah” overlaps the headdress of the larger of the standing figures.

Some scholars, including the excavator of the site, consider the inscription to be

connected to the drawing (Meshel 1986: 239). A few of them then interpret the standing figures as possibly Yahweh and Baal and the seated lyre player as possibly Asherah (Coogan 1987: 119; McCarter 1987: 146-147). Indeed, historian Baruch Halpern has suggested that the drawing “may be the only portrait of YHWH as yet recovered from an ancient context” (Quoted by Schiff 1985: 8). However, another interpretation of this drawing seems more likely: Beck’s carefully developed and widely accepted conclusion that the standing figures represent male and female Egyptian deities and the lyre player a temple musician (Hadley 2000: 137-144; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 218; Beck 1982: 4, 27-36). William Dever, who thinks the writing and the drawing are related, but also accepts Beck’s interpretation of the two standing figures, nonetheless understands the seated figure to be Asherah (Dever 1984: 30; Dever 1982: 38).

Whatever our interpretation of the seated figure, a goddess certainly appears in this picture in the form of the cow suckling a calf (Hadley 2000: 115, #3). This image, which had wide distribution in the ancient Near East, was “one of the most popular motifs of the first millennium in Western Asia.” It appears on many seals and on an “enormous quantity of ivory plaques,” beautifully carved by Phoenician artists of the eighth and seventh centuries BCE (Beck 1982: 120). Such plaques have been found in a number of excavations all over the Near East (Beck 1982: 11, #7; Mallowan 1978: 56, #65). The cow-and-calf motif is usually connected with the symbol system of goddesses (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 215). Indeed, R.D. Barnett thought that it “was a symbolic substitution for the actual representation of the suckling goddess” (cited by Beck 1982: 12). Another drawing of the cow-and-calf motif, this time unfinished, occurs on pithos B (Beck 1982: 4; 10, #6).

Just around the shoulder of pithos A there is another drawing that has very strong goddess implications: a sacred tree with animals eating from it (Hadley 2000: 117, #5; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 211, #219; Beck 1982: 7, #4). In its details, this tree has obvious “parallels in the iconography of the sacred trees in the ancient Near East” (Beck 1982: 13, 14-15). Beck considered that interpretation of such symbolic scenes “remains precarious,” but remarked that the motif might have had a fertility significance (Beck 1982: 16). Recently, scholars have come to different conclusions about the sacred tree’s meaning, and many accept that it has some relationship to goddesses and their worship (Hadley 2000: 152; Keel 1998: 16; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 51, 126; Gray 1982: 57). The person who did the Kuntillet ‘Ajrud sacred tree almost certainly intended it to represent a goddess, for he or she emphasized the goddess content by placing the tree on a lion’s back, a position similar to that of goddesses in a number of images. As we saw above, the lion had a clear and time-honoured association with goddesses (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 86; Hestrin 1987a: 67-68).

Whoever did the drawings on pithos A understood the symbolic tradition of goddesses very well and, probably intentionally, brought goddesses into the pictures by using three of the most prominent and potent goddess allusions: cow and calf, lion, and sacred tree. However, the drawings may or may not depict the goddess Asherah, either in person as the lyre player or symbolically. Beck, among others, thinks that it is “doubtful if [the] scenes [on pithos A] were connected to any particular deity” (Beck 1982: 16). On the other hand, those who argue that the drawings show or allude to Asherah also use that possibility as support for interpreting the inscriptions as referring to her (Hadley 2000: 152, 153; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 236; Freedman 1987: 245; Dever 1984: 255). For them, Asherah was the consort of Yahweh both in Israel and in Judah.

