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THE CASE FOR DEVER'S DOUBLE-SEATED HOUSE SHRINE

LAURA LINGMANN DALY

Laura Lingmann Daly is a recent graduate with a degree in Ancient Near Eastern Studies with a Hebrew Bible emphasis. This paper took second place in the Ancient Near Eastern Studies undergraduate essay contest.

The discovery of numerous new artifacts in the past few decades has caused Israelite religion to become something of a hot topic, prompting questions about whether Asherah was worshipped by the Israelites—an idea vehemently opposed by the redactors of the biblical text. However, archaeological remains have caused scholars to question the accuracy of the Bible in portraying popular Israelite religion. Many scholars are beginning to accept the idea that some Israelites actually worshipped the goddess Asherah—whether officially sanctioned or not—possibly even alongside their primary deity, Yahweh.

One prominent scholar in this school of thought is William G. Dever, whose recent publication in *BAR*, “A Temple Built for Two: Did Yahweh Share a Throne with His Consort Asherah?” has attracted even more attention on this issue.¹ In his article, Dever describes a house figurine acquired on the antiquities market that contains the unique feature of what he claims is a “double throne,” or a seat intended for a deity and his consort. Furthermore, he conjectures that, because there are no figurines included on the throne, it is an aniconistic depiction of Yahweh.

While Dever would happily draw the conclusion that this is evidence of Yahweh being worshipped along with his consort Asherah, a more thorough investigation of this house shrine is necessary in order to substantiate such a claim. The questions which need to be asked include (1) are there other house shrines similar to the *BAR* shrine which can tell us more about its cultic/cultural affiliation, (2) is this really evidence of aniconistic worship, and (3) are Yahweh and Asherah ever depicted together in anthropomorphic form? Based on a comparison of archaeological material including other house shrines

1. William G. Dever, “A Temple Built for Two: Did Yahweh Share a Throne with His Consort Asherah?” *BAR* 34 (2008): 55–62.

from Israelite and non-Israelite contexts, the cult stand from Taanach, and the temple at Arad, as well as the textual material at Kuntillet Ajrud and Biblical references, it is more likely that this shrine was solely dedicated to Asherah than Yahweh and a consort. After answering these questions, if it is not a completely unique artifact unlike any other house shrine, it will be necessary to determine where it fits into the broader scheme of house shrines based on iconography and as much supposition can be made concerning location and dating.

Before embarking on this analysis, it is necessary to point out some of the limitations of this study. First of all, this analysis is not an attempt to conclusively prove or disprove the worship of Asherah as a consort of Yahweh. This controversial issue has been debated extensively, and unless considerations are immediately beneficial to the study of the house shrine, they will not be explored in this paper.² As previously stated, the purpose of this analysis is to demonstrate whether the double-throne shrine can or should be associated with Yahweh and Asherah. This can be achieved by analyzing the archaeological and textual evidence directly associated with these house shrines.

Another limitation to take into consideration is the preference of archaeological material over textual material. While some biblical and non-biblical texts are analyzed in order to further illustrate the possible circumstances and context of house shrines, the majority of this analysis will be spent on other similar shrines in order to determine how the *BAR* house shrine fits in based on iconography, location, and dating. Due to the large number of shrines which have been identified in the past few decades, the shrines which have been reviewed in this study are those which were the most similar iconographically to the *BAR* house shrine, or shrines which will help us to determine whether or not the *BAR* shrine could be Yahwistic. Although the majority of the most distinctive house shrines will be discussed, not every house shrine has been included in this study. Because the *BAR* house shrine was not acquired in context, similar iconography will be a primary factor to determine its possible origin and dating. This preference to archaeological material is partly due to the fact that the references to house shrines are very scarce in the biblical text as well as non-Israelite inscriptions, making it very difficult to determine context and cultic practices for the shrine in question.

2. For a thorough treatment of the main arguments surrounding Asherah as the consort of Yahweh, as well as a comprehensive list of references to other works on the subject, see Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 47–54.

In the past few decades, an increasing amount of attention has been turned to Canaanite and Israelite worship in domestic settings, including the use of miniature house shrines. These figurines are likely patterned after the temples typical of the ancient Near East, consisting of an entryway leading into a main inner chamber and iconography associated with the god/gods being worshipped. They have been attested up until the Iron I period in Israel and Judah, as well as many shrines also discovered in Phoenicia. While it is difficult to connect many artifacts with cultic activities, house shrines are a clear representation of cultic activity because of their association with the temple.

