# The Inscriptions of Kuntillet ʿAjrud Through the Lens of Historical Research

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Kuntillet ʿAjrud is situated on an isolated hilltop in northern Sinai, about 50 km south of Kadesh Barnea, near Wadi Quraiya, which drains into the sea through Wadi al-ʿArish. It lies approximately 15 km west of Darb el-Ghazza – the road leading from the coast of Philistia, past Kadesh Barnea, Kuntilleh and beyond, as far as the Gulf of Eilat. At the bottom of the hill lies a high water table, into which thamileh are dug, which served as a permanent water source for residents of the region. In 1975–1976 Ze'ev Meshel conducted three short excavation seasons at the site, the results of which surprised the research community and forced it to reconsider its notions about religion in Israel during the First Temple period. The findings from the site were published incrementally from the late 1970s onwards, and a rich research literature has since been written about the site (Meshel, 1978; 1992; 1993), the artefacts uncovered in it (Beck 1982; Gunneweg/Perlman/Meshel, 1985; Sheffer/Tidhar, 1991; Ayalon, 1995; Goren, 1995; Freud, 2008), their date (Segal, 1995; Carmi/Segal, 1996; Finkelstein/Piasetzky, 2008), and their significance for the research of the religion and cult in ancient Israel. Following the peace agreement with Egypt, all the material found at the site was drawn up and photographed, then returned to Egypt, where it was stored away, beyond the reach of researchers seeking to re-examine it.

Recently, a full report was published of all the archaeological excavation findings, including the inscriptions, making it possible to re-examine the site and all its discovered artefacts (Meshel, 2012). In this paper, I present the main outlines of the site and its findings, then discuss the inscriptions, the date of the site and its religious-cultural nature in further detail.

## The Site and Its Findings

The Kuntillet ʿAjrud site was constructed on top of a hill, and comprised two structures: one is well preserved, but of the other only the foundations have survived (Meshel/Goren, 2012). The preserved structure has a rectangular shape measuring 29 × 15 metres, with tower-like structures at each of its four corners, surrounding a large courtyard bounded by rooms on three sides. The only entrance into the structure was from the east, next to a space with plastered walls, flanked by benches on all sides. Presumably, there was also a door with which one could block the entry to the building, which was otherwise closed on all sides, to protect its occupants from sudden raids by local resident nomads.

The Kuntillet ʿAjrud site essentially consists of only one layer, but three tabunes were found in one corner of the courtyard, each attached to a floor. It is difficult to estimate how long the site was in operation, but it appears to have been no more than a few decades (Meshel/Goren, 2012, 35).

Artefacts discovered at the site consisted mostly of clay vessels, wooden objects, textiles, loom weights, inscriptions and paintings on plaster and on pottery. The well preserved state of many of the objects – particularly the woodwork, textiles, paintings and inscriptions – is due to the dry climate of the region, and hints at what may have existed and did not survive at other archaeological sites around the country.

Excavations revealed a large collection of pottery vessels, which according to chemical and petrographic analysis originated mostly from Judah, with a few from the kingdom of Israel and the Phoenician coast (Gunneweg/Perlman/Meshel, 1985 [= 2012]; Goren, 1995 [= 2012]). No vessels of Negebite Ware, of the sort commonly attributed to nomads of the desert regions, were found – suggesting that the site's occupants came from distant regions, and not from among the local nomadic pastoralists. In this respect, too, the site differs from other Iron Age settlements in the Negev region and northern Sinai, many of which did contain Negebite Ware (Meshel, 2012a, 67b).

Approximately 120 pieces of cloth – mostly linen, a few made of wool – were uncovered at the site (Sheffer/Tidhar, 1991 [= 2012]; Boertien, 2007). Loom weights suggest that some of the fabrics were made on site. Such a large number of fabrics is unusual, and while this is undoubtedly attributable in part to the region's dry climate, it is perhaps also a reflection of the site's unusual character. The excavation also revealed pieces of wood from items of furniture, eating utensils and weaving tools used by the site's occupants (Sitry, 2012).

The drawings discovered at the site were produced on two pithoi that stood in and beside the entrance room and on the plastered walls of the bench-room, and are exceptional for the First Temple period both in their number and variety (Beck, 1982, 4–63 [= 2012, 144–199]; Uehlinger, 1997, 142–149; Keel/Uehlinger, 1998, 210–248; Hadley, 2000, 136–152; Schmidt, 2002, 104–122). Notable among them is a plaster painting on the entrance wall of a man seated on a throne and holding a lotus flower (for colour photograph see Beck, 2012, 191; for location see Meshel/Goren, 2012, 17, fig. 2.13). After analyzing the scene,

Beck (2000, 180–181) suggested that it represents "the king of either Israel or Judah" – in all likelihood, the one who established the site. Most of the surviving paintings are geometrical in nature and painted black, red and yellow. The severe fragmentation of the plaster paintings makes it impossible to reconstruct the scenes originally depicted on the walls. The paintings are not of a particularly high standard, and Beck has postulated that they are the work of itinerant artists who happened to pass by (1982, 61–62 [= 2012, 198]).

## The Inscriptions and Their Religious-Historical Background

Many of the inscriptions found at the site – engraved on stone and on clay, or written in ink on clay or on plaster – have been published gradually over the years and discussed in various contexts (e. g., Lemaire, 1981, 25–33; Renz, 1995, 47–66; Keel/Uehlinger, 1998, 225–248; Zevit, 2001, 379–400; Dobbs-Allsopp et al., 2005, 277–298; Aḥituv, 2008, 313–329). Aḥituv, Eshel and Meshel (2012) have published a new edition of all the available inscriptions – including transliteration, transcription and translation as well as detailed commentary of each text. The new edition does not detail what information was provided in earlier publications of the inscriptions, so on reading it is not clear what had been previously suggested by scholars and what is the contribution of the new edition. Moreover, on several occasions the new edition followed uncritically the transliterations and interpretations of Aḥituv (2008, 313–329) and errors that appeared in his edition were introduced to the new publication. Since the original inscriptions have long since been transferred to Egypt and were not available for the new edition, Aḥituv, Eshel and Meshel do not present new facsimiles, and have republished those prepared long ago without even noting discrepancies between those facsimiles and their own edition. Fortunately, they also published large black-and-white and colour photographs of all the important inscriptions, which enable readers to check the published texts and form their own opinion on the transcriptions.

On examination of the new text edition, it is clear that most of the stone and jar inscriptions have previously been published. Among the new inscriptions are several abecedaries and in particular, the fragments of inscriptions written in ink on wall plaster. Unfortunately, most of these are so fragmentary that no more than few words of the originally long texts can be deciphered.

In his edition of Hebrew and cognate inscriptions, Aḥituv (2008) vocalized all transliterated texts – including the Philistine, Ammonite, Moabite and Edomite inscriptions (even the text of the plaster inscription from Tell Deir ʿAlla, whose dialect is debated among scholars). In the new edition of the north Israelite inscriptions, Aḥituv, Eshel and Meshel have followed this practice. Vocalization might possibly be justified for Judahite inscriptions on the assumption of continuity from the First Temple period onwards, but not with regard to the Kuntillet ʿAjrud inscriptions. After all, we know next to nothing about how eighth-century BCE Israelites pronounced their language. That being the case,

vocalizing the Kuntillet ʿAjrud texts according to the traditional pronunciation of the Massoretic Text of the 10th century CE is anachronistic.

