

Article

Religion at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud

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Received: 31 January 2019; Accepted: 13 March 2019; Published: 19 March 2019



Abstract: The discovery of early Hebrew inscriptions at the site of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud has generated considerable discussion among scholars over the past few decades. The fact that the inscriptions contain explicitly religious themes led some to conclude that the site had a cultic function. In the present article, we challenge this assumption and argue that the inscriptions with religious themes are embedded in daily life as religion converges with scribal curriculum in ancient Israel. The inscriptions provide insights into conceptions of the Israelite pantheon, divine theophany, and theomachy in early Israelian religious ideology.

Keywords: Kuntillet ‘Ajrud; theomachy; theophany; blessings; religion; Hebrew inscriptions; scribal curriculum

The inscriptions from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud form what are perhaps the most significant textual data outside of the biblical literature for the religion of the northern kingdom of Israel during the early Iron Age. While the inscriptions are most often studied for what they reveal about the history of the goddess Asherah, they also provide glimpses into the pantheon of the northern kingdom. Since the inscriptions date to the late ninth and early eighth centuries, they provide a unique window into the pre-Deuteronomistic religious landscape of Israel and Judah. Several of the inscriptions feature poetic descriptions of theophanies and theomachies involving El, Baal, and Yahweh. These poetic texts represent some of our earliest examples of Hebrew poetry from the early Iron Age and offer a unique window into the background of early biblical poetic compositions (i.e., Ex 15; Judg 5; Deut 33, etc.). And, the complete corpus of inscriptions attest to the breadth of literary genres that Israelian scribes learned as part of the scribal curriculum in the early Iron Age.

Significant discussion of the site has focused on its function. Following the initial publications, most studies (with some exceptions) interpreted the site as a religious site. These interpretations were particularly influenced by some of the artistic representations as well as the references to blessings in the name of “Yahweh and his *’asherah*”. The complete publication of the site (Ahituv and Eshel 2015; Meshel 2012); however, now calls for the different approach to the site, its inscriptions, and its religion (e.g., Schniedewind 2014; Blum 2013). The approach that we take here differs from previous studies by arguing that the inscriptions attest to the role that religion played within the scribal curriculum of early Iron Age Israel and Judah. More than graffiti, the inscriptions were executed elegantly and reflect the religious landscape of scribes learning their trade. We contend that Kuntillet ‘Ajrud was not a religious site. Instead, the inscriptions represent the embeddedness of religious ideas and practices within the Israelian scribal education. At this site we have a window into the way that religious discourse permeated multiple streams of Israelian administration from epistolary conventions and personal names to the composition of poetic texts. The knowledge of divine names, religious blessings, and poetic hymns about the gods not only had some role in daily life in ancient Israel, it also formed a crucial part of scribal curriculum and practice.

1. The Interpretation of the Site

Kuntillet 'Ajrud sits in the barren wilderness of the central Sinai. The site itself was first discovered in 1869 by Palmer (1871), who believed that he had found Gypsaria, an old Roman trading fort on the road between Eilat and Gaza. However, later archaeological investigations refuted his dating and identification. Still, Palmer correctly intuited that the site must have been a strategic location along the ancient trade route. This route from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean is known today as the *Darb el-Ghazza* in Arabic, that is, "the Gaza Road". This route would have begun at the Red Sea near the site of ancient Eilat and/or Ezion-geber (Tell el-Kheleifeh), gone past Kuntillet 'Ajrud, then towards Kadesh Barnea (Tel-Qudeirat), and up to Gaza, where it reached the Mediterranean Sea. Thus, with respect to its location, it would have served as a caravanserai. The site of Kuntillet 'Ajrud itself lies just off the direct path of this route via the Wadi Quraiya, about 10 km to the west. The other major caravanserai along this route, Kadesh Barnea, also lies just off the direct route from Eilat to Gaza. In this respect, neither Kuntillet 'Ajrud nor Kadesh-Barnea lie on the most direct *Darb el-Ghazza* route, but they both provided convenient water sources along this trade route.

The site of Kuntillet 'Ajrud itself is situated on a solitary hill overlooking Wadi Quraiya (M.R. 094954) approximately 50 km south of Kadesh-barnea. The excavators of Kuntillet 'Ajrud found several shallow wells nearby that would have provided a perennial water source suitable for a small fortress, and the Arabic name actually means "hill of the water-well" (Meshel 2012, p. 3). Since the central Sinai receives less than three inches of rain per year, Kuntillet 'Ajrud provided one of the few water sources along the *Darb el-Ghazza*.

The function of the site has been hotly debated subject in the scholarly literature (see Hadley 1993, 2000, pp. 106–20; Dijkstra 2001, pp. 17–21; Mastin 2005, 2009; Singer-Avitz 2009, pp. 115–17; Hutton 2010, pp. 187–89; Na'aman 2011, pp. 314–19, 2013, pp. 40–45, 50–51; Schmidt 2013). Ze'ev Meshel's official publication of the site is subtitled, "An Iron Age II Religious Site" (Meshel 2012). However, the revised Hebrew edition of the site eliminates this reference to a religious site, and it also replaces the original chapter by Pirhiya Beck on the art that argued for a religious interpretation with a chapter by Tallay Ornan that interpreted the art within the context of the palace and state (see Ahituv and Eshel 2015). Indeed, the evidence for a specifically religious function in Meshel's original site report as well as in the secondary literature is unconvincing. While the site has inscriptions and drawings with religious themes, this does not necessitate a religious interpretation for the site as a whole. Rather, religion was part of the daily life of soldiers, scribes, and merchants that used the site.

To begin with, the religious interpretation of the site stems from the two well-known inscriptions that seem to mention "Yahweh and his *'asherah*". In addition, many of the drawings seem to have religious themes. Thus, the site is often deemed a religious site populated by priests (according to Meshel) despite the fact that, as pointed out by Judith Hadley, the site has no temple, shrine, or cultic objects (see Hadley 1993). Hadley's objections are cogent, and her view has been followed by some scholars (e.g., Schniedewind 2014, pp. 272–75). Nevertheless, many scholars have offered explanations for the lack of a shrine or cultic objects at a religious site. For example, Brian Schmidt focuses on the drawings and inscriptions in the bench room while admitting that the site has "None of the standard diagnostics—altars, conventional figurines, or zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, and composite vessels—indicative of cult were found in the bench room or in locus 13" (Schmidt 2016a, p. 21). Schmidt shares the view of Etan Ayalon and Zeev Meshel that non-ritual objects, such as a chalice, could have been used for ritual purposes (see Ayalon 2012, p. 271n8). Another approach is offered by Nadav Na'aman and Nurit Lissovsky, who invent a new cultic focus for the site without a shrine or cultic objects: "The point of departure for the discussion is the conjecture that a prominent sacred tree (or a sacred grove) grew in the vicinity of the site" (Na'aman and Lissovsky 2008, p. 198). The appeal to a sacred tree, of course, links with both the mention of the goddess Asherah in the inscriptions as well as Asherah imagery in the drawings on the site. There was water, so it does stand to reason that there were trees in the vicinity, but this is hardly a sound basis for a religious interpretation of the site.

