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Votive Offerings, Graffiti, or Scribal Exercises?

A Note on the grmlqr[t] Inscription from Sarepta and the “Blessings” from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud

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Abstract

This short article revisits the question whether a class of inscriptions from the Phoenician city of Sarepta and the Israelite settlement at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud should be understood as votive offerings, graffiti, or scribal exercises. It argues that differences in the manner of execution mean the Sarepta and Kuntillet ‘Ajrud inscriptions resist attempts to impose a single unifying explanation. By doing so, it yields insights into the nature of sacrificial terminology in the world of the Hebrew Bible and offers a more nuanced understanding of the *mlkʾmr* sacrifices that are named in some Punic inscriptions.

Keywords

Sarepta – Kuntillet ‘Ajrud – *mlk* Sacrifice – blessing – votive offering

1 A Phoenician Inscription from Sarepta

In 1975 Javier Teixidor published an inscribed sherd that had been discovered in excavations at the Phoenician city of Sarepta (registration number: Sar. 2214).¹ The triangle-shaped sherd, which measures 9 × 8.2 cm, comes from

1 See Teixidor, “Selected Inscriptions,” 99–100; cf. Pritchard, *Recovering Sarepta*, 98–100, photograph *ibid.*, 99; *idem*, *Sarepta IV*, 8–9, 275 fig. 2.

the body of a storage jar. The sherd was discovered in locus II-C-9, stratum 2, in the north-western section of the industrial complex, near the site of the Iron Age potter's kilns (Sounding X).² This may imply that the jar never left the potter's workshop, or that it was discarded before it was used.³ Yet given that the sherd was recovered so near the surface, it is also possible that at some stage during the site's history it was redeposited from higher up on the tell, nearer the "shrines" of Sounding Y. At any rate, there were no indications of the vessel's contents. Teixidor dated the script to the fifth or the fourth century BCE.

The letters were incised across two lines before the vessel was fired. Unfortunately, the beginnings and ends of both lines appear to be missing. The inscription reads:

(1)]*h w z ḥ t y*[

(2)]*'mr l'dnn grmlqr*[

The first line contains a partial abecedary following the conventional Northwest Semitic order.⁴ The second line is more complicated.

Teixidor interpreted the title *'dnn*, "our lord," as a divine epithet and understood the inscription—together with the contents of the vessel on which it was inscribed—as a dedication meant for a deity whose name has not been preserved. The personal name *grmlqrt* (Germelqart) is well attested in Phoenician and Punic sources.⁵ Consequently, Teixidor understood *grmlqr*[*t*] in line 2 to be the name of one of the donors. It is the interpretation of the first word in the line, *'mr*, which principally concerns us here.

Teixidor initially proposed the restoration [*mlk*]'*mr* at the beginning of the line. The technical term *mlk 'mr*, denoting a type of sacrifice, is attested on Punic votive stelae from Carthage, Cirta, and Malta.⁶ Five more votive stelae were discovered in the 1930s near N'gaus in Algeria. The latter were inscribed in Latin and dedicated to the god Saturn, but they include transcriptions of the Phoenician term *mlk 'mr* (Latin: *mor*[*c*]*homor*, *mochomor*, [*m*]*orcomor*, *molc*[*ho*]*mor*). Significantly, two of the stelae (III and IV) specify that the

2 See Pritchard, "Potter's Kilns," 71. As Pritchard (*Recovering Sarepta*, 74) noted, the chronology of the small tell (Area II) is something of a problem due to the disrupted stratigraphy and the peaceful history of the site, which means there are not clearly defined destruction layers.

3 It is unclear whether the potters' workshops were still in use in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, when Teixidor dated the script (see below); the ceramic forms associated with the later kilns seem to suggest an Iron I date; see Pritchard, "Potter's Kilns," 84.

4 The *yod* is only partially preserved and irregularly formed, but it is difficult to see what else it could be. Given the preceding letters are written in alphabetic order, *yod* seems a likely reading. On the order of the letters in the Semitic languages, see Hetzron, *Semitic Languages*, 30–33.

