Asherah, the mother goddess and *asherah*, the game board

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Abstract

The premise of this article is that the cult object *asherah* symbolized the mother goddess Asherah and was used during the Late Bronze period for playing a specific board game which had religious significance. The goddess Asherah has to be understood within the context of the Ancient Near Eastern culture where the mother goddess and her cult objects were associated with a specific game board. The cult object *asherah* is connected with the ancient "board game of 58 holes" or the "shield board game" according to archaeological and iconographical evidence from all over the Ancient Near East. This interpretation helps to illuminate the background of the book of Judges.

1. INTERPRETATION OF ASHERAH AND THE ASHERAHS

The mother goddess Asherah and her cult objects, the *asherahs*, have been the focus of various scholarly discussions. Several interpretations have been given to understand a important *crux interpretum* in the Hebrew Bible and it seems as if the debate will continue as long as new archaeological artefacts,

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iconographical representations and relevant inscriptions are being discovered each year.²

The major interpretations of A/asherah (Asherah = goddess and asherah = cult object)³ fluctuate between Asherah, the goddess and asherah as a cult object and each of these views can be divided into subsections. The interpretations of A/asherah in the Hebrew Bible can be divided into the pre-Ugaritic and post-Ugaritic phases, which means that the information discovered at Ras Shamra in 1929 brought a major new understanding in that Asherah was for the first time recognized as a separate goddess, distinct from Astarte, and was not regarded as a variant writing of Astarte any more.

During the pre-Ugaritic phase three interpretations dominated the understanding of A/asherah. In the first interpretation/instance, A/asherah was regarded as either the goddess Ashteroth (Astarte) or her cult object.⁴ In the second instance, A/asherah was interpreted as being only a cult object and not a deity.⁵ Thirdly, some scholars believed that A/asherah was both a cult object

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² During the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies that was held in Jerusalem from 22-29 July 1993 it was noticeable in several lectures that inscriptions were annually being added to the text corpus by archaeological excavations in Syria-Palestine which have references to the goddess Asherah and the cult objects, the asherahs.

³ This means that whenever the author writes the word “Asherah” (with a capital letter) it is a reference to the goddess Asherah, while “asherah” (with no capital letter) refers to the cult objects.

⁴ Ohnefalsch-Richter (1893); cf. also Plessis (1921) and Wiener (1847: 95-96).

⁵ These scholars interpreted only the references which indicate the asherah as a cult object and ignores the texts which refer to it as a proper name such as II Kings 23:4-7. Cf. also Smith (1927) and Budde (1899: 732).
and a deity with the same name. It is only the third interpretation that is still followed today in serious scholarly circles.

The first major study in the post-Ugaritic phase is the work done by William Reed (1949) and it is still regarded as a standard work on the A/asherah in the Old Testament. Attention was given to all the verbs and nouns which occur in context together with the A/asherah in all its 40 occurrences in the Hebrew Bible. On the basis of this, Reed (1949) determined that A/asherah was both a deity (Asherah) and a cult object (asherah) of the same name representing the goddess.

Tadanori Yamashita (1964) built on the work of Reed, but his main contribution was that he showed that all 40 occurrences of A/asherah in the Old Testament are found in Deuteronomic passages which are directly dependent on Deuteronomic texts. Yamashita is, however, negative with regard to the connection between the goddess Asherah and the Athirat in the Ugaritic texts.

The major contribution of Alice Perlman (1978) was the recognition of a formulaic pattern which surrounds the use of the A/asherah-related words. She regarded the pattern as stable in form, but variable in vocabulary. Unfortunately, her work was based on the invalid presupposition that the word asherim was lexically distinct from the word asherah and consequently also distinct from the name of the goddess Asherah.

Richard Pettey (1986) made a thorough study of all the occurrences of A/asherah in the Hebrew Bible and he gave attention to all the relevant issues.

