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"I BLESS YOU TO YHWH AND HIS ASHERAH"— WRITING AND PERFORMATIVITY AT KUNTILLET ʿAJRUD[1]

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I. INTRODUCTION

Kuntillet ʿAjrud (Ḥorvat Teiman) is a ninth–early eighth century B.C.E. site located at the crossroads of several overland routes that connected the Sinai to the major trade networks of the period.[2] Despite its remote location on the borderlands between Judah and Egypt, elements

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[2] Kuntillet ʿAjrud is located 50 km south of the biblical site of Kadesh-Barnea (ʿAin Qudeirât), and is at the junction of several desert routes: it is 15 km west of Darb el-Ghazzeh, an ancient route that runs from the coast southwards. Darb el-Gazzeh bifurcates into two roads: one runs southeast to the Red Sea, and the other continues south to the southern Sinai Peninsula. The site is also near Wâdî Qureiyah, which provided an east-west route for desert traffic. See A. F. Rainey and R. S. Notley, *The Sacred Bridge: Carta's Atlas of the Biblical World* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006): 223; Ze'ev Meshel, *Kuntillet ʿAjrud [Ḥorvat Teman]: An Iron Age II Religious Site on the Judah-Sinai Border* (Jerusalem: IES, 2012): 3-4; map on 4. Carbon 14 evidence dates the construction of Kuntillet ʿAjrud to 820–795 B.C.E. Israel Finklestein and Eli Piasetzky ("The Date of Kuntillet ʿAjrud: the C^{14} Perspective," *Tel Aviv* 35:2 [2008]: 175–185) attribute the site to Israelite economic expansion in the south during the late ninth century B.C.E. under Joash. They propose that Kuntillet ʿAjrud was abandoned between 745–730/20 B.C.E., coinciding with an increased Assyrian presence in the region. Ultimately, this caused a shift in desert traffic eastward to the Edom–Beersheba Valley route. See also Z. Meshel, I. Carmi, and D. Segal, "14C

of the material culture such as the pottery,[3] the "northern" orthography in certain inscriptions,[4] and reference to YHWH of Samaria suggest that Kuntillet ʿAjrud was an Israelite outpost, or at the very least, had a strong Israelite presence. The small number of cooking wares, the lack of agrarian tools or evidence of cultivation, coupled with the site's fortress-like construction (which includes corner towers, thick walls, and a large central courtyard), suggest that Kuntillet ʿAjrud was designed as a military outpost to monitor travel and trade in the region.

There is also compelling evidence that Kuntillet ʿAjrud had a religious function, though it is debated whether or not it should be classified as a

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Dating of an Israelite Biblical Site at Kuntillet ʿAjrud (Ḥorvat Teiman)," *Radiocarbon* 37 (1995): 205–212; Meshel, *Kuntillet ʿAjrud*, op. cit., 61–63.

[3] The wares and finish of the ceramics at Kuntillet ʿAjrud suggest that this site was part of the northern cultural horizon. See E. Ayalon ("The Pottery Assemblage," in Meshel, *Kuntillet ʿAjrud* [N 2]: 205–287; idem, "The Iron Age II Pottery Assemblage from Ḥorvat Teiman [Kuntillet ʿAjrud]," *Tel Aviv* 22 [1995]: 141–212) for a discussion of the parallels between the pottery assemblage at Kuntillet ʿAjrud and in Samaria strata IV, V, and VI. See also J. Gunneweg, I. Perlman, and Z. Meshel, "The Origin of the Pottery of Kuntillet ʿAjrud," *IEJ* 35 (1985): 270–283; Y. Goren, "Petrographic Analysis of Ḥorvat Teiman (Kuntillet ʿAjrud) Pottery," *Tel Aviv* 22 (1995): 206–207. However, L. Singer-Avitz ("The Date of Kuntillet ʿAjrud," *Tel Aviv* 33 [2006]: 196–228; idem, "The Date of Kuntillet ʿAjrud: A Rejoinder," *Tel Aviv* 36 [2009]: 110–119) argues that the assemblage consists primarily of Judean wares and should be dated to the late eighth century; see L. Freud ("The Date of Kuntillet ʿAjrud: A Reply to Lily Singer-Avitz," *Tel Aviv* 35 [2008]: 169–174) for a rejoinder.

[4] Kuntillet ʿAjrud was originally thought to have been a Phoenician outpost. However, the language and orthography of the inscriptions and the ceramics suggest that the site catered mainly to Israelites. Today, the inscriptions at the site are divided into two main categories: Hebrew inscriptions written in the Old Hebrew script, and Judean Hebrew inscriptions written in a Phoenician (or Phoenician-like) script. The inscriptions in the Phoenician script are limited to wall decorations, i.e., texts executed in ink on the plastered walls of the site (KA [= Kuntillet ʿAjrud] 4.1–4.4). S. Aḥituv attributes these inscriptions to a Judean scribe trained in the Phoenician scribal tradition. He cites the marking of the dipthong in Têmān (*tymn* [4.1.1]) and the use of a more defective spelling (*ymm* [KA 4.1.1] and *bym* [KA 4.2]) as characteristic of Judean Hebrew. Whereas, he attributes the inscriptions written in the Old Hebrew script, which make up the bulk of the inscribed materials at the site, to individuals trained in an Israelite scribal tradition. Salient among the "northern" features is the more plene spelling, which is also characteristic of the Samaria Ostraca, e.g., the marking of the final *ā* in personal names (*ʿdnh* [KA 1.2]), use of *yod* to mark the final *î* (*ʾdny* and *wyhy* [KA 3.6]), as well as the omission of the dipthong (*tmn* [KA 3.6 and 3.9] vs. *tymn* [4.1]), and the shortened theophoric element attested in Israelite personal names (*–yw* [KA 1.2 and 3.6] vs. *–yhw* in Judean inscriptions). See S. Aḥituv, E. Eshel, and Z. Meshel, "The Inscriptions," in Kuntillet ʿAjrud (N 2): 122–127; B. A. Mastin, "Who Built and Who Used the Buildings at Kuntillet ʿAjrud?" in *On Stone and Scroll: Essays in Honour of Graham Igor Davies* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011]: 69–86); idem, "The Theophoric Elements "*yw*" and "*yhw*" in Proper Names in Eighth-Century Hebrew Inscriptions and the Proper Names at Kuntillet ʿAjrud," *Zeitschrift für Althebräistik* 17–20 (2004–2007): 109–135.

religious center.[5] The wealth of iconography and epigraphic materials at

[5] The most recent publication is Meshel, *Kuntillet ʿAjrud* (n 2). Earlier publications include Z. Meshel, *A Religious Centre from the Time of the Judaean Monarchy on the Border of Sinai* (Israel Museum Catalogue 175; Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1978); idem, "Teman, Ḥorvat," *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (5 vols.; E. Stern, ed.; Jerusalem: IES & Carta, 1993): 4.1458–1464; idem, "Did Yahweh Have a Consort? The New Religious Inscriptions from the Sinai," *BAR* 5/2 (1978): 24–34. See also S. Ackerman, "The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel," *JBL* 112 (1993): 385–401; P. Beck, "The Drawings from Ḥorvat Teiman," *Tel Aviv* 9 (1982): 3–68; A. Catastini, "Le inscrizioni di Kuntillet ʿAjrud e il profetisimo," *Annali dell'instituto Orientali di Napoli* 42 (1982): 127–134; D. A. Chase, "A Note on an Inscription from Kuntillet ʿAjrud," *BASOR* 246 (1982): 63–67; W. G. Dever, "Asherah, Consort of Yahweh?" *BASOR* 255 (1984): 21–37; idem, "Archaeology and the Ancient Israelite Cult: How the Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet ʿAjrud 'Asherah' Texts Have Changed the Picture," in *Frank Moore Cross Volume* in *Eretz-Israel* 26 (B. A. Levine et al., eds.; Jerusalem: IES, 1999): 9*–15*; idem, *Did God Have a Wife?: Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); M. Dietrich and O. Loretz, *'Jahwe und seine Aschera': Anthropomorphes Kultbild in Mesopotamien, Ugarit, und Israel* (Münster: Ugarit, 1992); J. A. Emerton, "New Light on Israelite Religion: The Implications of the Evidence of the Inscriptions from Kuntillet ʿAjrud," *ZAW* 94 (1982): 2–20; J. Hadley, "Some Drawings and Inscriptions on Two Pithoi from Kuntillet ʿAjrud," *VT* 37 (1987): 180–213; idem, "The Khirbet el-Qom Inscription," *VT* 37.1 (1987): 50–62; idem, "Kuntillet ʿAjrud: Religious Centre or Desert Way Station?" *PEQ* 123 (1993): 115–124; idem, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 2000); J. S. Holladay Jr. "Religions in Israel and Judah under the Monarchy: An Explicitly Archaeological Approach," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (P. D. Miller et al., eds.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987): 249–299; J. M. Hutton, "Local Manifestations of Yahweh and Worship in the Interstices: A Note on Kuntillet ʿAjrud," *JANER* 10 (2010): 177–210; A. Lemaire, *Les écoles et la formation de la Bible dans l'ancient Israël* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 39; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981); idem., "Date et origine des inscriptions hébräiques et phéniciennes de Kuntillet ʿAjrud," *Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici* 1 (1984): 131–143; B. Margalit, "The Meaning and Significance of Asherah," *VT* 40: (1990): 264–297; D. N. Freedman, "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah," *BA* 50 (1987): 241–249; M. Gilula, "To Yahweh Shomron and His Ashera," *Shnaton* 3 (1978–1979):129–137; B. A. Mastin, "A Note on Some Inscriptions and Drawings From Kuntillet ʿAjrud," *PEQ* 137.1 (2005): 31–32; idem., "The Inscriptions Written on Plaster at Kuntillet ʿAjrud," *VT* 59 (2009): 99–115; P. K. McCarter, Jr., "Aspects of the Religion of the Israelite Monarchy: Biblical and Epigraphic Data," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, op. cit., 137–155; H. P. Müller, "Kolloquialsprache und Volksreligion in den Inschriften von Kuntillet Aǧrūd und Ḫirbet el-Qōm," *Zeitschrift für Althebraistik* 5 (1992): 15–51; N. Na'aman, "The Inscriptions of Kuntillet ʿAjrud through the Lens of Historical Research," *UF* 43 (2011): 299–324; N. Na'aman and N. Lissovsky, "Kuntillet ʿAjrud, Sacred Trees and the Asherah," *Tel Aviv* 35 (2008): 186–208; M. Weinfeld, "Kuntillet ʿAjrud Inscriptions and Their Significance," *Studi epigrafici e linguistici* 1 (1984):121–130; S. A. Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah: With Further Considerations of the Goddess* (Gorgias Ugaritic Studies 2; Piscataway: Gorgias, 2007); M. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1991): 118–133; T. Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit, Israel and the Old Testament* (JSOTSup 232; Copenhagen International Seminar 2; Sheffield: Sheffield

the site is unparalleled in the material record and distinguishes Kuntillet ʿAjrud from the border forts in the region.[6] The walls of both Building A and B were plastered and decorated with diverse images that include humans and/or deities, geometric patterns, and floral and faunal motifs; the walls and certain door jambs in Building A were also decorated with inscriptions executed in ink on plaster.[7] For this reason, Z. Meshel originally proposed that the site was a religious center, as he attributed cultic activity to a bench room at the entrance of Building A. He further identified repositories at both ends of the bench room, arguing that the low-level benches served as receptacles for the inscribed stone bowls and finer quality wares that were discovered in this area.[8]

Academic, 1997); J. Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000); R. S. Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007): 283–289; J. Tigay, "A Second Temple Parallel to the Blessings from Kuntillet ʿAjrud," *IEJ* 40 (1990): 218; B. Schmidt, "The Iron Age Pithoi Drawings from Ḥorvat Teman or Kuntillet ʿAjrud: Some New Proposals," *JANES* 2 (2002): 91–125; W. Zwickel, "Überlegungen zur wirtschaflichen und historischen Funktion von Kuntillet ʿAgrud," *ZDPV* 116.2 (2000) 139–142.