5 See Benz, *Personal Names*, 104; Naveh, "Unpublished Phoenician Inscriptions," 25–26.

6 See Brown, *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice*, 29.

offering consisted of a sheep (*agnus*), which was apparently offered as a substitutionary sacrifice for an infant.⁷ Subsequently, following Teixidor's lead, Pritchard chose to translate 'mr as "lamb."⁸

A different approach was taken by André Lemaire, who drew attention to the partially preserved abecedary in the first line and the fact that the second line resembles a common Northwest Semitic epistolary formula: 'mr X 'mr Y, "Message of X, say to Y."⁹ This led him to argue that the Sarepta sherd should be understood in the context of education as an exercise in the conventions of letter writing.¹⁰ But in that case, the question arises why the letters were incised prior to firing, not inked onto the surface or incised at a later time, as is more common.

2 Inscribed Blessings at Kuntillet 'Ajrud

A possible solution was proposed by Joseph Naveh, who compared the Sarepta sherd to a pair of letter formulae which were written in ink on the side of two storage vessels at Kuntillet 'Ajrud (KA 3.1 and 3.6).¹¹ Both KA 3.1 and 3.6 contain variations on the 'mr X 'mr Y formula and, notably, KA 3.6 was accompanied by four partially preserved abecedaries. Because the letter formulae contain explicit benedictions offered on behalf of the addressee, Naveh argued they were left by donors who wished to make a donation for a third party, rather than for themselves. Subsequently, Alice Mandell likened the inscribed formulae to New Kingdom visitors' graffiti in Egyptian tombs and temples, arguing that their purpose was to give enduring expression to the request for blessing.¹²

7 See the detailed discussion and references in Brown, *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice*, 29–32; cf. Smelik, "Moloch," 133–142; Amadasi Guzzo and Zamora López "Epigraphy," 163. See also Otto Eißfeldt's classic study, *Molk als Opferbegriff*.

8 Pritchard, *Recovering Sarepta*, 99. The noun 'mr, signifying "sheep, lamb," is attested both in Punic and Aramaic (cf. Akkad. *immeru*), but its meaning is frequently equivocal, and it is often uncertain whether the vocable should be interpreted as the verb 'mr, "say"; see Hoftijzer and Jongeling, *Dictionary*, 78 ('mr₃); see also, *ibid.*, 390 (*lḥnqt 'mr*) and, 641–642 (*mlk 'mr*).

9 See Wearne, "Role of the Scribe," 34–36.

10 See Lemaire, "Abécédaires," 228–230; *idem*, *Les écoles*, 26.

11 See Naveh, "Graffiti and Dedications." Naveh also compared KA 3.1 and 3.6 to a Thamudic inscription which contained a similar formula. The Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscriptions have since been published with photographs and some commentary in Aḥituv et al., "Inscriptions," 87–91, 95–97.

12 See Mandell, "I Bless You."

The motivation to leave donations on behalf of another could perhaps be explained by the remote location of the site and the perceived immanence of YHWH of the Teman/South, who is named in several of the inscriptions (i.e., KA 3.6, 3.9, 4.1).¹³

But if KA 3.1 and 3.6 were intended as blessings for a third party, one wonders why the full epistolary formula was included; after all, more direct benedictions are attested at the site (e.g., KA 1.2). Even more remarkable is the fact that KA 3.6 includes a welfare enquiry, *ʾmr lʾdny hšlm ʾt*, “Say to my lord, *are you well?*”, which would surely have been redundant in such a context.¹⁴ There is little reason to believe that the scribes were so wooden or unvarying, especially since the genuine letters attest variability with regard to the inclusion and content of blessing formulae and welfare enquiries. Because the letter formulae at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud are surrounded by multiple short inscriptions that can most convincingly be understood as educational exercises, a more satisfactory explanation is that KA 3.1 and 3.6 were produced in the context of scribal education.¹⁵

If KA 3.1 and 3.6 are understood as exercises for trainee scribes and not as inscribed blessings, we are once again left to ask why the Sarepta sherd was inscribed prior to firing. It is of course possible that the inscription was simply opportunistic, in the sense that the unfired vessel afforded a convenient surface on which the scribe could practice or while away time.¹⁶ But if that is the case, the inscription is exceptional. Since alphabetic correspondence was customarily written in ink, what would be the purpose of practicing incising the

