

BRIAN B. SCHMIDT

The Materiality of Power

*Forschungen
zum Alten Testament
105*

Mohr Siebeck

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105



Brian B. Schmidt

The Materiality of Power

Explorations in the Social History
of Early Israelite Magic

Mohr Siebeck

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Contents

List of Figures	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Abbreviations	xiii

CHAPTER I

MAGIC “FROM THE GROUND UP”: IMAGE, OBJECT, EPIGRAPH, THEN TEXT

On Defining Magic: Modernity’s Dilemma	2
Searching for Ancient Magic	5
Ancient Magic, Modern Constructions	7
Magic’s Material Turn	10
Doing Israelite Magic “From the Ground Up”	11

CHAPTER 2

“MAY YHWH BLESS YOU AND KEEP YOU!”: CULT AND *FAVISSAE* AT KUNTILLET AJRUD

Scouring “Cultic” Landscapes: The Natural, Human, and Divine	16
Kuntillet Ajrud’s Sacred Locus: Building A’s Bench Room	16
Were There <i>Favissae</i> or Intentional Cult Deposits?	17
The Evidence for a “Decorative Pithos Libation” Rite	21
The Larger Decorated Pithos Repertoire: “From Z to A”	24
Divining the Markings: The Decorated Sherds	25
Deciphering Decorated Sherds as Whole Pithoi	26
The Z Fragment or Sherd	27
The So-Called Pithos A Courtyard Fragment	28
A Second Immanent Ritual Setting: The South Storeroom’s Locus 8	29
Kuntillet Ajrud’s Other Ritual Annexes and Their <i>Favissae</i>	32
The Ritual Lives of Kuntillet Ajrud’s Decorated Pithoi	35
The Collocation of Apotropaism: The Numinous Pithoi, Walls, and Loci	35
Transmitting the Numinous: From Drafts to Murals	36
Pithos Decor as Scribal-Artisan Drafts	37
The Case of the Two “Seated Figures”	37
The Case of the Two “Overhead Captions”	39
The Case of the Two “Inscribed Blessings”	46
The Case of the Two “Artistic Repertoires”	50
The Case for Scribal-Artisan Drafts	54

Anomaly or Convention: Pithoi as Large-Area Drafting Surfaces	56
Figural Drafts on Limestone “Ostraca” or “Flakes”	57
Epigraphic Drafts on Limestone Slabs and Whole Jars	57
Constructing Pithos Rites: The Images and Epigraphs	59
Gendering the Divine	59
Gender Marking the Masculine	60
Gender Marking the Feminine	62
Gender Juxtaposed	63
Bearded Ladies and Numinous Necks	64
Sizing Up Gendered Partners	65
“Loops and Leggings”	65
A Cavorting Consort?	66
Up Close and Personal: Overlapping as Scribal-Artisan Technique	67
A Test Case: The Worshipper Procession Scene	68
The Bes-Like Dwarfism of Worshipper M	68
The Worshipper Scene’s Overhead Caption	69
Overlapping and the Bes-Like Figures	70
The Lyre Player	70
Dancers and Musicians?	72
Delineating Inscribed Divine Speech	73
Making Blessings and Dedications as Captions	74
The Responsive Graffiti	77
Other Related Texts	79
Convergence or Chaos: The Complex Integrated Scenes	80
The Integrated Scenes on the Pithoi	80
Corresponding Scenes on the Painted Plastered Walls	82
Libations and Votives: Rites for an Egyptianizing Israelite Pantheon	84
Constructing Apotropaic Bes and Beset	84
Bes and Beset: Form and Style	85
Bes Iconography	87
Journeying with Bes: The Levant and Beyond	87
Translating Bes and Beset: From Image to Text	89
Bes to Yahweh, Beset to Asherah	90
The Other Gods: El, Baal, and the Elim in Wall Inscription 4.2	90
The Goddess Asherah as Mediatrice	94
Asherah in First-Millennium Ancient Near Eastern Sources	96
Asherah in the Hebrew Bible	97
A Hybridized Desert Iconic Creole	100
Provisioning and Protecting: Yahwism’s Apotropaic Presence	103
The Decorated Pithos Loci	103
The Plastered Wall Paintings	105
Life-Sustaining Power: The Lotus Flower	105
The Royal Seated Figure	106
Constructing Aspects of the Pithos Libation Rite	107

The Numinously Empowered Plastered Wall Paintings	109
The Numinous and the Mundane: Kuntillet Ajrud More Holistically	111
Summary	122

CHAPTER 3

GODSPEED ON THE "OTHER SIDE": TEXT, TOMB, IMAGE, AND EVIL

The Ketef Hinnom Amulets	123
The Social Matrix of Early Judean Apotropaism	123
Amulets Galore: The Tale of a Jerusalem Tomb	124
Converging Nonutilitarian Artifacts	125
The Cooccurrence of Cultic Assemblages	126
Three Regional Site Samples of Late Iron II Amuletic Magic	127
Ketef Hinnom's Amulets Reassessed	128
The Dating of the Amulets	129
A New Reading: An "Eternal" Temple?	132
Other Rereadings: "The Evil (One)," "The Exorciser of the Evil (One)," and the Demonic	135
Remnants of a Wider Levantine Daimonic	137
Summary: Amuletic Magic in Judean Religious Life	140
Khirbet el-Qom	144
Khirbet el-Qom Tomb 2: Epigraph Meets Image Meets Object	144
The Site: Tomb 2's Wider Cemetery Setting	145
Tomb 2: The Immanent Sociohistorical Context	147
The "Telling" Tomb Assemblages	148
Narrowing the Context: The Incised Human Hand	151
Changing Views on Early Israelite Cosmological Beliefs	152
The Text of Khirbet El-Qom's Inscription 3	156
The Meaning of the Palaeographic <i>Doppelgänger</i>	158

CHAPTER 4

WAS THERE (A) PANDEMONIUM IN EARLY ISRAELITE TRADITION?
THE DAIMONIC DIMENSIONS OF DEUTERONOMY 32

The Demonic in Ancient Israelite Tradition	163
Demon or Daimon? The Haunting Question	164
Deuteronomy 32: A Reassessment	165
Deuteronomy 32:8–9	165
Summary	168
Deuteronomy 32:43	169
Summary	170
Deuteronomy 32:17	170
Identifying Hebrew <i>Shedim</i> : Cognate or Conceptual Parallels?	172
On Deifying Daimons and "Demonizing" Deities in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia	174

The <i>Shedu</i> -Gods of Psalm 106	180
Deuteronomy 32:17 and Greco-Roman Egyptian <i>Daimonia</i>	181
Summary	182
Deuteronomy 32:24	183
A Postscript to Pandemonium: Reimagining ʾĒLŌHĪM in 1 Sam 28:13	187
The MT and LXX Translations of 1 Sam 28:8–14	187
Samuel’s Ghost and Other Daimons at Endor	188
A Case of Prophet Deified or Ghost-Assisting Daimons?	189
1 Samuel 8: Narrating the Case against the Divine-Human	190
Reconsidering the Participants in 1 Samuel 28:12–15	193
An Early Israelite Daimonic Pandemonium: Revenants and Other Divine Entities	196
On Demon Demographics in Ancient Israel	197

CHAPTER 5

MATERIAL ASPECTS OF EARLY ISRAELITE APOTROPAIC MAGIC:
INTEGRATING IMAGE, OBJECT, EPIGRAPH, AND BIBLICAL TRADITION

Some Closing Comments: On Matters of Plausibility and Identity	201
Beset: The Identity and Role of Bes’s Female Partner	201
The Plausibility of Kuntillet Ajrud’s Divine Convergence	204
The Demonization of Deities and the Deification of Daimons	204
Beyond Demonization and Deification: Convergent, Hybrid Deities	206
Late Iron Age Cyprus: Two Case Studies in “Bes Hybridity”	207
Pyla: The Deity Reshef as “Bes Locally Imagined”	207
A Bes Trio from Athienou-Malloura	210
Making Explicit the Implicit: ‘Egyptianizing’ Samaritan Hybridity and Kuntillet Ajrud’s Graffito 3.1	214
Kuntillet Ajrud’s Unique Cult	216
Magic’s Materials: Image, Text, and Artifact	219
Discerning Asherah’s Role	220
The Daimonic in Deuteronomy 32	221
Conclusion	222
References	225
Subject Index	237
Ancient Sources Index	251
Modern Authors Index	255

List of Figures

CHAPTER 2

Fig. 2.1. Building A East (image courtesy Ze'ev Meshel)	18
Fig. 2.2 . Projection drawing of Pithos A (image courtesy Ze'ev Meshel)	28
Fig. 2.3. Sherd Z's seated figure (image courtesy Ze'ev Meshel)	38
Fig. 2.4. Wall painting no. 9 seated figure (image courtesy Ze'ev Meshel)	38
Fig. 2.5. Projection drawing of Pithos B (Image courtesy Ze'ev Meshel)	40
Fig. 2.6. Pithos B (photo) (image courtesy Ze'ev Meshel)	41
Fig. 2.7. Wall painting no. 11 (photo) (image courtesy Ze'ev Meshel)	41
Fig. 2.8. Wall painting no. 11 (<i>in situ</i>) (image courtesy Ze'ev Meshel)	42
Fig. 2.9. Graffito inscription 3.1 (photo) (image courtesy Ze'ev Meshel)	44
Fig. 2.10. Caption inscription 3.9 (image courtesy Ze'ev Meshel)	47
Fig. 2.11. Caption inscription 3.9 (photo) (image courtesy Ze'ev Meshel)	47
Fig. 2.12. Wall inscription 4.1.1 (image courtesy Ze'ev Meshel)	48
Fig. 2.13. Wall inscription 4.1.1 (image courtesy Ze'ev Meshel)	48
Fig. 2.14. Location map of inscriptions (image courtesy Ze'ev Meshel)	50
Fig. 2.15. Location map of painted pithoi and plaster wall fragments (image courtesy Ze'ev Meshel)	51

CHAPTER 3

Fig. 3.1. Ketef Hinnom's location in Jerusalem (image courtesy IAA)	124
Fig. 3.2. Floor plan of cave 2 (image courtesy IAA)	130
Fig. 3.3. Isometric drawing of cave 2 (image courtesy IAA)	130
Fig. 3.4. Distribution of finds in chamber 25 (image courtesy IAA)	131
Fig. 3.5. Amulet 1 photo with superimposed letters (image courtesy IAA)	134
Fig. 3.6. Amulet 1 drawing with reconstruction (image courtesy IAA)	134
Fig. 3.7. Amulet 2 photo with superimposed letters (image courtesy IAA)	136
Fig. 3.8. Amulet 2 drawing with reconstruction (image courtesy IAA)	136
Fig 3.9 . Khirbet el-Qom: The earthward hand and inscription 3 from cave 2 (image courtesy IAA)	145
Fig. 3.10. Close up of inscription 3 above the hand (image courtesy IAA)	146
Fig. 3.11. Close up of inscription 3 to the right of the hand (image courtesy IAA)	147

CHAPTER 5

Fig. 5.1. The Bes-headed cippus dedicated to Resheph Shed from Palaikastro (Pyla) (image courtesy the Louvre Museum)	209
Fig. 5.2. The Bes wall bracket from Athienou-Malloura (image courtesy AAP)	211
Fig. 5.3. The Bes wall bracket in multiple viewpoints (image courtesy AAP)	212

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I dedicate this volume to my family, first to my mother Bettye Loyce Schmidt whose years are quickly coming to fullness, to the memory of my dear grandfather, Hiram Ardis Simons who I knew as Pa and whose thirty year silence grows ever louder, and to the more distant memory of my wonderful grandmother, Archie Jennings Simons, a life cut far too short, whose memory lasts only as a fading glimmer - as two hands gently a grip; Ma's the stronger, mine the weaker.... Finally, I also wish to dedicate this volume to my daughter, Hayley, and to my son, Blake. They give good reason to keep my head held high. May they enjoy life's magic for many years-to-come.

With this volume completed I have been gratefully reminded that it takes a village, nay, a metropolis, to publish a book.

