

## NOTE

### GOD MALE AND FEMALE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: YAHWEH AND HIS "ASHERAH"

In a recent issue of this journal,<sup>1</sup> E. Johnson discusses the evidence for female language for the Deity in both Scripture and the tradition. Her discussion omits some recently discovered inscriptions which have caused a major shift in the scholarly understanding of the femaleness of the Divine in ancient Israel and, as a result, the history of Yahwistic faith. The purpose of this essay is to present these inscriptions as well as their theological and historical implications for understanding the Divine in the Old Testament.

In 1975-76, Z. Meshel excavated a 9th-8th century B.C. site in the eastern Sinai called Kuntillat 'Ajrûd.<sup>2</sup> The sanctuary discovered at Kuntillat 'Ajrûd yielded several inscriptions. The two following quotations typify the inscriptions containing the element 'šrth:

'mr X 'mr l-Y wlyw'sh w[l-Z] brkt 'tkm  
lyhwš šmrn wl'srth

X says: Say to Y and Yau'asah and [to Z]: I bless you  
by Yahweh, our guardian/of Samaria, and  
by his/its asherah/Asherah.

[']mr 'mryw 'mr l'dny [X] brktk  
lyhwš [šmrn] wl'srth

Amaryau [sa]ys: Say to my lord [X]: I bless you  
by Yahweh, [our guardian/of Samaria,] and  
by his/its asherah/Asherah.<sup>3</sup>

The following eighth century B.C. inscription was found on a wall of a

<sup>1</sup> E. Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female," *TS* 45 (1984) 441-65.

<sup>2</sup> Z. Meshel, "Kuntillat 'Ajrûd—An Israelite Site from the Monarchial Period on the Sinai Border," *Qadmoniot* 9 (1976) 118-24; "Kuntillet 'Ajrûd—An Israelite Religious Center in Northern Sinai," *Expedition* 20 (1978) 50-54; *Kuntillet 'Ajrûd: A Religious Centre from the Time of the Judaean Monarchy* (Museum Catalog 175; Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1978); "Did Yahweh Have a Consort? The New Religious Inscriptions from Sinai," *Biblical Archaeologist Review* 5/2 (1979) 24-34.

<sup>3</sup> See J. Naveh, "Graffiti and Dedications," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 235 (1979) 27-30; J. A. Emerton, "New Light on Israelite Religion: The Implications from Kuntillat 'Ajrûd," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 94 (1982) 1-20; S. Olyan, "Problems in the History of the Cult and Priesthood in Ancient Israel" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard Univ., 1985) 74-84.

tomb at Khirbet el-Qôm:

*brk 'ryhw lyhw*  
*nšry ul'šrth*

May Uriyahu be blessed by Yahweh,  
my guardian (?), and his/its asherah/Asherah.<sup>4</sup>

While it is unclear whether the word *'šrth* in these inscriptions refers to the goddess Asherah or to her cult symbol, the asherah, the inscriptions unambiguously place Yahweh in a positive context with what the biblical data present as foreign and therefore "evil in the eyes of the Lord" (1 Kgs 16:30, 33). The biblical view seems to be supported by the Canaanite (Ugaritic) texts,<sup>5</sup> which describe Asherah as a goddess. According to these texts, Asherah was the mother of the gods. She was the spouse of El, the older judge, patriarch, and father of the pantheon. Asherah was a nurturing mother goddess.<sup>6</sup> The religious symbol of the goddess, the asherah, was in Israel a wooden pole, or perhaps a tree,<sup>7</sup> representing the "tree of life."<sup>8</sup> The "tree of life" was an old motif in the ancient Near East, going back to the third millennium. In Israel it had become the goddess' symbol by the 13th century. The "tree of life" symbolized life and immortality.<sup>9</sup> Egyptian analogues to Asherah's symbol show the goddess Isis as a tree giving nourishment to the king, and to a noble and his wife.<sup>10</sup> Both

<sup>4</sup> A. Lemaire, "Les inscriptions de Khirbet el-Qôm et Ashérah de Yhwh," *Revue biblique* 84 (1977) 597-608; J. Naveh, "Graffiti and Dedications" 28-29; Z. Zevit, "The Khirbet el-Qôm Inscription Mentioning a Goddess," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 255 (1984) 39-47; Olyan, "Problems in the History" 71-74.

