Judahite Hebrew Epigraphy and Cult

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Abstract

This article presents a tentative review of the information about First Temple-period Judahite cult, which historians of religion can glean from the various inscriptions discovered so far. It surveys the various deities, sanctuaries, cultic rites, and feast days mentioned. When an inscription's reading, dating, or interpretation is controversial, I take a stand as an epigrapher but also consider the archaeological context and biblical literature. This *status quaestionis* seems to capture an important historical evolution of Juhadite cult.

Keywords: Judah; First Temple; deities; sanctuaries; *asherah*; feast days

1. Introduction

The Bible and archaeology seem to be the main sources of our knowledge about cult in Judah during the First Temple period. However, the number of contemporaneous Hebrew inscriptions that directly or indirectly refer to this subject has been growing steadily (Demsky 2012: 218–224; Maeir 2022; Renz 2022). Unfortunately, the interpretation of several significant inscriptions is controversial, requiring that we carefully unpack the arguments for various interpretations when trying to decide the most probable ones. This *status quaestionis* will also demonstrate that the Bible and archaeological record shed light on Judahite Hebrew inscriptions and help place them in their proper historical context.

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2. Deities

2.1. Yahweh

Probably originally vocalized *Yahwoh* (Caquot 1966: 244–257), Yahweh was clearly the main deity of the Judahite kingdom. Its eminence at the late part of the period is made especially clear by the greeting or blessing formulas that open messages in the Lachish and Arad ostraca, as well as in several unprovenanced ostraca, probably from the area of Khirbet el-Kom (Aḥituv 2008: 199–200; Lemaire 2012a: 34–36; Lemaire and Langlois 2021: 86*–88*). Actually, even if the scribe felt free to diverge from the formal greeting, there are three main opening formulas mentioning Yahweh: *yšmʿ yhwh ʾt ʾdny šmʿt šlm ʿt kym*, may Yahweh cause my lord to hear tiding(s) of peace today (Lachish ostraca 2, 3, 5, 9; cf. 4, 6); *brktk*(*m*) *lyhwh*, I bless you by Yahweh (Arad ostraca 16, 21, 40); and *yhwh yšʾl lšlmk*, may Yahweh watch over your welfare (Arad ostracon 18). A fourth formula appears in ostraca of the Jeselsohn Collection (henceforth, JH), soon to be published: *ytn yhwh lk*(*m*) *šlm*, may Yahweh give you welfare/peace (JH 145:1–2; 211:1–2?; 224:3).

Yahweh is the only deity with a dedicated house or temple (*infra*). It is also the only deity whom we know was addressed in prayer, as in Khirbet Beit Lei inscriptions 1–3 (Naveh 1963; Cross 1970; Lemaire 1976; Aḥituv 2008: 233–235) and the amulets from Ketef Hinnom (Barkay et al. 2004; Aḥituv 2008: 49–55). Notably, although these inscriptions are kinds of graffiti that are difficult to decipher, they reveal something about the Judeans' relationship with their national god. This is particularly clear in Khirbet Beit Lei inscription 1 (Fig. 1):

yhwh ʾlhy klʾ hʾrṣ ḥ	Yahweh is god of the whole land, the moun-
rʾy yhẇdḥ lʾlḥy yršlm	tains of Judah belong to the god of Jerusalem

Fig. 1. Khirbet Beit Lei inscription 1 (Courtesy of Joseph Naveh).

Though a few letters are difficult to distinguish, I argued for this reading, which hardly differs from the one proposed by Joseph Naveh (Lemaire 1976: 558–568; Renz 1995: 245–246; Aḥituv 2008: 233–234). Some questions remain about how to understand the phrase *kl h'rṣ*: Should it be construed as *the whole land* (Lemaire 2011: 50–52) or *all of the earth* (Naveh 1963: 84; Zevit 2001: 417; Aḥituv 2008: 284; Renz 2009: 310–311; 2022: 25)? Yet, the parallelism with "the mountains of Judah" and the use of the phrase "god of Jerusalem" seem to indicate clearly enough the expression's geographical context—the land of the Judahite kingdom. This also fits the historical context of an invasion (see also inscription 3: *hwšʿ yhwh*, Save Yahweh, a classical formula in wartime). Furthermore, while generally written with four letters, *yhwh*, the name seems abbreviated into *yh* in Khirbet Beit Lei 2 (Aḥituv 2008: 235), as is also the case with several Judahite personal names (Fig. 2; Golub 2017: 25, 28):

ṗqḏ yḥ̇wḥ̇ ḥnn.nqh yh yhwh	*Visit gracious* Yahweh, exempt (from punishment) Yah Yahweh

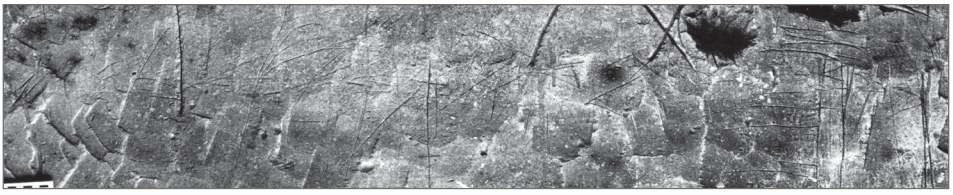

Fig. 2. Khirbet Beit Lei inscription 2 (courtesy of Joseph Naveh).

At the beginning of the line, the reading *yḥ̇wḥ̇* remains uncertain (Lemaire 1976: 560–561). Other commentators read *ʾl* (Cross 1970: 302; Renz 1995: 248; Naveh 2001: 198; Aḥituv 2008: 235); it is thus safer not to comment on the phrase *yḥ̇wḥ̇ ḥnn*.

