

KUNTILLET ^CAJRUD INSCRIPTIONS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE**Moshe Weinfeld*

The provisional publication of the Kuntillet ^CAjrud inscriptions¹ allows us a glimpse at the syncretistic world-view of Israel during the reigns of Ahab and his successors. At this time, Israelites were 'hooping on the two boughs': Baal-worship and the worship of Yahweh (I Kings 18:21). Judah also adopted this syncretistic system (cf. II Kings 11:18) especially after the kings of Judah established marriage ties with the house of Ahab. An allusion to the reign of Ahab in the Kuntillet ^CAjrud inscriptions is the name **עבדיו בנ עדנה** inscribed upon a stone bowl². The name ^CAdna, rather rare in the Bible, is the name of an officer of Jehoshaphat according to II Chr. 17:14: **עדנה השר**. We should add that the element ^Cdn is found in the name of the wife of Joash king of Judah: **יהועדין / יהועריין** (II Kings 14:2) and names like **מעדנה** and **חמיעדין** were found on Hebrew seals of the monarchic period³. In the light of the ^CAjrud inscriptions, the name ^CAdna, as attested in II Chr. 17:14, is then to be seen as authentic.

The ^CAjrud inscriptions offer concrete evidence for the above mentioned 'hooping on the two boughs'. Alongside blessing by Yahweh⁵, we find there blessings of Baal (**ברכ בעל**)⁶, and alongside Yahweh we find **אשרתה**, 'his Asherah'. It is quite surprising that as the ^CAjrud inscriptions were being discovered, A. Lemaire⁷ discovered that the correct reading of the Judean tomb inscription found in Khirbet el-Qom (14 km. w. of Hebron) from the 8th c. B.C.E. is:⁸ **ברכ בריהו ליהוה... ולאשרתה** 'Blessed be Uriah to Yahweh... and his Asherah...'.
The "Asherah" embodies the female element of the divinity, whether the

term is taken as a reference to a goddess⁹, or to a tree¹⁰ or wooden pole¹¹. As a function of her femininity, the Asherah is responsible for fertility¹². Hence it need not surprise us that women play an important role in fostering Asherah-worship. Maacah, mother of Asa, has an 'abominable image' made for the Asherah (I Kings 15:13); 400 prophets of Asherah sit at Jezebel's table, along with 400 prophets of Baal (I Kings 18:19), and during the syncretistic period of the reign of Menasseh women weave vestments for the Asherah (II Kings 23:7) (see below). Similar in character to the Asherah is the Canaanite goddess Anath, who is considered the "queen of heaven"¹³ as are the Mesopotamian goddesses Inanna and Ishtar¹⁴. There is undoubtedly a correspondence between Asherah, Ashtoreth, and Anath, as many have suggested¹⁵.

Judean women play an important role in Judean cult of the 'queen of heaven' **מלכת שמים**, (= Inanna = Ishtar) practices in Egypt (see Jer. 44:15-19, comp. 7:16-19)¹⁶.

Similarly, the Jews of Elephantine conduct syncretistic worship of Yahweh and Anath. Menasseh ben Shalum swears by **ענתיהו**¹⁷. A donation to **ענתיהאל**, Anath of Beth-el, is listed in the catalogue of donations from Elephantine¹⁸.

The discovery of the Asherah and, specifically, "his Asherah" in the Judean inscriptions can serve as evidence for a rather striking emendation suggested by J. Wellhausen. In Hosea 14:9 we read:

**אפרים, מה לי עוד לעצבים, אני עניתי ואשורנו,
אני כברוש רענן ממני פריך נמצא**

"O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols? *It is I who answer and look after him.* I am like an evergreen cypress, from me comes your fruit."

The general purport of the verse is clear: The God of Israel provides fertility, and not the idols. But the words **אני עניתי ואשורנו**, "It is I who answer and look after him", hardly suit the context. Wellhausen therefore proposed the reading **אני ענתו ואשרו** "I am his Asherah and Anath"¹⁹, i.e. the powers of fertility ascribed to these goddesses is, in fact, *my* power. From the Kuntillet Ajrud inscriptions we learn that Asherah was in fact worshipped during this period, and this verse may be a polemic against this cult (cf. Ho-

sea 2:10 ff.). Eissfeldt²⁰ explained the verse which follows in Hosea in light of Wellhausen's emendation: **מי חכם ויבן אלה, נבון וידעם, כי ישרים**

דרכי יהוה, וצדיקים ילכו בם ופושעים יכשלו בם.