### Goddesses and Sacred Trees

#### *Was the Syro-Palestinian Sacred Tree the Goddess Asherah?*

A good deal of evidence points to the likelihood that one or all Levantine goddesses had an association with trees. Such an association would not be surprising, given that the Levant was heavily influenced by the great civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia. In Egypt, a goddess, most often Isis or Hathor, whose locks became almost the sign of female deity in the Levant, manifested herself as the sacred sycamore or palm tree (Keel 1998: 36-38; Part I, #53-62; Hestrin 1987b: 218-219, #5). In Mesopotamia the sacred tree was closely related to goddesses, especially the great goddess Inanna-Ishtar (Stuckey 2001: 101; Keel 1998: 20-21; Part I, #2-8). Indeed, the relationship between trees and goddesses was “widespread ... in the ancient Near East” and dated “from at least the third millennium” (Keel 1998: 19; Hestrin 1991: 54). A few scholars have even suggested that people of the Levant worshipped “real and artificial trees” and “as manifestations of a single female deity or a number of different ones” (Keel 1998: 16; Hestrin 1987b: 222-223). Is there any evidence that trees were especially sacred to the goddess Asherah? Some scholars answer in the affirmative and argue that the goddess Asherah was symbolised by the sacred tree or even embodied by it (Hadley 2000: 153; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 153, 233).

An important piece of evidence that may indicate Asherah’s relationship to the sacred tree was excavated in the Late Bronze Age Canaanite city of Lachish (Tubb 1998: 79-80). Though some were found separately, the pieces of pottery fit neatly together to form the shoulder of a decorated cult vessel—the Lachish Ewer (Keel 1998: Part I, #49). The ewer is usually dated to “the late thirteenth century B.C.E” and understood as Canaanite (Hestrin 1987b: 212). Above the decoration, which consists of a row of animals and trees, there is an inscription: “Mattan. An offering to my Lady `Elat” (Hestrin 1987b: 211, 214). This probably means that a person named Mattan presented the ewer and its contents to the temple of the goddess Elat ((Hadley 2000: 159).

Significantly, the word for goddess, *ʾlt*, is positioned right over one of the stylised trees (Hadley 2000: 156; 157, #8). Since the inscription was done by the same person who executed the drawings (Hadley 2000: 160), it seems likely that the placing of the word was “not by chance” (Hestrin 1987b: 220). Indeed, the ewer “links the tree and the goddess” (Smith 1990: 82). Thus, the word *ʾElat* was probably placed so as to designate the tree as goddess, to indicate that it “represented her presence” (Smith 1990: 82).

However, to which of the Levantine goddesses did *ʾElat* refer? In the Hebrew Bible, *elah*, an orthographically predictable feminine form of *ʾel*, occurs seventeen times, but is always translated as “oak or “terebinth,” that is, a living tree (Binger 1997: 135) and “all occurrences of the word can be understood as tree” without damaging the text. However, in some places, the translation equally could be “goddess” (Binger 1997: 135). One scholar concluded that *Elah* and *Asherah* were “the same ..., even if one seems to be a living tree,” the other a wooden object (Binger 1997: 137). In the Ugaritic texts, though *ʾelat*, the grammatically feminine form of *ʾel*, can mean “goddess in a rather general way,” it can also be one of *Asherah*’s titles or epithets, “nearly a name” (Petty 1990: 13). As a result, a number of scholars think that the *ʾElat* of the Lachish Ewer named the Canaanite goddess *Asherah* (Hadley 2000: 159-160; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 72; Petty 1990: 181; Smith 1990: 82; Hestrin 1987b: 220; Maier 1986: 166). However, this identification does not

prove conclusively that in the ancient Levant the sacred tree always represented Asherah, though it is clear that goddesses and trees were closely associated, and the sacred tree could represent any one or all of them.

Another artefact recovered from the excavations at Lachish adds to the latter conclusion: a goblet decorated with “two ibexes facing each other, repeated four times” (Hestrin 1987b: 215). They are flanking not a sacred tree, but “an inverted triangle strewn with dots” (Keel 1998: 34; Part I, #50; Hestrin 1987: 215, #2; 216, #3). The inverted figure has been interpreted as a pubic triangle (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 72; Hestrin 1991: 55; Hestrin 1987b: 215). In this well-known image pattern, then, scholars see the replacing of the sacred tree with the vulva symbol making it highly likely “... that the tree indeed symbolises the fertility goddess ...” (Hestrin 1987b: 215). In response to critics of this interpretation, Keel has put forward recently published evidence from three different sites in Israel that may confirm that the triangles on the Lachish goblet do represent pubic triangles (Keel 1998: 34-35; Part I, #51, 52). He concludes: “... this configuration cannot be relegated to the status of a secondary motif” (Keel 1998: 35).