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6 This observation was based on Biblical evidence where some texts refer to a wooden object (e.g. Dt 12:21) and in others it mention Asherah as a deity (e.g. I Kg 15:13). Cf. Collins (1889) and Keunen (1882: 88-93).
This study can be used as a basis for further study in each individual occurrence of A/asherah. Petey also discussed the issue whether Asherah was a popular goddess among the Israelites. He stated that the consistent condemnation of Asherah and her asherahs was rejected only in Deuteronomistic circles, not in official religion.

Another very important contribution was made by Walter Maier (1986) who studied all the relevant extra-biblical evidence with regard to Asherah, and this could be regarded as an important stepping stone in any study of this crux interpretum of the Old Testament.

The role of Asherah and her asherah, the cult object in the Israelite religion, has been discussed more intensively in the past decade, due to the discovery of the inscriptions and drawings from Khirbet el-Qôm' and Kuntillet 'Ajrud. The major issue concerned was the A/asherah in relation to the Yahweh religion as reflected in the Hebrew Bible and especially the reference in the inscriptions to Yahweh and his A/asherah (cf. Dever 1982: 37-44). Consequently, the question of Yahweh having a consort had a great influence on the scholarly discussions with regard to the Israelite religion. This interest will continue as long as new archaeological discoveries are made each year, and the author is aware of various unpublished texts on A/asherah from Ancient Palestine which probably will be published in the next few years by several archaeologists, especially from the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.


2. THE NATURE OF THE ASHERAHS

Despite these divergent interpretations it is generally accepted that the asherahs were cult objects symbolizing or representing the goddess Asherah. However, the major uncertainty among scholars about the asherah is the precise nature or character of these cult objects (cf. Louie 1988). It is the intention of this article to come closer to the understanding of the nature of these objects. The basic research in this field of study was done by Reed (1949), who made a number of general observations:

Five verbs refer to their construction by man as an object, namely הַשְׂכָךְ ("to make" in 1 Kg 14:15, 15:13, 16:33; II Kg 17:16, 21:3, 21:7; II Ch 15:16, 33:3; Is 17:8), חֶבֶר ("to build" in I Kgs 14:23), עָשָׂה ("to stand erect" in II Kg 13:6; II Ch 33:19), לְאָשָׁר ("to set up" in II Kg 17:10) and מָצַח ("to plant" in Dt 16:21). On the basis of these verbs he determined that the object was man-made and not a living tree.

Ten verbs were found in conjunction with the destruction of the asherah as an object, namely חֻלָּה ("to cut off" in Ex 34:13; Jg 6:25, 6:26, 6:30; II Kg 18:4, 23:14), יָשָׁר ("to destroy" in Dt 7:5; II Chr 14:2, 31:1), בָּשָׂר ("to burn" in Dt 12:13; II Kg 23:6, 23:15), בָּעֶר (in Piel "to remove" in II Ch 19:3), לְשַׁב ("to break into pieces" in II Ch 34:7), פָּרָה ("to overturn" in II Ch 33:3), פָּרַע ("to pulverize" in II Ch 34:4; II Kg 23:26), פָּרַע ("to pluck up" in Mc 5:14), יָפַע ("to remove" in II Kg 23:6), פָּר ("to remove or take away" in II Ch 17:6).

From the use of these pairs of verbs Reed (1949) was convinced that the Asherah was both a deity and a cult object.

The other important section of Reed’s study is his investigation of the nouns which are found in conjunction with the asherah in the Hebrew Bible, namely גָּרֶן ("graven image" in Dt 7:5; 12:3; II Kg 22:7; II Ch 33:19; 34:3, 4, 7; Mc
5:12), "high place" in I Kg 14:23; II Kg 17:10; 18:4; 21:3; 23:14; II Ch 14:2; 17:6; 31:1; 33:3; 33:19 & 34:3), מַעֲלוֹת ("pillar" in e.g. Ex 34:13; Dt 7:5; 12:3; 16:22; I Kg 14:23; II Kg 17:10; 18:4; 23:14; II Ch 14:2; 31:1; Mc 5:13), מִלְחָשִׁים ("altar" in Ex 34:13; Dt 7:5) and מַכְבִּים ("incense altars" in II Ch 14:4; Is 17:8).