## The Inscriptions Written on Stone and Pottery

**(A)** The stone and clay inscriptions include various names, some with the theophoric element *yw*, suggesting that they originate from the kingdom of Israel, not Judah (see recently Heide, 2002; Mastin, 2004–2007). The pronunciation of the theophoric element is a matter of debate among scholars. Aḥituv, Eshel and Meshel (2012) rendered it *yāw*, but in light of the Assyrian cuneiform documents, it is more accurately rendered *yō* (Na'aman, 1997; Zadok, 1997).

**(B)** Aḥituv, Eshel and Meshel (2012, 80–81) published three jar inscriptions featuring the letters ***lšrʿr***, which they rendered "to/of the governor of the city" (for the title *śr hʿr* see Heltzer, 1998). They explained the omission of the definite article /h/, which appears in all references to *śar hāʿîr* in the Bible and on bullae (Heltzer, 1998, 18–19), by the hypothesis that this is a reflection of how it was pronounced in daily life (*śarāʿîr*). However – setting aside the uncertainty about the assumed pronunciation – this rendering presents other difficulties, since we do not know which town is referred to, nor the relationship of the said "governor of the city" to Kuntillet ʿAjrud. A more likely explanation is that *Šrʿr* is a personal name – of either the sender or the recipient of the three marked jars.

**(C)** The inscription on **Pithos A** has already been discussed by many scholars (e. g., Renz, 1995, 61; Dobbs-Allsopp et al., 2005, 289–292; Aḥituv, 2008, 315–317). In light of the excellent colour photographs published in the new report (figs. 5.26–5.29, 6.22) the text may be rendered as follows (Aḥituv/Eshel/ Meshel, 2012, 87–91):

> [1]*ʾmr* · ʾ[*xx*] · *rʿ hm*[*l*]*k* · *ʾmr* · *lyhl*[*yw*] · *wlywʿśh* · *wl*[….] *brkt* · *ʾtkm*
> [2]*lyhwh* · *šmrn* · *wlʾšrth*
> "Message of ʾ[*xx*], 'the ki[n]g's friend'. Speak to Yahēl[yō], and to Yōʿāśā, and to […]. I have blessed you by YHWH of Samaria and to Asherata."

The inscription begins with the word *ʾōmer* ("message"), followed by a three-letter name (ʾ[*xx*]) of the person bestowing the blessing, who was undoubtedly present at the site at the time of writing. The next letter is /r/ and is followed by /ʿ/ which is drawn within the top part of the headdress crown of the Bes figure (figs. 5.28; 6.22). In the next word, the /m/ of *hm*[*l*]*k* is written over another letter, possibly /n/.

The title *rʿ hmlk* (*reʿa hammelek*) is known from the Bible (2 Sam 15:37; 16:16; 1 Kgs 4:5; 1 Chr 27:33), and is mentioned once in the context of the Northern Kingdom (1 Kgs 16:11). Similar titles are known from various ancient

Near Eastern documents. 'The king's friend' was probably a counsellor and trustworthy attendant of the king, whose function has been discussed by scholars on several occasions (van Selms, 1957; Donner, 1961; Mettinger, 1971, 63–69; Rüterswörden, 1985, 73–77; Fox, 2000, 121–128). This is its first mention in an extra-biblical epigraphic source.

The inscription includes the blessing bestowed by the said 'king's friend' official on three unknown persons on behalf of YHWH of Samaria and his consort, the goddess Asherata. The presence of a royal Israelite official at the site is significant and will be taken into account in the discussion of the nature of the site.

**(D)** The first inscription on **Pithos B** has already been discussed by scholars (e. g., Renz, 1995, 62–63; Dobbs-Allsopp et al., 2005, 293–294; Aḥituv, 2008, 320–322). In light of the colour photographs published in the new report (figs. 5.38–5.39), the ten-line inscription may be translated as follows (Aḥituv/Eshel/Meshel, 2012, 95–97):[1]

> "Message of ʾAmaryō: Say to my lord. Are you well? I have blessed you by YHWH of Teman and Asherata. May He bless you and may He keep you, and may He be with the lord of your house (*ʾdn bytk*)."

The identity of ʾAmaryo is unknown, and the name of the recipient of the blessing is omitted, and he is referred to instead by the honorific "my lord" (*ădōni*) (line 2).

Lines 9–10: Aḥituv (2008, 320–322) read [9]*wyhy ʿm ʾdn* [10]*y* [*ʿd ʿlm*?] – and thus it appears in the new publication. Looking at the photographs, line 10 reads /b/, /y/, a blurred /t/, and then the upper part of /k/. I suggest rendering it *bytk*, and translate lines 9–10 "and may He [YHWH] be with the lord of your house". Amaryo blesses not only his unnamed superior on YHWH's behalf, but also the lord of the senior official's house – probably the king of Israel. On the preservation of the diphthong *ai* in the Kuntillet ʿAjrud inscriptions, see Aḥituv/Eshel/Meshel, 2012, 125b–126a.

The provenance of the blessings is exclusively YHWH, as implied by the verbal forms *y*$^{e}$*bārekā*, *yiš*$^{e}$*merekā*, *y*$^{e}$*hy*. This makes it necessary to ascertain the religious status of the goddess Asherat, who is mentioned beside him as a divine figure who, although not conferring blessings herself, is nevertheless an auspicious presence. Her status may be compared to that of the temple referred to in the Ketef Hinnom amulet, which according to the inscription carries a magic blessing ("a blessing from any snare and evil") and guarantees redemption ("for redemption is in it") (Na'aman, 2011, 189–192). In other words, YHWH alone

[1] Two short inscriptions written on Pithos B deserve a brief note. The publishers (2012, 98a) have rendered inscription Nº 3.7 *ʾmny* and interpreted it as a personal name. However, the photograph (p. 97) shows that it should be rendered *ʾbšy*, Abishai. They rendered inscription Nº 3.8 *h · šmrn* [·] *śʿrm* (p. 98). However, according to the photograph (p. 97) the text reads *hšmn śʿrm*, "the oil; barley".

has the active power of blessing and bringing redemption, but the presence of divine entities such as Asherat and the Jerusalem temple also conveys much blessings for the believers.

The reference to YHWH of Samaria in Pithos A, as well as the personal names based on the theophoric form Yō, indicate that the visitors were from the kingdom of Israel. Pithos B and other inscriptions mentions YHWH of Teman – that is, the god of the south Palestinian regions. In the biblical literature, the god Baʿal is associated with various places (e. g., Baʿal Gad, Baʿal Hazor, Baʿal-Hermon, Baʿal Peor, Baʿal Zaphon), while YHWH is portrayed as a universal, supra-territorial god. Here, however, the inscriptions present YHWH as being similarly associated with particular territories – suggesting that in the eighth century BCE, YHWH was seen as a local god (on this problem, see recently Hutton, 2010, with earlier literature). This would tie in with an inscription discovered in a cave at Khirbet Beit Lei, which says "YHWH is God of all the Land. The mountains of Judah belong to the God of Jerusalem" (Lemaire, 1976, 558–559; Renz, 1995, 245–246; Parker, 2003, 268–270), where "the land" is the Kingdom of Judah, and the God of Jerusalem is the god of that kingdom. The similarity between the "God of Jerusalem" and "YHWH of Samaria" is striking: the latter title appears to refer to the god of the Samarian region (rather than the town), much as the kingdom of Israel is referred to as "Samaria" ("Menahem of the land Samaria") in the inscription of Tiglath-Pileser III (Tadmor/Yamada, 2011, 87 line 5), and the inhabitants of the central highlands are dubbed "the Samarians" in an inscription of Sargon II (Gadd, 1954, 179–180 line 25). Clearly, then, in the eighth century BCE, YHWH was not yet perceived as a universal god, master of the entire land, but as a god associated with a specific region: 'YHWH Shomron' was the god of the Samaria region, 'YHWH Teman' was the god of the south Palestinian regions, and the 'God of Jerusalem' was the god of the highlands of Judah (Lemaire, 1984, 132–133). Naturally, for each of these regional gods there were distinct cultic vessels, rituals and ceremonies, as evident – to cite just one example – from the sacred bull ("calf") of the Northern Kingdom, on which YHWH is said to be seated, versus the Cherubim of the Kingdom of Judah, which served as YHWH's seat in the Temple's inner sanctum in Jerusalem.

