

Asherah and the Christmas Tree

Study notes should be read in connection with sermon #419.

Picture is a 9th century B.C. stone image of some type of Babylonian or Canaanite tree service.



Opening Text: *Exodus 34:10-14

Through my studying and meditating over the years, I have come to believe that there is a connection between the modern day Christmas tree and the ancient symbol for the fertility goddess named Asherah. In this lesson I would like to explain to you my reasons for holding to this belief.

Let me state at the outset that I do not believe that a tree itself is a pagan object. Yahweh created trees and they have their purpose. We even see great men of Yahweh like Abraham (Genesis 21:33) planting trees. What I will be teaching in this sermon is about ancient tree worship, and the custom or practice of tree worship surround the winter solstice.

I. Introduction

- A. I've been reading the HCSB translation for several years now. I think I started around 2005.
- B. I noticed in reading that I kept running across texts which mentioned "Asherah poles" and I had never seen this in the Bible I used to read most often, the KJV.
- C. One example is in our opening text today - *Exodus 34:13 - let's read it again.
 1. The KJV has here, "But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves."
 2. The Hebrew word for "groves" here is the word "asherah" defined by Strong's as

*#842 אֲשֵׁרָה 'asherah *ash-ay-raw*' or masheyrah {ash-ay-raw'}; from 833; happy; Asherah (or Astarte) a Phoenician goddess; also an image of the same:-- grove. Compare 6253.

- *1 Kings 18:19 references the goddess herself, whereas our opening text (Exodus 34:13) references the object used in association with the goddess. There is no word for "pole" in the Hebrew text, it is simply "*asherah*" or sometimes "*asherim*" in the plural.

3. So, apparently, the HCSB translators saw it better to transliterate the Hebrew word into English rather than seek for an English translation. I believe they did this because of their belief that this word was actually the proper name of one of the many pagan gods or goddesses of antiquity.

a. *Eerdmans, p. 93 - "Hebrew Asherah refers not only to the goddess but also to the consecrated poles, called either Asherah... or Asherim... that represented the deity. At first they may have been living trees... but in later usage were wooden poles, perhaps erected... to represent a tree..."

b. *ISBE, "Asherah; Her Symbol" - "...the tree trunk or cone of the stone which symbolized Asherah was regarded as a Bethel or house of the deity, wherein the goddess was immanent... The trunk of the tree was often provided with branches, and assumed the form of the tree of life..."

c. *Holman Bible Dictionary "Asherah"

d. Asherah was basically the primary Canaanite goddess, and was often considered the wife of El (the main Canaanite deity) and the mother of Baal (the chief Canaanite deity).

4. It is interesting to note here (and we will get back to this later) that the LXX translates the term as "grove" as well. A "grove" or "groves" is a term meaning a cluster of trees. (*The LXX refers to "prophets of the groves" at 1 Kings 18:19.*)

D. It is evident from our opening text in *Exodus 34 that "Asherah" was something forbidden to the people of Israel.

1. In verse 11 it is mentioned in connection with the people who will be driven out of the land.

2. In verse 12 Yahweh commands the Israelites to make no treaty with these people lest they become a snare to Israel.

3. Finally, in verse 13, Yahweh says to do things like tear down their altars, smash their sacred pillars, and also chop down their Asherah poles.

4. We see commandment violation mentioned in connection with all of this in verse 14 where Yahweh says, "You are never to bow down to another mighty one."

II. Let's Keep Going... - *Deuteronomy 7:1-6 (next mentioning in the Torah)

A. Here again Yahweh is instructing the people of Israel on what to do when they enter the land of Canaan. Yahweh was giving His chosen people this land, and He was going to drive out the inhabitants of that land so that His people could move there.

B. Yahweh speaks of these people in a very harsh manner, but this is fine because He is Yahweh.

1. He tells Israel to completely destroy them (vs. 2).

2. He says make no treaty with them or show them no mercy (vs. 3).

3. He says do not intermarry with them because their children will turn the children of Israel to worship other mighty ones (vs. 4).

4. He says that what they ARE TO DO is... (**Deut. 7:5**) - read it again.

C. CUT DOWN their Asherah poles.

1. *Now in Exodus 34:13 we read "chop down the Asherah poles." This is "karath asherah." KARATH carries the idea of "to cut or destroy."

2. Here is Deuteronomy 7:5 the Hebrew word translated "cut down" is the word GADA, defined by Strong's as "to fell a tree, but generally to destroy anything."

3. As in the previous text of Exodus 34, the LXX has again here "cut down their groves."

III. Next Passage - *Deuteronomy 12:1-4

A. Once again the context is very similar to both Exodus 34 and Deuteronomy 7 in that it speaks about entering the land and destroying the false worship items that the people of the land used in their worship.

