

David T. Sugimoto (ed.)

Transformation of a Goddess

Ishtar – Astarte – Aphrodite

Academic Press Fribourg
Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Göttingen



Publication subsidized by
the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences

Internet general catalogue:
Academic Press Fribourg: www.paulusedition.ch
Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen: www.v-r.de

Camera-ready text prepared by Marcia Bodenmann (University of Zurich).

© 2014 by Academic Press Fribourg, Fribourg Switzerland
Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Göttingen

ISBN: 978-3-7278-1748-9 (Academic Press Fribourg)
ISBN: 978-3-525-54388-7 (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht)
ISSN: 1015-1850 (Orb. biblicus orient.)

ORBIS BIBLICUS ET ORIENTALIS

Founded by Othmar Keel

Published on behalf of the BIBLE+ORIENT Foundation

in cooperation with

the Department of Biblical Studies, University of Fribourg Switzerland,

the Institute of Egyptology, University of Basel,

the Institute of Archaeology, Near Eastern Archaeology section, University of Berne,

the Institut romand des sciences bibliques, University of Lausanne,

the Institute of Religious Studies, University of Zurich and

the Swiss Society for Ancient Near Eastern Studies

by

Susanne Bickel, Thomas C. Römer, Daniel Schwemer and Christoph Uehlinger

David T. Sugimoto (*1958), PhD University of Sheffield (UK), is a professor in the Department of Archaeology and Ethnology of Keio University in Tokyo. He has published studies on religious artifacts unearthed in the Southern Levant, including *Female Figurines with a Disk from the Southern Levant and the Formation of Monotheism* (Tokyo: Keio University Press, 2008). He has also excavated at several archaeological sites in Israel, including Tel 'En Gev and Tel Rekhesh, and is currently co-directing the excavations at Beitin in Palestine.

Contents

<i>David T. Sugimoto</i> Preface	VII
List of Contributors	X
List of Abbreviations	XI
<i>Eiko Matsushima</i> Ištar and Other Goddesses of the So-Called “Sacred Marriage” in Ancient Mesopotamia	1
<i>Akio Tsukimoto</i> “In the Shadow of Thy Wings”: A Review of the Winged Goddess in Ancient Near Eastern Iconography	15
<i>Mark S. Smith</i> ‘Athtart in Late Bronze Age Syrian Texts	33
<i>Izak Cornelius</i> “Revisiting” Astarte in the Iconography of the Bronze Age Levant	87
<i>Keiko Tazawa</i> Astarte in New Kingdom Egypt: Reconsideration of Her Role and Function	103
<i>Stéphanie Anthonioz</i> Astarte in the Bible and her Relation to Asherah	125
<i>David T. Sugimoto</i> The Judean Pillar Figurines and the “Queen of Heaven”	141
<i>Elizabeth Bloch-Smith</i> Archaeological and Inscriptional Evidence for Phoenician Astarte	167
<i>Stephanie L. Budin</i> Before Kypris was Aphrodite	195

Index of Subjects	217
Index of Authors	224

Preface

David T. SUGIMOTO

This volume is a result of the *International Conference on Ishtar/Astarte/Aphrodite: Transformation of a Goddess* held at Keio University, Tokyo, Japan, from August 25-26, 2011.¹ The conference was originally planned for March 29-30 in the same year, but was postponed owing to the earthquake, tsunami, and the subsequent nuclear problems. However, despite the change in the schedule, most of the presenters could participate in the conference, and the conference itself was quite stimulating. On the basis of the discussions during the conference, each presenter rewrote his/her presentation into an article; this volume is the collection of these articles.²

The theme of this volume (and the conference) is appreciating the changing nature of the goddess Ishtar/Astarte/Aphrodite. Ishtar/Astarte/Aphrodite is a goddess widely revered in the ancient West Asia and the Mediterranean world and known by different names, but these three are often closely related and sometimes identified, and the lines of their development have been speculated. However, partly because of the dissection of the research fields, their commonality and differences have not been sufficiently dealt with. This volume and the conference aimed that specialists working on different areas and periods gather together and discuss the theme from different angles; through this we expected to gain more information on their interrelationship from a wider perspective. The areas covered in this volume range from Mesopotamia through the Levant, Egypt, to the Mediterranean world, and the periods included are from the third millennium BCE to the Hellenistic period.³

The title of the volume itself presents the nucleus of the issue. Although the title uses a singular form of “a goddess” to refer to Ishtar/Astarte/Aphrodite, this is highly debatable, and all three goddesses may have to be understood as completely independent. In fact, as some of the articles show, other goddess such as Inanna, Isis, Hathor, the Queen of Heaven, Tanit, Venus, and various indigenous goddesses may also need to be included in the

¹ It was sponsored by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research “Kakenhi” (no. 20401033).

² Eleven presentations were made at the conference; this volume includes nine of them.

³ We recognize that contributions from those who study the Roman period will further enhance the significance of this study.

discussion. However, even so, most scholars working in this field recognize that they are related, and it is important to find out how they are related. Their differences may reflect the social demands of each society, in which a particular form of a goddess was worshipped.

The volume is divided into four major parts:

- The first part deals with the nature of Ishtar in Mesopotamia. Matsushima particularly focuses on Ishtar's (Inanna) aspect of goddess of love and sexual behavior and discusses the nature of the Sacred Marriage during the Sumerian period and the Divine Marriage during the Post-Sumerian period. Tsukimoto explores the iconography of "Winged Ishtar" and suggests that the wing signifies her omnipresence and protection.
- The second part deals with Astarte ('Athtart/'Ashtart) in the Levant during the second half of the second millennium. Mark S. Smith collects vast information concerning 'Athtart from Ugaritic and Emar texts under five headings: the goddess in cultic texts, the goddess of hunt and warfare, the goddess' relations to other deities, attribute animals, and international contacts with other goddesses. Since the limited nature of reference to Astarte in Ugaritic text is recognized, this will be a valuable starting point for any future research on Astarte in the Late Bronze Age Syria. Cornelius reports on the iconographical sources possibly related to Astarte from the Levant. He shows the difficulty in identifying the goddess with iconographical features, discussing Astarte's relationship with other goddesses such as Anat and Qedeshet. Tazawa, on the other hand, deals with the Egyptian materials and discusses Astarte's position among more traditional Egyptian goddesses.
- The third part focuses on the Biblical description of Astarte and the archaeological findings from the Southern Levant in the first millennium BCE. Anthonioz discusses the possible differences in significance among singular and plural forms of Asherah and Astarte. Sugimoto explores the relationship between the Judean Pillar Figurines usually found from the contexts of the eighth and seventh century BCE and Asherah, Astarte, and the "Queen of Heaven".
- The last part studies the situation in the Mediterranean world in the later period. Bloch-Smith analyses five Phoenician archaeological sites claimed to be Astarte temples, ten more sites for which literary sources refer to Astarte temples, and two particular artifacts dedicated to Astarte. This catalogue and analysis will be a useful foundation for Astarte as a Phoenician goddess. Budin discusses on the birth of Aphrodite in Cyprus. She explores the possibilities of the influence from West Asia and the importance of the indigenous goddesses of Cyprus in the formation of Aphrodite.