November 2015
Brian B. Schmidt
Ann Arbor

Abbreviations

AMD	Ancient Magic and Divination
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by David Noel Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992
ARelG	<i>Archiv für Religionsgeschichte</i>
AIL	Ancient Israel and Its Literature
AJA	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
ArOr	<i>Archív orientální</i>
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BSFE	<i>Bulletin de la Société Française d'Égyptologie</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CdE	<i>Chronique d'Égypte</i>
CM	Cuneiform Monographs
DDD	<i>Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible</i> . Edited by Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst. Leiden: Brill, 1995
DemStud	Demotische Studien
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
DSD	<i>Dead Sea Discoveries</i>
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
EBR	<i>Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception</i>
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
HBS	History of Biblical Studies
HeBAI	<i>Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel</i>
HO	Handbuch der Orientalistik
HSS	Harvard Semitic Studies
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
IDD	<i>Iconography of Deities and Demons in the Ancient Near East</i> . Edited by Jörg Eggler and Christoph Uehlinger. OBO Series Archaeologica. Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
JAIE	<i>Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections</i>

<i>JANER</i>	<i>Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JEA</i>	<i>Journal of Egyptian Archaeology</i>
<i>JEOL</i>	<i>Jaarbericht van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Gezelschap (Genootschap) Ex oriente lux</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JNSL</i>	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSOTSSup</i>	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
<i>LHBOTS</i>	The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
<i>LÄ</i>	<i>Lexikon der Ägyptologie</i> . Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1975–92
<i>MAARAV</i>	<i>Maarav</i>
<i>MMJ</i>	<i>Metropolitan Museum Journal</i>
<i>NEA</i>	<i>Near Eastern Archaeology</i>
<i>NEAEHL</i>	<i>The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land</i> . Edited by Ephraim Stern. 4 vols. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society & Carta; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993
<i>NIDB</i>	<i>New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> . Edited by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. 5 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 2006–2009
<i>NINO</i>	Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten
<i>OBO</i>	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
<i>OEANE</i>	<i>The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East</i> . Edited by Eric M. Meyers. 5 vols. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997
<i>OLA</i>	Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta
<i>ORA</i>	Orientalische Religionen in der Antike
<i>OTS</i>	Old Testament Studies
<i>PEQ</i>	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
<i>RBL</i>	<i>Review of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>RBS</i>	Resources for Biblical Study
<i>RGRW</i>	Religions in the Graeco-Roman World
<i>SAK</i>	<i>Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur</i>
<i>SAOC</i>	Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilizations
<i>SCS</i>	Septuagint and Cognate Studies
<i>SJOT</i>	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
<i>STDJ</i>	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
<i>TA</i>	<i>Tel Aviv</i>
<i>UEE</i>	<i>UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology</i>
<i>UF</i>	<i>Ugarit-Forschungen</i>
<i>VA</i>	<i>Varia Aegyptiaca</i>

<i>VisRel</i>	<i>Visible Religion</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZDPV</i>	<i>Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins</i>

General

BCE	before the common era
ca.	circa
CE	common era
DA	Deir Alla
Dtr	Deuteronomist/Deuteronomistic
DtrH	Deuteronomistic History
HB	Hebrew Bible
KA	Kuntillet Ajrud
KH	Ketef Hinnom
KQ	Khirbet el-Qom
LBA	Late Bronze Age
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NB	Neo-Babylonian
v./vv.	verse/verses
vs.	versus

Chapter 1

Magic “From The Ground Up”: Image, Object, Epigraph, Then Text

It is most significant that in the lagoon fishing, where man can rely completely upon his knowledge and skill, magic does not exist, while in the open-sea fishing, full of danger and uncertainty, there is extensive magical ritual to secure safety and good results.

Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion*

Obviously the rituals and superstitions of baseball do not make a pitch travel faster or a batted ball locate gaps between the fielders, nor do Trobriand rituals calm the seas or bring fish. What both do, however, is give their practitioners a sense of control, and with that, confidence. And we all know how important that is.

George Gmelch, *Baseball Magic*

What evidence do we have for the practice of magic in early Israelite society of the late Iron II period (more precisely the Iron II B–C, 900–587 BCE), what form did it take, what objects did it use and what beliefs did it embody and convey? The five case studies presented here are designed to explore these questions. Three are centered on the material world of ancient Israelite society. Two representatives from ancient Israel’s literary traditions follow. The inspiration for the ensuing investigation derives from a variety of sources and developments. Chief among them are recent precedents utilizing material-cultural evidence as a primary source in exploring, articulating, and refining the study of ancient Mediterranean and ancient Near Eastern religious and magical traditions. The latest permutations of this approach typically integrate epigraphic and other textual evidence with the archaeological data in order to generate a more nuanced, holistic reconstruction of those traditions. Encouraging results continue to emerge from the integration of material and textual data that pertain to personal, family, domestic, and state religion and magic of the southern Levant. Likewise, increasingly sophisticated and nuanced reconstructions have been advanced in the wider worlds of ancient Egypt, Cyprus, and in other Mediterranean and ancient Near Eastern regions in the forms of major syntheses and specialized studies.¹ But before taking up the task of assessing the

¹ For examples of recent interregional and intraregional syntheses as well as case studies in some instances astutely combined see LARA WEISS, *Religious Practice at Deir el-Medina*. Egyptolo-

five case studies from early Israelite society presented in this volume, a working definition of magic that might guide that assessment will be proposed.

On Defining Magic: Modernity's Dilemma

Any attempt at a definition of magic is doomed to failure apart from the recognition that modernity possesses its own entanglement with magic, that the two are inseparable and that in defining magic, it ultimately becomes ... again ... our own as much as it describes the ancient realities that comprise the object of our study. After many years of undergoing a slow, agonizing death at the hands of both anthropologists and philosophers, first as the epitome of the primitive, then as the vestige of archaic survivals lurking in modernity's own dark corners, magic has reappeared as the quintessential tool for analyzing the moves that modernity makes in its shadow dance with itself.² Yet, as anyone engaged in the academic study of magic would acknowledge, the term, nay, the very concept "magic," while perhaps self-evident at some intuitive or ephemeral level, remains an ever-elusive, sly creature of impressive adaptability and agility. And this all confess irrespective of their particular take on the ongoing debate over the usefulness or futility of the modern term magic as a cipher for investigating histories past and cultures exotic. This is magic's own mysterious etic-emic tango. What investigators find preoccupying their energies when it comes to the various theories, methods, and ethnographies applied to magic is magic's complex intersection and continuous tension with modern manifestations of power. As fragmented and somewhat obfuscated as magic has now become, it continues to be invoked as an etic frame for investigation. But muddying these newer waters is the growing recognition that magic remains intimately entangled in and inseparably intertwined with modernity and modernity with magic. Despite conventional claims to the contrary, namely, that magic and modernity are essentially antithetical domains, they have reemerged in recent literature as co-dependent and mutually informing.

In a tour de force that served as the introductory frame to a 2003 collection of penetrating essays titled *Magic and Modernity*, Peter Pels constructed what he de-

gische uitgaven 29 (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut Voor Het Nabije Oosten; Leuven: Peeters, 2015); RAINER ALBERTZ and RÜDIGER SCHMITT, *Family and Household Religion in Ancient Israel and the Levant* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012); the fourteen essays in *Family and Household Religion: Towards a Synthesis of Old Testament Studies, Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Cultural Studies*, ed. RAINER ALBERTZ ET AL. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014) and ANDREW T. WILBURN, *Materia Magica: The Archaeology of Magic in Roman Egypt, Cyprus, and Spain: New Texts from Ancient Cultures* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

² Or more accurately "modernities" (plural!) in acknowledgment of the competing visions of modernity currently "out there." Following BRUNO LATOUR (*We Have Never Been Modern* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993], 10), modernity refers to a real or perceived rupture in the regular passage of time, something "new" in contrast to what preceded.

scribed as an alternative “perspective on the history of the anthropology on magic and witchcraft...”³ His is a compelling investigation into the modern study of magic as a conceptual field. He makes the case for the recognition, even among earlier anthropologists such as Benedict and Malinowski, that magic is not solely modernity’s preexistent antithesis or lesser equal, but the very product of modernity as modernity searches for identity and power. Yet Pels argues, such prescient insight on the part of earlier experts has seldom if ever been accompanied by, or followed up with, theoretical reflection on the manner in which magic belongs to modernity. That magic belongs to modernity stands as an exception to the long-dominant evolutionist view of early modern and modern anthropological scholarship where magic could hardly be seen as anything other than essentially (belonging to the) “Other.” Though once widely accepted (in variant forms), this evolutionist view has since suffered a slow demise. It is a relic of the scholarly past as are its presumed permutations in the modern western context as well as its persistence in the non-western world, past and present.⁴

Pels then asserts that this can be overcome by analyzing two aspects of the relationship between magic and modernity: what he refers to as the *supplementarity* of magic and modernity (“many modern discourses position magic as their antithesis, reinventing it in the process”) and the specific forms that the magic of modernity takes (“the enchantments that are produced by practices culturally specific to modern states, economies and societies”). Modernity’s enchantment constitutes those outcomes related to modernity’s assertion of itself in the way of allure and fascination that approximate what religion and supposedly magic have offered to so-called nonmodern societies. Pels envisions modernity’s enchantment as having a dual aspect; disenchantment and re-enchantment, in which firstly, modernity seeks to obliterate magic and then secondly, to replace it with its own enticements. This process Pels coins the “magicality of modernity.” That is to say, magic neither functions as modernity’s counterpoint nor does it simply continue into the modern. Rather, magic is the product of modernity.

In articulating the magicality of modernity, Pels refers to a central paradox in the study of magic; the exposure of the illusion or deception of magic led in turn to the revelation of magic’s existence. While early anthropologists produced what he labels an Occidentalistic discourse that negatively distinguished primitive logic

³ PETER PELS, “Introduction: Magic and Modernity,” in *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment*, ed. BIRGIT MEYER and PETER PELS (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1–38.

⁴ For an excellent survey of the various forms in which the early modern and modern evolutionist approaches to magic manifested themselves, see RANDALL STYERS, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic & Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 121–63. Styers organizes the morass of literature under the following rubrics: theories of the primitive philosopher, theories of primitive mentality, theories of psychic unity, theories of primitive ingenuity, and theories of primitive expressiveness as these bear on the questions of the definition and the scope of rationality.

from a modern, Western logic, Pels notes that by exposing the supposed inferiority of the rituals of non-Western cultures, they also revealed magic's continued existence, since anthropologists could only explain the otherness of magic by referring to analogous social and cultural traits in their own. They thereby reinvented the discourses in which Europeans addressed the occult in their own cultures. For Pels, modernity's "enchantment" is complemented by magic's "haunting." Magic's haunting refers to modernity's thwarted attempt to eradicate magic all the while producing new forms of it that resist that selfsame eradication and are, and have been, instead marginalized along "the fault lines of European social contradictions." Modernity relocates magic in the past, or among primitives, or on the modern Western margins; all three constituting worlds of the Other. What were the movements and communities that participated in this nuanced and subtle process? Pels identifies early anthropologists as the lead actors in the drama, and so in the nineteenth century, magic's illusionary dimension in exotic contexts was not only revealed, but then paradoxically lauded as a stroke of genius.

In different hands, magic could also be used "to conduct political and religious controversies and to upset the monopoly of certain hegemonic categories in the classification of intellectual progress." The late nineteenth-century world of the West in which both the notions of magic's falsification and its simultaneous exaltation as contemporary "occult" practices ironically arose, was one in which the evolutionist confidence in science ran headlong into the romantic impulse to "re-enchant" the world; "high imperialism meets high bourgeois anxiety" and "realist tradition meets gothic novel cum folklore studies and scientific metaphors." It was an "intellectual climate in which the Orientalist anthropology of Max Müller was fused with the new literary mysteries of (Edwin) Bulwer-Lytton in modern occultism," thereby "announcing modernist literature's persistent displacement of reason by magic, the occult, and the irrational" and introducing a "modernized magic" now associated with the "imponderabilities of science."

Pels cites as an example of the *supplementarity* that exists between magic and modernity and the forms of enchantment that modern magic can take, the clash between what he describes as "the magic of monarchy" and "the dazzle of halogen," that was brought about by the tragic accident leading to the death of the global media's darling, Princess Diana. Her celebrity-status death exposed the British royal family's domestic world with unrelenting scrutiny to the international press. It thereby posed a(nother) direct challenge to the long-standing taboo against publicizing the private lives of royals. Such secrecy and shrouding of royal privacy was upheld in order to maintain the magic of monarchy against the threat to its mystique brought about by the media frenzy surrounding Diana's life. The media's love affair with the Princess had all but exploded the border between royal public and private life. Here, modernity produced its own kinds of magic. The media possessed the power to produce an alternative form of enchantment, namely, celebrity, to that previously contrived by the monarchy, and yet, a seemingly disempowered monarchy's mystique was, in turn,

able to reestablish its insidious taboo against intrusions by its (republican-inspired?) citizenry. Monarchy too had created, and then recreated, its own magic. It is in just such revelations that magic's existence is unequivocally authenticated.

