Book Review

Judith M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah.* University of Cambridge Oriental Publications, 57. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000

Archaeologist and feminist scholar Judith Hadley of Villanova University has performed a major service to readers interested in a comprehensive study of the worship of the tree-goddess Asherah in biblical times. Expanding on her earlier work on the Asherah inscriptions from the Judean desert, the author provides a guide to and assessment of the current state of the question in secondary literature (which now abounds). She furnishes detailed linguistic and iconographic analysis of the recent finds, which are currently causing many scholars to reassess their treatment of early and monarchical biblical religion in Judah and Israel. Since the inscriptions and finds from Khirbet el-Qom (12 km west of Hebron) and Kuntillet ‘Ajrud (50 km south of Kadesh-barnea) are hotly disputed in both their literal meanings and their role in helping to interpret biblical goddess worship, Hadley’s book fills a welcome spot on any critical reader’s bookshelf.

Starting with a survey of current research on the topic—which remains stalled, in mainstream/ malestream quarters, largely around linguistic questions and the meaning of asherah—goddess? goddess’ stylized tree? just a sacred cult pole?, Hadley proceeds to present the textual evidence for the goddess Athirat (northwest semitic cognate of biblical *asherah*) in Ugaritic texts from the Late Bronze Age and the textual evidence from the Hebrew Bible. From this introduction to the topic, she takes up an intricate discussion of the Khirbet el-Qom inscription (dated to ca. 750-700 BCE) which Hadley reads as “Uriahu the rich wrote it./Blessed be Uriyahu by Yahweh/for from his enemies by his (*YHWH’s*) asherah he (*YHWH*) has saved him./ by Oniyahu/by his asherah/and by his a[she]rah” (p. 86). A small human hand is engraved upon the rock beneath the inscription. Hadley concludes that, since elsewhere in biblical Hebrew, the pronominal suffix is not attested on personal names (this *does*, however, occur in Ugaritic), the asherah mentioned here refers to the sacred pole, probably part of a cult installation (cf. Deut. 16.21). Since Jewish communities in Elephantine *did* swear by the *msgd’* (a temple, or cult stele or pillar), Hadley concludes that by the time of our inscription, Yahweh worship had begun to swallow up the worship of Asherah into its cult, and that ‘Yahweh/asherah’ were a ‘paired set,’ which might be invoked in such blessings (pp. 104-5).

From Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, a late 9th century or early 8th century religious center, which may have served as a pilgrimage site judging by the predominance of diverse ‘prayerful’ inscriptions to various semitic gods found there, Hadley examines both inscriptional evidence and drawings. Pithos A shows two Bes figures (the Egyptian dwarf-god, with associations of protection from demonic powers) and a seated lyre player; below and off to the left, a cow and suckling calf are depicted. Inscription 1 appears along the top of the scene, reading ‘X says: say to Yehal[lel’el] and to Yo’asah and [to Z]: I bless you by Yahweh of Samaria and by his asherah’. However, Hadley concludes that the inscription should not be read as a legend for the Bes figures and lyre

player, as they are clearly written with different materials. On the other side of Pithos A, a sacred tree bearing fruited palmettes is flanked by two feeding caprids; immediately beneath them appears a striding lion. After early attempts by some scholars to interpret the seated lyre-player with the goddess Asherah, Hadley and others conclude that there is no compelling textual or iconographic reason to make this identification. The sacred tree on the striding lion, however, should be identified as a genuine representation of Asherah in her stylized tree-of-life aspect; the lion in its 'striding' (as opposed to 'protecting') position also intensifies the connection with Asherah.