The evidence for a religious function offered by Meshel's site report is also fragile. One argument is that an unusual amount of linen was found at the site, and this is supposedly related to the wardrobe of priests. In the chapter on textiles, Avigail Sheffer and Amalia Tidhar point out that according to Ezek 44:17–18, priests were required to wear linen in the temple as opposed to wool (Sheffer and Tidhar 2012, p. 307). However, this is a rather thin thread to bear the weight of a religious interpretation of the site. The authors seem to feel that finding linen garments would be surprising in the desert. Yet, as Susan Ackerman intuitively, it is likely the arid climate for this trading post rather than the religious function that explains the preservation of linen (Ackerman 2008, p. 28). Moreover, it is not even clear whether the linen was worn, traded, or both. The problematic nature of this argument is confirmed by the acknowledgement that Meshel tucks away in an Appendix, namely that the presence of linen "has ceased to be unique since the discovery of similar textiles at Kadesh Barnea" (Sheffer and Tidhar 2012, p. 308). Meshel is thus forced to posit that there were also priests at Kadesh Barnea, citing 1 Chr 26:30–32. Of course, it is possible that priests or Levites traveled this trade route, but it is unlikely that they choose these sites specifically to establish as cultic sites. In addition, the presence of linen in the archaeological record or the possibility that there were trees near the site hardly makes a good case for interpreting the overall site as having a religious function.

The narrow religious interpretation of the site is centered in the interpretation of the inscriptions and drawings. Here, a religious interpretation seems to be required only when we do not sufficiently acknowledge that religion is part of daily life—not just something done at cultic shrines. With regard to the drawings, for example, Tallay Ornan has shown that all the Kuntillet 'Ajrud drawings have direct parallels in neo-Assyrian *palace* reliefs, not cultic shrines (Ornan 2015, 2016). As Ornan also points out, "The image of the king on the entrance pilaster of Building A define it as a royal edifice . . .", and Ornan concludes, "Like other state-supervised centres in the Negev [e.g., Arad], the outpost of Kuntillet 'Ajrud included a cultic architectural unit" (Ornan 2016, p. 22). In other words, there is no reason to associate them narrowly with a religious site. It is also worth pointing out that there are four inscriptions with the military title "Commander of the Fortress" (*šr 'r*) at the site. Three of these inscriptions are located on storage jars and one on the plastered walls of the fortress (Ahituv et al. 2015, pp. 80–81, 113; Schniedewind 2019). Now that the entire corpus of inscriptions has been published, a contextual examination suggests that the pottery inscriptions are mostly ephemeral texts related to a trading post or elementary scribal exercises likely composed by military scribes (Schniedewind 2014). In sum, the inscriptions and art nicely complement the architecture of the site, which looks like a typical desert fortress that built for the use of the Israelian state. The supposed unique character of the site likely more reflects its builders—namely, the Israelian state—rather than any unique religious character.

Finally, the identity of the occupants of the fortress is itself a matter of some discussion and begs the question as to whose religion the site should be related. The fortress is usually assumed to be Israelian based on the personal names that use the distinctively Israelian *-yaw* theophoric as well as the references to "Yahweh of Samaria" (Ahituv 2014, p. 31). Although the location of the site within the central Sinai would normally point to a Judean hegemony, the pottery excavated at the site also points strongly to the Israelian heritage of its occupants (see Ayalon 2012). In this respect, the Israelian personal names and the references to "Yahweh of Samaria" dovetails nicely with the material culture. With regard to the script, Ziony Zevit correctly points out that the "Phoenician" script likely reflects an early stage in the development of a Hebrew national script (Zevit 2001, p. 377–78). Thus, the label "Phoenician" is anachronistic, because distinctively Hebrew script was only beginning to emerge during the occupation of the site in the late ninth and early eighth century BCE. In the final report, Meshel follows the scholarly consensus that the script may be Phoenician, but linguistic features like spelling and morphology are Hebrew (Ahituv et al. 2012, p. 122). Zevit's hypothesis also highlights the problem with describing the "Hebrew" national script as a unified script. We must allow that the Israelian and Judean scripts may have had their own separate histories, with the Israelian script retaining its connection with the Phoenician coast longer than the Judean script. At this point, the

evidence is insufficient, but Kuntillet 'Ajrud suggests some independence in the development of the Israelian script. This observation also underscores the importance of not conflating Israelian and Judean religion. Kuntillet 'Ajrud is a site that gives evidence of Israelian religion during the Iron IIB period (ca. 840–721 BCE).

2. Israelian Religion in Daily Life

One key to a religious interpretation of the site has been the drawings, but in our view, these serve more to highlight aspects of religion in daily life. The early studies of the drawings were done by Beck (1982, 2012). Unfortunately, much of the discussion of the drawings has focused on the identity of the two apparent deities—possibly Bes and Asherah—on Pithos A (see Schmidt 2016b). The image of the lion pictured under the “tree of life” with gazelles certainly suggests the goddess Asherah. Indeed, the tree imagery might have been particularly significant here at a desert oasis. It is certainly possible that we have a crude drawing the Egyptian deity Bes, but it must be emphasized that this is not elegant artwork, but rather doodlings. Moreover, the Egyptian god Bes is also associated with animals, many of whom are illustrated on the pithoi (lions, bulls, gazelle, boar). While these animals can be associated with deities, they also seem to be the types of animals one might encounter in the region. In this respect, the animals as well as the deities are reflections of daily life. A possible Egyptian deity depicted on a pithos aligns nicely with the writing *mšry* “Egyptian” in a list of names on Pithos B (KA 3.10:6). Given its location, it is certainly plausible that Egyptians frequented the site as traders and merchants, perhaps some even worked at the site. Tallay Ornan’s recent study highlights that the Kuntillet 'Ajrud drawings all find nice parallels in neo-Assyrian palace reliefs (Ornan 2015). While her analysis undermines the interpretation of the site as a specifically religious site, it does not make the site a palace either. She suggests a state-sponsored military fortress, which makes sense. While the plaster wall drawings could have a state sponsored purpose, the drawings on the pithoi certainly do not. In addition, even the plaster wall drawings should be seen as expressions of religious art applied to various contexts of daily life. For this reason, we contend that both the drawings and the inscriptions reflect the ways that religion and religious themes were embedded within a variety of streams of Israelite culture.

The inscriptions have been a particular focus for the religious interpretation of the site. While Kuntillet 'Ajrud is the most extensive extra-biblical textual evidence we have for early Israelian religion, it is easy to overstate or misrepresent the significance of various inscriptions. One example illustrates this point. The final report on Kuntillet 'Ajrud suggests, “The authors of the inscriptions believed in the power of prayer to influence God” (Ahituv et al. 2012, p. 133). This is undoubtedly true, but the authors base this statement on lines 2–3 of inscription 3.9, which they translate, “If he would urge, YHW will give him according to his wishes”. It is important to read the whole inscription to contextualize the significance of its use at the fortress of Kuntillet 'Ajrud.