Common features of house shrines include: (1) two pillars at the front of the structure before the cubiculum; and (2) a broad entablature which rests upon the pillars, often containing symbols of the deity the shrine represents.³ It is unclear what miniature figurines were used for, other than to extend the holy space of the temple to another location so that worship could take place at a distance.⁴

Some scholars believe that the cubiculum, or main empty chamber inside the box, housed either a figurine of some kind or an offering to the deity. The only exceptions are the house shrines discovered at Tell Qasile, where the figurine inside the cubiculum is attached to the structure, as well as figurines discovered from the Gaza region.⁵ Most of the sites where house shrines have been discovered are either from large cultic centers or domestic cult sites.⁶ It is with these features in mind that we will proceed to analyze various groups of shrines, based on their similar characteristics and attempt to determine how and if the *BAR* house shrine fits in.

Beginning with the “double seat” shrine in question, it seems that apart from its distinctive throne feature, its other characteristics are fairly typical. It exhibits the two main features commonly found on house shrines, including two stylized pillars and a broad entablature. The pillars have been crafted with palm leaves curling from the top, which Dever points out is a common element in temple architecture by referencing the opinion of archaeologist

3. Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallaxic Approaches* (London, England: Continuum, 2001), 329. Due to the surprising scarcity of scholarly material on house shrines, I frequently reference Zevit’s work, which seems to be the first considerable attempt to compile a comprehensive analysis of house shrines in their respective contexts.

4. The temple-like structure of house shrines is also reflected in other temples in the ancient Near East, such as the temple at Arad where the main sacred space is guarded by two pillars.

5. Rainer Albertz and Rudiger Schmitt, *Family and Household Religion in Ancient Israel and the Levant* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 68.

6. Albertz and Schmitt, *Family and Household Religion*, 67.

Yigal Shiloh. Although these stylized columns seem to bear a similarity to the proto-aeolic capitals seen at Ramat Rahel associated with the Israelite monarchy, Shiloh believes they are significantly different.⁷ While most scholars attribute tree imagery to the goddess Asherah, some scholars such as Steven Wiggins disagree on the grounds that there is no clear evidence that Asherah was directly associated with the tree symbol.⁸ While Wiggins brings up an interesting point to consider, it seems more plausible to assume that the goddess is often represented by a tree symbol due to the numerous associations in the biblical text with erecting poles for the worship of Asherah.⁹

Underneath the pillars of the *BAR* house shrine are two lions, and at the top and center of the entablature is a dove. Imagery associated with doves is often thought to refer to Astarte, and may have later evolved into an association with Asherah as the goddesses are nearly indistinguishable by the beginning of the Iron Age.¹⁰ Inside the cubiculum is an empty throne that is stylized with two back panels, leaving an open space where the deity is assumed to have resided either figuratively or as represented by a cultic object. Dever has put forth an appraisal of the figurine that has gone largely unchallenged, dating the *BAR* house shrine to the eighth or ninth century B.C.E. in the Iron II period. This dating is based on its striking similarity to the Moussaieff Collection, which although it is unprovenanced is believed to date to the eighth or ninth century B.C.E. from Ammonite or Moabite territory. Dever even proposes that the *BAR* shrine and the Moussaieff Collection may have originally come from the same site.¹¹

The iconography of this shrine appears to be consistent with Asherah symbols, including the dove, tree-like stylized pillars, and lions. However, the empty throne inside the cubiculum is somewhat ambiguous and could have been a spot reserved for the figurine of any deity, possibly even a deity and his consort. Dever argues in his article that the throne was intended for the worship of Yahweh and a consort, which was probably Asherah. While this hypothesis is a possibility, the lack of evidence or iconography referring to

7. Yigal Shiloh, "The Proto-Aeolic Capital and Israelite Ashlar Masonry," *Qedem* 11 (1979).

8. Steve A. Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah: With Further Considerations of the Goddess* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007).