According to Pels, "the modern study of magic is largely a study in human subjectivity." The problems investigators face in defining magic are twofold; articulating the specific histories attached to and productive of magic or any one of its cognate terms, and the fact that any general definition of magic is itself the product of Western history with its assumptions about such categories or discursive fields as magic, religion, and science. Having so concluded, Pels somewhat surprisingly, throws caution to the wind, forges ahead through his historical resumé and offers his own definition of magic. For Pels, it is one of any number of concepts that denote for a modern discourse on magic any deluded, illusory, backward, or irrational belief that nonetheless was accompanied by doubts about just how deluded, illusory, or backwards that belief might actually be. He qualifies his definition, however, in concluding that, "it is more important to study *the practices* and power relationships which those things that we tend to call magic, or substitute for with related terms, are caught up ..." (my italics). Not only that, but the modern investigator too must examine the methods and practices she or he employs when, for example, identifying differences in the respective power relations involved in the process of anthropological translation.

Searching for Ancient Magic

If one may assume that "magic" per se existed in pre-, non-Greek, ancient Near Eastern societies and that it informed subsequent notions of magic in Western tradition, what did such magic look, smell, sound, taste, or feel like? What was its character and function? As one might intuit, what lies beneath the surface of the pursuit for answers to these historical/historicist-oriented questions is the often implicit, and persistent, competing yet ultimate search for origins and the use of those findings in current ethnicity constructions. Driving the pursuit of origins there lay beneath another, the one for identity, both individual and collective, and this same search is part and parcel to the great quest that has occupied modern intellectual inquiry for the past two hundred years: "who am I?" ... "who are we?" In modern versions of this enterprise, there lies embedded in works on magic of ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern societies a heavy dose of philological analysis aimed at primary source materials, the invocation of comparative data as a means of contextualizing texts, and more recently, the occasional and rather circumspect, application of anthropological and literary theory in order to generate heuristic parameters. While such a general orientation informs the present investigation as well, there also appears throughout these pages, due recognition of the limits of such an endeavor; no one writer fully commands all these fields and facets. Thus, like those that have gone before and those that shall

follow, *Materiality* is indebted to these ancient and modern intellectual histories as it seeks the modest goal of exploring magic as manifested in a discreet cultural tradition in time and space.

The present volume examines magic in ancient Israelite society of the late Iron II period. As opposed to the Late Bronze and Iron I periods at the one end and the Persian period on the other, the late Iron II historical period currently comprises one that is the least contested in scholarship (although, this too may be somewhat illusory). Nevertheless, it is by no means an exploration grounded only on the hard data we presently possess that drives it forward. In anticipation of the definition of magic employed in *Materiality*, some of the self-conscious assumptions or starting points that inform how magic is understood and interpreted include the following. Magic, like religion, was practiced in ancient social life and depicted in ancient literary constructions and either of those realities might potentially generate its complement. That is to say, prior practices informed, directly or indirectly, whether in part or in whole, literary images of the same or some approximation thereof. Likewise, literary productions could, and did, generate the performance of new rituals including magic. This constitutes the dynamics of magic and so the entire continuum of past ritual realities, whether practiced or imagined, discloses itself to exploration. Such prior practices and literary productions will be explored for their prospective contributions to the search for magic in early Israel of the late Iron II.

Furthermore, the historical dimension of the search need not be obfuscated by the complications that characteristically accompany historical investigation any more or less so than what would obtain in the literary analysis of ancient magic (which too presumes the “historicality” of an ancient text as an artifact). Can one genuinely avoid this reality frazzled as it may be at its edges? Admittedly, the citation of a text as a fully accurate portrayal of a corresponding ancient social reality is a highly precarious undertaking. Yet, to deny the possibility that a text might reflect historical realities, however partial and fragmented, and to employ such a text for historical reconstruction hardly warrants being entirely abandoned. In fact, one might argue, and others have, that the historical embeddedness of a given primary source, that is, its date, its findspot or disposition, its functions, and its ancient concentric circles of context (whether archaeological, historical, social, or political, and so on) forces itself upon the modern reader. Although it often is claimed that the portrayal of all magic is by nature sociopolitically rendered, it is assumed herein that a given ritual in a singular instance might be neutrally/accurately depicted. A scribe practicing his or her literate skills might record the actual ritual mechanics or procedures of a given practice. In such cases, the information one can glean from the primary source in question might provide a significant entryway into an ancient ritual that was considered by some magical, by others religious, and by still others at the immediate moment of its recording, simply the object of scribal duty.

Ancient Magic, Modern Constructions

Another assumption that informs the present treatment is the notion that modern conceptions of magic in fact have many connections with, nay their origins in, ancient constructions of the same emanating from the western reaches of the Asian continent, the southeastern coastal cultures of Europe, and the northwest region of the African continent. In other words, the dismissal of modern terms and concepts as viable avenues to building a descriptive discourse on ancient magic is unwarranted. While definitions of magic derived from emic usage ultimately remain impenetrable in character to the modern, etic-positioned researcher, one must seek to use language sufficiently familiar to us and where possible, derived from “theirs” in order to model and explicate what magic is or was. There is no way around the dilemma. So while a host of Victorian anthropologists may be criticized for a number of faulty assumptions, some were nevertheless imitating similar shortcomings or deliberate biases of the ancient writers themselves and upon whom the early modernists relied. In the case of historical accusations involving magic, a prominent tendency among scholars is to assume that the rituals of the accused are not accurately represented by the accusers and so do not offer much in the way of informing us about those rituals. While this undoubtedly is the situation in a number of cases, it hardly stands as a *fait accompli* that such is the case in all. Why could a rite not be accurately portrayed in its procedures, for example, but rejected on the basis of the underlying theology associated with it? Perhaps it was the right ritual, but the wrong deity presiding. The position taken here is that there are instances in which significant data can be retrieved from ancient sources in spite of their polemical or critical stance regarding the actual, ancient magical practices of others.

In *Making Magic*, Randall Styers has explored at length the problems attendant to the modern scholarly investigation of magic. Following the lead of critics like Bruno Latour, Emily Apter, and Michael Taussig, Styers identifies what he labels as the double gesture of demythologizing and reenchancement that scholars un-self-reflectively invoke in their search for objectivity. Magic’s long legacy of being closely attached to, even equated with, the power of words by scholars serves as his example of how this may manifest itself. He identifies a paradox at the very juncture where in past treatments of magic as the power of words, magic is upheld by the magician as the means to animate the world when, according to modern scholars, words themselves are held to lack any external reality. Words merely occupy a sort of shadow world. So, scholars in their attempts to analyze magic, make the claim that in magical traditions, words and external realities are (con)fused together into one larger mythical unity; word and physical reality become a singular, undifferentiated world. This scholars debunk as the magician’s attempt to subject all external reality to the desire of the magician with the result that linguistic categories and physical realities become merged. In so doing, scholars disavow the performative power of the speech act when evaluating the magician’s words, but in their own

critique those scholars exercise the very power of the words that they otherwise deny the magician; what Styers epitomizes as scholars “making magic” in which they also mask their own power. Ergo, not only has magic survived, it has thrived in direct proportion to its attempted suppression. As a fitting example, Pels cites the work of Gyan Prakash who has demonstrated how various sectors of society in India set out to “reform” Hinduism into a “modern” religion by separating out and highlighting certain “rational” aspects of Hindu belief and practice. As a direct outcome, newly constructed categories of superstition and folk-magic were created.

From Styers’ survey of scholarly opinion spanning the modern period, what becomes clear is that there has long persisted a conceptual tension between magic and religion. Influential scholarly constructions of magic seem to continue pre- or nonacademic understandings of that concept, which in turn has led to a significant critique of that category and its scholarly validity. In response, some have attempted to construct a continuum of magic and religion understood as ideal types while others have proposed the notion of a magical worldview. These have been exposed, however, as possessing historical attachments to an uncritical ethnocentrism that has played a significant role in colonialist agendas of subjugation and efforts toward “civilizing” the non-West. Furthermore, while magic is used as a term in all modern western European languages, there is no unanimously recognized academic definition of magic nor any shared theory or theoretical language. So, magic has continued to serve as a concept “with an extremely versatile and ambivalent semantics; it is the art of the devil or the path to the gods,” yet to impose “magic as an analytic tool may direct attention away from local contexts and suppress difference resulting in distorted findings, interpretations and narratives.” As Otto and Stausberg warn, in the belief that one is discovering magic “out there,” one may, in fact, end up with just “universalizing one’s own Western categories and background assumptions.”⁵ Thus, the broad range of disparate phenomena usually covered by the concept – its semantic diversity, conceptual heterogeneity, ethnocentric bias, and undesirable ideological implications – would seem to point away from using the concept. Yet, even some of those who use magic as an analytic category and argue that such concepts as magic, like religion, are requisite to initiating comparative research nevertheless recognize that all categorical concepts are ethnocentric, that Western presumptions cannot be circumvented. Furthermore, magic’s undeniable connection with modernity’s self-representation combined with the repeated observation of “facts” signaled by the kinds of examples and features present in such artifacts and writings as amulets, curses, incantations, and the like that are clearly associated with one type of magic or another, tells against abandoning the concept altogether. It would only risk undermining the scholarly attempt to describe the phenomena of the concept by robbing researchers of the ability to articulate those (arti)facts and

⁵ BERND-CHRISTIAN OTTO and MICHAEL STAUSBERG, “General Introduction,” in *Defining Magic: A Reader*, ed. BERND-CHRISTIAN OTTO and MICHAEL STAUSBERG (London: Equinox, 2013), 1–13.

their significances. In other words, one cannot stop speaking of magic when one cannot avoid encountering the abundance of evidence for its existence. However fragmented the material evidence may be at times, ancient magic's light still shines through.

Rejecting the notion of a single metacategory of magic, Otto and Stausberg propose in *Defining Magic* that magic can be employed as an open list of traits or features reflective of a range of phenomena that share a "family resemblance." Yet, instead of instinctively interpreting the occurrence of a limited number of traits as evidence for a family-style concept of magic or key to "the whole of 'MAGIC' in all of its amorphous multiplicity," one might split what they refer to as the extended *tribal* family of traits into a number of *nuclear* families with the result that, "instead of instances of 'magic,' we suggest speaking of patterns of magicity." They offer a lengthy trait list of thirty-five items that they gleaned from academic literature with a focus on what they describe as the denotation of magic or "the signals that trigger a recognition of X as an instance of M ('magic'/'magical'), rather than on overarching theoretical interpretations (e.g., the psychological or social functions ascribed to 'magic')." In an attempt to bring order to their catalogue, they entertain distinguishing different types of magic such as white and black or homeopathic vs. contagious, but reject this approach as it falls short of providing an overall coherence to the heterogeneity of their list. They also reject alternative models owing to their inability to bring coherency due to the lack of requisite information on the one hand, and on the other, the presumption that all these features and others should be brought together into one category. The repeated lack of multiple-trait convergence in any one instance of a ritual action simply impedes the articulation of the needed control factors expressive of magic. The broader, more inclusive patterns of magicity provide some forms and conditions for *structural* stability and offer ways to deal with cross-culturally attested observations without imposing parameters that are too narrow on one's prospective definition of magic. The authors cite as one example of the kind of patterns of magicity they have in view what they label "word efficacy." Word efficacy is derived from the recurrent observation that humans tend to ascribe efficacy to the utterance of specific words in ritual sequences and that this pattern of ascription is attested cross-culturally in a multiplicity of sources, forms, and expressions.

In another venue, Otto has proposed a "methodological turn" in the academic discourse on ancient magic and in particular in classical studies. He argues for the abandonment of an abstract category of magic on the one hand and on the other, for a systematic historicization of the ancient term, by which he has in mind the reconstruction of the ancient semantics, functions, and contexts of *mageia*. He avers: "Instead of implicitly or explicitly sustaining the idea of an ideal-type, transcultural, and ahistorical category, classical scholars should begin to perceive 'magic' as a historical term that pervades their sources and bears in fact, contrary to academic definition, a plethora of meanings, functions, and valuations worth

investigating.”⁶ The notion of magic that Otto has in view derives in part from his consideration of the Greek magical papyri (*Papyri Graecae Magicae*, hereafter *PGM*), that he suggests actually reflect a common set of religious ideas circulating in the ancient Mediterranean, which he otherwise labels as expressive of the academic discourse on *religion* in spite of the use of the term *mageia*. Accordingly, the *magoi* appear as participants in “a wide spectrum of ancient ritual practitioners sharing similar ideas, partly working inside, partly outside temples, partly having official positions in established cults, partly regarding ritual relations with gods as a mere means of earning a living as a private service provider.” So, with the above remarks in mind, where might one go to explore further the realities of ancient magic, the object of the current undertaking?

