

New Light on Israelite Religion: The Implications of the Inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud¹

"Did Yahweh have a consort?" That question was the provocative title of an article by Z. Meshel in 1979, and it arose from a new interpretation of some inscriptions that he had published for the first time in the previous year. They were found on jars at Kuntillet 'Ajrud, about 50 km south of Kadesh-barnea, where several routes met and there was a building that Meshel regards as a religious centre. He dates the finds between the middle of the ninth and the middle of the eighth centuries B.C. He originally favoured the reign of Athaliah (presumably for historical, rather than archaeological, reasons), but he now puts them a little later, in the reign of Joash of Israel, on the precarious ground that a word which he restores as ' [šjw] is a variant form of Joash's name (see Weinfeld, p. 284).

These inscriptions are important for several reasons. With the possible exception of an unpublished seal from the eighth century (Cross, p. 61), they appear to be the first texts written by Israelites (unlike the Moabite Stone) on which *jhw*, the longer form of the divine name, occurs. The other reasons will be considered below.

One of the inscriptions includes the words: *brkt . 'tkm . ljhwh . šmrn . wl'srth*, "I have blessed you by Yahweh *šmrn* and his Asherah". The verb *brkt* is regarded as the first person singular perfect (*berākti*) without a *mater lectionis* at the end, and the same formula of blessing is found at Arad (162–3; 212–3; 403). Similarly, a Phoenician inscription from Saqqara in the sixth century has *brtk lb'l špn*, "I have blessed thee by Baal Zaphon" (KAI 502–3; cp. Lemaire, p. 602).

1 A list of the principal works cited will be found at the end of the article. I am grateful to several friends for their help. Dr G.I. Davies read the article in draft and made some helpful suggestions (including references to several works). Dr J. Day made available to me a copy of Z. Meshel's article of 1979, to which I should not otherwise have had access. Dr A. Mazar drew my attention to M. Weinfeld's article, and Professor M. Haran enabled me to see it before the book in which it appears became available in Cambridge. Professor E. Würthwein reminded me of the relevance of H. Donner's article. The help I have received makes me more conscious than ever of the value of international co-operation among scholars. (*Ed. Note:* Throughout this article *j* is the transliteration for Heb. *yodh*.)

It implies a wish as well as being a statement, and so Meshel translates the verb and its object as "May you be blessed".

The word *šmrn* was first understood by Meshel as the active participle *qal* of the verb *šamār* with a first person plural suffix: *šom^erenu*, "who guards us"; and the verb appears in another inscription from Kuntillet 'Ajrud in which someone named *ʾmrjw* says: *brktk. ljhwh [...] wʾšrth. jbrk. wjšmrk wjhj ʾm. ʾdnj*, "I have blessed thee by Yahweh [...] and his Asherah. May he bless and keep thee, and be with my lord". One might have expected it to be written *šmrnw*, with a final *mater lectionis*, but the writers were not consistent in their use of such vowel letters, and we have seen that *brkt* was written, not *brktj*.

A different suggestion was made in the following year (1979) by M. Gilula, who preferred the reading *šom^eron*, "Samaria". Whether because of Gilula's article, or as a result of his own further thought, Meshel's article of the same year also allows the possibility of this reading, though it notes a syntactical problem (which we shall consider below) in understanding the phrase to mean "Yahweh of Samaria". Such an interpretation of the expression has, however, now been confirmed by the reading of several other inscriptions, which have another place name: *jhw h tmn wʾšrth* "Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah"; and Meshel accepts this way of understanding the inscriptions.²

It is thus probable that the inscriptions from shortly before or after 800 B.C. refer to "Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah" and "Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah". The purpose of the present article is to consider some of the implications of these texts for the study of Israelite religion.

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When I visited the Israel Museum in Jerusalem in May 1981 and saw the way in which these inscriptions are now read, it struck me at once that they had a bearing on a syntactical problem that has been much discussed by Old Testament scholars. One of the questions raised by the phrase *jhw h š^ebaʾôt* is whether it is legitimate to regard it as meaning "Yahweh of *š^ebaʾôt*", or whether the second word must be in apposition to the first. The former way of understanding the phrase appears to treat the tetragrammaton as if it were in the construct state, but such a usage has seemed anomalous to some. Yet at Kuntillet 'Ajrud the divine name is used in a comparable syntactical relationship. It would, however, be a superficial treatment of the subject merely to appeal to

2 See p. 284 of Weinfeld's article, which gives Meshel's most recent opinions on the subject. The inscriptions are now explained thus in the Israel Museum.