

# **The Archaeology of Religion in Ancient Israel**

**How Religious Texts and Artifacts from the Ancient Near East  
Illuminate Scripture**

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# Israel's Apostacy according to Scripture

- Numbers 25: Israel enticed by Moabites to Baal worship (cf. Ps 106:28)
- Judg 6: Gideon tears down the altar of Baal
- 1 Kings 16–18: Jezebel, Elijah against the prophets of Baal and Asherah
- Numerous kings of Israel (e.g., Ahaziah in 22:53)
- Judahites make child sacrifices to Baal (Jer 19:5) and Molech (Jer 32:35)
- Asa's mother worships Asherah (1 Kgs 15:13)
- Manasseh put an image of Asherah in the temple of Jerusalem (2 Kgs 21:7)
- Many, many others







# Baal

## Canaanite Storm Deity

- Rain-giver
- Voice = thunder
- Depicted as a warrior holding a lightning bolt
- Associated with *yām* "sea," a deity of chaos





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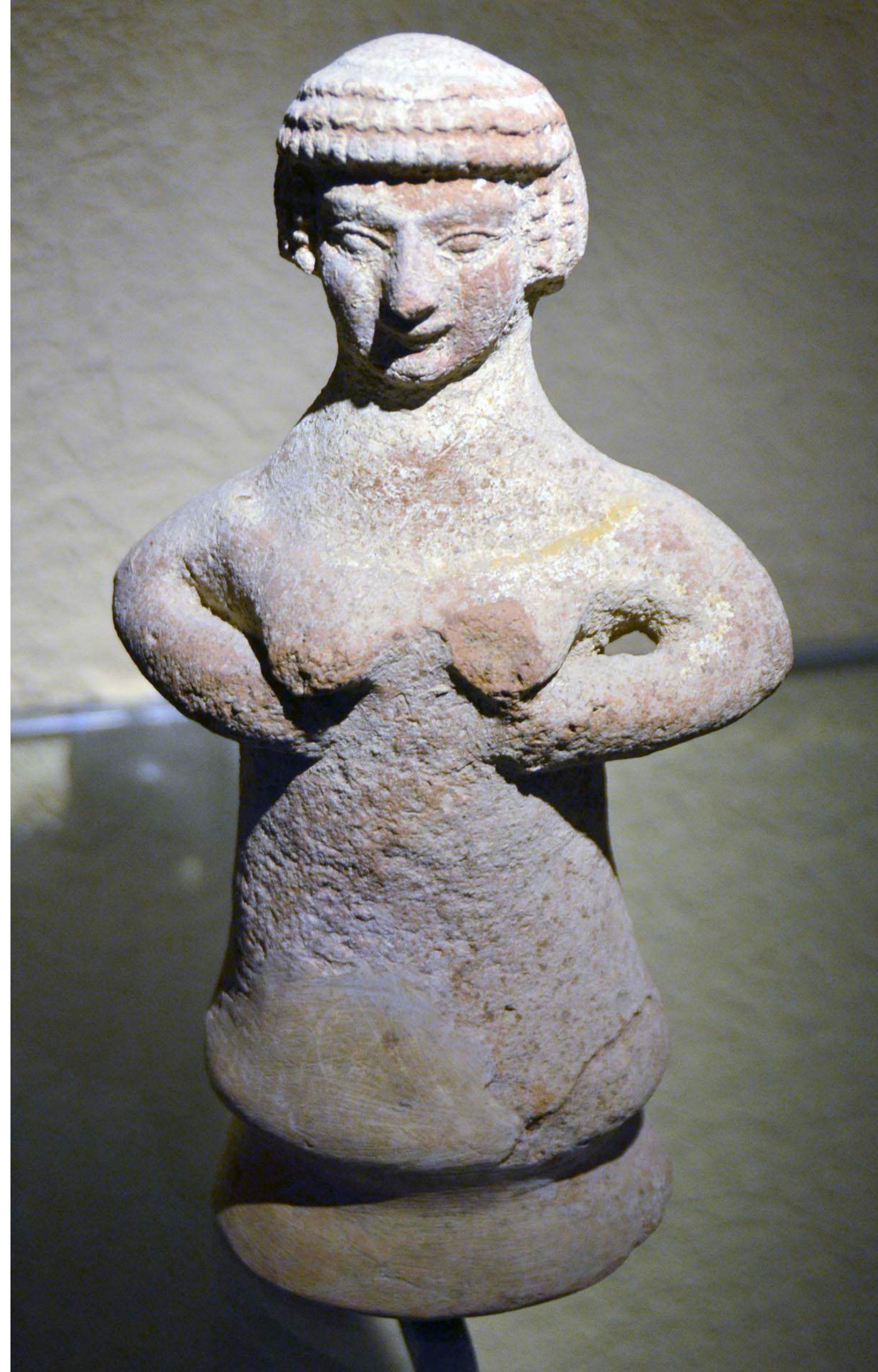




# Asherah

## Fertility goddess

- Commonly found alongside Baal in the Bible
- Most biblical references speak of a kind of Asherah pole/pillar/tree set up beside altars to male deities
- Dozens of "pillar figurines" found, every archaeological period (image to right)





