

The Hebrew Goddess Asherah in the Greek Septuagint

1. Abstract

When reading the Hebrew Bible, it is clear that the goddess Asherah is given a very negative image. There are some fascinating probable misreadings, including one showing that she once might have had a more exalted role: in Deuteronomy 33:2 at the Lord’s right hand there was a ‘fiery law’, or was it ‘Asherah’? However, it appears that the Greek Septuagint preserves some additional references to Asherah which are surprisingly positive. In all but one of the places examined Asherah can confidently be assumed to be underneath the Greek word for ‘grove’ (the traditional rendering of ‘Asherah’). Additionally, there are places where Asherah does not occur but the Greek translation gives us evidence that the word Asherah was there originally. Finally, two ‘goddess passages’ (Ezekiel 8 and Jeremiah 44) are shown to have significantly different emphases regarding Asherah when read in the Greek or other ancient translations.

Keywords: Asherah, grove, Septuagint, ‘Image of Jealousy’, ‘Queen of Heaven’, Pisgah

2. Introduction

In 2011 there was a TV series called the ‘Bible’s Buried Secrets’ broadcast by the BBC in the UK featuring an episode titled ‘Did God Have a Wife?’. This episode centred on the goddess Asherah who is mentioned – and denounced – 40 times in the Hebrew Bible. In this programme it was mentioned that Deuteronomy 33.2, which currently reads ‘from his right hand went a fiery law for them’ (KJV), originally had ‘Asherah’ in place of ‘fiery law’. In Hebrew these words appear very similar (as can be seen in Table 1) – so perhaps someone ‘corrected’ the text to remove this positive reference to the goddess?

However, what is called the ‘Hebrew Bible’ of today is not necessarily the Hebrew Bible of yesterdays past. Ezra (4/5th century BCE) was responsible for the ‘restorations of the scribes’: ‘The changes were a deliberate departure from the earlier text to avoid what was later perceived as blasphemy and they were made according to strict rules: certain letters could be exchanged or repositioned, or similar-sounding letters could be substituted so that the word was changed. Every effort was made to ensure that the resulting text had the same number of letters as the original’ (Barker, King of the Jews, 2014, p. 51).

It is interesting to note that the New International Version – to choose only one modern translation from among many – has the phrase ‘from his mountain slopes’ in place of ‘fiery law’, with the footnote, ‘The meaning of the Hebrew for this phrase is uncertain’. Yet why should it be uncertain when the Hebrew word used, *dath*, means ‘law’? Yet apart from this very ancient Hebrew passage, this word only occurs in the books of Ezra and Esther, both written about 4/5th century BCE. The word *dath* is a loan word of Persian origin and so could not have appeared in this part of the ancient poem: the Jews were exiled to Persia in the early 6th century BCE. I had this explained to me as follows: the word ‘pizza’ is indeed an English word – we all know its meaning. However, it is actually a loan word of Italian origin. Therefore, for example, we would not expect to find it in the works of Shakespeare!

So, in effect, we have a very awkward phrase which should not have been available in the Hebrew language of its time and looking very similar to ‘Asherah’. Suspicions are aroused. However, there have been other attempts to re-interpret this. It could be possible that the word for law *dath* could be an ‘irregular spelling’ for the verb ‘to fly’ *da’ah* (see, for

example, Deut. 28.49) making the latter part of this verse read, ‘from his right, fire flew to them’ (Steiner, 1996, p. 695).

Yet it is here that the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, called Septuagint or LXX¹, comes into its own, for it reads, ‘at his right hand were his angels with him’. In place of ‘fiery law’ it reads ‘angels’. Regarding this reading it has been commented:

It is also possible that the LXX read *r* instead of *d* in the word which they had before them, and that they arrived at the meaning “angels” through the Hebrew word *shârath*, “to minister.” [compare Ps. 104.4 linking angels and ministers] The confusion between *r* and *d*, which are extremely alike in Hebrew, is very common. (Ellicott, on Deut. 33.2)

If *shârath* did appear then we are one letter closer to Asherah. It should also be noted that the Psalms do talk of a divine female figure at the right hand of the Lord, ‘at your right hand stands the queen’ (Ps. 45.9)².

The probable reference in Deut. 33.2, while being enlightened by the Greek, is nevertheless still technically hypothetical. Yet given the possible differences between the Hebrew Bible and the Greek, a thought occurred to me: the word Asherah appears – negatively – 40 times in the Hebrew Bible, but could it appear elsewhere in the Greek? In order to look for Asherah in the Greek Bible we need to look for its translation, because the Hebrew word for ‘Asherah’ is translated into Greek with the word meaning ‘grove’, *alsos*. It appears in place of Asherah in all but four occurrences³. However, the Greek word for ‘grove’ or ‘grove-like’ occurs in other places in the Greek where there is no word for Asherah in the Hebrew. Examining these three new places reveals that Asherah was honoured in the original Hebrew Bible.