[6] This site boasts one of the earliest attestations of the "Old Hebrew" script in Israel. This script also occurs in the Moabite Stela, which raises the question as to whether or not this script was developed specifically for the Hebrew language, and, moreover, at what point it was adopted as a national script. For a discussion see C. A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age* (Atlanta: SBL, 2012): 42; 97–103; S. Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew* (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois, 2009): 122–125. See also A. Mazar and S. Aḥituv ("The Inscriptions from Tel Reḥov and their Contribution to the Study of Writing and Literacy during the Iron Age IIA," *ErIsr* 30 [2011]: 309–313 [Hebr.]) for a survey of tenth–ninth century inscriptions, and their respective chronologies.

[7] The use of plaster and paint at Kuntillet ʿAjrud is unique in the material record in the Levant, and only has parallels in temple and shrine complexes in Egypt and (perhaps) Urartu. Overall, Beck is skeptical of attempts to classify the site based upon its decoration and iconography. She concludes that the artistic tradition at the site was not inspired directly from Egyptian prototypes but rather drew upon a general Egyptianized style that was popular during this period. Instead, she associates the artistic motifs at the site with Phoenician-Northern Syrian artistic traditions. See Beck, "The Drawings from Ḥorvat Teiman" (n 5): 4-5; idem, "The Drawings and Decorative Designs," in Meshel, *Kuntillet ʿAjrud* (n 2): 184–198, with a focus on 197–198. Regarding the ink wall inscriptions at the site (KA 4.1–4.6, though only the hymno-epic content of KA 4.1.1, 4.2, 4.3 is assured), Deir ʿAlla is the only other Levantine site to features such texts painted in ink on plaster walls. For a discussion see Mastin, "The Inscriptions Written on Plaster" (n 5): 99–115; Aḥituv, "The Inscriptions" (n 4): 105–121.

[8] A large assemblage of mainly smaller vessels, including the fragments of two inscribed stone bowls (KA 1.1; 1.4) were discovered in the northeast corner room adjacent to the bench room (L.13). For a discussion of the bench room and *favissa* see Z. Meshel and A. Goren, "Architecture, Plan, and Phases," in Meshel, *Kuntillet ʿAjrud* (n 2): 22–31; for an analysis of the wares see Ayalon, "The Pottery Assemblage" (n 3): 240–243.

The images and graffiti on Pithos A and B, two storage jars thought to have originally stood in the bench room in Building A, feature prominently in debates regarding religious nature of Kuntillet ʿAjrud. In particular, there is disagreement regarding the relationship between the graffiti and the images on these vessels. KA 3.1 and 3.6,[9] two enigmatic graffiti that refer to YHWH and Asherah in the context of a blessing, are prominent in these discussions.[10] There is also no consensus as to whether or not the images on these vessels (in particular, the images of two Bes-like figures and a female lyre player on Pithos A, and a procession of worshipers on Pithos B) illustrate specific cultic activity enacted at the site. Beck disassociates the graffiti on these vessels from the ink drawings and concludes that there is insufficient iconographic evidence that the site had a religious function.[11] In this vein, J. Hadley also argues that the cultic materials at the site are exaggerated, citing a lack of explicit evidence of sacrifice, and of cultic paraphernalia and iconography. Instead, she proposes that the site served as a way station for travelers, though she does not rule out that it may have had a "religious or emotive atmosphere."[12]

In the most recent publication of the site, Meshel argues that Kuntillet ʿAjrud served as a residence for priests. He lists additional elements that may have had a cultic function, e.g., what may be a *bāmāh* between the wings of Building B, four standing stones (?) in the northwest corner of Building A, and a mural of a seated woman (or goddess?) in the

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[9] Kuntillet ʿAjrud 18 and 19 in older publications correspond to Inscriptions 3.1 and 3.6 in Meshel's (*Kuntillet ʿAjrud* [N 2]) most recent publication of the site materials. To simplify matters, in this article I will refer to the inscriptions as KA 3.1 and 3.6.

[10] G*raffito* (pl. *graffiti*) is derived from the Italian verb *graffiare*, 'to scratch'. The literal translation of *graffiti* (pl.) is "little scratchings." The technical term *graffito* (pl. *graffiti*) is a designation for texts and images that are scratched or incised on a range of surfaces (which can include buildings, walls, and statutes, etc.). Graffiti are not an original, or planned part of the design of an object or a structure, as opposed to inscriptions and/or images that are an integral part of the overall design. Moreover, graffiti tend to be spontaneous and "free of social restraint." Penden contrasts Egyptian graffiti with planned texts: "One might argue that these unostentatious inscriptions are a far more accurate reflection of the character of the society that produced them than much more polished artistic of literary works." For the above definition and discussion of graffiti see A. J. Penden, *The Graffiti of Pharaonic Egypt: Scope and Roles of Informal Writing (C. 3100–332 BC)* (Leiden: Brill, 2001): xix–xxi; xxi for quotations.

[11] See Beck, "The Drawings and Decorative Designs" (N 7): 143–184 (for an analysis of the pithoi drawings); 197–199 (for her conclusion).

[12] Hadley, "Kuntillet ʿAjrud: Religious Centre or Desert Way Station?" (N 5): 116; 118–119; idem, *The Cult of Asherah* (N 5): 108–120; for the quote see idem, "Some Drawings" (N 5): 184.

entrance of Building A.[13] Meshel attributes the construction of Kuntillet ʿAjrud to Joash, as part of a campaign to establish an Israelite presence in the Negev. A virgin site was chosen for this endeavor, one that (unlike Kadesh Barnea) had no prior association with the Judean monarchy. He disregards the fort-like design of the site and argues instead that the site was a residence and training center for priests and Levites and their apprentices. He proposes that the site had symbolic religious importance; as a northern Israelite enclave in the south, Kuntillet ʿAjrud symbolized "the control of Israel and the God of Israel over the road and over Judah."[14] In order to resolve the interpretive problem evident in the dearth of evidence of sacrifice, libations, or other cultic activity expected in a religious center, Meshel concludes that Kuntillet ʿAjrud housed priests, and was frequented by travelers seeking their counsel and blessings, but was not a full-fledged cultic center. To resolve the dearth of cultic objects or signs of sacrifice at the site, N. Naʿaman and N. Lissovsky similarly propose that Kuntillet ʿAjrud was affiliated with a nearby sacred tree (or grove) where the actual cultic activity took place.[15]

Z. Zevit also attributes a religious function to the site, pointing to the consideration with which the walls were plastered and decorated, moreover, to the overwhelmingly religious nature of the inscriptions. He relates the loom weights and one hundred or so linen and wool textile fragments discovered in Building A to the manufacture of cultic garments.[16] He also proposes that two cultic installations located in the northern end of the courtyard may reflect the worship of two main deities at this site.[17] This ties in nicely with the theory that worship at Kuntillet ʿAjrud was focused upon YHWH and Asherah. The divine pair are referred to in at least four inscriptions at the site, all of which are from the vicinity of the bench room: three graffiti written in the Old Hebrew script (KA 3.1, 3.6, and 3.9), and an ink wall inscription executed in a Phoenician-like script (KA 4.1.1). Moreover, Meshel's recent publication features updated images of the two Bes-like figures that conclusively identify them as a male and female pair. The "phallus" or "tail" on the smaller figure washed away when the image was cleaned, revealing a female deity, which suggests

[13] Meshel, *Kuntillet ʿAjrud* (n 2): 65–69.

[14] See Meshel, *Kuntillet ʿAjrud* (n 2): 11–13; Building A 22–30; Building B 53–59; 65–69, quote in 69.

[15] Na'aman and Lissovsky (n 5): 186–208.

[16] For a discussion of the textiles in particular the *Shaʿatnez*, or mixed weave garments see Z. Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001): 375–376; Meshel, *Kuntillet ʿAjrud* (n 2): 68.

[17] Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel* (n 16): 374–375; 379, cf. 54.

that these figures do indeed represent YHWH and Asherah, or at the very least a deity and his consort.[18]

The "fortress-like" design of Building A, the site's location at the nexus of desert routes coupled with the unique décor and inscriptions suggest that Kuntillet ʿAjrud was originally built as a military installation to monitor the region, but over time developed into a religious attraction—two functions which are not mutually exclusive. As J. Hutton observes, it is quite certain that small shrines (such as the bench room in Building A) were situated along well-traveled roads for travelers.[19] Indeed, the iconographic and epigraphic evidence at the site suggests that Kuntillet ʿAjrud did serve such a religious purpose, and was frequented by Israelite, and most likely, Judean travelers. The preponderance of iconographic and epigraphic materials related to cultic activity includes images of deities and worshipers, inscribed stone bowls left at the site as dedicatory offerings (KA 1.1–1.4),[20] what may be offering labels on storage vessels (KA 2.9–2.28),[21] hymno-epic inscriptions on the walls and door jambs of the site (KA 4.1–4.6), and dedicatory graffiti that make reference to blessings and prayer (KA 3.1, 3.6, 3.9).[22] Furthermore, the numerous references to deities in the inscriptions at the site, e.g., Baʿal, El, YHWH

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[18] See N 4 for a discussion of the scripts employed in these descriptions; for the identity and gender of the two Bes-like figures, see Meshel, *Kuntillet ʿAjrud* (N 2): 66–69.

[19] Textual references to such smaller cultic instillations include the shrine in 2 Sam 15:32, and the famous episode involving Asherah of Tyre's shrine in the Kirta epic (*KTU* 1.14.iv.34–43). See Hutton (N 5): 187–189.

[20] The inscribed stone vessels discovered at the site (KA 1.1–1.4) may have been left behind by travelers as dedicatory offerings. J. Tigay ("The Priestly Reminder Stones and Ancient Near Eastern Votive Practices," in *Shay: Studies in the Bible, Its Exegesis and Language Presented to Sara Japhet* [M. Bar Asher et al., eds.; Jerusalem: Bialik, 2007]: 342*, no.7) argues that the designation "votive" is too often used as a generic term for both votive and dedicatory inscriptions and objects. The term votive is only appropriate when discussing objects proffered to a deity in the context of a vow, whereas, the designation "dedication/dedicatory" is preferable as it is more neutral. For a recent discussion of such terminology see A. K. H. Gudme, *Before the God in this Place for Good Remembrance: A Comparative Analysis of the Aramaic Votive Inscriptions from Mount Gerizim* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2013).

[21] There is some debate about these markings. Meshel proposes that they relate to tithes sent to Kuntillet ʿAjrud, countering Naveh's suggestion that the markings designate the quality of product contained in the vessels (for a discussion see Aḥituv, "The Inscriptions" [N 4]: 82–83).

[22] The placement of several inscriptions on the doorjambs and entryways of the buildings at Kuntillet ʿAjrud is reminiscent of the apotropaic use of writing at the entry points of residences and gates in Deut 6:9. Affixing the law to the hand, forehead, and the doorposts of homes and gates (the points of physical and structural vulnerability), was a protective measure meant to safeguard individuals, their households, and their cities. Such written prayers of protection draw upon apotropaic terminology (see J. D. Smoak, " 'Prayers of

and Asherah, as well as regional manifestations of YHWH (YHWH of Samaria and Teman), suggest that it had religious significance to worshipers from diverse regions.[23]

The bench room in Building A appears to have been a locus of cultic activity. The ink wall inscriptions in the bench-room, though fragmentary, refer to several deities in language that is reminiscent of the Psalms: YHWH of Teman and Asherah (KA 4.1.1) and El and Baʿal (4.2). Moreover, the graffiti on Pithos A and B refer to the divine couple YHWH and Asherah in the context of prayer and blessing: YHWH of Samaria and Asherah on Pithos A (KA 3.1) and YHWH of Teman and Asherah on Pithos B (KA 3.6 and 3.9). The lack of evidence of sacrifice or libations suggests that this shrine was a place of offering and prayer, but not of sacrifice. Travelers from Israel (and perhaps Judah) stopped at Kuntillet ʿAjrud to pray for blessings and protection during their travels, often leaving behind a dedicatory inscription or vessel.[24] When the site was abandoned, it is likely that portable valuables, along with any cultic materials, were either moved to another location for safekeeping, or looted.