The collection of these articles and the discussion at the conference still could not yield a clear line of relationship between these goddesses or their

manifestations. However, the articles not only possess their own significance but also reflect the current state of research in different fields. We believe that they are helpful in setting any goddess research in a particular field in wider, yet closely connected contexts. The contributors enjoyed the discussions at the conference, and we hope that the readers of this volume will share the same pleasure.

As editor of this volume, I would like to express my gratitude to all the participants at the conference, especially those who also contributed to this book, for sharing their expertise. Ikuko Sato, Keiko Tazawa, and Mayumi Okada assisted me in organizing the conference. I would also like to thank Christoph Uehlinger, who guided the production of this volume and offered helpful academic and technical suggestions. Susan Tsumura checked the English of some of the papers of those who are not native English speakers. My thanks also go to Marcia Bodenmann, who carefully prepared our manuscripts for publication. Without her help, this book would not have materialized.

List of Contributors

Eiko Matsushima	Professor, Graduate School of Career Studies, Hosei University, Tokyo, Japan
Akio Tsukimoto	Professor, Faculty of Theology, Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan
Mark S. Smith	Skirball Professor of Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Studies, New York University, USA
Izak Cornelius	Professor, Stellenbosch University, Republic of South Africa
Keiko Tazawa	Associate Curator, Ancient Orient Museum, Tokyo, Japan
Stéphanie Anthonioz	Lecturer, Institut Catholique de Lille, France
David T. Sugimoto	Professor, Department of Archaeology and Eth- nology, Faculty of Letters, Keio University, Tokyo, Japan
Elizabeth Bloch-Smith	Lecturer, St. Joseph's University, USA
Stephanie Budin	Lecturer, Rutgers University, USA

List of Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
ABL	<i>Assyrian and Babylonian Letters</i> , 14 vols., ed. by R. F. Harper, Chicago, 1892-1914
ADAJ	<i>Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan</i>
AfO	<i>Archiv für Orientforschung</i> , Horn
AHw	<i>Akkadisches Handwörterbuch</i> , 3 vols., ed. by W. von Soden, Wiesbaden, 1965-81
AJA	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
ALASP	Abhandlungen zur Literatur Alt-Syrien-Palästinas, Münster
ANEP	<i>The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament</i> , ed. by J. B. Pritchard, Princeton, 1954
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> , 3rd ed. with supplement, ed. by J. B. Pritchard, Princeton, 1969
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
ASJ	<i>Acta Sumerologica</i>
ASOR	American Schools of Oriental Research
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BCE	Before the Common Era
BDB	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> , Oxford, 1907
BIFAO	<i>Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale</i> , Cairo
BN	<i>Biblische Notizen</i>
CAD	<i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CE	The Common Era
ch.	chapter
CM	Cuneiform Monographs
COS	<i>The Context of Scripture</i> , ed. by W. W. Hallo and K. L. Younger, Jr., 3 vols., Leiden, 1997-2002
CTA	A. Herdner, <i>Corpus des tablettes en cunéiformes alphabétiques découvertes à Ras Shamra-Ugarit de 1929 à 1939</i> , Paris, 1963
CTH	E. Laroche, <i>Catalogue des textes hittites</i> , Paris, 1971
DDD	<i>Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible</i> , ed. by K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, and P. van der Horst, Leiden, 1999
DULAT	<i>A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition</i> , 2 vols., ed. by G. Olmo Lete and J. Sanmartín, Leiden, 2003

<i>DNWSI</i>	<i>Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions</i> , 2 vols., ed. by J. Hoftijzer and K. Jongeling, Leiden, 2003
E	English translation
EA	Tell el-Amarna tablets (cited from J. A. Knudtzon, O. Weber, and E. Ebeling, <i>Die El-Amarna Tafeln</i> , 2 vols., [Leipzig, 1915]; and A. F. Rainey, <i>El Amarna Tablets 359-379: Supplement to J. A. Knudtzon, Die El-Amarna Tafeln</i> , 2nd rev. ed. [AOAT 8; Kevelaer and Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1970])
<i>EI</i>	<i>Eretz Israel</i>
<i>Emar</i>	Arnaud, Daniel, <i>Récherches au pays d'Aštata, Emar VI: Textes sumériens et akkadiens</i> , 4 vols., Paris, 1985–1987
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
HdO	Handbuch der Orientalistik
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HSS	Harvard Semitic Series
ICS	M. Olivier, <i>Les inscriptions chypriotes syllabiques</i> , Paris, 1961
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JCS</i>	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JNWSL</i>	<i>The Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
<i>JRAS</i>	<i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTS	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>KAI</i>	H. Donner and W. Röllig, <i>Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften</i> , 3 vols., Wiesbaden, 1971-76
<i>KAR</i>	E. Ebeling, <i>Keilschrifttexte aus Assur religiösen Inhalts</i> , Leipzig, 1919-23
KTU	M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartín, <i>Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit</i> , Bd. 1, Neukirchen, 1976
KUB	Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Vorderasiatische Abteilung, <i>Keilschrifturkunden aus Boghazköi</i> , 1921-
LAPO	Littératures anciennes du Proche-Orient
LXX	Septuaginta
MARI	<i>Mari. Annales de Recherches Interdisciplinaires</i>
MB	The Middle Bronze Age
MIO	<i>Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung</i>
MRS	Mission de Ras Shamra
MT	Masoretic Text
<i>NABU</i>	<i>Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires</i>
<i>NEAEHL</i>	<i>The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land</i> , ed. by E. Stern, 4 vols. + 1 supplementary volume, Jerusalem, 1993, 2008
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OLA	Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta
<i>OrNS</i>	<i>Orientalia</i> , new series
<i>PE</i>	<i>Preparatio evangelica</i> , written by Eusebius
<i>PEQ</i>	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>

