# Introduction

Eschatological scripture frequently provides information concerning God’s unique relationship with His people. Unfortunately, attempting to understand this scriptural genre is filled with uncertainty, even when additional evidence is provided through the archaeological activity, the interpretation can still be mistaken. Thus, when archaeologists analyze and report on an assemblage of artifacts, they “ . . . provide messages to other archaeologists and the non-archaeological public as to what archaeology is; . . . a . . . practical transformative activity on the past (Shanks and Tilley, 1992:109).” In other words, archeologists interpret a perceived reality by trying “ . . . to understand an alien culture involving meaning frames radically different … (Shanks and Tilley, 1992:107)” from their own mindset. This methodology of describing the perceived social reality can be understood by use of a model developed by Strange (1992:25). The model portrays the investigative and analytical processes accomplished by the analysis of assemblages; processes we will focus on in order to better understand the resulting ‘Social Reality’. A slightly modified model (Figure 1) demonstrates how physical and literary artifacts are analyzed and defined into a conglomerate of ‘social systems’ that then through a dialogue/dialectic process are merged together to form a combined social system, that through an iterative process finally constructs a ‘Social Reality’ representing the people and culture that created the specific artifacts under review. During this discussion we are going to be analyzing artifacts created within two social systems, the first being the religious cult social system, and the second, the marriage or consort social system. The interpretation of these two social systems is then based on the understanding of indicators in the archaeological record. This will then lead to a better understanding of a specific ‘social reality’ in 6th century BC Israel.

# Archaeological Indicators of Social Systems

Indicators of a religious cult social system (Renfrew and Bahn 1996:391) are seen in the archaeological record when an artifact or an assemblage provides for a focusing of attention. For example, special places, buildings, temple complexes, are to assist in focusing the celebrant’s attention on the unknown. In addition to special places, special equipment, such as altars, benches, lamps, gongs, and others are used to assist with the focusing of attention towards the deity or deities. These indicators are readily seen in our churches and other religious institutions today. Another focusing of attention indicator can be deduced when the artifacts or assemblages repeat the same or similar symbol, which by its redundant depiction permeates the site and assists in focusing the celebrant thoughts on worship within the religious cult social system. Another archaeological indication is the presence of a boundary zone separating this world and the next. For example, acknowledgement of the sacredness and efforts to provide for hidden mysteries and secret ceremonies along with public displays evident in the architecture would indicate boundary zones. Concepts of purity and pollution and maintenance of a sacred area through ritual cleansing and other efforts are also indications of the religious cult. Finally, anthropomorphic images representing the deity or deities and/or abstract symbols are also indications that the assemblage is associated with the religious cult social system. When the archaeological artifacts and/or assemblages manifest these types of indicators, an understanding of the religious cult social system is possible.

Indicators of the marriage/consort social system are seen in artifacts and assemblages associated with marital concepts. Ember and Ember (1973:306) noted that marriage is a “… socially approved sexual and economic union between a woman and a man” manifested in a variety of means. From the definition certain general concepts are normally present. The understanding that the marriage is a permanent event; it provided for a division of labor (i.e., domestic duties); it has established reciprocal rights and obligations, and it provides for sexual reproduction all lead to manifestation in the archeological context. Specific indicators (Ember and Ember 1973:306) are related to ceremonies and economic transactions that would accompany the marriage event, others would relate to the social privileges of the wife in the social system of… Table 1 provides an overview of the indicators and the social system they define as discussed above.

Table 1: Archaeological Indicators

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Religious Cult Social System Indicators | Marriage Social System Indicators |
| Focusing of attention | Marriage ceremonies |
| Boundary zones | Division of labor (domestic duties) |
| Presence of the deity | Economic transactions |
|  | Reciprocal rights and responsibilities |
|  | Sexual reproduction |

# Methodology Example

As an example of using this methodology, consider the following scenario, in which you are asked to place yourself far into the future. Mankind has reached the stars, and Tellus archaeologists are constantly researching the cultures and societies that aided in that push towards the stars, especially a society they have come to call the NorAm complex. This complex is specifically known for its architectural constructs and as the society that brought forth the initial computer capabilities that the current society relies upon. For some reason, either through war, famine, or conquest, undecipherable electronic data has survived. Additionally, very little written information is available, especially in the religious arena. For archaeologists in this hypothetical society, finding written manner produces great excitement in both the public and professional arenas. And so, it is with much excitement, that the following news article is published.

