

What is an Asherah pole?

An Asherah pole was a sacred tree or pole that stood near Canaanite religious locations to honor the pagan goddess Asherah, also known as Astarte. While the exact appearance of an Asherah pole is somewhat obscure, it is clear that the ancient Israelites, after entering the land of Canaan, were influenced by the pagan religion it represented.

In the Bible, Asherah poles were first mentioned in Exodus 34:13. God had just remade the Ten Commandment tablets, and Moses had requested God graciously forgive the Israelites for worshiping the golden calf. Verse 10 begins the covenant God made: if the Israelites obey Him, He will drive out the tribes living in Canaan. But they must cut down the Asherah poles. Deuteronomy 7:5 and 12:3 repeat the command nearly verbatim, while Deuteronomy 16:21 commands the Israelites not set up any wooden Asherah poles of their own. Two books later, In Judges 3:7, “The sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth.”

Gideon became the first to fight against the infestation of Asherah poles, although, in his fear, he chopped his father’s Asherah pole down at night (Judges 6:25-27). The books of 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles tell a long story of one king chopping down Asherah poles and another building them back up. King Manasseh of Judah went so far as to install a pole in the temple of the Lord (2 Kings 21:3, 7). In the midst of a great cleansing, King Josiah took out the Asherah pole and ground it to powder, further defiling it by spreading the dust over graves (2 Kings 23:6).

Most areas in that time and place had a god and goddess designated as responsible for the well-being of crops and livestock. Likely, in the constant evolution of pagan gods and goddesses, Asherah was one of the names given for a fertility goddess in the region.

Asherah's consorts varied, depending on the cultic beliefs of the people—sometimes Asherah was said to consort with the Canaanite creator-god, El; or with the god of fertility, Ba'al; or, horrifically, with the Lord God Himself. Asherah poles were wood poles (sometimes carved, sometimes not) or trees planted by the “high places” where pagan worshipers sacrificed, although the specific purpose of the poles is not clear. It's interesting to note that, while the once-essential “Asherah” has morphed from goddess to wooden pole to obscurity, Father God, Creator of the universe, has never changed.