"Whoever is wise, let him understand these things; whoever is discerning, let him know them; for the ways of the Lord are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them" (v. 10). According to Eissfeldt, this is a gloss added by a later scribe who felt uncomfortable with the notion that God embodies Anath and Asherah. The scribe warns that only the righteous and the wise can properly understand the above verse; sinners will be led astray by it. (Hence we have a comment akin to the later Hebrew dicta "this may be revealed only to the discreet" and "let the enlightened keep silent."). Later scribes, according to Eissfeldt, felt this warning was insufficient, and thus changed "עניחי ואשורנני" to "ענהו ואשרתו".

The latest discoveries at ^CAjrud, and the wealth of new information about Anath discovered since Wellhausen, serve to validate his suggestion.

The Asherah at ^CAjrud was apparently worshipped with a full array of rites. In II Kings 23:7 we read of 'vestments'²¹ for the Asherah woven by Judean women, a practice which is well-known in other ancient near Eastern temples²². Vestiges of beautifully-woven cloth were found at ^CAjrud, undoubtedly used in the local cult²³. One may reasonably assume that these are the vestments which served the Asherah mentioned in the inscriptions.

It seems that Judean syncretism found expression not only in the Asherah worship, but in the names of the divinity as well. Asherah's consort is El, referred to as **אל קנארצ**, "El, creator of earth", in an 8th c. B.C.E. inscription from Karatepe. This epithet is also reflected in the Hurrian-Hittite myth of the god *Elkunirsa* from the 2nd millennium B.C.E.²⁵ Surprisingly enough, this very epithet was discovered in the 8th-7th c. B.C.E. layer of the excavations in the Jewish quarter of Jerusalem²⁶. This cannot be considered a genuine Israelite epithet of God since the Bible uses **קנה שמים וארץ** (Gen. 14:18-20) or **קנה/עשה ארץ/עשה שמים וארץ** (Psalm 115:15; 121:2; 127:8, *et al.*) but never **קנה** alone²⁷. This particular epithet would thus seem to reflect a syncretistic

pattern of worship²⁸. Hosea may in fact be referring to this very El cult in his polemic against syncretism: **סבבני בכחש אפרים ובמרמה בית ישראל, ויהודה עוד רד עם אל ועם קדשים נאמן.**

"Ephraim has encompassed me with lies and the house of Israel with deceit; and Judah still follows²⁹ El and is still faithful to the holy ones" (12:1). The members of the council of El are called **קדשם**, 'holy ones' in Phoenician inscriptions³⁰, and Hosea is apparently referring to El and his sons in his rebuke of Judah's allegiance to El and the 'holy ones'³¹.

The 'holy ones' are not only associated with El but also with his consort Atiratu. Thus we find in Ugarit alongside *'ilm//bn qdš* 'the gods//holy sons' *'ilm bn 'atrt* 'the gods, the sons of Atirat' which seems to indicate that the sons of the mother-goddess Asherah are identical with the sons of El 'the holy ones'³². In the light of this and the ^CAjrud inscriptions, it would be worthwhile to take a second look at H.S. Nyberg's proposed emendation³³ of **מימינו אשרת למו**, 'At his [the Lord's] right hand, Asherah' (Deut. 33:2). This reading is most instructive since it comes after **רבבת קדש** *the myriads of holy ones* (cf. Targum and LXX) which accompany Yahweh in his march from his holy abode, an idea attested in Ps. 68:18: **רכב אלהים רבתיים אלפי שנאן אדני** 'God's chariots, myriads of thousands of archers, the Lord amongst the holy ones at Sinai'. After **אשרת** in Deut. 33:2 we find again 'all his holy ones' (**כל קדשיו**). All this brings us close to the Ugaritic concept of the divine retinue of El, Asherah and their holy sons (*bn qdš*) on the one hand, and to 'Yahweh and his Asherah' in the ^CAjrud texts on the other. Asherah at the right hand of Yahweh in Deut. 33:2 reminds us the consort, the *paredros* of the king, cf. I Kings 2:19, Ps. 45:10. (Compare Athena as *paredros* of Zeus.)

The site at ^CAjrud served as a wayfarer's station on the road to Eilat, the port from which ships were launched (I Kings 22:49-50). It is thus to be expected that the blessings and prayers found at ^CAjrud refer so often to divine protection. The phrase **יברכ וישמר ויהי עם אדני** 'May he bless you

and keep you and be with my lord" calls to mind God's promise to Jacob when he spent the night at a holy place before embarking upon his journey to Haran: 'Be hold I am with you and will keep you wherever you go' אֲנִי עִמָּךְ וְשָׁמְרתיךְ בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר חֲלַךְ (Gen. 28:15).