It becomes clear that in order to understand the exact nature of asherah, a thorough investigation of these words is of pivotal importance. This means that one has to clarify the context of these and other related words for a better understanding of the asherahs.¹⁰

Whenever one approaches the modern English translations of the Hebrew Bible it becomes evident that the real meaning of this word A/asherah still escaped the translators. Some translators were cautious and left it untranslated as "Asherahs" (NIV, JB), some used the alternative plural form "Ashteroth" (RSV, NEB), and others followed the LXX version and translated it as "sacred poles" (NAV) or "groves" (KJV) with no description of what it might mean or referred to. These interpretations are still a suitable reflection of the confusion that this word has caused in the scholarly world, whereas various proposals have been reflected in the modern Bible translations.

However, scholars agree that, from the evidence of the Hebrew Bible alone, it is impossible to come to grips with the exact nature of the object. It seems that the object was so well known in the Biblical period that it was unnecessary to provide the reader with all relevant information regarding its precise nature. However, four major interpretations have been proposed by scholars in order to capture the nature of these cult objects, although none

¹⁰ This is the reason why the author has embarked on an extensive discussion of these terms based on his understanding of the asherah object as an ancient game board.
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adequately fit into context as far as all the occurrences in the Hebrew Bible are concerned (cf. Day 1986: 401-407 and Louie 1988: 9-66).

(a) Firstly, the *asherim* were seen as "groves" or "living trees". This meaning was probably taken over from the LXX which has a term "*althos*" which was translated as groves. According to some texts in the Mishnah the *asherahs* were associated with living trees (Louie 1988: 16-18). Danby (1933: 793) describes the *asherah* in the Mishnah as "a tree worshipped by the heathen". Lamine (1977: 595-608 and 1984: 42-51) is the only modern scholar who still maintains the idea that the *asherim* were living trees.

(b) The second interpretation of the *asherahs* is that they were simply wooden carved images of the goddess Asherah. This means the *asherahs* were carved in such a manner that the image of a goddess was visible, probably in the shape of the female figure, but the specific type(s) to represent her was/were almost impossible to determine. Although the *asherah* cult objects symbolized the goddess Asherah, it does not necessarily mean that they were actual images.

(c) The third interpretation was put forward by Lipinski, namely that the *asherah* denotes sometimes a sacred grove and sometimes a chapel or cella (Lipinski 1972: 101-119). The interpretation of the *asherah* as a shrine was only a partial explanation where some occurrences refer to the *asherah* as a "sacred grove" (Ex 34:13; Dt 7:5; 12:3; 16:21; Jg 6:25-30; II Kg 23:15, 23; II Ch 14:2; 31:1; Mc 5:13) and others as a "shrine" (I Kg 14:15, 23; 16:33; 18:19; II Kg 17:10, 16; 21:3, 7; II Ch 19:3; 33:4, 7, 19; Jr 17:2); thus a combination tree-shrine view exists for *asherah* (cf. Louie 1988: 56-63).

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11 This interpretation was proposed by Reed (1949: 91-96) and followed by scholars such as Pettey (1986: 199-200) and Patai (1965: 40). Cf. also the discussion on the "image" view by Louie (1988: 46-55).
(d) The fourth opinion was that the *asherahs* were wooden poles sacred to the goddess Asherah. It is proposed that the sacred *asherah* pole had the form of a stylized tree and, although Day believes it would fit naturally into the evidence of the *asherah*, he accepts that no archaeological material found supports the idea of the sacred pole (cf. Day 1986: 403-408).

In all four the interpretations (above) of the nature of the *asherah* object it is noticeable that none of them adequately fits into the context provided from the Hebrew Bible alone.