Dateline: The future. The headline reads, “THE LAMB HAD A WIFE!” Tellus archaeologists today announced that an artifact recently discovered dating from the 21st century definitively proclaims that a worshiped deity called ‘the LAMB’, also known as Jesus Christ had a wife. The artifact in question is an impression left by paper and ink on a concrete building footing recently excavated on Tellus. This is a significant break- through for understanding the religious thinking from a time period critical to current religious thinking. Scholars and religious experts are ecstatic and are proclaiming the find as a significant archaeological event. Archaeologists state that a ‘Social Reality’ construction based on the imprint of a graphical depiction of an assembly of people and an inscription located directly below the graphic will be possible. Scholars who have seen the artifact differ concerning the entities depicted in the graphic shown here (Figure 2), especially the central figure, but all agree on its significance. There are many hypotheses concerning the personage depicted sitting on a chair that has all the trappings of a throne; is this the LAMB; or some other deity? Many scholars feel that the person standing in the center of the kneeling people is the Lamb mentioned in the accompanying inscription. While the graphic has a multitude of meanings, the writing associated with the graphic is very exact. It states that “(L)et us rejoice, and give honor to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife hath made herself ready ….” Unfortunately, the inscription is broken off at this point, so the name of the wife may never be known. Additionally, scholars are wondering why the inscription was placed as part of the construction for the building. Some scholars have ventured a hypothesis that this was a means of bestowing a prayer during the construction. Of course, we may never know the true reason for the placement of the paper, just as we may never know who is the wife of Jesus Christ, the LAMB.

Using the analytical model and the archaeological indicators of the two social systems, let’s perform an initial analysis of the futuristic scenario (Figure 3). The scenario described provides information from two distinct investigative artifacts. First, there is the physical drawing that contains images of entities and objects. Secondly, there is the literary artifact that contains the inscription. Our methodology describes the process by which each artifact would be properly analyzed and appropriate scholarly papers written and discussed, until a generally accepted social construct of the ‘Social Reality’ would be determined. For the scenario above, the drawing has archaeological indications of a religious cult social system, with a pictured worship room (focusing of attention) and personages bowing down to a person (presence of deity), who is faceless due to the glow about the face (presence of deity). Another eminent person is standing with out stretched hands (indicating an economic transfer from one to another). From the literary artifact investigation, it is possible to see religious cult social system indicators with the honoring of someone (presence of deity), while the marriage ceremony (marriage ceremony) and wedding (feasting ceremony) are indictors for a marriage/consort social system. Both social systems are associated to the same collection of entities due to its physical relationship being found in the same provenience especially for the LAMB and his wife. When these two social systems are combined together, a “Social Reality” could state that the people of the culture being analyzed understood that the Lamb deity had a wife, just like men. This anthropomorphic understanding of the culture would not be an unusual interpretation for this futuristic and simplistic scenario.

While this has been a whimsical exercise in using the model, is this not the same process Dever (1990:140-149) and others (Taylor 1994; Hestin 1991) have used when they constructed their ‘Social Reality’ of the Iron II period reflected by the artifacts found at Kuntillet cAjrûd and Kh. el-Qôm.

