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Before the God in this Place for Good Remembrance

Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

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A Comparative Analysis
of the Aramaic Votive Inscriptions
from Mount Gerizim

DE GRUYTER

To Rasmus

Acknowledgements

Prometheus: And I invented for men the combining of letters as an aid to memory.
Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*

A man's gift makes room for him,
And brings him before the great
Proverbs 18:16

Contents

List of Abbreviations

AJA	American Journal of Archaeology
BA	Biblical Archaeologist
BASOR	Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research
BDB	The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix containing the Biblical Aramaic. Hendrickson Publishers, eighth Printing, June 2004.
BSOAS	Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies
CAD	The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly
CIS	Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum ab Academia inscriptionum et litterarum humaniorum conditum atque digestum. Académie des inscriptions & belles-lettres. Parisiis : e Reipublicae typographeo, 1881–1962.
HUCA	Hebrew Union College Annual
IEJ	Israel Exploration Journal
JAOS	Journal of the American Oriental Society
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JMA	Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology
JNES	Journal of Near Eastern Studies
JTS	Journal of Theological Studies
KAI	H. Donner and W. Röllig (1964–1968). Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften. Mit einem Beitrag von O. Rössler. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
MDOG	Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft
MTSR	Method and Theory in the Study of Religion
PAT	Hillers, Delbert R. and Leonora Cussini. (1996) Palmyrene Aramaic Texts. Johns Hopkins University Press.
RB	Revue Biblique
RES	Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique
SJOT	Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament
SSI	Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions. volumes I–III. Gibson, John C.L. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press.
THAT	Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament. Edited by Jenni Ernst und Claus Westermann. München: Chr. Kaiser, 1971–1976.
ThWAT	Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament. 8 vols. Ed. By G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren and H.-J. Fabry. Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer.
TDOT	Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament. Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
VT	Vetus Testamentum
ZAW	Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
ZDMW	Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft

Introduction

The inspiration for the present study goes back a few years to 2006 when I was working on the law of the Nazirite in Numbers 6:1–21.[1] The Nazirite's vow led me to the study of conditional vows (*nēder*) in the Hebrew Bible, a topic, which had received recent attention in the form of two monographs, published in the 1990s, Tony W. Cartledge's, *Vows in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, and Jacques Berlinerblau's, *The Vow and the 'Popular Religious Groups' of Ancient Israel: A Philological and Sociological Inquiry.*[2] The more I pursued the phenomenon of conditional vows, the more I kept coming across references to 'votive practice,' and I set out to find the book(s) on votive practice in the Hebrew Bible. After all, a book has been written on nearly every aspect of daily life and religion in the Hebrew Bible and I was convinced that a book on votive practice was out there. As it turned out the book was not out there. During the past five years I have not been able to find a book or even a chapter that thematically and systematically dealt with votive practice in the Hebrew Bible. It happens that works on ancient Israelite religion contain references to votive practice, in particular in relation to the 'votive' or 'vow offering' in Leviticus 7:16 or to the vow of the Nazirite mentioned above, but the term is never explained or specified, nor is it related to votive practice in neighbouring cultures and religions.[3]

As I started to move out of the narrow field of Hebrew Bible studies and into the field of ancient religions in general I immediately came across some books and articles that dealt with either votive practice or votive objects, but I also soon realized that the use of the term votive was quite inconsistent and just as

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1 Gudme 2007.

2 Cartledge 1992; Berlinerblau 1996.

3 See for instance Miller 2000: 118–120; Olyan 2004; Milgrom 1991: 219–220. In Zevit 2001 the term votive appears a couple of times, but it is never defined or explained nor is it treated thematically anywhere in this otherwise very thorough study of ancient Israelite religion and its material remains (see pp. 203, note 130; 251 and 462–464). In his 1993 commentary on Numbers, Baruch Levine writes: "The involvement of the votive system in naziritism requires that the two phenomena be studied in tandem." (Levine 1993: 235) Levine himself did not act upon his own request. To some extent Cartledge's *Vows in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (1992) is the closest we come to a book on votive practice in the Hebrew Bible, but Cartledge's definition of 'votive' is very narrow and he never discusses the consequences of this narrow terminology, nor does he relate votive practice in the narrow sense to gifts to the gods in general or to the archaeology of Palestine. It should be noted that Jeffrey H. Tigay has a brief chapter on votive inscriptions in his 1986 book, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions*, but Tigay makes no attempt to define, analyse or place votive practice within a larger system of religious practices, see Tigay 1986: 23–36.

in Hebrew Bible studies it was almost never explained or defined. The reader was left to decide from the context whether votive in a given context meant a gift dedicated to a deity on the basis of a conditional vow, or if it meant gifts to the deity in general or simply referred to archaeological artefacts found in what was assumed to be a cultic context, the function of which was not mentioned in any detail.[4]

I was amazed that a religious phenomenon that was so well-documented in the archaeological record and so wide-spread across time and cultures and so obviously related to another religious phenomenon, sacrifice, which has been studied to near-exhaustion, was being treated in such a disorderly way, and it was this surprise and even frustration that got me started on the present study; an urge to try to make sense of the myriad of data and the peculiar lack of theoretical and terminological clarity that came with it. Therefore, I decided to write not *the* study on votive practice in the Hebrew Bible, because I hope that there will be many more, but *a* study on votive practice in the Hebrew Bible, placing this practice in its theoretical, material, textual and cultural context.