Magic's Material Turn

Many have embraced the position that a circumlocution like “ritual power” might serve to convey the barest bones of magic and at the same time avoid the supposed problems identified in using the sometimes etic, sometimes emic term “magic.” Nevertheless, recent attempts at assessing the materiality of magic pose promising heuristic potential in support of the viability of magic's continued employment in religious discourse. Such an approach not only takes into account those “(arti)facts” previously invoked, but it puts into play the study of the very *practices* and power relationships at the heart of what makes magic magic, as Pels so cogently articulated. In accord with his “archaeology of magic,” Anthony Wilburn in *Materia Magica* has outlined several useful points concerning the practice of magic that he is also able to validate on the basis of a detailed analysis of artifacts expressive of ancient Mediterranean magic.⁷ He notes that scholars are in general agreement about the spaces that magic may occupy: the phenomenon is often marked by mechanistic gestures and speech, which sometimes compel supernatural or divine forces in order to achieve a particular personal goal. Wilburn points out that a definition of magic suitable to empirical markers or evidence that we can see, or infer, from an object must take account of the fact that magic was an *actual practice* that involved the use of objects like lead tablets and the spells and drawings decorating them. The mental constructions expressed in emic approaches based on ancient indigenous literary constructions of magic do not adequately engage objects nor assess their practical use in what he refers to elsewhere as his “object-centered approach”; the investigation into an object and its biography. That is to say, confronting archae-

⁶ BERND-CHRISTIAN OTTO, “Towards Historicizing ‘Magic’ in Antiquity,” *Numen* 60 (2013): 308–47. He offers as a definition of *mageia* in the Greek magical papyri: “formalized ritual actions aiming at instrumentalizing transcendent beings for individual human needs,” 336.

⁷ See WILBURN, *Materia Magica*, 1–53, 254–72 where he thoroughly reviews the theoretical, methodological, and archaeological dimensions of the study of ancient Mediterranean magic much of which is largely germane to the study of southern Levantine magic.

Subject Index

- abecedaries, 46, 75, 77, 104, 109, 117–18
afterlife beliefs, 154
Ahab, 102
Aha (protective entity), 201
Ahaz, 102
Ahiram sarcophagus, 106, 120
Akko, 20
Albertz, Rainer and Schmitt, Rüdiger;
 assemblage typology of, 21, 126–27,
 149–50, 153, 217. *See also* assemblage
 typology
altars; as evidence of cult, 21, 34, 112–13,
 121; horned, 127; limestone, 22
Amaryaw, 77–78
Amaziah, King, 92
‘Amm (lunar deity), 97–98
Ammonite inscriptions, 91
Ammonites, 206; presence at Deir Alla, 215
amuletic magic, 124–25, 127–28, 140–43,
 154
amulets, 8, 12, 126–28; Arslan Tash, 137,
 164; Bes, 87, 125, 148–49, 153; bone,
 127; cowrie shell, 113; double-crown,
 127; Egyptian-made, 84; Egyptian-style,
 84, 142; faience, 148; feline-headed,
 141; figurine, 125; Iron Age, 123, 125;
 Isis with Horus, 128; Lotus and Mut,
 128; male-headed, 141; Pataeke, 125;
 pervasiveness of, 139–40; seal, 125; from
 Tell Jemmeh, 213; wedjat eye, 88, 125,
 141–42, 153. *See also* Ketef Hinnom
 silver amulets
Amurru (deity), 98
Anat, 97
Anatolia, 213
angeloï; Septuagint, 13
angels, 139–40, 167, 198, 223
aniconism, 100–102, 214; empty-space, 23,
 45–46, 68, 81, 89–90, 119–20, 206,
 214–15
animal art; at Kuntillet Ajrud, 21
animal bones, 30
animal remains, 218
animal sacrifice; absence of at Kuntillet
 Ajrud, 218
anthropologists, 4; nineteenth century, 7
Apathes (daimon), 175, 179, 197, 221
Apophis, 185–86
apotropaism, 11–13, 16, 23, 35, 55, 89,
 110–12, 116–19, 121, 123, 128, 132,
 139, 148–49, 178, 186–87, 203–5, 207,
 213, 218–19. *See also* magic: apotropaic;
 YHWH and Asherah: as protective
 deities
apparatchiks, 118, 215, 218
Apter, Emily, 7
Arabia, 216–17
Arabian rock art, 217
Arabian traditions, 97
Arad, 23
Aramaic language, 138, 172–75
Aramean influences, 121, 203
Arameans, 206; presence at Deir Alla, 215
archer, on pithos B, 29
Arslan Tash, 137, 164; amulets from, 137
artifacts; alabastrons, 126; arrowheads, 148,
 149; astragals, 112, 126–28, 150; axe
 heads, 127–28; bangles, 148–49; beads,
 126–27, 149; bone spout, 127; bronze
 bowls, 148; censor cups, 126; contain-
 ers, 126; corals, 126; cosmetic palettes,
 148–49; cowrie shells, 20, 33, 36, 113;
 decorated stands, 126; fenestrated and
 decorated stands, 126; game boards, 32,
 34, 112, 114; game pieces, 126–28; glass
 head, 127; goblets, 126; kernos rings,
 126; ladles, 126; lamps, 126; magical,
 8–9; miniature altars and shrines, 126;
 model furniture, 127–28; neck collar,
 64–65, 141; pendants, 126–27, 148;

- artifacts, *continued*
 pomegranate, 30, 33; religious, 126;
 semiprecious stones, 126; shells, 126;
 sherds of Samaria, 20; spoons, 126;
 stands, 127; weapons-related objects,
 127–28, 149. *See also* assemblages; chal-
 ices; fish bones; rattles
- artisan-scribes, 16, 42–44, 46, 58, 65, 67,
 70, 78, 80, 95, 100, 111, 119, 204,
 208, 210, 215; Judean, 100; at Kuntillet
 Ajrud, 204–5; Phoenician, 100, 208;
 Samaritan, 67
- Asa, King, 97
- Asherah/asherah, 13, 21, 23, 44–49, 59,
 69, 73–75, 78–79, 85, 88–103, 107–9,
 112, 118–19, 121–22, 139, 144, 151,
 157–58, 160–62, 205, 220; conver-
 gence with Beset, 73, 84, 88, 90, 100;
 as El's consort, 202–3; in Hebrew Bible,
 97–100; as hypostatis of YHWH, 144,
 220; identity of, 144; as patron goddess,
 121; role of, 220–21; as sacred object,
 91; at Ugarit, 98, 99; as wife of YHWH,
 202–3. *See also* consort; wife; YHWH
 and Asherah
- asherah (cult object), 59, 94, 98, 144,
 158; sacred pole, 59, 95; as temple, 59;
 YHWH and his, 94
- Asheroth, 97
- Ashmolean Museum, 57
- Ashratu, 96; wife of Amurru, 98. *See*
also Asherah
- Ashur, 137
- assemblages; cultic, 125–26, 128; as diag-
 nostic of cult, 126; domestic, 127–28,
 150. *See also* tomb assemblages
- assemblage typology; type A (nonutilitarian
 objects), 21, 32, 126, 149–50; type
 B (utilitarian objects), 21, 32, 126,
 149–50. *See also* Albertz, Rainer and
 Schmitt, Rüdiger
- Assurbanipal, 176
- Assur temple, 176
- Assyrians, 206
- Astarte, 96–97
- Athienou-Malloura, 210–12; wall bracket,
 210–12
- Athirat, 97–99, 165. *See also* Asherah
- Azazel, 140, 163
- Baal, 21, 61, 76, 90–93, 96–98, 101,
 109–10, 137, 180, 186, 202–3; as
 epithet for YHWH, 91; of Zaphon, 95;
 statue from Hazor, 60
- Baalim, 97
- baboon; associated with Bes, 88
- Babylonia; first-millennium, 178
- Babylonians, 101, 206
- Babylonian texts; Asherah in, 96
- Balaam Inscription, 55, 137
- bāmāh*, 112, 217
- Bastet, 141
- bath tub coffin, 150
- Beersheba, 127, 142; locus 844, 127; locus
 859, 127
- bench room, 15–17, 20–22, 24–26, 28–30,
 32, 35–37, 40–41, 43–46, 48–49, 52,
 55–56, 58, 73–74, 76, 78–80, 84, 90,
 100–102, 105, 108–11, 113–16, 214,
 219. *See also* Kuntillet Ajrud loci: locus 6
b³nē (bā)ʾelōhīm, 140
b³nē ʾelōhīm, 166
- Benedict, Ruth, 3
- Bes, 64, 148, 179; as apotropaic deity, 23,
 85, 88, 104, 179, 214; cippus, 207–14;
 coins, 87; on Cyprus, 23, 207–14;
 dwarf fish, 103; Egyptian, 84, 206; as
 master-of-animals, 104; receiving cult,
 208; sources for, 206; transformations
 of, 103; on wall bracket, 211–12; as
 YHWH (*see* YHWH and Asherah: as
 Bes and Beset). *See also* dancer; musician
- Bes and Beset, 13, 23, 50, 66, 68, 70, 73,
 84–85, 88–91, 96, 100, 102, 107,
 109–10, 122, 201, 203–6, 215, 222,
 223; elite interpretation of, 90
- Beset, 103, 201–4; as Asherah, 73, 84, 88,
 90, 100; as female form of Bes, 202–3;
 identity of, 201–4. *See also* Bes and Beset
- Bes imagery, 23, 86–89, 179, 206, 208–9
- Bes L figure, 43, 59, 63–66, 70–73, 78, 80,
 82–83, 85, 90, 103, 105
- Bes-like entities, 203–4
- Bes-like figures, 23, 43, 46, 50–51, 59–61,

- 65–67, 69–70, 72, 83–84, 91, 100–102, 110, 120, 122; hybrid form of, 205; overlapping of, 70–72
- Bes R figure, 59, 62–66, 70–73, 80, 82–83, 103; dancing, 103; lack of phallus on, 59. *See also* Beset
- biblical textual criticism, 165
- bichrome drawing, 27, 38–39, 56
- blessing, divine, 153, 155
- blessing formulae, 33, 104, 143; cooption of by elite, 143
- blessings, 21–23, 46, 49, 73, 88, 94–95, 104, 110, 114, 142–43, 160; apotropaic, 12; as captions, 74–75; inscriptions, 45–50; of YHWH, 46, 49; of YHWH and Asherah, 23, 73
- boar B, 61–63
- boars, 51
- boar Y, 25–26, 53, 63
- boar Y sherd. *See* Kuntillet Ajrud pithoi, E fragment
- bone repository, 129
- Building A, 15–16, 18, 20, 27–28, 32, 38, 40–41, 43, 52, 62, 74, 76–77, 79, 82, 90, 105, 110, 114–15
- Building B, 15, 24–25, 27, 37, 51–52, 105, 108, 110–11, 115, 218; white-plaster fragments in, 218
- Bull El, 168
- bull R, 46, 51, 61–63, 66, 69, 73, 81, 83; as graffito(?), 67
- Bulwer-Lytton, Edwin, 4
- burial, 139, 149–53, 157; Ketef Hinnom chamber 25, 129–31; Lachish, 127
- burial assemblages. *See* tomb assemblages
- burial caves, 12
- burning of incense, 32
- Byblos, 96
- Cain; in Kuntillet Ajrud inscription 4.3, 115
- calf X, 60–62
- Canaanite deities, 174–76, 181
- Canaanite-Israelite traditions, 195
- Canaanite religion, 179
- Capitolium, 19–21
- caption. *See* Kuntillet Ajrud inscriptions
- casting of lots, 128
- cattle bones, 113
- ceramics, 30, 154, 216; use of at Kuntillet Ajrud, 216
- chalices, 22, 24, 32, 35–36, 112, 126
- chariot horse and rider; on A fragment, 29
- child sacrifice, 173–75, 180–81, 198
- Christian tradition, 181
- Chronicler, 98–99
- cippus, 208–10; Bes-headed, 209; Pyla-Palaikastros, 23, 208–10
- city of David, 141
- coins; Bes, 87
- composite beings, 21. *See also* hybrid beings; *Mischwesen*
- consort, 66–67, 71–73, 84–85, 90, 95–99, 202–3. *See also* wife
- convergence, 122, 203–4; divine, 204–5; of YHWH and Asherah with Bes and Beset, 84, 88, 100, 215
- corner rooms. *See* favissae
- courtyard, 15–17, 20, 24–30, 33–35, 40, 45, 52, 56, 74, 79, 100, 105, 107–11, 113–15
- cow-and-calf scene, 60, 63, 66, 73, 102, 110
- cow L, 62–63, 66
- cow X, 62–63, 66, 83
- cult; bench-room, 215; semipermanent at Kuntillet Ajrud, 216
- cultic installations, 217
- cultic paraphernalia, 16, 22, 32, 40, 112, 114, 143, 150, 216–17
- cult images, 101–2, 197; pithoi as, 23, 119, 218. *See also* divine images
- cult sites, 21, 217
- cuneiform; alphabetic, 165
- cuneiform sources, 163
- curses, 8, 140, 142, 152, 160
- cylinder seals, 127
- Cypriot iconography, 213
- Cypriot wares, 149
- Cyprus, 1, 96, 213, 207–14; Iron Age, 207
- daimon, definition of, 164
- daimonia*, 180–86, 197–98, 221–22; in Egypt, 181–82