3. The enclosure of the Asherah

One new reference to Asherah is the following, with the current ‘non-Asherah’ part highlighted in bold:

And the Philistines came up yet again, and spread out in the valley of Rephaim. And when David inquired of the LORD, he said, ‘You shall not go up; go around to their rear, and come upon them opposite the balsam trees. And when you hear the sound of **marching in the tops of the balsam trees**, then bestir yourself; for then the LORD has gone out before you to smite the army of the Philistines.’ (2 Sam.⁴ 5.22-24)

¹ The Pentateuch (five books of Moses) were translated into Greek in the 3rd century BCE. Legend has it that they were translated by 70 separate people all producing identical translations as a proof of divine inspiration. Hence it is referred to by the term ‘Septuagint’ being Latin for ‘seventy’ (also LXX). The other books of the Old Testament were translated over the next two hundred years or so. Commonly, the term ‘Septuagint’ is applied to the whole Greek Old Testament.

² Because angels are mentioned in place of Asherah perhaps similar references to angels coming with the Lord should be interpreted in this light: Jesus said that ‘the Son of man is to come *with his angels* in the glory of his Father’ (Mt. 16.27) – ‘with his angels’ being a euphemism for ‘with his Asherah’?

³ The four places where the word Asherah is translated differently into Greek are 2 Chr. 15.16; 24.18 (by the name of the goddess Astarte/Ashtaroth, the two names being similar) and Isa. 17.8; 27.9 (by the word for ‘trees’; this removes all negative references to Asherah from the current book of Isaiah). The verses 1 Kgs. 14.15 and Jer. 17.2 are omitted in the ancient Greek Bible.

⁴ The books of 1/2 Samuel are called 1/2 Reigns in the Greek Bible, with 1/2 Kings being 3/4 Reigns.

The words in bold appear in the Greek as follows, ‘**the confinement of the grove of the Wailing**’. Now the word ‘confinement’ is more understandably (rather than literally) translated from the Greek as ‘enclosure’. However, far more significantly, instead of ‘tops’ we have the Greek word for ‘grove’. Yet can we be sure that the word ‘Asherah’ did appear in the Hebrew text in front of the Greek translator? Comparing the two words in Hebrew reveals a clear similarity between them as can be seen in Table 2. The first three letters are merely rearranged, with the final ending misread. So where in our Hebrew Bibles we read ‘tops’ it is clear that the ancient Greek translator read ‘Asherah’, making the above phrase read, ‘when you hear the sound of **the enclosure of the “Weeping” Asherah**’.

So it now needs to be determined if this is a *positive* reference to Asherah. This can be ascertained by considering why either ‘balsam trees’ (above) or ‘wailing’ (Greek) are mentioned. The word so translated is the word *baka* which only occurs elsewhere in the parallel passage 1 Chr. 14.14-15 and in Ps. 84.6. Ps. 84.6-7 talks of passing through the ‘valley of Baka’ to appear ‘before God in Zion’. This is getting promising. The true meaning of ‘Baka’ can be determined by considering another reference:

When the angel of the LORD spoke these words to all the people of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept. And they called the name of that place Bochim; and they sacrificed there to the LORD. (Judg. 2.4-5)

Here the place is referred to as ‘Bochim’ which is the same as the plural ‘bakim’ of ‘Baka’ but with the ‘glottal stop’ letter aleph removed. The Greek uses the word ‘wailing’ for both of these words. The place is called ‘weeping’/‘wailing’ because the Lord rebuked the people there, and they wept⁵. Significantly, it is where the Angel of the Lord appeared and where the people sacrificed to the Lord. And yet this is where the Asherah was.

Additionally, Jewish tradition tells us what ‘the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees’ was, for a commentary on this verse states, ‘the sounds of angels treading in the treetops whom I have lent to your aid’ (Rashi, on 2 Sam. 5.24). Given that the original was about Asherah, the mention of angels should remind us of the above link in Deut. 33.2 between Asherah and angels.

4. Two Asherahs?

Another place where Asherah appears in the Greek but not in the Hebrew does not seem significant, but a little extra thought shows how dramatic it might be. Again, the current ‘non-Asherah’ parts are highlighted in bold (Ashtaroth is the Hebrew form of the goddess Astarte):

Then Samuel said to all the house of Israel, ‘If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the **Ashtaroth** from among you, and direct your heart to the LORD, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.’ So Israel put away the Baals and the **Ashtaroth**, and they served the LORD only. (1 Sam. 7.3-4)

⁵ That the word in 2 Sam. 5.23-24 refers to the place of ‘weeping’ and not to trees is strengthened by the acknowledgement that ‘the exact identification of this tree is uncertain’ in the New Living Translation.