Though the Khirbet Beit Lei inscriptions were first dated to the early 6th century BCE (Naveh 1963: 92; 2001: 207; Cross 1970: 304; Aḥituv 2008: 233), their paleography (especially the *aleph* with a cursive hook), iconography, and content fit the Assyrian invasion of 701 BCE best (Lemaire 1976: 568; Parker 2003: 261–269; Rollston 2018: 467).

Another way to designate Yahweh is attested in a late 8th-century BCE graffito, probably from a Khirbet el-Kom tomb, about 5 km southeast of Khirbet Beit Lei (Naveh 2001: 194–207; Aḥituv 2008: 227–229): *yhwh ṣbʾt*, Yahweh of the Hosts (Fig. 3, line 2).

Fig. 3. A graffito mentioning Yahweh, presumably from Khirbet el-Kom (courtesy of the Bible Lands Museum).

Shmuel Aḥituv (2008: 50–51) also proposed to read this phrase at the beginning of the first amulet of Ketef Hinnom. This, however, would be a reconstruction, and while possible, it is also conjectural and uncertain.

The central role of the deity Yahweh in Judah is confirmed by the onomastic of Judahite personal names attested in various Hebrew inscriptions, especially ostraca (with lists of numerous personal names), seals, and bullae (Golub 2017). Note that Yahweh is generally written *yhw* in Judahite personal names and *yw* in Israelite personal names.

2.2. Baʿal Shamayim

The deity Baʿal Shamayim is mentioned twice in ostracon JH 417 from the Jeselsohn Collection (Fig. 4; Lemaire and Langlois 2021), an unfortunately unprovenanced inscription featuring a fragmentary and partly blurred text. The precise context of the two references is unclear, although they appear connected with women and baking (Lemaire and Langlois 2021: 90*) and may be comparable with 2 Kgs 23:4–5 and Jer 7:18; 44:17–19,25. The theonym *Baʿal Shamayim* was widespread in Phoenician (Engelken 1996: 241–247; Niehr 2003) and Aramean cultures (Röllig 1999a), suggesting that its occurrence in ostracon JH 417 is attributable to Phoenician, Philistine, or Aramean influence. Furthermore, it is comparable to the deity's occurrence in the contemporary Aramaic Adon papyrus sent from Ekron (Porten 1981: 43–45; Porten and Yardeni 1986: 6–7) and possibly connected with an Aramean influence in Judah during the 7th–6th century BCE (Lemaire 2012b: 436).

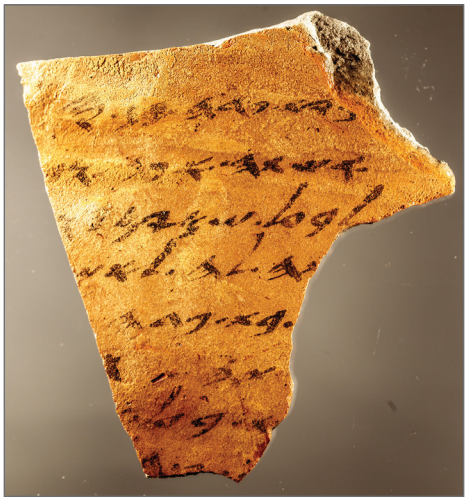

Fig. 4. Ostracon JH 417 (courtesy of Michael Langlois).

2.3. Baʿal

The theonym Baʿal is nearly absent in the Judahite onomasticon of the Iron Age IIB (Golub 2017: 19, 25, 28–29). It occurs only once in an unprovenanced ostracon (Fig. 5; Lemaire and Yardeni 2006: 220). Naḥman Avigad (1988: 8–9) mentioned a Judahite seal with the name *yhwbʿl*; this seal is still unpublished.

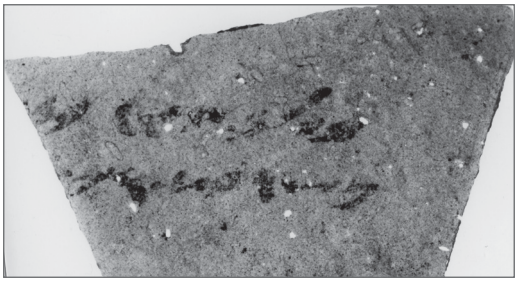

Fig. 5. An unprovenanced ostracon mentioning Baʿal (courtesy of Ada Yardeni).

Baʿal is widespread in 11th–10th-century BCE onomasticons, cited in Bet Shemesh (McCarter, Bunimovitz, and Lederman, 2011) Khirbet Qeiyafa (Misgav, Garfinkel, and Ganor 2009; Levin 2014; Garfinkel et al. 2015; 2018; Garfinkel 2022: 451; Rollston 2022) and Khirbet er-Raʿi (Rollston et al. 2021). It also occurs in 8th-century BCE Israelite ostraca (Lemaire 1977a: 55) and seals (WSS 297).

2.4. Bel

Etymologically related to *Baʿal* but boasting a distinct personality, Bel is evoked in ostracon JH 208B with the oath *byhwh wbbl*, by Yahweh and by Bel (Fig. 6; Lemaire and Langlois 2021: 90*–92*). Bel was a familiar appellation of Marduk and was widely cited together with his son Nabu in Aramean culture, especially during the Neo-Babylonian period (Abush 1999: 548–549; Millard 1999). Both deities are mentioned in the Bible (Isa 46:1; Jer 50:2, 51:14) and in Elephantine. The referral to Bel beside Yahweh in ostracon JH 208 fits its estimated date between the first and second Neo-Babylonian campaigns.

Fig. 6. Ostracon JH 208B (courtesy of Michael Langlois).