Following the discovery of inscriptions at Kuntillet ʿAjrud, several researchers have suggested that the famous verse of Deuteronomy 6:4 – "Hear, O Israel: YHWH our God is one YHWH" – was conceived specifically to counter the situation depicted in eighth-century inscriptions of this sort (McCarter, 1987, 139–143; Tigay, 1996, 439; Hutton, 2010, 179–187.203–205).[2] It states that YHWH, in his various local guises, is really one supra-territorial god, with uniform and clearly defined cultic rituals and ceremonies, and that all the laws and edicts in the Book of Deuteronomy (which, of course, were new norms formulated by its author) represent the obligatory norms of the worshippers of the "one YHWH."

[2] The translation was already suggested by Driver, 1906, 89–90.

Key to understanding the inscriptions at Kuntillet ʿAjrud is the meaning of *wl'šrth*. Aḥituv (2008, 221–224), followed by Aḥituv, Eshel and Meshel (2012, 130–132), interpreted *'šrt* as a cultic object – a view still held by a minority of researchers but which, to my mind, is obsolete. The great majority of scholars agree that *'šrt* is the name of a goddess, and the consort of YHWH. Evidence of Asherat's divine status is clearly revealed in three biblical passages (1 Kings 15:13; 1 Kings 18:19; 2 Kings 23:4). The fact that gods were thought to be embodied in their statues is indisputable. The statue of Asherat/Asherah that Ahab (1 Kings 16:33a) and Jehoahaz (2 Kings 13:7b) placed in Samaria represented the goddess in the major temple of the city. Similarly, Manasseh made an Asherah, "And he set a statue of the Asherah that he had made in the House", i. e. in the Temple in Jerusalem. Apart from a statue, a god/goddess could be also represented by his/her sacred animal or plant, or by an icon. In the Bible, the goddess Asherat/Asherah is identified with a particularly striking tree in nature (Deuteronomy 16:21; Judges 6:25–30), and also takes the form of a tree-shaped statue set within the Temple (1 Kings 15:13b and 16:33; 2 Kings 18:4, 21:3, 23:6).

In the Ugaritic texts the goddess' name is spelled *'ṯrt*, *'ṯrt ym* (Wiggins, 1993, 21–90), in two jar inscriptions at Ekron her name is written *'šrt* (Gitin, 1993, 250–251), and in southern Arabian inscriptions it was spelled *'ṯrt* (Wiggins, 1993, 153–164; Bron, 1998). The Kuntillet ʿAjrud inscriptions indicate that in the Kingdom of Israel her name was spelled *'šrt* (Asherat). In Judah, at some unknown period, the final *t* was dropped, and so the goddess became known as Asherah throughout the Old Testament and in Late Biblical Hebrew.

Some researchers have understood the final *-h* in *'šrth* to be the third person pronominal suffix – that is, "his Asherah" – thereby rendering the two inscriptions "To YHWH of Samaria and his Asherat" and "To YHWH of Teman and his Asherat", respectively. However, there are no other known instances in the Hebrew Bible of a proper name with a possessive suffix, and it is rare in extra-biblical documents (Merlo, 1994, 33–34; Xella, 1995; 2001; Rainey, 1998, 245–247). A more likely explanation is that the rendering *'šrth* is simply the name of the goddess Asherat with the addition of a suffix of some sort – e. g., a deity name with a double suffix, Asherat + *ā* (Hess, 1996; Zevit, 2001, 363–366), or a secondary extension of the relational suffix *-a* (Tropper, 2001, 100–102). Therefore, it is best to reject the notion that the final *-h* represents the third person possessive ("his Asherat"), in favour of the interpretation that *'šrth* is a form of the goddess' name, and that the two inscriptions should therefore read: "to YHWH of Samaria and to Asherata" and "To YHWH of Teman and to Asherata".

In Israel and in Judah, Asherat/Asherah was thought to be YHWH's consort, an intermediary between the believer and YHWH, and a goddess of auspicious presence who is embodied either as a statue or as a tree consecrated to her. Evidence of her function as an intermediary is supplied by a cave inscription at Khirbet el-Qōm in the eastern Shephelah: "Blessed is Uriahu by YHWH for

through Asherata He saved him from his enemy". In other words, Asherat is the divine being that mediated between Uriahu and YHWH, thereby saving the former (Keel/Uehlinger, 1998, 236–244; Parker, 2006, 87–91). Similarly, the goddess Athirat in Ugarit appears as a mediator before El, the chief god in the pantheon, and her partner.

**(E)** Below the first inscription on **Pithos B**, along a short vertical line, are two lines of text that have mistakenly been omitted in the new edition (Aḥituv/Eshel/Meshel, 2012, 96–97, figs. 5.38–5.39). These may be rendered as follows:

1. *mš*ʿ?
2. [..]ʿ*pṣq*?*'pl dynṣwt*

Line 1: There is a space at the beginning of line 1, followed by /m/, /š/ and possibly /ʿ/, namely *môšîa*ʿ ("deliverer"). Since the two lines above it include a blessing by YHWH to "the lord of your house", possibly the king of Israel (see above), it is tempting to identify the latter as the "deliverer". We may recall the description of Israel's subjection to Aram in 2 Kgs 13:3–4, which ends when "YHWH gave Israel a deliverer (*môšîa*ʿ)", who delivered them from Aramaic rule (v. 5) (for the identity of the deliverer, see Cogan/Tadmor, 1988, 143). The verb *yš*ʿ ("to deliver") appears in reference to Joash and Jeroboam. For Joash, "an arrow of victory (*tĕšûʿâ*) over Aram" (2 Kgs 13:17); and for Jeroboam, "and he delivered them (*wayyôšîʿēm*) through Jeroboam, son of Joash" (2 Kgs 14:27b).

Line 2: The first four letters appear in alphabetic order. The following three letters (*'pl*) were written by the same hand that wrote the alphabet. The next six letters (*dynṣwt*) are smaller and of different form, indicating they were written by a different hand. The meaning (if any) of the text following the alphabet is unclear to me.

**(F) Pithos B** features another inscription comprising three lines. It has already been discussed by scholars (see Weinfeld, 1984, 125–126; Renz, 1995, 63–64; Dobbs-Allsopp et al., 2005, 295–297; Aḥituv, 2008, 318–319), and two colour photographs (figs. 5.42a–542b) help it to be rendered as follows (Aḥituv/Eshel/Meshel, 2012, 98–100):

[1]*y*[*b*]*rk lyhwh htmn wl'šrth* [2]*kl 'šr š'l m'š ḥnn h'b*? *w'špth wntn lh yhw* [3]*klbbh*

"May he bless you by YHWH of Teman and Asherata. Whatever the 'favourer of the father and his quiver' asked from a man – YHW(H) shall give him according to his wish."

All three lines begin along a vertical line (see figs. 5.42a–5.42b); the realignment of the text and facsimile in the edition (pp. 98–99) is incorrect.