The first occurrence of ‘Ashtaroths’ is replaced by the word for ‘groves’, implying that the Greek translator must have read the similar word ‘Asherah’ there⁶. However, in the second occurrence the Greek reads, ‘**the groves of Ashtaroth**’, in other words, ‘the Asherahs of Astarte’. Yet given that archaeological inscriptions refer to ‘Yahweh and his Asherah’ (Muntean, 1998, pp. 36, 43), the phrase ‘Asherah of Astarte’ can plausibly only imply one thing: *there were two types of Asherah*. The ‘evil’ Asherah mentioned here is probably referring to the *sister* of Astarte (Botterweck & Ringgren, 1977, p. 253) rather than to *partner* of Yahweh.

What might have been the difference between the cult of ‘Asherah of Astarte’ and ‘Asherah of Yahweh’? Child sacrifice could be one option: in 2 Kgs. 21.3-6 we read that king Manasseh restored many forms of ‘forbidden’ worship including that of Asherah. He also ‘burned his son as an offering’ (2 Chr. 33.6 mentions ‘sons’ in the plural). Yet was this a polemical confusion of different rites and rituals? Was Asherah herself associated with child sacrifice?

Hos. 9.13 reads, ‘Just as I saw Ephraim like Tyre, planted in a pleasant place, so Ephraim will bring out his children to the murderer’ (NKJV). However, the word ‘as’ is consonantly identical to the word ‘Asherah’ but missing the final ‘h’, so this passage has been seen as a reference to child sacrifice related to Asherah. It has been paraphrased as follows, ‘As when children were brought to the Asherah of Tyre, which was as planted in a meadow, thus is Ephraim in the process of bringing his children (in order) to be slaughtered before the Asherah’ (Wacker, 2004, p. 224)⁷. It is interesting that the city Tyre should be mentioned because it was Phoenician, and the Phoenicians certainly did sacrifice their children to gods (Muntean, 1998, p. 45).

Another difference between the two Asherahs could have been the striking differences between their images. The Judean Pillar Figurines [JPFs] have been associated with Asherah and show ‘a female figure from the waist up with a cylindrical base below ... usually with the hands to the breasts’ (Muntean, 1998, p. 42). However,

The JPFs are distinctive, and a map of their distribution shows that the greatest numbers have been found in Jerusalem itself and in the area round it. Further, he [Kletter] noted, the JPFs were mostly from the eighth-seventh centuries BCE and found in almost every site in Judah. Within the heartland of Judah, 822 JPFs were discovered, about 96 per cent of the total number found, and 47.5 per cent of all JPFs were found in Jerusalem. (Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, 2012, p. 119)

It is also assumed that ‘the figurines represent a goddess unique to Jerusalem and Judah’ (Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, 2012, p. 120). Therefore perhaps when Asherah is mentioned negatively in the Bible we were originally meant to suppose that it was Astarte’s Asherah, not Yahweh’s? Perhaps this is why we read of the righteous kings Asa through to Jotham (913BCE – 735BCE) that their hearts were ‘perfect with the Lord’ all their days and

⁶ Compare with 2 Chr. 15.16; 24.18 (see note 3) where the Hebrew has ‘Asherah’ yet the Greek has ‘Astarte’.

⁷ Just after this we read that Hos. 14.8 should be emended to the Lord saying ‘I am his [Ephraim’s] Anath and his Asherah’ in place of ‘It is I who answer and look after you’ (Wacker, 2004, pp. 224-225); Anath was a Canaanite goddess. The objection that Hosea could never have actually said this would be countered if there were two Asherahs, one ‘good’ and the other ‘bad’, and similarly for Anath. It is interesting to note that Anath was worshipped alongside Yahweh by Jewish exiles in Egypt in the 5th century BCE, being known as Anat-Yahu (Barker, *Revelation*, 2000, p. 206).

that they did ‘right in the sight of the Lord’ even though the ‘high places’ with their Asherahs were not destroyed (e.g. 1 Kgs. 15.14; 22.43, 2 Kgs. 12.3)? The ancient kings rightly removed the false worship (in their view) of Astarte’s Asherah but kept the worship of Yahweh’s Asherah. The later reformers then did not distinguish between the two and removed all the symbols of Asherah.