2.5. El?

Several commentators asserted that the deity El is evoked by several Judahite inscriptions (e.g., Renz 2022: 87). However, all the instances brought forth are unclear. The reading of *El* in the phrase *ʾl ḥnn* in Khirbet Bet Lei 2 is paleographically doubtful since the traces can also be read as *ẏ̇hẅḥ ḥnn* (Lemaire 1976: 560–561). The inscription *ʾl* is clearly observed on a bowl from Khirbet el-Kom (Dever 1970: 173), but it is not integrated into a dedicatory formula, rendering its interpretation as a dedication to a deity named El uncertain and conjectural. It is possible that this inscription only indicates the bowl's owner with a hypocoristic name containing the theonym *El*, god. A third inscription occurs on a jar fragment discovered in Jerusalem in 1971 (Fig. 7) and published

by Naḥman Avigad (1972; Miller 1980; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 241–242; Aḥituv 2008: 40–42). It seems more interesting at first glance, reading [ʾ*l*] *qn*ʾ*rṣ*. The formulation *El-creator-of-the-earth* is known in Phoenician, Punic, and Aramaic epigraphy (Röllig 1999b). However, the *El* in the said Jerusalem inscription is not read but reconstructed. One only reads]*qn*ʾ*rṣ*, and it is unclear how the formula *El-creator-of-the-earth* would fit the inscription that seems to present a list of personal names with patronyms. Notably, Lipiński (1993: 69) proposed to read this line as a personal name and title, [*z*]*qn* ʾ*rṣ*, [el]der of the land (compare with the plural *zqny ʾrṣ* in Prov 31:23 and *zqny hʾrṣ* in Jer 26:17). Furthermore, Johannes Renz (1995: 198; 2022: 87) rejected the restoration of *El* in this inscription (see also Lemaire 2011: 53).

Fig. 7. Jerusalem, Jewish Quarter (courtesy of Naḥman Avigad).

2.6. Asherah?

The existence of a goddess Asherah, more or less Yahweh's *paredra*, has been widely discussed over the last fifty years, and many contemporary scholars have answered the question positively after the publication of the Khirbet el-Kom and Kuntillet ʿAjrud inscriptions. However, given the current state of the evidence, this interpretation remains philologically uncertain, to say the least. The problem is directly related to the meaning of *asherah* concerning sanctuaries (below).

3. Sanctuaries

Unfortunately, Judah has nothing comparable to the Mesha stele, where the king boasts of having built a *bmt*, a high place, in his capital (line 3) and several temples (*bt*) in Madaba, Diblaten, and Baalmeʿon (line 30). He also dedicated to his national god, Kamosh, objects of the Yahweh cult captured from the towns of ʿAṭarot (line 12: *ʾrʾl dwdh*) and Nebo (lines 17–18: *ʾr[ʾ]ly yhwh*) (Lemaire 2022).

3.1. Temple

Thus far, the Hebrew word *bamah*, conventionally translated as *high place* and indicating an open-air sanctuary, has not been observed in any Hebrew inscription. Conversely, the phrase *byt yhwh*, the temple of Yahweh, is unequivocally mentioned in Arad ostracon 18 (line 9; Fig. 8) dated to early 597 BCE (Lemaire 1977a: 232). Although the context is unclear, this ostracon likely refers to the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem (Aharoni 1981: 37); the Arad temple no longer existed at this time. Khirbet Beit Lei 1 also seems to implicitly evoke the temple of Jerusalem with the phrase *ʾlhy yršlm*, god of Jerusalem (line 2).

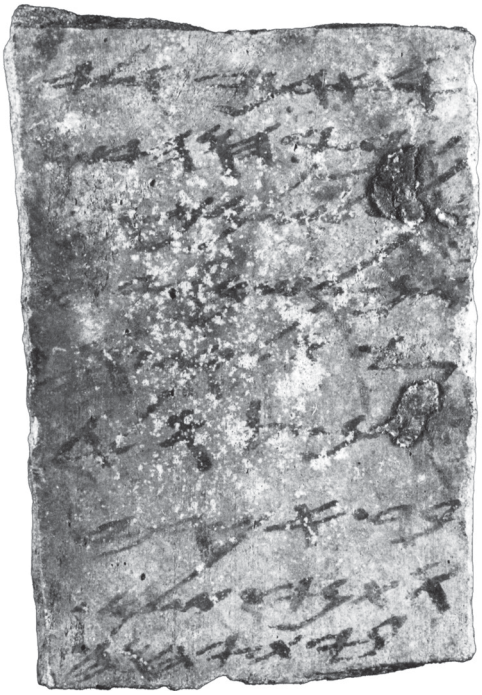

Fig. 8. Arad ostracon 18 (courtesy of Yoḥanan Aharoni).

