IN discussing the inscriptions from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, Z. Meshel and others have held that in the blessings ‘by YHWH of Samaria/Teman and His/its asherah’, the term asherah refers to the cultic object of that name and not to the goddess Asherah. The plausibility of this interpretation is, I believe, enhanced by a practice of late Second Temple times in which YHWH and a personified cult object were addressed in the same breath. According to Tannaitic sources, the altar was addressed on the seventh day of Sukkoth: ‘When they departed, what did they say? “Praise to you, O Altar! Praise to you, O Altar!”’ (Mishnah Suk. 4:5). According to Rabbi Eliezer b. Jacob, they said ‘To Yah and to you, O Altar! To Yah and to you, O Altar!’ (Tosefta Suk. 3:1 end).2

Rabbi Eliezer b. Jacob’s version of the address apparently raised eyebrows in Talmudic times, much as the Kuntillet ‘Ajrud blessings have done in modern times. The Babylonian Talmud asks whether the address does not violate the prohibition on ‘joining the name of the Lord with something else’ — that is, treating something else as divine together with the Lord — thus violating the rabbinic understanding of Exod. 22:19b (‘save for the Lord alone’). It answers that the meaning is simply ‘To Yah we give thanks and to you, O Altar, we give praise!’ (BT Suk. 45b).

Whether or not the Talmudic explanation represents the exact meaning of the address, the address itself shows that people who were unquestionably monotheistic did not hesitate to address YHWH and a personified cult object in a way which seems to give comparable status to each. This is similar to what is done in the blessings from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, according to the view that the asherah is a personified cult object and not a goddess. The parallel thus lends plausibility to this view.