Line 1: The first four letters, not identified in the new edition, are large and written over an erased inscription. The identity of the persons bestowing and receiving the blessing is not conveyed in the text.

Line 2: Aḥituv (2008, 318–319) translated the line "Whatever he asks (*yš'l*) from a man, that man will give him generously (*ḥnn h'*). And if he would urge (*w'm pth*) YHW will give him" – and thus it appears in the new publication. First, however, there is no /y/ before *š'l*, which is a perfect verbal form ("he asked"). Second, not only is the connection between the two statements awkward, but *ḥnn h'* (*ḥōnen hū'*) means "he is generous" (Ps. 37:21.26; 112:5). The 'giving' ("that man will give him generously") is arbitrarily inserted to the text.

On closer examination of the photo, the letter /š/ situated slightly above the line appears between the /'/ and /p/ (the publishers read it /m/), and the text reads *w'špth* ("and his quiver"). In light of this reading, a two-letter noun must be sought before it. The first letter is /'/ and the second (ignored by Aḥituv, Eshel and Meshel) is possibly /b/. I suggest reading it *ḥnn h'b w'špth* (*ḥōnēn hā'āb w$^{e}$'aš$^{e}$pātô*), namely, "the favourer of the father and his quiver".

Who is called "the favourer of the father and his quiver"? To answer this, we must first identify "the father". With all due caution, I suggest that it refers to Joash, father of Jeroboam, the present king of Israel. In light of this interpretation, the subject of the blessing is probably the king, namely Jeroboam, who participated in his father's wars against the Arameans. The writer wishes him that whatever he asked of his subjects, will be granted by YHWH (compare Ps. 20:5–6).

As for the quiver (*aš$^{e}$pā*), we may recall the story of Elisha's prophecy of victory to Joash (2 Kgs 13:14–19), describing how the prophet, on his deathbed, orchestrates the performance of an act of magic that guarantees Israel's victories over Aram (in addition to the commentaries and the monographs on Elisha, see Couroyer, 1980; Barrick, 1985; Karner, 2006). Bows and arrows are repeatedly mentioned in the prophetic story, although the quiver from which the arrows are drawn is not mentioned. Quivers are mentioned several times in the Bible, always in a military context (Isa 22:6; 49:2; Jer 5:16; Ps 127:5; Job 39:3; Lam 3:13). The military context of the quiver in the Kuntillet ʿAjrud inscription is self-evident.

In summary, the anonymous writer first blesses an individual who is likely his superior in the name of YHWH and Asherat, then addresses the king, wishing him that YHWH will grant all his wishes.

## The Plaster Inscriptions

Fragments of five inscriptions written on plastered walls and jambs were discovered near the two entrances leading from the bench room and the western storeroom to the central court (see location map in Aḥituv/Eshel/Meshel, 2012, 74). The inscriptions are written in the Hebrew language, but in the Phoenician

script (see Mastin, 2009; Aḥituv/Eshel/Meshel, 2012, 126). Whoever founded the site clearly was at great pains to adorn the entrances with long inscriptions (for photographs of the longest inscription, see pp. 115–116). To this end, skilled scribes were engaged, who made the inscriptions in the Phoenician script, which was considered more prestigious than its Hebrew counterpart.

The corpus of plaster inscriptions deserves a detailed study that exceeds the bounds of this article. I shall limit myself to analysis of three inscriptions – two of which have been known for many years, and the third published in the new site report for the first time.

**(G) The first fragmented plaster inscription (№ 4.1.1)** was found near the western door of the bench room. It was published about twenty years ago and has been extensively discussed (Meshel, 1992, 107; Dobbs-Allsopp et al., 2005, 285–286; Aḥituv, 2008, 322–324) – however, good photographs (figs. 5.49–5.50b) help to re-examine it (Aḥituv/Eshel/Meshel, 2012, 105–107):

[1][*y*]*brk* · *ymm* · *wyśbʿw* [*lḥm w* …] *ytnw* · *l*[*y*]*hwh* [*h*]*tymn* · *wl'šrth* […]
[2]*hyṭb* · *yhwh* · *hty*[*mn* ….]*y hyṣb* · [*h*]*gpn* [*whtʾn*]*h*[??] *h*[….] *yhw*[*h*] *ht*[*ymn* …]

[1][May he (God)] bless their days so they may have [plenty] to eat [and …] recount (praises) to YHWH of the Teman and Asherata. [2]YHWH of the Te[man] did good [….], set the vine [and the fig tre]e[??]. YH[WH] of the Te[man] has [….]

The publishers have rendered the first word [*y*]*'rk* ("[May] he lengthen"). But the first fragmented letter is certainly not /'/ (compare the /'/ in *'šrth*). I suggest it is [*y*]*brk*, "[may he] bless". For the proposed restoration *wyśbʿw* [*lḥm*], see Ex 16:12; Jer 44:17; Ps 132:15; Pr 12:11; 20:13; 28:19; 30:22. A small isolated fragment (Inscription 4.1.7; fig. 5.49, 5.51–5.52) includes the letters /m[?]/, /w/, /š/. Theoretically, these may be shifted to the space after *wyśbʿw*, with the restored text reading: *wyśbʿw* [*lḥ*]*m wš*[*m*] *ytnw*, "they may have [plen]ty to eat and the[re] recount (praises)". Compare *šām y[e]tanû* in Judg 5 11.

The second line probably has a series of three Hiphil verbal forms – *hyṭb, hyṣb, h*[…] – and YHWH of the Teman as their subject. The verbal forms with the internal *ai* diphthong may reflect the way they were pronounced in the Northern Kingdom. The object of the first verb (*hyṭb*) is missing. A small isolated fragment (Inscription 4.1.20; fig. 5.49, 5.51–5.52) includes the letters /ʿš/. Theoretically these may be shifted to the space after the god's name, rendering the restored text: *hyṭb yhwh hty*[*mn m*]*ʿśy*, "YHWH of the Teman did good to my [under]taki[ngs]". If this is indeed the case, the first line refers to God's believers and the second to the person who wrote the text. The tentative restorations of the gaps in lines 1–2 assume that six letters are missing. Needless to say, both restorations are nothing more than unverifiable conjecture.

The publishers have rendered the second verb *hyṭb ym*[…]. But the third letter is certainly not /ṭ/ and the fifth and sixth not /ym/. The verbal form is probably *hyṣb*, "set" (Hiphil from the verb *nṣb*), and is followed by a missing letter

and then /g/, /p/ and the edge of /n/, namely *gpn*. For the pair *gepen* and *t$^{e}$ʾēnāh*, see 1 Kgs 5:5; 2 Kgs 18:31; Jes 36:16; Jer 5:17; Hos 2:14; Joel 1:7.12; 2:22; Mic 4:4; Hag 2:19; Zech 3:10; Ps 105:33.

The end of line 2 reads *yhw*[*h*]. One of the small isolated fragments (Inscription 4.1.15; fig. 5.49, 5.51–5.52) includes the letters *ht*. I suggest shifting it to the end of line 2, and restoring *yhw*[*h*] *ht*[*ymn*] there. This makes it clear that Teman was consistently used in this inscription with the definite article.

The text, therefore, presents YHWH of the Teman as the provenance of the blessing on his believers: God provides them with food, supports their endeavours, and promotes the success of their orchards. The reference to the vines and fig trees (if this is the correct restoration) indicates that the believers arrived from cultivated regions, but while staying in the south they attributed the success to the local patron god.