<sup>5</sup> For general introductions to these texts, see M. D. Coogan, *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978); P. C. Craigie, *Ugarit and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> For further information about Asherah in Ugaritic and biblical literatures, see A. Cooper, "Divine Names and Epithets in the Ugaritic Texts," in *Ras Shamra Parallels III*, ed. S. Rummel (Analecta orientalia 51; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1981) 346-47; Olyan, "Problems in the History" 53-71, 84-105; and A. L. Perlman, "Asherah and Astarte in the Old Testament and Ugaritic Literature" (Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> Emerton, "New Light on Israelite Religion" 15-19.

<sup>8</sup> For a survey of the "tree of life" in the ancient Near East and in Israel, see C. L. Meyers, *The Tabernacle Menorah: A Synthetic Study of a Symbol from the Biblical Cult* (American Schools of Oriental Research Dissertation Series 2; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1976) 95-131, 133-64.

<sup>9</sup> If the tree of life in the Garden of Eden symbolizes immortality which was placed within the grasp of the humans, then the human person was perhaps not created immortal. By the same token, it is clear from Genesis 3:19 that the human person was not created mortal. Was the human person undifferentiated with respect to mortality when God created the human? On these motifs in Genesis 2-3, see H. N. Wallace, *The Eden Narrative* (Harvard Semitic Monographs 32; Atlanta: Scholars, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> See O. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 186-87. I wish to thank Ruth Hestrin for bringing these examples of iconography to my attention.

depictions come from the period of the New Kingdom, a time of great Semitic influence in Egypt. If these analogues are any indication, the tree was a symbol not only of life and immortality but also of nurturing and nourishment.<sup>11</sup>

The Hebrew inscriptions from Kuntillat 'Ajrūd and Khirbet el-Qôm suggest the possibility that Asherah, or at least her symbol, the asherah, was acceptable in at least some quarters of pre-exilic Israelite society. A reading of the Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy, Judges, Joshua, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings) indicates that the asherah was observed as early as the period of the Judges (ca. 1200–1000) and as late as a few decades before the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah (587/586). It was acceptable in both the northern and southern kingdoms, both inside and outside the royal cults of Samaria and Jerusalem. This information comes mostly from the Deuteronomistic History, especially in the late editorial sections condemning or praising Israelite kings for their religious adherence to, or violation of, Yahwistic law. The asherah is attested in the northern kingdom in the period of the Judges, as Judges 6:25–26 indicates. Gideon is commanded to “pull down the altar of Baal which your father has, and cut down the asherah that is beside it.” Deuteronomy 16:21 forbids the “planting” of “the asherah of any wood . . . besides the altar that you put up for Yahweh, your god.” These two passages illustrate that the asherah was a wooden object erected next to the altar of a god. It is clear also that the devotion of the asherah was being maintained by Israelites; otherwise the prohibition would have been unnecessary. Finally, the association between the Canaanite deities Asherah and Baal was perceived by the Deuteronomistic school as having existed in the period of the Judges. By the time of the Israelite monarchy this association was made between Asherah and Yahweh.

In the period of the northern monarchy (ca. 922–722) the asherah is first mentioned in the reign of Ahab (869–850). Ahab set up an asherah in Samaria according to 1 Kings 16:33. Contrary to the information in Judges 6:25–26, this asherah was separate from the cult of the Canaanite god Baal (2 Kgs 13:6). The next mention of the asherah in the north is found in the conflict on Mount Carmel between Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18. There is a reference in verse 19 to 400 prophets of the goddess Asherah, yet they play no role in the story. Baal is mentioned five times, and his prophets four times, but Asherah and her prophets appear only once. Scholars explain the single reference to Asherah as an editorial gloss, designed to condemn the goddess by

<sup>11</sup> Meyers, *The Tabernacle Menorah* 95, 138–39.

associating her with the god Baal.<sup>12</sup> In 2 Kings 9-10, Jehu (842-815) initiates a reform opposing devotion to Baal, yet there is no mention of opposition to either the goddess Asherah or her cult symbol. At the end of the northern kingdom in 722, the Deuteronomistic Historian assesses the fall as due to idolatry (2 Kgs 17:6, 23:15). As in 1 Kings 18:19, the Historian brands the asherah as a Canaanite practice by connecting it with the god Baal.