We would reconstruct and translate KA 3.9 as follows: (1) [*mr* PN¹ *mr* lPN² *brtk*] *lyhw.hf m'n wl' šrth*; (2) [—] *kl' šr yš' l m' š lnn h' w' m pth wntn lh yhw~* (3) *klbbh* “[Message of PN¹, say to PN²: I bless you]by Yahweh of the Teman and by his *asherah*. [—]whatever he asks from a man, he will give generously. In addition, if he petitions, then Yahwe(h) will give to him according to his desire”. Now here it becomes clear that we have a practice letter and after the formal opening, the second part (lines 2–3) forms the body of the scribal exercise. This type of exercise is not unusual in the near east. We have a remarkably similar student exercise at Ugarit (KTU 5.9), which is a letter that begins with a formal introduction then proceeds in the body to include a “reciprocal formula” and then gives a humorous grammatical exercise of the verb *ytn* “to give” (Schniedewind forthcoming, chp. 5). Parallels to this reciprocal formula can be found in a variety of places. For example, in a Sam'alian Inscription, we find, *wmz' š' l mn' lhy ytn ly* “And whatever I shall ask from my god, may he give to me” (KAI 214:4), and later in the same inscription, *wmh' š' l mn' lhy mt ytnw ly* “and whatever I shall ask from my god, surely he shall give me” (Il. 12–13). Scholars have also suggested several biblical correlates for Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscription, including: Ps 20:5 *ytn lk klbbk* “He shall give to

you according to your desire” (also see Ps 37:21, 26; 112:5). In sum, reciprocal-type formulas can be adduced in a variety of texts from a variety of places.

We may imagine that reciprocal language would have been learned and memorized from school exercises, then applied in a variety of daily contexts—some specifically religious and others rather mundane. As Avi Shveka points out, the reciprocal formula uses stock scribal terminology typical of requests known from Ebla, Amarna, and elsewhere in the near east (Shveka 2005, pp. 298–99). A nice illustration in biblical literature is Hiram’s letter to Solomon, which encodes this general paradigm (1Kgs 5:22): “Hiram sent word to Solomon: ‘I have heard that you have sent to me, and I will do all that which you desired (תִּשְׁמַעְתָּ לְכָל־דְּבַר־יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר־אֶמְרָא)”. Such language evoking reciprocal relationships, requests, and gifts could be adapted to a variety of contexts, including prayers. In sum, we should understand the reciprocal formula in KA 3.9 as a stock expression—but also as something that reflects deeply embedded social and religious values.

3. The Use of Blessing Formulas

A large number of the inscriptions from the site are blessing formulas. Nine blessings in total were discovered at the site (Ahituv et al. 2012, pp. 127–28). While there are a variety of forms of blessings attested most studies have focused upon the blessings that reference the two gods Yahweh and Asherah (Mandell 2012; Dijkstra 2001; Dietrich and Loretz 1992; Hadley 2000). However, it should be emphasized at the outset that the blessings are different in function from the inscribed blessings discovered at the sites of Khirbet el-Qom and Ketef Hinnom (Smoak 2016, pp. 12–60). The blessings at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud are exercises written by scribes who were learning to write epistolary correspondence. That is, most of the blessings were not related to religious practice at the site. Rather, they reflect the long tradition of use of blessings in letter writing in West Semitic administrative correspondence (see already Lemaire 1981, pp. 26–28; Chase 1982, pp. 65–66; Catastini 1982, pp. 127–34).

Most of these blessing formulas appear on two pithoi discovered in the main building of the site. The single exception to this is a blessing that was inscribed upon the rim of a stone basin discovered near the eastern entrance to the site. This blessing reads, “to/of ‘Obadyaw son of ‘Adna, blessed be he to YHW” (Ahituv et al. 2012, p. 76). Studies have pointed to the large size of the basin on which the inscription appears and the form of the inscription as evidence for the religious nature of the site (Tigay 2007, p. 345*). There may be good reason for interpreting this particular blessing as a request for the person who donated the object to the site to be blessed by the deity. However, the presence of the blessing on the object does not necessarily point to the religious function of the site (Dijkstra 2001, p. 23). Inscriptions containing petitions for divine blessings are found on a variety of objects and in a variety of contexts in the Iron Age Levant. The appearance of such blessings in a variety of contexts points to their use in daily life rather than an exclusive setting in temples or cultic areas.

All of the other blessing formulas were written in ink on two pithoi discovered in a bench room in the main building. For example, the following inscription was written in red ink on Pithos A (3.1) (Ahituv et al. 2012, p. 87):

[Message of . . .] [-]M[-]K: “Speak to Yaheli, and to Yo’asa, and to [. . .] I have [b]lessed you to YHWH of Shomron (Samaria) and to his ‘*asherah*” (3.1).

This particular blessing formula, with the Piel verb in the suffix conjugation form followed by a genitival *lamed* prefixed to a personal name, appears in several other Iron Age inscriptions (Ahituv et al. 2012, p. 127). The formula functions as a petition to the deity to bless the individual identified in the inscription. A longer blessing formula appears on Pithos B (KA 3.6). The blessing reads (Ahituv et al. 2012, p. 95),

Message of Amaryaw:

“Say to my lord, are you well? I have blessed you to YHWH of Teman and his ‘*asherah*. May he bless you and may he guard you, and may he be with my lord [forever(?)].”

In this inscription, we have several features that mark it as a letter exercise. First, the introductory phrase 'mr + PN ("Message of 'Amaryaw") is the standard opening in Ugaritic, Akkadian, and Iron Age Hebrew letters (Pardee and Sperling 1982, p. 145; Cunchillos 1999, pp. 359–74; Huehnergard 1999, pp. 375–89). Such letters open with the phrase "Says PN" followed by a question about the well-being of the recipient. This question is reflected in line 4 of this inscription where we have the phrase "Are you well?" This is followed by two blessing formulas (Thomas 2009, pp. 21–22). The first one, "I have blessed you by . . ." is similar to the formula on the stone basin described above. The second one, located in lines 7–9, exhibits prefix verbal forms (*yrbk*, *yšmrk*, and *yhy*) instead of the suffix forms verbal forms attested in the blessing in line 4. The blessing in lines 7–9, with its pairing of the verbs "bless" and "guard/keep," closely resembles the lexical and syntactic formulation of the biblical priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24–26:

ybrkk yhwš wyšmrk

y' r yhwš pnyw`lyk wyhmk

yš' yhwš pnyw`lyk wyšm lk šlw

May Yahweh bless you and guard you;

May Yahweh make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

May Yahweh lift up his face upon you, and give you peace.