# Asherah

Fertility goddess









# YHWH and His Asherah?

## 8th c. Tomb Inscription

*Uryahu, the wealthy man, had it written: Blessed be Uryahu by YHWH  
And from his enemies, O Asherah,  
save him.*

or perhaps

*Uriyahu the prince wrote it: Blessed  
be Uriyahu by Yahweh and his  
Asherah, for from his enemies, he  
(Yahweh) saved him.*





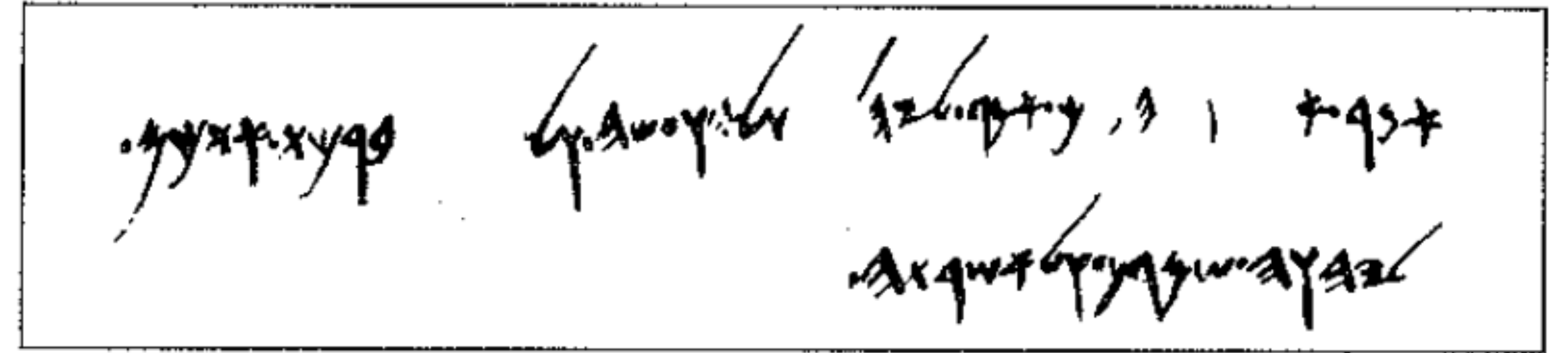




# YHWH and His Asherah?

## Kuntillet 'Ajrud Inscriptions

I bless you by/to YHWH of  
Samaria and by/to Asherata.



# Religion(s) of Ancient Israel and Judah

## Summary so far

- People in Israel/Judah were worshipping deities other than YHWH.
- Can't be certain how widespread this was. Kuntillet 'Ajrud is far from Jerusalem's oversight.
- At the same time, the OT acknowledges that worship of Baal and Asherah were ongoing issues, even in the temple in Jerusalem.
  - Manassah brought the Asherah fertility cult into the temple (2 Kgs 21:7).
  - Josiah destroyed the "houses" of cult prostitutes (2 Kgs 23:4–7).

# Psalm 29

A PSALM OF DAVID.

- 1** Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,  
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
- 2** Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;  
worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness.
- 3** The voice of the LORD is over the waters;  
the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over many waters.
- 4** The voice of the LORD is powerful;  
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.
- 5** The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;  
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
- 6** He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf,  
and Sirion like a young wild ox.”

# Psalm 29

**7** The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.

**8** The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;  
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

**9** The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth and strips the forests bare,  
and in his temple all cry, "Glory!"

**10** The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;  
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.

**11** May the LORD give strength to his people!  
May the LORD bless his people with peace!







El grants permission for Baal to build a house (i.e., a temple). Then...

Lady Asherah of the Sea replied:

"You are great, El, you are truly wise;

your gray beard truly instructs you...

Now Baal will provide his enriching rain,

provide a rich watering in a downpour;

and he will sound his voice in the clouds,

flash his lightning to the earth.

Let him complete his house of cedar!

Let him construct his house of bricks!

Let it be announced to Baal the Conquerer:

# **Epic of Baal**

**6:5.lines 3–19**

'Call a caravan into your house,  
supplies into your palace  
the mountains will bring you much silver,  
the hills fine gold in abundance  
the best ore will be brought to you:  
and build a house of silver and gold,  
a house of lapis lazuli.'"

Maiden Anat was glad;  
she stamped her feet and left the earth.  
Then she headed to Baal on the peak of Zaphon,  
a thousand fields, ten thousand acres at each step.

# **Epic of Baal**

**6:5.lines 3–24**

# Conclusion

## Ps 29 and the Baal Myth

- Once again, archaeology shines light on the world of the Bible
- Non-biblical ancient texts also provide a window into the biblical world.
- With the combination of texts and artifacts, we can arrive at a clearer understanding of what the biblical texts meant in their ancient contexts.
- Without knowledge of Baal myth, Psalm 29 is a lovely hymn of praise; in light of the Ugaritic myth, we can see that it *is* that, plus a courageous declaration of who the *real* deity is. Knowing that may encourage believers in our time.