The phrase *byt yhwh* was also partly reconstructed for an inscription on an unprovenanced ivory pomegranate: *lbẏṫ* [*yh*]*wh*̇ (Fig. 9; Lemaire 1981; Avigad 1990; Renz 1995: 192–193; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 579–581). While the pomegranate's authenticity is often doubted (Maeir 2022: 361; Frevel 2023: 198; Mathys 2023: 95–98), no serious argument has been made in this vein. The main argument presented against the pomegranate's authenticity was the so-called "incompletion of the *taw*, *he*, and *yod* in relation to the break in the pomegranate" (Goren et al. 2005: 19). However, upon reexamination, of the three "incomplete letters," only one remained—the *taw* (Aḥituv et al. 2007: 91)—and it too turned out to be incomplete only by token of an optical illusion (Lemaire 2006: 172; Aḥituv et al. 2007: 93–94). The item's authenticity was officially confirmed on June 16, 2015, following a reexamination in the Israel Museum. Thus, in an email to Hershel Shanks, Ada Yardeni stated, "I could clearly see the crucial part of the fragmentary left stroke of *Taw* at the break" (June 17, 2015), and in an email to this author, she further noted, "I agree now that there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the pomegranate!" (June 17, 2015). This is clearly demonstrated by the RTI (Reflectance Transformation Imaging) photographs taken by Bruce Zuckerman and his team (Figs. 10, 11). Lately, Eran Arie (2018/9) rightly dated the ivory pomegranate to the Late Bronze Age (see also Lemaire 1981: 239), and similar specimens from Ugarit and other sites were recently published (Sauvage 2013; 2014). However, his conclusion that the inscription is a forgery does not take into account the possibility that an inscription can be incised on an old and precious ivory object. As is well known, "many assemblages come from caches or hoards, often palaces or temples, collected over long periods of time—up to centuries. Ivory, both in the form of objects and as raw material, was considered precious and was thus passed on from generation to generation" (Ben-Shlomo and Dothan 2006: 29).

Fig. 9. The phrase *lbyt [yh]wh* on an ivory pomegranate (courtesy of Bruce Zuckerman and the West Semitic Research Project).

Fig. 10. *lbyt*, ivory pomegranate
(courtesy of Bruce Zuckerman and the West Semitic Research Project).

Fig. 11. Closeup RTI photo of the *taw*
(courtesy of Bruce Zuckerman and the West Semitic Research Project).

Anyhow, since the inscription is unprovenanced and paleographically dated to the mid-8th century BCE (Avigad 1990: 160), it is impossible to ascertain where was the temple of Yahweh evoked on this ivory pomegranate.

3.2. QDŠ, holy

Other sanctuaries are indicated by holy vessels (Demsky 2012: 218–224; Maeir 2022; Renz 2022: 102, 187). In Iron Age Judah, such vessels were sometimes inscribed *qdš*, holy, as observed in Arad (Fig. 12; Aharoni 1981: 118, no. 104), Beersheba (Fig. 13; Aharoni 1973: 73), and Bet Shemesh (Manor 2016: 470–479). Two additional vessels of this type are unprovenanced (Fig. 14; Lemaire 1981; Barkay 1990). Vessels with incomplete inscriptions attributable to this group include a specimen from Jerusalem with the letters *q* and *d* (Nadelman 1990: 33,36: B2) and another that is unprovenanced (probably from Khirbet el-Kom) with *q* only (Lemaire 2002: 189–190, No. 388).

Fig. 12. Arad inscription 104 (courtesy of Yoḥanan Aharoni).

Fig. 13. A krater from Beersheba bearing the inscription *qdš* (courtesy of Yoḥanan Aharoni).

Fig. 14. An ivory pomegranate with the inscription *qdš khnm* (courtesy of Bruce Zuckerman and the West Semitic Research Project).

Finally, Arad inscriptions 102 and 103 were found in the sanctuary's courtyard near the sacrificial altar (Locus 394, Stratum X). Both are plates with two incised signs, the first of which is definitely a *qoph*. Aharoni (1981: 116) initially proposed to identify it as an abbreviation of *qdš*, holy, but later preferred to interpret it as an abbreviation of *qrbn*, sacrifice. The second sign is enigmatic and is different in the two inscriptions. The one on Arad inscription 102 is similar to an archaic 10th century BCE *kaph* (Fig. 15), while the sign on Arad inscription 103 is reminiscent of a ca. 600 BCE Phoenician *shin* (Fig. 16). Thus, one remains undecided whether it is a *kaph*, a *shin*, or a symbol (Davies 1991: 37; Renz 1995: 72–74). If we read *qš*, it is probably an abbreviation for *q*(*d*)*š* (Cross 1979: 77; Eshel et al. 2022: 44–45) and if we read *qk* (Vainstub 2012: 6–8, 87*), it may be considered an abbreviation of *q*(*dš*) *k*(*hnm*) (Herzog et al. 1984: 32; Herzog 2002: 56; Maeir 2010: 52; 2022: 361), a phrase incised in full on a pomegranate (Fig. 14). One may note that while these vessels were found in different places and probably associated with different sanctuaries, they all seem to date from the 8th century BCE.

Fig. 15. Arad inscription 102 (courtesy of Yoḥanan Aharoni).

Fig. 16. Arad inscription 103 (courtesy of Yoḥanan Aharoni).

3.3. Priest

Another word that might be directly connected to sanctuaries is *khn*, priest. However, thus far, Beersheba is the only controlled excavation to produce an inscription of this sort. It consists of a kind of South Arabian seal (Singer-Avitz 1999: 51; van der Veen and Bron 2014: 205–206), and its reading of *khn* remains tentative (van der Veen and Bron 2014: 206). Otherwise, and besides the abovementioned pomegranate (Fig. 14), *khn* has been sighted in a few

unprovenanced inscriptions. The clearest is a Judahite seal (WSS 28) with the inscription "Belonging to Ḥanan, son of Ḥilqiyahu, the priest." The father of the seal's owner is probably the high priest Ḥilkiah credited in 2 Kgs 22:8 with the discovery of Deuteronomy (Elayi 1986; 1992); it is perhaps also comparable with the owner of the Jerusalem bulla of "'Azaryahu son of Ḥilqiyahu" (Schneider 1998). Another priest called Shebna' is probably mentioned in an unprovenanced ostracon from the end of the First Temple period (Fig. 17; Lemaire and Yardeni 2006: 207).