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- 13 Leaving aside the vexed question of how the expression “I have blessed you to YHWH of Samaria/Teman and his Asherah” should be translated in these inscriptions, it is clear that Kuntillet ‘Ajrud had a special connection to the southern regions in which it is situated. In addition to multiple references to YHWH of Teman/the South, KA 4.2 contains a theophany which has clear links to the biblical southern theophany tradition, which locates the deity in the region, e.g., Hab 3:3, “God comes from Teman”; see, Wearne, “Plaster Texts,” 99–119. It matters little at this juncture whether Kuntillet ‘Ajrud is interpreted as a pilgrimage site, a desert fortress, a waystation, or something else.
- 14 The welfare enquiry is paralleled in a Phoenician letter from Saqqara (KA1 50) and in an Edomite letter from Ḥorvat ‘Uza (see Beit-Arieh and Cresson, “An Edomite Ostrakon”) and an Ammonite letter from Tell el-Mazar (see Yassine and Teixidor, “Ammonite and Aramaic Inscriptions”).
- 15 The evidence for scribal education includes, but is not limited to, the abecedaries and examples of hieratic numerals which were repeated multiple times in close proximity; see Schniedewind, *Finger of the Scribe*, 23–48; Wearne, “Role of the Scribe,” 33–35; Smoak and Schniedewind, “Religion at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud,” 5–6.
- 16 As Menahem Haran (“On the Diffusion,” 94) noted, the motivation to inscribe such vessels might stem from nothing more than the joy of writing or the availability of a convenient writing surface.

formula?¹⁷ It therefore seems more likely that the vessel was inscribed for a special purpose. This cautions against treating the Sarepta sherd and the Kuntillet 'Ajrud formulae as functionally analogous, despite their superficial similarity.

3 The Meaning of *'mr*

Staying with the Sarepta sherd, two questions remain: What is the meaning of *'mr*? And what is its relationship to the nouns *'dnn* and *grmlqr[ʔ]*?

The uncertainty about the interpretation of *'mr* is compounded by the lack of a clear archaeological context for the sherd. To be sure, it is possible to follow the editors and restore [*mlk*]'*mr*, but, in that case, it should be noted that there does not appear to be any trace of the *kaph*'s tail. As an alternative, I propose that *'mr* be interpreted as a passive participle with the acceptance "that which has been promised."¹⁸ In that sense, the inscription would denote the vessel—or rather its contents—as something that was donated as a votive offering, in the technical sense of the term, i.e., that which has been promised in fulfilment of a vow. (On the use of *'mr* rather than *ndr*, "to vow," see below.)

Although no precise parallel for this use of *'mr* is currently known, a comparable acceptance is attested in Hebrew in contexts where the *qal* perfect of *'mr* refers to a promise or its fulfilment. Thus, in several instances *'mr* is used in an adverbial clause to denote a divine promise, e.g., יהוה פקד את־שרה כאשר ולא־אבה יהוה להשחית, "YHWH visited Sarah, as he had promised" (Gen 21:1); אמר, "YHWH was not willing to destroy Judah, for the sake of his servant David, since he had promised to give a lamp to him and to his sons forever" (2 Kgs 8:19; 2 Chr 21:7); ולא־נשא דויד מספרם למבן עשרים שנה ולמטה כי אמר יהוה להרבות את־ישראל ככוכבי השמים, "David did not count anyone twenty years old or younger, because YHWH had promised to make Israel as numerous as the stars in the heavens" (1 Chr 27:23). *'mr* can also be used of promises made by people, including commitments made to God, e.g., אמרתי לשמר דבריך, "I promise to heed your words" (Ps 119:57); cf. לו אמר לו, "they came to Egypt, to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, who gave him a house, and promised him food, and gave him land" (1 Kgs 11:8); ויגדלו מרדכי את, "because he had promised to make Israel as numerous as the stars in the heavens" (1 Chr 27:23). *'mr* can also be used of promises made by people, including commitments made to God, e.g., אמרתי לשמר דבריך, "I promise to heed your words" (Ps 119:57); cf. לו אמר לו, "they came to Egypt, to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, who gave him a house, and promised him food, and gave him land" (1 Kgs 11:8); ויגדלו מרדכי את, "because he had promised to make Israel as numerous as the stars in the heavens" (1 Chr 27:23). *'mr* can also be used of promises made by people, including commitments made to God, e.g., אמרתי לשמר דבריך, "I promise to heed your words" (Ps 119:57); cf. לו אמר לו, "they came to Egypt, to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, who gave him a house, and promised him food, and gave him land" (1 Kgs 11:8); ויגדלו מרדכי את, "because he had promised to make Israel as numerous as the stars in the heavens" (1 Chr 27:23).

