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A New Mobilities Approach to Naming and Mapping Deities: Presence, Absence, and Distance at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud

Introduction

Despite the recent proliferation of studies exploring divinity in the ancient world, a key methodological component remains absent. Few, if any, present works integrate findings from modern mobility studies. Failure to do so has left noteworthy lacunae not only in our epistemologies of movement and place, but also in our understanding of the relationship between divinity and place that informs the acts of naming and mapping. This essay provides a more solid theoretical grounding for discussing perceptions and processes of human movement and placemaking that undergird the activities of naming deities, locating them in space and time, accounting for their movements and activities, and constructing space in response to assumptions about their personhood and capacities.

The metanarrative that society is essentially sedentary is ancient and persists into the present. Movers, in all of their various dimensions, are thus typically investigated from the perspective of stasis and often understood as undermining or destabilizing the structures of “real” (read sedentary) society.¹ Yet, partially in response to the spatial turn, and partially in response to the new mobilities turn, sociologists have begun to question whether society should be studied primarily from the vantage point of its sedentary attributes or, whether the subject is better understood as being constituted by persons and things that are essentially mobile and in dynamic entanglement with one another.

In line with this trend, I approach the topics of naming and mapping deities in the ancient world through a kinetic social model and raise two fundamental questions. The first, is how are human experiences of mobility related to perceptions of divine personhood and engagements with divine or superhuman powers? The second, is how do instances of naming and mapping gods take place in contexts of mobility? Three concepts found at the terminological nexus of religious experience and mobility will guide my investigation: presence, absence, and distance. The specific site that will serve as a case study for this project is Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, a 9th–8th century BCE caravansary in the Negev.

Movement does not simply occur in space but is a constituent element of spatial production defined primarily by power relationships.² Experiences of mobility or

1 Nail 2015, 3–5; Urry 2000, 1–3.

2 Adey 2017, 62–69; Cresswell 2006, 1–7.

immobility are always tied to larger contexts of agency and access. Different bodies, including divine bodies, are expected to have and are granted different spectrums of mobility. Power is also a fundamental aspect of divinity in the ancient world and often associated with a deity's presence as it is understood through the experiences of immediacy, accessibility, and efficacy; all of which are attributes connected to a god's ability to move or make others move.

My work follows historian and religion scholar Robert Orsi's critique that, in their studies of divine presence social scientists too often assume divine absence as reality when observing religiosities. In doing so, researchers undermine the accounts of those who claim to experience such presence. The result of this methodological predilection toward absence is that explorations of presence fail as legitimate scholarly enterprises because they commonly degrade into a search for ways to prove that presence, which is already assumed be absent, does not actually exist.³ An alternative approach is to take the matter of presence, and those who experience it, seriously in order to generate a more accurate picture of religion as it is lived; to, in Orsi's words, "approach history and religion through a matrix of presence."⁴

Site Location and Description

Located in the northeast corner of the Sinai Peninsula, in Wadi Quraiyah, Kuntillet 'Ajrud was in use during the 9th–8th century BCE. Situated just west of the Dharb al-Sha'ira, the site was several days journey from Qadesh Barnea (approx. 50km). Travelers hoping to approach the site from Dharb al-Ghaza could do so by making a small deviation (approx. 15km) from this north-south route via a network of wadis.⁵ The spring and wells at the site likely drew merchants, traders, and military personnel traveling in the regions between greater Judah, the Negev, the Sinai, and the Gulf of Eilat. Others making their way down the coastal road and looking to cross over to the southern Transjordan could also have a passed through the site.

Two buildings were perched on an elliptical mesa, the ruins of which now sit lonesome in the intense desert sun with the original access to the top eroded away. The larger of the two was constructed with an open courtyard bordered by several smaller corner rooms or storage spaces. Two sets of stairs potentially indicate a second story, or at least access points to the roof of the structure. The entrance to the larger building was flanked on the left and right by small rectangular spaces known collectively as the "bench room" because of the presence of raised benches in each. The smaller building on the hilltop has decayed significantly more than

³ Orsi 2016, 1–11.

⁴ Orsi, 251.

⁵ Avner 2021, 23–24.

the larger, although, remains of its originally plastered walls preserve floral and geometric painted designs along with inscriptions of two human figures and a bovine creature in a grazing position.⁶

When Kuntillet 'Ajrud was excavated in the late 1970s, it was first identified as an "Israelite religious center in northern Sinai."⁷ However, later analysis of the finds raised questions about the site's "Israelite" nature since some of the iconographic and inscriptional remains found there failed to align with biblical accounts of Israelite religion, even those expressed in biblical texts as being explicitly unorthodox (2 Kings 23).⁸ Beyond debates over ethnic designations, questions have surfaced regarding the classification of the site as cultic.⁹ As a result of disagreements over the site's primary uses, the two buildings there have been variously described as shrines, temples, fortifications, guest houses and a caravansary. Given the realities of interregional mobility I refer to the site primarily as a *caravansary*, a designation that can account for the site's use as both a wayside and point of religious engagement.¹⁰

What Mobilities Created Kuntillet 'Ajrud?