#### *The Taanach Cult Stand*

Whatever position scholars take on the theory that the sacred tree was Asherah’s symbol, the majority recognise that the powerful image signals the presence of a goddess (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 233). An elaborate clay cult stand from ancient Taanach in northern Israel is full of goddess symbols (Hadley 2000: 170, #13; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 159, #184; Gadon 1989: 174, #97; Metropolitan Museum 1986: 162, #79). The ornate stand, just over 53 centimetres in height, dates to the tenth century BCE (Hadley 2000: 169). On its front and sides, its four levels or registers bear elaborate decorations, modelled in high relief (Metropolitan Museum 1986: 161). The reliefs are representations of animals and one human. In the centre of the bottom register stands a naked goddess, controlling, one with each hand, two flanking lions. The second register contains an empty, door-like space flanked by winged sphinxes wearing Hathor locks. On the next register, two ibexes nibble at a sacred tree, a scene which is flanked by lions. The top register is occupied by a quadruped, either a bull calf or a young horse (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 158, 160). It strides between two volutes, with what looks like a rayed or winged sun disc on or above it (Beck 1994).

Explanations of the symbols on the Taanach cult stand are still very much in dispute and vary from its belonging totally to Canaanite worship to its being an Israelite cult object dedicated to Yahweh and his Asherah (Hadley 2000: 169-176). There is general agreement that the piece is a model of a temple belonging to the deities or deity depicted on the façade, with the tiers displaying temple scenes (Hadley 2000: 171-172; Hestrin 1991: 57; Hestrin 1987a: 65; Beck 1994: 358). Interpreted strictly as a Canaanite cult object, the Taanach cult stand depicts the main Canaanite deities, and a female deity clearly appears on two of the levels, the naked goddess at the bottom and the sacred tree on the third level from the bottom. Those arguing this position usually identify the goddess as Asherah (Hestrin 1991:57; Hestrin 1987a:78; Dever 1983:573). The empty space on level two is a doorway into the shrine (Hestrin 1991:57; Hestrin 1987a:75,78). The door-post volutes on level four frame either a temple entrance (Hadley 2000:172) or the “holy of holies” (Beck 1994: 375). Between the volutes, the Canaanite storm god Baal Hadad manifests himself in the form of

a bull calf (Hadley 2000: 172-173; Hestrin 1991: 57). Thus, Baal is “certainly the centre of the whole composition” (Hestrin 1987a: 75). Another view has the Canaanite god El manifest as the bull, “the usual symbol for El in the Canaanite pantheon” (Petty 1990: 183).

Yet another interpretation sees the animal in the top register not as a bull, but as a horse. Thus, the stand depicts Canaanite goddesses only, with the naked goddess being the “Mistress of the Wilderness” and the quadruped in the top register manifesting Astarte or “Anat-Astarte” in the form of a horse (Keel 1998: 41; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 160). Levin understands the cult object as dedicated to a single female fertility deity. The four levels present “two views of the same scene: a two room temple,” of which the top two levels are “the entrance area” and the two bottom ones the “holy of holies.” The empty space would have held a figurine of the goddess, and the quadruped at the top is not a bull or a horse, but a lamb, an animal closely associated with “female fertility deities” (Levin 1995: 28).

According to those who see the stand as an early Israelite cult object devoted to Yahweh and his Asherah, it shows Asherah on level one, with the tree as Asherah or the asherah, her symbol, appearing on level three. The invisible deity Yahweh is understood in the empty door on level two and again, on level four, by either his bull symbol or his empty bull-calf dais (Hadley 2000: 173-174; Smith 1990: 19-20). However, since all symbols and symbolic objects often can have a number of meanings, the Taanach cult stand could be both Canaanite and Yahwistic, in much the same way as, in African American religions, for example, a sacred image can signify both an African deity and a Christian saint (Paper 1997: 220).