II. THE LANGUAGE AND STRUCTURE OF KA 3.1 AND 3.6

KA 3.1 and 3.6, two graffiti originally inscribed on storage vessels in Building A, are a source of controversy regarding the nature of ancient Israelite religion. The enigmatic term ʿ*šrth* in these inscriptions is at the heart of debates as to whether or not the goddess Asherah was YHWH's consort.[25] The main questions raised by this term are as follows: (a) Is

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Petition' in the Psalms and West Semitic Inscribed Amulets: Efficacious Words in Metal and Prayers for Protection in Biblical Literature," *JSOT* 36 [2011]: 75–92).

[23] For a discussion of regional YHWH worship see Hutton (n 5): 177–210.

[24] Meshel (*Kuntillet ʿAjrud* [n 2]: 68–69) concludes that there is no evidence for sacrifice or libations at the site, but suggests that other religious services were provided to travelers. C. Freval ("Gift to the Gods? Votives as Communication Markers in Sanctuaries and Other Places in the Bronze and Iron Ages in Palestine/Israel," in "*From Ebla to Stellenbosch*": *Syro-Palestinian Religions and the Hebrew Bible* [Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2008]: 39–40) best classifies the bench room as a wayside "shrine," comparable to the gate shrines at Wadi et-Temed (Khirbat al-Mudayna Thamad), Beth-Saida and Dan.

[25] The term ʿ*šrth* is also attested in KA 3.9, 4.1.1 and in Khirbet el-Qôm 3, a tomb graffiti dating to the eighth century B.C.E. See Johannes Renz, *Die althebräischen Inschriften: Teil 1, Text und Kommentar* (Johannes Renz and Wolfgang Röllig, *Handbuch der althebräischen Epigraphik: Band I*; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995): 199–211; Shmuel Aḥituv, *Echoes from the Past: Hebrew and Cognate Inscriptions from the Biblical Period* (Trans. A. F. Rainey; Jerusalem: Carta, 2008): 220–226.

ʿ*šrth* a designation for an object (a pole/tree) symbolizing Asherah, or a reference to the actual goddess herself? (b) Is the final *-h* an anomalous spelling, a variant pronunciation, or the 3ms pronominal suffix (rendering the translation "*his* Asherah," i.e., YHWH's consort).[26] The identity of the two Bes-like figures depicted on Pithos A is another point of contention. The main views are that these two figures are YHWH and Asherah (the deities referred to in KA 3.1, 3.6, 3.9 [the pithoi graffiti] and 4.1.1 [an ink wall inscription]), or that they are Bes figures, or local deities drawing upon Bes iconography.[27]

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[26] Zevit ([N 16]: 364–366) proposes that the term ʿ*šrth* in these inscriptions is just another form of the goddess' name. He attributes the final *-th* to "secondary feminization," whereby the feminine suffix is doubly marked by the archaic feminine marker *-at* followed by *-ā(h),* the feminine marker that emerged at the end of the tenth century B.C.E. For a rejoinder see C. Rollston, review of Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel*, *BASOR* 348 (2007): 99. For further discussion of the term ʿ*šrth* in these inscriptions see Dever, "Asherah, Consort of Yahweh?" (N 5): 21–37; idem, "Archaeology and the Ancient Israelite Cult" (N 5): 9*–15*; Hadley, "The Khirbet el-Qom Inscription" (N 5): 50–62; Dietrich and Loretz, "*Jahwe und seine Aschera*" (N 5); O. Keel and C. Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, & Images of God in Ancient Israel* (Thomas H. Trapp, trans.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998): 228–236; J. Tropper, "Der Gottesname **Yahwa*?" *VT* 51 (2001): 81–106; G. R. Driver, "Reflections on Recent Articles," *JBL* 73 (1954): 125–136; P. Xella, "Le Dieu et 'sa' déesse: L'utilisation des suffixes pronominaux avec des théonymes d'Ebla à Ugarit et à Kuntillet 'Ajrud," *UF* 27 (1995): 599–610; Emerton (N 5); Zevit (N 16): 363–364; 401–405; McCarter, "Aspects of the Religion of the Israelite Monarchy" (N 5): 143–149; Margalit (N 5): 288–291. For a summary of debates see M. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 2001): 118–125. See also Dever, *Did God Have a Wife* (N 5): 196–208.

[27] Meshel's 2012 publication (*Kuntillet ʿAjrud* [N 2]: 66; fig. 6.20–6.21; 166–167) confirms that the two figures are a male and female pair. The "penis" or "tail" on the smaller crowned figure (Figure T) was nothing more than soot that disappeared once the image was cleaned. For an analysis of these figures see Beck, "The Drawings from Ḥorvat Teiman" (N 5): 27–31; idem, "The Drawings and Decorative Designs" (N 7): 165–169); M. Gilula, "To Yahweh Shomron" (N 5): 129–137). Hadley ("Some Drawings" [N 5]: 196) proposes that the two Bes-like figures served an apotropaic function to ward off evils, such as snakes and scorpions from the entrance of the site, citing Egyptian parallels. Dever ("Asherah, Consort of Yahweh?" [N 5]: 21–37; idem, "Archaeology and the Ancient Israelite Cult" [N 5]: 9*–15*; idem, *Did God Have a Wife* [N 5]: 163–167) identifies the two figures as representations of Bes, whereas, he identifies the Lyre Player on Pithos A as the goddess Asherah. Emerton ("Yahweh and His Asherah": The Goddess or Her Symbol?" *VT* 49 [1999]: 317–319) synthesizes the various positions, concluding that there is insufficient evidence to forge a connection between the images and the inscriptions. Margalit ("The Meaning and Significance of Asherah" [N 5]: 288–291) proposes that the Lyre Player is providing musical accompaniment for a divine enthronement ritual involving YHWH and his consort. Schmidt ("The Iron Age Pithoi Drawings" [N 5]: 91–125) argues that these two figures are Yahweh and Asherah; he discusses the symbolic significance of the overall scope and arrangement of the images and texts on the two vessels, arguing that they work in tandem to create a religious narrative that enhanced religious experience at the site.

In spite of the attention that the images and inscriptions on Pithos A and B have received since their discovery, several intriguing aspects of KA 3.1 and 3.6 have yet to be resolved, namely, their function and the odd use of epistolary language in these two graffiti. KA 3.1 and 3.6 share a similar structure, content, and were executed in red ink on storage vessels (Pithos A and B) thought to have stood in the bench room in Building A. KA 3.1 was discovered on fragments of Pithos A, in the northern corner of the bench room (L 6, 262, and 19); KA 3.6 was discovered on fragments of Pithos B in the central courtyard, adjacent to the wall of the bench room (L 19 near to W 10).[28] The orientation of KA 3.1 and 3.6 indicates that they were inscribed while the vessels were still upright.[29] The inscribed labels on the pithoi match those on vessels in the storerooms, which suggests that they were moved from the storerooms to the bench room area, where they remained stationary—hence the accumulation of graffiti on these jars.[30] In KA 3.1 and 3.6, an individual directly addresses his/her audience and blesses them invoking YHWH and Asherah.[31] Use of the epistolary formula and the first and second person structures KA 3.1 and 3.6 as direct speech as though an interaction between two groups of people.

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[28] For the inscriptions on Pithoi A and B see Meshel, *Kuntillet ʿAjrud* (N 2): 74, fig. 5.1; 86–104.

[29] For the most part, the clay of the storage jars at Kuntillet ʿAjrud matches deposits around Jerusalem. For clay analysis see Gunneweg et al. (N 3): 272; 275–278; Ayalon, "The Iron Age II Pottery" (N 3): 157–158; idem, "The Pottery Assemblage" (N 3): 243–245; Meshel, "Teman, Ḥorvat" (N 5): 1458–1464; also articulated in Meshel et al., "14C" (N 2): 207–208.

[30] Pithos A is incised with the letter *ʾalep* and Pithos B with the abbreviation *qr*. These markings also occur on other vessels in the storerooms. Meshel (*Kuntillet ʿAjrud* [N 2]: 82–83; 86–87) lists twenty storage jars at the site of the same size and shape that were also inscribed with such markings before firing. Most of the vessels were inscribed with an *ʾalep* or *yod*. Only two (3) were inscribed with *qr,* which he suggests is an abbreviation for *qrbn* 'sacrifice'.

[31] See also KA 3.9, an ink graffiti on Pithos B, that calls for YHWH to answer the prayers of his worshipers. The transcriptions and translations provided here follow Aḥituv, *Echoes from the Past* (N 25): 315–322; in particular 315; 320; repr. in Aḥituv, Eshel and Meshel, "The Inscriptions" (N 4): 87; 95. The transliteration provided here is in Roman characters whereas Aḥituv uses the block Hebrew script. Additional transcriptions and translations can be found in G. I. Davies, *Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions (AHI): Corpus and Concordance* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1991): section 8 (8.017, 8.021); F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp et al., *Hebrew Inscriptions from the Biblical Period of the Monarchy with Concordance* (New Haven: Yale Univ., 2004): 277–298; Renz (N 25): 59–62; P. K. McCarter Jr., "Kuntillet ʿAjrud: Inscribed Pithos 1 (2.47A)," and "Kuntillet ʿAjrud: Inscribed Pithos 2 (2.47 B)," in *The Context of Scripture: Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World* (W. W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., eds.; Leiden: Brill, 2000): 171–172.

KA 3.1

*ʾmr ·ʾ[-]**[-]k. ʾmr.lyhly.wlywʾśh.wl [———]brkt.ʾtkm./lyhwh. šmrn.wlʾšrth.*[32]

Message of '[—] M[–]K:[33] "Speak to *Yāhēlî*,[34] and to *Yôʾāśāʰ*, and to [. . .] I have [b]lessed you to YHWH[35] of *Shômrôn* and to His *asherah*."

KA 3.6

ʾmr/ʿmryw/ʾmrl.ʾdny/hšlm.ʾt/brktk.ly/hwhtmn/wlʾśrth/yb/ rkwyšrmk/wyhyʿm.ʾdn/y [break]

Message of *ʾAmaryāw*: "Say to my lord, are you well?[36] I have blessed you to YHWH of *Tēmān* and to His *asherah*. May he

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[32] There is room in this lacuna for about eighteen letters (approximately two/three additional personal names). See Aḥituv, Eshel and Meshel, "The Inscriptions" (N 4): 87.

[33] Aḥituv (*Echoes from the Past* [N 25]: 326; Aḥituv, Eshel and Meshel, "The Inscriptions" [N 4]: 90) translates *ʾmr* as "message" as a parallel to *tḥm* in Ugaritic letters. He observes that in biblical Hebrew, sentences do not begin with the verbal perfect, therefore *ʾmr* must be a noun. Though, this term is elsewhere translated as an imperative (see N 31 for a list of other translations). The repetition of the verb *ʾmr* in the epistolary introduction formula (*ʾmr* X *ʾmr l*-Y "So says/said X: Speak to Y") occurs in epistles from diverse Northwest Semitic scribal traditions (e.g., the Ḥorvat Uza ostracon, the Tel el-Mazar ostracon 3, a sixth century B.C.E. Ammonite letter [CAI 144], and KAI 50). For a discussion see D. Pardee, *A Handbook of Hebrew Letters* (SBLSBS 15; Chico: Scholars, 1982): 121 and J. Greenfield, "Notes on the Phoenician Letter from Saqqarah," in *Al Kanfei Yonah: Collected studies of Jonas C. Greenfield on Semitic Philology* (2 vols.; S. M. Paul et al., eds.; Jerusalem and Leiden: Hebrew Univ. Magnes and Brill, 2001): 2.756–757.

[34] This is reconstructed as the PN *Yāhēlî* from the root y/*h-h-l* 'to shine' (see Aḥituv, *Echoes from the Past* [N 25]: 316; Aḥituv, Eshel and Meshel, "The Inscriptions" [N 4]: 90; and Zevit [N 6]: 390–391).

[35] In this formula the deity(s) is understood to be the indirect object of *l*-, as opposed to the agent of this preposition. For a discussion of the expression *brk l*-DN see D. Pardee, "The Preposition in Ugaritic," *UF* 8 (1976): 221–223; T. Muraoka "Hebrew Philological Notes," *Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute* 5 (1979): 92–94; Zevit (N 16): 366–367; S. Parker, "Divine Intercession in Judah?" *VT* 56 (2006): 87–90; Müller (N 5): 42–43; for an Aramaic version of this formula, see J. F. Healey, "May He Be Remembered for Good: An Aramaic Formula," in *Targumic and Cognate Studies: Essays in Honour of Martin McNamara* (JSOTSup 230; K. Cathcart and M. Maher, eds.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996): 177–186.