Reconstructing the past at Kuntillet 'Ajrud requires more than assessing its now static remains. We must consider how place accumulates through the constant flows of movement. Meanings of topographies and architectures emerge and evolve with and according to those who exist in them and move through them. Inasmuch, the transition from space to place is an endless act of becoming, with constructions of place compounding in multiplicity and stratification. Like any place, Kuntillet 'Ajrud was constituted by more than the landscape and structures that mark it off from its surroundings. Situated in a relatively isolated locale, it was by most measurements a liminal node in comparison to those with which it was networked.¹¹ Still, it was a place created by mobilities and one which generated its own mobilities. The people, animals, and objects that passed through it, and those persons who maintained the

⁶ Zevit 2001, 371.

⁷ Meshel 2012, 65–71. The title of Meshel's full site report captures the ambiguity that still plagues the identification of the site.

⁸ For a full translation of all the inscriptions found at the site see Dobbs-Allsopp et. al. 2005, 277–98.

⁹ See Lemaire 1984, 131–143; Keel/Uehlinger 1998, 247; Most recently, Jeremy Smoak and William Schniedewind have rejected the designation of the site as "religious". This follows on the heels of a revised site report which revises the language of "religious site". Smoak/Schniedewind 2019.

¹⁰ Hadley 1993, 115–24; Thareani-Sussely 2007, 123–41. Na'aman 2011, 309–310; Na'aman 2013, 39–51; Schniedewind 2014, 271–93. Whether the site was a "state-run caravansaraei" is open to debate. Cf. Keel/Uehlinger 1998, 247.

¹¹ Thareani 2017, 409–28. For dating of the site see, Finkelstein/Piasetzky 2008, 175–85; Zevit 2001, 376–78.

daily functions of the site participated in continually reconstituting the site and its attendant meanings through both deliberate and unintentional patterns of being.

It is broadly assumed that the Israelite court constructed and maintained the site, but that it was used by Israelites, Judahites, and potentially by other regional actors. Whether the site was considered to be its own destination or created specifically as a waypoint remains unknown. Regardless, its emergence generated new mobilities that connected new destinations to old ones and offered a new stopover point along a familiar trade route and a place where peoples from different walks of life could have interacted. The site may have even served the strategic purpose of being a transit “pinch point” for monitoring and controlling mobile agents in the region. It is still unclear if the site maintained year-round inhabitants.

Even though the site is not situated directly along a main trade route, material remains recovered from Kuntilet ‘Ajrud indicate it might have played a role as a redistribution site for various goods. Excavators recorded finding seashells from both the Red Sea and Mediterranean, as well as remains of wood sourced from as far south as the southern Sinai and as far north as Lebanon.¹² Other finds included loom weights and more than one hundred textile fragments.¹³ In addition, the site’s storage rooms contained wares and storage jars that originated in Samaria and the southern coastal plain, as well as large pithoi that came from the region around Jerusalem.¹⁴ While the primary visitors were likely traveling merchants, traders, or military personnel, pilgrims to religious sites in the Transjordan and Sinai cannot be ruled out as potential passersby. While we have identified remains from the site and potential persons and objects that transited through it, we still do not know what those traveling to or through Kuntilet ‘Ajrud called it. Nor do we know how it may have fit into their cognitive catalogue of sites and routes throughout the region.

Any strict interpretation of the site as a desert religious retreat or shrine is difficult to substantiate from the material cultural record.¹⁵ The sum of the remains found at Kuntilet ‘Ajrud do not indicate that it served a strictly religious purpose, but there are objects and spaces that may have been used for ritual purposes. Throughout the site, but primarily in the “bench room” and adjoining rooms of the main building, objects were found that may have played roles in religious activities. Among these are a large stone basin, lamps, vessels made of fine pottery, clay bowls, flasks, and juglets.¹⁶ Some of these items are inscribed with petitionary or blessings content, as well as with images of flora, fauna, and humanoid figures singing and dancing in ways that might be interpreted as religious behavior. The larger of the two buildings also contained the remnants of two ovens. While sacrifice is a common marker of civic religiosities, the

¹² Meshel 1978, 50–54.

¹³ Zevit 2001, 375, 379.

¹⁴ Gunneweg/Perlman/Meshel 2012, 279–88.

¹⁵ Meshel 2012, 65–71.

¹⁶ Meshel 2012, 51; cf. Zevit 2001, 379–81.

site's chief excavator, Ze'ev Meshel, noted that no evidence of sacrifice was found there.¹⁷ Likewise, there are also no remains of statues or figurines, which stands in contrast to evidence from a similar Iron Age wayside Moabite shrine, WT-13 of Wadi ath-Thamad, and other sites of civic religiosity in Israel and Judah.¹⁸

Beyond the necessities of sustenance, lodging, and refreshing one's animals, it appears that Kuntillet 'Ajrud was also a place where travelers took stock of their own emotional or spiritual wellbeing and that of others. Arrival to the site would have provided a moment of pause, as travelers transitioned from being on the move to being present in a moment of relative fixity. To draw a modern parallel, we might think of the recalibration that takes place when one arrives at a waypoint or a destination such as an airport. After a long and tiresome journey, we may have the sensation that our body has arrived in the place but that we are still waiting for the rest of ourselves to catch up. A less exacerbated experience of the fragmented self coming to rest attends the activities of trekking or riding on the back of a beast of burden.