# Asherah

Prior to discussing the artifacts, let’s first examine some common understandings concerning the asherah. Asherah or its equivalent personage is mentioned in numerous non-Biblical texts in Egypt and Syria-Palestine, with the best known being those from the Ugarit tablets. That asherah is associated with life giving is seen by her association with life giving trees, pubic triangles and the nude figure. (Figure 5) Throughout the near east, in Egypt where she was know as Qudshu, in Ugarit where she was know as Athirat or ’Elat, or in Israel, as the asherah, the symbols of the tree, the pubic triangle, and the nude female depiction are constant. In general, asherah were known to provide consort services (marriage social system) to the gods, to be a mother (sexual reproduction) of the gods, the goddess of love (sexual reproduction), and the one who attends to household tasks (division of labor). For instance, in the Ugarit poems, asherah is called the Progenitress of the Gods (Ginsberg 1958:98-104) and she also acts in a place of propitiation for her children (reciprocal rights and obligations) (Ginsberg 1958:98-104). Asherah is also known as the goddess of fertility for humanity (sexual reproduction), flocks, and crops, and for great wisdom. In the Egyptian version asherah is associated with the god of fertility (sexual reproduction) and the Egyptian symbol of life: the ankh. However, before contending that the asherah is a depiction of a specific goddess, especially in the Israeli context, it should be noted that the noun asherah is many times preceded by the definite article “the” (ה in Hebrew) (Taylor 1994:54) and might be better read as “the asherah” which could just as easily be translated as a class of goddesses. What is significant, however; is that the asherah motif was wide spread in the Near East world, a motif that permeated the Israelite cultural reality. Thus, when examining the literary artifacts, the asherah motif and influence is important to a proper understanding of the perceived social system.

# Analysis of Kuntillet cAjrûd and Kh. el-Qôm Assemblages

The physical location of the Kuntillet cAjrûd artifacts, specifically those in an “ . . . evidently . . . small sanctuary (Dever 1990:140)” providing a focusing of attention and boundary zones denote an area located within a caravserai where travelers could bed down for a night and, at the same time, pray for a safe journey (Taylor: 1994:53), and is extremely indicative of the religious cult social system. Specifically, the sanctuary served to assist in focusing the celebrant’s thoughts on specific prayer requests. Additionally, the ritualistic symbols representing the deity on the walls, and especially on large storage jars assist in affirming this assemblage reflects a religious cult social system. The religious nature of the location within the caravserai is thus easily recognized. Similarly, the Kh. el-Qôm artifact’s location within a burial location, which is normally associated with boundary zones, is indicative of the separation between this world and the next and with burial rites. Of course, burial rites by themselves are normally assumed to be an indicator of a religious cult social system. The physical location of the two archaeological finds definitely speaks to the religious cult aspect of the find sites and would provide input to an understanding of that specific social system. As should be evident, these two site assemblages are seen to strong indicators for the religious social system.

Again, using Strange’s methodology the inscription artifact from Kuntillet cAjrûd assists in understanding a religious cult social system understanding by its request for a blessing from an acknowledged deity (presence of deity). Additionally however; the indication associated with the word consort (reciprocal rights and obligations) seems to demonstrate a marriage/consort social system understanding for the deity Yahweh and His asherah. Similarly, the Kh. el-Qôm inscription confirms the religious cult social system by the desire to obtain a blessing (presence of deity) and while the implication of the phrase ‘ . . . save him by his asherah’ is not a strong suggestion of reciprocal rights and obligations available within the marriage/consort social system, it is at least suggestive. It seems that the described process is reflective of that followed by Dever in his analysis of these two assemblages! Naturally, once these two social systems are combined, it is easy to state that the “Social Reality” of the Iron II period was that the deity Yahweh had a consort named asherah and that invoking this “asherah” for a blessing was an allowed and accepted practice in Israel. Dever (1990:147) then provides additional literary support for his contention that the Israelites fostered this type of acceptance by citing II Kings 21:7 and 23:7, where mention is made of furnishings made for asherah (economic transactions), not just the market place, but even in the Temple complex. Finally, from the physical remains arena, Dever mentions the proliferation of “asherah figurines” in Israel (presence of deity and focusing of attention) as supporting his contention that asherah was worshiped in Israel. Thus the “Social Reality” constructed (Figure 6) by Dever and others seem to have a logical basis. While Dever points out the abundance of “asherah pillars” in Israel in support of his conclusions about the understanding of asherah, it must also be noted that the proliferation provides a strong typology indicative of a significant human behavior for this historical period. Chang (1967:9) states that, “Typology, by virtue of its identification with behavior and, perhaps, intent, is a theoretically systematic, persistent, and rigorous instrument with which to probe human behavior and human history.” The typology that the asherah pillars provide is of commonality and acceptance. If the asherah pillars were so readily accepted, the “Social Reality” must have been one that at a minimum condoned them. This iterative process utilizing dialectic processes therefore seems to bring some substance to the constructed “Social Reality” that has been stated thus: “ . . . to Jerusalem devotees of Asherah, the goddess was only the wife of Yahwe (sic), just as she was the spouse of El in the Ugaritic pantheon (Gordon 1965:249).” In other words just like the pagan religions surrounding Israel, the Israelite people succumbed to subscribing to an anthropomorphic religion.