Undoubtedly, a goddess is central to the symbolism of the Taanach stand, and I would argue that the cult stand lays out symbolic correspondences on four levels: a goddess is there also in the door on level two and the animal on level four. The symbolism of the cult stand suggests that this Levantine goddess is very much like the Mesopotamian great goddess Inanna (Stuckey 2001: 92-94). The female figure on the bottom register underpins everything; she is the foundation of all and so queen of heaven, earth, and underworld. She is both life and death, the latter obvious in the menacing lions which she controls. Above her looms the door to her shrine and the mystic entrance to her realm both on earth and in the underworld. More important, it is the symbol of her essential nature, which, like that of Sumerian Inanna, is transformation, change (Stuckey 2001: 95; Friedrich 1978). To enter into her realm is to undergo change: whether it is to die on the battlefield, to be born, to fall in love, to engage in sexual activity, or to leave the ordinary and through ritual enter sacred time and space. The tree on level three is yet another statement of the goddess’s presence, and, like her, it has its branches in the heavens, its trunk on the earth, and its roots reaching toward the world beneath the earth (Stuckey 2001: 101). The animal on the fourth level, which I think may be a bull calf, perhaps represents her consort, the storm god, whose function it is to bring rain, to fertilise the earth so that the life cycle can go on. Given what we know about Canaanite religion in the first millennium BCE, I would assign the Taanach stand not to Asherah, but possibly to Astarte, who, at that time, was consort of the storm god Baal (Patai 1990: 56-57; Petty 1990: 25; Smith 1990: 20, 89; Olyan 1988: 49).

#### *Goddess as Sacred Tree*

Evidence suggests that, in the Bronze Age Levant, the sacred tree was all but

synonymous with goddesses. Not only do pendants depict goddesses with trees growing up from their vulvic triangles and seals and other artifacts show sacred trees, complete with browsing animals next to goddesses, but one of the most beautiful objects from Ugarit presents a goddess as a tree.<sup>9</sup> On a fragment of a carved ivory lid of a small box, a goddess takes the position normally held by the sacred tree and feeds caprids that lean forward and upward to take the vegetation out of her hands (Keel 1998: Part I, #43; Patai 1990: Plate 19; Pritchard 1969: 160, #464). Despite this exquisite Late Bronze Age testimony to the identity of goddess and tree, Keel demonstrates that by the Iron Age, the figure of the goddess “is to a large extent replaced by the tree flanked by caprids” (Keel 1998: 35). Gradually, throughout the Iron Age, the image of sacred tree with caprids became rare in Israel and Judah (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 399-400), though it continued as an important symbol in surrounding ancient Eastern Mediterranean cultures (Gray 1982: 59-61). The tree symbol, however, may have survived even in Judah in the form of “the seven-branched lampstand of the priestly tradition” (Keel 1998: 56).

### **The Goddesses Outside the Levant**

Anat may once have been worshipped throughout the Levant, although she was probably more important in the north than in the south. However, by the Late Bronze Age her cult seems to have begun to die out as her attributes and functions were taken over by the other great goddesses. Nonetheless, it was in the Late Bronze Age that Anat made her greatest impact, as an Egyptian war goddess, important to the Ramesside pharaohs. Indeed, the warrior king Ramses II (1304-1237 BCE) regarded her as his patron deity (Patai 1990: 62; Bowman 1978: 225) and some Egyptian reliefs of the Ramesside Age (1300-1200 BCE) are dedicated to Levantine goddesses and mention Anat by name (Pritchard 1969: 352, #830). At the bottom of one, there is a depiction, with inscription, of an offering ritual to Anat (Westenholz 1998: 80, #28; Pritchard 1969: 163, #473; 304).

Although not as important at Ugarit as Asherah and Anat, Astarte was also a war goddess of the Egyptians in the second millennium BCE (Patai 1990: 56). She became even more important in the first millennium BCE and held a central position in the pantheon of the Phoenicians (Patai 1990: 56-57; Hvidberg-Hansen 1986: 170). As a result, her worship spread with the Phoenicians throughout the Mediterranean (Mayer and Rodà 1986: 293; Marin Ceballos 1978: 21). In Cyprus, where the Phoenicians arrived in the ninth century BCE (Yon 1997: 9), Astarte was identified with Greek Aphrodite (Hvidberg-Hansen 1986: 186; Fitzmyer 1966: 288; Meurdrac 1941: 50). Eventually, Astarte too became absorbed into the “Syrian Goddess” of Roman times (Lucian 1976: 4).