17 Incised inscriptions are known, but they were typically inscribed *after* firing, and usually produced in the context of offerings or instructions for delivery or storage; see, e.g., Barkay, "A Bowl."

18 The plural pronoun confirms that *'mr* should be understood as a substantive signifying the vessel or its contents, not a perfect verb, which would require the plural *'mm*.

“And Mordechai reported to him all that had happened to him, *and the precise sum of money that Haman had promised to pay* into the king’s treasuries for the destruction of the Jews” (Esth 4:7). A similar acceptance also seems to be reflected in personal names that include an *mr* element, e.g., *mrhw* on seal impressions from Gibeon.¹⁹ In such cases, however, it is unclear whether the name should be glossed, “lamb of YHWH,” “YHWH speaks,” or “YHWH has promised/promised of YHWH.” The vocalisation אִמְרֵיהוּ (e.g., 1 Chr 6:7) suggests a *qal* perfect, rather than a participle; but it is not certain this should obtain in every instance. For the present purposes, באשר אמר, “as he had promised,” in Gen 21:1 is especially noteworthy, because in that instance *mr* stands metonymically for the promise itself.²⁰

It is also notable that in Hebrew narrative contexts, the spoken content of vows is regularly foregrounded by the use of *mr*, functioning as a direct discourse marker, e.g., וידר יעקב נדר לאמר, “Jacob vowed a vow, saying ...” (Gen 28:20); וידר ישראל נדר ליהוה ויאמר, “Israel vowed a vow to YHWH. *They said ...*” (Num 21:2; cf. Judg 11:30; 1 Sam 1:11; 2 Sam 15:7–8).²¹ This suggests that the act of verbally uttering the promise was integral to the vowing ritual. Significantly, as Jacques Berlinerblau observed, the emphasis on verbalisation is also reflected in the fulfilment formula כ שמע קלא, “for he heard his voice,” which regularly occurs in the conclusion to Phoenician and Punic votive inscriptions.²² It is, *ex hypothesi*, the spoken promise to which *mr* in the Sarepta sherd would metonymically refer.

The suggestion that *mr* should be interpreted as a participle meaning “that which was promised” is also indirectly supported by the vocalisation *molchomor* (vel sim.) in the votive stelae from N’gaus. Given that the noun *mr*

19 See Avigad and Sass, *Corpus*, 484.

20 In this sense, the semantic shift “say” > “promise” > “that which is promised” mirrors a process of metonymic chaining that is attested in Hebrew, and also Phoenician and Punic, for the cognate noun *dbr*: “word” > “words” > “report” > “that which is reported”; see Mylonas et al., “Speaking to One’s Heart.”

21 See Berlinerblau, *Vow*, 86–90.

22 See Berlinerblau, *Vow*, 90; Amadasi Guzzo and Zamora López, “Epigraphy,” 175–176. The use of the noun *dbr* in early examples of this formula does not necessarily contraindicate the present interpretation of *mr*. First, in the concluding formula it is used substantively to denote the content of the vow, rather than the act of verbalisation; second, in Hebrew, at least, *dbr* and *mr* are often used synonymously with the acceptance “to promise” (e.g., Gen 21:1, באשר דבר, “as he had promised, and YHWH did to Sarah what he had promised”; Exod 12:25, כִּי־תבאו אֶל־הָאָרֶץ ... כאשר דבר, “when you enter the land ... which he has promised”). It does not matter for the present purposes whether the formula is understood as indicative or volitive; cf. Kerr, “In Search,” 80.

(/*ʕimme:r/), meaning “sheep, lamb,” is independently attested, it would seem to be more than a coincidence that the N’gaus stelae identify the *molchomor* offering as a sheep (*agnus*). Yet the transcription *omor* is not an expected reflex of /*ʕimme:r/, cf. אָמַר (Jer 20:1, etc.); עֲמַרְרָא (Ezra 6:17); Akkadian, *immeru*. It is, however, a close approximation of the passive participle /*ʕamur/, “spoken, promised.”²³