[36] The phrase *hšlm. ʾt* is well attested in contexts of direct speech in biblical literature, where it serves as a salutation between two parties. In biblical literature this expression serves as a general greeting, e.g., Gen 29:6, ויאמר להם השלום לו ויאמרו שלום "He said to them, 'Is it well with him?' They said, 'It is well'" (see also Gen 43:27; 2 Sam 20:9; 2 Kgs 4:26; 5:21; and most eloquently, in Jehu's retort in 2 Kgs 9:22). Similar wishes of wellbeing using the root *šlm* 'peace, wellbeing', are also attested, e.g., 1 Sam. 25:6,

bless you and may He keep you,[37] and may he be with my lord [forever?]"

As J. Naveh observes, the opening lines most resemble the epistolary introduction formula: "Say to X: so said Y." This basic formula is well attested in Akkadian, Canaanite Akkadian, Ugaritic and NWS epistles.[38] In letters, this introductory formula serves a very pragmatic purpose: it identifies the sender and the recipient of the message, and clarifies their ranks and the nature of their relationship. However, the question remains as to why the epistolary formula was used in these inscriptions, which are not letters, but are graffiti inscribed on large storage jars.

ואמרתם כה לחי ואתה שלום וביתך שלום וכל אשר־לך שלום "And speak to him thus: To life! 'May Peace be to you, and peace be to your house, and peace be to all that you have'." See Aḥituv, Eshel, and Meshel ("The Inscriptions" [N 4]: 128) for a brief discussion. In epistles, this idiom serves as a polite greeting, mimicking the protocols of spoken interactions. It is also well attested in Akkadian letters (e.g., *lū šalmāta* "may you be well"; *lū šulmu ana muḫḫīka* "May it be well with you!") and notably in the Amarna Letters (EA 1: 1 *šulmu ana maḫrīka* "May all be well with you!") (A. Rainey, *The Tell el-Amarnah Correspondence* [Leiden: Brill, forthcoming]: EA 1: 3–4). Since KA 3.6 is not a letter, and thus does not anticipate a response, it seems more likely that this expression is a wish for the wellbeing of Amaryaw, which renders a more idiomatic translation, "May all be well with you."

[37] In KA 3.6, the verb *brk* 'bless' is paired with the verb *šmr* 'to keep, protect', drawing upon stock protective language. J. D. Smoak ("May Yhwh Bless You and Keep You from Evil: The Rhetorical Argument of Ketef Hinnom Amulet I and the Form of Prayers for Deliverance in the Psalms," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 12 [2012]: 202–236.; idem., "'Prayers of Petition'" [N 22]: 75–92; idem*, May Yahweh Bless You and Keep You: The Early History and Ritual Background of the Priestly Blessing* [Oxford: Oxford Univ., forthcoming]) makes the compelling argument that the rhetoric of blessing and cursing and the language of protection in the Psalms (also in the Priestly Blessing, and in the Ketef Hinnom amulets) most likely has its origins in apotropaic terminology. In the context of KA 3.6, the pairing of the verbs *brk* and *šmr* would have had a similar function, calling for both the blessing and protection of Amaryaw's superior. See also B. Schmidt, "The Social Matrix of Early Judean Magic and Divination: From 'Top Down' or 'Bottom Up'?" in *Beyond Hatti: A Tribute to Gary Beckman* (B. J. Collins and P. Michalowski, ed.; Atlanta: Lockwood, 2013): 279–293; with focus on 284–293.

[38] J. Naveh, "Graffiti and Dedications," *BASOR* 235 (1979): 28–29. For the best parallels, see the Murabba'at Papyrus 17 (papMur 17), a palimpset dating to the seventh century B.C.E. (Pardee, *Hebrew Letters* [N 33]: 120–122) and Ostracon 4, a Hebrew ostracon dating to 600 B.C.E. (A. Lemaire and A. Yardeni, "New Hebrew Ostraca from the Shephelah," in *Biblical Hebrew in Its Northwest Semitic Setting: Typological and Historical Perspectives* [Steven Fassberg and Avi Hurvitz, eds.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006]: 205–206. For a general overview of epistolary formulae see D. Pardee and R. Whiting, "Aspects of Epistolary Verbal Usage in Ugarit and Akkadian," *BASOR* 50 [1987]: 1–31; Pardee, *Hebrew Letters* [N 33]: 120–121; 166–167; J. Mynarova, *Language of Amarna—Language of Diplomacy. Perspectives on the Amarna Letters* [Prague: Czech Institute of Egyptology, 2007]).

The second part of KA 3.1 and 3.6 comprises of the blessing formula: *brk* PN *l*-DN ("blessed be PN to DN").[39] The verb *brk* in the two inscriptions is active and in the 1cs. This structures these texts as direct speech, as though a direct communication between two parties: the one blessing and the recipient(s) of the blessing. This blessing formula is well attested in letters and in contexts of direct speech in biblical narratives. In letters it is part of epistolary protocol and serves as a polite expression of goodwill; in biblical narratives it occurs in familial, royal, and religious contexts when one party confers a blessing over a second party.[40] Whereas, the "passive" blessing formula (i.e., using a passive form of the verb *brk*: "May PN be blessed") is well attested on dedicatory and votive objects.[41] Such blessings were inscribed on offerings and left in cultic areas, the hope being that this would confer a blessing upon the worshiper. In both the active and passive versions of the blessing formula, a deity is usually appealed to as the source of the blessing.

Scholars have approached the use of epistolary language in KA 3.1 and 3.6 in various ways. There has been some speculation as to the function of these graffiti and whether or not they have any religious significance at all, are merely scribal exercises, or the doodles of bored functionaries and travelers. Hadley attributes these inscriptions to travelers seeking to leave their mark as they passed through the site: "Some would leave inscriptions of imprecation or blessing, on the pithoi or the walls, and others may have simply written the alphabet if that was all they knew."[42] M. Dijkstra categorizes the graffiti as the "doodles" of scribes, who wrote the epistolary formula out of sheer boredom, or a desire to sharpen their stylus. He proposes that the fragments of Pithos A and B were used

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[39] Blessing formulae using the verb *brk* occur in Kuntillet ʿAjrud Inscription 1.2, 3.1, and twice in 3.6. The expression *brk PN l-DN* is also attested in what may an Edomite letter (the Ḥorvat Uza ostracon [late seventh–early-sixth century B.C.E.]), a fifth century B.C.E. Phoenician letter from Saqqarah (*KAI* 50), and in several Arad Letters (16, 21, and 40). See J. Whisenant, "Writing, Literacy, and Textual Transmission: The Production of Literary Documents in Iron Age Judah and the Composition of the Hebrew Bible" (Ph.D. Diss., The University of Michigan, 2008): 241–243.

[40] The blessing formula *brk* PN *l-* DN is attested in biblical literature in contexts of direct speech in both greetings and in blessings (e.g., Gen 14:19; Judg 17.2; 1 Sam 15:13; 23:21; 2 Sam 2.5; Ruth 2:20; 3:10; Ps 115:15; see also the Priestly Blessing in Num 6:24). In the Phoenician Letter from Saqqarah the recipient is blessed by Baʿal Saphon and all the deities of Tahpanhes (*KAI* 50:2–3) using this same blessing formula.

[41] KA 1.2, a large stone basin from the Southern Storeroom, reads: "To/of ʿ*Obadyāw* son of ʿ*Adnāh*, may he be blessed to YHW [*brk h' lyhw*]" (see Aḥituv, Eshel, and Meshel, "The Inscriptions" [N 4]: 76–77).

[42] Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah* (N 5): 155.

as "rough paper" for writing after the vessels were broken.[43] A. Rainey characterizes these inscriptions as the beginnings of business letters and does not attribute any religious significance to them. As he puts it, "some Israelite soldier sat down near a storage jar and scribbled graffiti."[44] A. Lemaire attributes KA 3.1 and 3.6 to students practicing their letter writing skills, and suggests that the bench room was a place of scribal education where the two pithoi functioned as "black boards."[45] In the final publication of the site materials, S. Ahituv and E. Eshel conclude that the blessing inscriptions on Pithos A and B have "no practical function."[46] Like Lemaire, they propose that the pithoi were used as writing surfaces: KA 3.1 and 3.6 were practice letters written by a skilled hand.[47]

However, the numerous religious elements in the bench room, such as the dedicatory objects, cultic iconography, and numerous references to deities in both the graffiti and ink wall inscriptions, suggest that the references to YHWH and Asherah in these inscriptions (and in KA 3.9 and 4.1.1) were deliberate and related to worship in the bench room. The blessings and elements of direct speech in these inscriptions are just what they appear to be at face value—these graffiti commemorate blessings that were spoken during ritual activity in the shrine area.

Accordingly, a second camp of scholars relates KA 3.1 and 3.6 to the religious function of the bench room. Meshel and Zevit propose that these two graffiti were messages left for a third party to read and relay to those being blessed.[48] O. Keel and C. Uehlinger link these two inscriptions to the image of a procession of worshipers on Pithos B, which may be a depiction of those worshiping at the site. They suggest that these inscriptions are excerpts of actual letters sent from Samaria to Kuntillet ʻAjrud that were written to travelers by friends wishing them a safe journey: "PN1 sends best wishes to PN2 as he goes on his trip."[49] J. F. Healey proposes that such graffiti were interactive, and specifically invited travelers to speak a benediction. He compares the formulaic language in these inscriptions to the Aramaic formula *dykr PN btb* ("May

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[43] M. Dijkstra, "I Have Blessed You by YHWH of Samaria and His Asherah": Texts with Religious Elements from the Soil Archive of Ancient Israel," in *Only One God? Monotheism in Ancient Israel and the Veneration of the Goddess Asherah* (B. Besking, ed.; London: Sheffield Academic, 2001): 26–31.

[44] A. Rainey, "Down-to-Earth Biblical History," review of *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It*? by William G. Dever, *JAOS* 122.3 (2002): 547.

[45] Lemaire, *Écoles* (n 5): 25–32; in particular 30.

[46] Aḥituv, Eshel, and Meshel, "The Inscriptions" [n 4]: 127.

[47] Ibid.

[48] See Meshel, *Kuntillet ʻAjrud* (n 2): 134–135; Zevit (n 16): 390–391, 397.

[49] Keel and Uehlinger (n 26): 242–243; particularly 242 n. 119.

PN be remembered for good"), which is attested in both Jewish Aramaic and Nabatean graffiti. Such inscriptions prompted travelers to read the graffiti aloud and thereby bless the memory of the inscriber.[50]

Naveh offers an elegant solution for the use of epistolary language in these inscriptions that ties in nicely with their context in area of the bench room. He proposes that epistolary language was used in written dedications, such as KA 3.1 and 3.6, when worshipers offered up an object or a prayer for others.[51] In letters, which are an interaction between two parties, the verb of blessing is active; dedicatory objects on the other hand, tend to employ the passive form of the verb *brk*, calling for the worshiper to be blessed by the deity.[52] By analogy, Naveh argues that written dedications involving two parties took on a resemblance to letters: "It seems likely that the opening and the greeting formula of the letter were used as dedications when the donor wished to give his donation not for his own sake, but for the sake of his friend(s), relative(s), etc."[53] The direct speech and the epistolary formula in KA 3.1 and 3.6 commemorate these blessings as an interaction between two groups: the party actively blessing, and the recipient of the blessing.

Naveh's interpretation is particularly appealing in light of the use the epistolary formula *'mr* X *l*-PN on a Phoenician storage jar. Though incomplete, the Sarepta Inscription, dating to the fourth–fifth centuries B.C.E., reads: *'mr l'dnn grmlqr[t]* "Say to our lord Germelqar[t]".[54] The meaning of the word *'mr* was debated in the original publication. Originally, it was translated as "lamb" based upon a parallel in a Punic dedicatory stela with the phrase: *mlk'mr*. Lemaire later identified this

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[50] Healey (N 35): 185–186.

[51] Naveh (N 38): 29.

