

Who was Ashtoreth?

Ashtoreth was the name of a goddess of Phoenicia, referred to in Scripture as “the goddess of the Sidonians” (1 Kings 11:33) and is one of the false gods that drew King Solomon away from the truth (1 Kings 11:5). Ashtoreth was known in other cultures as Ishtar and Astarte (“Star”). Centuries later, the worship of Ashtoreth morphed into the worship of Aphrodite in some Greek provinces.

Ashtoreth is often mentioned with Baal, and the two were seen as consorts, each complementary to the other (see Judges 2:13; 3:7; 10:6; 1 Samuel 12:10). In fact, the phrase the Baals and the Ashtoreths may have been used as a generic term for all the pagan gods and goddesses in their various forms.

In Canaanite theology, Asherah and Ashtoreth are closely related, and their names share a common origin. According to the International Bible Encyclopedia, Asherah and Ashtoreth were one and the same goddess in Babylon, but “in the West . . . Asherah and Ashtoreth came to be distinguished from one another, Asherah being exclusively the goddess of fertility, whereas Ashtoreth passed into a moon-goddess.”

Some scholars distinguish Ashtoreth and Asherah, saying that Ashtoreth is the personal name of the goddess, while Asherah is the name of her image. In that case, we could understand that, when King Josiah cut down “the Asherim” (2 Kings 23:14, ESV), he was destroying the high places Solomon had made “for Ashtoreth the abomination of the Sidonians” (verse 13, ESV). If this is correct, then an Asherah is a carved pole or limbless trunk of a tree erected in honor of Ashtoreth.

The Lord God, through Moses, forbade the worship of Ashtoreth and all other false gods.

Despite God's clear instructions, Ashtoreth-worship was a perennial problem in Israel. The era of the judges was plagued with repeated outbreaks of Ashtoreth-worship. As Solomon slipped into idolatry, one of the pagan deities he brought into the kingdom was Ashtoreth (1 Kings 11:5), "so Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord, . . . [and] the Lord became angry with Solomon" (verses 6, 9).

Ashtoreth and the images people made in her honor are dead, false gods:

"Their idols are silver and gold,
made by human hands.

They have mouths, but cannot speak,
eyes, but cannot see.

They have ears, but cannot hear,
noses, but cannot smell.

They have hands, but cannot feel,
feet, but cannot walk,
nor can they utter a sound with their throats" (Psalm 115:4-7).

In contrast, "our God is in heaven; / he does whatever pleases him" (Psalm 115:3).