The author proposes the idea that the *'aierah* as a cult object in the Hebrew Bible refers to a certain type of ancient game board on which the "shield board game" or the "game of 58 holes" was played throughout the entire Ancient Near East (ANE). Several of these game boards were also found in ancient Palestine, made of ivory or baked clay. The Israelites probably played with these game boards, the *asherahs*, although they would never have fully understood the impact that these board games might have had on their religious life. The motivation for this interpretation will be discussed in the rest of this article.

However, in order for us to understand the significance/nature of these *asherahs*, the shield game boards, they have to be placed and understood in terms of their religious character in the ANE. Although it is unconceivable to place the different religions of the ANE under one umbrella, there are, however, some similar characteristics and themes in all these religions (cf.

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12 The absence of the wooden game boards in ancient Palestine is understandable due to the poor durability of wood over periods. Then there are also the reports that during the reforms of Josiah and Hezekiah that they were all destroyed by being chopped down or burnt as firewood.
Vermaak 1995: 16-39). In this regard there has to be a clear understanding of the benefits and limitations of the study of comparative religion.

3. **THE MOTHER GODDESS AND THE ANCIENT "SHIELD BOARD GAME"**

The "game of 58 holes" (Petrie 1974: 55) was a very popular board game and several of these game boards were excavated all over the ANE, namely in Egypt13, Mesopotamia (Vermaak 1993:116-125), Elam,14 Anatolia15 and Palestine16. This board game was previously called the "game of dogs and jackals"17, but more recently it was referred to as the "shield board game", as it is called by sport/games historians, due to its obvious geometrical shape (Decker 1987:132-140).

In the ANE the mother goddess had many manifestations and diversities and her name overlaps with terms such as "earth mother", "earth goddess" or

13 Cf. Petrie and Brunton (1924: plates XXI and XXII: 7, 12); Winlock (1928: Section II: 10); Carnavon and Carter (1912: 56ff and Petrie 1890: plate XVI).

14 Several fragments of these game boards were found at Susa; however, it is difficult to determine an exact date for these fragments. Cf. Mecquenem (1905:104-106, and Figs. 345-351).


16 Three boards of this category were found among the Megiddo ivories and could be dated to the 13th - 14th centuries B.C. Cf. Loud (1939: 9-10, 19 Plates 47-50).

17 Cf. Carnarvon & Carter (1912:56 ff.) who describe it as "The Game of Hounds and Jackals" because the pegs which fitted in the game board had the heads of either jackals or dogs.
"fertility goddess". In the ANE, gods and goddesses were regularly symbolized by various living creatures. The mother goddess was often represented by the symbol of a "lion", a "throne" or a "tree", which alluded to "strength", "dignity" and "fertility", as in the case of the "storm god". Some pictorial devices or symbols such as "trees", "lions", "thrones" or "pairs of eyes" are in various instances displayed on the obverse face of the actual shield game boards. These symbols possibly provide the context or the *Sitz im Leben* in which these boards games were actually played. It is noticeable that these symbols can all indirectly be connected in some way or another with the mother goddess. It could therefore be argued that these specific game boards were regarded in the ANE as possible cult objects of the mother goddess. In the same sense the *asherahs* could be regarded as game boards which were played in honour of the goddess Asherah.

The meaning of this game has to found in the broader context in which they are found. The game boards were usually found in burial sites and the vast majority of the evidence of the actual game boards come from the Early Bronze to the Late Bronze periods. However, it seems that the meaning of the game boards also changed. During the Early Bronze period this game was apparently played only for the sake of a pastime with no special significance,

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19 Cf. Keel and Uehling (1992); Black and Green (1992); Frankfort (1939) and Collon (1987).

20 The pairs of eyes would indicate that these game boards symbolized some anthropoid form or human objects. The human-like forms of the shield game are found especially during the Late Bronze period. Cf. discussions hereafter by Vermaak (1995: 16-39).

21 Cf. the previous article by the author on the "mother goddess and her games/gaming connection" in this journal (Vermaak 1995: 16-39).
but it developed into a game with special religious significance in the Late Bronze period. The changing of the shape might be a reflection of this change of meaning in society.