5. The Book of Ezekiel

Both the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah prophesied during the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586BCE. Both also specifically mentioned certain ‘false’ goddesses in their writings, yet on closer inspection things are not as we have been led to believe. We shall talk about Jeremiah later, but concerning Ezekiel, he was taken in a vision to the temple court,

to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north, where was the seat of **the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy**. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the vision that I saw in the plain. Then he said to me, ‘Son of man, lift up your eyes now in the direction of the north.’ So I lifted up my eyes toward the north, and behold, **north of the altar gate, in the entrance, was this image of jealousy**. And he said to me, ‘Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel are committing here, to drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see still greater abominations.’ ... Then he brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the house of the LORD; and behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz. Then he said to me, ‘Have you seen this, O son of man? You will see still greater abominations than these.’ (Ezek. 8.3-6; 14-15; the bold parts indicate significant differences in the Greek)

So at the north gate there was an ‘image of jealousy’ before which were women weeping for the god Tammuz (assuming the same location). Tammuz is described as follows: ‘In the Mesopotamian version of the common ancient Near Eastern myth of the dying and rising god, Tammuz was a god whose courtship and marriage to the goddess Ishtar was associated with fertility and the fruitfulness of the land. When Tammuz dies in the myth, the bounty that the land has produced also comes to an abrupt end. The myth is tied to the seasonal crop cycles in the ancient Near East, with the dry season (summer) coinciding with the ‘death’ of Tammuz, an event mourned by women in cultic rituals’ (Newsom, Ringe, & Lapsley, 2012, p. 286).

Yet the ‘the glory of the God of Israel was there’. Why should the glory of God be where a false god was? The answer is that the first bold part highlighted above was read differently by the ancient Greek translators:

Ezekiel did not at this point describe the glory, but the text suggests that the glory was with ‘the seat (or site) of the image of jealousy that provokes to jealousy’ (Ezek.8.3-4). Here there is an obvious corruption of the text: *sml hqn’h*, ‘the image of jealousy’ was originally *sml hqnh*, the image of the woman who creates, which in Ugarit had been a title for Athirat [i.e. Asherah]. The correcting scribes have inserted one (silent) letter, an *aleph*, and thus changed the meaning, whereas Ezekiel was using the Hebrew equivalent of the title known at Ugarit. The LXX describes it as ‘the monument of the one who acquires’, ... , ‘acquire’ being the other possible meaning of the Hebrew *qnh*,

beget, the word in the Lady's title. This shows that the Hebrew underlying the LXX did not have 'the image of jealousy' but **'the image of the woman who creates'**. In other words, Ezekiel originally described the Lady in the temple together with the glory of the God of Israel. (Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, 2012, p. 240; bold added)

As for the second bold part, 'north of the altar gate, in the entrance, was this image of jealousy', the Greek reads the much shorter **'from the north to the gate to the east'**. So the 'great abominations' Ezekiel saw do not refer to 'the image of the woman who creates'. Yet it was here that the women were weeping for the foreign god Tammuz. It is easier to understand the adoption of foreign gods if the ancient Israelite religion was outwardly similar to the other religions in both terminology and appearance. We know that, despite the 'Ten Commandments', both the Tabernacle and Temple had engraved images of animals/cherubim (Exod. 26.31; 1 Kgs. 6.29, 7.29). The Ark of the Covenant had cherubim on it yet Joshua prostrated before it (Exod. 25.22; Josh. 7.6). Additionally, the angels could be called 'gods' (Ps. 82.1)⁸.

However, before leaving this passage of Ezekiel, there is one more thing to discuss. The Hebrew word here for 'image' *cemel* is used only five times in the Hebrew Bible: twice in this passage, Deut. 4.16, and 2 Chr. 33.7, 15. As the Hebrew Bible stands this word is only used for idolatrous purposes. Deut. 4.16 reads as follows, 'beware lest you act corruptly by making a graven image for yourselves, in the form of any figure (*cemel*), the likeness of male or female', but its Latin Vulgate form is shorter, 'Lest perhaps being deceived you might make you a graven similitude, or image of male or female'. In other words, the word is omitted here in the Latin Vulgate.

This then leaves the passages in 2 Chr. 33. In verse 7 we read of Manasseh, 'the image of the idol (*cemel*) which he had made he set in the house of God, of which God said to David and to Solomon', and in verse 15 'he took away the foreign gods and the idol (*cemel*) from the house of the LORD'. Yet verse 7 has a parallel in 2 Kgs. 21.7, where we read of him, 'the graven image of Asherah that he had made he set in the house of which the LORD said to David and to Solomon'. Here the word *cemel* (translated as 'idol') has been replaced by the word for Asherah, which we may assume was a 'bad' Asherah. All this then could imply that the word for 'image' used by Ezekiel could have been a unique word for something related to Asherah and not necessarily associated with idolatry in any Bible passage.