From the same site, we find Pithos B, with a procession of worshippers with a few animal motifs, and inscriptions. Written vertically, Inscription 2 reads: 'Amaryau says: say to my lord: Is it well with you? I bless you by Yahweh of Teman and by his asherah. May he bless you and be with my lord…' Inscription 3, written at the top of the procession of male worshippers, reads 'Whatever he asks from a man, may it be favoured…and let Yahw(eh) give unto him as he wishes (according to the his heart)'. Inscription 4, badly preserved on a plastered floor, may be reconstructed to contain a prayerful reference to 'Yahweh of Teman and his asherah'. Hadley cites the various difficulties in reading any of the inscriptions as direct reference to the iconography preserved, and once more concludes that if 'asherah' is indeed reconstructed in inscription 4, it must refer to the sacred pole symbolizing the goddess and used here as a 'blessing agent'.

In her final chapters, Hadley discusses other relevant finds, which shed light on the inscriptions and graphic representations from the sites discussed above. These include the sites of Lachich, Pella in Jordan, Ekron, Jerusalem, and the famous cultic stands from Taanach. Her final chapter surveys female figurines, both of 'plaque' and 'pillar' type, with the latter probably developing from the former. Though not attested before the Iron II period, they are found in great numbers thereafter throughout Judah and many are from Jerusalem. These figures are free-standing clay sculptures of females with moderately detailed heads made from a mould, and bodies, either hollow or solid, made separately and showing no sexual markings below the waist. It may be that this 'plain' feature of the base of the pillar figurine is meant to suggest a tree trunk or sacred cultic pole, which would have been associated with Asherah. The pillar figurines were probably used in some sort of domestic cult, since whether they are taken as a representative of a particular or syncretized goddess (suggested by the exaggerated full breasts), or a copy of the cultic Asherah pole in the Jerusalem temple, toys (but why no male toys attested at the same sites?), or just a metaphor for fertility in its most generalized form, they clearly highlight the powerful aspect of female fertility. Since other divine markings of the goddess Asherah (or others) are missing from these figurines, Hadley concludes it is not possible to identify them clearly as goddesses, or with the 'asherim' of the biblical authors (p. 204).

Hadley does an excellent job of shepherding her readers through the intricacies of reconstructing the inscriptions and the years of scholarly conjecture on their meaning and connection to the iconography she studies, but those without much familiarity with Hebrew grammar may find this heavy going. Her conclusions are judicious, neither favoring the identification of Asherah nor

ruling it out where it seems more likely. This is clearly the reference work to own on these exciting finds from the Judean desert.

Elsewhere, Hadley takes up the questions of interpretation of Judean and Israelite religion occasioned by these finds. While most scholars are content to dither over the precise meanings to be assigned to each type of evidence—are they only poles, or stylized trees, or images of a goddess? Hadley understands that these considerations are only the beginning of the inquiry. Certainly, the Hebrew Bible is clear in its statements that 'heterodox' theology and worship *did* exist and was to be thoroughly condemned. Further, from Genesis, we know that it is quite customary to refer to the ancestral deity by terms associated with specific locations, so it is no particular surprise that a 'YHWH of Teman' or 'Samaria' should be invoked in these inscriptions. What the Hebrew Bible does *not* make clear is something toward which these finds gesture: goddess worship, particularly that of Asherah, appears to be comfortably at home within Yahweh-worship and carries no overtones of cultural hegemony forced on the biblical states by outsider 'heathens'.

Questions which most occupy feminist readers (so what does it all mean? What kind of impact did goddess worship have on the lives of average women, as well as the religious elite?) are of less concern in this piece of Hadley's work than mapping of the playing field on which these questions must be played out. Rather like a game of Quidditch, Hadley shows us that we shall have to chase several different balls before we win the game of redefining what was considered reasonable and customary in monarchical biblical worship. The work highlights how much our 'reconstructions' of biblical worship and domestic religion have been shaped by the interest of male clerics and scholars for whom 'hard' archaeological evidence is of less weight than the 'soft' assumptions of text and theology. In fact, both kinds of 'evidence' require close scrutiny and interpretation. We await with interest the moment when traditional scholars discover that the playing field has gone 'tilt', and has been redrawn in such a way that they must now deal with the 'woman question' in ancient biblical religion — will they or nil they.

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