A development in the shape of the actual game boards of this game can be determined from the Early to the Late Bronze period. The examples from the Early Bronze Age in Egypt and Mesopotamia both display more the real "shield format", with no indication of the human-like format, in contrast to the examples from the Late Bronze period which are all human-like. The examples from the Middle Bronze period are, however, neither completely in the shield format nor entirely human-like - a sort of half-way development.

This development of the game boards from shield format into the anthropoid format was probably also a reflection of the changes which took place in religions of the ANE, because it is not only certain that other board games such as the senet-game had secular meanings during the Early Bronze and Middle Bronze periods in Egypt (Pusch 1979: 5-60 & 165-191), but also developed into games with religious significance - especially with regard to the progress of the soul of man into the netherworld in the Late Bronze period (Pusch 1979: 61-135 & 193-367). One could, therefore, easily state that related board games which earlier (Early and Middle Bronze periods) were played for the sake of a pastime only, were later (Late Bronze period) also played with a different connotation.

The implication of this interpretation would then be that these games were played as a fertility game in order to bring back the mother goddess, who would be passing through to the netherworld to fetch the fertility god, which in most cases were also the storm god. For people who were dependent on the agriculture of the land this would be a favourable game to play.
4. THE SHIELD GAME BOARDS IN SYRIA-PALESTINE

The game boards with 58 holes from ancient Palestine were found in four Canaanite cities and they were dated independently by separate archaeologists as being from the end of the Late Bronze Age, all in the vicinity of 1200 B.C. It is extremely noticeable that the most of these game boards from Palestine were found within burial contexts. This immediately raises the question whether these objects were indeed cult objects. It is, however, well known that board games in Egypt were related to religion. This means these playing objects were not only used as a pastime, but also had to do something with the life after death.

4.1 Megiddo

In Megiddo (figs. 4 and 11) three well-preserved ivory game boards, and fragments of a fourth one, have been discovered during the first series of discoveries. The two best preserved are on exhibition in the Rockefeller Museum (Jerusalem). The geometric drawing of the game boards clearly indicates the difference between this one and the more secular game boards from the rest of the ANE (cf Vermaak 1995). Several pieces (cf. Loud 1939: plates 74-95) were found, which exactly fit into the rosette-like holes on the boards. Although the origin of the ivories might be dated back to about 1350 B.C., this group from the Megiddo ivories is stratigraphically attributable to the early 12th century B.C. (Loud 1939:1).

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22 Cf. Loud (1939: 9-10, 19 and Plates 47-50). The real ivories are found in plates 46, 48, 49, 50 while the line drawings of some of the game boards are found in Plates 47 and 49.
4.2 Gezer

One clay game board (fig. 5) was found in Gezer and was described by the excavator as a "degenerated Ashtoreth plaque". This clay plaque which has a distorted anthropoid shape consists of a larger and a smaller circular disc seemingly joined together - the smaller part being the head and the larger part being the body and limbs. A number of holes that were made in the clay formed a symmetrical pattern, corresponding with the board game of 58 holes. The object that was discovered in 1909 during an unscientific excavation was dated by Macalister (1912) as from the early "Third Semitic period". This period correlates more or less with the period of the United Monarchy. According to the later excavations (cf. Aminan and van Beek 1976:545-548) this object could then probably also fit into the period about 1200 B.C.

4.3 Beth-Shan

Two ivory specimens (figs. 7 & 8) of this game were found in the tombs of Beth Shan.23 Although they are in a fragmentary condition, enough has remained to determine according to their symmetrical arrangements that they were initially part of the game boards that there were well known in ancient Palestine and the rest of the ANE. The remaining holes that are left in these objects also fit into the pattern of 58 holes that are usually found in the so-called "shield game" (cf. figs. X & Y). The example from tomb 7 has almost a third of the holes left and, according to the other evidence from the tomb 7, it can be dated to the 12th-11th centuries B.C. The other example, from tomb 90, has about half of the original holes and can be dated to somewhere between the 13th and 11th centuries B.C. (Oren 1974:120-123) In comparison with all other ivories from the Canaanite region Oren (1974:123) pointed out that these objects were both found in the tombs in Beth Shan in about 1200 B.C.