[52] At first glance, the blessing formula in Khirbet el-Qôm 3, a tomb inscription, is quite similar to the Kuntillet ʿAjrud graffiti—it even appeals to the same string of deities, YHWH and Asherah. However, there are several differences between the inscriptions. KA 3.1 and 3.6 are structured as direct speech and use an active form of the verb *brk*. Moreover, they request a blessing for another party, whereas in Khirbet el-Qôm 3, the recipient of the blessing, Uriah, is credited with writing (or commissioning) the inscription: "Uriah the wealthy has written it." Like the Kuntillet ʿAjrud graffiti, the Khirbet el-Qôm inscription may have also had a visual component. The imprint of a human hand is inscribed in the tomb wall adjacent to the inscription. For the various views of the significance of the inscribed hand, the main debates being (a) whether or not it was executed in tandem with Khirbet el-Qôm 3; (b) is a divine or human hand; and (c) what it signifies, see Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah* (N 5): 102–104.

[53] Naveh (N 38): 29.

[54] For the text and translation see ibid., 29; for the original publication see J. B. Pritchard, *Recovering Sarepta, A Phoenician City* (Princeton: Princeton Univ.: 1978): 98–100; idem., *Sarepta IV: The Objects from Area II, X* (Beirut: l'Université Libanaise, 1988): 8–9; 257 fig. 2.

word as an imperative of the verb "to say," arguing that this text, and the abecedary also inscribed on this storage jar, were school exercises.[55] However, the Sarapta Inscription was inscribed before the vessel was fired, which suggests that the inscription was integral to the design and function of the vessel. It is unlikely that this storage jar was an actual message, used in lieu of ostraca, papyri, or parchment—this would have been quite impractical and cumbersome. It is much more probable that the Sarepta Inscription is another instance where the epistolary formula was re-purposed to create a dedication—epistolary language was after all a rudimentary part of scribal training. Use of the epistolary formula in the Sarepta Inscription and KA 3.1 and 3.6 suggests that this practice was not limited to Israel and Judah, but also extended to Phoenician scribal circles. Scribes and/or literate functionaries drew upon their repertoires of formulaic phrases, and adapted them to compose dedications.

III. THE *SITZ IM LEBEN* OF KA 3.1 AND 3.6

KA 3.1 and 3.6 are coherent, grammatical, share a similar structure and content, and do not reference travel, trade, or military strategy, which suggests that they were not happenstance "doodles" inscribed by bored functionaries, nor were they messages composed in the context of trade and/or military operations at the site. Moreover, these two graffiti refer to specific people being blessed by specific deities, namely, the gods worshiped in his (her) homeland. Furthermore, the prayerful tone of KA 3.9, a red ink graffito inscribed on Pithos B, directly above the image of a procession of worshipers, underscores the religious purpose of such graffiti: "To YHWH of Têmān and His asherah./ Whatever he asks from a man, that man will give him generously. And if he would urge—

[55] Lemaire ("Abécédaires et Exercices d'Écolier en Épigraphie Nord-ouest Sémitique," *Journal Asiatique* 266.3–4 [1978]: 228–230; idem, *Écoles* [N 5]: 26) extends this interpretation to KA 3.1 and 3.6 and the abecedaries inscribed on Pithos A and B. The abecedary on the Sarepta jar, which is the first of its kind discovered in a Phoenician context, follows the same order as the acrostics in Psalms 111, 112, and 114, which is what enabled the excavators to decipher this inscription. Though most scholars (in particular Lemaire, *Écoles* [N 5]: 7–33) classify abecedaries as school/scribal exercises, M. Haran ("On the Diffusion of Literacy and Schools in Ancient Israel," in *Congress Volume, Jerusalem 1986* [J. Emerton, ed.; VTSup 40; Leiden: Brill, 1988]: 85–91) proposes that they are practice texts executed by artisans and/or craftsmen whose professions required minimal literacy. Though the odd context of such texts (including those inscribed on Pithos A and B, and on the Sarepta vessel), suggests that not all abecedaries were used as school texts or were strictly utilitarian; abecedaries may also have served a mantic/ritual function. See S. Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) for a range of interpretations of the abecedaries in the material record.

YHW will give him/ according to his wishes."[56] This graffito calls upon YHWH and Asherah to answer the prayers of their worshipers, echoing the appeals to these deities articulated in KA 3.1 and 3.6. Such graffiti was inscribed to commemorate prayers made by worshipers at the site, and to serve as ongoing petitions to the Divine.

In light of the religious nature of these blessings, it is tempting to forge a connection between KA 3.1, 3.6 and 3.9 and the images on Pithos A and B, especially those that appear to illustrate worship enacted in the bench room. These inscriptions were all executed adjacent to scenes of worship: KA 3.1 is inscribed on Pithos A next to the Bes-like figures and the Lyre Player; KA 3.6 and 3.9 frame a procession of worshipers who stand with their hands upraised.[57] P. Beck views the overlap between the figures and text as evidence that the inscriptions and images were inscribed separately and are thus unrelated.[58] B. Schmidt takes another approach, one that considers the overall meaning of the artistic motifs and texts inscribed in the bench room. He links the images and inscriptions on the pithoi, arguing that the overlap is intentional and that they complement each other.[59] He makes a compelling argument that the inscriptions and painted figures work together to create a complex field of meaning intended to enhance the worshiper's experience at this site.[60] He compares the execution of the images and inscriptions on these two pithoi, in particular the overlapping of text and image, the orientation of the figures, and the repetition of several of the motifs, to an Egyptian technique referred to as the "association of ideas." This artistic strategy is characterized by the deliberate arrangement and/or repetition of disparate units of text and image to create a cohesive composition. Once unified, the composition takes on new symbolic meaning that relates to the work as a whole.

Schmidt's approach is particularly appealing because it examines the individual texts and images and their significance as discrete compositions. He then extrapolates how they would have functioned as a whole in the context of religious experience at the site, arguing that the seemingly chaotic pastiche of texts and images on Pithos A and B was imbued with deep symbolic meaning. For example, in his analysis he considers

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[56] Aḥituv, *Echoes* (n 25): 317–319; Aḥituv, Eshel, and Meshel, "The Inscriptions" (n 4): 98.

[57] More specifically, KA 3.1 overlaps with the headdress of a Bes-like figure on Pithos A; KA 3.6 overlaps the figure of a bull, and runs alongside the procession of worshipers on Pithos B.

[58] Beck, "The Drawings from Ḥorvat Teiman" (n 5): 3–68.

[59] Schmidt, "The Iron Age Pithoi" (n 5): 112–115; 122.

[60] Ibid., 112–115.

how the disparate images, such as the two Bes-like figures (presumably YHWH and Asherah), the Lyre Player, and the procession of worshipers work together to express various attributes of the Divine. For Schmidt, each set of images is an intentional composition that served a distinct purpose within the context of worship at the site. Pithos A "embodied a theophany assuring divine imminence by means of a conventional iconic form that is overlapped with an inscribed benediction [KA 3.1] all within the context of an urban cultic enclosure and public processions." With regards to the lack of an overt deity figure next to the procession of worshipers, he draws upon T. N. D. Mettinger's work on empty space aniconism.[61] Though not expressly depicted, the presence of the Divine is implied. The images on Pithos B, on the other hand, reflect "rural, open air" worship; the positioning of KA 3.6 above the deity figures, as though "writ in the sky," is deliberate and symbolizes the transcendence of YHWH and Asherah.[62]

To Schmidt's analysis of the interaction between the images and texts on Pithos A and B, I wish to contribute a third element—that of performative ritual, which is so central to the oral backdrop of these benedictions. The previously mentioned graffiti and images were clearly inspired by cultic activity at the shrine, in particular, the veneration of YHWH and Asherah. Regardless of whether or not the inscriptions and images on these pithoi were executed in tandem, once inscribed, they worked together to narrate cultic activity at the site. It is no coincidence that the images adjacent to KA 3.1, 3.6 and 3.9, in particular, the two standing figures and the Lyre Player playing music (Pithos A), and the procession of worshipers with their hands upraised (Pithos B), all illustrate cultic activity—perhaps even the ritual of blessing and prayer narrated in these graffiti. The content of these inscriptions should not be divorced from the religious function of the bench room. These inscriptions specifically invoke YHWH and Asherah because of the site's association with the divine couple—it is no coincidence that four inscriptions at Kuntillet ʿAjrud refer to these two deities (KA 3.1, 3.6, 3.9, and 4.1). The most probable *Sitz im Leben* for these inscriptions, which factors in the use of direct speech, their form, arrangement on the storage jars, and positioning near images of deities and worshipers, is that of dedicatory graffiti inscribed during a visit/pilgrimage to Kuntillet ʿAjrud.

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[61] T. N. D. Mettinger, *No Graven Image?: Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995).

[62] Schmidt, "The Iron Age Pithoi" (N 5): 112–115; 122.

As Zevit suggests, the image of the procession of worshipers with their hands upraised is most likely a representation of such worship.[63] Indeed, Ps 118:25–26 describes a blessing ritual similar to that narrated in KA 3.1 and 3.6. In this hymn pilgrims bless other individuals during a visit to the temple-complex in Jerusalem. Upon ascending up to the temple area, the worshipers offer up their prayers and supplications:

אנא יהוה הושׁיעה נא אנא יהוה הצליחה נא
ברוך הבא בשׁם יהוה ברכנוכם מבית יהוה׃

> "Save us, we beseech you, O YHWH! O YHWH, we beseech you, give us success!/ Blessed be he who enters in the name of YHWH! We bless you from the house of YHWH."[64]

In this psalm individuals in a procession/pilgrimage inform a second party (presumably their kin or members of their community) that will be blessed at the Temple. The phrase "We bless you from the house of YHWH" parallels the blessing formula in KA 3.1 and 3.6—it is structured as direct speech, as though the travelers are narrating the blessing to their audience as it is taking place.[65] In verse 26a, where those

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[63] Zevit ([N 16]: 393–394) suggests that the varied stance and positioning of the worshipers is a representation of a cycle of movement performed during ritual activity. See also Keel and Uehlinger (N 26): 241–242. Psalm 34 provides a nice description of such worship, in particular, the lifting of hands as part of a blessing ritual: "Come, bless YHWH, all you servants of YHWH, who stand by night in the house of YHWH! [2]Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless YHWH! [3]May YHWH bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth!" Gestures, such as the lifting of hands in this psalm and in the Kuntillet ʿAjrud inscriptions, were most likely part of such blessing rituals.

[64] See E. S. Gersternberger, *Psalms, Part II and Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); H. J. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150, A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993): 392–401; L. Allen, *Psalms 101–150* (WBC 21; Waco: Word, 1983); C. Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980). S. Mowinkel (*The Psalms in Israel's Worship* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004]: 180–182) includes Ps 118 among the enthronement psalms, classifying it as a thanksgiving hymn sung during processions. Both Kraus and Mowinkel note the importance of the gate area in this psalm as a demarcation point separating the profane from the sacred. It is no surprise that the shrine area at Kuntillet ʿAjrud was adjacent to the main entrance of Building A. The importance of gate shrines as loci of judgment and ritual activity is well documented, both in the biblical (Ruth 4:1, 10–11; Prov 22:22; 2 Kgs 23:8; Ezek 8:3) and the archaeological record (for a recent summary see D. Edelman, "Cultic Sites and Complexes Beyond the Jerusalem Temple," in *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah* [F. Stavrakopoulou and J. Barton, eds.; London: Clark, 2010]: 93–94).

[65] Kraus cites Psalm 24 as a parallel to Psalm 118, as it also describes a worshiper being blessed during a procession to the Temple precinct. However, in Ps 24:5 Yahweh blesses the worshiper, whereas, in Ps 118:26, the worshipers bless another group of individuals.

participating in the procession to the Temple are blessed, the verb *brk* is passive; whereas, in verse 26b, where the pilgrims bless an unidentified audience (perhaps those unable to participate in this particular pilgrimage), the verb *brk* is active and in the 1st person: "We bless (1cp) you (2p)." Inscribed dedications, such as KA 3.1 and 3.6, may have been the next step in prayer and blessing, thus enabling worshipers to memorialize their spoken prayers and invocations in writing. During pilgrimages, or even brief visits to shrines during a journey, the practice of inscribing such a dedication or blessing would have enabled those present and those unable to travel to benefit from the ritual performed at the site, and to "leave their mark," so to speak. Building upon Schmidt's suggestion that the images and inscriptions work together to create a cohesive representation of cultic worship at Kuntillet ʿAjrud, I propose that the use of direct speech and the blessing formula in these graffiti contribute another element to the overall field of meaning—that of spoken blessings and prayer, thereby capturing the oral component of ritual performance in the shrine room.