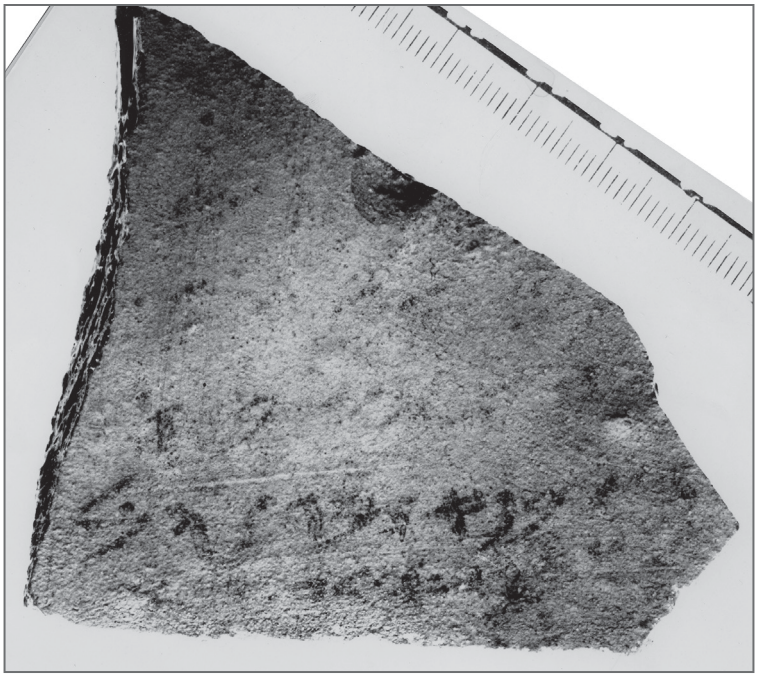

Fig. 17. An unprovenanced ostracon mentioning the priest Shebna' (courtesy of Ada Yardeni.

Although not titled priests, several Judahite Iron Age inscriptions invoke personal names associated with priests in the Bible (Maeir 2022: 360). The Arad ostraca featuring only one personal name are the most interesting among them. Three were found in the sanctuary (nos. 50–52; Aharoni 1981: 85), one cites the personal name Meremot (no. 50) and another the name Pašḥur (no. 54), which are often associated with priests in the Bible. Aharoni already noted: "From the place where they were found, and from their contents … these ostraca are connected with the rites of the sanctuary, but unfortunately, we cannot be certain of the exact function. Our conclusion, that they have to do with the casting of lots for the priestly watches … is of course only a hypothesis."

Aharoni (1981: 148; cf. Aḥituv 2008: 148) also proposed interpreting Arad inscription 49 as "a list of offerings to the sanctuary." This last interpretation remains conjectural.

3.4. Altar? Stele?

Thus far, Judahite Hebrew inscriptions do not seem to mention altars (*mzbḥ*) or stelae (*mṣbh*), although the word *mzbḥ* might be reconstructed on an Edomite ostracon from Ḥorvat ʻUza (Beit-Arieh 2007: 136; Aḥituv 2008: 351).

3.5. Asherah

Inscription 3 of a Khirbet el-Kom tomb sheds some light on ancient sanctuaries. It is a graffito that first emerged on the antiquities market and was published by William Dever, who ascertained its origin on account of a tiny fragment still *in situ* (Dever 1970: 139, 146). Although the inscription is difficult to read, there is a general agreement on the reading of lines 2–3 and 5–6 (Fig. 18; Lemaire 1977b: 599–602; Renz 1995: 202–211; Aḥituv 2008: 221):

2. brk. ʾryhw.lyhwh	*Blessed be ʾUriyahu by Yahweh*
3. wmṣryh.lʾšrth.hwšʿ lh	*and from his enemies by his* asherah save him
5. wlʾšrth	And by his asherah
6. [wlʾš]r[t]h	[And by] his [ashe]rah

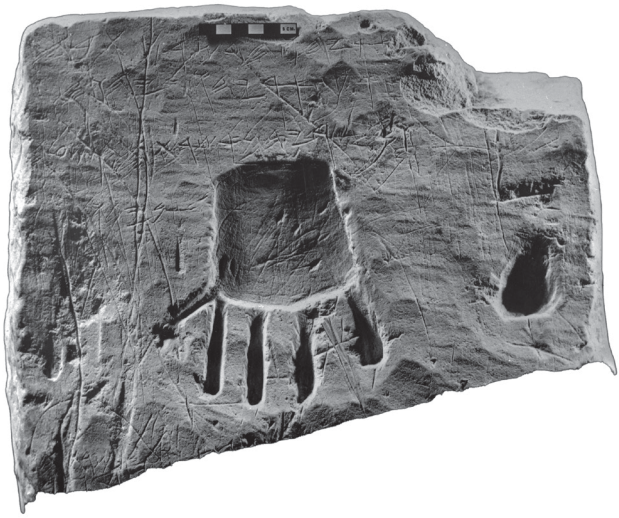

Fig. 18. Khirbet el-Kom 3 (courtesy of William G. Dever).

The placement of *lʾšrth* in line 3 is somewhat problematic, as shown by its repetition in lines 5 and 6 and the parallelism with the Kuntillet ʿAjrud blessings in inscriptions 3.1, 3.6, and 3.9 (Aḥituv, Eshel, and Meshel 2012: 87–100). Apparently, the phrase "and by his *asherah*" should have been written at the beginning of line 3 but was forgotten by the engraver, who immediately and mistakenly incised "from his enemies." He did not erase the erroneous phrase but, instead, added "by his asherah" after, reiterating it twice more in lines 5 and 6 to make it clear that he made a mistake and wanted to correct it. Correction by addition is a familiar practice in epigraphy and manuscripts (Greenstein 2023). Anyhow, this is a small problem that has little effect on the inscription's meaning, mainly thanks to some parallelism between lines 2 and 3. In both cases, Yahweh and *asherah* are associated; the personal suffix *-h* of *ʾšrth* refers *asherah* to Yahweh.