It is of further interest that just as Jacob vows at Bethel before his journey, so King Keret in the Ugaritic Epic stops at 'atrt Ṣym 'the Asherah of the Tyrians' and vows to donate much silver and gold if he succeeds in bringing the damsel Hry home to his court³⁴. ^CAjrud may have served kings in a similar capacity and the blessings may be directed at the king, hence "my lord" in the above citation. Asherah is in fact considered the sea goddess, 'atrt ym³⁵ in Ugarit, and her Punic counterpart Tanit³⁶ rides a fish or a dolphin³⁷. It is thus to be expected that the Asherah is so central to the cult at ^CAjrud, on the road to Eilat. The site may also have served Phoenicians who accompanied the Israelites on their sea ventures at Eilat (cf. I Kings 9:26-28). This would account for the Phoenician writing and motifs in the iconography at ^CAjrud. The partnership undoubtedly served to enhance the syncretistic trend described above.

The ^CAjrud inscriptions contain a number of references to יהוה חמנ ואשרה , 'Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah' confirming the reading יהוה חמנ ואשרה , 'Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah' (not יהוה שִׁמְרֹן , "the Lord our guardian") of the inscription on the first pithos, a reading suggested by M. Gilula³⁸. The reference to *Teman* is in keeping with location (near Sinai); compare Habakkuk 3:3: "God came from Teman and the Holy One from Mount Paran"³⁹ (see below).

ADDITIONAL FINDS

- 1) On the second pithos we find besides an opening address אֲמַר / אֲמַרְיו אֲמַר / לאֲדַנִּי... בְּרַכְתְּךָ לַיהוָה חֲמַנ וְלֵאשֶׁרֶתָּה, יִבְרַכְךָ וְיִשְׁמַרְכֶּךָ וְיִהְיֶה עִמָּךְ אֲדַנִּי which is typical of letter opening formulae⁴⁰, the blessing כֹּל אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁאַל בְּיָדְךָ מֵאִשְׁ חֲנַנ... וְנָתַן לְךָ יְהוָה כֹּל לְבַבְּךָ which means 'whatever he requests from a

man may it be favoured... let Yahweh give him according to his wish'. The two elements contained here: 1) grace in the eyes of man 2) response from God, in other words: blessings for finding favour in the eyes of God and man (compare Prov. 3:4), are attested in letter formulae of the Ramesside Egyptians and in various prayers and dedications of later periods⁴¹. The phrases **שאל מאיש** and **חנן** occurring in the ^CAjrud inscription are found in the Exodus stories: **וישאלו ממצרים... (11:2-3) וישאלו איש מאת רעהו... ויתן יהוה את חן העם** and **וייהוה נתן את חן העם** (12:35-36) in connection with asking cloth from the Egyptians, and being responded with favour (**חן**).

2) Amongst the inscriptions on plaster we find an inscription which has elements of theophany: the appearance of God on the day of war:

ובזרח... אל וימסנ הרמ...
ברכ בעל בימ מלח [מת]
לשמ אל בימ מלח [מת]

'when God shines forth (= appears)⁴² the mountains melt... Baal on the day of w[ar]'... for the name of God on day of w[ar]'. The 'shining' of the Lord - within a description of theophany - is found in Deut. 33:2, a text which has affinities to the ^CAjrud inscriptions in two additional respects: 1) Asherah (**אשרה > אשרת**) discussed above 2) Yahweh of the South (**יהוה חמנ**), (cf. above) which is reflected in the geographical setting of Deut. 33:2 **פארן, שעיר**. The melting of mountains during the theophany is clearly expressed in Micah 1:3-4:

'For the Lord is coming forth (**יצא**)⁴³ from his abode...
the mountains shall melt (**ונמסו**) under him'.

Compare also Judges 5:4-5:

'When you came forth (**בצאתך**) from Seir...
the mountains quaked'.

Most interesting for our topic is Habakkuk chap. 3 where the theophany opens with the depiction of God appearing from **תימן** and **פארן** following which the mountains shatter (v. 6). It seems that God of **תימן** was especially worshipped in the southern district, close to Seir and Sinai.

As indicated above, the blessings in the ^CAjrud inscriptions seem to be associated with expeditions towards Eilat. As we know from Israelite history, expeditions to the south were often involved with war against Edom (II Kings 8:20-22; 14:7, 22). ^CAjrud might then have served as a kind of a 'shrine' where kings spent some time before proceeding to the Red Sea. This was the right opportunity to receive divine blessings especially before war-expeditions.

*This article is an elaborated version of my Hebrew studies in *Shnaton*, 4 (1980), 280-84; 5-6 (1981-1982), 237-39.