IV. THE ORAL-LITERATE CONTINUUM: WRITING IN THE CONTEXT OF RITUAL

Ultimately, all of the units that make up KA 3.1 and 3.6 are rooted in verbal communication, as both the introductory letter formula and the blessing formula are derived from oral idioms. The retention of verbs of speech in written messages is part of a historical development whereby written letters eventually replaced spoken messages. Although the medium of communication changed, the formulaic language used in these messages remained the same. Hence, two parties "speak" to each other, though the actual message is communicated in writing. Use of the epistolary formula in KA 3.1 and 3.6 expresses the spoken, interactive, and performative nature of blessing, as though capturing the moment in time when a worshiper "speaks" directly to the person(s) whom they are blessing.

Blessings and curses are also rooted in speech, as they are essentially performative utterances, i.e., "speech acts." J. Austin's classic work *How to Do Things with Words* describes performative utterances as statements and or/actions that come into existence as they are spoken.[66] Performative utterances can include gestures, symbolic actions (such as writing),

[66] One such example is the statement, "I now pronounce you husband and wife," made by the officiant at the conclusion of a wedding ceremony. For a general description of performative utterances see J. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 1962): 6–11.

and typically draw upon a stock of culturally relevant terminology and metaphor. Blessings and curses are performative by their very nature, as the act of speaking or writing a blessing or a curse is what "activates" its power.[67] Indeed, the dramatic increase in blessing and curse texts in Iron II Israel, particularly from "unofficial" contexts (such as tomb graffiti) is best explained by this phenomenon. As Schniedewind observes: "graffiti [from the Iron II] do seem to draw from the use of writing in magic rituals to express power. In both the Khirbet el-Qôm and the Khirbet Beit-Lei inscriptions, the writing asks for blessing or good wishes for those who did the writing. It may be inferred that the act of writing itself actuates the blessings and the desires of those writing the graffiti."[68] Writing became a key part of such ritual activity, as it was seen as an extra measure that enhanced the efficaciousness of a blessing or curse.

The *Sotah* ritual in Num 5:11–31 is often overlooked as an example of "numinous" writing. In this ritual, the priest transcribes a curse on a scroll, which is then dissolved in water and consumed by a woman accused of adultery.[69] If she dies she is guilty of adultery; if she survives, she is acquitted. There is a tendency to attribute the power of the curse to the sacred qualities of the dust on the Tabernacle floor, or to the water in the ritual as a magical element, or even to the use of the Divine name in the written curse.[70] However, the act of writing out the curse is, in

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[67] Vows also fall into the category of spoken invocations (see J. Berlinerblau, *The Vow and the "Popular Religious Groups" of Ancient Israel* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996]: 83–90). In biblical literature the act of making and fulfilling a vow is typically associated with verbs of speaking and listening. Worshipers *speak* their vows and God (presumably) *listens*. Petitioners memorialized their (spoken) vows in writing on votive gifts in the hope that God would *hear* their prayer.

[68] W. Schniedewind, *A Social History of Hebrew: Its Origins Through the Rabbinic Period* (Yale: New Haven, 2013): 214.

[69] Num 5:23–24.

[70] J. Milgrom (''The Case of the Suspected Adulteress, Numbers 5:11–31: Redaction and Meaning,'' in *The Creation of Sacred Literature: Composition and Redaction of the Biblical Text* [R. E. Friedman, ed.; Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1981]: 69–75, esp. 70–72, 75) proposes that the original curse was an ancient Near Eastern incantation formula that was later attributed to YHWH. B. A. Levine (*Numbers 1-20* [D. N. Friedman, ed.; AB; New York; Doubleday, 1964]: 204–211) cites the water ordeal in the Code of Hammurabi as a partial parallel, but does not comment upon the use of writing to enhance and activate the curse. A. Jeffers (*Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria* [New York; Brill, 1996]: 163–164) does not even mention the role of writing in this passage, but instead identifies the use of water as the magical component in this spell. D. Miller ("Another Look at the Magical Ritual for a Suspected Adulteress in Numbers 5:11–31," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 5.1 [2010]: 1–16) associates this ritual with Egyptian magical practices: "By rubbing the ink of the incantation off into the 'holy water', which also contains dust from the tabernacle (Temple) floor, he [the priest] transfers that cosmic energy to the liquid concoction. The mixture is now magically charged—magic by inherent property

and of itself, central to activating the power of the ritual—indeed, one could argue that it is the very act of writing and dissolving the *written* words of the curse that renders the ritual efficacious. R. Ritner views Num 5:23–28 as being most at home in Egyptian magical practices. In Egypt it was common practice for magicians to dissolve a written spell in water and drink the water in order to absorb the *heka*, or magical power of the spell.[71] In such rites, water served as a medium, transmitting the power in the spoken and written spell to the practitioner.

In order to better understand the performative elements of KA 3.1 and 3.6, it is important to understand the relationship between speech and writing in such invocations. The genre of blessing and cursing has its roots in oral tradition, as is reflected, for example, in the numerous spoken blessings in biblical literature. Inscribed blessing and curses are also widely attested in the epigraphic record at Khirbet el-Qôm (late eighth century B.C.E.), Beit Lei (seventh to early sixth centuries B.C.E.), Silwan (700 B.C.E.), and of course in the Kuntillet ʿAjrud graffiti. Texts of this genre evidence a cultural belief that writing was numinous and could enhance a verbal blessing or curse. The Ketef Hinnom amulets, two silver amulets inscribed with protective language and blessings that parallel the language of the Priestly Blessing (Num 6:23–27), attest to the practice of inscribing such benedictions on amulets and wearing them as protective measures.[72] The discovery of the Ketef Hinnom amulets in a tomb context suggests that they were seen as "magical" objects, imbued

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complementing magic by speech (the spoken incantation) and magic by rite (the writing of the incantation and the infusion of the ink into the mixture)." However, he does not delve very much into the significance of writing in this passage, which was not merely an element of the ritual, but the primary act of power that activated the curse.

[71] Writing was quite central to curative magic in Egypt. Anti-venom spells, for example, were written down on the skin of the afflicted individual near to the affected area; the injured individual then licked off the written spell in order to be healed. Spells were also written on linen and worn near afflicted body parts in order to neutralize illness and pain. See R. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 54; Chicago: OI, 1993): 94–95; 108–110; G. Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt* (Austin: Texas Univ., 1995): 70–77.

[72] The practice of wearing such amulets brings to mind verse 27 of the Priestly Blessing: "So shall they place (וְשָׂמוּ) my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them." Such blessings were written down and worn, serving an apotropaic function. For a discussion of the Priestly Blessing and the Ketef Hinnom amulets see G. Barkay, "The Priestly Benediction on Silver Plaques from Ketef Hinnom in Jerusalem," *Tel Aviv* 19 (1992): 139–192; G. Barkay, M. J. Lundberg, A. G. Vaughn and B. Zuckerman, "The Amulets from Ketef Hinnom: A New Edition and Evaluation," *BASOR* 334 (2004): 41–71; for a more in depth discussion of the language of blessing and protection in these amulets, see J. D. Smoak, "Amuletic Inscriptions and the Background of YHWH as Guardian and Protector in Psalm 12," *VT* 60.3 (2010): 421–432; idem, "May Yhwh Bless You" (N 37): 202–236.

with a protective power, one perhaps even able to guard their owners in the afterlife. The influx of blessing and curse inscriptions in the Iron II attests to a market for such short, personalized texts in both Israel and Judah,[73] perhaps in response to the unrest resulting from the turmoil of Assyrian expansion.[74]

The interplay between orality and literacy in such written invocations is best understood from the perspective of the "oral-literate continuum" in ancient Israelite culture. S. Niditch argues that such short blessing and curse texts reflect the "ongoing mentality of an oral world" in emerging-literate and literate societies.[75] As writing became increasingly important in Israel, inscribing blessing and curse formulae, be it in a tomb, cave, or shrine setting, or on personal objects (such as dedicatory vessels, amulets, or jewelry), was seen as a means of enhancing their power. Writing was a more permanent medium that preserved benedictions and maledictions, both literally and figuratively, long after they were spoken.[76] As Niditch states, writing "bring[s] the God-presence into a sort of material reality, and the materialization lasts—such are the undoubted benefits of writing."[77] The act of speaking a blessing is a limited and finite event, however, once a blessing is written, it is preserved forever—or at least as long as the physical text endures.

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[73] One example of such personalized writing in the royal sector is Hezekiah's prayer in Isa 38:9. W. Hallo ("The Royal Correspondence of Larsa: A Sumerian Prototype for the Prayer of Hezekiah?" in *The World's Oldest Literature: Studies in Sumerian Belles-Lettres* [Leiden: Brill, 2010]: 333–352) characterizes Hezekiah's written prayer as a "prayer letter," a type of formalized message written as though it were a letter to a deity (e.g., the prayer letters composed by the royal scribes of Larsa for Sin-iddinam). However, the enigmatic term מכתב in this verse is also thought to refer to an inscription memorializing Hezekiah's prayer. See H. L. Ginsberg, "Psalms and Inscriptions of Petition and Acknowledgement," in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume* (S. Lieberman et al., eds.; New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945): 159–171; P. D. Miller, "Psalms and Inscriptions," *Congress Volume, Vienna 1980* (J. A. Emerton, ed.; Leiden: Brill, 1981): 311–332.

[74] A similar phenomenon is attested in the epigraphic record in Egypt; there is an increase in inscribed protective spells on amulets, ostraca, stelae and statues from the twelfth century B.C.E. on in reaction to Egypt's decline, both abroad and internally. See Pinch (N 71): 65.

[75] S. Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996): 46–47; see also her discussion of R. Finnegan's work on the oral-literate continuum, 45–46.

[76] Ibid., 44–48. Frevel ([N 24]: 30, 43) provides a nice description of the symbolic importance of votive objects, describing the act of leaving votives at a sacred space as a "performative and durative act." He describes votives as "a sort of communication media, since they symbolize the intention of the person which offers and it often stands for the offering itself." When such objects contain an inscription, or symbolize the petitioner, "they stand as signs of an ongoing prayer or cultic act."

[77] Niditch (N 75): 46.

V. "VISITORS' GRAFFITI" IN EGYPT

Egyptian inscribed materials have been largely overlooked in discussions of the inscriptions at Kuntillet ʿAjrud.[78] Yet, the use of writing in Egypt as a means of enhancing spells, blessing, and curses provides fruitful parallels to the function of such short "numinous" texts in ancient Israel. In particular, ancient tourist graffiti in Egypt sheds light upon the function of KA 3.1, 3.6 and 3.9. Egypt is known as "das klassischen Lande der Graffiti" on account of the thousands of graffiti inscribed by travelers on the surfaces of rocks, tombs, and even the most elaborate state and religious monuments.[79] In Egypt, such graffiti was tolerated and even encouraged.[80] As A. J. Penden observes: "As with all societies, expediency and opportunism, rather than any strictly enforced social mores, guided human activity in Pharaonic Egypt when it came to writing graffiti texts for posterity."[81] Inscribing a graffito during a visit to a monument or tomb enabled travelers to commemorate their visits and to display their rank and status to future visitors. It was thought that the deity(s) venerated at these sites would bless those leaving behind a personalized dedication. Tomb graffiti addressed future travelers, soliciting

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[78] KA 3.0, an ink inscription on Pithos B, refers to an Egyptian (*mṣry* "the Egyptian") in a list of personal names (Aḥituv, Eshel, and Meshel, "The Inscriptions" [N 4]: 100–101). Hutton ([N 5]: 177–210) provides a very cursory discussion of the similarities between the Kuntillet ʿAjrud inscriptions and the graffiti at Wadi el-Ḥol in Egypt. Key studies that examine Egyptian parallels to the artistic tradition at Kuntillet ʿAjrud include Beck, "The Drawings from Ḥorvat Teiman" (N 5): 3–68; G. Barkay and I. MiYoung, "Egyptian Influence on the Painted Human Figures from Kuntillet ʿAjrud," *Tel Aviv* 28 (2001): 141–205; Zevit (N 16): 383–389; B. Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts," in *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms* (D. Edelman, ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995): 75–105; idem, "The Iron Age Pithoi" (N 5): 96–102; H. Weippert, *Palästina in vorhellenistischer Zeit*. *Handbuch der Archäologie* (Vorderasien 2/1; Munich: Beck, 1988): 673; Keel and Uehlinger (N 26): 218–223; Hadley, "Two Pithoi from Kuntillet ʿAjrud" (N 5): 180–213; Weinfeld (N 5): 121–130.