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23 Cf. Oren (1974): tomb 7, fig. 41, no. 37; and tomb 90, fig. 45, no. 23.
4.4 Tell Jemmeh

The last game board of the Asherah type was found in Tell Jemmeh\textsuperscript{24}, which is located about 10 kilometres south of Gaza. The broken clay board can also be reconstructed according the existing boards that were found in the rest of the ANE. According to the excavation report the stratum in which the board were found can also be dated to approximately 1200 B.C. (cf. Petrie 1928:1-3)

4.5 Summary of evidence from Syria-Palestine

According to the archaeological evidence provided from Syria-Palestine (above) it is obvious that this "shield" board game had not only a similar anthropoid geometric shape, but the symmetrical pattern of holes within clearly indicates that the notes were originally part of a game board that was well known in the ANE. All these game boards from Palestine were archaeologically dated between the end of the Late Bronze Age and the beginning of the first Iron Age period and therefore about 1200 B.C. This not only correlates with the initial date of the settlement of the Israelites in Canaan, but three of the excavated places of the these game boards were prominently mentioned in the first chapter of the book of Judges - namely Beth Shan, Megiddo and Gezer. These cities formed part of the northern tribal territory where the Canaanites were not conquered, but where the Canaanites and the Israelites lived together for a certain period of time. Although this is only circumstantial evidence to link this board game with Asherah, there is, however, also other evidence which supports this idea.

To prove that an asherah was a specific game board which represented or symbolized the goddess Asherah, can only be done by means of contextual

\textsuperscript{24} Tell Jemmeh was considered (Petrie 1928:1-3) as ancient Gerar (Gn 20:1; 26:1-12), but the majority of scholars agree that the identification of the site as being ancient Yursa according to Mazar's suggestion (Aminan and van Beek 1976:545-548).
comparative research, because the full picture cannot be drawn from the evidence of the Hebrew Bible alone, and Syria-Palestinian artefacts and inscriptions have been found, which have direct relevance to this issue. Although evidence from Syria-Palestine might be scanty, there is enough material that can be justifiably linked up with the evidence from the ANE.

5. ASHERAH, THE GAME BOARD IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

If it is accepted that the cult object, the asherah is an ancient game board on which a certain game was played, then certain issues have to be dealt with and some questions have to be answered. It seems also as if the asherah-related words and concepts support the idea that it might been some kind of board game. In order to understand the nature and significance of the asherah in any way, it is necessary to explain the related words, concepts and contexts where the asherah is associated with. Perlman (1978) has shown that the asherah normally occurs in a certain formulaic pattern, although the order of the vocabulary is not found in a consistent order. Pettey (1986) has drawn up helpful tables which can be used to study these related words from different angles. Some details will now be discussed, regarding these related asherah-words.

The major interpretations in the past decade were that the worshipping of the asherah was permitted in popular life and state circles, but it was rejected in the Deuteronomistic circles (Pettey 1996). The question immediately arises whether these objects were officially accepted or whether the magical significance was understood by the major religious circles (Pettey 1996).

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25 This same applies to the significance of the baals which were normally found together in the Hebrew Bible.
5.1 Etymology

The goddess Asherah first occurs in the Ebla texts (Archi : MARI 7), but is then mentioned in the lists of gods in the third dynasty of Ur as well as in Old and Late Babylonian times. She was a West Semitic goddess and the consort of the Amoritic god, Amuru.

The Ugaritic word 'ṣr has thrown some valuable light on the use of the northwest Semitic 'ṣṣr and therefore also the use of 'ṣr in the Hebrew Bible. Although the Semitic root 'ṣr can have various meanings, the Ugaritic does not have the normal "stride" or "walk", but "follow" (De Moor 1974:438).