- daimonic realm, 11, 140
- daimons/demons, 13, 137, 149, 154, 164, 171–72, 175, 182, 184–86, 194–97; deification of, 179, 183, 197, 204–7; in Egypt, 85, 176, 205; fear of, 139–40; guardian, 179; in Israel, 13; in Mesopotamia, 178; ; and pollution, 163; as protective beings, 179; receiving cult, 176; ubiquitousness of, 140; in Ugarit, 137. *See also* demons; *shedū*-daimons; supernatural beings; and individual daimons
- dancer; Bes as, 70, 72–74, 86–88, 103, 212
- David, 189–91
- dead, the, 13, 142, 148–50, 155, 164, 187–88, 190, 193–97, 199; apotropaic protection of, 223; as gods, 190–91; in Egypt, 191
- Deber, 140
- “decorated”; definition of, 53
- Deir Alla, 55, 91, 121, 137, 173–75, 180, 215; as multipurpose site, 121
- Deir Alla inscriptions, 137, 164, 173
- demon; definition of, 164; vs. daimon, 164
- demon expulsion; as function of Bes and Beset, 203
- demonic powers, 13
- demonic world, increase in, 176
- demonology; Egyptian, 206–7; Mesopotamian, 204–6
- demons. *See* daimons/demons
- Demotic script, 58
- detestable things, 198
- Deuteronomist, 194–95
- Deuteronomistic History, 97, 189–92
- Deuteronomistic tradition, 101
- Deuteronomy; papyrus manuscript from Qumran, 165
- Deuteronomy 32; daimonic world in, 13; text-critical reading of, 13
- divination, 32, 34, 112, 124, 128
- divine attributes, 178
- divine images, 16, 19, 22–24, 33, 36, 79, 102, 110. *See also* cult images
- divine kingship, 191–92
- divine protection, 55, 138
- diviners, 112
- divine sons, 13, 165, 223
- divine speech, 73–74
- divine words, 16, 23–24
- donkey, as daimonic animal, 186–87
- doom oracle, 90–92. *See also* Kuntiller Ajrud inscriptions, 4.2
- doorjambs, 20, 30, 55, 76, 79, 90, 109, 115; inscription 4.3 on, 15, 76
- doorposts, 110
- doubling, 158–61
- drafts/drafting, 36–37, 54–55, 57–58, 100; of Balaam text, 55; as distinct from graffito or inscription, 45–46; by scribal-artisans, 25, 37–39, 54, 90
- drawings; relationship to inscriptions, 111
- DSS, 184, 198. *See also* Qumran
- Dura Europa synagogue, 152
- dwarf-god. *See* Bes
- dwarfism, 68
- Eanna archive, 176
- Eanna temple, 177
- earthquake imagery, 118–20
- earthward hand. *See* Khirbet el-Qom: human hand
- Ebla, 192
- Edom, 216–17
- Edomite-Arabian traditions, 203, 217
- Edomite gods, 92
- Edomite influence, 37, 217
- Edomite pottery, 217
- Edomites, 116, 206
- Egypt, 1, 16, 23, 28, 39–40, 56–57, 68, 72, 84–86, 89–90, 103, 107, 129, 181, 186–87, 191–92, 197–98, 203–4, 216, 222; demons in, 174–80, 221; Greco-Roman, 182; Reshef in, 206
- Egyptian cosmology, 197
- Egyptian influences, 37, 84, 217
- Egyptian religion, 24, 85
- Egyptians, 87, 116, 175
- Eighteenth Dynasty, 86
- Ein Haseva, 22–23
- Ekron Inscription, 138
- ʿēl, 166–67, 171–72, 190, 194–97
- El, 21, 76, 90–93, 98–99, 101, 109, 165, 167–72, 182, 185, 198, 202–3, 222,

- 227–28; father of YHWH, 91, 166,
182–83, 202–3; as name for YHWH,
91; theophany of, 76–78
- “El” bowl, 149
- El/Eloah, 222
- El Elyon, 167
- “El Everlasting,” 135
- Elijah, 98, 189–91
- ʿēlīlīm, 183–84
- ʿēlīm, 166
- Elim, 90, 93, 101, 221
- elites, 80, 93, 121
- elite writers/writing, 96, 118
- Eloah, 171–76, 180–85, 198–200, 222–24,
232–34
- ʿēlōhīm, 166–68, 171–75, 178–80,
188–200, 223–24
- Elyon, 93
- enemies (supranatural beings), 223
- Enuma elish, 177
- Erra, poem of, 178
- “Eternal” Temple, 132–33
- “evil”/“The Evil (One),” 11, 80, 109, 123,
138, 163, 222; in Kuntillet Ajrud
inscription 4.6.3, 79–80, 111
- evil eye, 142, 152
- evil, personified, 12
- evolutionist view, 3
- exilic period, 101
- exorcism, 220
- exotica, 21–22, 24, 31, 36, 113, 218;
aquatic, 218
- Eye-of-Horus amulets, 148–49, 153. *See*
also amulets: wedjat-eye
- family and household religion, 125
- Fatuma; hand of, 152
- faunal remains, 113, 150
- favissa, definition of, 17–19
- favissae, 12, 15–22, 24, 29–36, 52, 108–11,
113–16; corner rooms as, 16
- figurines, 36, 113, 128, 150; animal,
127–28; Bes, 87; bronze bull, 127;
burial of, 85; Egyptian goddess, 127; for
necromantic rituals, 128; human, 127;
human and animal, 126; Judean pillar,
127–28; pillar-base female, 148–49;
- sphinx, 127
- First and Second Kings, books of, 99
- First Samuel 28; daimonic world in, 13;
text-critical reading of, 13
- fish bones, 21–22, 30, 112–14
- flyers (demonic beings), 137
- foreigners, 176, 178–79, 193, 197
- foreign gods, 174–76
- fossils, 126
- fruit; in communal meals, 218
- funerary wall inscriptions, 12
- Galilee, 96
- GAʿAR, 138
- gendered divine, 59
- gender marking, 60–67, 71, 83–84, 111,
122
- genii; in Mesopotamia, 176
- genizah, 19–21
- ghosts, 140, 149–50, 154–55, 196
- gibbōrīm*, 140
- Gileadite presence, at Deir Alla, 215
- goat, 106
- god-king, 191–95
- graffiti, 26–27, 55, 67, 69, 73, 75, 77–78,
81–83, 85, 89–90, 99–100, 104,
108–9, 111–19, 122, 147–48, 153, 157,
161–62; 201, 204–7, 214; as distinct
from draft or inscription, 45–46; per-
sonal, 118; responsive, 77–78, 122, 214;
spontaneous, 55, 67, 158. *See also* visi-
tors’ graffiti
- graffito writer, 81, 90, 119, 204
- Great Mother Goddess, Asherah as, 144
- Greco-Roman period, 201
- Greek magical papyri (PGM), 10
- Greek satyrs, 201–2
- guardian demons, 175–77, 179, 197;
Egyptian, 205
- ḥ3ty.w*, 175, 179, 181, 197, 221
- Hadatu (Arslan Tash), 177
- hand; divine, 155. *See* Khirbet el-Qom:
human hand
- Ḥaniqātu, 137
- Haseva, 218
- Hathor, 88

- Hawran, 137
 Hazor, 63; Baal statue, 62; stele from, 152
 Hebrew language, 93, 99
 Hebrew *Vorlage*, 166–71, 182, 185, 187, 189, 193, 195, 198, 222
 Hebrew Bible; Asherah in, 97–100
 Helal ben Shachar, 140
 Herrmann, Christian, 132, 154
 Hinduism; magic in, 8–9
 Hinnom Valley, 155
 Holy One, 21, 91, 92; epithet of El (?), 93
 horned animals, 50, 61
 horse-and-rider figurines, 127–28, 148–49
 horses, 51
 Horvat Qitmit, 22–23, 112–13
 human hand. *See* Khirbet el-Qom: human hand
 human head, 30, 34, 41, 43–45, 54, 63, 82, 106; captioned, 55
 hybrid beings, 85, 178; as rival to personified deities, 177
 hybrid bulls, 172
 hybrid deities, 206–7
 hybridity, 208, 214; Bes, 207; cultural; at Kuntillet Ajrud, 37
 hybridization, 203, 210, 213, 217, 219; of artistic forms, 23; religious, 23
 Hyksos, 185
- ibex F, 60–63, 66
 ibex G, 60, 63, 66
 ibex J, 62–63, 66
 ibex W, 83
 image and text; coherence between, 75
 Ina-šilli-Urdimmu, 176
 incantations, 8, 138; Ugaritic, 137
 incense bowls, 126
 incense burning, 22, 24, 35–36, 112–13, 219
 incest, 202–3
 integrated scene, 45–46, 59, 60–63, 65–67, 69–75, 77–78, 80, 82–83, 89, 100, 102, 105, 109, 111, 119–20
 Iran; Bes in, 208
 Iron Age, 212, 221; Cyprus, 207; Iron I, 6; Iron II, 1, 6, 11, 13, 102, 125, 127, 128, 135, 163, 220
- Ishtar, 97
 Israel, 59, 85, 87–88, 96, 101
 Israelite dialect, 49, 95
 Israelite pantheon; Egyptianizing, 84
 Israelite presence; at Deir Alla, 215; at Kuntillet Ajrud, 88
 Israelite religion, 59; aniconism in, 101
 Israelite traditions, 101
 Italy, 96
 Ithobaal, 106
- Jeroboam, 92
 Jerusalem, 11, 28, 80, 103, 123–24, 128, 137–38, 141, 142, 155; official cult in, 98
 Jewish interpretations, 184
 Jewish tradition, 181
 Joash, King, 92
 Job, book of, 171–73
 Josiah, 97, 189–90
 Judah, 93, 102, 216
 Judahite script, 99
 Judaism, 183–84
 Judean amuletic magic, 124
 Judean dialect, 49–50
 Judean hill country, 145
 Judean influences, 37, 203, 217
 Judean pillar figurines, 127–28
 Judean religion, 135
 Judeans, 92–93, 99, 102, 116, 206
 Judean texts; Asherah in, 96
- Kadesh Barnea, 114, 121
 Karnak temple, 57
kernoi, 149–50
 Ketef Hinnom, 11, 117, 137; cave 24, 129, 130; chamber 25, 131, 141; priest at, 142
 Ketef Hinnom amuletic inscriptions, 12, 123; #1, 129, 132–34, 138; #2, 129, 135–36, 138; authorship of, 128, 131, 142; paleographic analysis of, 132
 Ketef Hinnom silver amulets, 80, 123–44, 163–64; dating of, 129
 Khirbet al-Mudayna, 22, 34
 Khirbet el-Qom, 11, 117, 137; bench tombs, 148; cave 2, 145, 153; graffito,