**(H)** The second fragmented **plaster inscription (№ 4.2)** was found near the western entrance of the bench room. It was published about twenty years ago, though with no photographs (Meshel, 1992, 107a; Dobbs-Allsopp et al., 2005, 286–289; Aḥituv 2008, 324–328). Four good photographs (figs. 5.53–5.55b) enable it to be re-examined, rendering it as follows (Aḥituv/Eshel/Meshel, 2012, 110–114):

[2]….] *brʿš · wbzrḥ · ʾl · br*[*ʾš* ….] [3]….]*r · wymsn · hrm · wydkn · gbnm* [….] [4]….] *ʾrṣ · dšdš · ʿly · ʾbn · sg · wr*[*ms* ….] [5]….] *hkn lbrk · bʿl · bym mlḥm*h [….] [6]….] *lšm ʾl bym mlḥ*[*mh* ….]

"[2]….] in earthquake. And when God shone forth in the sum[mit of ….] [3]….] and the mountains melted and the humps crushed [….] [4]….] he treaded on earth over the stones (*eben*), moved away (*sāg*) and tr[ampled ….] [5]….] he prepared (*hēkîn*) for the blessed one (*b$^{e}$rûk*) of the Lord on the day of battl[e ….] [6]….] for the name of God on the day of batt[le ….]"

Lines 2–3 describe the revelation of YHWH in a language similar to that of various biblical texts (e. g., Deut 33:2; Judg 5:4–5; Mic 1:3–4; Hab 3:3–6; Ps 97:2–5). For the pl. noun *gbnm* ("humps") see Dobbs-Allsopp et al., 2005, 288.

Line 4: The verbal form *dšdš* (*dišdēš*) is probably a Pilpēl from the verb *dwš* "to tread, trample" (for Pilpēl conjugations in ע"ו stems, see Gesenius, 1946, 152 § 55f, 197–198 72m). The verbal form *sg* (*sāg*) is a Qal form of the verb *swg*, "moving away". Compare Ps 53:3: "They have all fallen away (*sāg*)". The restoration *r*[*ms*] (*rā*[*mas*]), "tr[ampled]", is *ad sensum*.

Line 5: Aḥituv (2008, 324.327) rendered it *hikkon l$^{e}$bārek baʿal* and translated "prepare (yourself) to bless Baal" – and thus it appears in the new publication. However, unlike human beings, deities are omnipotent and require no blessing (the 'blessing' of YHWH in the Bible refers to the songs of praise in God's honour). The most likely rendering of the text was suggested by Dobbs-Allsopp et al. (2005, 287.289) – "for the blessed one of the Lord" –

with an allusion to Azitawada, who in his inscription calls himself *hbrk bʿl* ("the blessed of Baʿal"). Compare biblical *brwk YHWH*, "the blessed of YHWH" (Gen 24:31 and 26:29). Whether Baʿal should be interpreted as the god's name, or is an honorific title for YHWH ('Lord'), remains uncertain. A similar question pertains to *'l* (line 5): is it a personal name ('El') or a generic appellation ('god')? I prefer the latter option in both instances, as reflected in the translation.

Line 6: *šm 'l* "name of God" is the hypostasis of the deity's entity, the embodiment of God in his name (Dobbs-Allsopp et al., 2005, 289). Note the Bethsaida inscription *lšm*, followed by an ankh symbol (Wimmer, 2000; Savage, 2009), which may be translated "for/by the name" of the god, who is represented by a symbol rather than by his proper name. It suggests that the roots of biblical name theology may be sought in the Kingdom Israel of the eighth century, if not earlier.

It seems to me, then, that the revelation of God in the opening lines presents Him as being alerted to help the ruler, namely, "the blessed one of the Lord", in a war waged by the ruler "in God's name". The Song of Deborah (Judg 5), which opens with a theophany of God (vv. 4–5) and continues with YHWH's leading role in the victory over the Canaanites (vv. 19–21, 31), offers a similar literary structure and ideology. I have already mentioned Beck's attractive suggestion that a painting at the entrance to the structure is that of Israel's ruler seated on a throne, and it seems to me that the plaster inscription was similarly intended to proclaim the god's greatness and His support of the ruler.

**(I)** Unlike the other inscriptions discussed so far, **plaster inscription Nº 4.3** is published for the first time by Aḥituv, Eshel and Meshel (2012, 115–116a). It was found in situ on the northern doorjamb of the bench room's western entrance. It encompasses seven broken lines, six of which have at least a few words. Like other inscriptions unearthed at Kuntillet ʿAjrud, it is arranged along a vertical line (see photograph on p. 115), so the beginning of five lines has survived. The publishers have not succeeded in deciphering the fragmented inscription and have therefore avoided translating even a single line. Here is my transliteration, translation and commentary of the text:

[2][*xxxx* ']*hly* · *yš*[?][…] [3]*lydth* · *wh*' [….] [4][ʿ]*ny* · *wʿsq* · *bn* · *'b*[*yn*] · '[*š*] *dl* [….] [5]*lbšm* · *ywn md*[?]*w* [*ng*]'*l* · *bd*[*m* ….] [6]*nd* · *ḥlp wym* [*y*]*bš* ʿ[?]*d* [….] [7][*ḥ*]*rn* · *bšnt* · *d*[*br*[?]] *r*[ʿ]*b* · *w*[*ḥ*]*rb* · *šḥt* · *qyn* · *š*[*q*]*r* · *wmrmh* · [….]

"[2][… t]ents of Is[rael[?] …] [3]His birth, and he […] [4]A poor and oppressed son of a ne[edy], a poor per[son ….] [5]Their clothing are muddy, his garment defiled with blo[od …] [6]Heap of water has passed and the sea [has dr]ied until[?] [….] [7][A burn]ing anger in a year of pl[ague], hunger and desolate, the spear destroyed, falsehood and deceit [….."

Line 2: A fragmented /š/ probably appears at the end of the line. A possible restoration is *yś*[?][*r'l*], "the tents of I[srael]".

Line 3: The internal diphthong *ai* is preserved in *lydth* ("his birth"), similar to the orthography of other words written in the Phoenician inscriptions (e. g., *htymn*, *hyṭb*, *hyṣb*; see Aḥituv/Eshel/Meshel, 2012, 126a.[3]

Line 4: Biblical parallels to the terms *ʿānî*, *ʿāšûq*, *ebyôn* and *dāl* are well known and need no comment. Interesting is the rendering of *ʿsq* (*ʿāsûq*) versus Judahite Hebrew *ʿāšûq* (see Gerstenberger, 2001). The interchange of the sibilants /š/ and /s/ brings to mind the famous *šibbōlet* incident (Judg 12:6), for which several explanations have been offered (Emerton, 1985; Lemaire, 1985; Marcus, 1992; Hendel, 1996).

Line 5: Due to the fragmentary condition of the text, we do not know the identity of the men in question – only that they are referred to in plural, that their clothes are muddy, and a man – probably their leader – whose garment is covered with blood. For *ywn* (*yāwēn*) in the sense of muddy, see Ps 40:3; 69:3. For *mdw* (*maddaw*), "his garment", see Judg 3:16; 1 Sam 4:12; 17:38–39; 18:4. For the motif of garment stained with blood, see Isa 63:3. For hands defiled with blood, see Isa 59:3; Lam 4:14.

Line 6: The scene is not dissimilar to the crossing of the Sea of Reeds in the Exodus story and the crossing of the Jordan upon entry into Canaan, and shares with them the noun *nēd*, "heap of waters" (Ex 15:8; Ps 78:13; Josh 3:13.16). Unfortunately, the text breaks and no further detail of the assumed crossing can be extracted.

