

St Andrew's Presbyterian Church Penrith

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ENCOURAGEMENT LETTER 9/10/2024

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Hugh here. How are you today? I'm thankful for the long weekend, and the opportunity to see God's beauty curated with human creativity at the Floriade flower festival.

Today's encouragement is on "the Lord alone" after which we move on to church matters.

The goddess Asherah (pl. "Asherim" in the ESV) appears close to 40 times in the OT, including in 1 Kings 14 and 15 (preached on recently in the morning services). Today, we're going to find out a little bit about this commonly mentioned idol. Because Asherah's an idol, she's a distortion of the true and living God, and looking at her alone would be depressing, disturbing and misplaced, so we'll look at Asherah only enough to understand the scriptures and how she contrasts with the Lord. It's as we look at the Lord's truth, goodness, and beauty, that we'll be strengthened today.

The idol Asherah seems to overlap with the similar Ashtoreth, who is mentioned three times in the Bible. Both are mentioned together in 2 Ki. 23, suggesting the overlap was not complete. Asherah has a Canaanite origin, Ashtoreth Phoenician (see 1 Ki. 11:5, 33, 2 Ki. 23:13). Both were fertility goddesses and Ashtoreth was also a goddess of war. Adopting, switching, and renaming deities is common in polytheistic religions. The Romans did this when they renamed Zeus to Jupiter, but we can't do this with the Lord. People who worship a god other than the god of the Bible are not worshipping the Lord under another name, they are worshipping an idol.

When Paul went to Athens he says:

As I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth ... since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." Acts 17:23-31

Many post-modern Australians, like ancient pagans, would like to believe that all religions are essentially the same. They are not. We must worship the Lord as he reveals

himself, most fully in the person of Jesus Christ, and after coming to know Christ, how could we turn to or mistake him for any other?

Asherah was a fertility goddess and was considered Baal's consort/ wife/ queen. For this reason, they are often mentioned together as head of the pantheon, (similar to how Zeus and Hera are the head of all the Greek gods). As the king and queen gods, the Bible sometimes uses them to represent the deities under them (e.g. Jud. 3:7). Archaeological evidence proves that Asherah was sometimes adopted by the Israelites as a female consort for the Lord. We can understand how this might have happened. God is usually described in masculine terms, and in a polytheistic world, where the gods are really just bigger versions of humans, it would only be natural to give the Lord a feminine counterpart.

This is why it's important for us to remember who God is. He isn't simply a bigger, more powerful version of you and me. Nor is he male with reproductive organs and desires like human beings. Deut. 6:4 says: *"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one."* That verse tells us that God is not the head of a pantheon – he rules alone. Nor is God in need of a consort, because God isn't lonely. The Bible reveals that we worship one God in three persons – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. He is self-sufficient in and of himself. No consort required. No consort required ... but in his grace, God chooses to take us, his chosen people as his bride to live with him and enjoy him forever (Hos. 2:16-17).

Asherah is usually mentioned in reference to the poles used to worship her. None of these poles have survived to modern times, but seem to have been a wooden trunk placed in the ground. They're described as being *"set up"* or *"planted"* (Deut. 16:21), *"cut down,"* and *"burned"* (e.g. Ex. 34:13, Deut. 12:3, 1 Ki. 15:13). They seem to have had carvings (2 Ki 21:7), which, if like the smaller clay statues that have remained, would have depicted her holding her breasts (remember she's a fertility goddess).

As a fertility goddess, she no doubt inspired all kinds of sexual misconduct amongst God's people (as we saw in 1 Ki. 15:12-13). The Bible is full of scorn for idols:

"Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it?

Or an image that teaches lies?

For he who makes it trusts in his own creation;

he makes idols that cannot speak.

Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!'

Or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up!'

Can it give guidance?

It is covered with gold and silver;

there is no breath in it.

But the LORD is in his holy temple;

let all the earth be silent before him."

Habakkuk 2:18-20.

God's ways are too perfect to be connected with the vile practices of prostitution. God is too glorious to be depicted by a pole. It can't do him justice, and yet in his grace, God did allow himself to be perfectly depicted by the man Jesus Christ, and Jesus allowed himself to secure justice by dying on a pole (with crossbeam). How wonderful that we don't gather to worship around a pole, but the empty cross of the risen, ascended Lord.

FINAL COMMENTS

*to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ!
Amen.*

Romans 16:27

Love and prayers, Hugh