Nevertheless, despite the word for 'image' being associated with Asherah, it is important to note that, consonantly, the word Asherah does appear in the book of Ezekiel. Ezek. 27.6 reads, 'Of oaks from Bashan they made your oars; the company of Ashurites have inlaid your planks with ivory from the coasts of Cyprus' (NKJV). The plural word in the text for 'Ashurites' is consonantly identical with the masculine plural form of Asherah ('Asherim'). Due to the strange reference to Ashurites, other translations have 'with pines' or 'with cypress wood' (RSV/NIV), assuming the initial letter has been missed out of the word *tē'ashshuwr*. Yet here the Greek comes into its own, for it keeps the reference to groves/Asherah: 'They made your oars from Basanitis; they made your holy things from ivory, woodland ['grove-like'] houses from the islands of the Chettiin [i.e. Cyprus]'.

The key to the difference in understanding is that the word for 'planks' *qeresh* has been read as the similar word for 'holy things' *qodesh*; as before, the 'r' and 'd' look very

⁸ Regarding the ancient Israelite having 'gods', it should be pointed out that in the Hebrew Bible Ruth is told that her sister-in-law 'has gone back to her people and to her gods' (Ruth 1.15). This is surely a testimony of monotheism versus polytheism? However, the Syriac Peshitta renders this 'has gone back to her people and to her kinsmen' thereby removing such a reference.

similar in Hebrew. With the word ‘planks’, the rest of the verse is interpreted as the adornment of a boat due to the reference to ‘oars’. However, with the words ‘holy things’, the rest of the verse is now about God and temples; the footnote in the NETS translation says ‘holy things’ could be temples. So where in the Greek is Asherah? The actual word used is not the Greek *alsos* (‘grove’) but its adjectival form *alswdous*, hence ‘woodland’ for ‘grove-like’ for ‘Asherah-like’. So the original Hebrew must have read, ‘Asherah-houses (from wood) from the islands of Cyprus’. This passage is addressed to the people of Tyre, but Tyre is a symbol for Zion as the two words look similar (Barker, Revelation, 2000, p. 104); it should be remembered that it is Jerusalem/Zion which is about to fall to the Babylonians and so it is to them that such passages are addressed. As such, this is probably another positive reference to the goddess Asherah.

6. The Book of Jeremiah

Arguably, the most significant goddess passage in the whole Bible is Jeremiah 44. The context is that Jeremiah spoke to the Jewish exiles in Egypt after the destruction of Jerusalem to stop idolatry, but the people rejected his words, saying:

[The men said] ‘But since we left off burning incense to **the queen of heaven** and pouring out libations to her, we have lacked everything and have been consumed by the sword and by famine.’ And the women said, ‘When we burned incense to the queen of heaven and poured out libations to her, was it without our husbands’ approval that we made cakes for her bearing her image and poured out libations to her?’ (Jer. 44.18-19)

It is the clear description of what the women were doing that makes this passage so fascinating – and also so damning as Jeremiah insisted. Goddess worship is most clearly condemned in the surrounding passage, and it can be major stumbling block for ‘Bible believers’ to accept the modern position that ancient Israel had a goddess figure. Having one ‘good’ goddess and one ‘bad’ goddess could help, but the detail provided here makes the acceptance of this passage awkward for those of us who accept Asherah. Yet the Greek translation comes to our help again, for the bold term above ‘the queen of heaven’ also occurs in Jer. 7.18 in the Hebrew but not in the Greek:

The Queen of Heaven and the host of heaven were sometimes confused: the [vowel] pointing of the Hebrew of Jeremiah 7.18 suggests that (offerings for) ‘the host of heaven’ was to be read there, rather than (offerings for) ‘the queen of heaven’. This is how the LXX read the Hebrew, and several Hebrew texts do have the longer form here, *ml’kt* ‘the work of’ (as in Gen.2.2) instead of *mlkt*, ‘the queen of’. (Barker, The Mother of the Lord, 2012, p. 41)

So this begs the question, could Jer. 44 be talking about the ‘**host/works of heaven**’ instead of the ‘queen of heaven’? Looking in the Greek Septuagint and Latin Vulgate, we find the word ‘queen’ used in all of the four times it appears in Jer. 44:17, 18, 19, 25. The word used for queen in these verses of Jeremiah is *mēleketh* (*mlkt*). The fact that this word only appears in these verses could cause some suspicion, after all why not use the usual Hebrew word for queen which covers the vast majority of cases? Yet Gesenius’ Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon has a startling comment regarding the Hebrew manuscripts, that ‘not a few

copies write fully' *ml'kt* (i.e. 'works') and that the Syriac follows suit. Also the Aramaic Targum has 'stars' in place of 'queen', both in Jer. 7 and 44⁹.