Presence, Absence, and Distance – Theoretical Foundations for Naming and Mapping

Movement is marked by the observable undulation between presence and absence. As we move, we become newly present within changing surroundings and absent from others. The experiences of presence and absence elicit interconnected cognitive and physical responses. In many instances, the intensity of our feelings of presence and absence correspond to physical distance; the further away we are from somewhere, someone, or something, the greater the sense of loss or yearning.

Yet, distance is not merely measured in cartesian spatial terms but also by quantum metrics of relationship and personalism. Our awareness of presence and absence depends on our relationship to particular spaces, people, and things. We may know moments of presence that reverberate with life or love, along with those that are unbearable. Likewise, when absent from someone or something we cherish, we can ache with longing. Yet, absence from other places and people can result in a sense of newfound freedom or gainful escape. Presence in place and presence of place can mean two different things. One might be in close proximity to a person or place and still lack a sense of presence. Those of us who have been found to be absent-minded have experienced first-hand the way cognitive presence in a particular moment can lead to a loss of focus on a task at hand or to the realization that we can't recall why

¹⁷ Meshel 2012, 65–66. Recognizing the lack of an altar or specific cultic paraphernalia, Zevit still argues that the nature of the site is “one planned in advance for a certain purpose, and that is *raison d'être* was cultic”. Zevit 2001, 374.

¹⁸ Daviau/Steiner 2017, 81–136.

we have ventured into a certain room. To be present is to feel that a multitude of distances between person and place have been bridged in meaningful ways.

Time is a related variable in the calculus of absence, as we measure moments of presence gained and lost or estimate the required pace and means necessary to close gaps between where we are and where we want to be. In all of this, time can appear as an unfixed variable, shortening and lengthening itself against our wills. The many junctures of presence and absence in our lives form a matrix on which we chart the self. Again, the quantum nature of identity comes to the fore as we, who are always in the process of becoming, locate ourselves at different points of intersection depending on context.

Movement not only alters our previous experiences of presence but also generates new ones. For this reason, moments of transition are frequently moments of manifold presence. We take stock of where we have been and might be going, what we have gained and lost in miles, time, and know-how, who we have met and who we have left behind. In their own ways, these actions are processes of naming and mapping. For some, taking account of the self in a moment of transition also includes calling upon the sacred.

Readers may wonder what these reflections have to do with naming or mapping deities. The answer is that the practices of identifying gods and their associations with particular regions or sites are ultimately acts of mediating presence, absence, and distance. Among other things, names are points of access to persons and places that offer a sense of control over those entities. Maps are highly curated scale models of the real world. No map can show reality in its entirety. Rather, each is a tool used to showcase certain aspects such as selected demographic data points, physical features, regions, or boundaries. In line with the cartographic mediation of comprehensive geospatial realities, the practices of *naming* and *mapping* deities are strategies for mediating the comprehensiveness of divine personhood. Neither a name nor a single geographic epithet can express the entirety of divinity. Rather, each provides a set of points for navigating divine personhood and presence in the present.

The texture and contents of space, including the deities that are present within it, are bound up with mobile actors that constitute that space. Cultures of mobility are reflected in the perceived capacities of deities. As deities operate within and beyond the everyday realms of existence, divine presence and mobility are understood as simultaneously analogous and unanalogous to human presence and mobility. Humans accomplish the analogical task of relating to divinity through the practices of *naming* and *mapping*. Naming deities locates them in relation to the self and society. Mapping deities locates them in relationship to place and time. Combining a divine name with a geographic name links the divine entity not only with a particular conception of place but also with a conception of the self at a specific point in time, a point identifiable as a *moment of presence*.

The processes of deciphering and mapping divine epithets are both hermeneutical and cartographic. As was true for ancients who employed these means of

representing and engaging divinity, our own cognitive frameworks of divinity and mobility guide our decipherments of the evidence. With these methodological considerations enumerated, I turn to the primary case study of naming and mapping divinity in contexts of mobility at the site of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud.