4 The Vocalisation of the Phoenician Passive Participle

Evidence for the vocalisation of the passive participle in Phoenician is scant. Based on the transliterations of a handful of personal names, Johannes Friedrich and Wolfgang Röllig argued the participle was vocalised according to the **qatīl* pattern, as in Aramaic. The most notable examples include the Latin transliterations *Baric*, “blessed one,” *Baricbal*, “Baal has blessed,” etc.; Ασεπτ, “gathered/foundling(?)”;²⁴ and the late Punic hypocoristic *Aris*, etc., “requested (of God)”; fem. *Arest*, *Arisuth*.²⁵ Each of these examples can be explained in other ways. Frank Benz observed that *Baric* and its variants can be understood as a *piel* imperative, rather than a participle, and Karel Jongeling also postulated that /barik/ might reflect a *qal* perf. 3. m. s. of the **kabid* type.²⁶ It is, therefore, also worth noting that variations on the spelling *buruc*, *boruc*, and *boroc* are attested, implying a **qatūl* participle, as in Hebrew.²⁷ Turning

23 Edward Lipiński (“Le sacrifice *mol*,” 143) seems to have reached much the same conclusion; however, he seems to have interpreted *ʕmr* as an active participle, glossing *mlk ʕmr* as a “sacrifice *mol* de celui qui l’a promis” (cf. “*mlk* sacrifice of one promising (it),” Gibson and Lipiński *apud* Hoftijzer and Jongeling, *Dictionary*, 642 [*mlk*₅]). In that case, we would expect an *i*-class vowel in the second syllable, as in *duber*; Plautus, *Poen.* 944, 928, etc.; cf. Friedrich and Röllig, *Phönizisch-Punische Grammatik*, §139; Krahmalkov, *A Phoenician-Punic Grammar*, 197.

24 For the possible interpretation of Ασεπτ as “foundling,” see Friedrich and Röllig, *Phönizisch-Punische Grammatik*, §156.

25 Friedrich and Röllig (*Phönizisch-Punische Grammatik*, §140, §174) also cite *padi*/פָּדִי, “redeemed,” and *šobi/šobit*, “desired.” As noted by Benz (*Personal Names*, 233, 235), *padi*/פָּדִי follows a common pattern of hypocoristic names augmented with the 1. c. s. pronominal suffix -y. *Šobi/šobit* is only attested in cuneiform transcriptions, where /i/ can be understood as the *qal* perf. 3. m. s. Alternatively, *Šobi/šobit* might be derived from *šabit/šabiyah* (cf. Heb. אֲבִיבָה, “gazelle”; see Friedrich and Röllig, *Phönizisch-Punische Grammatik*, §174.

26 See Benz, *Personal Names*, 291; Jongeling, “Name Element BRK,” 229–232.

27 See Jongeling, “Name Element BRK,” 232–233, 240–241; Benz, *Personal Names*, 291. Jongeling (*ibid.*, 232–233) notes that names of this type are most readily explained as the *qal* passive participle; but things are not entirely straightforward, since examples of this

to $\text{A}\epsilon\pi\tau$, Friedrich and Röllig acknowledge that the transliteration with ϵ is unusual. They remark that the spelling might suggest that the second syllable was short, but as Benz noted, the transliteration also permits the vocalisation /ʔasapt/ (cf. Hebrew רָשַׁף).²⁸ It is therefore *Aris* (vel sim.) which offers the strongest support for the **qatūl* pattern.²⁹ But against this we must balance multiple cuneiform transcriptions of Phoenician names which imply the **qatūl* pattern for the passive participle, e.g., *ḥanūn*, “gracious,” in *Ba-(ʔa)-al-ḥa-nu-nu* (Ashurbanipal A II 84, 91; cf. רָנַן , 2 Sam 10:11, etc.).³⁰

In contrast to Friedrich and Röllig, Charles Krahmalkov argued that the Phoenician passive participle followed the **qatūl* pattern, citing, *inter alia*, the Neo-Punic transliteration *ilim sebuim*, “sacrificed gods” (*IRT* 893.4/5³¹), from *zābah*, “to sacrifice.”³² However, the text of *IRT* 893 is extremely difficult, and Krahmalkov is alone in reading *sebuim* at this point. Palaeographically, *sebuim* is not assured, but alternative readings are equally problematic.³³ In short then, the vocalisation of the *qal* passive participle remains uncertain. Against this uncertainty the transcription *omor*, should itself be weighed as potential evidence for the **qatūl* pattern, since, as noted above, it is unlikely on phonological grounds to represent /*ʔimmer:/, “sheep, lamb.”

type are only known for females, including examples without the feminine ending *-t*. As an alternative explanation, he proposes that names in this category were constructed from two nouns, one feminine and the other masculine, that need not have corresponded in gender with the sex of the bearer.