As studies have noted, the blessing from Kuntillet 'Ajrud contains a close parallel to the first line of the biblical blessing (v. 24) (Zevit 2001, p. 396). The blessing from Kuntillet 'Ajrud indicates that the biblical blessing is a development of stock blessing language known from epistolary exercises and correspondence. The biblical blessing has adopted the lexical and syntactic formula of this shorter blessing and developed it to include additional blessings invoking the divine face of Yahweh (Smoak 2016, pp. 116–18).

The parallels between the blessings at Kuntillet 'Ajrud and the biblical priestly blessing are also instructive for what they reveal about Israelian and Judahite religions. Whereas Kuntillet 'Ajrud's blessings include references to Yahweh's *'asherah*, the priestly Judahite formulation in the book of Numbers only refers to Yahweh. While this is not necessarily surprising, the contrast sheds light on some of the chronological and regional differences in the religions of Israel and Judah during the Iron Age. In terms of the variations of this blessing formula in the Iron Age the fact that we now have a formulation with striking similarities to the biblical version at Ketef Hinnom in Jerusalem becomes especially relevant. Ketef Hinnom's blessings also lack inclusion of any references to Yahweh's *'asherah*. Additionally, whereas the Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscriptions connect Yahweh's blessings to his cultic locales at Samaria and Teman, the formulation in Numbers reflects an attempt to connect the blessing with Yahweh's temple in Jerusalem.

4. The Israelite Pantheon at Kuntillet 'Ajrud

As noted at the beginning of the study, it is hard to overstate the importance of the inscriptions for understanding early Israelite religion. Taken together, the inscriptions contain references to the names of several gods, including El, Yahweh, Baal, and Asherah. The reflection of the Israelian pantheon evidenced by the inscriptions is consistent in certain ways with the biblical texts, as we will explain below. The difficulties involved in dating the biblical texts, however, highlights the significance of the inscriptions. The picture of the Israelian pantheon provided by the inscriptions can be dated securely to the late ninth and early eighth centuries. It may be assumed, however, that this picture was not invented at Kuntillet 'Ajrud. It was well-known poetry or liturgy that was merely used there. In this way, the inscriptions offer a chronological anchor of sorts for the development of the pantheon. As we will stress below, the secure date of the inscriptions confirms certain arguments that scholars have made about characteristics of the Israelian pantheon during the early Iron Age.

The plaster texts at Kuntillet 'Ajrud are the most significant for reconstructing the history of the pantheon at the site. The most substantive of the reconstructed plaster texts is KA 4.2 (4.1 in the

Hebrew edition) (Ahituv et al. 2012, pp. 110–14; Ahituv et al. 2015, pp. 109–11).¹ This inscription was discovered on one of the plaster walls near the western entrance to the bench room of the main building. The text poses certain difficulties owing to its fragmentary state. However, it seems clear that it refers to the names of three deities and contains allusions to both a theophany and a theomachy. The English publication transcribes and translates the inscription as follows (Ahituv et al. 2012, p. 110):

1.]šnt[
 2.]br'š.wbzrh.'l.br[m.y]hw[h
 3.]r.wymnsn.hrm.wydkn.[g]bnm[
 4.]'rṣ.q{š}dš.'ly.'lm[
 5.]°hkn [l]brk.b'l.bym.mlh̄mh
 6.]lšm 'l bym mlh̄[mlh
1. ...] second time /years[...
 2.]in earthquake. In addition, when El shines forth in the [heights. Y]HW[H ...
 3.] R The mountains will melt, the hills will crush [...
 4.] earth. The Holy One over the gods [...
 5.] prepare (yourself) [to] bless Ba'al on a day of battle [...
 6.] to the name of El on the day of bat[tle ...

Although many of these readings are tentative (see especially Blum 2013), several observations about the Israelian pantheon still arrive out of the inscription with some certainty. First, lines two and six refer to the divine name El. That the god El was worshipped in Israel and Judah in the early Iron Age is confirmed by both biblical and extrabiblical evidence (Smith 2002, pp. 32–43, 2001, p. 141; Cross 1973, pp. 44–75; Hermann 1999, pp. 278–79). Several biblical texts indicate that early in Israel's history, El stood in a hierarchical relationship to the god Yahweh. Most notably, 4QDeut^j and the Septuagint describe Yahweh as one of the sons of El (see discussion in Smith 2004, pp. 108–9; Himbaza 2002):

When the Elyon gave to the nations their inheritance,
When he separated humanity,
He fixed the boundaries of the peoples
According to the number of divine beings ('*lhym*).
Indeed Yahweh's portion is his people,
Jacob his allotted heritage.

As many studies have noted, the MT version of the end of v. 8b—which has “according to the number of the sons of Israel”—is difficult to understand (Joosten 2007, p. 549). The Qumran and Septuagint variants; however, provide a more convincing reading of the verse as “according to the number of divine beings ('*lhym*). This reading results in a description of Elyon allotting each people a territory and a deity.

Recently, Jan Joosten has made the compelling argument that the MT reading “sons of Israel” in v. 8b reflects a theological emendation to an original text that read *bny šr 'l* “the sons of Bull El”. (Joosten 2007, p. 551). Assuming that the noun *šr* “Bull” appeared in the proto-Masoretic text explains how the MT ended up with “sons of Israel”. The MT emended the phrase *šr 'l* “Bull of El” by adding one more *yod* taken from the end of the noun *bny* “sons of” and attaching it to the beginning of the

¹ Also note earlier translations of the text in Dobbs-Allsopp et al. (2004, pp. 234–36) and McCarter (2000, p. 173). The official publication now revised in a Hebrew edition (Ahituv et al. 2015, pp. 71–121). The revised Hebrew edition relies on alternative readings (some otherwise unpublished) by Erhard Blum (see Blum 2013, pp. 21–54).

noun *śr* “Bull”. This resulted in the sequence of words that would have looked very similar to the expression *bny yśr’l* “sons of Israel”. It would have also resulted in a reworking of the text that fit the larger theological understandings of the MT.

Joosten’s argument reinforces the view of some scholars that Deuteronomy 32 reflects a view of the Israelite pantheon that reckons El and Yahweh as separate deities (Smith 2002, pp. 48–49; Eissfeldt 1956, p. 29). According to this view, vv. 8–9 describe Elyon as the deity at the top of the pantheon who apportioned the nations their inheritance. In verse 8, El assigns the nations different gods “according to the number of divine beings”. The use of the particle *kî* at the beginning of v. 9 is best understood as emphatic, conveying the sense of “indeed” or “and lo” (Tigay 1996, p. 303). The particle serves to introduce and reinforce the statement in v. 9 that Yahweh was one of the sons of Elyon who came from a region outside of the land of Canaan (i.e., Edom/Teman).

Genesis 49 reflects a similar view of the Israelite pantheon in the early Iron Age. The poem describes the last words of Israel’s ancestor Jacob to his sons. Given the difficulties involved in its interpretation, we quote an extended part of it here,

¹⁸ I wait for your salvation, O Yahweh.

...