But is this in reality the final statement concerning the “Social Reality” of this historical period in Israel? Could additional iterations using different literary and physical remains be added to increase our understanding? Prior to proceeding, it should be understood what Shanks and Tilley (1992:256) stated by saying that the “ . . . past is read from the present and its reality may have different pertinent meanings in different historical circumstances.” As an evangelical Christian the viewpoint one comes with when analyzing these assemblages does impact how one treats each individual artifact. While I agree that many of the Israeli nation during the Iron II period worshiped the gods of other nations, I do not necessarily believe as others might that it was just due to a syncretistic religious environment. Rather some of the manifestations of the cultural understanding were due to an ongoing and evolving understanding of the nature of Yahweh. This evolving understanding when combined with a cultural mindset similar to that, which allowed the Egyptian religious scene to have their multitude of gods, begs additional iterations through the model. This cultural mindset of “Ancient thought – mythopoeic, “myth-making” thought – (that) admitted side by side certain ***limited*** insights, which were held to be ***simultaneously*** valid, each in its own proper context, each corresponding to a definite avenue of approach (Frankfort 1961:4).” When combined with this revolving of a surety the Israelite nation was influenced by this mindset and it is this mindset that had significant impact on the religious mindset in every culture during this time period. I contend that the assemblage of artifacts that are now examined in conjunction with those already reviewed support an evolving understanding of Yahweh, and His relationship with Israel. And while Taylor (1994:55) has stated, “All these strands of theological understanding of Yahweh and Yahweh worship existed simultaneously – a most elevated and abstract understanding within a pagan (though Yahwistic) context,” I contend that the resultant artifacts are reflective of a clashing of those mindsets with a evolving revelation of Yahweh and His relationship with Israel.

Re-Write entirely….. (((((That the Israelite understanding of Yahweh was an evolutionary understanding is because Yahweh was seen to be reveal His nature through the unique function of scripture; which Warfield (1948:79) states is through the process of historical development. Israelite understanding of Yahweh was evolving and additional iterations through Strange’s model should provide the means to assess whether there are indications of an evolving understanding of Yahweh. This assessment can seen by adding into the mixture the four-tiered cultic stand excavated in Taanach and scripture from Hosea.)))))

A review of the Taanch stand, which Taylor (1994) believes portrays the invisible Yahweh with the visible symbols available for the asherah is now in order. First, however, note that the entire stand is a representation of a religious cult social system from a historical time period. The four tiers have been suggested to represent either Yahweh or the asherah (Taylor 1994), or alternatively Baal and Asherah (Hestin 1991). In either case, the tier definitely represents a means of focusing attention towards a deity or deities and attests to a presence of deity or deities. The physical artifact (Figure 7) is a indication of the religious cult social system. It is interesting that Taylor suggests that the tier represents Yahweh and the asherah, since, as Taylor states, “ . . . this deity (Yahweh) is characterized by the impossibility of a representation or depiction – an abstract, non-anthropomorphic deity (Taylor 1994:60).” According to Taylor, tier 1 at the top represents Yahweh as a horse below a blazing sun, which readily brings to mind II Kings 23:11.

“He [Josiah] removed the horses that the kings of Judah had dedicated to the sun, at the entrance of the house of the Lord . . . and he burned the chariots of the sun with fire” (II Kings 23:11).