POCA	Postgraduate Cypriot Archaeology Conference
PRU	C. F. A. Schaeffer and J. Nougayrol, <i>Le Palais Royal d'Ugarit</i> , Paris
PTU	F. Gröndahl, <i>Die Personennamen der Texte aus Ugarit</i> , Studia Pohl 1, Rome, 1967
RA	<i>Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale</i>
RCU	D. Pardee, <i>Ritual and Cult at Ugarit</i> , Atlanta, GA, 2002
RES	<i>Revue des études sémitiques</i>
RIA	<i>Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie</i> , Berlin and Leipzig
RIH	J. de Rouge, <i>Inscriptions hiéroglyphiques copiées en Egypte</i> , 3 vols. Études égyptologiques 9–11, Paris, 1877–78
RS	<i>Ras Shamra</i>
RSO	Rivista degli studi orientali
SAA	State Archives of Assyria
SAAS	State Archives of Assyria Studies
SBH	G. A. Reisner, <i>Sumerisch-babylonische Hymnen nach Thontafeln Griechischer Zeit</i> , Berlin, 1986
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLWAW	Society of Biblical Literature: Writings of the Ancient World
SHAJ	Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan
SJOT	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
TIM	Texts in the Iraq Museum, Baghdad
UF	<i>Ugarit-Forschungen</i>
UNP	<i>Ugaritic Narrative Pottery</i> , ed. by S. B. Parker, Atlanta, GA, 1997
v.	verse
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplements
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZA	<i>Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und verwandte Gebiete und Vorderasiatische Archäologie</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZDMG	<i>Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>

Abbreviations of Biblical Books

Gen	Genesis	II Kgs	II Kings
Exod	Exodus	II Chr	II Chronicles
Num	Numbers	Isa	Isaiah
Deut	Deuteronomy	Jer	Jeremiah
Jdg	Judges	Hos	Hosea
I Sam	I Samuel	Mic	Micah
II Sam	II Samuel	Ps	Psalms
I Kgs	I Kings		

Astarte in the Bible and her Relation to Asherah

Stéphanie ANTHONIOZ

1. Introduction

The name of the goddess Ishtar is a Semitic name. However, its etymology has not yet been clearly established. It could be based on the root meaning “being rich,”¹ or it could refer to the “morning star”.² Anciently pronounced Eshtar, the name derives from the common Semitic *'ttr*, which appears as the name of a masculine divinity³ in South-Arabian sources and in the city of Ugarit.⁴ The feminine form is also attested in South-Arabian sources (*'ttrm*)⁵ and is much more common than the masculine in West-Semitic sources (*'ttrt*)⁶ at Ugarit,⁷ in Phoenicia,⁸ and in the Bible (עשתרת).

¹ H.-P. Müller says most scholars believe that we are dealing with the Semitic root “being rich,” but that surprisingly the divinity exists in languages where the verbal root is not attested; H.-P. Müller, “עשתרת, *'astôret*,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 11:423-434 (hereafter Müller, 2001).

² V. Blažek “The Semitic Divine Name **'attar*(-at-) and its Possible Afroasiatic Cognates,” in P. Zemánek (ed.), *Studies in Near Eastern Languages and Literatures: Memorial Volume for Karel Petráček* (Prague: Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic Oriental Institute, 1996), 133-141.

³ That the goddess Ishtar should bear a masculine name is best explained by the fact that the divinity was originally androgynous. Moreover, the masculine form would be related to Venus as the morning star, whereas the feminine form would be related to the evening star; A. Yahuda, “The Meaning of the Name Esther,” *JRAS* 8 (1946), 174-78, reedited in C. A. Moore, *Studies in the Book of Esther* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1982), 268-272; G. Buccellati and W. Heimpel, *The Descent of Inanna as a Ritual Journey to Kutha & A Catalog of Near Eastern Venus Deities* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1982), 9-22; A. Archi, “Divinités sémitiques et divinités de substrat: Le cas d’Išhara et d’Ištar à Ébla,” *Mari: Annales de recherches interdisciplinaires* 7 (1993), 71-78.

⁴ Mark S. Smith, “The God Athtar in the Ancient Near East and His Place in KTU 1.6 I,” in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 627-640.

⁵ F. Bron, “Divinités communes à la Syrie-Palestine et à l’Arabie du Sud préislamique,” *Aula Orientalis* 17-18 (1999-2000), 437.

⁶ Except in Ebla where the name is noted *^dAš-tár*. But as P. Mander noted, the goddess found less room in Ebla “en raison de la concurrence de la déesse du substrat Ishhara”; P. Mander, “Les dieux et le culte à Ébla,” in G. del Olmo Lete (ed.), *Mythologie et religion des Sémites occidentaux* (Louvain: Peeters, 2008), 58.

⁷ As equivalent both to the Mesopotamian Ishtar and to the Ashtarat of Mari; P. Bordreuil “Ashtart de Mari et les dieux d’Ugarit,” *Mari: Annales de recherches interdisciplinaires*

The plural of the feminine form has been recognized as a generic for “goddesses” in Neo-Assyrian sources (*ištarātu*). And the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* considers the common name *ištar* to mean “goddess.” But it is not easy to decide whether the root means “goddess,” or whether the all-encompassing Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar has given her name to the common noun by way of assimilation. Is not Ishtar at the same time any goddess and all goddesses, the divine feminine par excellence? This last position has been current,⁹ but J.-M. Durand has argued that *ištar* should be compared to Baal, which means “master” and designates any storm divinity in West-Semitic sources.¹⁰ And so the city of Mari on the Euphrates has attestations to several different Ishtars named according to their locality, just as Neo-Assyrian sources have located her in Nineveh, Assur or Arbela.¹¹ This last position is very consistent with the recent analysis on the South-Arabian goddess *’ttrm* as documented by Christian Robin.¹²

Ishtar is mentioned in the Bible using various terms, such as “Queen of Heaven,”¹³ but since she is most often present in the form “Ashtoret” (עשתרת), also attested in the plural “Ashtarot,” it is worth considering the question of its use as a generic. This analysis will lead us to compare the use of Astarte-Ashtoret with that of “Asherah,” which is also attested in the plural. The contexts of their occurrences will enable us to consider, not just the question of their use as generic names, but also the question of their representation and their relation to one another in biblical sources.¹⁴

4 (1998), 545-547.

⁸ See the sarcophagus of Tabnit in Sidon dating back to the 6th century (KAI 13), where the king is priest of *’ttrt*, possibly patroness of the city; the sarcophagus of Eshmunazar also in Sidon (KAI 14), where his mother is priestess of *’ttrt*; and the votive throne in Tyre from the 2th century (KAI 17). See also Bordreuil, “Ashtar de Mari.” The Phoenician goddess is well attested in Egypt. Finally I would refer to the Ammonite Shagar-and-’Ashtar at Deir ‘Alla; É. Puech, “Bala’am and Deir ‘Alla,” *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 39.