²⁴ Yet his bow remained taut,
and his arms were made agile
by the hands of the Bull of Jacob,
by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel,

²⁵ by El, your father, who will help you,
by the Shadday who will bless you
with blessings of heaven above,
blessings of the deep that lies beneath,
blessings of the breasts and of the womb.

²⁶ The blessings of Father, Hero, Almighty,
the blessings of the eternal mountains,
the bounties of the everlasting hills;
may they be on the head of Joseph,
on the crown of him of the chosen of his brothers.

Following several studies on this text, we understand these verses to describe the god El as a deity distinct from Yahweh (Freedman 1987, pp. 324–25; Cross 1973, pp. 54–56; Smith 2002, pp. 32, 48–49). Verse 18 alludes to a petition for help from the god Yahweh as part of the description of the tribe of Dan (see vv. 16–18). Several verses later, the description of the tribe of Joseph repeats several epithets for the god El (vv. 22–26): “Mighty One” (*’byr*) (v. 24), El (*’l*) (v. 25), Shadday (*šdy*) (v. 25) (Cross and Freedman 1975, pp. 95–96; Smith 2002, p. 49). For reasons that we describe in more detail below, it is noteworthy that the description of El in these verses connect the god to “eternal mountains” and “the everlasting hills”.

The descriptions of the pantheon in these poetic biblical texts frame an understanding of the descriptions of El and Yahweh in the plaster inscription. Whereas Deuteronomy 32 and Genesis 49 reckon El and Yahweh as distinct gods, the plaster text may be interpreted as converging them by placing their names in parallel lines (see Aḥituv et al. 2012, p. 133; 2014, p. 36). To be sure, there are difficulties involved in reconstructing the verb preceding the name El in line two and this argument must remain very tentative. It would appear, however, that the end of the line contains a reference to Yahweh (Aḥituv et al. 2012, pp. 110–11). This would mean that the two lines attest to the process whereby El’s name was identified with the god Yahweh (Aḥituv et al. 2012, p. 130). This is not surprising, given that several biblical texts dating later than the poems described above converge El’s name and characteristics with the god Yahweh. The identification of the name El and El epithets with

Yahweh is particularly noticeable in the first two verses of Psalm 91: “You who live in the shelter of Elyon, who abide in the shadow of *Shadday*, will say to *Yahweh*, “My refuge and my fortress; *my God* (*’lhy*)”. The identification of El with Yahweh also occurs in a variety of biblical texts that render the name El into a noun in construct with *elohim* in the expression “God of gods is Yahweh” (cf. Ex. 6:2–3; Josh 22:22; [Smith 2002](#), pp. 33–35).

The plaster inscription is unique; however, in the way that it parallels El and Yahweh in what appears to be a description of divine theophany or divine-warrior march. While it is difficult to reconstruct the language of line two, line three refers to the “mountains melting” and the “hills crushing”. The beginning of line four may continue this imagery if the reconstruction of the word “land” or “earth” is correct. The expression “the mountains melt” recalls similar imagery in several biblical texts where the context is also a divine-warrior theophany (cf. Micah 1:4; Ps. 97:5; see [Ahituv et al. 2012](#), p. 111).

The appearance of the expression “the Holy One” in line four also provides an important window into the Israelian pantheon in the ninth-eighth centuries. While it seems reasonably clear that the line reads “the Holy One” it is less certain that the clause that follows this divine epithet is to be reconstructed as “over the gods”. If we are correct that the phrase should be reconstructed as “the Holy One over the gods,” then we may have a text that reflects the emergence of Yahweh to the top of the Israelian pantheon. Ahituv, Eshel, and Meshel suggest that the expression may “refer to the defeat of the gods by YHWH ([Ahituv et al. 2012](#), p. 133). Alternative readings, however, are possible ([Blum 2013](#), pp. 26–27; [Ahituv et al. 2015](#), p. 109). The expression is reminiscent of those biblical texts that focus upon the incomparability of the gods to Yahweh (e.g., Ps. 29:1; 89:7). Read as part of the following two lines, the expression may describe Yahweh’s dominion over Baal and the name of El.

Alternatively, *b’l* here may be taken as the noun “lord” rather than a proper noun. Admittedly, it is difficult to decide between these options. The fact that the noun stands in parallel to the phrase “the name of El” would seem to support the view that the text understands the names as hypostases of Yahweh, or at least that the text is identifying the gods with Yahweh ([Ahituv et al. 2012](#), p. 133; see also [Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2004](#), p. 236). According to this view, the inscription might be interpreted to reflect the convergence of not only El and Yahweh but also Baal and Yahweh.

The identification of Baal with Yahweh in this plaster text is consistent with the picture of the pantheon preserved in several biblical texts. Again, it is the collection of poetic texts in the biblical literature that provide us the best glimpses of the process by which Baal imagery was applied to Yahweh. Psalm 18 is particularly relevant because it conflates imagery of El, Baal, and Yahweh ([Smith 2002](#), pp. 55–56):

Yahweh also thundered in the heavens,
and Elyon uttered his voice,
hailstones and coals of fire.
And he sent out his arrows,
and scattered them;
he flashed forth lightnings.
and routed them
Then the channels of the sea were seen . . .

In this text, Yahweh is the subject of the thundering in the heavens and the deity is paired with the epithet Elyon, one of the names associated with the god El ([Smith 2002](#), p. 56). The verbs thundering, uttering, and flashing in the verses recall storm imagery associated with Baal. If we are correct that this plaster inscription conflates Yahweh with Baal and El, then we have an inscription that stands close to what scholars have suggested happened in the period of the early Israelite monarchy, namely, that much of Baal’s imagery was applied to the god Yahweh. This is particularly the case with the so-called divine march poems in the biblical literature. The imagery of the divine march and theophany would have held an especially significant import for the monarchies of Israel and Judah. The application of

Baal imagery, especially warrior and divine march imagery, to Yahweh would have been important for the emergence of the image of Yahweh as the divine patron of Israelite and Judahite kings. Our plaster text takes on added meaning against the background of this development. The inscription appears to reflect the practice of conflating Yahweh and Baal in the composition of a hymn that would have had wide resonance within Israelian royal ideology and practice. Describing Yahweh as the Holy One over Baal and the name of El reflected the emergence of the Israelian polity within the southern Levant during the ninth-eighth centuries.