28 See Benz, *Personal Names*, 272.

29 See Friedrich and Röllig, *Phönizisch-Punische Grammatik*, §196b; Benz, *Personal Names*, 235, 276; Jongeling, *North-African Names*, 11.

30 See Friedrich and Röllig, *Phönizisch-Punische Grammatik*, §197c. Since both **qatūl* and **qatūl* nouns are often both found in West Semitic languages, neither form can be considered conclusive for the present purposes; see Fox, *Semitic Noun Patterns*, 129; Jongeling, “Name Element BRK,” 232, who considers the possibility of two different spellings for רָש ; cf. idem, “Names in Neo-Punic Inscriptions,” 35–36.

31 *IRT* = Reynolds and Ward-Perkins, *Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitana*.

32 See Krahmalkov, *A Phoenician-Punic Grammar*, 154, 201–202. Linpiński (*Semitic Languages*, 419) likewise offers Neo-Punic *ḥlwš*, “saved,” but does not indicate the source.

33 For a brief survey of the literature, see Kerr, “North African Centenaria,” 482–484. Photographic reproductions can be found in de Mathuisieulx, “Rapport,” pl. 21; Brogan, “Some Ancient Sites in Eastern Tripolitania,” 108–109 and pls. XLII–XLIII; Kerr, “North African Centenaria,” 503, fig. 4. Based on Brogan’s photographs, Kerr (*ibid.*, 484) has recently read *sebu[na]n*, which he interprets as a probable name.

5 “The *Mulk*-Sacrifice of the Promised Substitute”

If we accept the possibility that *omor* represents the *qal* passive participle **amūr*, then it is plausible to gloss *molchomor* (vel sim.) in the N'gaus stela as “the *mulk*-sacrifice of that which was promised (i.e., as a substitutionary sacrifice),” or, metonymically, “the *mulk*-sacrifice of the promised substitute.” The expression is comparable to the biblical תְּבַח־תְּוֹדָה, “thank offering,” נְדָבָה, “freewill offering,” etc. More importantly, this interpretation seems to be consistent with other compounds of *mlk* in Punic inscriptions, namely, *mlk 'dm*, *mlk 'zrm*, *mlk b'l*, *mlk b'sr*, and *mlkt bmsrm*.³⁴ To begin with, the fact that *mlk* is often attested alone suggests that we should understand the second element of the noun phrase as an adnominal adjunct specifying different types of *mlk* sacrifices, as in the Hebrew examples above, rather than viewing the two nouns together as a compound noun.³⁵ This sub-classificatory function obtains even if the various expressions came to be lexicalised (see below). It should also be stressed that there continues to be considerable uncertainty about how each of these lexemes should be understood.³⁶ Attempts to correlate the expressions with different kinds of sacrifices of human infants are attractive insofar as they offer a more-or-less coherent explanation for the different terms, but it is not clear that this brings us closer to being able to differentiate between **immēr*, “sheep, lamb,” and **amūr*, “promised substitute.” According to the human sacrifice explanation, the prevailing view is that the second element of the noun phrase stands in apposition to the first and designates the object of the sacrifice (i.e., the sacrificial victim).³⁷ Thus Robert Kerr, for example, glosses *mlk 'dm* and *mlk b'l*, as the “human sacrifice of (the child of) a commoner,” and the “human sacrifice of (the child of) a landowning citizen (or burgher),” respectively.³⁸ For *'zrm* and the hapax legomenon *bmsrm*,

34 See Hoftijzer and Jongeling, *Dictionary*, 641–644 (*mlk₅*).

35 On the syntax of the Hebrew expression, see Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, §12.3b.

36 This is illustrated by the fact that the entry under *mlk₅* in Hoftijzer and Jongeling, *Dictionary*, stretches to five pages.

37 It is far beyond the scope of the present article to examine each of these terms in detail. For the sake of argument, it will suffice to follow the recent summary by Kerr, “In Search,” 75–76.