⁹ Müller, 2001, 11:425.

¹⁰ J.-M. Durand, “La religion amorrite en Syrie à l’époque des archives de Mari,” in G. del Olmo Lete (ed.), *Mythologie et religion des Sémites occidentaux* (Louvain: Peeters, 2008), 163-716, 198-201.

¹¹ W. Lambert “Ištar of Nineveh,” *Iraq* 66 (2004), 35-39; B. Porter, “Ishtar of Nineveh and Her Collaborator, Ishtar of Arbela, in the Reign of Assurbanipal,” *Iraq* 66 (2004), 41-44.

¹² Personal communication.

¹³ Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 182 (hereafter Smith, *Early History*); S. Olyan, “Some Observations Concerning the Identity of the Queen of Heaven,” *UF* 19 (1987), 161-174; M. Delcor, “Le culte de la ‘Reine du Ciel’ selon Jer 7,18; 44,17-19.25 et ses survivances: Aspects de la religion populaire féminine aux alentours de l’Exil en Juda et dans les communautés juives d’Égypte,” in W. C. Delsman et al. (eds.), *Von Kanaan bis Kerala: Festschrift für J. P. van der Ploeg zur Vollendung des siebzigsten Lebensjahres am 4. Juli 1979* (AOAT 211; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1982), 101-122.

¹⁴ I wish to thank in a special way Mark S. Smith and Elizabeth Bloch-Smith because this paper in its final form has benefited a lot from our dialogue on the topic of Ishtar, even though the conclusions presented here are my own.

2. *Astarte-Ashtoret*

Since the biblical references to Astarte-Ashtoret are not so many, it will be convenient to recall each one. We follow here the biblical order for the most part.

Judges 2:11-13

Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of Yhwh and served the Baals (הבעלים).¹² They forsook Yhwh, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked Yhwh to anger.¹³ So they forsook Yhwh and served (ולעשתרות) the Baal (לבעל) and the Ashtarot (ולעשתרות).

All occurrences of Baal or Ashtarot in this passage, when vocalized, have the determinative: it is about *the* Baal, *the* Baals and *the* Ashtarot. The last of these seems to be a common plural feminine form (עשתרות). However N. Wyatt has proposed a new hypothesis concerning the vocalisation of the Hebrew name of Astarte (Wyatt 1999, 210).¹⁵ He suggests that the *'Ashtarot(u)* form could have evolved into an *'Ashtarot ('aštārôt)*, just as Dagan evolved into the biblical Hebrew Dagon. But Wyatt does not exclude the possibility that Ashtarot sometimes has a plural meaning. This hypothesis will be kept in mind, but for our purpose it will not carry much weight. It is true that in v. 13 above it is tempting to consider “Ashtarot” as a singular, since the “Baal” preceding it is also a singular. In that case the couple Baal-Ashtarot/Ashtoret would be emphasized in that great Deuteronomistic chapter as the cause of idolatry and of the final punishment leading in the end to the exile.¹⁶ But in the meanwhile, Yhwh God shows compassion and raises Judges:

The anger of Yhwh burned against Israel, and he gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them; and he sold them into the hands of their enemies around them, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies.¹⁵ Wherever they went, the hand of Yhwh was against them for evil, as Yhwh had spoken and as Yhwh had sworn to them, so that they were severely distressed.¹⁶ Then Yhwh raised up judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them. (Judg 2:14-16)

¹⁵ N. Wyatt “Astarte,” *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 210.

¹⁶ Ever since the thesis of Martin Noth, the discourses in Deut 1–30; Josh 1 and 23; Jdg 2: 6–3:6; I Sam 12; I Kgs 8; II Kgs 17 and 25 have been considered the great pillars of the Deuteronomistic History, which presents an account of the past and origins of Israel through cyclic crises leading to the final exile; M. Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), translated from *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1943). For a general view on the Deuteronomistic History, see T. Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

We have here the first example of the Deuteronomistic cycle of crisis, Israelite idolatry and apostasy, which leads Yhwh to anger and then to compassion.

There is a similar passage in the next chapter.

Judges 3:7-8

The sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of Yhwh, and forgot Yhwh their God and served the Baals (הבעלים) and the Asherot (האשרות).⁸ Then the anger of Yhwh was kindled against Israel, so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-rishathaim king of Aram-Naharaim; and the sons of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years.

One is surprised here to meet “the Baals” in the plural coupled with “the Asherot” (feminine plural of Asherah) and not “the Ashtarot.” One is all the more surprised since all other occurrences of the plural “Baals” are associated with Ashtarot. That is why exegetes have often proposed to emend the text. But it is not necessary to do so.¹⁷ As we shall see, the references to Astarte-Ashtoret in the Bible are very few and always polemical, just as those concerning Asherah are. It seems quite clear that both goddesses are associated in the polemic against idolatry by the Deuteronomists. Therefore the occurrence of Asherot where one would expect Ashtarot is not illogical. On the contrary, it shows how the names of both goddesses are blurred by polemical rhetoric and no longer refer to specific divine entities.

The next case of Astarte-Ashtoret is in Judges 10:6-7

Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of Yhwh, served the Baals (הבעלים) and the Ashtarot (העשתרות), the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the sons of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; thus they forsook Yhwh and did not serve Him. ⁷The anger of Yhwh burned against Israel, and he sold them into the hands of the Philistines and into the hands of the sons of Ammon.

With this third example the polemical rhetoric becomes clear. Diverse techniques are used: the repetition of the same phrases (“to do evil in the sight of Yhwh,” “to serve other gods,” “to forsake Yhwh,” “to kindle his anger”), the repetition of the same scheme of divine retribution, and, most important for our purpose, the stress on the same divine couple Baals/Ashtarot amidst the many other gods that are mentioned here but are never (or rarely) called by name. It becomes important to underline the recurrent plural form of the divine couple. The Deuteronomists seem to refer both to Baal and Ashtoret/Ashtarot (whatever its form in the singular is) as generic names. Therefore

¹⁷ Saul Olyan has proposed that Astarte, not Ashera, had been the consort of Baal, Ashera being Yhwh’s consort. This association would thus not be historical, but the work of the Deuteronomists eager to discredit the cult of Ashera; S. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988), 9-11.

at this point the same phenomenon observed in Mesopotamian sources,¹⁸ in Mari and in South-Arabia, seems to be confirmed by the biblical witnesses.

I Samuel 7:2-4

From the day that the ark remained at Kiriath-Yearim, the time was long, for it was twenty years; and all the house of Israel lamented after Yhwh. ³Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, “If you return to Yhwh with all your heart, remove the foreign gods (אלהי הנכר) and the Ashtarot (העשתרות) from among you and direct your hearts to Yhwh and serve him alone, he will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines.” ⁴So the sons of Israel removed the Baals (הבעלים) and the Ashtarot (העשתרות) and served Yhwh alone.

