



*Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2014.08.11*

**Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme, *Before the God in this Place for Good Remembrance: A Comparative Analysis of the Aramaic Votive Inscriptions from Mount Gerizim*. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 441. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013. Pp. xii + 181. ISBN 978-3-11-030118-2. Hardcover. €89.95/ \$126.00.**

**John F. Healey  
University of Manchester**

This short book, a revised version of a University of Copenhagen Faculty of Theology doctoral thesis, is of outstanding interest. It brings a sound methodology and careful philology to the study of late Aramaic epigraphs from Mt Gerizim and elsewhere, while using this evidence to tease out some profound insights into religion in the biblical and postbiblical periods.

As the title indicates, the material starting-point of the research was the Aramaic votive inscriptions from Mt Gerizim. These are in themselves of great interest because they reflect the social and religious circumstances of Samaria in the 2nd century BCE. The author of this book is not content, however, with a superficial study of yet another corpus of epigraphic data. Instead she undertakes a “root and branch” study of the concept of votive offerings and inscriptions, drawing in a wide range of inscriptions and showing an impressive grasp of the theoretical issues involved.

The first chapter gives an excellent account of the theoretical background in the study of votive offerings and inscriptions. Votive offerings are gifts to gods in order to create a mutually beneficial bond between worshipper and worshipped. Votives are often durable items which will stand (forever?) in the presence of the deity in his or her temple. The terminology is, however, a little vague and Gudme succeeds in clarifying it, preferring a broader definition of votives as “gifts to gods” rather than the narrowly etymological definition which would link votives exclusively to the fulfilment of vows. This is set in a wider context of gift-giving as a social practice.

The second chapter looks at votive practice in biblical literature, discussing also non-durable votive objects, such as sacrifices (particularly well represented in the Bible), and the frequent connection with vows. Less visible in the biblical narratives are durable votive objects: Gudme examines the evidence in detail. Thus, for example, the votive objects (*qodāšīm*) of silver and gold and other objects in the Temple treasury (1 Kgs 7: 51, 15: 15, etc.). She also discusses “Sacerdotal Giving”, gifts for the upkeep of the Temple and its institutions: such gifts could be converted for use to finance the repair of the building.

Chapter Three brings us to the heart of the book, the selective presentation and analysis of the 381 Aramaic votive inscriptions from Mt Gerizim, dated to the 2nd century BCE. These inscriptions follow a standardized formula: “That which [Personal Name] from [Geographical Name] offered for himself, his

wife and his sons for good remembrance before the god in this place". The inscriptions are written on building stones and appear to record the offering of gifts to the Temple which have been used to finance building work: the stones on which the inscriptions are engraved are notionally the things which were offered, though the author goes on to argue that some of the inscriptions were added to stones which were already in place. In this case it was not individual stones which were donated, but gifts which supported more generally the advancement of the building work. That there is reference to the god's "place" suggests the continuation of the presence in proximity to the deity of the good act of giving credited to the donor. The giving created a relationship between god and donor.

Gudme supports strongly the view that there was nothing distinctly "Samaritan" about the Mt Gerizim temple in the 2nd century BCE and that the inscriptions from the site attest, therefore, not to a deviant form of Judaism, but to normal Yahwistic practice in the Hellenistic period. She gives us a succinct and clear account of the site of Mt Gerizim and the excavations carried out there under the direction of Dr Yitzhak Magen (Magen *et al.*, *Mount Gerizim Excavations*, volumes I and II, 2004, 2008). The special significance in these inscriptions from Mt Gerizim would lie in the fact that such repeated acts of individual piety (even if there was some self-interest involved) reveal an aspect of the religious life of Hellenistic Judaism which is not otherwise known.

The formula of the inscriptions has a resonance beyond the confines of Hellenistic Judaism, since formulae of this kind are extremely widespread in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Hence in Chapter Four the author examines inscriptions with similar formulae from pagan environments: Assur, Hatra, Nabataea, Palmyra and Sumatar Harabesi (near Edessa). And to this are added some similar inscriptions from early synagogues. The particular inscriptions used for comparison are selected carefully on the basis of determining a similar context: some, for example, have a funerary setting or are casual graffiti. The ones chosen for careful attention are those which have a cultic setting (as at Mt Gerizim). An important conclusion is that:

the practice and rationale behind the inscriptions seem to be cognate. . . .By virtue of the material presence of the inscription in the sanctuary, "before the god," the worshipper is perpetually brought to the deity's attention and consequently remembered, not forgotten, by the deity. (133-4)

Thus Gudme has shown, through a very specific and well-argued case-study, that, at least at the level of popular religiosity, there was substantial common ground between Jews and pagans in this period so far as the theology of individual piety was concerned. It is not possible to understand the piety reflected in the Mt Gerizim temple inscriptions without reference to the wider cultural environment.

A fifth and final chapter takes us back again to the biblical literature, where the link between the theme of ensuring the deity keeps the worshipper in perpetual memory and the representation of this through a material object (whether inscribed or not) can be interpreted afresh.

The Conclusion reflects on the theology or "perception of the divine" implicit in these inscriptions, both those from Mt Gerizim and those from elsewhere:

Yahweh's good remembrance is secured by means of two mutually interlinked strategies; the gift establishes and maintains the beneficent social relationship between the deity and worshipper and a memento of the gift is placed literally *in front of* the deity, in the sanctuary, to remind him of the gift and to make sure that the worshipper is never forgotten and therefore is eternally blessed. (150)

There are a few trivial errors of spelling and English, such as the use of "beneficent" in the above quotation: "beneficial" would be better (see also p. 3), and "discern" where "distinguish" is meant (pp. 35,

49). Clearly not the author's fault is the non-granting of permission for the reproduction of pictures of the Mt Gerizim excavations, inscriptions and floor plans (p. 4).

This is a fine piece of work, combining attention to epigraphic and archaeological detail with thoughtful methodology based on the theory of gift-giving. The significance of it goes beyond the immediate concern with the Mt Gerizim temple. The claim that the latter is Yahwistic is important: in the light of that claim, Mt Gerizim cannot be set aside as Samaritan (and deviant). And it further implies that the theology of the votive offering was part of a theological *koine* shared by Jews with many different varieties of pagans, even if the particularities of each religious community have to be kept in mind.