The main philological problem pertains to the meaning of the word *ʾšrh*/*ʾšrth*, producing an enormous bibliography (see Wiggins 1998: 231–240). Four interpretations have been proposed (Kim 2021: 90–91; Ackerman 2022: 193–198); let us review them briefly:

1. *Asherah* means a goddess. Athirat (Asherah) was an important goddess in 2nd-millennium BCE Ugarit, a kind of *paredra* of El and a mother of gods (*qnyt ʾilm*), associated with the sea (*ʾaṯrt ym*) and Tyre ("Athirat of the Tyrians"; 1 Keret:197–199,202). Many Biblical scholars think that it was more or less the same in Israel and Judah. However, the presence of a goddess by the name of Athirat or Asherah in the 1st-millennium BCE northwest Semitic world is problematic. She seems to go unmentioned in Phoenician and Aramaic inscriptions and onomasticons (Zevit 2001: 649). She is only cited in South Arabic, mainly in Qatabanic inscriptions (Bron 1995: 432; 1998; Frantsouzoff 2006: 71). Is she mentioned in the Hebrew Bible? "The absence of an explicit reference to Asherah in the Old Testament invites skepticism" (Wiggins 1993:150). 1 Kgs 18:19 and 2 Kgs 23:4,7 are often mentioned as references to Asherah as a goddess. However, the former is definitely a late polemical addition (Aḥituv, Eshel, and Meshel 2012: 131), and the latter is also polemical, possibly referring to the tradition of placing vestments in sacred trees (Smith 1894: 185–186; Lagrange 1905: 172, 175). As noted by John Day (1992: 485), "The ancient versions failed to recognize that OT Asherah was the name of a goddess, and it was only with the discovery of the Ugaritic texts that scholars as a whole were convinced that it was one of the basic meaning of the word in the OT" (see also Dever 1984; 2017: 594–600; Leuenberger 2021: 188). But was 1st-millennium BCE Judahite religion the same as in Ugarit?

2. *Asherah* means *sanctuary*. While a goddess by the name of Asherah went unmentioned in Phoenician and Aramaic inscriptions, the words *ʾšrh* or *ʾšrt* were used in Early Aramaic (Sfire IB11), Phoenician (Maʿaṣub inscription, Donner and Röllig 2002: No. 19), and in an Acco ostracon (Dothan 1985: 86; Cross 2009: 21*–23*; Lipiński 2009: 107*) to mean sanctuary. They can be compared to the Akkadian *aširtu* (Oppenheim 1968). The translation sanctuary has been argued by Frank Moore Cross (2009: 23*–24*), Benjamin Sass (2014), and Émile Puech (2015).
3. *Asherah* is a wooden pole roughly symbolizing or representing a goddess. *Asherah* is often interpreted as a wooden cult object symbolizing the eponymous goddess (Day 1992; Dietrich and Loretz 1992). This is, for example, the position of William Reed (1949) and John Day (1992: 486) in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*: "The most likely view is that Asherah was a wooden pole symbolizing the goddess Asherah." Was it a kind of totem? Is this interpretation influenced by critics of idolatry in Isa 40:18–20 and Jer 10:3? This argument seems to lack a clear Biblical reference, but it enjoys the advantage of combining a reference to the goddess Asherah, on the one hand, with the Biblical association of the Hebrew word *asherah* with *ʿēṣ*, meaning tree and wood, on the other hand.
4. *Asherah* is a sacred tree or grove. Strangely enough, some commentators fail to mention the fourth interpretation of *asherah* as a sacred tree or grove (e.g., Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 411–412; Thomas 2017). The clearest reference to the Hebrew word *asherah* is in Deut 16:21–22, where this cultic object is forbidden: "You shall not plant for yourself an *asherah*, any tree (*ʾᵃšērāh kol-ʿēṣ*), beside the altar of Yahweh your god, that you will make for yourself. You shall not set up for yourself a stele (*maṣṣēbāh*), for Yahweh your god hates them" (my translation). In this text, *ʾᵃšērāh* is clearly an *ʿēṣ*, wood or tree, and parallel to *maṣṣēbāh*. As noted by Kyle McCarter (1987: 146), "it is not surprising that the traditional understanding of the asherah, as reflected in the Septuagint's translation *alsos*, has been that it was a sacred grove, or at least a single tree" (see also Reed 1949: 1; Albright 1968: 60: LaRocca-Pitts 2001: 317–329; Na'aman and Lissovsky 2008). The rabbinical literature also uses *asherah* to mean *sacred tree*. Thus, for example, the Mishnah states, "What is an *asherah*? Any [tree] under which there is a foreign cult (*ʿabodah zarah*). R. Simeon says: any tree which is worshipped" (*ʿAbod. Zar.* 3:7; see also Na'aman and Lissovsky 2008: 193–194).

It is difficult to choose between the four interpretations, and one can understandably hesitate. For instance, in 2008, Shmuel Aḥituv translated Asherah as the name of a goddess (Aḥituv 2008: 221–224, 315, 320, 322), whereas, in 2012, he translated *asherah* as "a sacred cultic object" (Aḥituv, Eshel, and Meshel 2012: 130–132). One may emphasize that, philologically, Hebrew is not Ugaritic, Phoenician, or Aramaic. As I tried to show when I first published the reading of *l'šrth* (Lemaire 1977b: 603–608), the fourth interpretation fits the ancient Hebrew evidence insofar as we acknowledge that the deification of cult objects was a widespread practice (McCarter 1987: 146–149; Hundley 2023) and that the *asherah* was on the way of hypostatization.