Here Ashtarot is again clearly a plural, as it is associated first with “foreign gods” and then with the Baals. It is also worth noting that the Septuagint has translated the second occurrence by “the Baals and the groves-Ashtarot” (τα αλση Ασταρωθ).¹⁹ The reference to groves shows once more the continuing confusion between Astarte and Asherah, as the latter, as we shall see, is associated with groves, green trees and hills, especially in the plural form (Asherim). The confusion in our opinion is again polemical.

I Samuel 12:8-11

When Jacob went into Egypt and your fathers cried out to Yhwh, then Yhwh sent Moses and Aaron who brought your fathers out of Egypt and settled them in this place. ⁹But they forgot Yhwh their God, so he sold them into the hand of Sisera, captain of the army of Hazor, and into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the king of Moab, and they fought against them. ¹⁰They cried out to Yhwh and said, “We have sinned because we have forsaken Yhwh and have served the Baals (הבעלים) and the Ashtarot (העשתרות), but now deliver us from the hands of our enemies, and we will serve You.” ¹¹Then Yhwh sent Jerubbaal and Bedan and Jephthah and Samuel, and delivered you from the hands of your enemies all around, so that you lived in security.

This occurrence is again in one of the great Deuteronomistic chapters, and so we are not surprised to meet the same scheme, expressions, and the divine couple Baals/Ashtarot in the plural. The crisis here is all the more important

¹⁸ See the eighth-century Akkadian inscription from ʿAna on the middle Euphrates mentioned by Mark S. Smith in this volume, describing the goddess Anat as the “strongest of the Astartes/goddesses” (*gaš-rat* ^dES₄.DAR^{mes} l. 2), and as one whose “pre-eminence can not be compared among the Astartes/goddesses” (*GAŠAN šá-ru-uh-tum šá ina* ^dES₄.DAR^{mes} *la iš-šá-an-na-nu* l.4); A. Cavigneaux and B. K. Ismail, “Die Statthalter von Suhu und Mari im 8. Jh. v. Chr.,” *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 21 (1990), 321-456.

¹⁹ It is worth noting that in the Septuagint almost every occurrence of Ashera is translated by *αλσος*. It seems that to the translator Ashera meant nothing more than a place of idolatry. When the reference was obviously to a divinity, the translator named her Astarte (I Kgs 7:3-4, 12:10; II Chr 15:16, 24:18)!

as it is followed by the institution of kingship in Israel (I Sam 12:13). The next occurrences will show some differences, so it is right to underline and tentatively conclude that in the books of Judges and Samuel at least, the Baals coupled with the Ashtarot function as generic names of masculine and feminine divinities. But since their occurrences are always imbedded in the polemical rhetoric against idolatry, more than generic names, they appear as a *terminus technicus* in the Deuteronomistic argument: Baals and Ashtarot are somehow joined as the perfect couple symbolizing idolatry in Israel. They are not referred to so much as divine entities (and for this reason we know next to nothing about their cult), as the materialization of the sin of Israel that will finally lead to exile from the land.

I Samuel 31:10

In the next occurrence we learn that Saul's armor after he died was hung in the temple of Ashtarot (בֵּית עֲשֶׁתְרוֹת). This case seems to support Wyatt's theory on the vocalization, as it certainly does refer to the divinity in the singular. Furthermore, note that the divine name bears no article. Of course, we learn nothing about her except that she is the goddess of the Philistines (later references refer to her as the goddess of the Sidonians).

I Kings 11:5, 33; 2 Kings 23:13

These three references have in common that there is no article and the reference to the goddess is in the singular. Ashtoret²⁰ goddess of the Sidonians is introduced during the reign of Solomon because of his many foreign wives:

For Solomon went after Ashtoret the goddess of the Sidonians and after Milkom the detestable idol of the Ammonites (I Kgs 11:5), ...because they have forsaken me, and have worshiped Ashtoret the goddess of the Sidonians, Kamosh the god of Moab, and Milkom the god of the sons of Ammon; and they have not walked in my ways, doing what is right in my sight and observing my statutes and my ordinances, as his father David did. (I Kgs 11:33).

If the goddess is introduced with Solomon, she is so to say ex-troduced with Josiah the good Judean king in the eyes of the Deuteronomists:

The high places which were before Jerusalem, which were on the right of the mount of destruction which Solomon the king of Israel had built for Ashtoret the abomination of the Sidonians, and for Kamosh the abomination of Moab, and for Milkom the abomination of the sons of Ammon, the king defiled (II Kgs 23:13),

²⁰ It is usually agreed that the Massorettes vocalized the name according to the noun "shame" (*bōšet*); M. Jastrow, "The Element *boshet* in Hebrew Proper Names," *JBL* 13 (1894), 19-30. This is to be compared with other biblical names such as Ishboshet for Ishbaal, Meriboshet for Meribaal, or even Molek.

and no other reference to her occurs in between, even though the polemic against idolatry recurs in every notice concerning every king of Israel and Judah.

It is clear that the second reference is pointing back to the first, and it is clear also that in associating Solomon with Ashtoret, the writer is suggesting that the institution of kingship itself is flawed from the beginning, and the good will of Josiah will be of no avail in the final catastrophe. The fact that in the book of Kings the goddess is referred to in the singular only and that Solomon himself is involved, points to an official cult, whereas the plural in Judges does not make clear to us whether the cult is an official or just a popular one. Moreover, if the plural is used as a generic name, it cannot inform us of the identity of the goddess designated: is she Astarte, or another feminine goddess such as Asherah? In this sense, even if the singular in the Book of Kings highlights the unique and official that is royal cult of the goddess, we may still ask what her exact identity is. We shall come back to that point. It is, however, no wonder that so few references are made to her, since naming her would give her existence, which is what the Deuteronomists refuse to do: Yhwh alone is God.²¹

It seems that the distinction between singular and plural points to the official/unofficial status of the cult, and this will be our working hypothesis. In the ancient Near East, it must be recalled that official cultic statues are always named after their divinity. The statue itself is but the materialization of the divinity and need not be mentioned.²² This is all the more important since it reminds one that the question of the relation between the divinity and its representation is a modern concern, not an ancient one. This will be consistent with our analysis of Asherah and Asherim below. But at this point of the analysis, it is clear that the question is no longer circumscribed by some generic use of the singular or plural form of a divinity's name. The question is intrinsically linked to the rhetoric and ideology at work in the Deuteronomistic History.