9. Ruth Hestrin, "Understanding Asherah: Exploring Semitic Iconography," *BAR* 17 (1991): 52. Hestrin categorizes references to Asherah in the biblical text into three groups: as an image (herself), a green tree, and a tree trunk. Asherah is referred to eighteen times as a tree trunk. Tree trunks are usually placed beside standing stones or pillars. Verbs used in connection with these references to Asherah include *cutting*, *burning*, and *rooting out*, which all bring to mind the image of a tree and not stone.

10. J. Fossum, "Dove," *DDD* 1:500-3.

11. Dever, "A Temple Built for Two," 56.

Yahweh makes it a difficult claim to justify. A further analysis of other Israelite shrines may shed some light on the cultural and religious identity of the *BAR* house shrine and whether or not it can reasonably be identified with them.

One figurine among the Israelite shrines that looks very similar to the *BAR* shrine was discovered at Tell el-Far'ah, formerly the Israelite capital of Tirzah. It has been dated from the ninth to eighth century B.C.E. (putting it around the same estimated timeframe as the *BAR* shrine), and it was discovered in a pit near the city gate.¹² The shrine reflects the typical one-room style with an empty cubiculum and iconography on the façade, but there are some significant differences with the symbols.

Two pillars flank either side of the doorway, but the top of the column is styled in upturned volutes instead of the drooping petals on the *BAR* shrine. This scroll-type design seems more similar to the Israelite proto-aeolic capitals typical of the First Temple period; however, the volutes scroll inward instead of outward. It is also missing the central triangle, which is typical of proto-aeolic capital. In either case, the pillars seem to represent stylized palm trees, as noted by Othmar Keel. Keel further conjectures that these columns may have originally been a representation of goddesses flanking the doorway, as seen on other house shrines, which will be discussed later. It may also indicate a shift away from anthropomorphism, transitioning sacred tree imagery into an acceptable form of Yahwistic worship.¹³

Another noticeable feature is a crescent moon symbol at the center of the entablature typically associated with Astarte. In addition to the nearly complete shrine, other fragments of house shrines were discovered that seem to originate from two or three other shrines. One fragment was assumed to be part of the doorway of another shrine, and contains similar styling to the complete shrine. The second fragment also appears to be the piece of a doorway, but contains petal-style columns instead of the scrolling volutes. Because no other fragments of these shrines have been recovered, it is difficult to determine whether these were a part of the same cache or whether the shrine with petal-style columns may have originated from another area.

12. Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel*, 337.

13. Othmar Keel, "Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh: Ancient Near Eastern Art and the Hebrew Bible," *JSOTSup* 261 (1998): 42. Keel describes a shift during the Iron Age I and Iron Age IIA periods from the use of anthropomorphic figures to represent deity to the use of sacred tree symbols. He points out that this does not mean that the deities were disappearing altogether, or that anthropomorphic representations were not used again later, but that the general tendency during this period was to steer away from anthropomorphism. Keel cites the work of Ch. Frevel ["Aschera und der Ausschliesslichkeitsanspruch YHWHs," *BBB* 94 (1995)] but mentions that this point is overstated in his work.

Another Israelite house shrine was discovered at Tel Rekhesh, an area associated with Anaharath mentioned in Joshua 19:19 and attributed to the tribe of Issachar.¹⁴ Dated a few centuries earlier to the Iron I period, this house shrine has the same basic structure as the two previously mentioned shrines, but it has some very unique characteristics, including horns protruding at the top and drilled holes for a door to the cubiculum. A piece is supposedly missing across the midsection of the front, which was thought to have been decorated by a design of clay buttons that carry over to the face of the shrine, and a serpentine pattern is portrayed along the bottom. Instead of the typical pillars flanking the entrance of the shrine, two small, unidentifiable figures (thought to be dogs or lions) sit on either side where the base of the pillars would be.¹⁵

It is difficult to determine the deity associated with this shrine because of its limited iconography, other than the horns which are a common symbol associated with various deities in the ancient Near East and the serpent design at the bottom. The crouching figurines could reasonably be lions, which is a feature also represented in the *BAR* shrine and probably associated with Asherah.¹⁶ The piece which appears to be missing from the shrine may have contained more iconographic details to associate this shrine with a particular god/goddess.