According to this interpretation, the relation between *asherah* and Yahweh in Khirbet el-Kom 3, as implied by the personal suffix, is clear. Yahweh's *asherah* apparently referred to sacred trees or groves in Yahwistic sanctuaries. In fact, early Biblical traditions explicitly mention such sacred trees planted by Abraham in Beersheba (Gen 21:33), connected to Jacob in Shechem (Gen 35:4; see also Josh 24:26; Judg 9:6) and Bethel (Gen 35:4), and serving as a meeting place at Ophra between Gideon and Yahweh's messenger (Judg 6:11,19). Thus, the Khirbet el-Kom inscription fits well with 8th-century BCE cultic traditions in Judah (Rollston 2018: 467) and the importance of sacred trees in contemporaneous sanctuaries, especially rural sanctuaries. Notably, the cult of sacred trees never disappeared completely and was still observable in 20th-century Palestine (Lagrange1905: 175; Dafni 2006; Na'aman and Lissovsky 2008: 190–191).

4. Cultic Rites

Do we have indications of Judahite cultic rites? Though not explicit, three groups of inscriptions are noteworthy: two amulets from Ketef Hinnom, a chiseled inscription on an unprovenanced decanter, and at least two possible references to tithes.

4.1. The amulets from Ketef Hinnom

The two amulets contain the so-called priestly benediction of Num 6:24–26 (Barkay et al. 2004; Aḥituv 2008; 49–55; Smoak 2016; Kotansky 2019: 535–536), probably pertaining to a rite practiced in the Jerusalem temple. However, it is important to note that the inscriptions themselves do not contain any reference to priests or the temple, and their use by priests is only implicitly indicated in the Bible.

4.2. Libation?

An unprovenanced chiseled inscription on a decanter reads *lmtnyhw yyn nsk rbʿt*, "to Matanyahu, libation wine, a quarter" (Deutsch and Heltzer 1994: 23-26). It is comparable to Exod 29:40 and Lev 23:13, which specify that "a libation of a quarter of a *hin* of wine" should be offered with a ram (my translation). However, the inscription has no archaeological context, and it does not explicitly mention any sanctuary or priest. Since the inscription seems to date from the 8th century BCE and predates Hezekiah's reform, there is no reason to connect it directly with the Jerusalem temple. Anyhow, a cultic reference seems to be indicated by the parallelism with Biblical texts.

4.3. Tithe?

The verb ʿšr (*ʿāśar*) is clearly used in an Ophel ostracon connected with an account (Lemaire 1978: 159–160; Aḥituv 2008: 37), and the word *mʿ*[*šr*], tithe, is partly reconstructed in Arad ostracon 5, lines 11–12 (Fig. 19). Unfortunately, we do not know to whom the tithe was paid. As noted by Shmuel Aḥituv, "In this context, it is more likely that the tithe being alluded to is that for the monarchy" (Aḥituv 2008: 105).

Fig. 19. Arad ostracon 5 (courtesy of Yoḥanan Aharoni).

5. Feast Days

5.1. Calendar

As in any land, the cultic activities of the people of Judah were connected to their feasts, which were fixed in their calendar. The main source of information about the Judahites' feast days and rites is the Bible, the various literary traditions and calendars of which are difficult to untangle. The information provided by Judahite inscriptions is limited and, so far, only pertains directly to the 7th and early 6th centuries BCE. At this time, the months were indicated according to their order from first to twelfth (Lemaire 1986: 361–364). Thus, *ʿšry*, tenth, is cited in Arad ostraca 3 and 7; *šlšy*, third, may be mentioned in an unprovenanced ostracon (JH 414; Eshel 2003; Aḥituv 2008: 190); and *šbʿy*, seventh, is quoted in an unprovenanced ostracon from Khirbet el-Kom (Deutsch and Heltzer 1995: 81–83, no. 76; Lemaire 1997: 457–458; Aḥituv 2008: 180–181). No Canaanite or Neo-Babylonian month names are mentioned around 600 BCE.

5.2. New moon

An occasionally mentioned feast day is *ḥdš* (*ḥodesh*), the new moon. The word *ḥdš* is ambiguous: it means *new moon* but also *month*, the period of this new moon. Arad ostracon 5, lines 12–13, evokes the word in the sense of *new moon*: "before new moon passes" (*bṭrm yʿbr.ḥḥdš*; Fig. 19), which is comparable to Amos 8:5. When will the new moon be over? The new moon is probably a feast day, also mentioned in Arad ostracon 7 (Fig. 20), prescribing that a quantity (of wine?) be given to the Kittim on the first of the month but registered only the following day. However, this fragmentary text can be interpreted in various ways (Na'aman 2002).

Fig. 20. Arad ostracon 7 (courtesy of Yoḥanan Aharoni).

5.3. Shabbat

Another feast day is Shabbat, which is mentioned in at least two ostraca. The first is well known, deriving from Mezad Ḥashavyahu, a fort south of Yavneh-Yam (Naveh 1960; 1964; Lemaire 1971; Aḥituv 2008: 156–163). It consists of a harvester's complaint that his garment was taken while he finished harvesting "before Shabbat" (*lpny šbt*, lines 5–6; Fig. 21). The text suggests that this harvester did not work on Shabbat. The second ostracon is unprovenanced (Moussaieff Collection; Fig. 22); it features a list of quantities of food and drinks apparently for Shabbat, which is mentioned twice at the beginning of lines 8 and 9 (Lemaire 1997: 460–461; Aḥituv 2008: 183–186). The menu's quality (bread, vegetables, *ḥallot*, date cakes [*ʾšprm*], wine) suggests Shabbat was a feast day. Following Émile Puech (2020: 325, 329–330), a third tentative mention can be suggested for an ostracon from Ḥorvat ʿUza at the end of line 7. However, the context is unclear, and the proposed interpretation requires two corrections of the Hebrew text (restoration of two words in the second part of line 7 and translation of *šbtkh̲* as a plural). Furthermore, *šbtk*[*h*] can also be interpreted as *your place* (Beit-Arieh 1993: 58, 61; 2007; 123, 125), *ton séjour* (Lemaire 1995: 222), *your sitting (in mourning)* (Cross 2003: 135; 2007), *your period of mourning* (Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 522, 525), and *thy imminent destruction* (Arabic *sabata*; Sasson 2005: 602–603, 606); finally, Nadav Na'aman (2013: 224, 227) reads it *šptk*, you set fire.