The remaining references are those where "Ashtarot" is connected with the herd or the flock (Deut 7:13, 28:4, 18, 51) or is part of a place name (see for instance Ashtarot Qarnayim in Gen 14:5 and also Deut 1:4; Josh 9:10, 12:4, 13:12, 31; I Chr 6:71, 11:44). The latter need no further explanation, but for the former Judith Hadley has convincingly proposed the concept of de-deification: the name of the goddess and those of other gods in Deuteronomy, Dagon and Tirosh, are used not as divine names, but as

²¹ Similarly, Milkom god of the Ammonites is rarely named in the Bible (II Sam 12:30; I Kgs 11:5; I Chr 8:9; 20:2; Isa 3:15; Jer 30:9; 49:1, 3; Hos 3:5; Amos 1:15; Mic 2:13), and Kamosh god of the Moabites, even less (Num 21:29; Judg 11:24; I Kgs 11:7, 33; II Kgs 23:13; Jer 48:7, 13, 46).

²² S. Anthonioz, 'À qui me comparerez-vous?' (*Is 40,25*): *La polémique contre l'idolâtrie dans le Deutéro-Isaïe* (Paris: Cerf, 2011), 35-43.

common nouns referring to their blessings. But of course Yhwh alone is the source of that blessing, here the blessing of the flocks.²³

In sum, what we see is that the polemic against idolatry in the Deuteronomistic History displays more than one technique. It is interesting to notice that the technique used differs according to the book. For example, the de-deification at work in Deuteronomy is not found elsewhere in the books of the Deuteronomistic History. Moreover these techniques seem consistent with the overall biblical chronology and ideology. And so the singular feminine Ashtoret is only connected with kings and the official, that is the royal, cult, whereas the plural is attested only before kingship arose in Israel, that is during the period of the Judges and that of Samuel. In that sense, the royal responsibility in rendering the cults official is all the more underlined. If it can be argued that Ashtoret/Ashtarot is used in a generic sense in biblical sources, one must admit the limited scope of the biblical use and the ideology and theology at work. That the expression “the Baals and the Ashtarot” can be assimilated to Akkadian *ilānu u ištarātu*²⁴ is clearly possible, but the difference is immense because under the pen of the Deuteronomistic scribe it has become nothing else than a *terminus technicus* annihilating all other gods! Moreover one has to remain cautious on the identity of the goddess referred to: Astarte or Asherah? The fact that Astarte/Ashtoret is introduced with Solomon only to be ex-troduced with Josiah could also be another device of the Deuteronomists eager to link idolatry to the foreign cults and gods. If all other references to a feminine goddess in the Books of Kings are to Asherah, is it not possible that in bracketing the references by those opening and closing ones to Ashtoret (I Kings 11:5, II Kings 23:13), the redactor intended to give Asherah a foreign identity? Asherah is thus subversively turned into a foreign goddess, making the polemic all the more powerful as she becomes one of those foreign divinities.

3. Asherah and Asherim

Let us now turn to Asherah.²⁵ The root of the name is clearly different from that of Astarte and has been connected to the North-West Semitic **ʾr*, meaning “to follow (in the footsteps of).” This is consistent with the fact that in the ancient sources, the goddess is commonly the consort of the main god.²⁶ Just as the god El is the prototype of all gods since his name means

²³ J. Hadley, “The De-deification of Deities in Deuteronomy,” in R. P. Gordon, *The God of Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 157-174; “Fertility of the Flock? The De-Personalization of Astarte in the Old Testament,” in B. Becking and M. Dijkstra (eds.), *On Reading Prophetic Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 115-133.

²⁴ A. Lenore Perlman, *Asherah and Astarte in the Old Testament and Ugaritic Literatures* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1979), 183.

²⁵ The bibliography on the subject is wide, so only those references necessary for our demonstration will be cited.

²⁶ B. Margalit, “The Meaning and Significance of Asherah,” *VT* 40 (1990), 264-297

power, and Baal the prototype of all husbands, so Asherah becomes the prototype of all spouses, feminine and fertile. Athirat is well known at Ugarit where she appears as “mother of the gods” (*qnyt ilm*) and wet-nurse of the kings. Her main divine epithet connects her to the world of the sea (*ʾrt ym*).²⁷ Ashratu is also attested in Mari (*^dAš-ra-tum* and *^dA-ši-ra-tum*) where she is the consort of the god Amurru, but here connected to the world of the steppes and mountains like her husband. If one considers the main characteristic of the goddess, one is not surprised to find her as consort of Yhwh in Israel. And so Margalit has not hesitated to accept the interpretation of the famous Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom inscriptions as “Yhwh and *his* Asherah,” Yhwh being identified with Baal or El.²⁸ David N. Freedman has proposed that because Asherah was venerated in many places it was necessary to distinguish her like Ishtar.²⁹ He adds that if Asherah appears to be the consort of Baal in I Kgs 18:19, she can not be other than that of Yhwh in II Kgs 13:6. But many have opposed this theory arguing that Asherah is but a cultic object as commonly attested in the Bible and that technically on linguistic grounds it was impossible for a proper name to bear a possessive suffix: no example is in fact attested in the Bible.³⁰ Judith Hadley has for her part interpreted the Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet Ajrud inscription as referring to a symbol rather than to the goddess herself, though she finds elsewhere in the meagre material from Lachish, Pella, Taanach, Tel Miqne and Jerusalem reason for associating Asherah with Yhwh.³¹

Asherah is quite well known in the Bible, where she appears as a goddess (I Kgs 15:13, 18:19; II Kgs 21:3, 23:4f). However her cult is not better known than that of Astarte-Ashtoret. The biblical complexity is made worse by the common use of the plural form Asherim alongside the singular Asherah.

(hereafter Margalit, 1990). Maier proposes that the root and vocalization of the Ugaritic Athirat signifies “the one advancing,” but that as a common noun the word designates a holy place or a sanctuary; W. Maier, *Ašerah: Extrabiblical Evidence* (HSM 37; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987), 194; see also R. Hess, “Asherah or Asherata,” *Orientalia* 65 (1996), 209-219.

²⁷ F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 67. Binger has however proposed connecting her to the “day” and not the sea (same consonants); T. Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit, Israel and the Old Testament* (JSOTS 232; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1997); T. Binger, “Ashera in Israel,” *SJOT* 9 (1995), 3-18.

²⁸ Margalit, 1990, 284; see also W. Dever, “Archaeology and the Ancient Israelite Cult: How the Kh. el-Qôm and Kuntillet Ajrûd Asherah Texts Have Changed the Picture,” *Eretz-Israel* 26 (Frank Moore Cross Volume; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1999), 9*-15*; W. Dever “Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet Ajrûd,” *BASOR* 255 (1984), 21-37.