Tier two depicts a tree of life and as has already been discussed, this tree motif is normally associated with the asherah. Tier three is unique with no visible symbol representing a deity and will be further discussed below. Tier four depicts a nude female characteristic of asherah. As stated earlier, the entire stand has indications of the presence of the deity, and it also allows for a focusing of attention providing the celebrant a visible focal point to concentrate on while seeking supplication from the deity or deities. Taylor contends that the stand’s third tier (starting from the top) with its vacant space between two cherubim (Taylor 1994:60) is an abstract representation of the non-anthropomorphic Yahweh. That the Israelite people at this point understood their deity to have an incorporeal presence is a significant evolutionary thought. Previously Yahweh was associated with physical and auditory manifestations that would or could easily be associated with a physical deity. Which remains a manifestation for the religious cult social system (presence of deity). The stand with the exception of the third tier manifests an abundance of anthropomorphic concepts associated with the deities depicted, reflecting the prevalent understanding of Yahweh at the time. That the tier is also an artistic interpretation of the religious scene is evident. However, artistic artifacts are but just one piece of evidence in a culture being studied and cannot be solely relied upon to produce an understanding of the social norms. Thus Chang states:

“Culture does not consist of artifacts; these are merely the results of culturally conditioned behavior performed by the artisan. Types and modes express the culture which conditions the artisan’s behavior. Types are stylistic patterns to which the artisan tries to make his completed artifacts conform. Modes are community-wide standards which influence the behavior of the artisan as he makes the artifacts (Chang 1967:8-9).”

The stand artistically represents the changing cultural types and modes within the community concerning Yahweh and the asherah. In the Taanch stand the artist has combined both the visible with the invisible, the consort understanding prevalent in the community with the asherah. Once this is acknowledged the questions become:

Is the vacant space an indication of an evolving concept for Yahweh?

Is the combining of the asherah with Yahweh an indication of an evolving understanding of a consort relationship?

To attempt an answer to these questions, our discussion now turns to the literary artifacts gathered from the scripture. During the historical period that we have been discussing, the prophets Hosea and Ezekiel seem to call upon the people to understand that their nation has a special relationship to Yahweh; a relationship similar to the husband/wife relationship obtained within a marriage/consort social system. Focusing on Hosea, in Hosea 2:16-17, the scripture states that God is to be addressed by a new title. Henceforth, “Israel will address Yahweh as her covenant lord (Heb. *’îš î,* “my husband”); no longer will she use the name Baal (Heb. *ba’ělî*, “my master”) in any context (Noll 1984:571). Hosea seems to be proclaiming the various indicators of a marriage/consort social system understanding for Yahweh and the Israeli people. While, Noll (1984) states that Hosea calls for a complete break from the syncretistic worship practiced in the eighth century Israel (Hosea 2:19), could this not be a reference to the promise of a new “marriage” covenant ceremony, reciprocal rights and responsibilities Yahweh establishing or revealing to his people (Hosea 2:16, 20-22). These reasons are a strong indication of the evolving understanding of Yahweh that contributed to the linking of Yahweh to the asherah. Hosea is stating that this is a new understanding of the God-Israelite relationship (Hosea 2:16-17): a marriage/consort relationship.

This evolving understanding of the Yahweh/Israelite relationship was unfortunately dynamically influenced by the social paradigms surrounding the Israelite nation. As mentioned earlier, the asherah concept was a common motif throughout the Near Eastern world. As the consort of the gods, the asherah were seen in a multitude of roles, especially in the marriage/consort arena. This paradigm is seen especially the Ugarit poems where she was called upon to plead the case of Baal before El. When asherah pleaded with El to build a house for Baal (Ginsberg 1958:98-104), this is an indicator of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities within the marriage/consort social system. As the mother of the gods, asherah had responsibilities towards the offspring. As the consort of El, asherah had the right to plead the case of her offspring to El. This depiction of asherah in the marriage social system was re-enforced by the Egyptian goddess Qudshu who was associated with Min, the Egyptian goddess of fertility and with an ankh, the Egyptian symbol of life, both indicators of the marriage/consort social system. Asherah then physically represent the marriage/consort social system associated with the gods. We than can interpret the “asterah” as a means of describing the marriage/consort relationship with the gods. If this is a possible interpretation, then it is possible that these representations of the asherah were joined with the evolving understanding of the Yahweh-Israeli / husband-wife analogy so vividly described in Hosea and again in Ezekiel? The understanding of the asherah in Israel came to reflect the special relationship (reciprocal rights and responsibilities) Israel had with Yahweh. The “Social Reality” depicted then is not of an actual goddess, but rather Israel as wife to Yahweh. While Dever (1990:145) and others consider the mentioning of asherah in the scripture as a softening of the impact by construing the name as cultic items, is it not possible that the scripture reveals the evolving understanding of the relationship Israel has with Yahweh? Is it not possible that the mentioning of “the asherah” in the scripture is an indication of the unfortunate becoming of (the Yahweh–Israel) husband-wife relationship into a pagan pantheon similar to those in Near East nations? Similarly, could not II Kings 21:7 and 23:7, where mention is made of furnishings made for asherah (economic transactions?), be understood to reflect furnishings made for a physical representation of Israel? And, finally, from the physical remains arena, could not the proliferation of “asherah figurines” in Israel (presence of deity and focusing of attention) indicate that in Israel, the understanding that Israel was the asherah of Yahweh. This could easily lead to an understanding that offered prayer to these asherah could induce Yahweh to show favor on the nation.

