

Kuntillet 'Ajrud Inscription 4.3: A Note on the Alleged Exodus Tradition

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Abstract

It has been proposed recently to read the heavily fragmented plaster inscription 4.3 from Kuntillet 'Ajrud as an attestation of the Exodus tradition. Based on the marked differences from the comparative biblical material, far-reaching conclusions regarding the evolution of the Exodus tradition have been drawn. But the reading suffers from serious problems.

Keywords

Kuntillet 'Ajrud Inscription 4.3 – Exodus tradition

Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscription 4.3 is written with ink on plaster. Positioned quite prominently on the northern doorjamb of the western entrance to the so-called "Bench-room Complex" (building A), circa 1.30 m above floor level, it is the only plaster inscription discovered in situ. Due to poor preservation, its reading is extremely difficult.¹ For this reason, presumably, the inscription has not been

¹ See Z. Meshel (ed.), *Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Ḥorvat Teman): An Iron Age II Religious Site on the Judah-Sinai Border* (Jerusalem, 2012), p. 115 and S. Ahituv and E. Eshel (eds.), *To YHWH of Teman and His ashera: The Inscriptions and Drawings from Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Ḥorvat Teman) in Sinai (Treasures of the Past)* (Jerusalem, 2015), p. 115 (Hebrew). See further N. Na'aman, "The Inscriptions of Kuntillet 'Ajrud Through the Lens of Historical Research", *UF* 43 (2011), p. 310; É. Puech, "Les inscriptions hébraïques de Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Sinai)", *RB* 121 (2014), p. 181.

published until lately.² The much-anticipated *editio princeps* of the Kuntillet 'Ajrud findings by Ze'ev Meshel offers the first full treatment of the text.

The inscription as we have it comprises seven lines. On the basis of what they were able to reconstruct,³ however, the responsible editors, Shmuel Ahituv and Esther Eshel, decided to translate but one line,⁴ thus betraying the evident difficulty in reading the heavily fragmented text. In a 2015 volume prepared by the same editors, they present an almost identical reconstruction.⁵

Against this background, the recent news regarding a hitherto unknown Exodus tradition to be found in that inscription come as no little surprise. In *UF* 43 (2011), Nadav Na'aman, offering a detailed discussion of the text as deciphered by him, concluded that "the story is possibly an early version of the Exodus story".⁶ Albeit admitting that this conjecture is burdened heavily with the fragmentary state of the text, he went on to argue that "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."⁷

Na'aman's suggestion has repeatedly been adopted.⁸ Confronting his bold claim, however, attention must be called to the fact that the alleged Exodus

2 Cf., e.g., J. Renz and W. Röllig, *Handbuch der althebräischen Epigraphik: Vol. III* (Darmstadt, 1995), pp. 47-64.

3 See the presentation in Meshel, *Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Ḥorvat Teman)*, p. 115.

4 Line 7: "...] Cain destroyed a field and lofty mo[untains".

5 S. Ahituv, E. Eshel, and Z. Meshel, "Inscriptions and their Interpretation", in S. Ahituv and E. Eshel (eds.), *To YHWH of Teman and His ashera: The Inscriptions and Drawings from Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Ḥorvat Tēman) in Sinai (Treasures of the Past; Jerusalem, 2015)*, p. 115 (Hebrew). For a comparison regarding l. 6, see below.

6 Na'aman, "The Inscriptions of Kuntillet 'Ajrud Through the Lens of Historical Research", p. 312.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 312.

8 In *ZAW* 126 (2014), the reader is informed of a "possible connection of Kuntillet 'Ajrud with the Exodus and desert wandering accounts" (I. Finkelstein and T. Römer, "Comments on the Historical Background of the Jacob Narrative in Genesis", *ZAW* 126 [2014], p. 329), and a comprehensive 2015 book article on the evolution of the Exodus tradition seconds by citing the proposal "that plaster Inscription 4.3 refers to the Exodus story" (I. Finkelstein, "The Wilderness Narrative and Itineraries and the Evolution of the Exodus Tradition", in T. E. Levy, T. Schneider, and W. H. C. Propp [eds.], *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture, and Geoscience [Quantitative Methods in the Humanities and Social Sciences; Cham, 2015]*, p. 44). Most recently, see also I. Finkelstein, "Notes on the Historical Setting of Kuntillet 'Ajrud", *Maarav* 20 (2013 [published 2015]), p. 21.