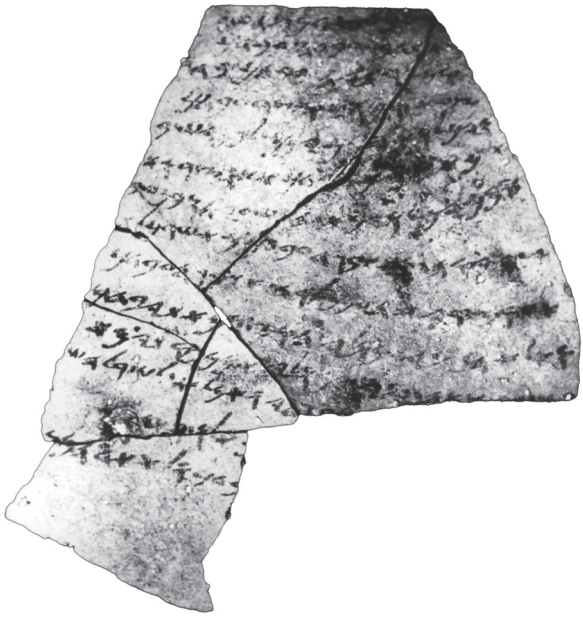

Fig. 21. Ostracon from Mezad Ḥashavyahu mentioning Shabbat (courtesy of Joseph Naveh).

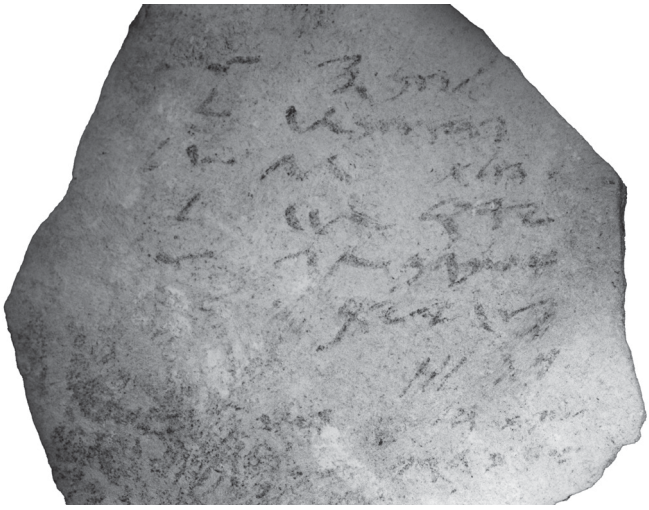

Fig. 22. Ostracon in the Moussaieff Collection, mentioning Shabbat.

Was Shabbat a feast day at the full moon or the seventh day of the week? A century ago, J. Meinhold (1905; 1909; 1916; 1930) convincingly argued, on critical biblical grounds, that during the First Temple period, it was a feast day held at the full moon. Later, I tried to show that this interpretation fits what we know about neighboring countries (Lemaire 1973), especially Assyrian hemerologies (Labat 1939: 34–39; Heath-Whyte 2022: 52–53). Several scholars accepted this historical interpretation (e.g., Briend 1984; Robinson 1988: 49–65; Veijola 1989; Rachenmacher 1996: 202; Cooper and Goldstein: 2003; Wénin 2005: 10–12; Römer 2008: 29, 39; Feldman 2009: 353–363; Grund 2011: 66–133; Lukács 2020: 1–3, 293, 296), and Oded Tammuz (2019: 289) audaciously wrote that "today it is commonly agreed on." Anyhow, the abovementioned epigraphic cases do not weigh in on this historical problem.

6. Conclusion

What may we conclude? First Temple-period Judahite Hebrew epigraphy offers a few references and allusions to the contemporary cult, but they are always short and incidental. Most are nearly impossible to understand without archaeology and the literary Biblical Hebrew tradition. Nevertheless, they seem to manifest a Judahite historical evolution, especially concerning the deities and the use of cultic places.

– Whereas Ba'al often appears in 11th–10th-century BCE onomasticons, he is rarely mentioned in the 8th–7th century BCE Judahite kingdom, when *yhwh*

becomes the main national deity (Khirbet Beit Lei, Khirbet el-Kom ostraca). At the very end of the First Temple period, probably after Nebuchadnezzar entered Jerusalem in 597 BCE, two other deities are occasionally cited: Baʿal Shamayim and Bel.

– The evolution of the cultic places is connected with the meaning of the word *asherah*, apparently designating a sacred tree or grove. In the 8th century BCE, the sacred tree seems to have played an important role associated with Yahweh, but it disappeared at the end of that century. This development might be due to Hezekiah's drastic cultic reform: "It was he who suppresses the *bāmôt*, smashed the *maṣṣebôt*, cut down the *asherāh/ôt* …" (2 Kgs 18:4, my translation).

Because of the limited number of Hebrew inscriptions, this conclusion can only be tentative.

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