The Hebrew word 'asherá has, like its counterpart in Ugaritic, a common noun, 'ṣr, meaning "footstep", as well as a denominative verb 'ṣr with the meaning of "follow (behind)" (cf. Margalit 1990:278-284). This is especially true when the Pi'el form of the verb is used, for example:

Proverbs 4:14 "Do not set your foot on the path of the wicked, or follow in the way of the evil men."

Although the author agrees with Margalit (1990:278) that the Hebrew Bible knows the metaphoric use of "follow in someone's footsteps" as referring to "loyalty, fidelity" in general, it is not certain that it refers to the marital fidelity of a wife to her husband, in particular.

If the word 'asherá derives from the 'ṣr, then this would make perfect sense in terms of the explanation by the author that the 'asherá alludes to the board game related to Asherah, which is dealt with elsewhere. This would then mean that the Asherah board game can be regarded as a "following game". The further implication is that the Asherah game can be regarded as a counterpart of the "senet-game" of Baal, which will be discussed in a following article and
interpreted as a "passing game". This unity of the baals and asherah board games will be pointed out in a forthcoming article.

5.2 Asherahs and the book of Judges

The Israelites came into the land of Canaan during the so-called "Crisis Years" (1250-1150 B.C.)\(^{26}\) of the ANE which was also earlier called the "Dark Age."\(^{27}\) In the book of Joshua several accounts are found which indicate that the Israelites conquered various peoples in order to become the governing people of this region. However, in the book of Judges it is mentioned that the Israelites not only captured a large number of cites, but also mixed/intermingled with some of the local peoples of the day (cf. Jg 1-2). The section on the settlement of the northern central tribes described in the Judges 1:27-35 provides vital evidence for the study of the baals and the asherahs, although this is not explicitly mentioned. Archaeological evidence found in these cities (mentioned in Judges) relates historically to this period. This means that if one accepts the interpretation of Dever (1982: 37-38), who stated that, archaeologically speaking, there then has to be a regional approach, because there is a variety of views that can be ascertained from the various sites.

For this study on the asherahs, material from three archaeological sites was utilized to substantiate the arguments - namely Megiddo, Beth Shean and Gezer. These three cities were not only mentioned in Judges 2 as cities which

\(^{26}\) The congress volume edited by Ward and Jaukowsky (1992) was devoted to the "Crisis Years" of the 12th century: "From beyond the Danube to the Tigris." The variety of articles from the congress covers a large variety of problem areas and provide us with a wealth of information in this regard.

\(^{27}\) This is a term applied by Albright (1956:114-164) to the 12th-10th centuries B.C., which he borrowed from the later Hellenistic studies.
were not conquered by the Israelites, but the Israelites intermingled with the people from these cities. In his regional description of the transition period - namely from the Late Bronze to the Iron Age. - Dever (1982:37-38) groups these cities among those that have a combined Egyptian and Canaanite character. This would then justify the author’s approach of using comparative material from Egypt during this period. The major texts, artefacts and iconographical material from Egypt during this period may also be used in connection with the asherahs.

However, according to the reports from the book of Judges, the Israelites were probably involved in the playing of these games, but they were apparently not aware of any metaphysical value of these playing objects. They only joined in the playing of the game for the sake of enjoyment and pleasure or as a pastime.

If the etymology of asherah is taken into account with *šr having the meaning of “follow”, then it is quite possible that the asherahs could give insight into the rules of the game, namely a “following game”. This would mean that one player had to start with a lead and then be followed by the opponent and be caught or passed by the opponent.

In Judges 2:3 the Israelites were informed by an angel that the baals and asherahs were some kind of trap or a lure/bait (ψηλος). The angel described the significance of these items to the Israelites. They cried when they realized that what they were doing with these games had a magical connection. They were initially ignorant as to the real meaning of these asherahs (games). Although the Israelites tried to get rid of these objects, they kept coming to the fore as a threat to the people. These objects fascinated the people.