However, what is still significant is the prominent role the women play in this worship, so perhaps that would imply a female goddess? Yet the Hebrew word for 'angel' is *mal'ak*, which is consonantly the same as *ml'kt* but without the final letter *tau*. While the plural of angels has the masculine 'im' ending, having the *tau* at the end would make it an artificial feminine plural (the word Asherah has both masculine and feminine plural forms in the Bible). As such perhaps it is female angels which were being worshipped?

Those who know the history of Islam will know that pre-Islamic Arabians did worship female angels and also practised female infanticide.

And they assign daughters for Allah! - Glory be to Him! - and for themselves sons the issue they desire! When news is brought to one of them of the birth of a female child, his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people, because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain it on sufferance and contempt, or bury it in the dust? Ah! what an evil choice they decide on?

...

Now ask them their opinion: Is it that thy Lord has only daughters, and they have sons? Or that We created the angels female, and they are witnesses thereto? (Quran 16.57-59; 37.149-150; brackets removed)

Yet there is good evidence that female infanticide could also be female child sacrifice:

In Arabia, as among other barbarous peoples, child-murder was carried out in such a way that no blood was shed: the infant was buried alive, and often, if we may believe Zamakhshari on Sur. lxxxi. 8, the grave was ready by the side of the bed on which the daughter was born. The same authority says that girls were sometimes spared till the age of six, and then adorned and led forth by their father and cast into a pit in the wilderness. This, however, seems to be rather a kind of human sacrifice, such as we know the Arabs to have practised, for the father said to the mother, 'Dress her up that I may bring her to her mothers' i.e. to the goddesses or *Banat allah* [Daughters of Allah] (Smith, 2014, p. 281; written originally in 1885)

However, surely after the purges of Josiah against all forms of 'idolatry', child sacrifice would not have been possible, and Jeremiah surely would have mentioned it. So it could be that the women making cakes for worship were continuing part of the custom associated with the sacrifice of children without actually sacrificing them. So to summarise, this passage in Jeremiah is not against the worship of Asherah in any form.

Yet the worship of Asherah is opposed elsewhere in the book of Jeremiah, 'while their children remember their altars and their Asherim, beside every green tree, and on the

⁹ Based on the Latin translation which uses the word 'syderi'/'stars': for Jer. 44 (Walton, p. 8-9 in the web site's pdf for 'Walton's Polyglot, Part 7 JeremiahB – EcclesiasticusA'; the Arabic can be found on p. 20 where *regina/queen* is used), for Jer. 7 (Walton, p. 238 in the web site's pdf for 'Walton's Polyglot, Part 6 PsalmsB – JeremiahA'). Contrary to the claim of Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon, the Syriac here does have 'queen' but only in 44.19, and that Lamsa's translation of the Peshitta has 'queen' in all places, although it appears he modified the KJV Bible where significant and might have overlooked the significance of this passage.

high hills, ... the price of your sin' (Jer. 17.2-3). The curious part is that Jer. 17.1-4 is omitted from the ancient Greek, technically making it possible that no part of the book of Jeremiah was against Asherah. Nevertheless, the Greek gives us more, for there is a positive reference to Asherah only a few verses later. The Hebrew reads that the one who trusts in the Lord 'is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain **green**, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit' (Jer. 17.8).

The Greek replaces 'its leaves remain green' by 'the trunks on it will be **grove-like**' [i.e. 'Asherah-like'], and here the translators of the Greek into English have kept the traditional word 'grove', the Greek word being the adjective *alwdous* as clearly used for Asherah in Ezek. 27.6. The source Hebrew for the Greek must have read 'its branch(es) will be like Asherah', i.e. like an Asherah pole.

Additionally, the word translated as 'leaf' or 'trunks/branches' is the word *'aleh* which means something growing, hence leaf, trunk, or branch. The puzzling part about this is that I am convinced that this is a deliberate word play in the source Hebrew text. For the word for 'branch' is similar to the word for an oak *'elah*, the only difference being the initial letter is an *ayin* instead of an *aleph* which can be similar in Hebrew (Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, 2012, p. 10, note 18). Yet it is not a play on the word for an 'oak' which was meant, but the word for 'goddess' which is consonantly identical to 'oak' in Hebrew (Barker, *Revelation*, 2000, p. 206)¹⁰.