tradition is not quite as well founded as one would wish. On the contrary, the ground could hardly be thinner. In what follows, I do not offer a new reading of the inscription, let alone a comprehensive interpretation. Far more modest, the goal of this short note is to recommend caution regarding the extensive reading of Na'aman and the rather far-reaching conclusions drawn from it. Before accepting the newly unearthed Exodus tradition, it commends itself to consult the source and assess the available evidence critically.

Here is the transliteration and translation of Na'aman's deciphering as presented by him:⁹

2	[xxxx 'hly · yš' [...]	[... t]ents of Is[rael? ...]
3	lydth · wh' [...]	his birth, and he [...]
4	['ny · w'sq · bn · 'b[yn] · 'š]	a poor and oppressed son of a ne[edy],
	dl [...]	a poor per[son. ...]
5	lbšm · ywn md'w [ng]'l ·	their clothing are muddy, his garment
	bd[m....]	defiled with blo[od ...]
6	nd · ħlp wym [y]bš 'd [...]	heap of water has passed and the sea
		[has dr]ied until? [...]
7	[ħ]rn · bšnt · d[br?] r['b ·	[a burn]ing anger in a year of
	w[ħ]rb · šħt · qyn · š[q]r ·	pl[ague], hunger and desolate, the
	wmrnh · [...]	spear destroyed, falsehood and deceit
		[....]

The subsequent commentary and interpretation neither offer an epigraphic discussion (explanation of newly proposed readings for fragmented letters etc.) nor address the problem of genre, focusing instead right away on the question whether the reconstructed story may be understood as a form of the Exodus tradition, and how it is to be distinguished from the known attestations of the latter. Attention is drawn, for example, to the hero's "humble social background", which is contrasted with Moses' upbringing in the Egyptian court.¹⁰ On these grounds, Na'aman ventures to argue that the profile of Moses as an Egyptian is due only to a secondary development of the Exodus tradition.¹¹

But the basis of this entire interpretation is less than clear. In most cases where Na'aman departs from the more cautious deciphering of the inscription by Aḥituv and Eshel, I literally fail to see what Na'aman reports to have seen.

9 Na'aman, "The Inscriptions of Kuntillet 'Ajrud Through the Lens of Historical Research", p. 310.

10 Ibid., p. 311.

11 Ibid., p. 312, n. 4.

As the extant photographs unfortunately are of too low a resolution to scale them up significantly, and the original being, to the best of my knowledge, not available for inspection, Na'aman's confident reading eludes me.¹² This pertains in particular to line 6, and it is this very line which is at the heart of the Exodus tradition hypothesis.

The *editio princeps* reads:¹³

6]^ol^owy^o[]k^oh[]k 'd[

In the 2015 edition, Aḥituv and Eshel present a slight modification of their reading.¹⁴ As concerns our present discussion, mention should be made of the proposal to read a Mem towards the center of the line. Note, however, that the proposal is labelled as tentative:

6]^olh[?] · wym[?][]k^oh[]k 'd[

Based on his reading (see above) and translation of the same line, “heap of water has passed and the sea has dried until . . .”, Na'aman notes that “[t]he scene is not dissimilar to the crossing of the Sea of Reeds”.¹⁵

Indeed, if one was to read the proposed combination of the lexemes *ym* and *ybs̄* with *nd*, one could, in my view, argue with reason for an attestation of, at least, the miracle at the sea.¹⁶ Alas, neither *nd* nor *ybs̄* are to be verified on the grounds of the extant photographs. As for the proposed reading *ym*, the letter Mem is to be called into question. Erhard Blum actually suggests that it might not be a letter at all, but a sign from Palestinian hieratic meaning *hmr*,¹⁷

12 The same holds true for the reading presented by Puech, “Les inscriptions hébraïques de Kuntilet ‘Ajrud (Sināi)”, pp. 182-183.