Kuntillet ‘Ajrud: At the Crossroads of Divine Presence(s)

The inscriptional remains of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud raise several questions regarding presence in contexts of mobility. Among them is how we ought to interpret multiple instantiations of the epithets “Yahweh of Teman” and a single instance of “Yahweh of Shomron” found in four blessing formulae from the site. For consideration, I present the inscriptions here.¹⁹

The first, found on Pithos B in the courtyard, reads:

Message of Amaryaw: “Say to my lord, are you well? I have blessed you to YHWH of Teman and his *asherah*. May he bless you and may he guard you, and may he be with my lord [forever(?)].”²⁰

The second, also found on Pithos B in the courtyard, reads:

to YHWH of the Tēmān and His *ashera*; Whatever he asks from a man, that man will give him generously. And if he would urge – YHW will give him according to his wishes²¹

The third, found in ink on plaster in the “bench room,” a long narrow room in which the stone benches are built along the length of the wall reads:

May] He lengthen their days and may they be sated [. . .] recount to [Y]HWH of Tēmān and His *ashera* [. . . because (?) YHWH of Tē[mān], has shown [them(?)] favour, has bettered their da[ys . . .]²²

The fourth, found on Pithos A in the “bench room,” reads:

Message of ‘[-]M[-]K: “Speak to Yāhēlī, and to Yô’āśā^h, and to [. . .] I have [b]lessed you to YHWH of Shōmrōn and to His *asherah*”²³

¹⁹ Ahituv et al. 2012, 73–141. For recent translations and discussions of the inscriptions, see Puech 2014, 161–94 and Smoak/Schniedewind 2019. The translations presented here follow Smoak and Schniedewind’s.

²⁰ Ahituv et al., 95; Inscription 3.6.

²¹ Ahituv et al., 97; Inscription 3.9.

²² Ahituv et al., 105; Inscription 4.1.1.

²³ Ahituv et al., 87; Inscription 3.1.

At the outset, it is important to elaborate several observations about the inscriptions and the objects/surfaces on which they are found:

- 1) The author(s) of each of these inscriptions are unknown, though it appears that each was generated by a different hand.²⁴ The identity of their creators cannot be adduced by analysis of the text alone.
- 2) The geographies of Teman and Shomron may be references to specific sites or to broader regions. The epithets may also indicate specific attributes of Yahweh that are associated with either site/region.
- 3) It is likely that the “[Y]HWH of Teman” inscription on the plaster wall was put in place by whoever built or administered the site and may indicate a particular religious preference of the site’s builders, though not necessarily of those who sponsored the building, since architects or those building the site may have taken their own liberties during construction.
- 4) Though found in the same locus, the relationship between the “YHWH of Shomron” inscription on Pithos A and the “[Y]HWH of Teman” plaster inscription is a matter of debate. There appears to be no evidence that one was intentionally damaged in favor of another.
- 5) Pithos B, which was found in the courtyard, on the opposite side of the bench room’s interior wall, contains two mentions of Yahweh of Teman that are differentiated by spelling and uses of the definite article: “YHWH of the Teman and His *ashera*” and “YHWH of Teman and his *‘asherah*.”
- 6) Each of the inscriptions appears to be a request for similar kinds of blessing. Ostraca found at Arad, and an inscription on the “Edomite” ostrakon from Horvat ‘Uza, two sites of marked mobility, bear similar blessing formulae.²⁵

A full reconstruction of the religious lives of the persons at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud is ultimately impossible. Nevertheless, scholars should try to imagine how various forms of movement to the site and throughout it contributed to its enchantment, or to the enchantment of particular objects and spaces there. Brian B. Schmidt’s work, *The Materiality of Power*, takes up this task with the remains at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud. Recognizing the speculative nature and limits of this type of inquiry, Schmidt contributes to the discussion by demonstrating how modern scholars who are separated from ancient religious subjects and places by time and space can postulate potential scenarios for how sites and objects were understood and used to both create and accomplish religious/magical ends.²⁶

²⁴ Zevit 2001, 377–78.

²⁵ Cf. Arad ostrakon 16, *brtk lyhwh* (I bless you by YHWH); Arad 18, *yhwh yš’l lšlmk* (May YHWH seek your welfare); Arad 21, *brtk l[hw]* (I bless you by [YHW]H); Arad 40, *brkt[k lyhw]h* (I bless [you by YHW]H). Dobbs-Allsopp et al. date these ostraca to sometime between 598–587 BCE. Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005, 277–98. For Horvat ‘Uza, see Beith-Arieh 2007, 122–87.

²⁶ Schmidt 2016, 16–122.

We might ask what visitors to the site knew or were told about the various rooms at the site. Did they know or anticipate that a space like the bench room existed there? Did they expect particular objects or spaces of religious engagement to be there? Did they make deliberate choices in their planning for a journey to pack objects or vessels intended for religious use along the way? Beyond these questions, we can ask about the pithoi on which we find the inscriptions. Having likely come from Jerusalem, we might consider their paths of transit to the site or the types of persons who delivered them there. While all of the particulars of the pithoi's journeys are ultimately unknowable, the intersection of their presence along with that of the persons who are responsible for the various inscriptions has forever influenced our perception of the site. These contingencies, which are related by and large to the various mobilities that created the site of Kuntillet 'Ajrud, are well worth paying attention to. Even if we cannot find answers to specific questions, the exercise of inquiry is worthwhile for deepening our perspective of potential mobilities to, through and at the site that contributed to and characterized moments of presence there.