The current Hebrew word for 'green' which is in place of Asherah is *ra`anan* which means green of foliage, and so also metaphorically flourishing. This does not appear to show any particular similarity to Asherah. However, the Greek word for 'grove-like' does additionally appear (negatively) in the following verses: 2 Kgs. 16.4; 17.10; 2 Chr. 28.4; Jer. 3.6, 13. Checking these verses, along with the remaining verses where *ra`anan* occurs, I again could not find anything particularly significant. Please note that these negative instances of Asherah not appearing in the current Hebrew text (see also the opposite in note 3) could imply that the originals read 'green tree' and were changed to refer to Asherah in some manuscripts. Whether Asherah or 'green' is read would then depend on the manuscripts used.

7. Abraham and Asherah

In these last two sections the name Asherah does not occur in any Hebrew manuscript or translation. However, suspicions are aroused as to what the original text was. The first of these is the only place in the KJV where the word 'grove' is used not referring to Asherah: if it had not been there I might not have examined it further. The Hebrew word is *'eshel* and appears only in three verses, which in the KJV run as follows (the RSV and NKJV use 'tamarisk tree' in all three occurrences):

Gen. 21.33. And [Abraham] planted a **grove** in Beersheba, and called there on the name of the LORD, the everlasting God.

1 Sam. 22.6. When Saul heard that David was discovered, and the men that were with him, (now Saul abode in Gibeah under a **tree** in Ramah, having his spear in his hand, and all his servants were standing about him;)

1 Sam. 31.13. And they took their bones, and buried them under a **tree** at Jabesh, and fasted seven days.

¹⁰ As a similar word for 'oak' appears in Ezek. 27.6, could this whole verse be about the goddess?

However, the Greek in these three places, and only in these three places, has the word ‘*aroura*’ meaning ‘tilled or arable land’ (see Liddell & Scott). Yet the related Greek words are ‘to plough’ *arotriaō* and ‘a plough’ *arotron*. Searching the Greek text for where these words occur shows that in 9 out of 16 occurrences the underlying Hebrew word was *charash* (e.g. Deut. 22.10) or related words; the other occurrences were a mixture of the Hebrew words for ‘goad’, ‘hoe’, or ‘ploughshares’.

Furthermore, in the parallel passage for 1 Sam. 31.13 we read that ‘And they buried their bones under the **oak** in Jabesh, and fasted seven days’ (1 Chr. 10.12). Please observe the use of the word ‘oak’ *'elah*, which is explained above as being consonantly identical to the word for ‘goddess’.

The Hebrew words *'eshel*, *charash*, and *'elah* are compared with ‘Asherah’ in Table 3. When we consider that the Hebrew letters *lamed* (L) and *resh* (R) can be confused (Scott, 1927, p. 28), then surely it cannot be a coincidence that such varied words could all be derived from the one word Asherah?¹¹ The name Asherah must have been originally present in the Hebrew text in these places. As such, the veneration of Asherah was part of the religion of Abraham.

8. Rock Image of Asherah?

Another possible group of references to Asherah in the Septuagint, albeit again where the word for Asherah/‘grove’ does not occur, is the following:

Num. 23.14: And he took him to the field of Zophim, to **the top of Pisgah**, and built seven altars, and offered a bull and a ram on each altar

Deut. 4.49: on the east side of the Jordan as far as the Sea of the Arabah, under **the slopes of Pisgah**.

Josh. 13.20: Beth-peor, and **the slopes of Pisgah**, and Beth-jeshimoth

In the Greek, the word/name Pisgah for Num. 23.14 is rendered as ‘Hewn’ with the footnote in NETS translation saying, ‘possibly a rock formation of a hewn appearance’. For Deut. 4.49 the phrase ‘the slopes of Pisgah’ is rendered into Greek as ‘Asedoth quarried from rock’ (the occurrence in Josh. 13.20 is left transliterated as ‘Asedoth Phasga’). Can I therefore suggest that the word Pisgah is intended to suggest an actual rock formation?¹²

If so, then Asherah is only a few slips of the scribe’s pen away: the word for ‘top’ in Num. 23.14 is similar to ‘Asherah’ as per Table 2. For Deut. 4.49 and Josh. 13.20, the word used for ‘slopes/Asedoth’ is very similar to Asherah as can be seen in Table 4¹³. (We should recall that in the introduction we mentioned that where Asherah probably occurred in Deut. 33.2 it had also been translated as ‘slopes’). Therefore can it be that what was referred to is in reality a rock formation or sculpture/statue of Asherah herself? It should be pointed out that

¹¹ Additionally, a title for Asherah was the ‘Holy One’ (Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, 2012, p. 113), and the word ‘holy’ is *qodesh*. Yet the Syriac in 1 Sam. 22.6;31.13 has the word for ‘almond’ (based on the Latin ‘amygdalum’; Walton, p. 97 in the web site’s pdf for ‘Walton’s Polyglot, Part 4, JudgesB – IV KingsA’). Yet the word for ‘almond’ in Hebrew is *shaqed*, which is consonantly the same word as ‘holy’ but with the letters re-arranged.

