The worship of deities other than Yahweh in Israel and Judah has long been a matter of interest. Recent archaeological discoveries have reopened the debate on the worship of various goddesses in ancient Israel and Judah. Ever since the discovery of the Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom material, interest in the worship of Asherah in particular has been building. On the basis of these finds, together with other supporting evidence such as the Taanach cultic stands and the numerous female pillar figurines from 8th century Judah, and especially the discovery of the Ugaritic material, many scholars now agree that the goddess Asherah was worshipped as the consort of Yahweh in both Israel and Judah during the period of the Israelite monarchy (for a full discussion of this material see Hadley 1994 and Hadley forthcoming, and the references there).

Taking this archaeological evidence as background material, the present study will briefly consider those biblical passages in which the "evolution" of the meaning of asherah can be seen from that denoting a goddess in her own right during the Monarchy period to referring to solely an object by the time of the exile. Then we will turn to a similar process that is occurring with the goddess Astarte, paying particular attention to the mention of Astarte in the book of Deuteronomy as a part of a common idiom referring to the fertility of the flock. Anat will not be considered, as she appears in the Hebrew Bible only in the context of personal or place names. Finally, the personification of Wisdom as a woman in the book of Proverbs and several deuterocanonical books will be briefly considered, in the light

1 Parts of this article are taken as summary excerpts from longer, fuller treatments to be found in Hadley 1994, Hadley 1995, and Hadley in the press. I wish to express my thanks to E.J. Brill; Othmar Keel, editor of Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis; and Chris Scarles of Cambridge University Press for permission to reproduce those paragraphs here.
of the apparent attempt to eradicate the worship of goddesses such as Asherah and Astarte in Israel and Judah.

The biblical passages that best illustrate the “demotion” of the goddess Asherah to solely an object can be seen in those passages in the books of Kings in which Asherah is referred to in the singular, together with the parallel accounts in Chronicles where the term appears in the plural. For example, in 1 Kings xv 13 and its parallel account in 2 Chr. xv 16, Asa removes Maacah his (grand?) mother from the position of Queen Mother because she made a miplešet, “horrid thing” (BDB, p. 814a), for the asherah. It is then this miplešet which Asa cuts down (krt), beats into dust (dqq, Chronicles only), and burns (šrp) in the Kidron. As there is no mention of the removal of the asherah, scholars have interpreted asherah here to refer to the goddess.

The word miplešet occurs in the Hebrew Bible only in these two verses. What exactly it is remains open to speculation, especially since the word denotes a feeling of abhorrence to an unspecified object, and not necessarily the object itself. But since the object here is cut down and burned, which is the same treatment often afforded to the wooden cultic object of the goddess, it is reasonable to assume that miplešet in this instance referred to something similar to an asherah, and may in fact have been an (explicit?) image of the goddess.

The parallel account in 2 Chr. xv 16 mentions asherah in the singular, against all other places where the Chronicler uses the plural. The Chronicler has also changed the word order here, from miplešet lāʾāšērā to laʾāšērā miplešet (in pause). Perhaps we are intended to read “because she made a miplešet in the function of an asherah”. To add to the confusion, the LXX has a variant reading here, which mentions Astarte instead of Asherah. This may indicate that by the time of the Chronicler (ca. mid 4th century BCE; cf. Williamson 1982, p. 16), the term “asherah” had ceased to mean either the goddess or the cult symbol associated with the goddess, and the distinction between the two ideas had become obscured. Therefore, when the Chronicler envisioned an asherah, the image brought to mind was only a wooden object. This may be the reason the Chronicler had a tendency to speak of the asherah in the plural. In the Kings passage, however, the combination of asherah and miplešet was baffling, especially if the Chronicler was not acquainted with the goddess Asherah in whose image the original miplešet was made. The LXX writer, as well, evidently did not immediately recognize the term asherah as referring to a deity, since the variant reading in the LXX refers to Astarte (for more on