When these interpretations are processed though the dialectic process per the model, (Figure 8) we come to a different combined social system than what Dever and others have constructed. The combined social system would be that since Israel is called as a wife for Yahweh, and since the prevalent religious cult social system acknowledged that the consort of the gods was asherah, with it privileges, rights, and accesses that Yahweh had to have an asherah. Once this line of thought is pursued, it becomes interesting that the asherah depicted on the Taanach stand has lions on the two tiers, associated with the asherah, and that Judah/Israel is many times associated with lions. In fact whimsically, it might be tempting to state that Israel is “the asherah” of Yahweh. However, in reality the model seems to suggest that a corrupted understanding of “the asherah” was forced upon the Israelite understanding of the invisible Yahweh and that corrupted understanding led to the creation of the artifacts discussed. The corruption of the evolving understanding of Yahweh and His relationship with Israel led to the artistically created artifacts found at Taanch, Kuntillet cAjrûd, Kh. el-Qôm, and especially the multiplicity of asherah pillars.

In conclusion, there is a link between theological understanding and execution of specific artifacts by artists/people in the society. That the artifacts mentioned are manifestations of the religious cult social system has been attested to previously (Taylor 1994, Dever 1990, Hestrin 1991) and is not contested. However, even as Taylor (1994) stated, these artifacts represent the multiple strands of Yahweh understanding, an understanding that was evolving through time. By proposing an alternative understanding of how the Israeli people could have understood the asherah I hope to open debate concerning the generally accepted understanding of the religious mindset in the Iron II period.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Renfrew, Colin and Paul Bahn.

1996 *Archaeology: Theories, Methods and Practice.* Thames and Hudson, Itd, London.

Chang, K. C.

1968 *Rethinking Archaeology.* Random House, New York

Ember, Carol R. and Melvin Ember.

1. *Anthropology,* 4th edition. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Dever, William G.

 1990 *Recent Archaeological Discoveries and Biblical Research*. University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA and London.

Frankfort, Henri.

1961 *Ancient Egyptian Religion*. Harper Tourchbooks, Harper & Row, Publishers, New York.

Ginsberg, H. L.

1. Ugaritic Myths and Epics. In *The Ancient Near East, Volume 1: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Hestin, Ruth

1991 Understanding Asherah. *Biblical Archaeological Review* XVII(5):50-58.

Noll, S. F.

1984 Ishi. In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* edited by Walter A. Elwell, p. 571. Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI .

Shanks, Michael and Christopher Tilley.

1992 *Re-Constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice, 2th*

*ed.* Routledge, London.

Taylor, J. Glen.

1994 Was Yahweh Worship as the Sun? *Biblical Archaeological Review* 20(3):53-61ff.

Warfield, Benjamin.

1948 *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*. The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Phillipsburg, NJ.

Strange, James F.

##  1992 Some Implications of Archaeology for New Testament Studies. In *What has Archaeology to do with Faith?*edited by James H. Charlesworth and Walter P. Weaver, p 23. Trinity Press International, Philadelphia, PA.