¹² Pisgah is additionally translated as ‘hewn’ in Num. 21.20 and Deut. 3.27. In all other places it is transliterated as ‘Phasga’, Deut. 3.17; 34.1; Josh. 12.3; 13.20. ‘Asedoth’ appears on its own in Josh. 10.40; 12.8, and with ‘Phasga’ in Deut. 3.17 and Josh. 12.3.

¹³ In Josh. 13.20 the word ‘the slopes’ in the Syriac Peshitta is rendered ‘Ashtaroth’ (Astarte), which following note 3 can be misread for Asherah.

Moses saw the Promised Land before he died at ‘the top of Pisgah’ (Deut. 34.1) – i.e. by the Asherah rock statue – thereby validating its existence.

9. Conclusion

A quick web search shows that the ‘Bible’s Buried Secrets’ programme did produce a lot of adverse reaction, especially the episode ‘Did God Have a Wife?’. Yet it can be seen that, for Greek speaking Jews and Christians, the word Asherah in its ‘grove’ form would have been known in a positive sense. This implies that Asherah would have appeared openly in these positive passages in the original Hebrew, probably into the start of the ‘common era’. Her name might have no longer have been in use, undoubtedly replaced by ‘Wisdom’¹⁴, but she had not been totally buried.

10. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Maximus Lavriotes and Dr Margaret Barker for their help and support.

11. Tables

Table 1 for the section ‘Introduction’

Deuteronomy 33.2		
English Translation	Hebrew (read from right to left)	Transliteration
Fiery law	אש דת	<i>'esh dath</i>
Asherah	אשרה	<i>'asherah</i>
Asherahs (fem. plural form)	אשרות	<i>'asheroth</i>

One may wonder if perhaps an irregular plural אשרת without the *waw* might have been used, as per ‘slopes’ in Table 4?

¹⁴ The word ‘happy’ in ‘Happy is the man who finds wisdom’ (Prov. 3.13) has been taken to be a word play on the name Asherah/Ashratah; ‘Ashratah’ could have been the original name for the Hebrew goddess, being corrupted to ‘Asherah’ by the ‘correcting scribes’ (Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, 2012, pp. 74, 124).

Table 2 for section ‘The enclosure of the Asherah’

2 Samuel 5.22-24		
English Translation	Hebrew (read from right to left)	Transliteration
Tops	ראשי	<i>ro'shi</i>
Asherah	אשרה	<i>'asherah</i>
Asherahs (masc. plural form)	אשרים	<i>'asherim</i>

Table 3 for section ‘Abraham and Asherah’

Genesis 21.33 with 1 Samuel 22.6, 31.13		
English Translation	Hebrew (read from right to left)	Transliteration
‘grove’	אשל	<i>'eshel</i>
‘plough’	חרש	<i>charash</i>
‘oak’/ ‘goddess’	אלה	<i>'elah</i>
Asherah	אשרה	<i>'asherah</i>

Note that the Hebrew letters *lamed* (L) and *resh* (R) can be confused, (Scott, 1927, p. 28).

Table 4 for section ‘Rock Image of Asherah?’

Deuteronomy 4.49 and Joshua 13.20		
English Translation	Hebrew (read from right to left)	Transliteration
‘Slope’	אשדה	<i>'ashedah</i>
‘Slopes’ (plural form appearing in Deut. 4.49)	אשדת	<i>'ashedoth</i> (whence the Greek Asedoth)
Asherah	אשרה	<i>'asherah</i>
‘Slopes’ (slightly different plural form in Josh. 13.20)	אשדות	<i>'ashdowth</i>
Asherahs (fem. plural form)	אשרות	<i>'asheroth</i>

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Additionally, these web sites were used:

<http://www.blueletterbible.org> for its Hebrew Bible options, Strong's concordance, Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon, along with various English translations. The translation used here is the Revised Standard Version (RSV). An interlinear of Hebrew and English is found at <http://biblehub.com/interlinear>.

<http://www.htmlbible.com/sacrednamebiblecom/kjvstrongs/STRINDEX.htm> for listing the Strong's Concordance words,

<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition> for the translation of the Greek, and <http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/grie/sept/sept.htm> for its ability to search the Greek.

Google translate has proved useful for Latin translation, and the Latin Vulgate was accessed from <http://latinvulgate.com>.

George Lamsa's translation of the Syriac Peshitta Old Testament can be found at <http://www.superbook.org/LAMSA/ot.htm>.

For ease and accuracy, book pages from the internet were read by <https://www.newocr.com>.