- 157; human hand, 12, 140, 144–45, 151–53, 162; text 2.3, 95; tomb 2, 144, 145–47, 152–54
- Khirbet el-Qom inscription 3, 33, 99, 118, 129, 132, 139, 144–48, 151, 153, 155–56, 158, 160, 162, 220, 223; authorship of, 153
- Khorsabad, 178
- kings; deification of, 190–93, 196
- Kings, book of, 98
- knives, 88, 148–49; magical, 201; Bes on, 86
- Kuntillet Ajrud, 11, 15–22, 137; animal images, 67; artistic repertoires, 50–54; bent-axis entrance, 114; dancing at, 112; decorated sherds, 25–27; Egyptian influence at, 89, 213–14; external provisioning of, 112–13; final report, 12, 107–9; graffiti (*see* Kuntillet Ajrud inscriptions); isolated renderings, 102; as multipurpose site, 121; music at, 112; northern dominance of, 92; numinous status of, 109; one-period site, 54; painted plastered walls, 109; pithos cult, 109, 110, 143; religious function of, 113; ritual specialists at, 112; sacrifice at, 112–13; scribal artisans at, 111, 122; state sponsorship of, 32, 92–96, 99, 107, 112, 116–17, 121, 219; textile production at, 112, 219; visitors to, 110, 117–18, 121 (*see also* visitors); white-plastered walls, 15, 105
- Kuntillet Ajrud inscriptions, 15, 34, 43, 54, 95, 110, 115, 164; authorship of, 99; as distinct from graffiti or draft, 45–46; as graffiti, 45–46, 55, 77, 81–82; Phoenician language in, 42; in Phoenician script, 43, 91, 93, 95; as scribal-school exercises, 117; supervisor's corrections 100–101. *See also* Ancient Sources Index for individual inscriptions
- Kuntillet Ajrud loci: locus 1, 16, 33–34, 38; locus 6, 17, 20–21, 24, 26, 30–33, 35, 46, 74, 119, 207, 216–19 (*see also* bench room); locus 7, 16; locus 8, 17, 24–26, 29–33, 35, 46, 77, 108, 110, 119, 207, 216, 218–19; locus 10, 32–34, 110, 115; locus 13, 16–17, 20–21, 24, 30, 32, 110; locus 14a, 32, 76; locus 15, 62, 77; locus 18, 33; locus 19, 17, 33–35, 74, 119; locus 22, 32; locus 50, 16, 24, 30–31, 33, 35, 108, 110; locus 51, 112; locus 62, 16; locus 81, 114; locus 92, 33–34, 110, 115; locus 94, 110; locus 101, 82, 115; locus 102, 33–35; locus 104, 41, 115; locus 161, 26–27, 35, 37; locus 256, 24, 29–30, 32, 108
- Kuntillet Ajrud pithoi; A fragment, 16, 24–30, 33, 35, 52, 56, 107–8, 110, 114, 218; C fragment, 24–26, 28–33, 35, 37, 52–53, 56, 107–10, 218; D fragment, 24–26, 28–33, 35, 37, 52–53, 56, 107–10, 218; E fragment, 24–25, 28–33, 35, 37, 52–53, 56, 107–10, 218 (*see also* boar Y). *See also* pithos A; pithos B; Z fragment
- Kuntillet Ajrud storerooms, 16, 37; south, 17, 24–26, 29–32, 35, 52, 55–56, 77, 84, 108, 111, 114–15; west, 33, 34, 41, 79, 82, 110, 114–15
- Kuntillet Ajrud wall murals, 15, 17, 35–36, 46, 51, 54, 63, 67, 73, 83, 108, 110, 121, 217–19; in bench room, 214, 216; relationship to pithoi, 17, 37
- Kuntillet Ajrud wall paintings; no. 9, 27, 37, 39, 50, 56, 62–63, 76–77, 110; no. 10, 51, 106; no. 11, 34, 41–43, 82; no. 12, 30, 51, 63, 106
- Lachish, 60, 127–28, 142, 146, 150; tomb 106, 127; tomb 1002, 127
- Lamashtu, 178
- lamassu, 172–74
- lamelekh jar handle, 145
- Late Bronze, 6
- Latour, Bruno, 7
- lector priests, 90, 100, 128, 176
- Leningrad Codex, 167, 170–72
- Levant, 59, 84, 87–89, 97, 99, 103–4, 113
- Levantine demons, 137
- Levantine traditions, 97
- Leviathan, 140
- libation rituals, 12, 21–24, 27, 29, 31–32, 35–37, 46, 54, 78, 107–9, 113, 115,

- libration rituals, *continued*
 122, 149, 214, 216, 218–19
 Lilith, 140
 limestone flakes, 57–58
 limestone slabs, as epigraphic drafting surfaces, 57–58
 lioness C, 61–63, 66
 lion H, 60–63, 66–67
 lotus flower motif, 50, 76, 105–7, 110
 lyre player, 51, 62, 64–65, 67, 69–73, 78, 80, 82–83, 100–103, 112, 120; as isolated rendering, 101–2

 Ma'acah, 97
mageia, 10; definition of, 10
 magic; amuletic, 125, 127–29, 140–43, 154; ancient Mediterranean, 1; ancient Near Eastern, 1; apotropaic, 121, 127, 132, 142; Egyptianizing, 121; as a concept, 8–9; definition of, 2–14; Egyptian, 84, 213; Israelite, 13; modern conceptions of, 7–14; power of words in, 7–8; practice of in Iron II Israel, 1, 6–14; in Western tradition, 5
 magic and modernity; relationship between, 2–3, 4–14
 magic and religion; tension between, 8–9
magoi, 10
 Makkedah, 146
 male ruler. *See* royal seated figure
 Malinowski, Bronislaw, 3, 159
 Marduk, 177–78
 mare A, 62
 Masoretic Text (MT), 13, 167–69, 171, 182, 184–85, 188–89, 195–96, 198, 222–23
 master-of-animals motif, 87
maṣṣā' bāhl maṣṣā' bōt, 23, 32, 34, 112, 114, 217
mater lectionis/matres lectionis, 132, 158, 173–75
 mediatrix, 73, 84, 88, 94–95, 99, 144, 213, 220, 222–23
 Medinet Habu, 57–58
 Mediterranean Sea, 112
 Megiddo, 127, 142; locus 2081, 127
 Meresger (deity), 57

 Mesopotamia, 84, 174, 181, 191–92, 197–98, 213, 222; bent-axis entrance, 114; demons in, 174–80, 221; hybrid beings in, 85
 Mesopotamian influences, 37, 203
 Mesopotamian traditions, 97, 171, 190–91
 Middle Kingdom Egypt, 201–2
midrashim, 184–85
miplešet, 97
Mischwesen, 101, 176–78, 206, 214, 236; Bes and Beset as, 206
mis pi, 23
 Miṣri, 84, 213
 Mithra, 85
 Moab, 34
 Moabites, 206
 modernity, 2–11. *See also* magic and modernity: definition of, 2
 monochrome drawing, 39, 50
 monotheism, 93, 183
 motifs, 50, 52; cow-and-calf, 50; grazing bovines, 50; hand, 140; seated figures, 50; shared, 54. *See also* lotus flower motif; master-of-animals
 mouth-washing rituals, 24
 Mudayna, 22, 121
 Müller, Max, 4
 murals, 109, 218. *See* Kuntillet Ajrud wall murals
 musician; Bes as, 72–74, 86–88, 103
 Mut, 65
 mythology; Ugaritic, 165, 167

 Nahas, 213
 Near East, 91, 98, 154, 163, 185, 197, 221; Asherah in, 96; daimonic world of, 174; gendered divine in, 59; magic in, 5; terms for god, 195. *See also* Mesopotamia
 Near Eastern traditions, 24, 190–91
 necromancer, 187, 189, 193, 195–96; from Endor, 187–88
 necromancy, 150, 193, 196, 199
 Neo-Assyrian art, 29, 37
 Neo-Babylonian period, 176
 netherworld, 142, 149, 154–55
 newborns, 87–88, 103

- New Kingdom Egypt, 87–88, 103, 175
 Nile perch, 20, 31, 112
 Nineteenth Dynasty, 57–58
 Nineveh, 176
 nipple circles, 62, 65–67, 71–72
 nonutilitarian objects. *See* assemblage
 typology
 northern domination, 93–94
 Northern Kingdom, 117–18
 Northwest Semitic inscriptions, 104
 Numbers 6, 123, 143
 numinous, 16–17, 23–24, 26–27, 35–37,
 40, 46, 50, 55–56, 64, 78, 80–81, 84,
 102, 105, 107–11, 116–19, 122
 Nusku, 177
nəphīlīm, 140

 ʾōblʾōbōt, 140, 187, 193–97, 223
 Obadyaw (PN), 31, 77
 Occidentalist discourse, 3
 Old Kingdom Egypt, 88
 Old South Arabia; Asherah in, 96
 ʿōlīm, 194
 Oniyahu (PN), 139, 156
 Ophel, 103, 141
 Orientalist anthropology, 4–14
 ostraca, 26–27, 39–40, 56–57, 88; as draft-
 ing surfaces, 56–57
 ostrich egg shells, 32, 126–27
 “Other,” 3–4
 Otherness, 159
 overlapping, 43–44, 46, 65–75, 79, 82–83,
 85, 90; as scribal-artisan technique, 67;
 in worshippers scene, 69; on pithos A,
 100

 Palaikastros, 23, 207, 210; cippus from, 209
 Paleographic *Doppelgänger*, 158
 palmette trees, 51
 pandemonium, 13, 118–20, 163, 187,
 194–97, 221–22
 penis, 59, 61, 63, 65–66, 72, 86, 88. *See*
 also phallus
 Persia, 84–86, 213
 Persian Empire, 86
 Persian period, 6–14, 23, 86, 124, 131–32,
 141

 personal god, 163
 personal piety, 35, 55, 108, 119
 phallus, 13, 60–63, 65–67, 71. *See also* pe-
 nis
 Philistia, 145
 philological analysis; limits of, 5
 Phoenicia, 87–88, 93, 96, 120; Astarte in,
 96
 Phoenician authorship, 23, 93, 201, 204,
 207–8, 210
 Phoenician influences, 37, 76, 85, 88–89,
 91, 93, 101, 106–7, 131, 203, 213
 Phoenician religion, 94
 Phoenicians, 43, 92–93, 99, 116, 206
 Phoenician script, 42–43, 49–50, 93, 95,
 99–100; inscription 4.2 in, 90
 pig, as daimonic animal, 186
 pithoi; as cult images, 24, 32, 119, 218;
 decorated, 12, 24; as drafting surfaces,
 17, 55, 107; as the focus of a cult locus,
 108; numinous power of, 16, 107; as
 receptacles for cultic attention, 108; as
 storage jars, 28, 107–9
 pithoi A and B, 15, 27, 54, 58, 107–9; as
 drafting surfaces, 17, 25–28, 35–37,
 55–56, 58, 84, 109, 111, 122, 218; in
 bench room, 24; graffiti on, 109; rela-
 tionship to one another, 17; ridged-rim,
 53; ritual function of, 17, 23–24, 29,
 35–37
 pithoi drawings; connection to wall murals,
 52–55
 pithos A, 16–17, 27–28, 30, 32, 40, 67,
 81–82, 90–91, 107–10, 114–15, 120,
 204, 215–16, 218; A fragment and,
 16–17, 26–27, 29–30, 33, 52, 100,
 107 (*see also* Kuntillet Ajrud pithoi:
 A fragment); apotropaic function of,
 33, 35, 109; in bench room, 16, 20,
 49; Bes figures on, 23, 43, 59, 61, 63,
 67–70, 80–84, 88–90, 96, 100, 102,
 201, 203–6, 212, 214; boar B on, 61;
 chariot horse-and-rider on, 29; cow and
 calf on, 50, 60, 63; ibex-and-garland,
 73, 105; inscription 3.1 on, 29, 43–46,
 73, 77–80, 82–83, 94, 100, 118, 214;
 integrated scene on, 80, 105; lion on,

- pithos A, *continued*
 61–62; lyre player on, 62, 73, 80; mare on, 62; ridged-rim, 53; ritual function of, 22, 24, 31, 35, 108, 110, 114–15; tree-and-ibexes-and-lion scene on, 50, 60–61, 63–64, 80–81, 102, 106
- pithos B, 16–17, 23, 27, 49, 80–81, 100, 108, 114, 119–20; archer on, 29; in bench room 16; bull R on, 51, 61, 83; caption on, 206; in courtyard, 25, 28, 33–34, 40, 108–12; cow and calf on, 60; cow L on, 63; ibex J on, 62; inscription 3.6 on, 44–45, 73, 75, 77, 94, 99, 110, 119, 214; inscription 3.9 on, 40–41, 44–46, 49, 73–74, 79, 89, 94, 104, 108–10; inscription 10 on, 43, 45, 75–76, 82, 110; integrated scene on, 80; ridged-rim, 53; ritual function of, 25–27, 33–35; Temanite tradition on, 216; worshippers scene on, 40–41, 43–44, 50, 61–63, 67–68, 75, 79, 80–83, 89, 102, 110, 206, 214. *See also* aniconism: empty-space; worshippers scene
- pithos cult, 24, 59, 78, 102, 108–9
- pithos Z. *See* Z fragment
- pollution, 163, 175, 180
- polychrome drawings, 27, 38–39, 50, 56, 106
- polymorphism, 176
- polytheistic tradition, 93
- pot stands, 126
- potter's wheel, 58
- Prakash, Gyan, 8–9
- precinct of Mut, 57
- preexilic Israel, 101, 163, 223
- preternaturalism, 193
- Priestly Blessing, 123
- priestly laws, 163
- priests, 112, 118, 124, 143; lack of at Kuntillet Ajrud, 216, 218
- Princess Diana, 4–5
- production of culture, 213
- prophets, 112
- prophet (Samuel), 188–93
- protection and provision, 11, 23, 29, 36, 88, 103, 108, 111, 119–20, 122, 143, 214, 216, 218–20
- public display, 22, 34, 75, 77, 79–80, 90–91, 99–100, 104, 109–10, 117, 120
- Pyla. *See* Palaikastros
- qāsam*, 197
- Qeteb, 140, 184–86, 198, 221–23; transformation to bird, 185
- qeteb* (demonic entity), 13
- Qitmit, 22, 218
- “Queen of Heaven,” 97
- Qumran, 13, 138, 165–70, 172. *See also* DSS
- Qumran scrolls, 168
- Qurayyah painted ware, 217
- Ramat Rachel, 37
- Ramesses III, 57
- Ramesses IX, 57
- Ramessesides, 185–86
- rattles, 112, 126–28, 148–51, 153; apotropaic nature of, 150; unique to tomb assemblages, 128
- Red Sea, 112, 216
- religious pluralism, 159; in the priestly sector, 142
- religious traditions; domestic, 143
- Reshef, 23, 140, 184–87, 197–98, 207–8, 210, 221–23; demonization of, 206, 221; transformation to bird, 185–86, 197
- reshef* (demonic entity), 13
- Reshef-Shed, 208–24
- revenants, 196–97
- ridged-rim pithoi, 53, 120. *See also* Kuntillet Ajrud pithoi
- ritual meals, 22, 24, 36
- ritual power, as a term, 10
- ritual procession, 17, 34
- rituals: execration, 186; forms of, 113; at Kuntillet Ajrud, 17, 216–19; mortuary, 150; necromantic, 128. *See also* libation rituals
- Rome, 19
- royal ideology; Canaanite, 192
- royal seated figure, 37–39, 50, 54–55, 62–63, 76–77, 106–8, 110. *See also* Kuntillet Ajrud wall paintings: no. 9