- 1) Cf. Z. Meshel, *Kuntillet-^CAjrud: A Religious Center from the Time of the Judaean Monarchy*, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Spring 1978, Catalogue No. 175. See also Z. Meshel: BAR, 5/2 (1979), 24 ff. I am indebted to Dr. Z. Meshel for providing me with additional information concerning the findings of Kuntillet-^CAjrud, which will be discussed at the end of this article.
- 2) Cf. Meshel, *op. cit.* (Israel Museum Catalogue).
- 3) Cf. N. Avigad: IEJ, 28 (1978), 146-51.
- 4) ^Cdn is to be taken in the sense of irrigating/watering as in Ugaritic: ^Cdn mtrh (CTA 4 V 68) and in the Tell Fekherye inscriptions referring to Adad, the weather god: m^Cdn mt kln 'who waters all the lands' (cf. A. Abou-Assaf-P. Bordreuil - A.R. Millard, *La statue de Tell Fekherye*, 1982, p. 23:4-5, and J.C. Greenfield - A. Shaffer: *Iraq*, 45 (1983), 112-13, line 7). Compare Ps. 36:9: ונחל עדניך חשקם 'let them drink at your stream of abundance (of water)'.
 5) On the stone bowl: לעבדיו בנ עדנה ברכ הא ליהו.
- 6) It seems that before the decisive battle with Baal, at the period of Jehu, there was no objection to the usage of Baal alongside Adonay, as an epithet of Yahweh, both signifying Lord or Master. Cf. e.g. II Sam. 5:20 where בעל (פרצים) is ascribed to *Yahweh* who broke the lines of the enemy. Contrast Hosea 2:18.
- 7) *Les inscriptions de Khirbet el-Qōm et l'Ashērah de Yhwh*: RB, 84 (1977), 595-608.
- 8) The reading of the word after ליהוה is doubtful and disrupts the flow of the sentence. Lemaire reads: *umsryh* but J. Naveh suggests the reading

wnsr̄yh 'his guardian', a reading which he seems to support by the reference in the ^CAjrud inscriptions to יהוה שמרן ואשרתה 'Yahweh our guardian and his Asherah'. However, the reading of ^CAjrud should be: 'Yahweh of *Sa maria*...' (see below).

- 9) In Ugarit, *'atrt* is the wife of El, the head of the pantheon, and her epithets are: *qnyt 'ilm*, 'creatress of the gods' or: *'um 'ilm*, 'mother of the gods'. The latter found its way through Asia Minor to Greece, where μήτηρ θεῶν is an epithet of Hera (see M.P. Nilsson, *Gesch. d. Griech. Religion*, 1967, 725 ff.). In the Bible Asherah is found together with Baal (who supplanted El in the first millenium B.C.E.). Cf. Judges 3:7; 6:25 ff.; I Kings 18:19; II Kings 21:3; 23:4.
- 10) Deut. 16:21: 'You shall not *plant* an Asherah, any kind of tree, beside the altar of Yahweh your God'.
- 11) Note the verbs which imply wood with reference to the Asherah: *krt*, "cut down" (Exodus 34:13 *et al.*), *gd^c*, "hew down" (Deut. 7:5), *šrp*, "burn" (Deut. 12:3). A third definition has been suggested: 'holy place' (cf. Akkadian *ašru*, Phoen. 'šr), see E. Lipiński, *The Goddess Atirat in Ancient Arabia, in Babylon, and in Ugarit*: OLP, 3 (1972), 101-19; J.C. de Moor, Art. אַשְׂרָה, in TWAT I, 1973, 472-74; while this definition may be etymologically sound, it in no way explains the cultic concept of the Asherah. Asherah in the Bible may be interpreted as a consort, an image or figure, but not as temple or holy site, see recently J.A. Emerton: ZAW, 94 (1982), 13-18.
- 12) The tree, specifically the palm tree, has symbolized fertility since ancient times. The Sumerian Goddess Inanna married Dumuzi (Tamuz) during the date harvest, and she guards the date storehouses. (See T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 1976, 135). For iconography, cf. Picture no.505 in Pritchard, ANEP. R. Barnett identified Asherah in a picture of a palm surrounded by four men picking dates (R. Barnett, *Nimrod Ivories: Iraq*, 2 [1935], 208-209). The Talmudic sage Samuel specifically identifies the Asherah-tree with the date-palm (B. Abodah zarah 43b).
- 13) See B. Porten: JNES, 28 (1969), 120.
- 14) See my article *The Worship of Molech and of the Queen of Heaven and its Background*: UF, 4(1972), 133-54.
- 15) F.M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 1973, 28 ff.; R.A. Oden, *The Persistence of Canaanite Religion*: BA, 39/1 (1976), 33 ff.
- 16) See my article on Molech worship (note 14), 149 ff.
- 17) Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri*, no. 44.
- 18) Cowley, *op. cit.*, no. 22, lines 124-5. See B. Porten, *Archives from Elephantine*, 1968, 178 ff.

