Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Epigraphy: The Inscriptions from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud

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The present study is offered in tribute to Jacob Neusner, a prolific scholar, devoted teacher, and dear friend, for whom no intellectual problem is too broad and no project too complex. He has raised critical questions about the composition and messages of ancient texts, in his case, primarily rabbinic texts. This is in addition to producing English language editions of the massive library of rabbinic texts, a Herculean enterprise. His efforts to test methods of interpretation so as to expose meaning in context are an inspiration to scholars in many fields. We are all his grateful students.

It is generally acknowledged that the contextual study of the Hebrew Bible, and of ancient Israelite religion as represented in it, have been impeded by a dearth of contemporary Hebrew epigraphy. Imagine if we possessed in quantity the sorts of texts we have from other ancient Near Eastern lands. What if we had a trove of legal documents from the court of Hezekiah in Jerusalem, royal edicts issued by Ahab in Samaria, inscribed walls and statuary, or hordes of receipts for goods delivered to the Temple in Jerusalem, and to other sacred sites? Our perceptions of religious life in the biblical societies, north and south, might differ in major respects from what is reported in the biblical record, while confirming that record in other respects. There has been considerable speculation as to why this situation obtains, ranging from assuming limited literacy, to factoring in the possible effects of repeated destruction levels, to citing the use of perishable materials for alphabetic writing.

We are far from an adequate explanation of this disadvantage and are required to work with what we have, limited as it is, searching all the while for an integrative method of applying epigraphic evidence to biblical interpretation, without distorting either! From a comparative point of view, little if anything can be closer to the text of the Hebrew Bible than contemporary Hebrew epigraphy, mostly written in the same language, uncovered in Bible lands, and which can be dated fairly accurately and its provenience determined. How can

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1 In the following, all translations of biblical and other ancient texts are the responsibility of this author. I am grateful to William W. Hallo for discussing the subject of this study with me, and to Siyantha Thavapalan, a graduate student at Yale University, for her logistical assistance.
biblical scholarship best utilize contemporary Hebrew epigraphy in the effort to understand Israelite religion in particular? The larger context of this question embraces archeological evidence of material culture in Canaan of biblical times, which is considerable in contrast.

In pursuit of answers, I will examine an informative case in point, the long awaited final report of the excavations at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, an ephemeral site on the Judah-Sinai border, which has yielded a trove of early Hebrew inscriptions, most of which are of a religious character. The final report by Ze’ev Meshel, the principal archeologist, and his large team of specialists, entitled Kuntillet ‘Ajrud (Ḥorvat Teman), only recently appeared in 2012 (henceforth: Meshel 2012). However, the inscriptions, uncovered at the site in the late 1970s, have appeared in other publications over the decades, so that a vast literature has amassed around them.2

The edition of the inscriptions in the final report was prepared by Shmuel Ahituv, Esther Eshel, and Ze’ev Meshel (Meshel 2012, pp. 75–142), incorporating the earlier presentation in Ahituv’s handbook, Echoes from the Past (2008), with revisions, added commentary, and further discussion of issues raised by the inscriptions. Of special interest is the sub-section entitled: “Contribution to the Study of Israelite Religion” (Meshel 2012, pp. 129–138). Anticipating the discussion to follow, I can state at the outset that there is reason to dispute the given interpretation of the inscriptions on several accounts, which will be clarified in due course. Whereas the editors have provided a thorough treatment of the inscriptions, I find myself disagreeing with the conclusions they draw regarding the character of early Israelite religion. In interpreting the inscriptions from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, I have been guided by several important studies, among so many.

Preceding the discovery of the inscriptions was an article by Frank Moore Cross, Jr., “Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs” (1962), where Cross shows how prominently the West-Semitic deity, El, figures in the patriarchal narratives, once we decode them. Subsequently, P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. contributed a comparative study of the Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, and other inscriptions, entitled: “Aspects of the Religion of the Israelite Monarchy: Biblical and Epigraphic Data” (1987), followed by: “The Origins of Israelite Religion” (1992). We also have McCarter’s editions of several key inscriptions from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, with introduction and commentary (McCarter 2000). In a broader sense, I acknowl-