In the southern kingdom King Asa (913-873) is the first monarch blamed for approving of the devotion to the asherah (1 Kgs 15:13; cf. 2 Chr 15:16). The predecessors of the two great reforming kings in the south, Hezekiah and Josiah, were patrons of the asherah (2 Kgs 18:6, 21:7, and 23:4, 6, 15). The asherah which Josiah removed had been housed in the Jerusalem temple (2 Kgs 23:4, 7). While the asherah was wrong in the eyes of Hezekiah and Josiah, it was right to their predecessors. It is noteworthy that these two kings were acceptable to the Deuteronomistic Historian precisely because their reforms included the removal of the asherah. One may ask, however, if the other kings were any less devoted to Yahweh because their Yahwism included a devotion to the asherah. It would appear from the inscriptions and the biblical evidence that the asherah was not simply a Canaanite import; it appears to have been perfectly at home in ancient Israel in the pre-exilic period. S. Olyan brilliantly argues that of all the extant sources, only the Deuteronomistic school opposed the practice of the asherah in pre-exilic Israel. Neither Elijah nor Jehu nor Hosea opposed the asherah, although they were outspoken in their criticism of Baal.<sup>13</sup>

One conclusion that may be drawn from Olyan's analysis is that in the period of the Kings the devotion to the asherah in its Yahwistic context was acceptable to much (and perhaps most) of pre-exilic Israelite society. Deuteronomy 18:21 indicates that the asherah cult had become partially or fully assimilated into the cult of Yahweh. This may be confirmed by the fact that the Deuteronomistic History rarely criticizes the goddess per se, but focuses its attention on the cult symbol, the asherah. If the devotion to asherah was part of the Yahwistic cult, why did the Deuteronomistic school discount the asherah as non-Yahwistic? Any answer is speculative, but it lies in the lesson which the Deuteronomistic school

<sup>12</sup> Olyan, "Problems in the History" 58. The Hexapla marks the prophets of Asherah with an asterisk to indicate that they are a gloss on the text of the Septuagint of Origen (so Emerton, "New Light on Israelite Religion" 16; E. Lipinski, "The Goddess Ašīrat in Ancient Arabia, in Babylonia, and in Ugarit," *Orientalia Lovaniensia periodica* 3 [1972] 114).

<sup>13</sup> Olyan, "Problems in the History" 57-59. This conclusion, however, is based mostly on an argument from silence.

drew from Israel's demise. Both kingdoms fell, first the north in 722, and then the south in 587. Yahweh was punishing Israel for its idolatry. For the Historian, a vital issue was identifying the idolatry. A radical event like the exile to Babylon inspired a radical reading of Israel's religious history. The Historian viewed as idolatrous what was considered legitimate Yahwism in earlier times. For the Historian, the asherah was foreign, first because the Canaanite goddess went by the same name, and also because the asherah had become secondarily associated with Baal in the royal cults of Samaria and Jerusalem.

The story of the asherah does not end simply with the condemnation of the Historian. While the goddess or her symbol did not survive with its own distinct cult, she did survive in a transformed way in the Bible. In Proverbs 1-9 the female figure of Wisdom, considered by early Christians to be a prefiguring of Christ,<sup>14</sup> is contrasted with a second female figure, Folly. According to some scholars, Folly represents the Canaanite Asherah or her cult.<sup>15</sup> The figure of Wisdom is a counteradvertisement to Folly.<sup>16</sup> Wisdom represents the Torah, the real tree of life. Although one female figure is approved while a second is condemned, both derive some of their characteristics from the goddess Asherah and her cult. Like Asherah, Wisdom existed before all else; she was with God before creation (Prov 8:22). Like Asherah, Wisdom is a divine wife, though not of the Divine. Wisdom is the wife of the wise man. First she pursues him in Proverbs 1-9, and by the end of the book of Proverbs she has become his "good wife" (*'ēšet-ḥayil*), as Proverbs 31:10 calls her.<sup>17</sup> While the asherah receives no direct endorsement in the Book of Proverbs, the language and symbolism of the asherah have become part of the figure of Wisdom.