Line 7: A burning anger (*ḥārôn*) is usually a reference to YHWH's anger, so I assume that He is the subject of the noun. I translated *bšnt* (*biš$^{e}$nat*), "in a year", although it might also be vocalized *baššēnît*, "for the second time". The triple *deber*, *rāʿāb* and *ḥereb* is well known from the story of David's census (2 Sam 24:13; 1 Chr 21:12) and from the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The pair *šeqer* – *mirmāh* is likewise well known in biblical literature, particularly in wisdom literature. For *qayīn* "spear", see 2 Sam 21:16. For the Piel of the verb *šḥt* in the sense of "to destroy", see Gen 19:29; Isa 14:20; Jer 48:18; Ezek 26:4; Lam 2:5–6.

On the one hand, the writing *bšnt* ("in the year") indicates that the inscription is not written in the North Israelite dialect, otherwise it would have be rendered *bšt*. On the other hand, the writing *ʿāsûq* ("oppressed") indicates that it was not written in Judahite Hebrew (see above). I will leave the problem of the dialect to scholars who are better qualified than me in clarifying the dialectical issue.

With regard to the plot itself, the Exodus story comes to mind. The hero's birth is described in line 3, and his humble social background in line 4. It contradicts the biblical story of Moses' upbringing in the Egyptian court – a story modelled on the story of the birth of Sargon, king of Akkad, which was probably composed during the time of Sargon II (721–705) (Childs, 1965; Otto, 2000, 51–59; Römer, 2003, 18–21) – and casts in doubt the Egyptian derivation of the

[3] Willi-Plein (1991, 115–117) demonstrated that the verb YLD is a leading word in the story of the birth of Moses.

name.[4] As the result of unknown events, the hero's garment is defiled with blood and his followers' clothes covered with mud (line 5). Line 6 possibly recounts the episode of the crossing of the sea. Line 7 describes YHWH's burning anger and its devastating outcome for the community.

The text of line 7 may shed a new light on Amos 4:10, "I sent against you plague on the way (*bdrk*) to Egypt" (Robinson/Horst, 1954, 86).[5] For this interpretation of *bdrk*, see Gen 16:7; 35:19; 48:7; 1 Sam 17:52; and possibly Isa 10:24.26, too. Most scholars assumed that this is a reminder of the pestilence that, according to Ex 9:3–6, befell all Egyptian livestock and thereafter referred to as *bdrk mṣrym* "after the manner of Egypt" (e. g., Wolff, 1977, 210.221b; Andersen/Freedman, 1989, 436.442–443; Paul, 1991, 137.147). The inscription demonstrates that Amos may have heard a different tradition – one in which the Israelites suffered natural disasters after crossing the Sea of Reeds – and it is to this tradition that his prophecy is referring to.

In summary, the story is possibly an early version of the Exodus story – and if this is so, it has far-reaching ramifications for the discussion of the development of historiography in the First Temple period. The text is too fragmentary to verify this conjecture and its attendant far-reaching conclusions. If it is, as I have tentatively suggested, the story shows marked differences compared to the canonical biblical story, confirming the assumption of scholars that biblical traditions developed gradually over many years. It suggests that the eighth century North Israelite story of the Exodus was developed and theologized in the Kingdom of Judah, and its early form composed and recorded in writing in the seventh century BCE.

## Establishing the Date of the Site

The quality of the structure at Kuntillet ʿAjrud, and the nature of its findings, indicate that it was an Israelite state-sponsored enterprise. The pottery's chemi-

[4] Given the description of the hero's humble and possibly Israelite origin, the idea that Moses is a name of Egyptian derivation must be reexamined. Deriving his name from Egyptian *ms* is possible, but involves serious problems (see Griffiths, 1953; Zadok, 1985, 393–394; Knauf, 1988, 104–105). Since Moses was the leader of a West-Semitic people, it is preferable to derive his name from the verb *mšh*, "draw out (from the water)", as explained in Exod 2:10. Indeed, the history of Moses links him to water, as indicated by the stories of the crossing of the Sea of Reeds and the drawing of water from the rock (Exod 17:6; Num 20:8–11). In this light we may reverse the discussion and suggest that the application of the Sargon Birth Legend to the history of Moses (Exod 2:2–10) was motivated by the original "watery" derivation of his name. If this is indeed the case, the figure of "Moses the Egyptian" is secondary, introduced to the story in the seventh century BCE under the influence of the Akkadian legend.

[5] Robinson and Horst (1954, 86) speculated that "vielleicht ist ein israelitisches Heer an der sumpfigen Mittelmeerküste der Sinaihalbinsel von einer ähnlichen Heimsuchung betroffen worden wie Sanheribs Heer im Jahre 701 v. Chr.".

cal and petrographic analysis reveals that supplies came mostly from southern Judah, with only a handful from Israel and Phoenicia. We should recall in this context that not long before, Joash king of Israel had defeated Amaziah king of Judah, taken him captive and conquered Jerusalem (2 Kings 14:11–14). We do not know how long the subordination of Judah by Israel lasted, but presumably the supplies delivered to Kuntillet ʿAjrud from Judah formed part of the tribute imposed by the victorious kingdom upon the other. The many items of Judahite pottery found at the site should not, therefore, be understood as indicating the allegiance of the site's occupants to the pottery's place of origin.

The site's dating is a matter of dispute among scholars. The means used for dating include matching the pottery at the site to samples of pottery at other sites of the same period; radiometric dating of the pieces of wood found at the site; palaeographic dating of the script; and general historical considerations.

a) Radiometric data dates the site between the beginning of the eighth century and the Assyrian conquest (Segal, 1995; Carmi/Segal, 1996; Finkelstein/Piasetzky, 2008).
b) Ceramic comparisons suggest the site dates to approximately the first half of the eighth century BCE (Ayalon, 1995; Freud, 2008; for a different opinion see Singer-Avitz, 2006; 2009, 110–114).
c) It is difficult to determine a precise date for the inscriptions based on their scripts. A tentative dating to the first half of the eighth century is only a rough approximation (Lemaire, 1984, 134–136).
d) There is a marked difference between Kuntillet ʿAjrud – in terms of its location, structure and contents – and the fortresses built by the Assyrians in the southern desert regions from late eighth century onwards. While the latter were established on crossroads and at strategic locations, the former was built some 15 km off the trade route, at a place of no strategic importance. The Assyrian fortresses were surrounded by walls that could withstand a siege, while the walls at Kuntillet ʿAjrud were substantially thinner, providing protection against sudden raids, but no more. Finally, the religious and cultural characteristics of the site and its findings are alien to the character of the Assyrian fortresses, which were built for domination and commercial considerations. All these indicate that the site was built well before the Assyrian conquest of the Levant under Tiglath-pileser III.
e) The latter conclusion fits in well with the data from the inscriptions which suggest that the site was established by a king of Israel – most likely Jeroboam II – who was involved both in its construction and in its maintenance.

When all these factors are considered together, they lead to the conclusion that the site was built during the reign of Jeroboam II (786–746), and was possibly abandoned near the end of his reign.[6]

[6] Finkelstein and Piasetzky (2008, 180–184) suggested that the site was in operation between ca. 795 and 730/720 BCE. But three quarters of a century seems too long for a single phase site, and I prefer to date its end to around the mid-eighth century BCE, near

## Character of the Site: Caravanserai or Cultic Centre?

The character of the site is hotly debated among scholars. It should be emphasized that we know of no other similar state-sponsored Israelite or Judahite structure established at such a remote desert location, prior to the arrival of the Assyrian empire in the region. At the period in question, Kadesh Barnea was deserted, which means that the new structure stood in splendid isolation in the vicinity of the route from the coast of Philistia to the Gulf of Aqaba (Meshel, 2012a, 67a). Why, then, was this particular spot – 15 km west of the road – specifically chosen, rather than Kadesh, which sat on the route itself, with the added benefit of an abundant and stable water source all year round?