[79] This famous description of Egypt is cited in Penden, *Graffiti of Pharaonic Egypt* (N 10): xix; for the original quote see G. Klaffenbach, *Handbuch der Archäologie* (München: Allgemeinen Grudlagen, 1969): 367, n. 2.

[80] For an overview see Penden (N 10). Penden restricts his study to graffiti on rock surfaces, tomb walls, and monuments that span the First–Thirtieth Dynasties in Egypt and Nubia. He omits inscriptions on objects and ceramics, as he does not classify "odd marks or texts on individual objects" as graffiti. For Penden (xx–xxi), inscriptions that identify the owner of the vessel, or are the mark of a specific pottery workshop, are not reflective of "a true writing system." Though KA 3.1 and 3.6 were inscribed on ceramic vessels, they fall into Penden's rubric for "graffiti," as they are complete texts, both grammatically and semantically, and were not originally part of the design of the vessels.

[81] Ibid., 294.

them to read the inscriptions, which were thought to bless both the visitor and tomb owner.

The more basic graffiti (consisting of an image, an individual's name, and perhaps their profession, rank, and the date, etc.,) may have been motivated by boredom, or a traveler's desire to mark their presence as they passed through a site (i.e., graffiti of the "I was here" variety). However, much of the graffiti in Egypt, particularly in temple and tomb contexts, had a specific, religious purpose. Such graffiti contain formulaic curses and blessings, petition specific deities, and often express the hope that the written requests would materialize in the near future and in the afterlife. Many sites also feature graffiti consisting of both text and image; for example, certain graffiti in the Valley of the Kings include the images of various deities, most likely the very deities being petitioned in these inscriptions.[82] In Egypt, writing an invocation or a spell was seen as a means of enhancing its power.[83] Texts that appeal to deities for a specific outcome, which include spells, blessing and curse texts, and the warnings directed at those defacing tombs and inscriptions, fall under the rubric of "magical" or "numinous" writing, i.e., the use of writing to activate or enhance a blessing, curse, incantation, or prayer.[84] Writing was an intrinsic part of Egyptian magical practices—priests were the authors and performers of spells and magical rites.[85] As Ritner observes, "Combining in himself the roles of composer, compiler, and performer,

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[82] Ibid., 154.

[83] For a general discussion of magic in Egypt and the relationship between speech and writing in Egyptian magical practices see Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practices* (n 71): 35–72.

[84] Ritner (ibid., 40–44) proposes a working definition for magic in Egyptian contexts that is grounded in the intrinsic performativity of *HkA* (the Egyptian term best defined as 'magic'). Egyptian magic consisted of three basic components: the property to be "possessed," the rite to be "performed," and the words (i.e., spell) to be "spoken." He ultimately argues that Egyptian magic is best defined as magic by rite, or "a thing done," which encompasses both possession and the spoken elements of magical rites. Magic in Egypt was intrinsically oral and performative. *Axw* 'spells' (literally, 'effective things') were performed while the written words of the spell were spoken aloud. Spells were often structured as direct speech, and make constant reference to their orality. Terms such as *mdw* 'word', *rA* 'speech', *dD* 'statement', *Sd* 'recitation', and/or 'to enchant' (originally with the basic meaning 'to recite'), and *Sni* 'to enchant, conjure, or exorcise' (derived from the basic meaning of the verb 'to ask, recite') are standard in this genre. Additionally, the term *rA* (derived from 'mouth') can be used in the context of *HkA* as a general term for 'spell'. The term *rA* is also used as a section heading in temple and funerary texts that alerts the reader that recitation is in order. See J. Baines ("Literacy and Ancient Egyptian Society," *Man*, N.S., 18.3 [1983]: 588–589) for a discussion of how such "magical texts" functioned on a symbolic level.

[85] Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practices* (n 71): 220–221.

it is the priest alone who constitutes the "private" magician in Ancient Egypt."[86] The ability to compose and read magical spells was limited mainly to a literate elite, as only an estimated one percent of the population (consisting mainly of court officials [and the Pharaoh], priests and scribes), were literate.[87] This presumes that priest-scribes composed the bulk of magical texts and dedications for non-literate individuals.[88]

In the restricted scope of this article, I focus mainly upon Egyptian graffiti from the New Kingdom through the Third Intermediary Period.[89] Beginning in the New Kingdom, not only is there a general increase in both hieratic and hieroglyphic graffiti, such texts even appear to be written by lower ranking officials and functionally literate individuals (such as the workmen at Deir el-Medina). The increase in such inscribed materials attests to the spread of basic literacy beyond the scribal elite, to artisans and craftsmen needing such skills.[90] Indeed, this is the period

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[86] Ibid., 232. As part of their training, priest-scribes were trained in magical arts that included the production of magical texts and objects (e.g., protective amulets, copies of the Book of the Dead, and manuals for rituals such as the *wpt-r* or "Opening of the Mouth" funerary ritual, etc.). Scribe-priests were affiliated with a scribal institution referred to in Egyptian texts as the "House of Life." The House of Life was part of the temple apparatus and functioned as a library, scriptorium, school, and research institution for the study of medicine, astronomy, and the production and transmission of rituals texts (see K. Nordh, *Aspects of Ancient Egyptian Curses and Blessing: Conceptual Background and Transmission* [Uppsala Studies in Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern Civilizations 26; Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1996]: 107–130). Scribes in charge of magical texts were designated as *ḥry-ḥb* or "lector priest," an official title thought to be related to the Hebrew term *ḥrtm* or "foreign practitioner of magic." Originally, the lector-priest was the person in charge of reciting incantations and hymns during state, temple, and private rituals. However, over time this term became a generic designation for "magician" (Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practices* [N 71]: 220–221).

[87] Ibid., 204; for a comprehensive discussion see also Baines (N 84): 584–586.

[88] A "magician's box" dating to the Middle Kingdom reveals a mix of scribal tools, such as reed pens and papyri, as well as various writing implements and trinkets. The owner appears to have been a priest working in the local community. For a list and analysis of the objects in this collection see Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practices* (N 71): 222–232.

[89] Penden ([N 10]: 289–291) provides a useful summary of the major periods of graffiti and correlates them to social and political changes. To briefly summarize the periods before the New Kingdom: graffiti from First–Tenth Dynasties are few, which may reflect the more limited nature of literacy at this early stage. The bulk of third millenium B.C.E. graffiti are from mine and quarry contexts, where they served as semi-official records of such expeditions. There is an influx in graffiti dating to the Middle Kingdom, which suggests that there was a slight increase in literacy rates. Penden attributes this to state-sponsored efforts to rejuvenate Egyptian scribal institutions at the end of the First Intermediary Period.

[90] See Penden (N 10): 290; for New Kingdom graffiti see 58–133, also his section on the Deir el-Medina graffiti: 134–181. See also R. Janssen and J. J. Janssen, *Growing up in Ancient Egypt* (London: Rubicon, 1990); A. G. McDowell, "Student Exercises from Deir el-Medina: The Dates," in *Studies in Honor of William Kelly Simpson* (2 vols.; Peter

when the first *Besucherinschriften*, or "visitors' graffiti" are attested.[91] This term is a designation for graffiti left by travelers, most of which consisted of a prayer, blessing, or personal name inscribed on the walls of a site or a natural rock surface. The impetus to inscribe such graffiti was the hope that a personalized inscription would bring travelers good fortune and perpetuate their memory, and perhaps even their existence, in the afterlife.

The abundance of personalized graffiti in Egypt attests to the popularity of this practice among elites and non-elites alike. There is evidence that non-literate Egyptians arranged for scribes or literate friends to compose dedications on their behalf.[92] The corpus of ink-graffiti, dating to the Twentieth Dynasty on the walls and pillars of the Amun Temple of Thutmosis III include several inscriptions written on the behalf of female visitors, perhaps by a scribe or a literate family member. These graffiti petition specific deities, including Hathor, the principle deity of Deir el-Baḥri, using the common formula *jr nfr jr nfr* PN "Do good, do good to PN!"[93] Such graffiti was also written by proxy for individuals unable to travel.[94] In such cases, the client composed the text of the graffito; at later date a scribe engraved the graffito at the designated site.

Der Manuelian, ed.; Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1996): 601–608; idem., "Teachers and Students at Deir el-Medina," in *Deir el-Medina in the Third Millennium AD: A Tribute to Jac J. Janssen* (R. J. Demarée and A. Egberts, eds.; Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2000): 217–233. For a discussion of literacy during the New Kingdom, and the social changes catalyzed by Akhenaten's reforms, see Baines (N 84): 590–593.

[91] W. Helck, "Die Bedeutung der ägyptischen Besucherinschriften," *ZDMG* 102 (1952): 39–46.

[92] As Baines ([N 84]: 584–585) observes, although lower ranking scribes were for hire, non-literate individuals most likely asked a literate friend or acquaintance for help in such matters. The increase in "non-professional" texts evidences the spread of basic literacy outside of the scribal profession during the New Kingdom. The extensive corpus of graffiti from Western Thebes comprises graffiti written by scribes and non-professionals alike; the majority of graffiti were composed by individuals that self-identify as scribes, yet, there are also numerous graffiti that were written by lower-level workmen. These graffiti were inscribed by royal tomb workers, who recorded their names, ranks, and prayers, and also inscribed images on rock surfaces in the Valley of the Kings. Such graffiti tend to be clustered together, a phenomenon also attested at Kuntillet ʿAjrud, following the principle that graffiti attracts more graffiti. The graffiti in the Valley of the Kings are grouped together on smooth rock surfaces in the shade, which suggests that the workers wrote these inscriptions during their breaks. Penden ([N 10]: 151–155) suggests that not all graffiti were written out of boredom, or as he puts it "vanity." Graffiti consisting of prayers and the images of deities clearly had a dedicatory purpose. The royal necropolis was seen as a sacred place where deities could be petitioned, which is most likely the reason for the accumulation of graffiti in this area.

[93] Penden (N 10): 121–123, cf. 405.

[94] Though dating to a much earlier period, certain rock inscriptions at Hatnub exemplify

Most relevant to the phenomenon of blessing and curse texts in ancient Israel at sites such as Kuntillet ʿAjrud, Khirbet el-Qôm, Beit Lei, and Silwan, etc., are graffiti (particularly in tombs) that were in a sense, "interactive." Such inscriptions served as vehicles of communication between two parties: the "sender," i.e., inscriber of the text, and its "recipient," i.e., a future traveler reading the graffiti.[95] The New Kingdom graffito of Neferhotep, a scribe working in Queen Hatshepsut's temple at Deir el-Baḥri, illustrates how graffiti served as an intermediary between the author and a future audience. This graffito uses the *ḥtp-dj-nsw* formula and appeals to a string of deities that include the deities of the necropolis, as well as key figures of the Egyptian pantheon (including Amen-Re, Hathor, and Mut), for funerary offerings from their own offering tables. It ends with an appeal to future visitors to read the graffito aloud; if they comply, Neferhotep promises that they too will be blessed and favored by the gods. Such graffiti were meant to be read aloud, and in a sense, re-enacted with each new reading.