²⁹ D. N. Freedman, “Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah,” *BA* 50 (1987), 241-249.

³⁰ J. Emerton, “‘Yahweh and His Asherah’: The Goddess or Her Symbol?” *VT* 49 (1999), 315-337; Smith, *Early History*, 118.

³¹ J. Hadley, “Yahweh and ‘His Asherah’: Archaeological and Textual Evidence for the Cult of the Goddess,” in *Ein Gott allein?* (OBO 139; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 1994), 235-268.

What is the exact relation between the plural and the singular forms? Does the plural simply refer to an object? Roland de Vaux has synthesized the biblical data in a very useful way:³² Asherah has to be considered as both the representation of the goddess and as a cultic object or symbol. In the Bible she appears as the consort of Baal in two instances (Judg 3:7 and 2 Kgs 23:4). And when the cultic object is referred to, it is made of wood (Judg 6:26) that one can cut (Exod 34:13, Judg 6:25) or burn (Deut 12:3; II Kgs 23:6, 15). It can also be a living tree that one plants (Deut 16:21) or roots out (Mic 5:13; II Kgs 23:14). Most commonly it is fashioned (I Kgs 14:15, 16:33; II Kgs 17:16, 21:3; Isa 17:8) and erected as a stele (II Kgs 13:6, 17:10; Isa 27:9) reminding one of a pole. And de Vaux concludes: "We cannot specify its appearance and there is no proof that this pole was sculpted to represent the goddess." Defining the Asherim has thus been a very difficult task, often governed by theological presuppositions. A cautious position has often been preferred: the Asherah is both goddess and cultic object.³³ The exact relation between the two is not clear, but it seems that there has been an evolution from the divinity to the purely cultic or symbolic object. It seems to me that at this point it is necessary to remember that such an evolution is the vision that emerges from a biblical and specifically Deuteronomistic view: reducing divinities to mere objects without life and incapable of giving life, is it not the very heart of the polemic against idolatry? One has to remember again that statues and other cultic objects were understood as divine in themselves and referred to accordingly.³⁴

The working hypothesis I wish to test here is based on the results of the preceding case of Astarte. I distinguish the plural from the singular forms of

³² R. de Vaux, *Les Institutions de l'Ancien Testament*, vol. 2, *Les Institutions militaires; Les Institutions religieuses* (Paris: Cerf, 1960), 110f.

³³ R. Pettey, *Asherah: Goddess of Israel* (New York: Lang, 1990); J. Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature," *JBL* 105 (1986), 408; W. Reed, *The Nature and Function of the Asherah in Israelite Religion According to Literary and Archaeological Evidence* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1982); W. Reed, *The Asherah in the Old Testament* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1949).

³⁴ An interesting point has been made by K. Slanski relating to the famous Sippar Šamaš Tablet where the Sun God, in the absence of his statue destroyed by the Sutean invasion under king Adad-apla-iddina (1068-1047), is represented by the symbol of a disc. The symbol is officially replacing the statue until the god reveals the model of his statue, and king Nabu-apla-iddina (887-855) immediately has the statue made according to the model; K. Slanski, "Classification, Historiography and Monumental Authority: The Babylonian Entitlement *narūs* (*kudurrus*)," *JCS* 52 (2000), 95-114. In another article, the author developed that idea with relation to other divine symbols such as socles, pedestals, weapons or pictures. She writes: "While divine symbols and divine cult images are both representations of the gods, they are representations on a very different order. Nonetheless, the symbol is a representation of the divine, and does signal, if not the god in his anthropomorphic eating/drinking/listening persona, some aspect of his power, strength, and character"; K. Slanski, "Representation of the Divine on the Babylonian Entitlement Monuments (*kudurrus*), Part I: Divine Symbols," *AfO* 50 (2003-2004), 316.

the name and test their function. As in the case of Astarte, does the singular refer to the official representation of the divinity? And does the plural allude to general cults located anywhere and everywhere (as opposed to the official cult necessarily located in the official place, that chosen by the divinity itself)? The best way to proceed now is to go through all the passages in the biblical order of the Deuteronomistic history mentioning “Asherah,” and then through those mentioning “Asherim.”

The first occurrence of “Asherah” is given in the Deuteronomic Law:

You shall not plant for yourself an Asherah (אשרה) of any kind of tree beside the altar of Yhwh your God (אצל מזבח יהוה), which you shall make for yourself.²² You shall not set up for yourself a sacred pillar (מצבה) which Yhwh your God hates. (Deut 16:21-22)

According to the context, it is clear that the Deuteronomic law is referring to some official cult of the goddess (note the absence of the determinative) “beside the altar of Yhwh,” that is in the temple. The existence of such a law implies that the situation prohibited may well have existed. And if so, one is led to acknowledge that Asherah was also considered the consort of Yhwh. Otherwise the Deuteronomic law itself would not make sense.

Judges 6:25-26

Now on the same night Yhwh said to Gideon, “Take your father’s bull and a second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal which belongs to your father, and cut down the Asherah (ואת־האשרה) that is beside it (אשר עליי),²⁶ and build an altar to Yhwh your God on the top of this stronghold in an orderly manner, and take a second bull and offer a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah which you shall cut down.”

Because the Asherah is standing “beside” the altar of Baal this time, and because the cult of Baal is at the time of Gideon’s father the official cult, this reference confirms our working hypothesis. Though the cults of Baal and “his” Asherah are condemned by the Deuteronomists, their official status is witnessed to nonetheless.

In the course of the books of Kings, Asherah becomes one of the main targets of the polemic against idolatry, in contrast to Astarte, who only opens the book with Solomon and somehow closes it with Josiah, as seen above. Every king is judged according to his deeds and obedience to the law of Yhwh, first and foremost according to his exclusive worship of Yhwh. Therefore Asa king of Judah is judged in a good way since he did what was right in the eyes of Yhwh as his father David had done:

He also put away the male cult prostitutes from the land and removed all the idols which his fathers had made.¹³ He also removed Maaka his mother from

being queen mother, because she had made a repulsive image for Asherah (מפלצת לאשרה). And Asa cut down her repulsive image (את־המפלצת) and burned it at the brook Kidron. (I Kgs 15:12-13)

Here the connection of Asherah with Baal or Yhwh is not made, but the cult of the goddess is connected to the queen mother who supported it. Therefore the official nature of the devotion is underlined. Next comes Ahab, son of Omri, who did what was wrong in the eyes of Yhwh. Not content with marrying Jezebel the daughter of the king of the Sidonians, he also worshipped Baal:

So he erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal which he built in Samaria.³⁵ Ahab also made the Asherah (האשרה). Thus Ahab did more to provoke Yhwh God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him. (I Kgs 16:32-33)

Once again it is made clear that what is at stake concerning Asherah is the institution of an official cult. This is also clear in the next occurrence, namely the reference to the prophets of Asherah in connection with the reigning Jezebel ("450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table," I Kgs 18:19). This is again confirmed by the judgment on king Jehoahaz of Israel during whose reign the Asherah remained standing (II Kgs 13:6). With the fall of Samaria the same judgment is pronounced, but this time all Israel is condemned and not their kings alone:

They forsook all the commandments of Yhwh their God and made for themselves molten images (מסכה), even two calves (שנים עגלים), and made an Asherah (אשירה)³⁵ and worshiped all the host of heaven and served Baal. (II Kgs 17:16)

After the fall, Judah and its kings fall under the same ban. Hezekiah king of Judah did what was right in the eyes of Yhwh:

He removed the high places and broke down the pillars and cut down the Asherah (את־האשרה). He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan. ⁵He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel; so that after him there was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor among those who were before him. (II Kgs 18:4-5)

Manasseh did what was evil in the eyes of Yhwh: he had the high places rebuilt and altars made in honor of Baal as well as an Asherah (II Kgs 21:3). But worst of all:

³⁵ Note here the absence of the determinative.

He set the carved image of Asherah (אֲתֵרֶת פֶּסֶל הָאֲשֵׁרָה) that he had made, in the house of which Yhwh said to David and to his son Solomon, “In this house and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen from all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever.” (II Kgs 21:7)

Asherah is thus identified as the goddess who is elevated to the official rank of consort of Yhwh and made to stand with him in his temple. The “objectivation” or insistence on her being a handmade and carved object appears to be, in my view, another tool in the Deuteronomistic polemic against idolatry. And this is evidently the worst sin for the Deuteronomists. And finally Asherah is mentioned in the reform of Josiah where she is identified as consort of Baal (II Kgs 23:4-6) and taken out from the temple of Yhwh along with her vessels and those of Baal. All occurrences to the goddess in the singular have so far confirmed our working hypothesis. In the singular, “Asherah” refers to an official cult, whether it be as consort of Baal in his temple or in the temple of Yhwh.

It remains now to go through all the occurrences of “Asherim.” As used in the Deuteronomic law, Asherim evoke not an official but a popular cult; they are not connected with temple, but with mountains, hills and green trees:

You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess serve their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. ³You shall tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and burn their Asherim (אֲשֵׁרִיָּהֶם) with fire, and you shall cut down the engraved images of their gods and obliterate their name from that place. ⁴You shall not act like this toward Yhwh your God. ⁵But you shall seek Yhwh at the place which Yhwh your God will choose from all your tribes, to establish his name there for his dwelling, and there you shall come. (Deut 12:2-5)

If the high mountains, hills and every green tree are connected to the “nations,” it is part of the Deuteronomistic ideology concerning foreign gods (introduced by foreign wives), epitomized in the expression “other gods.” The books of Kings thus display this polemic against popular religion, and Asherim serve in every occurrence as the symbol of this polemic against popular cult (I Kgs 14:15, 23; II Kgs 17:9-10, 23:14). Finally, even outside the Deuteronomistic History, it is worth mentioning that all references to Asherim work in the same sense and in dependence on this polemic (Exod 34:13; Isa 17:8, 27:9; Jer 17:2; Mic 5:13).

4. Conclusion

What can we now conclude? The working hypothesis has proved stimulating. The difference between the use of singular and plural serves the Deuteronomists in constructing their polemic. On the one hand Asherah

is about the official cult (her name and representation being one and the same reality as in ancient Near Eastern sources), on the other hand Asherim are about popular cults and places.³⁶ Both of course are judged impious, but they are not on the same level. Going back to Astarte where that distinction was first analyzed, it seems clear that the biblical occurrences can not tell us much concerning linguistics, history or religion: is the name of Astarte used as a generic name as elsewhere in the ancient Near East? Was the goddess venerated officially? Was she represented, and how? What was her cult about? We wish we could answer all these questions positively. Alas, the biblical scholar is left with the ideology at work in the Deuteronomistic History, which is persuasively constructed as the accompanying table of occurrences shows.

Table 1: Occurrences of the Goddess Names in the Deuteronomistic History

	Ashtoret	Ashtarot	Asherot	Asherah	Asherim
Deuteronomy				16:21	12:3
Joshua					
Judges		2:11-13 10:6	3:7	6:25-26	
I Samuel		7:3-4 12:10 31:10			
I Kings	11:5, 33			15:13 16:33 18:19	14:15.23
II Kings	23:13			13:6 17:16 18:4 21:3-7 23:4-6	17:10 23:14

³⁶ Therefore I do not agree with Steve Wiggins, who proposes a diachronic solution to the problem, that the singular Asherah refer to pre-exilic time, and the plural Asherim, to exilic times; S. Wiggins, *A Reassessment of 'Asherah': A Study According to the Textual Sources of the First Two Millennia B.C.E.* (AOAT 235; Kevelaer: Butzon und Bercker & Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1993), 169-170, 186.

Most of all this polemic blurs all “other gods” into one and the same rhetoric against idolatry. In this sense Astarte is confused with Asherah, or more accurately, Asherah is subversively confused with Astarte/Ashtoret. It is therefore not impossible to propose that Asherah is one of the Ashtarot (that is one goddess in the general sense), and at the same time confused with the foreign deity Astarte, thus making the polemic against idolatry all the more powerful. But it remains that if Ashtarot associated with Baalim work as a *terminus technicus* against idolatry, Asherim work as a kind of second level of veneration in the polemic: only one official representation of the goddess would stand in the main temple and be rendered an official cult, but many shrines could be found around high mountains and hills where any one would feel free to go and venerate her.³⁷ Of course in both cases the Deuteronomistic judgment was without concession. Judged impious and repulsive, they first brought about the end of Samaria, and finally the end of Judah!

³⁷ This recalls the famous Pillar figurines. Identified with the goddess Ashera since no other goddess is worshipped in the 8th-7th century BCE Judah, Raz Kletter has underlined that these figurines were meant for private devotion only and were of very bad and cheap quality; R. Kletter, “Asherah and the Judean Pillar Figurines engendered,” in S. Parpola and R. H. Whiting (eds.), *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th RAI* (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 291 (for a different view, see the article by David T. Sugimoto in this volume). In this way we would have a kind of a third level of devotion, private devotion, besides the popular and official ones.