38 See Kerr, “In Search,” 75, with additional references. With Kerr (*ibid.*, 75 n. 76) it seems reasonable to understand the hapax legomenon *mlk b'sr* as a variant of *mlk 'dm*. Xella (“Tophet,” 269) observes that *mlk 'dm* and *mlk b'l* never occur together in the inscriptions of a particular *tophet*, which might indicate that they were local variants of the same expression. Syntactically, *mlk 'dm* and *mlk b'l* could also be analysed as a construct phrase, indicating a genitival relationship foregrounding the donor rather than the sacrificial

he proposes “youngest child” and “issue, offspring, progeny,” respectively; however, both terms are exceedingly difficult.³⁹ Syntactically, both *’*immēr*, “sheep, lamb,” and *’*amūr*, “promised substitute,” follow the same pattern, in which ’*mr* is used appositionally. Moreover, in pragmatic terms, it is reasonable to suppose that processes of lexicalisation and the ritualised nature of sacrificial practices could have led *’*amūr*, “promised substitute,” to be understood in common usage as denoting a lamb or kid.⁴⁰ In any case, since the *molchomor* could encompass a substitutionary sacrifice of a lamb or sheep—as is made explicit in the N’gaus stela—the salient difference between *’*immēr* and *’*amūr* is one of degree of specificity.⁴¹

By extension, it is logical to infer that ’*mr* in the Sarepta sherd denotes the vessel’s contents as an offering of a particular kind (i.e., something that had been promised), rather than an offering of a particular thing (i.e., an offering of a sheep/lamb). Given the ritualised and highly contextualised nature of sacrificial offerings, it is not surprising to find the votive stela or the inscribed vessel referring to the sacrifices in such elliptical terms.⁴²

6 Why Not *ndr*, “Vow”?

We are left to ask why would the scribe use ’*mr*, not the technical term *ndr*, “vow, votive offering”? After all, *ndr* is regularly used on votive stela to signify fulfilment of a vow.⁴³ It is possible to conceive of several plausible explanations.

object. In that case *mlk* + expressions would exist in two varieties, one which was genitival and another which was appositional, with *mlk* ’*mr* belonging to the second variety; see Lipiński, “Le sacrifice *molk*,” 143. The contention that *mlk* ’*dn* and *mlk* *b’l* must be interpreted as “offering of a citizen/human” rather than “offering by a citizen/human” depends primarily on the interpretation of, and presumed equivalence with, *mlk* ’*mr*; see Amadasi Guzzo, “Il tofet,” 350; Xella, “Tophet,” 269.

39 See Kerr, “In Search,” 75–76, with additional references.

40 This is borne out by the animal remains from the urns at Carthage, which are comprised primarily of lambs and kids; see Schwartz et al., “Skeletal Remains,” 6 and table S1; Schwartz et al., “Two Tales of One City,” 450–451.

41 The case for interpreting ’*mr* as a reference to that which was offered as a substitutionary sacrifice is even stronger if we follow Otto Eißfeldt (*Molk als Opferbegriff*, 29–30) and René Dussaud (“Précisions épigraphiques,” 383) and interpret *mlkt bmsrm* as a sacrifice made in distress, since in that case the expression would seem to foreground the circumstantial cause of the sacrifice, rather than denoting its substance. Cf. Hoftijzer and Jongeling, *Dictionary*, 643 (*mlk*₅, 8).

42 See Amadasi Guzzo and Zamora López, “Epigraphy,” 167.

43 The terms *mnt*, *zbt*, and *ns*² are also used to denote the sacrifice/offering; see Amadasi Guzzo and Zamora López, “Epigraphy,” 171–173.

It is notable that use of the term *ndr* on Punic stelae appears to have become increasingly common over time. This may suggest there was a diachronic dimension in that the Sarepta sherd antedated the widespread use of *ndr* in such contexts.⁴⁴ Alternatively, it is possible that the term *ndr* had, or attracted, a technical sense, which was more narrowly conceived than *'mr*. Conversely, if it is legitimate to view the *'mr/mlk'mr* specifically as a substitutionary offering, it is possible that *ndr* covered a broader range of votive offerings. In either case, *ndr* and *'mr* were not strictly synonymous. It is also possible that the memorial stelae, which were not themselves votive offerings, were explicitly linked to the offerings through use of the term *ndr*, but that this specificity was not felt to be necessary for the vessels in which the offerings were contained.⁴⁵ In other words, the lexical choice was determined by the highly contextual nature of the inscription. Indeed, as far as I can determine, the term *ndr* is exclusively inscribed on commemorative stelae, not the votive objects themselves. Then again, it is possible that the term *ndr* was originally included as part of a longer inscription, but that it was lost when the vessel was broken.⁴⁶

7 “Promised for Our Lord *Germelqar[t]*”

Turning to the remainder of the line, Teixidor interpreted *'dnn* as a reference to a deity, arguing that in Phoenician and Punic inscriptions *'dn* is mostly used as an epithet for gods or goddesses and occasionally for kings.⁴⁷ It was this that led him to conclude that *Germelqar* was the name of (one of) the donor(s). But it should be noted by way of comparison that in the Phoenician and Punic votive stelae, the deity is usually named. In any case, it seems preferable on syntactic grounds to interpret *grmlqr[t]* as the complement of *'dnn* and so as the name of the intended beneficiary. As such, the fragmentary inscription can be translated: “(the offering) promised for our lord *Germelqar*.” There is no way to know whether the inscription was originally longer—perhaps naming the donors—or whether such details were simply implied.