During the New Kingdom there was an increase in graffiti calling for an exchange between the inscription's author and audience. Tomb owners addressed future tomb visitors to recite a benediction or inscribe a

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the practice of graffiti-by-proxy. The Hatnub graffiti were inscribed during the First Intermediary Period and Middle Kingdom to commemorate expeditions to the quarries at this site. This corpus consists mainly of biographical information, offering formulae, blessing and curse formulae, and on occasion, depictions of those named in the graffiti. Several of these inscriptions were inscribed at the site for individuals perhaps unable (or unwilling) to travel to Hatnub. The inscriptions of the nomarch Neheri I and his sons were most likely composed prior to the expedition to these quarries. Ahanakht, a scribe and *wab*-priest of Sakhmet who worked for the nomarch's family, inscribed this series of graffiti for his employer. Having a graffito inscribed at this site appears to have been prestigious and reflected positively upon those involved, even if they did not personally go to the quarries. See Nordh (N 86): 183–184; for the original publication see R. Anthes, *Die Felseninschriften von Hatnub* (Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Altertumskunde Aegyptens 9; Leipzig: Olms, 1928): 192. There is also evidence that the Philae temple personnel inscribed graffiti for various individuals. The Philae graffiti are composed as though letters from worshipers to the deities associated with the site. See the brief discussion in Nordh (N 86): 182–183; for primary publications of the Philae graffiti see F. L. Griffith, *Catalogue of the Demotic Graffiti of the Dodecaschoenus* (2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford Univ., 1937): 42–130.

[95] For a discussion of the interactive nature of such texts in Egypt, and in particular, the blessing and curse genre, see Nordh (N 86): 11–13; 69–80; 182–184; see also K. P. Kuhlmann ("Eine Beschreibung der Grabdekoration mit der Aufforderung zu kopieren und zum Hinterlassen von Besucherinschriften aus saitischer Zeit," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung Kairo* 29 [1973]: 205–215; in particular 207) for a Saitite Period graffito that provides the best description of such interactive graffiti: "Wo immer ihr wollt, da schreibt auf die freigelassenen Stellen, auf dass ein Mann zu seinem Gefathrten spreche, indem es auf den freien Stellen eingeschnitten ist; dort soll (dann) gefunden werden, um spatter als Leitspruch(?) zu dienen."

graffito on their tomb walls.[96] In these inscriptions, tomb owners promise to intercede for those that comply in the afterlife, and guarantee them and their progeny success and a long life.[97] Such graffiti facilitated what was essentially a transaction between the tomb owner and tomb visitor, believed to benefit both parties. This type of interactive graffiti often contains direct speech, as though a record of a benediction or prayer spoken in the tomb.

One such graffito from Medum, dating to Year 26 of Thutmosis III (Eighteenth Dynasty), reads: "The Scribe Aakheperkare-sonb, son of Amenmesu, the Scribe and Ritualist of the deceased Thutmosis I, came to see the beautiful temple of King Snofru. He found it as though heaven were within it, Re rising in it. Then he said, 'May heaven rain fresh myrrh, may it drip incense upon the roof of the temple of King Snofru'."[98] Not only is this graffito stylized as though the speech of the scribe, the dedication is a blessing on behalf of a third party, the Pharaoh Snofru (Fourth Dynasty) who was venerated during the New Kingdom.[99] This graffito ends with an appeal that is standard in dedications of this genre, addressing scribes, literate travelers, and *wab*-priests not only to read this text aloud, but to recite the *ḥtp-dj-nsw* formula on behalf of the deceased. In exchange, those who complied were promised a long life, burial within the Memphite necropolis, and the guarantee that their children would inherit their offices.[100] This use of direct speech reflects the orality and performativity underlying such dedications, which were most likely spoken aloud before they were inscribed.[101]

Graffiti dating to the Third Intermediary Period (1069–664 B.C.E.), the period most contemporary to the Kuntillet ʿAjrud materials, include a series of (mainly hieratic) black ink graffiti inscribed by pilgrims visiting the Osireion at Abydos (Twenty-Second to Twenty-Third Dynasties).

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[96] Penden (N 10): 73; E. F. Wente, "Some Graffiti from the Reign of Hatshepsut," *JNES* 43 (1984): 47–54.

[97] The Twenty-Sixth Dynasty tomb inscription of Aba (Thebes, Tomb 36) reads: "Schreibt dort auf die leeren Fläschen (scil. des Grabes), was ihr wollt, dammit ich (ehrenvoll) daraus hervorgehen möge für die Zukunft." For the publication and German translation of this inscription, see M. Weber, *Beiträge zur Kenntnis des Schrift und Buchwesens der alten Ägypter* (Inaugural-Dissertation, Universität zu Köm, 1969): 11–12 and n. 71. For a more general discussion of these types of tomb inscriptions, see Nordh (N 86): 10–12; 76–77; for a general discussion of visitors' graffiti see Helck (N 91).

[98] Penden (N 10): 64–65; W. M. F. Petrie, *Medum* (London, 1892): 40–41 and pl. 33.

[99] Another such text is the XXVI Dynasty ink graffito on the Step Pyramid of King Djoser inscribed on behalf of Pharaoh Necho II: "May Pharaoh Necho, l.p.h, live for ever and ever!" (Penden [N 10]: 279).

[100] Ibid., 64–65.

[101] See the discussion in Nordh (N 86): 187–190.

The majority these texts contain the names and ranks of travelers, most of whom were scribes.[102] Inscriptions in Luxor from this period include hieroglyphic graffiti composed by priests that combine text and image. The depictions narrate cultic activity at the temple, thereby providing a visual complement to the biographic data inscribed on the temple walls.[103] Approximately three hundred graffiti on the rooftop of the Khonsu Temple precinct at Karnak combine texts with animal, deity, and various other images (though some of this graffiti dates to later periods). In particular, there is a series of predominately hieratic graffiti on the temple rooftop that is attributed to priests from Dynasties XXII–XXV. This graffiti comprises the names of the priests and their titles (certain ones also include the year dates of contemporary Pharaohs), as well as the outlines of human feet, presumably the feet of the priests who inscribed them.[104] Some of the graffiti also contain warnings and curses directed at those seeking to deface the inscriptions: "The one who will efface the footprint of Djediah, my servant, I shall efface his name from the Benben, my great and noble house, and I shall not place his son in the position of his father."[105] Graffiti of this type are also attested at other temples (Medinat Habu, Deir el-Medineh, Edfu, and Philae), and seem to have been a means for low-ranking priests, perhaps unable to afford a dedicatory object or statue, to leave behind something more permanent in the cultic area.[106] The outlines of the worshiper's feet symbolized their own enduring presence, as though constantly petitioning the deities affiliated with these temples.[107]

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[102] Ibid., 267.

[103] These inscriptions are associated with the depictions of the High Priest of Amun Pinudjem I and his daughters worshipping the deities Amun, Mut and Khonsu. Another such graffito depicts the (deceased) High Priest of Amun, Piankh and his sons, as well as the new High Priest Pinudjem I during funerary rites, perhaps to commemorate Piankh's death. See Penden (n 10): 272–273.

[104] Some of the outlined feet are bare, others are shod. See Penden (n 10): 268–271; R. K. Ritner, *The Libyan Anarchy: Inscriptions from Egypt's Third Intermediary Period* (Atlanta: SBL, 2009): 65–68; for a comprehensive study of these graffiti see H. Jacquet-Gordon*, Temple of Khonsu, Volume 3. The Graffiti on the Khonsu Temple Roof at Karnak: A Manifestation of Personal Piety* (OIP 123; Chicago: Oriental Institute, Univ. of Chicago, 2003).

[105] Graffito Number 10 in Ritner, *The Libyan Anarchy* (n 104): 65–66; see also Jacquet-Gordon (n 104): 7, 55.

[106] Jacquet-Gordon (n 104): 3–7.

[107] The inscribed feet in Egyptian temples are clearly representations of human worshipers, as opposed to the inscribed feet at 'Ain Dara, which are barefoot, huge and most likely symbolize the presence of a deity.

From the Saite Period on, there is a dramatic increase in graffiti inscribed by foreigners in their own native languages in Egypt at major monuments as well as remote sites, such as the Wadi Hammâmât quarries.[108] Most relevant to this study are the Aramaic graffiti discovered at Abydos dating to the fifth century B.C.E. that make use of the blessing formula *brk* PN *l*-DN. In such inscriptions, the deity being appealed to for a blessing is Osiris: *bryk* PN *qdm ʿwsry* "blessed be PN before Osiris."[109] The NWS blessing formula *brk* PN *l*-DN appears to have served as a stock "fill in the blank" formula, wherein the deity names were interchangeable.[110]

The inscribed materials from Egypt (with the exception of the Aramaic Abydos inscriptions) do not provide a word-for-word parallel to the formulaic language in the Kuntillet ʿAjrud graffiti. However, the general function of Egyptian graffiti in tombs and temples elucidates the function of such inscriptions in Israel and Judah. In particular, the interactive elements of Egyptian graffiti, such as the use of direct speech and blessing and curse terminology, the appeals to specific deities, and the use of images to complement written dedications provide fruitful parallels to the graffiti at Kuntillet ʿAjrud. More generally, such parallels evidence a similar attitude towards the "magical" properties of writing, moreover, to its use (and usefulness) in ritual practice. The inscriptions at Kuntillet ʿAjrud, Ketef Hinnom, Khirbet el-Qôm, Khirbet Beit Lei, and the Silwan Valley suggest that, as in Egypt, writing was considered to be a powerful, numinous technology that could enhance the efficaciousness of a spoken prayer, curse, or blessing, especially within the confines of a sacred space, such as a temple, shrine or tomb.

In Judah, as in Egypt, tomb owners guarded their tombs with protective inscriptions that blessed them and their legacy, and warded off unwelcome visitors. Such inscriptions were intended to bless the deceased in perpetuity, and remind visitors to honor the sanctity of the tomb, and perhaps say a blessing on behalf of the departed. On the other hand, the erasure or defacing of a personal name and/or personalized inscription was perceived as an act of *damnatio memoriae*, a means of destroying the memory of the deceased.[111] The association of written name of an individual with their spirit and/or legacy is well attested in biblical

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[108] Penden (N 10): 292.

[109] See *KAI* 267, also B. Porten, "Funerary Stela from Saqqarah," in *The Context of Scripture, Vol 2. Monumental Inscriptions* (W. W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, eds.; Leiden: Brill, 1996): 187–188 (texts 2.1–2.2).

[110] Naveh (N 38): 27.

[111] See the Silwan and Beit Lei inscriptions in Renz (N 25): 242–251; 261–265 and Aḥituv, *Echoes* (N 25): 44–47; 233–236.

literature.[112] Ps 69:29 includes a particularly evocative description of the consequence of being erased from God's scroll: (Regarding those afflicting the poet) "Let them be blotted out of the scroll of the living. Let them not be enrolled among the righteous." In this psalm, having one's name "erased" from the scroll of the living is tantamount to being cursed by God. Similarly, defacing a tomb inscription was a destructive act, thought to damage the memory of the tomb owner and harm them in the afterlife.

The increase in short blessing and curse texts in the southern Levant in the Iron II attests to a pervasive belief that writing had numinous properties. Israelite scribes fulfilled a similar role to that of their Egyptian counterparts and composed personalized "magical" texts for their clients (e.g., the Ketef Hinnom amulets). In light of the close proximity to Egypt, it is not surprising that Kuntillet ʿAjrud features graffiti functioning in a similar manner to Egyptian *Besucherinschriften*. Such graffiti "enhanced" the efficaciousness of spoken prayers, preserving them *in perpetuum*—or at least as long as the inscriptions endured.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, KA 3.1 and 3.6 were originally blessings spoken by travelers that were then inscribed in the shrine area at Kuntillet ʿAjrud. Once the blessings were articulated verbally, they were transcribed to enhance their efficaciousness. Such graffiti functioned in a similar way to to visitors' graffiti left in Egyptian tombs and temples, and were meant to endure long after the worshiper had left the sacred area. The specific similarities to Egyptian epigraphic and iconographic traditions may have arisen in part from Kuntillet ʿAjrud's geographic proximity to Egypt. However, the epigraphic record in the Iron II also attests to a general increase in written dedications, and in particular, blessing and curse texts, which suggests that as writing became progressively relevant to daily life in Israel and Judah, it was incorporated increasingly into religious practice. Overall, the presence of such inscriptional materials in Judah and Israel (presuming that Kuntillet ʿAjrud does reflect a northern orientation) attests to the evolving role of scribes (and perhaps other literate individuals) who served a similar role to their Egyptian counterparts and produced, what may be described as, personalized "magical" texts. Writing thus became the next step in performative ritual, transforming spoken invocations, blessings, and curses into something much more permanent and efficacious.

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[112] In particular, see Deut 25:6; Ps 9:5 [9:6 Hebr.]; and 109:13.