A third Israelite shrine was recovered from Dan and dates significantly earlier to the twelfth to eleventh centuries B.C.E. The shrine has a somewhat unique structure in the sense that it appears to be made from the top third of a storage jar, including what appear to be handles on either side of the main opening. These handles may have served the same function as the pillars found on nearly all other shrines, carrying the idea of guarding entrance to the sacred space. The shrine was discovered in a domestic context along with other common household artifacts.¹⁷ No other features are distinguishable on the pot-shaped shrine, other than the lid which was placed as a roof on the mouth of the storage jar turned cultic shrine. This is the earliest example of an Israelite house shrine, and it appears to be a somewhat primitive form with

14. Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel*, 336.

15. Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel*, 337.

16. Hestrin, "Understanding Asherah," 55–8. Hestrin references a depiction of the goddess Qudshu (the Egyptian equivalent of Asherah) standing on top of a lion, as well as the lions flanking a depiction of the goddess on the Taanach stand. According to Hestrin, these lions act as guardians for the goddess. Emile Puech also supports the connection between lions and Asherah, as well as the Egyptian Qudshu (E. Puech, "Lioness," *DDD* 1:981–983). Some scholars, such as Binger, Tilde Binger, *Asherah* (JSoTSup 232. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 57, disagree that there is a direct connection between Qudshu and Asherah based on a lack of supporting evidence.

17. Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel*, 336.

little iconography. Of the four Israelite shrines, it bears the least resemblance to the *BAR* shrine and suggests that the *BAR* shrine probably fits better in a later context closer to the Early Iron Age.¹⁸

The last Israelite shrine was found at a cave in Jerusalem, and it is the most plain-featured of the four shrines. It is dated by the material remains it was discovered with to be from approximately 700 B.C.E., putting it in the context of the Judahite Kingdom. Its structure is a basic cube shape with no painting, iconography, or noticeable features, except for a large piece on the front which may have functioned as an entablature of sorts. The only other clue about its cultic function is the area on the top-left of the front and the middle of the left side where it appears that something was attached. This house shrine may have originally contained an affixed head as we see on the Megiddo stand, representing the deity being worshipped.¹⁹ However, this is merely speculation, and the simplicity of the shrine leaves scholars guessing which deity it was dedicated to.

It may be reasonable to suggest that this shrine is an example of aniconistic worship taking place in the Judahite Kingdom with its lack of symbols and anthropomorphic representations of deity. Compared to the first shrine in this analysis recovered in ancient Tirzah from only one or two centuries earlier, it is significantly less stylized. It could also be argued that these shrines show that the northern Israelite Kingdom was less hesitant to use symbols and other representations of deity while the Judahite Kingdom was more conservative with their iconography in cultic worship.

It appears that the *BAR* house shrine contains many similar features to the Israelite shrines, but a further analysis of non-Israelite shrines will be helpful to see which of the two it seems more likely to fit in with stylistically and iconographically.

The non-Israelite shrines have been discovered from locations scattered throughout the Levant, exhibiting unsurprisingly diverse features from a wide range of periods and cultures. One shrine in particular, discovered near Mt. Nebo, may indicate what these shrines were used for. Dating to the Iron Age, the shrine was found along with several other ritual pieces, including bowls and small jars with perforation and zoomorphic elements. Some of the bowls have a spout and are supported by three legs, similar to bowls discovered at

18. With the exception of the Jerusalem Cave house shrine, the styling and iconography employed on house shrines seems to grow more ornate from the Late Bronze period up to the Iron I and II periods. Because of the use of several symbols on the *BAR* shrine, it would make more sense for it to fit into the Early Iron I period.

19. Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel*, 338.

Bethsaida.²⁰ These vessels give us some indication as to ceremonies which may have been part of the use of this cultic figurine, but no such accompanying items have been found in an Israelite context. The structure of the shrine from Mt. Nebo is plain with an oversized façade which is empty of iconography. However, fragments of a second shrine were also discovered from the same site, including two freestanding pillars containing lions resting at the base, probably representative of the goddess Asherah.²¹

A similar non-Israelite shrine purchased by the Rockefeller Museum in the 1940s by J.H. Iliffe consists of the familiar box-type structure and accompanying ritual items.²² Although its context is uncertain, it is believed to originate from the Transjordan area. The ritual vessels contain the same perforations as the Mount Nebo assemblage, and it may have been used for pouring libations on the shrine. As for the appearance of the shrine itself, it is empty of iconography except for two small faces of goddesses which are probably representative of the guardian goddess of the sacred space. Compared to the *BAR* shrine, it lacks the stylized columns, but this feature may have been substituted by the miniature goddesses above the entryway.²³

While the Mount Nebo and Transjordan shrines were both discovered with what seem to be accompanying ritual vessels, no such artifacts have been found along with Israelite shrines. This demands the question of whether or not the *BAR* shrine originally had its own collection of ritual bowls and pots that were simply not recovered from the site, or if it truly is an Israelite shrine which seems to lack the accompanying vessels.