The female protagonist of the Song of Songs is thought by some to

<sup>14</sup> See Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God" 447-48.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., R. J. Clifford, "Proverbs IX: A Suggested Ugaritic Parallel," *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (1975) 305. For older studies in this vein, see G. Boström, *Proverbiastudien: Die Weisheit und das fremde Weib in Spr. 1-9* (Lund: Gleerup, 1935) 12-14, 135 f.; H. Ringgren, *Word and Wisdom: Studies in the Hypostatization of Divine Qualities and Functions in the Ancient Near East* (Lund: Hakan Ohlssons Boktryckeri, 1947) 132-34; L. A. Snidgers, "The Meaning of *zār* in the Old Testament: An Exegetical Study," *Oudtestamentische Studien* 10 (1954) 63. More recent studies which criticize earlier scholarly emphasis on Canaanite goddesses for understanding the female figure of Wisdom nonetheless admit that Canaanite goddesses may have contributed to the emergence and development of the figure of Wisdom. See, e.g., C. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Bible and Literature Series 11; Sheffield: JSOT, 1985) 95, 103, 106, 115, 133, 187-90, 276, 283.

<sup>16</sup> G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1970) 167. See also Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine* 265-71.

<sup>17</sup> T. P. McCreech, "Wisdom As Wife: Proverbs 31:10-31," *Revue biblique* 92 (1985) 25-46; cf. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine* 90-96, 179-208.

have been modeled in part on a Canaanite goddess, since she is described in superhuman terms in Song of Songs 4:1-5 and 7:1-9.<sup>18</sup> In light of the evidence on the Israelite asherah, it appears that the heroine of the Song of Songs was based partially on a good Israelite prototype, Asherah. The Song of Songs may have been allegorical in the sense that the human audience participates in the story of two human lovers whose relationship mirrors and participates in the divine love. Originally, that love may have been between Yahweh and his consort Asherah. The language of divine love appears also in the prophetic tradition of Hosea and Jeremiah, in reference to Yahweh and Israel.<sup>19</sup> The divine female principle survives in later Judaism in the form of the Shekinah-Matronit, whose mating with God on the Sabbath corresponds to a human couple's fulfilment of the biblical commandment to be fruitful and multiply.<sup>20</sup> If Wisdom and the heroine of the Song of Songs are modeled even in part on the figure Asherah, then it is imperative to retain a sympathetic understanding of Asherah and her cult. Otherwise the language of Proverbs 1-9 and Song of Songs 4 and 7 cannot be fully appreciated.

The acceptability of Wisdom versus the condemnation of Asherah and her symbol in the Deuteronomistic History raises a critical question about monotheism in ancient Israel. Some biblical scholars believe that there was a fundamental difference between Yahwism and devotion to non-Israelite deities.<sup>21</sup> Other scholars minimize this difference.<sup>22</sup> In both cases the issue revolves around Yahweh and other deities. Thanks to the inscriptions from Kuntillat 'Ajrûd and Khirbet el-Qôm, it is possible to define a more complex spectrum of views as to what constituted Yahwism in ancient Israelite society. All Yahwists were presumably committed to the centrality of Yahweh. Beyond this essential feature, there was a diversity of views. Some Israelites believed that Yahwism was compatible with devotion to Baal. Other Yahwists held a more restricted view that Yahweh was the only god and Asherah was his consort. Finally, the Deuteronomistic Historian's view of matters was even more restricted, not allowing even for a devotion to Asherah or to her symbol, the asherah.

<sup>18</sup> See M. H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (AB 7C; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973) 465, 468; M. S. Smith, "Divine Form and Size in Ugaritic and Israelite Religion," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* (in press). For a comparison of the language of love in Proverbs 1-9 and the Song of Songs, see Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine* 99-103.

<sup>19</sup> Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine* 105-9, 277; A. Feuillet, " 'S'asseoir à l'ombre' de l'époux (Os., XIV, 8<sup>e</sup> et Cant., II, 3)," *Revue biblique* 78 (1971) 391-405.

<sup>20</sup> Pope, *Song of Songs* 153-79, esp. 175, 177.

<sup>21</sup> E.g., see Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile* (tr. and abridged by M. Greenberg; New York: Schocken, 1960) 7-148.

<sup>22</sup> See G. W. Ahlström, *Aspects of Syncretism in Israelite Religion* (Horae Soederblominae 5; Lund: Gleerup, 1963).