- sacred meals, 32, 35, 113, 219
sacred tree, 106
sacrificial animals, as offerings, 177
Sakhmet, 141
Samaria, 89, 93, 102; gods of, 102
Samaritan influences, 37, 76, 91, 107, 109, 121–22, 203, 214
Samaritans, 35, 92, 99, 116, 206
Samaria ware, 17
Samuel (prophet), 187–96
Saphir, 146
Saqqara, 93, 95
Sargon, 102
Satan, 138, 140
Saul, 187–98
scribal curriculum, 118, 121
scribal education, 116; in Mesopotamia, 118
scribal-school exercises, 116, 119
scribes, 128; as priests, 143
seal impression, 176
seals, 126–28; Neo-Assyrian, 127; stamp, 127
seashells, 17, 20, 22, 32, 36, 112–13
seated figures. *See* royal seated figure
Second Intermediate period, 201–2
Second Kings, book of, 97
Sennacherib, 176
Septuagint (LXX), 13, 165, 167–74, 184, 188–89, 195, 198, 222–23; translator, 182–86; *Vorlage*, 190–91
Seth, 176–77, 185–87, 197–98; as warrior god, 185; demonization of, 176, 197, 221; demotion of, 185–87
Seth-animal head, 127
sha'atnez, 31, 112
Shaddai (divine name), 171
shaddayin (divine beings), 137, 173, 180
Shamash, 137
shedim, 13, 171–86, 197, 221–22; as recipients of cult, 221; elevation to divine status, 179, 197, 221; Jewish interpretation of, 172–74
shedu (daimons), 171–83, 223–24; as daimon, 178
Shedu-gods, 171, 179–83, 186, 198, 222–23
Sheol, 154
Shephelah, 145
Sibitti (Seven), 178
Sidon, 96
Sinai, 117, 205, 213; interaction with Egypt, 213
solar cult, 113
soldier-scribes, 116
Solomon, 189–90
“sons of El,” 168
“sons of God,” 169
sons of god(s), 198, 222
south Arabia, 98
southern Levant, 1; Egyptian influence on, 213
Spain, 96
spells, 160
standing stones, 23
stone basin, 31, 77, 113–14, 119
stone bowl, 17, 34
Strangler. *See* Ḥaniqātu
Stranglers (daimons), 137
Styers, Randall, 7–8; *Making Magic*, 7
suprahuman beings, 137, 165, 167, 178–79, 182, 184–85, 198. *See also* supernatural beings; daimons/demons
supranatural beings, 11, 36, 164, 174–75, 188, 190, 194–96, 198. *See also* suprahuman beings; daimons/demons
Taanach stands, 60
talmudim, 184
targumin, 184
Taussig, Michael, 7
Tayma, 217
Tell Jawa, 22
Tell Jemmeh, 213
Teman, 217. *See also* YHWH of Teman
Temanite tradition, 109, 214–16
temple priest, 142
textile production, 112, 117, 121, 219
textiles, 30, 107, 112, 116, 121; and religion, 121; prestige, 36
“The Adversary,” 138
“The Evil (One),” 80, 135, 140, 142, 154–55, 220–22

- “The Exorciser of the Evil (One),” 12, 80,
 135, 138, 140, 142, 154–55, 163
 “The Molekh,” 180
 theomachy, 118–20
 theophany, 90–93, 110, 118
 The Story of Sinuhe, 57
 Third Intermediate period, 87, 103, 185–86
 Tiamat, 177
 tomb assemblages, 127–28, 148–50, 156.
 See also assemblages: as subset of domes-
 tic assemblages, 128
 Transjordan, 34
 travelers, 11, 36–37, 109, 111–12, 116,
 205, 216, 219–20. *See also* visitors
 tree-and-ibexes(-and-lion) scene, 60–64, 66,
 73, 80–81, 102, 105–6, 110, 120
 Tutu (daimon), 175, 179, 197, 221
 Tyre, 96

 Ugarit, 137, 164, 192, 202–3. *See also* in-
 cantations: Ugaritic; mythology:
 Ugaritic
 Ugaritic texts, 165
 Uphai (PN), 153
 Urdimmu, 176–79, 183, 197, 221; as
 benevolent being, 178; as dog-man,
 177; as protectors of the newborn, 177;
 receiving offerings, 177; with divine
 determinative, 177–78
 Urdimmu-ilua, 176
 Uriyahu (PN), 99, 139, 153, 156, 161–62,
 223
 Urmahlullu, 176–79, 197, 221; as a
 lion-centaur, 177; as benevolent being,
 178; receiving offerings, 177; with
 divine determinative, 177–78
 Uruk, 176–77, 183–84, 206
 utilitarian objects. *See* assemblage typology
utukku (demon), 178

 vain things, 198
 vessels, 36; alabaster, 148–49; anthropo-
 morphic, 21; miniature, 126; zoomor-
 phic, 21, 127–28, 148–49
 visitors, at Khirbet el-Qom, 161
 visitors, at Kuntillet Ajrud, 23, 26–27, 29,
 35, 46, 205–6, 215–16, 219; elite, 46,
 55, 56; Judean, 207; northern, 108
 visitors’ graffiti, 35, 45, 55–56, 66, 74–75,
 108–9, 111, 158. *See also* graffiti
vores magicae, 159
 votive rituals, 218
 votives, 16, 19–21, 23, 31, 36, 57, 108,
 112–13, 149, 218

 Wadd (lunar deity), 97–98
 Wadi Fidan, 23, 217
 Wadi Lachish, 145
 Wadi Qubeibeh, 145
 wall mural art; high register of, 113
 wall murals. *See* Kuntillet Ajrud wall murals
 warrior deity; Reshef as, 186, 197
 water, 31, 36, 107, 112, 116, 121, 216
 weaving, 112, 121; and Asherah, 121
 wedjat amulets. *See* amulets: wedjat-eye;
 Eye-of-Horus amulets
 Western perspective, 4, 8
 Western traditions, 163
 West Semitic Research Project; publication
 of amulets from Ketef Hinnom, 12
 wife. Asherah as, 90, 95, 202–3; depiction
 of in art, 66–67, 73; of a deity, 84. *See*
 also consort
 Wilburn, Anthony; *Materia Magica*, 10
 worshippers scene, 40–41, 43–45, 47, 50,
 60–61, 63, 66–69, 73–83, 89–90, 102,
 110, 117, 119–20; as adoration scene,
 110; connection to inscription 3.10, 41,
 75–77; as practice draft, 69; worshipper
 M, 62, 65, 68–70, 73, 75, 81–83, 89,
 120; worshipper N, 60–62, 65, 68–70,
 73, 75, 81–83, 89, 120; worshipper O,
 62, 69, 81; worshipper P, 62, 69, 73, 75,
 83; worshipper Q, 62, 69, 73, 75, 81,
 83. *See also* Kuntillet Ajrud inscription
 3.9; pithos B
 writing; magical, 118–20, 161

 Yahwism, 103, 142, 174, 179, 215; com-
 peting forms of, 179; northern, 108,
 214, 215; southern, 99, 214; Temanite
 traditions of, 214, 215
 Yam, 138
 YHWH, 21, 76, 85, 89, 93–94, 96, 98,

- 120, 142, 153, 158, 170, 172, 180, 182, 186, 190–92, 198, 202–3, 205, 220, 222; appropriation of Reshef's imagery, 221; as Bes (*see* YHWH and Asherah: as Bes and Beset); Asherah as wife of, 202; as local deity, 101; as one of the “sons of the gods,” 168; as protective deity, 13, 75, 142, 155, 222 (*see also* YHWH and Asherah: as protective deities); as rogue deity, 168, 202–3; blessing of, 90; convergence with Bes, 84, 88, 215 (*see also* YHWH and Asherah: as Bes and Beset); cult of, 101, 122; deification of, 223; hand of, 152, 162; as the Holy One, 91–92; of Shomron, 100; of Teman, 95, 99; as protective deity, 157; Samaritan, 215; temple image of, 101; “The Everlasting,” 135; “The Exorciser of the Evil (One),” 12, 80, 220–22; tradition, 108, 206; Temanite, 215
- YHWH and Asherah, 23, 88–90, 94–95, 102–3, 118–19, 207, 214; as Bes and Beset, 73, 89–91, 100, 122, 201, 203–6, 210, 215; as protective deities, 11, 13, 23, 45, 78, 88, 119, 121–22, 214, 219; of Samaria, 206; portrayed aniconically, 23, 89, 206; traditions, 122
- YHWH and His Asherah, 46, 107, 109, 119, 121, 144, 153, 220, 223. *See also* YHWH of Samaria; YHWH of Shomron; YHWH of Teman
- YHWH of Samaria, 207, 215
- YHWH of Shomron, 44, 79, 85, 88, 93–94, 100–103, 108–9, 214, 216
- YHWH of Teman, 45, 48–50, 74–75, 78, 88–89, 93–94, 101, 108–9, 214, 216
- yidd^h ʾōnim*, 140, 223
- Z fragment, 24–25, 27–28, 35, 52, 56, 107–10, 218; relation to wall painting no. 9, 27, 56, 77; seated figure on, 26–27, 37–39, 50, 62–63, 77, 106–7
- Z sherd, 29, 39, 52. *See* Z fragment

Ancient Sources Index

Hebrew Bible		32:43	168–70, 172, 182–86, 198, 222–23
<i>Genesis</i>			
3:8	78	<i>Joshua</i>	
21:33	135	10	146
<i>Exodus</i>			
18:5	78	<i>Judges</i>	
20:8	158	3:7	97
<i>Numbers</i>			
6	123, 143	<i>First Samuel</i>	
		8	190–91
		8:5	190–95
		8:7	190
		8:7–8	191
		8:8b	191–92
		8:14	191
		8:14a	189
		8:20	195
		15:12	190
		28	152
			11, 13, 137, 163–64, 187–88, 190–96, 222, 223
		28:8	193
		28:9	193–94
		28:12–15	193
		28:12a	188
		28:13	188–96
		28:13–14	194
		28:13b	195
		28:14	188
		28:14b	193
		28:19	195
<i>Deuteronomy</i>			
32	11, 13, 140, 163–66, 168, 170–74, 176, 178, 180–84, 186–87, 198, 202, 204, 221–23		
32:8	167, 169, 172, 184–85, 194, 196		
32:8–9	93, 101, 165, 171–73, 185–86, 196, 198, 202, 222–23		
32:9ff.	168		
32:12	171–72, 189, 221		
32:15	171		
32:16	198		
32:17	137, 168, 170–72, 179, 181, 183–86, 197–98, 221–23		
32:17a	178		
32:17b	178		
32:17c	178		
32:17d	179		
32:21	171–72, 198, 221		
32:24	197–98, 221–23		
32:27	223		
32:31	171–72, 198, 221		
32:37	198, 221		
32:39	171–72, 198		
<i>Second Samuel</i>			
		7:14	191, 192
		18:18	152
<i>First Kings</i>			
		15:13	97
		18:19	97, 98