Another non-Israelite example of interest in this analysis of the *BAR* shrine is an Iron Age shrine discovered in a tomb near Amman in 1959.²⁴ While the *BAR* shrine was also claimed to be from Ammonite or Moabite territory, it exhibits few similarities with this shrine which was actually recovered in context. The shrine is a plain box which stands on four knobs protruding at

20. Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel*, 332.

21. Hestrin, "Understanding Asherah," 58. Hestrin analyzes the Egyptian alias of Asherah known as Qudshu—the name being derived from the Hebrew *qodesh* meaning holy. Qudshu is portrayed naked standing in a frontal position in typical Semitic fashion and is standing on top of a lion. In addition to the naked goddess, Hestrin points out that an Egyptian inscription was discovered which uses the name Qudshu along with Astarte and Anat. As demonstrated in her paper, these goddesses can be equated with the biblical references to Asherah.

22. Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel*, 332.

23. As explained previously, one of the common features of house shrines are two pillars or figures which flank either side of the doorway. See Keel, *Goddesses and Trees*, 41, where various types of shrines and stands are discussed that contain two figures on either side of the entryway acting as guardians of the sacred space.

24. Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel*, 333.

each corner, and it contains no significant iconography or design other than horizontal bands above the entryway. Because the *BAR* shrine was not discovered in context, this shrine throws a connection with Ammonite territory into doubt.

A final category of non-Israelite shrines have been discovered in Cyprus, and they contain some of the most unique features compared to the other shrines. Several have been discovered that contain rows of clay buttons above what appears to be a wide tongue rolling downwards from the cubiculum. The specific number of buttons represented on most of these shrines is six, causing scholars to wonder at their significance. Some consider the possibility that the number of buttons is a divine number and portrays the deity the shrine is meant to be dedicated to.²⁵ Examples of these shrines can be found in the Cesnola collection and the British Museum. This style of shrine was not limited to the Cyprus region, however. An example from Achzib just west of the Dead Sea contains the same rows of buttons and tongue extending out of the cubiculum. Instead of the usual six buttons affixed to the Cyprus shrines, this shrine has eight. Pottery from the same stratum dates it to the seventh century B.C.E., and its location in the southern part of Phoenicia makes it a significant discovery because it reveals the use of abstract iconography up to the seventh century in the motherland.²⁶ While this shrine contains few similarities to the *BAR* shrine, it does indicate that the use of various styles of shrines were spread throughout different areas of the Levant during the seventh century, making it even more difficult to pinpoint a context for the *BAR* shrine.

Israelite and non-Israelite house shrines could be considered part of a broader scheme of cultic objects, including cult stands, which often reflect similar iconography and may be useful in this analysis of the *BAR* house shrine.²⁷ Although cult stands may have performed a similar conceptual function to the house shrines by creating a connection with deity through a portable object, they are generally more abundant in symbols and iconography with which the worshipped deity can be determined.

One stand in particular discovered at Taanach has caused a great deal of debate because of its association with Asherah and the possible representation

25. Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel*, 335.

26. Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel*, 336.

27. Lamoine F. Devries, "Cult Stands: A Bewildering Variety of Shapes and Sizes," *BAR* 13 (1987): 27. Devries suggests a shift away from the label "cult stands" to "offering stands" due to the fact that not all stands performed a religious function. This reasonable distinction verifies the connection between "offering stands" and house shrines, since they both contained offerings to the deity being worshipped. However, the connection is clear under both titles due to the clearly cultic nature of house shrines.

of Yahweh in register two. The first register contains the representation of a nude goddess flanked by two lions, which is most likely Asherah as pointed out previously in the discussion of non-Israelite shrines.²⁸ This hypothesis can be further confirmed by the pairing of the first and third registers, which apparently represent the same deity with alternate imagery. For example, the third register displays a tree flanked by what appear to be goats, followed by the two guardian lions that tie it back to the first register. Most scholars agree that the first and third registers both portray the goddess Asherah, first as the anthropomorphic goddess and secondly as a sacred life-giving tree.²⁹ The second register contains two winged sphinxes standing on either side of an empty space, which appears to have been left empty on purpose with no broken edges.