44 See Amadasi Guzzo and Zamora López, “Epigraphy,” 168–169.

45 As noted by Amadasi Guzzo and Zamora López (“Epigraphy,” 169 n. 47), the inscribed stelae cannot themselves be considered the donations since, unlike the urns, they are not always present.

46 Given that the abecedary begins at *he*, it is probable that four or more letters are missing from the beginning of the first line.

47 See Teixidor, “Selected Inscriptions,” 99–100. On the semantic range of *'dn*, see Krahmalkov, *Phoenician-Punic Dictionary*, 34–35 (’DN).

8 Conclusions

The suggestion that the Sarepta sherd and the letter formulae from Kuntillet 'Ajrud were functionally analogous must be judged to be extremely unlikely. Naveh attempted to use the Sarepta sherd to support his case that KA 3.1 and 3.6 at Kuntillet 'Ajrud were blessings offered for a third party, but when we reverse the perspective, the comparison does not hold up. If we interpret KA 3.1 and 3.6 as scribal exercises, we are left to explain why the Sarepta sherd was incised prior to firing. This does not exclude the possibility that the Sarepta sherd was also a practice exercise, but to view it as such requires a far greater speculative leap. At best, such arguments are circular. It therefore seems warranted to accentuate rather than diminish the fact that the Sarepta sherd was incised whereas the Kuntillet 'Ajrud formulae were written in ink.

The case that *'mr* should be interpreted as a passive participle meaning "that which was promised," rests principally on: (1) the evidence for a comparable metonymic usage in Hebrew (esp. Gen 21:1); (2) the analogous syntagm *mlk 'mr*, which, based on the Latin transcription *molchomor* (vel sim.), is unlikely to represent the noun **'immēr*, "sheep, lamb"; and (3) the highly contextualised and elliptical nature of ritual language.

All things being equal, the fact that the Sarepta sherd was incised prior to firing suggests that the vessel was specifically prepared for a dedicatory purpose. As such, the inscription can be understood to refer elliptically to the offering contained in the jar. In this sense the interpretation offered here is comparable to those of Teixidor and Naveh, but the inscription itself requires a modification of both positions. Rather than interpreting the inscription as a label for a *mlk 'mr* offering by Germelqart and his companions, or as a repurposed letter formula offered to invoke blessings for Germelqart by a third party, the most economical option is to interpret the inscription as a label attached to a votive offering which was dedicated for the sake of Germelqart. By implication, it seems likely that the abecedary was included with the dedication because of the perceived numinous properties of writing.⁴⁸

This has implications for how we think of votive practices in the world of the Bible, inasmuch as it obviates, to some extent, the fact that, to date, we do not have any inscribed objects from ancient Israel that explicitly mention a

48 It is also possible that the letters in the first line were copied as a model for the inscription in the second line; see Haran, "On the Diffusion," 94. It would be unjustified to speculate as to the identity of the writer; theoretically, they might have been the potter, one of the donors, or a trained scribe. The formation of the letters suggests a relatively experienced hand.

“vow” (*ndr*).⁴⁹ If it is correct to interpret *ʾmr* as “that which was promised,” then the implication seems to be that sacrificial terminology was more flexible and varied than the stylised and technical vocabulary of the Hebrew Bible would suggest. In other words, it was possible to refer to a type of sacrifice without naming it. At the same time, the elliptical nature of the expression underscores the highly contextualised nature of sacrificial acts. Consequently, although the Sarepta sherd seems to refer obliquely to its own function, the fact that it is not more explicit indirectly supports William Dever’s observation that an object does not need to say it is a votive offering in order for it to be one.⁵⁰

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49 See Berlinerblau, *Vow*, 43; cf. Cartledge, “Were Nazirite Vows Unconditional?,” 421.

50 See Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?*, 196.

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