The asheras got hold of the Israelites in four phases, namely in the ignorant phase (Jg 2:3), then they became part of their private religion Jg 2:11-13; 3:7), then the temple and eventually the altar (Jg 6:25-33). The rest of the book
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shows how these items, as well as other images, became part of their religious activities.

In Judges 2:13 the meaning of the word עבֵד could then be interpreted differently from the normal “worship”. The unusual occurrence of the ל is an indicator of the indirect object after this verb:


In accordance with the discussion above this interpretation would fit appropriately into a translation such as “they have played with the baals and the asherahs”. Although this is the only intransitive use of this verb עבֵד in Judges, it raises the question whether the other occurrences without the ל should also be interpreted figuratively. It means that this occurrence in Judges 2:13 could mean, literally, playing with the game boards and, figuratively, worship.

6. THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF ASHERAH AS A GAME BOARD

The cult object asherah from the Hebrew Bible was a symbol or representation of the goddess Asherah. The objects of the mother goddess Asherah can only be understood within the broader context of the mother goddess in the ANE and certainly in association with the storm god, Baal, in the Hebrew Bible. The mother goddess was connected, via her iconographical symbols and in literary texts, into the world of gaming practices. The game boards with their symbols of the mother goddess also give us the scope that the asherahs were playing objects, and the author believes they refer to certain game boards. This game was played to enhance the return

28 This relation with Baal and his gaming connection will be dealt with by the author in forthcoming articles.
of the mother goddess from the netherworld and that she might return safely and not without the storm god Baal. In this sense it could also be regarded as a fertility game.

The fact that most of the examples of this game were found in burial contexts also substantiates the idea that the game was played to ensure life after death. The religious meaning of these objects was therefore obvious; however, one has to understand it in terms of the comparative religion of the ANE. This was the practice of the Canaanite groups when the Israelites came into Israel in about 1200 B.C. and intermingled with the foreign pagan nations in a number of areas and cities.

The asherah, as a specific game board for playing the asherah - game, would firstly give some insight into the mysterious popularity of the baals and the asherahs among the people. The mystery had to be something extraordinary that could control their minds, hearts and feelings. It seems that the majority of the people did not really understand the metaphysical meaning of these objects. The magic of the game took control of them and the real significance was only understood by a few. Although one might say that only the Deuteronomistic circles realized the diabolical effect on the people, it was only after the Lord sent an angel to the Israelites in the pre-monarchial period that some of the people understood its significance (Jdg 2-3). The Israelites played with the asherahs as a daily pastime, but the pagan influence of the asherahs on their lives was ignored by most of them or they were unaware of it. One could even say that they were disguised objects, not merely innocent playing objects; they were objects which could have an impact on life after death.

The message and focus of the book of Judges is that “the Lord will provide”. Whenever the Israelites came under threat from the Canaanite groups, the Lord provided a way out, by presenting them with another judge to redeem the people from the outsiders. In this way the Lord kept them dependant on Himself for their daily survival and comfort. However, the people kept on
asking for some kind of physical guarantee that He was present. From the Canaanites they acquired this security and presence from the game boards. The meaning of the asherahs (to make provision for abundance of crops and independence) was quite opposite from the purpose of the book of Judges. In sum, the Israelites initially played with these game boards for pleasure, but their magical affects eventually became a threat to themselves and to their religious life.

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PLATE I: GENERAL FORMAT OF THE GAME BOARD

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 4
PLATE II: GAME BOARD AND HUMAN MOTIF

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

Fig. 7

Fig. 8
PLATE III: GAME BOARD AND LION MOTIF

Fig. 9

Fig. 10

Fig. 11

Fig. 12
PLATE IV: GAME BOARD AND TREE MOTIF

Courtesy:
Metropolitan Museum of Art
New York

Fig. 13

Fig. 14

Fig. 15

Fig. 16