

A Second Temple Parallel to the Blessings from Kuntillet 'Ajrud

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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.¹ 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.

¹ For the text of the inscriptions and bibliography up to 1986, see the literature cited in J. Tigay: *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions* (Harvard Semitic Studies 31), Atlanta, 1986, pp. 26–29. Subsequent discussions include P. Kyle McCarter: *Aspects of the Religion of the Israelite Monarchy: Biblical and Epigraphic Data*, and M.D. Coogan: *Canaanite Origins and Lineage: Reflections on the Religion of Ancient Israel*, in P.D. Miller *et al.* (eds.): *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, Philadelphia, 1987, pp. 143–147 and 118–119 respectively.

² This passage also appears in some editions of the Mishnah, but it is not original there. See J.N. Epstein: *מברוא לנוסח המשנה*, Jerusalem–Tel Aviv, 1964, Vol. II, pp. 928–929; S. Lieberman: *Tosefta Kifshutah*, Part 4 (*Mo'ed*), New York, 1962, p. 871; see also *idem*, קלט קילוסין, in *עלי עין* (S. Schocken Volume), Jerusalem, 1948–1952, p. 81, n. 33. Cf. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Shevuot 11:2.