- 19) J. Wellhausen, *Die Kleinen Propheten*³, 134.
- 20) O. Eissfeldt: BO, 27 (1970), 293.
- 21) I.e. clothing which was draped over the statue of the Asherah, Heb. **בתיים** (lit. 'houses'). For this use of **בית** cf. Exodus 26:29, 36:34; Mishnah Niddah 8:1, *et al.* The LXX here translate 'tunics': $\chi\epsilon\tau\tau\iota\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\nu$, LXX^{LUC}: $\sigma\tau\omicron\lambda\acute{\alpha}\zeta$; Aram. Targum.: **מכולין**, 'coverings'.
- 22) For documentation see Montgomery, *Kings* (ICC), *op. cit.* In Ugarit we find clothing for ^c*tt*rt; in Greece the robe (Peplos) of the Goddess Athena was woven by young girls of noble birth. S. Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, 168-69, compared this to the noble virgins who were weaving the veil of the Temple (Mishnah Sheqalim 8, 5).
- 23) Cf. A. Sheffer in Z. Meshel, *Kuntillet^c Ajrud*, 15-16.
- 24) KAI, no. 26, A III, 18-19.
- 25) Cf. H. Otten, *Ein Kanaanäischer Mythos aus Bogazköy*: MIO, 1 (1953), 125 ff.; H.A. Hoffner, *The Elkunirsa Myth Reconsidered*: RHA, 23 (1965), 5-16. For later attestations of this epithet see the list in P.D. Miller: BASOR, 239 (1980), 44.
- 26) N. Avigad: IEJ, 22 (1972), 195-96, cf. the discussion of P.D. Miller, *cit.*, 43-46.
- 27) Jer. 10:12; 51:15, which speak of the **עשה ארץ** 'makes the earth', occur next to **נטה שמים** 'stretches out the sky'.
- 28) On the Canaanite character of the epithet *'lqn'rš* cf. F.M. Cross, *op. cit.*, 50-51.
- 29) Compare Akkadian *redû* and see W. Reines: *Hos. 12:1*: JJS, 2 (1950-51), 156-57.
- 30) Cf. KAI 4:4-5: 'the assembly of the holy ones of the El of Byblos' (**מפחרת אל גבל קדשם**) and KAI 27:11-12: 'and all the divine members and the great council of the holy ones' (**וכל בני אלם ורב דר קדשם**) after mentioning Asherah. To the latter compare **בני אליים/קהל קדשים** in Ps. 89:7-8 and see my article in *Beth-Mikra*, 57 (1974), 137.
- 31) Cf. M. Pope, *El in Ugaritic Texts*, 1955, 13. For another Hosea's reference to the worship of El cf. 8:6 **כי מישראל והוא חרש עשהו** which should be read with Tur Sinai (*Halashon we-Hasefer*, III, 1955, 47 = *Festschrift K. Marti*, 1925, 278) etc. **אל שר מי כי** which corresponds to *tr 'il* in Ugarit. This is the only plausible reading for the crux in this verse, compare NEB which seems to have adopted this reading (though not keeping in eye the Ugaritic parallel): 'for what sort of a god is this bull'.
- 32) Cf. recently P. Xella, QDŠ. *Semantica del "sacro" ad Ugarit*: MLE, I (1982), 9-17.

- 33) ZDMG, 92 (1938), 320 ff.
- 34) *Keret*, lines 197 ff. (CTA 14).
- 35) Frequently in Ugaritic literature.
- 36) See Cross, *op. cit.* (note 15), 28 ff.
- 37) See Oden, *art. cit.* (n. 9).
- 38) *Shnaton*, 3 (1978-79), 129-37.
- 39) See also Emerton: ZAW, 94 (1982), 9-10.
- 40) Cf. J. Naveh: BASOR, 235 (1979), 27-30; A. Lemaire, *Les Écoles et la Formation de la Bible dans l'Ancien Israël*, 1981, 27-28; D.A. Chase: BASOR, 246 (1982), 63-68.
- 41) Cf. my article in *ErIs*, 16, H.M. Orlinsky Volume, 1982, 93-99.
- 42) Cf. S. Morag: *Tarbitz*, 41 (1971-72), 4 ff. and the various references there to the connection between the semantic field of 'shining' and that of 'growing', 'sprouting' etc., in the Semitic languages.
- 43) See note 42.