A reference to Baal also appears in a fragment of a plaster text discovered near the entrance to the Western Storeroom (4.4.1). The location of the discovery of this fragment led the excavators to suggest that it may formed part of a larger text written on the doorposts of the entrance (Ahituv et al. 2012, p. 117). Only two words of the fragment can be read with any certainty:

]b'l.bql[
] Baal in voice [

In the Hebrew edition, Ahituv, Eshel, and Meshel offer a different reading of the fragment (Ahituv et al. 2015, p. 117):

]p'l bq°[

We maintain that the reconstruction *b'l bql* is the better one, and that the phrase should be translated “Baal with (his) voice”. The letter *peh* in the reconstruction *p'l* is poorly preserved. However, *peh* as a Hebrew letter is rather infrequent in contrast with *bet*, and in this respect its reconstruction here is less probable. The traces certainly could fit the *bet*, as the editors originally read the text. Likewise, the *lamed* in *bql* is tentative, but certainly a possible reading. To be sure, it is a tentative reconstruction, but, in our estimation, a plausible reconstruction that has much more contextual merit. Indeed, a reference to Baal’s voice here would recall imagery in the Ugaritic Baal myth. Perhaps most relevant here is the description of Baal’s voice thundering as part of the theophany associated with his taking up residence in his palace (KTU 1.4 VII 25–31; Smith 1994, p. 110)

He opens a window in this house,
window in the midst of the pala[ce].
Baal open[s] a break in the [clou]ds,
Ba[al g]ives his holy voice (*qhl qdš*)
Baal repeats the is[sue of?] his [li?]ps,
His ho[ly?] voice, the earth [sha?]kes.

Similar imagery appears with Yahweh in a variety of biblical texts. Most notably, Psalm 29 repeats the expression “the voice of Yahweh” as part of a description of divine theophany (see Schniedewind 2017). As studies have noted, the description of Yahweh’s voice in this text is highly reminiscent of Baal’s thundering in his temple in the Ugaritic Baal myth (Smith 2001, p. 75; Cross 1950, pp. 19–21; Pardee and Pardee 2000, pp. 115–28). The *qol* is also a metaphor for the sound of earthquakes, as we see in biblical texts such as Exodus 19 and Psalm 18. In this respect, the metaphor works especially nicely in the context of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud’s proximity to the earthquake faults along the Rift Valley. Since we understand Baal as originally a storm god, then the use of *qol* “voice” to refer to earthquakes illustrates another way that Israelian scribes re-appropriated language and imagery.

Another important aspect of the inscriptions is the way that they reflect an understanding of the local manifestations of Yahweh (Smith 2016, pp. 91–92; Sommer 2009, p. 39; Hutton 2010, p. 177–210). As noted above, several of the blessings refer to “Yahweh of Shomron (Samaria)” and “Yahweh of Teman” (Ahituv et al. 2012, p. 130). These expressions draw attention to the various local manifestations of different gods in the early Israelite pantheon. The pairing of certain gods with toponyms is a common feature of West Semitic literature, indicating that the deity was regarded as the lord over or owner

of the city or region (McCarter 1987, p. 140–41). Indeed, as Jeremy Hutton argues, the fact that the inscriptions connect Yahweh with two different locales—Samaria and Teiman—may reflect competition between different sites associated with the deity (Hutton 2010, p. 178). In this way, the inscriptions provide an important window into the different places to which Yahweh’s presence was connected before the rise of the Deuteronomic movement in the late Judean monarchy (Ahituv et al. 2012, p. 130; cp. Deut. 12).

The expression “Yahweh and his *’asherah*” appears in two of the inscriptions at the site, as described above. The difficulties involved in understanding the expression—particularly the word “his *’asherah*”—deserve some further discussion here. The expression stands close to another epigraphic find from Khirbet el-Qom, which also contains a blessing that refers to Yahweh and his *’asherah* (Zevit 1984, pp. 39–47, 2001, p. 361). The main problem involved in interpreting the expression at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud has to do with the presence of the possessive suffix “his” on the noun *’srth* (Dever 1984, pp. 21–37, 1999, pp. 9*–15*; Hadley 1987, pp. 50–62; Tropper 2001, pp. 81–106). This grammatical form has resulted in two lines of interpretation. First, several studies argue that the presence of the suffix on the deity’s name means that the expression refers not to the goddess but to a cultic object (Olyan 1988, pp. 33–35; Miller 1986, p. 247; McCarter 1987, p. 143). Support for this line of argumentation also comes from the fact that we do not have any evidence for the goddess on Phoenician, Israelian, or Judean inscriptions in the first millennium (Keel and Uehlinger 1998, p. 229). The biblical texts also may be interpreted to support the conclusion that by the eighth century the term *’asherah* did not refer to a goddess, but instead to a cultic object. For example, several biblical texts place a definite article on *’asherah*, indicating that some type of religious object and not a proper name is meant (1 Kgs 15:13; 18:19; 2 Kgs 21:7; 23:4,7; see Keel and Uehlinger 1998, p. 231).

The other option is that Asherah here refers to the name of an independent goddess and the consort of Yahweh. Studies have also argued that the problem of the suffix on the noun may be explained by the fact that the term *’asherah* in the inscriptions stands for the idea of consort more than the personal name Asherah (Margalit 1990; Meshel 1979; Dever 2005, pp. 165–66). Given the fact that the inscriptions at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud do not contain any actual description of A/asherah, it is difficult to choose between the options presented here. We might note in conclusion, however, that the verb *brk* in both inscriptions is formulated in the singular. This indicates that, regardless of how we understand *’srth* here, the blessing conveys that it is the god Yahweh who gives the blessing (Sommer 2009, pp. 47–48).

More recently, it has been proposed that *’srth* at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud (as well as Kh. el-Qom) may not refer to the deity or a cult object, but rather to a “temple”. Sass (2014), for example, argues that a goddess Asherah in the West Semitic pantheon is largely based on reconstructions. Moreover, he points out that many of the supposed biblical references to Asherah never use this name. Thus, we find “the Queen of Heaven” and not Asherah (e.g., Jer 44:15–19). Sass does not, however, discuss the important example in Deut 16:21: $\text{לֹא־תִשָּׂע לְךָ אֲשֶׁרָה כְּלִי־עֵץ אֲצִיל מִזְבַּח יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ}$ “you shall not set up for yourself an *A/asherah*—any sacred pole— beside the altar of the LORD your God”. The reference to “Yahweh and *’srth*” at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud (as well as Kh. el-Qom) seems to echo an element of this prohibition. Here, an interpretation of “temple” or “shrine” cannot be made to fit. The indiscernibility of a goddess Asherah in the biblical text is much more likely the work of biblical editors (see Olyan 1988, pp. 1–22). In addition, texts like Deut 16:21 seem intent on demoting the goddess into a mere cultic object. Could this already be going on at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud? In this case, we might be able to explain the unusual form of *’srh* with a suffix.