Many researchers believed that the building at Kuntillet ʿAjrud – a khan, built on a hilltop, near a water source, not very far from the trade route – served as a caravanserai for caravans travelling from the coast of Philistia to the Gulf of Aqaba (e. g., Beck, 1982, 61; Lemaire, 1984, 136; Hadley, 1993; 2000, 106–120; Keel/Uehlinger, 1998, 247; Dijkstra, 2001, 17–21; Singer-Avitz, 2009, 115–117; Hutton, 2010, 187–189; Blum, 2012, 55). Presumably – given the efforts involved in establishing such a khan and maintaining it at such a remote location – the Darb el-Ghazza route saw brisk traffic that made such an enterprise financially worthwhile, and the king of Israel established this outpost to bolster his control of the area and to exact tribute from passing caravans. However, such an account fails to explain why the site would yield a wealth of exceptional findings quite unlike any other Israelite and Judahite site excavated to date. The findings at the late Iron Age caravanserai excavated near Tel ʿAroer, for example, fit in well with its function as a way and supply station (Thareani-Sussely, 2007, citing a series of later examples). If indeed Kuntillet ʿAjrud was nothing more than a way station of this sort, why were there such elaborate inscriptions and drawings on the plaster walls and doorjambs? How can we explain the presence of the large, heavy stone basin with the dedication inscription "To/of ʿObadyo son of ʿAdna, blessed he be to YHW" (Aḥituv/Eshel/Meshel, 2012, 76–77)?[7] What possible function did these features fulfil in a place whose principal purpose was a resting stop and supply station, and why were skilled scribes engaged to produce them?[8] Furthermore, if the site's primary purpose

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the end of Jeroboam's reign.

[7] Aḥituv, Eshel and Meshel (2012, 75–76) published an inscription written on a rim fragment of a stone bowl, which they rendered *šbl ḥlyw* (2012, 77–78). But the photograph (fig. 5.4) shows that the first letter is /t/. The inscription should be rendered "Tubal (son of) Ḥalyo".

[8] On the religious nature of the site, see Zevit, 2001, 374–375 n. 47; Schmidt, 2002, 96.98–99; Meshel, 2012a, 66a–67. Hutton (2010, 187–189) pointed out the nexus between trade and cultic devotional practices, and suggested a few examples to substantiate his claim. However, none of the examples he presents is particularly relevant to the discussion of Kuntillet ʿAjrud and its findings. They are too general and do not really explain the site's unique character.

was to control the area and collect tolls, why was it established some 15 km from the road, which would only make it easy for caravans to avoid paying? Last but not least, Meshel (2012a, 67a) has pointed out that the site had no space to accommodate travellers, who likely camped by the thamileh rather than at the site itself. This would explain why only a few cooking vessels were found at the site – a finding that in itself is at odds with the notion that it functioned as a guesthouse (Meshel, 2012a, 67–68). We may conclude, therefore, that the caravanserai hypothesis does not account for the site's unique features.

The site's unusual character calls for an exceptional explanation for its construction and maintenance. The religious nature of some of the inscriptions has led some researchers to speculate that the site served a cultic purpose. But this would require the presence of an altar, sacred vessels and remains of sacrifices, none of which are in evidence (see Hadley, 1993; Schmidt, 2002, 96.98–99; Meshel, 2012a, 68b–69a). Some scholars have even linked the site to a possible pilgrimage to Mount Sinai, said to be situated somewhere in the desert (Axelsson, 1987, 62–63.181; Weippert, 1988, 625; Dijkstra, 2001, 22; Meshel, 2012a, 68b). But pilgrimages to far-off destinations were unknown before the Byzantine period, when pilgrims began visiting the places associated with the life of Jesus and other sacred sites mentioned in the Old and New Testaments. The notion of a pilgrimage from the kingdom of Israel to Sinai during the First Temple period – based on the late post-exilic story of Elijah's journey to Mount Horeb[9] – is anachronistic and must be rejected outright.

Meshel (2012a, 69a) speculated that "ʿAjrud was a religious site, but no cultic activities took place there". In the scenario that he puts forward, the king of Israel settled a group of priests and Levites there, who were provided for from offerings and tithes sent to them from Jerusalem (2012a, 68b). These priests would have been engaged not in worship and sacrifices, but in training apprentice scribes, who were responsible for making the inscriptions and the paintings on the plaster and jars, dispensed blessings on passing travellers, and even engaged in weaving, as indicated by the loom, linen and wool found at the site.

However, Meshel's hypothesis falls short of explaining what was so special about this 'religious centre' that the king of Israel would want to build and maintain it and invest so many resources in it. After all, every cult place in the ancient world had a formative myth behind it that accounted for its sanctity in the eyes of the priests and believers: in the absence of such an explanation, the underlying reason for the effort invested by the kingdom of Israel in establishing and maintaining this remote site remains elusive. Moreover, why would the king place priests at a site with no offerings and ritual ceremonies? The primary role of priests in ancient Near Eastern kingdoms was to offer sacrifices to the gods and to held rituals and ceremonial rites in their honour to secure the safety of the kingdom and its inhabitants. If there were no such offerings and rituals at the

[9] For the late date of 1 Kings 19:1–18, see Otto, 2001, 184–196.261–262.264, with earlier literature.

site, there was no reason for priests to be present.

Before I address the issue of the site's sanctity, I would like to briefly examine another hypothesis that has not yet been raised in the research literature – namely, that travellers along the Darb el-Ghazza identified the imposing hill of Kuntillet ʿAjrud as the elusive Mountain of God – the precise location of which was unknown – and established upon it a site of religious nature in honour of YHWH. Such an explanation might account for why this particular site was chosen, but it is still problematic: the Mountain of God was seen as the seat of the chief god and the place where the gods would assemble. Traditionally, any site of this sort did not have a temple built on the site itself, but rather at the foot of the mountain, to view it from below. Therefore, establishing a cultic site on the hilltop itself would have been regarded an act of sacrilege, which rules out the possibility that the Kuntillet ʿAjrud hill was thought to be the elusive sacred mountain. Moreover, the site does not provide a vantage point towards any particular distant mountain, thereby dismissing even that tenuous link with this particular biblical Sinai tradition.[10]

In my discussion of the plaster inscriptions I raised the possibility that inscription Nº 4.3 related to an early version of the Exodus story. However, only a fragment of the inscription survived, and four other fragmented plaster inscriptions have been discovered in the site. Given that all five plaster inscriptions are badly broken, it is impossible to estimate the place and importance of Nº 4.3 in the corpus of plaster inscriptions and the other findings at the site. Tempting as it may be, it is best that we avoid drawing conclusions from the inscription about the possible connections of the site to the biblical tradition of the Exodus and the