This puzzling vacancy has left scholars to wonder if it could possibly be a representation of Yahweh, based on the aniconic tradition of the Yahwistic cult. The guardian sphinxes flanking the empty space are also reminiscent of Yahwistic worship; for example, the cherubim standing on either side of the empty space attributed to Yahweh as described in the biblical text for the tabernacle and king Solomon's temple. Additional support of this theory is nuanced by the coupling of the empty register with the fourth, which contains a four-legged animal which scholars believe is a calf commonly worshipped in Canaanite religion, in front of a winged sun-disc. The combination of these features strengthens the argument for a representation of Yahweh, beginning with the sun disc which may be representative of the astral characteristics attributed to Yahweh.³⁰

The calf is another familiar symbol of the cult and is frequently mentioned in the biblical text (including passages such as Exod 32:20, Ps 106:19, 1 Kgs 12:28, 2 Kgs 17:16). All of these instances refer to the creation of a calf figurine which is worshipped as the representation of a deity—possibly Yahweh. However, this cultic activity was later condemned by the Deuteronomistic Historian who often imposed their ultra-orthodox views on the practices of earlier Israelites when they may have been generally accepted at the time. The bronze calf figurine discovered in the region of Northern Samaria, dated to the Iron Age, further solidifies the idea that some Israelites worshipped the

28. Hestrin, "Understanding Asherah," 58.

29. Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic Press, 2007), 322. In addition to Hess' argument on the Taanach stand, the Kuntillet Ajrud pithoi (discussed in more detail later in this study) confirms the connection between Asherah and lion imagery, as well as a tree flanked by ibexes.

30. Glen J. Taylor, "Yahweh and the Sun: Biblical and Archaeological Evidence for Sun Worship in Ancient Israel," *JSOTSup* 111 (1993): 100–1. Taylor analyzes the appellation "Lord of Hosts" in reference to the Taanach stand, pointing out as stated in Ps 80:1 that Yahweh is described as dwelling among the cherubim.

image of a bull.³¹ With these factors in mind, it is reasonable to assume that the Taanach stand contains symbols for both the goddess Asherah and Yahweh. However, these symbols are not the anthropomorphic representations needed to make an accurate comparison to the supposedly missing god and goddess figurines seated in the *BAR* shrine.

In order to provide a more thorough analysis, we will turn from the house shrines and cult stands for a moment to seek textual evidence for the depiction of Yahweh alongside the goddess Asherah. The inscription discovered at Kuntillet Ajrud on a pithos in the Sinai Desert contains an inscription that references Yahweh and “his Asherah.” Accompanied by a painted image of three deities with two in the forefront standing side-by-side and a third off to the side, some scholars believe that this is clear evidence for the worship of Yahweh with Asherah as his consort. However, several problems have arisen with a more detailed study of the text. Andre Lemaire points out that in Hebrew, a personal name never carries a suffix, creating a difficulty when “Yahweh and his Asherah” is translated as a goddess possessed by Yahweh. However, if Asherah is a noun which represents the cultic symbol of the Asherah, such as a pole, then this inscription makes more sense.³² The painting directly below the text also raises questions about the identities of the trio of gods, and scholars have begun to question if they have any connection with the inscription at all. In fact, the painting may have been an earlier or later addition by travelers passing through who felt the need to leave their mark at the site.³³ Ruth Hestrin also points out that the two prominent figures are more likely representations of the Egyptian god Bes with their bent elbow stances and feather headdresses.³⁴

Although this painting may not have a connection with the text, an additional painting on the other side of the pithos displays common elements

31. Amihai Mazar, “The ‘Bull Site’: An Iron Age I Open Cult Place,” *BASOR* 247 (1982): 27–29. Mazar also mentions the common worship of bull imagery in the ancient Near East, including caches of figurines discovered in Egypt and Cyprus and multiple artistic depictions during the Bronze Age. This particular figurine is believed to be the depiction of a deity and not a votive offering based on its size and the use of costly materials such as gems placed in the eye sockets.