In a related way, we should also consider how the site's physical environment and its various surrounding landscape features were entangled with practices of mobility and religiosity, as well as with conceptions and experiences of divine presence. For example, the site's location near water sources could certainly contribute to its primary function as a place where rest was taken and resources for the journey were restocked but, the conceivable uses of the site were not limited to strictly utilitarian activities. Once present natural elements such as water, and perhaps even trees, could also have been used for other religious activities by those transiting the site.²⁷ How did the site's users perceive its relationship to other natural features? How did conceptions of distance and related perceptions of nearness and farness to other sites or relative physical features inform religious belief and practice? Did visitors to the site understand Yahweh of Teman to be uniquely present there given its southern desert location? Would they have understood the desert setting to amplify particular characteristics of Yahweh's divinity? Would they associate particular landscape features with Yahweh's attributes or abilities?

Considering the site's hilltop location may afford us another angle from which to speculate on the activities that took place there. Although they came to the site for a variety of reasons, persons at Kuntillet 'Ajrud may have envisioned it as a type of peak sanctuary like those Zevit discusses.²⁸ While the bench room was not open-air, the view from the site is elevated and looks out across the desert. The fact that the site is on a hilltop could mean that it was thought of as a kind of mountain residence of Yahweh. Yahweh's association with a particular mountain may also shed light on the epithets at Kuntillet 'Ajrud. If these epithets are meant to identify his ability to appear in

²⁷ Mazar 2000, 350–352; Na'aman/Lissovsky 2008, 186–208. See also Schmidt 2016, 17–21.

²⁸ Zevit 2001, 375.

variant places as a mountain, further parallels might also be drawn between the mention of El/ēl as “the head of the mountain” in the inscription just outside the bench room and Yahweh’s own status as the head of a particular mountain(s).

Pluriform Presence: Divine and Spatial Multiplicity at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud

Recognizing that different users of the site appealed to Yahweh there raises another set of questions regarding the boundaries of divine names, particularly as they relate to different earthly and cosmic geographies. The term typically employed to discuss a deity’s multiform presence is multiplicity, meaning the extent to which a deity’s person is understood to be divisible and/or capable of being present in multiple locations, either simultaneously or at distinct periods of time. Multiplicity is tied to further questions regarding divine mobility. Does a deity’s presence in one location signal absence in another? Likewise, how does divine agency vary across space? Are deities that share the same name, but have different geographic/cosmological associations in, actually the same deity, just with different local manifestations?

The roots of the discussion about divine multiplicity in Yahwism can be traced back more than a century to when scholars of the Bible and ancient Near East first sought to understand whether conceptions of divinity in the ancient world were essentially localized or universalized.²⁹ The conversation has frequently spotlighted the various instantiations of Ishtar among Neo-Assyrian and Hittite texts and inscriptions designating the domains of Ishtar of Arbela, Ishtar of the countryside, Ishtar of Heaven, and Ishtar of Nineveh.³⁰ Early on, scholars posited that each epithet represented a localized manifestation that was understood to share in the identity of the deity. This argument was typically made by reference to lexical god-lists, which some scholars believed to reveal the process of syncretic association or overlap of some deities with others.³¹ As a result, the vast pantheons of Mesopotamian deities were understood to be reducible to a number of main gods/goddesses that subsumed the attributes or identities of the multitude.³² In recent decades, a consensus has begun to form around the position that each Ishtar is a deity wholly distinct from the other Ishtar, though, this by no means a ubiquitous position.³³

A record of different associative geographies or points of provenance for Yahweh has led scholars to suggest that what is observed at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud is the kind

²⁹ Smith 2016, 71–77.

³⁰ Allen 2015, 2–3, 12.

³¹ See Beaulieu 2004, 165–72; Lambert 1975, 191–200; Parpola 2006, 165–209.

³² Allen 2015, 18–26.

³³ Allen 2015, 26–31.

of “poly-Yahwism” extant throughout the region in the first Millennium BCE.³⁴ Inscriptional and biblical evidence point to Yahweh’s association with multiple sites. In addition to Teman, Seir, Edom, and Paran, which are associated with Yahweh’s origins, there are also the examples of Yahweh of Zion/Jerusalem (Ps 65:1, 84:7, 99:2, 132:13, 135:21; Amos 1:2, Joel 4:16) and Yahweh in Hebron (2 Sam 15:7–8). Among the more recent contributors to the conversation, P. Kyle McCarter established what has become the normative assessment of divine multiplicity in ancient Israel and Judah.³⁵ Building on J.A. Emerton’s grammatical work concerning the syntactical relationship between divine names (DN) and geographic names (GN), McCarter forwarded the claim that each manifestation of Yahweh associated with a different geographic location was in effect, if not actually, a distinct deity. Thus, even though McCarter doesn’t articulate a defined theory of poly-Yahwism, others have substantiated their own claims for such by using his work. Since McCarter, several other scholars have picked up questions of divine multiplicity in their discussions of divine bodies and personhood throughout the ancient world. The sum of these investigations is robust and cannot be recounted in full here, but several elements that are pertinent to this discussion of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud will be briefly elaborated.