Even in Ugaritic times, the roles of the three great goddesses melded into each other (Hadley 2000: 42). This process is evident in a group of Egyptian reliefs dating to the Late Bronze Age; the name usually given to them is “Qudshu” plaques, from the Egyptian title of a goddess portrayed on them (Hvidberg-Hansen 1986: 174; Maier 1986: 81-83). Wearing the Hathor locks she usually stands, naked, on a lion, her arms spreading out to either side, snake(s) in one hand, flower(s) in the other. The reliefs divide into two kinds: one displaying the goddess alone, with or without worshippers (Patai 1990: Plate 25; Pritchard 1969: 163, #471, 472; 304), the other depicting the goddess between two male deities (Westenholz 1998: 80, #28; Pritchard 1969: 163, #470, 473, 474; 304-305). Inscriptions accompany number of these reliefs, most of them calling the goddess “Qudshu,” Semitic *Qdsh*, “Holy

One.” However, one inscription gives three names: “Qudshu-Astarte-Anat” (Pritchard 1969: 352, #830; 379; Pettey 1990: 29). Though Astarte and Anat are closely associated in Ugaritic mythic material, this trinity of goddesses does not occur in any Levantine text (Bowman 1978: 245) and may have been an Egyptian development. Who, then, was Qudshu? Because the Ugaritic texts apply the epithet *qds* to Asherah by process of elimination most interpreters understand Qudshu to be Asherah (Hvidberg-Hansen 1986: 174; Maier 1986: 42, 90-91; Betlyon 1985: 55).

In the Iron Age the Israelite military colony on the island of Elephantine in Upper Egypt seems to have revered Anat (Bowman 1978: 249-258; Porten 1969: 120). At the end of the fifth century BCE, a member of that community wrote letters mentioning Anat along with “Yaho,” that is, Yahweh (Patai 1990: 65-66). Indeed, Anat may have been Yahweh’s consort at Elephantine (Toorn 1998: 85). Some Phoenician evidence from Cyprus refers to Anat and suggests that she was venerated on the island (Hvidberg-Hansen 1979: 133) and later, she seems to have been identified with Athena (Bowman 1978: 219-220; Oden 1976: 32). Otherwise, Anat seems not to have survived as a separate deity, but may have been assimilated into the “Syrian Goddess” of Roman times (Lucian 1976: 4).

Asherah was chief goddess of Ugarit, as well as of the cities of Tyre and Sidon and continued to be an important goddess in the Levant during the first millennium BCE (Olyan 1988: 39; Betlyon 1985: 53-54). Further, it is highly likely that she was, for a time, consort of Israel’s god Yahweh. However, it was her fate to disappear as a separate entity (Hvidberg-Hansen 1986: 170).

Devotion to the great goddesses of the Levant was prolonged by Phoenicians who lived along the Syro-Lebanese coast in the first millennium BC and were great seafarers and traders. They ventured far into the western Mediterranean and even reached Cornwall in England (Tubb 1998: 140-141). Wherever they went, they took their religion with them when they established trading posts and founded colonies, including Carthage, the north African rival of Rome in the third and second centuries BCE (Tubb 1998: 142-145). It is generally agreed that Asherah survived through Tanit, the chief deity of the Phoenician colony of Carthage in north Africa (Pettey 1990: 32; Olyan 1988: 66; Maier 1986: 96, 115). With the Carthaginians, Tanit/Asherah worship spread far from her original Levantine homeland into western Europe (Maier 1986: 118).

## Conclusion

For close to two millennia, the polytheistic peoples of the Levant revered a number of goddesses as part of their male-dominated pantheon. Although Anat, Asherah, and Astarte may be considered “great goddesses” none of them was supreme. Neither were any of them popular in all of the Levant at all times. The three goddesses had a tendency to share attributes, roles, and functions, and to meld together, as they probably did by Greco-Roman times as the goddess Atargatis (Maier 1986: 119; Marin Ceballos 1978: 29). Her name may have come from a combining of the names Astarte and Anat (Hvidberg-Hansen 1986: 175). On the other hand, she may have been the result of a fusion of all three Levantine great goddesses (Pettey 1990: 32-33; Olyan 1988: 39). In the second century of the our era, there appeared an account of the “Syrian” Goddess,” *De Dea Syria*, which tradition has attributed to Greek satirical writer Lucian (Lucian 1976). Though Lucian gives Greek names for the deities he describes in the work, the goddess of the title is clearly