32. Andre Lemaire, “Who or What Was Yahweh’s Asherah? Startling New Inscriptions from Two Different Sites Reopen the Debate about the Meaning of Asherah,” *BAR* 10 (1984): 47, 50. Lemaire also contends that Asherah could refer to a holy place, such as a sacred cultic site dedicated to Yahweh.

33. Judith M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 57; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Hadley argues that Kuntillet Ajrud was not a cultic site, but more of a “way station” where travelers would stop to water their animals and rest for the night.

34. Hestrin, “Understanding Asherah,” 58.

associated with the goddess Asherah. In this painting a tree is flanked by two ibexes, as well as two lions. Hestrin points out that this may not be a depiction of the actual goddess; it represents the cult symbol of Yahweh as mentioned in the text as "his Asherah."³⁵ Hadley furthers this hypothesis by stating that the Asherah in the inscription is depicted by the lion on the opposite side, and that it is likely that a supplementary god like Bes could be portrayed literally in a painting, while a primary goddess like Asherah could only be represented by the tree, ibex, and lion symbols.³⁶ While this textual evidence may add to the discussion about Asherah as a consort of Yahweh, the god and goddess are not depicted together anthropomorphically despite the enticing reference in the inscription.

After analyzing a variety of Israelite and non-Israelite house shrines, other cultic stands, and some textual evidence from the Kuntillet Ajrud inscription, it seems that there is no solid ground in which to stake Dever's claims about the *BAR* house shrine as a throne for Yahweh and Asherah. This can be concluded by reviewing the preliminary questions which guided this analysis, including (1) are there other house shrines similar to the *BAR* shrine which can tell us more about its cultic/cultural affiliation; (2) is this really evidence of aniconistic worship; and (3) are Yahweh and Asherah ever depicted together in anthropomorphic form?

When taking into consideration the common motifs and symbols found among these shrines, it seems clear that the *BAR* house shrine is devoted to the goddess Asherah. The tree-stylized columns, lions, and the dove symbol all have been attested in other shrines as symbols of the goddess, and there really are no apparent Yahwistic elements.

Another claim put forth by Dever which is unfounded is that the empty throne in the cubiculum is representative of the aniconistic worship of Yahweh. As has been shown with other house shrines, the cubiculum is often left empty, possibly because the god/goddess figurine was separate or the empty space was used to place offerings to the deity.³⁷ Another possibility is that the empty space could have been representative of the sky god Baal Shamem, who was known according to Syrian texts to be represented by a "sacred emptiness." Furthermore, the empty space may have been representative of any god/goddess who was depicted through iconography on the façade of the house shrine, and it may not necessarily be limited to the aniconic Yahwistic tradition.³⁸

35. Hestrin, "Understanding Asherah," 57.

36. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah*, 154.

37. Albertz and Schmitt, *Family and Household Religion*, 68.

38. Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel*, 329.

The final leading question of this analysis was to determine whether or not Yahweh has been depicted along with the goddess Asherah as his consort, and the evidence is too weak to support this claim. As shown by the Kuntillet Ajrud inscription, what some scholars have anxiously claimed is a clear representation of Yahweh and Asherah connected to a descriptive text, a closer examination reveals that the painting is not associated with the text. While the inscription seems to explicitly mention an intimate relationship between two deities by stating “Yahweh and *his* Asherah,” an understanding of the Hebrew text leads us to believe this reference is not a personal name but probably a cultic symbol or a sacred space associated with Yahweh. In regard to the double-seated throne in the *BAR* shrine, Dever claims that the two back panels are clear evidence that it was intended for a deity and his consort. However, a lack of evidence among other house shrines for this particular type of double-throne makes it very difficult to prove or disprove anything conclusively.

While there are still many unanswered questions about the *BAR* house shrine, it is clear that the evidence used to tie it to the Yahwistic cult is unconvincing, and it would be irresponsible to make such a claim without additional evidence. In the face of the growing excitement about cultic objects used in relation to household Israelite worship, it is becoming increasingly important that scholars take a step back to reassess artifacts and textual materials in order to accurately place it in the context in which it belongs.