[10] Based on the findings from Kuntillet ʿAjrud, Erhard Blum (2012, 58–60) suggested that the references to YHWH of Teman reinforce the biblical tradition of the origin of YHWH in the south, and indirectly support the biblical tradition that the cult of YHWH was brought to Canaan by the 'Exodus group'. In his words: "Von den Kuntillet 'Ağrud-Befunden und ihren Implikationen her gewinnt auch die herkömmliche Deutung der o. g. spätbronzezeitlichen Belege aus Ägypten an Wahrscheinlichkeit. Spricht demnach in religionsgeschichtlicher Perspektive doch alles für eine Herkunft der JHWH-Verehrung aus den an das südliche Kanaan angrenzenden Regionen von Midian/Edom, dann behält auch die Hypothese eine hohe Plausibilität, dass dieser JHWH-Kult durch eine ‚Exodus-Gruppe', die das Gelingen ihres ‚Auszugs' diesem Gott zuschrieb, an das sich in Kanaan konstituierende Israel vermittelt wurde". However, the inscriptions of Kuntillet ʿAjrud reflect the religious beliefs of the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom in the mid-eighth century BCE, not those of the inhabitants of southern Palestine. The date of the emergence of the cult of 'YHWH Teman' is unknown. Extrapolating from mid-eighth century North Israelite inscriptions to the biblical tradition of YHWH's origin in the south in the late thirteenth century BCE is, in my opinion, methodologically and materially unlikely. All that can legitimately be stated is that the eighth century inhabitants of Israel considered 'YHWH Shomron' to be the god of the Samaria region, and that 'YHWH Teman' was the god of the southern Palestinian districts. Hence, whilst staying in the southern regions they sought blessings from the local god, rather than from the remote god of the Samaria highlands.

Israelites' wandering in the desert.

Nonetheless, the question as to what made this place so significant for the Northern Kingdom is crucial to understanding why it was established where it was, and none of the many studies published to date have provided an adequate explanation. With this in mind, a few years ago, Nurit Lissovsky and I put forward a bold hypothesis that Kuntillet ʿAjrud was once the site of a spectacular tree, and it is this that made the site sacred. The cultic rituals would have been conducted near the tree, outside the building – a practice well known from the many various biblical references to worshipping "under every green tree". This would account for the absence of an altar, sacred vessels or the remains of sacrifices anywhere within the building (Na'aman/Lissovsky, 2008).

Examination of the biblical texts reveals that the goddess Asherat/Asherah was identified in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah with large trees of generous canopies that symbolized fertility and growth. She was thought to be YHWH's consort, and embodied in large trees in nature, as well as in tree-like sculptures in centres of worship (Day, 1986, 403–406; Ganghoff, 1999; 2001). For this reason, in biblical texts she appears variably as a goddess, as a sacred tree and as a statue in the Temple, all rolled into one.

If our hypothesis is correct, the building's primary purpose was to serve as a storage space for the holy trappings of worship of Asherat, for the gifts brought to her by her believers, and to accommodate the cultic personnel. A secondary function may have been to provide accommodation for eminent guests (such as the king's 'friend').

Of course, the difficulty with this hypothesis is that a tree – holy or otherwise – can only survive a few hundred years before it withers away and vanishes without trace. Therefore, supporting evidence can only be circumstantial – such as the various cultic sites that have been excavated in Israel and Judah that centred around a sacred tree (Na'aman/Lissovsky, 2008, 195–198; cf. Kottsieper, 2002). We might also recall, in this context, the tamarisk tree that Abraham is said to have planted in Beersheba at the founding of the site of worship known as "YHWH, the everlasting God" (Gen 21:33), to commemorate the sacred tree that stood there. That there are many instances of places of worship founded around a sacred tree in the desert area (Beersheba, ʿEn Gedi, Ḥorvat Qitmit) is not surprising, since in such regions an exceptionally large tree would undoubtedly stand out and assume an aura of sanctity.

In pursuit of this line of reasoning, we extended the study of the phenomenon of sacred trees during the First and Second Temple periods, and in the landscape of modern Israel today, and have considered the associated aspects of worship in each case. One of the striking features of the cult of trees was the custom of draping fabrics on the tree, or tying them to its branches, as a means of establishing an intimate bond between the believer and the deity or saint associated with the tree. The biblical account of King Josiah's reform includes the description "And he broke down the dedicated treasure buildings [sic!] within the House of YHWH, where women weave coverings for Asherah" (2 Kings 23:7)

– an indication that cloths were woven at the Temple in Jerusalem with which they wrapped the statue of the goddess. This and other examples would account for the unusual abundance of textiles found at the site, which were possibly sold to believers to hang upon the sacred tree (Na'aman/Lissovsky, 2008, 198–199; also Ackerman, 2008).

This interpretation accounts for the prominence of the goddess Asherat in the Kuntillet ʿAjrud inscriptions, and the special significance of the site, which was established in honour of the sacred tree and the goddess of fertility and growth that it embodied. Conceivably, therefore, whoever wrote the dedications *lyhwh tmn wl'šrth* intended it for the god of the region and to the goddess Asherat, as embodied in the vigorous tree that grew at the site. Whether the painting on Pithos A of the budding tree with lotus flowers flanked by upright ibexes on either side and a lion below are also related to the goddess Asherat is a question that I am not in a position to answer (See, Beck 1982, 13–18 [2012, 152b–157a]).

In light of all the above, we might speculate that people travelling along the Darb el-Ghazza route may have stopped at Kuntillet ʿAjrud to draw water from its *thamileh*, where they encountered the magnificent tree that grew nearby. Like many other awe-inspiring trees around the world from ancient times to the present day, the tree acquired an aura of holiness, and eventually became a site of worship to the goddess Asherat, and was consecrated to her as the goddess of fertility. Since much of the trade along that route was conducted by the king's traders, word of the site eventually reached the king, probably Jeroboam II, who, as an act of piety, established the cultic building nearby. As religion and politics are bound together, the religious centre increased his power and dominion in the region. The worship centred on the goddess, which would explain her prominent role beside YHWH – her partner and chief god of the Northern Kingdom – in the dedication inscriptions written at the site.

The advantage of this hypothesis is that it offers the first ever explanation as to why this particular site was chosen. Its weakness lies in the fact that it is impossible to prove, and therefore can only be consigned to the realm of conjecture.

In conclusion, an analysis of the inscriptions and drawings from Kuntillet ʿAjrud demonstrates not only its distinctive religious nature, but also the abiding interest of the authorities of the Northern Kingdom in the place. The figure of a ruler, probably the king of Israel, seated on a throne and holding a lotus flower, was painted on plaster on the entrance wall to the building (see Meshel/Goren, 2012, 17). The front room (i. e., the bench-room) was covered with plaster, and several inscriptions in the prestigious Phoenician script adorned its walls and jambs as well as on those on the other side of the central court. A fragment of epic/hymnic wall inscription describes a theophany of a God – apparently YHWH – called upon to help the king in his war. Another fragmented narrative possibly conveyed an early version of the Exodus story. The inscription on Pithos A was

written by a royal high official ("the king's friend") who arrived at the place. The inscription on Pithos B includes a blessing to "the lord of your house", probably the king of Israel. I further interpreted the noun *môšîaʿ* ("deliverer") that is mentioned in the next line, in allusion to the biblical descriptions of Joash and Jeroboam as saviour kings. Another inscription on Pithos B mentions "the favourer of the father and his quiver", which I interpreted as a reference to Jeroboam II, who took part in his father's wars against the Arameans. The cumulative textual and artistic evidence points to a site of religious nature, established by the king of Israel and maintained by his administration.

Scholars may object and point out that my conclusions are based on uncertain readings, restorations and interpretations – and I openly admit it. Nevertheless, the inscriptions – under this or some other interpretation – go hand to hand with the many other findings from the site, all suggesting that the site is unique and requires a special interpretation. In my opinion, the caravanserai hypothesis held by many scholars fails to explain the site's extraordinary nature and is best discarded. Many new materials, including good photographs of the inscriptions and drawings, have now been published, providing rich data that calls for a thorough re-investigation of this unique desert site and its findings.

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