The comparisons between these biblical texts and the plaster text at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud described here raise an intriguing question. Where do these texts come from? It is unlikely that these texts were composed by the scribes at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud. More likely, they were known compositions that were copied. If we take advanced cuneiform literature as a model, students copied well-known texts as a means of learning (see Robson 2001). Thus, the *edubba* borrowed literary and liturgical texts for use with students. At Kuntillet ‘Ajrud we can assume something similar was happening. These were literary

and liturgical texts used in daily life that were borrowed as school exercises. The parallels in religious and literary themes and language that we can identify with texts like Psalm 18, Genesis 49, Habakkuk 3, or Deuteronomy 32 suggest that the ideas were not unique to the plaster wall texts. Indeed, the texts were chosen because they reflected well-known religious ideas as well as often-used literary techniques. The close parallels that this plaster text shares with the biblical poetic texts about divine theophany and the pantheon suggest that we have here exercises taken from known Israelian liturgical texts. It seems likely that these texts were both memorized and copied (see Carr 2005, pp. 27–28, 71–74). This literature is largely lost since the biblical canon was collected and edited in Jerusalem by Judean scribes. Nevertheless, hints remain of some of the common religious themes and literary tropes. If we are correct that the plaster texts reflect the training of scribes in memorizing and perhaps copying literary texts, then the site also provides a unique glimpse into the function that such poetic texts held in scribalism. Practicing the composition of texts about divine theophany and theomachy would have been relevant to the situation of a soldier scribe at a fortress like Kuntillet ‘Ajrud.

5. Theophany

In inscription 4.2, lines two and three appear to describe a theophany involving El and Yahweh, or El identified as Yahweh. The official publication suggested the verb *zrh* “to shine forth”, probably because this best fits the general context (see Aḥituv et al. 2012, p. 110). However, the *zayin* is partially effaced, and it has been alternatively reconstructed as a *yod*—that is, *yrh* “month” (Blum 2013, p. 31; Aḥituv et al. 2015, p. 109). The problem with this alternative is that it does not make as much sense of the context. Moreover, the letter *zayin* could fit the traces even if *yod* seems more likely. In any case, even if line two is not reconstructed to include the verb, *zrh*, the imagery in line three still closely resembles theophany scenes in the biblical texts (Deut 33:2; Isa 60:2; Hab 3:3; Aḥituv 2014, p. 32). In these biblical texts, the shining forth of Yahweh connotes the luminosity that occurs in the divine march and the cultic presence and holiness of the god. Deuteronomy 33:1–2 illustrate this function of the verb in the context of a divine march scene:

Yahweh came from Sinai,
and dawned from Seir upon us;
he shone forth from Mount Paran,
With him were myriads of holy ones;
At his right a, a host of his own.

As these verses show, *zrh* often conveys the divine appearance of Yahweh from the southeast. It alludes to the imagery of the sunrise and formed part of the constellation of terms used to associate deities with solar symbolism in the Iron Age (Smith 2002, p. 149; Weinfeld 1984, p. 126). Especially noteworthy here are the references to Sinai, Seir, and Mount Paran, which lie to the south and southeast of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud.

The expression “the mountains melt” recalls the imagery of several biblical poems and carry forward theophany language. The imagery stands particularly close to the description of mountains shattering in Hab 3:6:

He stopped and shook the earth;
He looked and made the nations tremble.
The eternal mountains were shattered,
Along his ancient pathways
the everlasting hills sink low.

This passage from Habakkuk shares the imagery of mountains and hills quaking and shattering with line two of the plaster inscription. This imagery is undoubtedly drawn from the experience of frequent earthquakes in this region of the world (which is close the Great Rift Valley that divides the African and Arabian tectonic plates). This comparison is especially relevant here because the poem in Habakkuk

3 locates the theophany of Yahweh in the region of Teman and Paran (v. 3) (Smith 2012, pp. 1–27). Similar to the plaster inscriptions, Habakkuk 3 remembers Yahweh's origins in the region of Teman, mountainous landscape of the southeast (see Emerton 1982, pp. 2–20; Ahituv 2014, p. 32).

The use of the verb *mss* “melt” here in the theophany scene parallels the occurrence of the verb in Micah 1 and Psalm 97 (Ahituv et al. 2012, p. 111; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2004, p. 235; Keel and Uehlinger 1998, p. 244). Both passages employ the verb as part of descriptions of theophanies where the march of the deity causes the land to convulse and melt. The use of the verb in these two biblical texts parallels the plaster text here further with the use of the plural noun “mountains” (*hrym*) alongside the verb “melt” (*mss*). Micah 1:4 reads, “The mountains shall melt under him and the valleys burst open”, whereas Psalm 97:5 reads, “Mountains melt like wax at Yahweh's presence”.

It is not surprising that the plaster texts from Kuntillet 'Ajrud would include references to divine theophany language. The ability of a scribe to compose poetry that described the cultic presence of a deity would have stood at the very center of advanced scribal curriculum. While many studies focus upon the way that such imagery might be interpreted to reflect religious ideas, our texts from Kuntillet 'Ajrud offer a window into the types of religious motifs that scribes worked with as part of the practice of copying and memorizing poetic texts. Indeed, it is for this reason that it is not surprising that the small excerpts of poetry evident at this site bear close parallels to those biblical texts that describe divine theophanies and attendant imagery. The copying of texts that describe the gods in solar imagery would have had an especially important place in the training of scribes in the Iron IIB period. During this period, solar imagery was employed to describe both the king and the god, as both the textual and iconographic sources indicate (Smith 2002, pp. 154–55; Keel and Uehlinger 1998, pp. 248–81).

6. Theomachy

The last two lines of plaster inscription 4.2 describe a battle involving Baal and the name of El. If we are correct that line four alludes to Yahweh as the Holy One over the gods, then we may have in lines four through six a description of a divine battle between Yahweh and lesser deities. Although this must remain tentative, if this reading is accepted, it locates this text within the tradition of theomachies in West Semitic literature. Line 5 contains a call for Baal to be blessed on the day of war. The divine warfare imagery is reminiscent of several biblical texts that invoke blessings in connection with battles. Particularly noteworthy here are the calls for the tribes to bless Yahweh in the context of his divine march from Edom and Seir in Judges 5 (Ahituv et al. 2012, p. 114; also Wearne 2015, pp. 99–119). The relevant sections of the poem read: “when people volunteered—bless Yahweh!” (v. 2) and “the volunteers among the people—bless Yahweh!” (v. 9). The use of these phrases in Judges 5 is relevant here, because the context is a theophany of Yahweh and the description of Yahweh as a divine warrior. In the song, the call for the tribes to bless Yahweh appears alongside descriptions of Yahweh's march from Edom and Seir (v. 4), the quaking of mountains (v. 5), and reference to war in the gates.

Line 6 parallels line 5 with the phrase “to the name of El on the day of war”. It is worth noting that this phrase, *yôm milhāmāh*, appears in a variety of biblical texts (see Hos 10:14; Amos 1:14; Prov 21:31; cp. Deut 20:3; 1 Sam 13:22). Here we presumably have another call for a blessing on the day of war, but in this case the blessing is directed toward the name of El. The call for a blessing for the name of a deity is well known in the biblical texts. Invocations for Israel to bless Yahweh appear frequently in contexts marked by theophany imagery and divine warrior language. Blessing or giving thanks to the name of Yahweh is a characteristic feature of the language of the enthronement psalms (Ps 96:2; 97:12). Psalm 96 describes Yahweh as the God “above all the gods” who takes up residence in his sanctuary as the king who created the world. The psalm begins by calling for his subjects to “sing to Yahweh, and *bless his name*” (v. 2).

