At the beginning of the Va’etchanan Torah portion (Deuteronomy 4:23–7:11), Moses concludes his historical survey, and proceeds to explain the commandments, beginning with the giving of the Ten Commandments Mount Sinai. At the end of the portion, Moses warns the Children of Israel about the dangers of idol worship, as well as the consequences of intermarrying with the Canaanite nations:

“When the LORD your God brings you to the land that you are about to enter and possess, and He dislodges many nations before you-the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations much larger than you and the LORD your God delivers them to you and you defeat them, you must doom them to destruction: grant them no terms and give them no quarter. You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods, and the LORD’s anger will blaze forth against you and He will promptly wipe you out. Instead, this is what you shall do to them: you shall tear down their altars, smash their pillars, cut down their *asherot*, and consign their images to the fire.” (Deuteronomy 7:1-5.)

We can learn about Canaanite religion from the Bible—which reveals a negative attitude towards it—and from archaeological findings. Most of our knowledge of the Canaanite pantheon and mythology is drawn from artifacts discovered in Ugarit (Ras Shamra on the northern Syrian coast) a Canaanite port city that flourished in the second half of the second millennium BCE. At the head of the Canaanite pantheon stood El and his royal consort, Asherah. El and Asherah gave birth to many descendants, the most important of which were Baal, Astarte, Anat, Yam, and Mot.

In the Bible, the Children of Israel are commanded to cut to pieces, chop down, and burn *asherot*. We learn from this that the *asherah* (singular of asherot) was a ritual object made of wood, perhaps a sacred tree, associated with the worship of the Canaanite goddess, Asherah.

In Kuntillet Ajrud in northern Sinai, a small fortress was uncovered that dates to the end of the ninth century — or the beginning of the eighth century — BCE. Among the artifacts discovered there were inscriptions in ancient Hebrew letters that mention the God of Israel and “his Asherah.” Some researchers understand this as testimony that, in the First Temple era, Asherah was considered the consort of the God of Israel. It is therefore, not difficult to understand the Torah’s uncompromising opposition of to worship of the Asherah.

*The image of a naked Canaanite goddess (perhaps Ashera) standing on a cow and grasping horned animals in its hands.*

*Golden Tablet/Ras Shamra (Ugarit), Syria/1300-1500 BCE*