Atargatis (Maier 1986: 66; Lucian 1976: 4). The worship of Atargatis spread from Syria across the Mediterranean and lasted well into the third century of our era (Maier 1986: 79, note 75, 76; Weiss 1985: 371, #72; Godwin 1981: 150-152, 158, #124). Thus, long after their independent identities were lost, the three Levantine great goddesses lived on in composite form as the “Syrian Goddess.”

### Notes

1. The Levant is a name for the area that is the equivalent of “the modern states of Israel, Transjordan, coastal Syria (including Lebanon) and southern inland Syria” (Tubb 1998: 13).
2. Protector or tutelary deities are usually war deities, but their warrior function probably originated in their tutelary function, not vica versa. Greek Athena, tutelary deity of Athens, and Roman Mars, originally guardian of boundaries or perimeter, are cases in point.
3. It is interesting that the shape of the Hathor coiffure is similar to “an Ω-shaped mark” used on Levantine seal “amulets” dating to the Middle Bronze Age, c.1750-c.1550 BCE. It is possible that the “Ω-shaped mark ... may have symbolized a mother’s womb” (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 26).
4. All quotations from the Hebrew Bible come from *Tanakh* 1988.
5. Unlike most other scholars, Mark S. Smith distinguishes between *asherah* and *asherim*. He thinks that the former was a “cult symbol,” whereas the latter were “religious items collectively called the asherim” (Smith 1990: 80).
6. It was in the latter part of the seventh century BCE that Josiah, King of Judah, began his drastic religious reforms. Josiah was “one of the great heroes of the Deuteronomists” (Binger 1997: 117). It is also noteworthy that the Hebrew Bible reached its final form in Judah (Friedman 1987: 223).
7. A few scholars have put forward what is clearly a minority view: the word “asherah” means “sacred place”; so they translate the critical phrase as “Yahweh of Samaria [or Teman] and his sanctuary” (Olyan 1988: 26, n.16, n.19; Maier 1986: 169, 182, n.42).
8. A few scholars have put forward what is clearly a minority view: the word “asherah” means “sacred place”; so they translate the critical phrase as “Yahweh of Samaria [or Teman] and his sanctuary” (Olyan 1988: 26, n.16, n.19; Maier 1986: 169, 182, n.42).
9. The object looks Late Mycenaean in style, but the “symmetric arrangement is purely Mesopotamian and Syrian ...” (R.D. Barnett cited in Keel 1998: 31).

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These goddesses were worshipped well into the Israelite period and Asherah may have been the consort of the god Yahweh....<sup>^</sup> During the Bronze Ages, circa 3100 to 1200 BCE, the people of the Levant worshipped many goddesses, but only three "great" ones; Anat, Astarte and Asherah. These goddesses were worshipped well into the Israelite period and Asherah may have been the consort of the god Yahweh. Evidence for goddess veneration comes from the written mythical and cultic material from Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible, as well as the myriad of visual images excavated all over the Levant and the evocative images they display. Possibly the most significant is the "sacred tree," which almost certainly rep The levant. 82 likes. Community.<sup>^</sup> The cult of the mother goddess is treated as an indication of a society which venerated femininity. This mother goddess was conceived as a virgin, one who has given birth to all and one and was typically associated with Shaktism.[26] The temples of th [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dravidian\\_folk\\_religion](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dravidian_folk_religion). en.wikipedia.org. Dravidian folk religion - Wikipedia.<sup>^</sup> The first settlers to this region did not speak Greek, it was only thousands of years later that the Greek-speaking Alexander the Great, King of Macedonia, conquered this land and<sup>^</sup> The levant. 12 September 2017 <sup>^</sup>. <http://www.nature.com/â€|/jourâ€|/v17/n11/full/ejhg200958a.htmlâ€|> The levant. 20 July 2017 <sup>^</sup>. <http://all-that-is-interesting.com/jericho-skull>. all-that-is-interesting.com.