Benjamin Sommer has argued that deities can be present in multiple manifestations that are not necessarily different gods. Regarding the epithets at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, Sommer allows those multiple manifestations of Yahweh could exist simultaneously without challenging core monotheistic understandings.³⁶ According to Sommer, the explicit denial of multiplicity was the product of a later period in which the Priestly and Deuteronomic tradents worked to limit such conceptions of divinity.³⁷ One challenge to Sommer’s work arises with his definition of divine selfhood. Sommer is keen to assert the ontological differences between deities and humans in the ancient world. He therefore focuses on the ways the essential elements of divinity were conceived of as being radically different than that of humans in the ancient Near East. For him, the notion of the self requires that a deity is a conscious being that is cognizant of itself as a distinct entity.³⁸ While this definition makes sense when the discussion is focused on anthropomorphic deities, it does not function well in the broader Mesopotamian landscape of divinity in which non-anthropomorphic objects and entities could be labeled as divine.

Mark Smith employs the analogy of a kaleidoscope to name the composite and convergent nature of human conceptualizations of the divine. Smith has demonstrated that anthropomorphic representations of God in the Hebrew Bible fall into three categories: God’s human-sized “natural” body, God’s temple-sized “superhuman” body,

³⁴ Stavrakopoulou/Barton 2010, “Introduction,” 1.

³⁵ McCarter 1987, 137–55.

³⁶ Sommer 2009, 38–57.

³⁷ Sommer 2009, 58–79.

³⁸ Sommer 2009, 12.

and God's "cosmic" body of heavenly proportions. Each of these somatic entities is variously located and interacts with humans within a spatial matrix constituted by material/immaterial, prosaic/numinous, and earthly/heavenly quantities.³⁹ In addition, Smith maintains that the spaces of temples and cities analogically impart information about divine characteristics while serving as representations of the limits of congruence between humans and deities.⁴⁰ The question is whether these bodily categories are simply the constructs of biblical authors or also part of the religious thought worlds of the common person in ancient Israel and Judah.

Smith's specific observations about the divine epithets at Kuntillet 'Ajrud include the claim that the inscriptions represent a kind of map of spatial knowledge across time whereby the old (Yahweh of Teman/the Teman) meets the more recent (Yahweh of Shomron/Samaria). In this regard, the sites are not necessarily juxtaposed to one another in any kind of antagonistic fashion, but are rather simply a record of sacred geographies and affiliations, and perhaps even a marker of appreciation for an ancient tradition regarding Yahweh's origins. As Smith demonstrates, such juxtapositions are also present in the purposeful association of Yahweh with the sites of Hebron and Jerusalem/Zion for the sake of staking political claims to power (2 Samuel 15).⁴¹

Jeremy Hutton's analysis of the inscriptions leads him to claim the various inscriptions were elements of benign competition between preferred divine epithets that comprised the religious market at the site.⁴² By this reading, the multiple inscriptions enumerating Yahweh's associations with Teman and singular instance of "Yahweh of Samaria/Shomron," indicate that the Temanite association for Yahweh is the more accepted expression of divine manifestation at the site.⁴³

In his monograph, *The Splintered Divine*, Spencer Allen highlights the difficulties associated with assuming that Mesopotamian and Israelite/Judahite conceptions of divinity are synonymous. In doing so, he challenges McCarter's reading of the Kuntillet 'Ajrud data and argues that what is true regarding ancient Near Eastern conceptions of divine multiplicity may not hold in ancient Israel or Judah. Allen contends that the glaringly clear, yet commonly overlooked fact is that while biblical authors deal shrewdly (and repeatedly) with the problem of Israel's worship of many gods, they never once engage in a polemic against practice of worshiping multiple Yahwehs. This is not because they fail to recognize that there are multiple manifestations of Yahweh, but because they do not understand the different manifestations of Yahweh to be unique gods.⁴⁴

³⁹ Smith 2016, 13–30.

⁴⁰ Smith 2016, 71–108.

⁴¹ Smith 2016, 91–94.

⁴² Hutton 2010, 178.

⁴³ Hutton 2010, 204.

⁴⁴ Allen 2015, 247–309.

The above review of scholarship reveals that more often than not, studies of divinity in the ancient world portray the geographic and onomastic elements of DN + GN formulae in oppositional terms of flux and stasis. The assumption is that the entity represented by the divine name maintains a fluid and fragmentable identity while the toponym remains a fixed quantity. Infrequently, if ever, are questions raised about the fluid nature of the places with which the deities are associated. The question, then, is what value does calling on Yahweh of Teman or Yahweh of Shomron have at Kuntillet 'Ajrud for those who created the inscriptions? Moreover, can the places of Teman or Shomron transcend distance in an appreciable way through transference or replication?

