

Who was Asherah?

Asherah was the name of the chief female deity worshiped in ancient Syria, Phoenicia, and Canaan. The Phoenicians called her Astarte, the Assyrians worshiped her as Ishtar, and the Philistines had a temple of Asherah (1 Samuel 31:10). Because of Israel's incomplete conquest of the land of Canaan, Asherah-worship survived and plagued Israel, starting as soon as Joshua was dead (Judges 2:13).

Asherah was represented by a limbless tree trunk planted in the ground. The trunk was usually carved into a symbolic representation of the goddess. Because of the association with carved trees, the places of Asherah worship were commonly called "groves," and the Hebrew word asherah (plural, asherim) could refer either to the goddess or to a grove of trees. One of King Manasseh's evil deeds was that he "took the carved Asherah pole he had made and put it in the temple" (2 Kings 21:7). Another translation has "graven image of the grove" (KJV) instead of "carved Asherah pole."

Considered the moon-goddess and a goddess of fertility, Asherah was often presented as a consort of Baal, the sun-god (Judges 3:7; 6:28; 10:6; 1 Samuel 7:4; 12:10). Asherah was also worshiped as the goddess of love and war and was sometimes linked with Anath, another Canaanite goddess. In the theology of Canaan, Asherah was also closely related to Ashtoreth. The names have a common origin. In fact, according to the International Bible Encyclopedia, the name Asherah was "originally an epithet of Ishtar (Ashtoreth) of Nineveh. In the West, however, Asherah and Ashtoreth came to be distinguished from one another, Asherah being exclusively the goddess of fertility, whereas Ashtoreth passed into a moon-goddess." Both Asherah and Ashtoreth seem to have been consorts of Baal.

Some scholars distinguish the biblical references by saying that Ashtoreth is the proper

name for the goddess, while Asherah is the name of her image, that is, the tree trunk or pole. So, when King Josiah cuts down “the Asherim” (2 Kings 23:14, ESV), he is destroying the groves Solomon had “built for Ashtoreth the abomination of the Sidonians” (verse 13, ESV). If this theory is correct, then an Asherah is a limbless tree trunk planted in honor of the goddess Ashtoreth.

Worship of Asherah was noted for its sensuality and involved ritual prostitution. The priests and priestesses of Asherah also practiced divination and fortune-telling.

The Lord God, through Moses, forbade the worship of Asherah. The law specified that a grove of trees was not to be near the altar of the Lord (Deuteronomy 16:21). Despite God’s clear instructions, Asherah-worship was a perennial problem in Israel. The wicked Queen Jezebel, a Phoenician, strongly promoted Asherah-worship, with 400 prophets of Asherah on the royal payroll in Israel (1 Kings 18:19). At times, Israel experienced revival, and notable crusades against Asherah-worship were led by Gideon (Judges 6:25 -30), King Asa (1 Kings 15:13), and King Josiah (2 Kings 23:1 -7).