13 Meshel, *Kuntilet ‘Ajrud (Horvat Teman)*, p. 115.

14 Aḥituv, Eshel, and Meshel, “Inscriptions and their Interpretation”, p. 115.

15 Na'aman, “The Inscriptions of Kuntilet ‘Ajrud Through the Lens of Historical Research”, p. 311.

16 Note in particular that the word *nd*, “wall, dam, heap”, is attested only in four places in the Hebrew Bible and pertains exclusively to the miracle at the sea: While Ps 33:7 remains vague in this respect, the connection established in the Song of the Sea Exod 15:8 is clearly adopted in Ps 78:13; in Josh 3:13, 16, the word serves to compare the dry-shod crossing of the Jordan to the miracle at the sea. For a discussion, see J. J. Krause, *Exodus und Eisodus: Komposition und Theologie von Josua 1-5* (VTSup 161; Leiden – Boston, 2014), pp. 239-240.

17 Cf. S. Wimmer, *Palästinisches Hieratisch: Die Zahl- und Sonderzeichen in der althebräisch- en Schrift* (ÄAT 75; Wiesbaden, 2008), p. 254.

that is, in the present context, an ass load,¹⁸ thus supporting his preliminary interpretation of inscription 4.3 as containing lists of goods with indications of quantity given in hieratic.¹⁹ *With* the combination of *ym*, *ybs̄*, and *nd*, it might seem sensible to try and relate other parts of the text to a presumed Exodus narrative.²⁰ *Without* these words, however, one would hardly hit on the idea to read the inscription—even granted, for the sake of argument, the other lines were to be deciphered according to Na'aman's most confident proposal—as an attestation of that tradition.²¹ In fact, the fundamental question as to the genre of the inscription arises anew. In favor of a list or, probably more to the point, of lists being employed, rather than a story, one could further refer to a detail in line 4. Instead of Na'aman's reading *'sq* and the rather forced rendering that comes with it,²² one might simply read *sq*, “sack”.²³ This suggests itself all the more given that reading the preceding character as an Ayin is not a viable option in my view.

In light of these data, it does not seem to commend itself to reckon with an Exodus tradition in Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscription 4.3, still less to build further hypotheses on this basis. In any case, it should be pointed out that a decision on the matter will have manifest ramifications for the question whether the place indeed was a “religious site” established for cultic purposes,²⁴ or rather a way station serving the needs of those travelling on the Darb el-Ghazza trade route.²⁵

18 Erhard Blum, personal communication.

19 See E. Blum, “Die Wandinschriften 4.2 und 4.6 sowie die Pithos-Inschrift 3.9 aus *Kuntillet Aġrūd*”, *ZDPV* 129 (2013), p. 48, n. 115; see also *ibid.*, p. 21, n. 3.

20 Note, for example, Na'aman's argument concerning the birth of the hero in l. 3, which suffers, however, from the rather unlikely interpretation (in an eighth century inscription!) of the Yod in *lydth*. A similar problem is posed by the reading *'sq*, rendered “oppressed”, in l. 4. To support this interpretation and the assumed interchange of /š/ and /s/ here, Na'aman has to resort to the Shibboleth incident in Judg 12:5-6.

21 In this view, it is no coincidence that Na'aman repeatedly stresses the *unknown* form of the tradition.

22 See above, n. 20.

23 As is done by Puech, “Les inscriptions hébraïques de Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Sinaï)”, p. 182.

24 Thus the view advocated prominently in Meshel, *Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Ḥorvat Teman)* (the citation is from the book's subtitle) and argued resolutely in the most recent contribution by N. Na'aman, “A New Outlook at Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Its Inscriptions”, *Maarav* 20 (2013 [published 2015]).

25 Thus, among others, Blum, “Die Wandinschriften 4.2 und 4.6 sowie die Pithos-Inschrift 3.9 aus *Kuntillet Aġrūd*”. See now also T. Ornan, “Drawings from Kuntillet 'Ajrud”, in S. Aḥituv and E. Eshel (eds.), *To YHWH of Teman and His ashera: The Inscriptions and Drawings from Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Ḥorvat Tēman) in Sinai (Treasures of the Past; Jerusalem, 2015)*

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