Even if the above discussion clarifies instances of aspective divine agency or identity, the question of multilayered place at the site requires further consideration.⁴⁵ Both *distance* and *absence* can inspire reevaluations of place, persons, and presence. It is common to witness acts of merger, overlap, transference, and translation of geographies and gods as outcomes of human mobility. Movers not only rename places in destination sites using placenames from their former homes, they also seek out ways to recreate or reconstruct those previous sites in new locations, and to access familiar forms of divine presence there. This pattern of spatial transference is observable not only in destination sites or among long-term relocative populations, but also in the practices of short-term movers and at various points along routes where ritualized placemaking brings former sites into existence in new spaces.

At Kuntillet 'Ajrud, passers-by potentially understood that the sites with which Yahweh was associated could be connected to or recreated in new locations. Teman and Shomron may have been understood to have merged in a similar way at Kuntillet 'Ajrud. Perhaps, those transiting the site understood that far-away places with which Yahweh was associated, or where they had experienced an immediacy of presence, could be connected to and overlapped with one another or recreated in new locations, such as Kuntillet 'Ajrud. If such was the case, calling on the Yahweh of Shomron was potentially act of recreating Shomron in a new location in an omni-temporal way, much like biblical authors do with Horeb/Sinai/Nebo/Zion/Saphon. In all of this, however, the recollection or elision of places is not performed simply to call a previous location into existence elsewhere. While the latter is a plausible desire, another intention also exists; that is, to create a map of divine personhood via (his)storytelling that can provide a reliable resource for accessing presence as one makes their way through the world.

The various Teman inscriptional hands may have wished to give prominence to Yahweh's southern origins, to his association with the desert, or to a particular mountain in the South.⁴⁶ In doing so, the epithets could accentuate the southern

⁴⁵ Hundley 2013, 68–107.

⁴⁶ Avner 2021, 1–57; Miller 2021, 41–60.

origins of Yahweh, as well as his migratory nature for merchants, soldiers, and pastoralists moving throughout these desert regions. In a different way, the Shomron inscriptional hand, may be wanting to showcase Yahweh's northern-related attributes, mainly his association with a particular mountain in the Israelite capital as well as a more general political affiliation with the Northern Kingdom.

It is also possible that the persons responsible for the inscription recognized and accepted Yahweh's Temanite origins but now believed that Yahweh resided in the royal temple city of Samaria. For this writer, the assumption may be similar to certain biblical authors who see that, while Yahweh had a mobile past, he has in essence settled down. We may also be witnessing a polemic regarding Yahweh's domestication. The Temanite association of Yahweh is one with the wilderness and could highlight characteristics of Yahweh that are seen to be untamed or dangerous. Promoting an association that is primarily city-based, as is Samaria, has the effect of "civilizing" Yahweh according to a worldview that considers society to be essentially sedentary rather than mobile.

While their presence at the site overlapped over the course of its use, the likelihood is that each person who made their way through Kuntillet 'Ajrud maintained different sensations of distance and absence from their sites of origin. Their lived experience of the site as "place" was equally manifold. That they understood themselves in terms of modern geographic categories is unlikely. Nevertheless, like all humans, they would have responded subjectively to the site by mapping themselves onto its contours in myriad ways. The inscriptional evidence from the bench room and the pithoi demonstrate that those present at Kuntillet 'Ajrud shared more than the experience of mobility. Their inscriptions witness to the realities of shared convictions that Yahweh was accessible there, perhaps even present in a unique way. And so, they called on his name.

Blessing as Invocations of Presence

That the four inscriptions under consideration share the characterization of blessing formulae is more important than it may first appear in the broader discussion of the relationship between presence, absence, distance, and naming and mapping. Blessing takes place at intersections and divergences; at the junctures of security and insecurity, at points where the present and future converge, at the crossroads of life and death. Blessing is the language of hospitality; of meeting and departure, of sending and receiving. Blessing is frequently the language of those who are on the move. Among modern migrants, we find many who attend different types of blessing ceremonies where they discern if and when to leave their homes, and petition the divine for safety along the way, both for themselves and their loved ones. Likewise, along their routes, migrants make use of various installations and infrastructures to seek

divine blessing.⁴⁷ Even for those who are not spurred to movement by insecurity still often seek traveling mercies.

The act of blessing is naming behavior. In each of the inscriptions, the person offering a blessing names both the receiving party and the deity who they expect will enact the blessing. Constituent to the praxis of naming human and divine parties is that of specifying a cartographic element of divine personhood. In all of this, blessing is the language of *presence*. Invoking presence via blessing is a request for the distance between the divine and human realms to be tangibly bridged. Therefore, the experience of divine presence requires boundary crossing.

Borders are always sites of movement, confluence, and contestation. Even if divine and human realms are understood to be parts of the same whole, the porosity between the two is unpredictable. Just as borders reveal dynamics of power between movers, acts of blessing reveal varying capacities of agency. Blessing is predicated on inequalities between the one who gives the blessing and the one who receives it. The *absence* of equality is what the naming of a divine entity in a blessing formulation turns on. To bless one in the name of a particular god is to invoke the power and authority of that deity over another for their own good. Yet in doing so, neither blessing nor presence are guaranteed.