B. Let's start of with this text by noticing the locations of worship mentioned in verse 2.

1. First you've got the high mountains and hills. One of the main reasons that people would go to worship on top of a high place was that it was located closer to the heavens where they believed their mighty ones dwelt. Your mind may think of the account in Genesis 11 where a tower was being built with the idea that the top would reach into the heavens.

*Eerdmans, p. 486 - "High places were a common fixture of Canaanite religion when the Israelites entered Palestine. The common ancient Near Eastern cosmology held that the earth was flat, and that the gods dwelt in the heavens above. Consequently, a worship center located on an elevation had a better chance of gaining their attention."

2. Next we've got the location of the "flourishing tree" usually rendered as *green tree* in the KJV. It is amazing to see all of the references made to the worship under the green or flourishing tree in Scripture. I will just mention 2 references here. *(**Jeremiah 2:20; Ezekiel 6:13**).

*Eerdmans, p. 1018 - "The Canaanite fertility goddess Asherah was symbolized by trees or treelike pillars. Worship among the trees was condemned by Israel's prophets because of association with Canaanite religious practices..."

C. So we go to *Deuteronomy 12:3 and we see right in the midst of the command to get rid of false worship there is a command to "burn up their Asherah poles." This is a command to set these idols on fire.

D. Deuteronomy 12:4 is very important because Yahweh instructs His people - "Do not worship me in this way." In other words, do not mimic the way that the heathens worship their mighty ones. Don't just take the same things they do and begin to apply them to me, thinking you are allowed to "re-interpret" them. Instead, you worship me (Yahweh says) the way I command.

IV. Next Passage - *Deuteronomy 16:21 (both KJV and HCSB)

A. Here we just have another simple reference to this Asherah pole which was part of the worship of the peoples of the land that Yahweh was about to give them.

B. Yahweh prohibits setting up this pole by His altar. His worship is to be pure and not tainted or mixed with the worship of any other people towards any other mighty one.

C. *LXX = "Thou shalt not plant for thyself a grove; thou shalt not plant for thyself any tree near the altar of thy Mighty One." (**Deuteronomy 16:21**)

D. *Adam Clarke - "Thou shalt not plant thee a grove, etc. - We have already seen that groves were planted about idol temples for the purpose of the obscene worship performed in them... On this account [the Almighty] would have no groves or thickets about his altar, that there might be no room for suspicion that any thing contrary to the strictest purity was transacted there. Every part of the Divine worship was publicly performed, for the purpose of general edification."

E. *2 Kings 18:1-5, Hezekiah "cuts down the (groves) Asherah."

V. Next Passage - *Judges 6:25

A. First off, this is taking place shortly after Yahweh's initial call on Gideon's life (vss. 11-24).

B. Secondly, look at vs. 25 again. Yahweh instructs Gideon to TEAR down the altar to Baal, and to CUT down the Asherah pole beside it.

1. Asherah is here associated with Baal.

2. Gideon's father was an idol worshiper, so this presumes that Gideon (being his son) was reared this way even though they were from the tribe of Manasseh.

3. The Asherah pole had to be cut down. This is similar to the other texts we've covered that mention chopping down or cutting down the Asherah pole. It doesn't seem that these were always just poles stuck in the ground, but some type of flourishing tree planted beside the pagan altars of Baal in honor of the fertility goddess Asherah. (Remember: the word "pole" is added by the translators for the sake of clarification. The Hebrew just reads "asherah" or "asherim.")

4. In my studies at this point I am concluding that it would sometimes be better to render this as "Asherah tree" rather than Asherah pole, although pole may be better in some cases as well.

C. Now in *verse 26 (let's read it again) we see that Gideon was instructed to use the WOOD of the Asherah pole he CUT DOWN to burn bull for the burnt offering to Yahweh. Verse 27 shows us Gideon accomplished the task.

D. *Verses 28-30 (read) show that the men of the city (obviously idol worshipers themselves) were upset because Gideon tore down the altar dedicated to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside the altar.

1. Now think about this for a second. What made this first altar - "the altar of Baal?" It wasn't because it was "shaped" like Baal or because it was an idol representing an image of Baal. It was in all likelihood simply an altar

dedicated to the Canaanite mighty one Baal, yet Gideon was not allowed to just go on using that altar. He was instructed to tear it down and construct a new one in honor to Yahweh.

2. Likewise with the Asherah pole or tree. Gideon was not allowed to come up with a new meaning for the pole. He was not allowed to say that to him it meant something different than Asherah. The only thing he was allowed to use the pole or tree for was to take the wood from chopping down the tree and use it for the fire of the burnt offering to Yahweh.