Similarly, Psalm 113 focuses upon the incomparability of Yahweh among the gods. He sits high above the gods and rules over the nations. Significantly, the first two verses of the psalm invoke blessings for his name before the descriptions of his royal residence above the earth. Taken together, these psalms locate the invocations for blessing the name of Yahweh directly before descriptions of

his incomparability and residence above the nations. While there are no clear references to divine battle in these psalms, the imagery is not far from it. The focus upon the incomparability of Yahweh, references to Yahweh's kingship, and the imagery of divine judgment and creation locate them within the traditional language of theomachy in West Semitic literature. Hence, these biblical texts provide the larger context for the meaning of the reference to blessing the name of El alongside theophany imagery in our plaster text. It is not surprising that the plaster text with its references to divine theophany the "Holy One" would also invoke blessings for the name of a deity on the day of battle. This is characteristic language of theophany and theomachy texts in the biblical literature.

A reference to the noun *šm* "name" in the context of theomachy and theophany is also not surprising. Studies have long argued that the noun in both Ugaritic and Hebrew texts signifies the cultic presence of a deity (Smith 2001, p. 74; McCarter 1987, p. 147; McBride 1969, p. 135–37; Sommer 2009, pp. 26–27). Particularly relevant here are those texts that employ the imagery of the divine name in contexts marked by divine war. Again, the theophany imagery of Psalm 29 is especially instructive. As Mark Smith observes, the expression "glory of his name" (*kbd šmw*) in this psalm conveys a sense of "the name as a divine quality with martial qualities" (Smith 2001, p. 74). In several other biblical texts, the imagery of the divine name appears in contexts where the concern is a theophany of Yahweh for protection against enemies (Isa 63:9; Ps 29:2). These texts make it clear that the construct of the noun *šm* + divine name reflects the wider significance that the name of a deity played in descriptions of theomachies in Near Eastern literature (Lewis 2011).

Recently, Ted Lewis has invoked a substantial body of texts to argue that the name of a deity had a specific application in human and divine warfare (Lewis 2011, pp. 219–21). His description of the use of the expression "name of YHWH" in Isa 30:27–33 is especially instructive here:

The name of Yahweh (*šm-yhwḥ*) comes from afar,
 In blazing wrath . . .
 His tongue like a devouring fire,
 His breadth like a raging torrent . . .
 In raging wrath,
 In a devouring blaze of fire,
 In tempest, and rainstorm, and hailstones.
 Truly, Assyria, who beats with the rod,
 Shall be cowed by the voice of Yahweh.

Lewis notes that the expression "name of deity" in certain contexts stands in parallel for physical weapons (Lewis 2011, p. 222). Based upon this evidence, he argues that the name of a god was used as an incantation in military contexts as an effective weapon of war. Summarizing the import of this observation for thinking about West Semitic poetry about divine war, he concludes, "As the name of the deity was invoked by humans in their battles, so too the names of warrior deities were used on a cosmic scale" (Lewis 2011, p. 222). Such arguments fit the context of the reference to the "name of El" in the plaster text. The text invokes the name of El on the day of battle. Although it is unclear how the name of El is being marshalled in this text or against whom it is going to battle, its function is clear. Our plaster text invokes the name of El as part of the preparations for divine battle. Invoking a blessing for the deity and summoning the name of the deity were part of verbal performances associated with war preparations.

One of the most well-known biblical accounts of divine warfare is the "Song of the Sea" (Exod 15). The song also highlights the importance of the divine name, *šm*, alongside the divine warrior. The song begins as an account of YHWH's glorious triumph. Enemies are subdued and cast into the Sea (v. 1b). The victor is proclaimed: "YHWH is a man of war (*ʿyš mlḥmh*), YHWH is his name" (v. 3). Based on its conclusion (v. 17), we may presume that the text was used as a temple liturgy. In its narrative context, it is merely a victory hymn. This reminds us of the imagery of the theomachy alluded to in the plaster text at Kuntillet 'Ajrud, but the parallel is primarily thematic. If the reconstruction of line 3 as a

reference to Yahweh as the Holy One is accepted, then we might have in these lines a description of Yahweh battling against Baal and the name of El. While it is possible that these divine names refer to hypostases of Yahweh, this must remain only a tentative hypothesis. It might be that we have a text that describes Yahweh over the gods Baal and the name of El. Taken together, then, lines 3–5 may refer to a battle between Yahweh and the lesser gods that resulted in Yahweh emerging victorious as the Holy One over the gods. In this case, we would have an Israelian text that offers a window into the emergence of the “divine warrior” Yahweh as a national god of the northern kingdom over Baal.

7. Conclusions

We return to the original point that we raised at the beginning of the study. Was Kuntillet ‘Ajrud a religious site? Our contention here is that strictly speaking it was not. However, we also note that the interpretation of the site over the past few decades reflects the ways in which religion is often defined and studied in our field. Some of the first studies asked whether or not the site was a religious site. The debates over this question that followed tended to discuss this question from a top-down approach. Discussion of the religion of the site was framed within the question of whether or not there was evidence for the site to be identified as a cultic or religious site. The search for the religious nature of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud was closely tied to the interpretation of the architecture, furniture, and location of the site. That is, did it have an altar or a shrine? We argue here that the study of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud provides a heuristic model for thinking about the definition of religion in ancient Israel. It is common to define religion within the parameters of architecture with the goal of locating the places of religion. Temples, shrines, altars, and other cultic locals are deemed the places of religion. As a result, there is a tendency to study Israelite and Judean religion through the search for the locations of religious practice. The problem with this, of course, is that religion formed in many ways the very fabric of daily life in ancient Israel and Judah, as more recent studies have emphasized (Stavrakopoulou and Barton 2010; Albertz and Schmitt 2012). While many of our texts that offer a window into the religious life of ancient Israel and Judah reflect the ideology of the elite, we must remember that the archaeological remains of these regions reflect a picture of religion embedded within all streams of Israelite and Judean life and within all of the spaces in which such streams were located (i.e., houses, gateways, seals, amulets, bodies, etc.) (see Dijkstra 2001, p. 22).

When we think about the way that religion permeated the scribal exercises and other materials at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud we may approach the question from a different angle. Kuntillet ‘Ajrud may not have been a religious site, but it attests to the great import that religion held in the education and practice of Israelian scribes in the early Iron Age. Indeed, religious themes so permeated the texts left by the scribes at the site that it became difficult not to interpret it as a religious site. However, was Kuntillet ‘Ajrud constructed to function as a cultic site? No. The site’s religious character only arrived when scribes used its walls and other materials to practice educational curriculum. Here we have a picture of religion embedded within the scribal curriculum of the northern kingdom of Israel. This picture of religion reminds us of the extent to which the biblical texts also offer a window into the melding of religion and scribalism.

Author Contributions: The authors contributed equally to all parts of the article.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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