Blessing functions as a medium through which divine presence is accessed and activated. As with the language of presence, blessing involves both person and place. Naming and mapping, thus, converge through blessing. Throughout the ancestral narratives of the Pentateuch, we find collective memories of naming places and the divine in response to moments of encounter and blessings received while on the move. These sites are charted on the landscape and associated with aspects of divine presence as the act of naming transforms space into place and time into history. In some instances, these sites become part of Israel's liturgical cartography (Gen 32:18–19). In others, they are identified with apostate activities (Amos 4:4, 5:5).

One of the difficulties with the inscriptions at Kuntillet 'Ajrud is that we don't know who wrote them or where to locate those who are named in them. At least two of the texts appear to name persons who were not present at the site during the time the inscriptions were created. Perhaps the texts were left by those passing through as messages to ones that they know will also make a stop-over there. In this case, the texts serve not only to call divine presence into place on behalf of the recipients, but also to preserve the presence of the message writer in absentia after they have moved on. In another reading of the evidence, perhaps each text is intended to be a message for someone located beyond the site who would not journey to Kuntillet 'Ajrud. In this scenario, another traveler passing through the site could have been meant to see and to deliver the contents of the message to their recipients. We can't know if the inscriptions were ever read or received by their intended

47 Hagan 2008, 3–19; Hagan/Ebaugh 2003, 1145–1162; Sarat 2013.

audiences. Thus, in still another scenario, the blessing may be offered on behalf of the absent party with the knowledge that they would benefit from it but never hear or read it. This last instance may be akin to the countless prayers offered for loved ones left far away but kept close through constant acts of remembrance. Although ultimately unique from one another, each of these scenarios is an attempt to conjure or preserve presence at a distance.

To inscribe a blessing in a fixed location is to situate a point of divine access more tangibly than in speech alone. Thus, some have argued for the numinous quality of inscriptions, including those at Kuntillet 'Ajrud, whereby text becomes a bridge between human and divine realms.⁴⁸ I have written at length elsewhere how the artwork that compliments the inscriptions on Pithos A and B are akin to *retablos* created by Central American migrants.⁴⁹ These small artworks employ stylized thanksgiving, petitionary, and blessing formulae and serve as objects to direct veneration of particular saints or worship of the divine. In short, they are objects that convey and conjure presence in contexts of mobility, often while displaying particular sites where presence is most intensely encountered. These works of art are generated at the intersection of mobility and presence. They recall memories of times when the realities of distance from home and loved ones were painfully present or when the fear that God or their patron saint was absent in a moment of supreme need. In each of these small votive creations, we repeatedly find proclamations that the Divine met those struggling precisely where they were when they needed it most. In this way, though unique to the situations of their creators, each *retablo* celebrates the triumph of presence over absence by both naming and mapping divinity using the language of blessing.

We can also see, that beyond being the language of presence, and the language of those on the move, blessing is also the language of multiplication (Gen 1:22, 28; 9:1; 17:16, 20; 22:17–18). In addition to associations with prolific offspring, wealth, and health, blessing demonstrates the comprehensiveness of divine personhood. It may, therefore, be constituent to perceptions of divine multiplicity, which relates back to discussions of the different toponymic appellations for Yahweh found at Kuntillet 'Ajrud.

Conclusion

The inscriptional remains from Kuntillet 'Ajrud are but one window into the worlds of ancient persons in contexts of mobility. By examining the words that they have

⁴⁸ Schmidt 2016, 54–58, 73–79; Sanders 2019, 327–49; Niditich 2015, 98–99.

⁴⁹ Trinka 2019, 66–90; Trinka 2022, 162–83. For full discussion of iconography on the pithoi see, Schmidt 2002; Beck 2012, 143–204; Thomas 2016, 121–91.

left behind through a mobilities-informed hermeneutic we find that there is less distance than is sometimes imagined between ancient and modern experiences of presence and between ancient and modern practices of naming and mapping gods. Considering the practices of naming and mapping gods from a mobilities-informed perspective illuminates the intersections of power and place commonly understood as presence. In particular, this essay has demonstrated how practices of blessing and conceptions of divine multiplicity are interlinked with naming and mapping.

Contrary to any assertion that multiplicity inevitably leads to the fragmentation of divine personhood or sacred space, we can acknowledge that both person and place can be endlessly compounded. Such is the agglomerative nature of reality that leads to layered selves rather than fractured or fragmented selves. Contingency begets contingency without necessarily superseding that which came before it. This is not simply coexistence, nor is it always competition. It is, instead, comprehensiveness; the contours of which are often inexpressible and potentially incoherent. Naming and mapping provide a means to articulate the inexpressible in moments of presence.

Naming and mapping, then as now, are epistemological endeavors. Our knowledge of place accrues with experiences of being present in and with it. Likewise, places themselves responsively evolve through our participation. This relational dialectic of presence leads to the multiplicities of person and place that constitute everyday existence and contribute to our experiences of distance and absence. Within this matrix of knowing, the practices of naming and mapping gods ultimately function as means of wayfinding in a world that is on-the-move.

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