VI. Conclusion and Application

***Point #1: We've learned much today about the idolatrous practice of worshiping the fertility goddess Asherah by setting up a tree or wooden pole as a representation of her life.** This was most certainly a practice of the Canaanites in ancient Biblical times, and was strictly forbidden for the Israelites to partake in. I think that a case can be made that Asherah was symbolized sometimes by just a tree dedicated to her or sometimes by some type of a tree trunk or pole placed in the ground.

***Point #2: Some Bible teachers say that the modern day Christmas tree finds its origin in the Asherah pole,** and I believe that a connection can be made, because the similarities are too many in number. You can very easily go to a number of (1) secular and (2) Biblical encyclopedias (*including history channel*) and learn that the practice of placing evergreen trees inside of a home was something practiced by the heathens all over the world as a representation of life during the shortest daylight periods of the year, i.e. the time around the winter solstice. It is very likely the origin of what is now called the Christmas tree is the Asherah tree or pole. Do I believe that people who erect "Christmas Trees" in their homes are trying to worship Asherah? No. I believe they are often oblivious to the origin of the custom they are participating in.

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***Point #3: There is a verse in Scripture that I believe is a legitimate condemnation of what people now call the Christmas tree.** *Let's look at **Jeremiah 10:1-5**.

1. I remember the very first time I read this verse of Scripture. Tisha had shared it with me before we got married, and I honestly could not believe that this was in the Bible.

2. Later on down the line I heard some people just dismiss the verse by saying, "Oh... that verse is just talking about an idol. It's saying that someone forms an idol and worships the idol."

3. Over the years I've looked and re-looked at this text again, and I don't think we should be so quick to just latch onto the argument that says the Christmas tree does not fall up under the condemnation of Jeremiah 10.

a. Verse 2 speaks of the heathen being dismayed at the signs in the heavens. This is exactly what ancient heathen peoples did during the winter solstice time. They were dismayed at a fact within nature whereby Yahweh caused the sun to rule the day for a shorter period of time than any other day of the year. The heathens would bring into their homes pieces of nature (specifically evergreen trees) which symbolized life to them, in hopes of appeasing the S-U-N deity to come back and bring them longer days.

b. Verse 3 mentions cutting a tree out of the forest. That is not difficult to understand, and that is exactly what people do for Christmas.

c. Verse 3 mentions the work of the hands of the workman with the axe. Some people point to this and say that it is speaking of some type of chiseling down the wood into a form, but I'm just not convinced. I know for certain that "Asherah trees" were sometimes planted and that they didn't take on a specific idol image, but were just a representation of what the goddess Asherah stood for - fertility. The phrase about the workman with the axe seems most likely to me to describe the man who cut down the tree out of the forest with the axe, and not to chiseling it into some type of image.

d. Verse 4 mentions decking it with silver and gold which is just another way of saying "they decorate the tree."

e. Verse 4 also mentions fastening it with nails and hammers so it doesn't move. This makes more sense to me to be speaking of a tree that has simply been cut down. A tree would need to be fastened so as not to topple. An image-idol could be carved in such a way as to stand up alone with no need of fastening it down to not move.

f. I could go on, but let me say finally that I do agree that an idol is in view. However, it is factual that the heathens worshiped trees as idols! The modern day Christmas tree finds its origins in winter solstice celebrations of the heathen nations, thus I believe that the Christmas tree falls under the condemnation of Jeremiah 10, and I believe that all tree worship by heathens stems from ancient Asherah worship.

***Point #4: Remember that we are not called to re-interpret pagan worship, but to worship Yahweh the way He commands.** We see this commanded in Deuteronomy 12:1-4, as well as in the instructions Yahweh gave to Gideon in Judges 6. Gideon was to tear down the altar of Baal and chop down the Asherah tree/pole. He was then to build a new altar to Baal, and only use the wood from the Asherah as fire wood.

***Point #5: We should resist fighting with Yahweh. We should not continuously come up with excuses to disobey Him.** I'm all for interpreting Scripture accurately, and I

realize that sometimes people manipulate Scripture, but with something as plain as we have seen in this lesson concerning Asherah poles, groves, green trees, and Jeremiah 10, why would someone insist on continuing to participate in something anti-Scriptural? It has to be because they love what they love MORE than what Yahweh says. That's the simple answer. If we find out that a certain custom we are partaking in stems from worship given to other mighty ones then we are commanded by Yahweh to drop that. It is a commandment not a suggestion.

Final Scripture: ***Deuteronomy 12:29-32**