<i>Second Kings</i>	97	<i>Nahum</i>	
13:11	92	1:4	138
14: 4	92		
21:7	97	<i>Zechariah</i>	
23:4	98	3:2	138
23:4–6	97		
23:6–7	98		
		Septuagint	
<i>First Chronicles</i>			
18:3	152	1 Reigns	189–90
21:1	138		
<i>Second Chronicles</i>			
25:14–16	20, 27, 92	Dead Sea Scrolls	
		4QDeut ^f	166, 183–84
<i>Job</i>		4QDeut ^g	166, 169–70
38:7	168		
<i>Psalms</i>			
2:7	191–92	Jewish Texts	
2:7–8	192		
82:1	6, 167, 168	<i>Ben Sira</i>	
91	143	17:17	183–84
96:5	183–84	44:1–2	183–84
105:37	182–83		
105	182		
105:37	180		
106	180–81	<i>Fouad</i>	
106:36–38	180	848	166
106:37	179–80	106c	166
106:37–38	173–75		
106:38	174–76	<i>Papyrus 848</i>	183
<i>Isaiah</i>			
8:19	195, 199	Inscriptions	
8:19b	199	<i>KAI</i>	
56:5	152	50:3	93, 95
<i>Jeremiah</i>			
7:18	97	<i>Ketef Hinnom</i>	
36:23	188–89	#1	129, 132–34, 138
		#2	129, 135–36, 138
<i>Amos</i>			
8:14	158	<i>Khirbet Beit Lei</i>	
		3:1	157
<i>Micah</i>			
1:11	146		

Modern Authors Index

- Abdi, Kamyar, 85, 86
Aharoni, Yohanan, 37
Ahituv, Shmuel, 20, 24, 25, 28, 29, 37, 41,
42, 43, 49, 52, 53, 55, 58, 74, 76, 77,
79, 81, 82, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96,
97, 98, 99, 100, 104, 115, 118, 131,
132, 133, 138, 158
Aitkin, James K., 143
Albertz, Rainer, 2, 21, 22, 32, 99, 113, 125,
126, 127, 149, 150, 153, 160, 217, 237,
238
Altenmüller, Hartwig, 152, 155, 202
Altmann, V., 206, 225
Andrews, Carol, 152
Antonaccio, Carla, 213
Ariel, Donald T., 141
Asher-Greve, Julia M., 59
Ayalon, Eton, 20, 21, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28,
29, 31, 32, 52, 53, 54, 56, 120

Bareš, Ladislav, 45
Barkay, Gabriel, 84, 104, 123, 124, 129,
131, 141
Barnes, John W. B., 57
Barton, John, 99, 125
Beaulieu, Paul-Alain, 176, 177, 178
Beck, Pirhiya, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 36,
37, 38, 39, 41, 42, 43, 45, 46, 49, 50,
51, 52, 54, 56, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63,
64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73,
77, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 90, 103, 104,
105, 106, 111, 113, 120, 218
Becking, Bob, 102, 139, 171
Beckman, Gary, 22, 23
Beherec, Marc, 22, 23, 217
Ben Arieh, Sarah, 22
Ben-Shlomo, David, 65
Ben-Yosef, Erez, 22, 213
Bergman, Jan, 155
Berlejung, Angelika, 123, 129, 131, 137
Bernick-Greenberg, Hannah, 121
Binger, Tilde, 202
Blair, Judit M., 139, 184
Bloch-Smith, Elizabeth, 23, 148, 150, 151,
217
Bodel, John, 125
Boertien, Jeannette, 121
Bohak, Gideon, 124
Bosse-Griffiths, K., 202
Brauer, A., 208

Cahill, Jane M., 141
Caquot, André, 138
Chanteloup, J. de, 155
Ciraolo, Leda, 192
Cohen, Rudolph, 121
Collins, Billie Jean, 123
Coppens, Filip, 45
Cornelius, Izak, 96
Counts, Derek B., 23, 208, 212, 213
Cranz, Isabel, 163
Cruz-Uribe, Eugene, 45

Dasen, Véronique, 68, 86
Daviau, P. M. Michele, 22, 34
Day, John, 184
De Groot, Ariel, 141
Dell, Katharine J., 143
Dessel, J. P., 151
Dever, William G., 144, 145, 146, 147,
148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 154, 156, 158
Dick, Michael B., 23
Dijk, Jacobus van, 155
Dobbs-Allsopp, F. W., 131, 139
Donner, H., 95
Donohue, A. A., 208
Dougherty, Carol, 213, 225
Duncan, J. A., 167
Durand, Jean-Marie, 59

- Ebeling, Jennie R., 113, 125
 Eggler, Jörg, 64, 66, 68, 72, 86, 88, 103, 206
 Elayi, Josette, 59
 Eshel, Esther, 20, 24, 25, 28, 29, 37, 41, 42, 43, 49, 52, 53, 55, 58, 74, 76, 77, 79, 81, 82, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 104, 115, 118, 158
- Forshaw, Roger, 90, 129
 Frevel, C., 98
 Frey-Anthes, Henrike, 184
- Gane, Constance H., 178
 Genaille, Nicole, 155
 Gera, Avivit, 121
 Gilmour, Garth, 103
 Gitin, Seymour, 151
 Gogel, Sandra L., 47, 157, 158
 Goren, Avner, 16, 17, 20, 21, 25, 26, 27, 30, 31, 33, 34, 37, 38, 41, 52, 74, 77, 79, 82, 105, 111, 115, 218
 Grataloup, Catherine, 23
 Green, Anthony, 85
 Guri-Rimon, Ofra, 19
- Hackett, Jo Ann, 173
 Hadley, Judith M., 98, 156
 Hayes, William Christopher, 40
 Hays, Christopher B., 195
 Heckl, Raik, 123
 Heessel, Nils, 178
 Herrmann, Christian, 65, 66, 86, 88, 89, 125, 132, 139, 141, 143, 154, 213, 242
 Hiebert, Robert J. V., 167
 Hitchcock, Louise A., 113
 Hölscher, Tonio, 178
 Horst, P. W. van der, 171
 Horwitz, Liora Kolska, 21, 33, 112, 113
 Hutton, Jeremy M., 96, 101, 124, 160
- Jastrow, Marcus, 184
 Joosten, Jan, 138, 165, 168, 184
 Jördens, Andrea, 175
 Joüon, P., 191
- Kató, Szabolcs Ferencz, 184
- Keegan, Peter, 45, 55
 Keel, Othmar, 60, 62, 152
 Kieffer, René, 155
 Kletter, Raz, 19, 160
 Knapp, A. Bernard, 213
 Kousoulis, Panagiotis, 175, 176, 179
 Kratz, Reinhard G., 170
 Kurke, Leslie, 213, 225
- Labrique, Françoise, 207
 Lange, Armin, 164
 Latour, Bruno, 2, 7, 244
 Lemaire, André, 43, 59, 76, 91, 92, 93, 144, 151, 155
 Lemon, Joel, 90, 235
 Leuchter, Mark A., 124
 Levine, Baruch A., 173
 Levinson, B., 165, 182
 Levin, Yigal, 158
 Levy, Thomas E., 22, 23, 213, 217
 Lewis, Theodore J., 22, 23, 137, 138, 160
 Lichtenberger, Hermann, 164
 Lieven, Alexandra von, 191
 Liphshitz, Nili, 33
 Lipiński, Edward, 139
 Lucarelli, Rita, 85, 175, 176, 179, 185, 186, 197, 204, 222
 Luft, Ulrich, 86
 Lüscher, Barbara, 40
- Manassa, Colleen, 191
 Mandell, Alice, 45
 Manowski, Paul V., 172, 179
 Markoe, Glenn, 106
 Martin, Dale, 183
 Martin, Sarah R., 19
 Mastin, Brian A., 143
 Mattusch, C. C., 208
 Maul, Stephan, 178
 Mazar, Amihai, 21
 Mazow, Laura B., 113, 125
 McCormick, Clifford M., 114
 Meeks, Dimitri, 86, 174
 Meltzer, Edmund, 155
 Merlo, Paolo, 96, 97, 99
 Meshel, Ze'ev, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 37,

- 38, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 47, 48, 49, 50,
51, 52, 53, 55, 58, 59, 60, 62, 65, 74,
76, 77, 79, 81, 82, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94,
95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 104, 105, 111,
114, 115, 118, 143, 218
- Meyer, Birgit, 3
Meyer, Marvin, 159
Michalowski, Piotr, 123
Minault-Gout, Anne, 57
Mirecki, Paul, 159
Mittmann, Siegfried, 155
MiYoung Im, 84
Moor, Johannes de, 137
Mulder-Hymans, Noor, 121
Müller-Roth, Marcus, 179
Münger, Stefan, 213
Münnich, Maciej M., 139, 184, 186
Muraoka, T., 191
- Na'aman, Nadav, 91, 92, 128, 129, 131,
132, 133
Najjar, Mohammad, 22, 23, 213, 217
Naveh, Joseph, 104, 138
Navratilova, H., 45, 55
Nicklas, Tobias, 175
Nordh, Katarina, 129
- O'Connor, Michael, 188
Ogdon, Jorge R., 155
Olmo Lete, Gregorio del, 155
Olyan, Saul M., 96, 98, 125
Ornan, Tallay, 37, 61, 63, 85, 102, 106,
176, 177, 178, 185
Otto, Bernd-Christian, 8, 9, 10
- Pardee, Dennis, 137, 171
Parker, Richard A., 58
Parker, Simon B., 153
Peden, Alexander J., 45, 90
Pels, Peter, 2–5, 8, 10
Peters, Melvin K. H., 167, 169, 170
Petersen, Anders K., 164
Pietersma, Albert, 170
Porter, Barbara Nevling, 85
Press, Michael D., 126
Puech, Emile, 152, 155
- Quack, Joachim, 40, 57, 58, 175
- Reiterer, Friedrich V., 175
Renz, Johannes, 129
Reshef, Nadin, 31, 32
Ritner, Robert K., 192, 202
Ritter, Nils C., 172
Robins, Gay, 56, 57
Roemheld, K. F. D., 164
Rofé, Alexander, 170
Röllig, W., 95
Romano, James F., 86
Römer, Thomas, 175
- Sanders, Paul, 167
Sanders, Seth, 160
Sass, Benjamin, 59, 144
Sasson, Jack M., 85
Schiffman, Lawrence L., 168
Schipper, Bernd, 174
Schmidt, Brian B., 16, 23, 35, 89, 91, 96,
101, 104, 110, 118, 121, 123, 215
Schmitt, Rüdiger, 2, 21, 22, 32, 113, 125,
126, 127, 149, 150, 153, 160, 217, 237,
238
Schniedewind, William, 116
Schoepflin, Karin, 175
Schroer, Silvia, 140, 152, 155
Seidl, Jonathan, 192
Shaked, Saul, 138
Shanks, Hershel, 59
Sheffer, Avigail, 33
Smith, Mark S., 168, 171
Smith, Robert, 155
Smoak, Jeremy D., 104, 123, 128
Smoláriková, Květa, 45
Sokoloff, Michael, 138
Sonik, Karen, 178
Sourdive, Claude, 155
Spieckermann, Hermann, 142, 143, 170
Spiegelberg, Wilhelm, 58
Spronk, Klaas, 137
Stausberg, Michael, 8, 9
Stavrakopoulou, Francesca, 99, 125
Stavrianopoulou, K., 159
Steen, Eveline van der, 121
Stowers, Stanley K., 125, 142

- Strassburger, Nicole, 19
Strawn, Brent, 90, 235
Styers, Randall, 3, 7, 8
Szpakowska, Kasia, 175
- Tebes, Juan Manuel, 217
Thareani, Yifat, 22
Theis, Christoffer, 16
Thomas, Ryan, 208
Tidhar, Amalia, 33
Toorn, Karel van der, 102, 171
Toumazou, Michael K., 208, 212
Tov, Emanuel, 167, 169, 170, 187
Tzoref, Shani, 168
- Uehlinger, Christoph, 22, 60, 62, 63, 152, 160
Ulrich, Eugene, 86, 167
- Van Beek, Gus W., 65
Van Dommelen, Peter, 213
Verderame, Lorenzo, 178
Versnel, Henk, 159, 160, 161
Volokhine, Youri, 175, 179, 202, 204
- Waltke, Bruce K., 188
- Washburn, Jody, 160
Weiss, Lara, 1, 125, 142
Westenholz, Joan Goodnick, 59
Wevers, John W., 167, 170
White Crawford, Sidnie, 167
Wiggermann, F. A. M., 85, 176, 178
Wiggins, Steve A., 97, 98
Wilburn, Andrew T., 2, 10, 11
Wilson, Veronica, 85, 86, 88
Winter, Irene, 106
Wright, Archie T., 139
Wright, Benjamin G., 170
Wright, J. Edward, 151
Wüthrich, Annik, 179
- Xella, Paolo, 184
- Yadin, Yigael, 152
Yardeni, Ada, 123
Yasur-Landau, Assaf, 113, 125, 126
- Zevit, Ziony, 113, 114, 151, 156, 159, 160, 161
Ziffer, Irit, 19, 37, 63, 106
Zwickel, Wolfgang, 19