Yahwism existed in a complexity of forms, which is one way of remembering that God is God the mystery.<sup>23</sup> Whether in the form of asherah or Wisdom or the Jewish Shekinah-Matronit, femaleness has been fundamental to Yahwism.

The maleness and femaleness of the Divine may be implicit in the creation of the human person in Genesis 1:27:

So God created man in His own image,  
In the image of God He created him,  
Male and female He created them.

Commentators have long noted how each line of this tricolon modifies and helps to elucidate the others. The creation of the human person involves male and female. The author of this verse radically reinterpreted the prophetic visionary experience of the Divine. The prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel see God in human form and superhuman in size, enthroned in heaven.<sup>24</sup> Whereas Ezekiel's vision of the Divine was "like the appearance of a human being" in 1:26, the author of Genesis 1:27 turns this image around and sees the human in terms of the Divine. Rather than reducing God to human terms as in Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1, Genesis 1:27 magnifies the human person in divine terms. The imagery of the human in terms of the Divine in Genesis 1 seems to assume a divine couple, male and female, since the human person is created in the image of the Divine, partaking of both maleness and femaleness. The divine sexuality is muted and subtle; perhaps it was left to the imagination or was unintended. Yet the image of the Divine in Genesis 1 clearly lies in maleness and femaleness; the human sexuality and love mirrors divine love. To this degree both Genesis 1:27 and the Song of Songs describe two human lovers aspiring to be divine, a complex of associations perhaps presupposing an ancient Israelite tradition of two divine lovers, Yahweh

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God" 441-65.

<sup>24</sup> On Isaiah 6 see J. C. Greenfield, "Ba'al's Throne and Isa 6:1," in *Mélanges bibliques et orientaux en l'honneur de M. Mathias Delcor*, eds. A. Caquot, S. Légasse, and M. Tardieu (Alter Orient und Altes Testament 215; Kevalaer: Butzon und Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985) 193-98; F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ., 1973) 186-88; T. N. D. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies* (Coniectanea biblica, Old Testament Series 18; Lund: Gleerup, 1982) 19-37, and "YHWH SABAOTH—The Heavenly King on the Cherubim Throne," in *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon and Other Essays: Papers Read at the International Symposium for Biblical Studies, Tokyo, 5-7 December, 1979*, ed. T. Ishida (Tokyo: Yamakawa-Shuppansha, 1982) 109-38. On Ezekiel 1 see, in addition to the commentaries, M. Greenberg, "Ezekiel's Vision: Literary and Iconographic Aspects," in *History, Historiography and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literatures*, eds. H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1983) 159-68; and N. M. Waldman, "A Note on Ezekiel 1:18," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984) 614-18. See also Smith, "Divine Form and Size" (n. 18 above).

and Asherah.<sup>25</sup>

In conclusion, students of Scripture and theology might have a newly found appreciation for polytheism without embracing it. Before dismissing polytheism as beneath or unworthy of modern consideration, one may ask with more sympathy what the ancients saw in polytheism. Then it might be possible to know better what the ancient Israelites, and we as well, see in Yahweh.

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<sup>25</sup> The use of the first common pl. verb in Gen 1:26 ("Let us make") likely presupposes biblical scenes of the divine heavenly council as in Gen 3:22, Gen 11:7, and Isa 6:8; see Cross, *Cananite Myth* 187. Cf. B. Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977) 53-56; J. W. Miller, "Depatriarchalizing God in Biblical Interpretation: A Critique," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 48 (1986) 615. While drawing comparisons between Yahweh, on the one hand, and El and Baal, on the other, Miller omits any discussion of Asherah or the significance of the Hebrew inscriptions containing the form *'srth*. The female language for Yahweh might indicate that Asherah's characteristic as mother was an intrinsic feature of Yahweh for some sectors of Israel, at least as far back as the monarchy. E.g., Deuteronomy 32:18 refers to Yahweh as the God "who gave you birth." For further treatments of female imagery for the Deity, see M. Gruber, "The Motherhood of God in Second Isaiah," *Revue biblique* 90 (1983) 351-59; J. J. Schmitt, "The Motherhood of God and Zion as Mother," *Revue biblique* 92 (1985) 557-69.