I do this by making the votive inscriptions from the Yahweh sanctuary on Mount Gerizim the centre of my analysis. The Gerizim inscriptions were excavated in the 1980s and 1990s and published in 2004.[5] The assemblage of votive inscriptions from Gerizim contains 381 inscriptions and fragments of inscriptions, written in Aramaic and dating to approximately the 2nd century BCE. The inscriptions all appear to follow either a short or a long version of the same dedicatory formula: "That which (personal name) from (geographic name) offered for himself, his wife and his sons for good remembrance before the god in this place."[6] The inscriptions are private votive inscriptions, written on ashlars that were probably once part of the inner wall of the sanctuary, and each of them is a memento of a gift that was once dedicated to Yahweh on Mount Gerizim.

Mount Gerizim is both historically and today the centre of worship for the Samaritan community and therefore the temple on Mount Gerizim is frequently associated with 'Samaritan' worship and religion, which is seen as distinct from Judaism and the Yahwism practiced in Judah in the Persian and Hellenistic periods. It is my contention however, that there is nothing distinctly 'Samaritan' about the sanctuary or the worship on Mount Gerizim in the 2nd century BCE

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4 Cf. Osborne 2004, who regrets scholarship's inconsistent approach to "objects of dedication."
5 Magen, Misgav and Tsfania 2004.
6 Magen, Misgav and Tsfania 2004: 16.

and therefore the votive inscriptions from Gerizim offer us a rather unique window to Yahwistic votive practice in Hellenistic period Palestine.

In the following, the votive inscriptions from Mount Gerizim are interpreted in the light of votive practice in the Hebrew Bible as well as of votive practice in general on the basis of a terminological and theoretical discussion. The votive inscriptions from Mount Gerizim are also interpreted in their broader cultural context by relating them to a group of Semitic dedicatory inscriptions which, like the Gerizim inscriptions, contain a version of a remembrance formula; that is, inscriptions containing a request from the worshipper that the deity may remember him. Finally, the aspect of divine remembrance in the Hebrew Bible is explored and related to the materiality of the votive inscription.

The study is divided into five main chapters; Chapter 1 describes the theoretical framework within which the analysis of the votive inscriptions from Mount Gerizim is to be carried out. The central concept is that votive practice, broadly defined as gifts to the gods, is the practice of giving gifts to deities in order to establish or maintain a relationship that is seen as being mutually beneficent for both deity and worshipper. The nature of the durable votive object, including the votive inscription, further emphasizes this aspect by lending the worshipper a lasting material presence in front of the deity, acting as a memento of the gift. Chapter 1.1 contains a terminological discussion to define votive practice and it reaches the conclusion that a broad definition understanding votive practice basically as gifts to the gods is preferable. This chapter is followed by a chapter on gift giving (1.2) in which it is argued that gift giving is essentially an open-ended social practice that has the ability to create lasting relationships between people. Finally in chapter 1.3 the conclusions from the two previous sections are tied together in a description of gifts to the gods.

Chapter 2 contains a survey of votive practice in biblical literature and chapter 3 a presentation and analysis of the votive inscriptions from Mount Gerizim. Chapter 3.1 contains a general introduction to the site of Mount Gerizim and the excavations carried out there, followed by a discussion of the so-called 'Samaritan' issue in chapter 3.2. As mentioned above, the conclusion is reached that there is nothing particularly 'Samaritan' about the worship carried out on Mount Gerizim in the 2nd century BCE, but that the sanctuary on Mount Gerizim simply gives us an example of Yahwistic worship in Hellenistic period Palestine. In chapter 3.3 there follows a description of the sanctuary excavated on Mount Gerizim and in chapter 3.4 the votive inscriptions from Mount Gerizim are presented and analyzed.

Chapter 4 further investigates the concept of "good remembrance" asked for in some of the votive inscriptions from Mount Gerizim. First, a comparison is made with five groups of dedicatory inscriptions, containing a version of a re-

membrance formula. The inscriptions come from Assur (chapter 4.2), Hatra (4.3), the Nabataean sanctuary at Jebel Ramm (4.4), Palmyra (4.5) and Sumatar Harabesi in present day Turkey, a former centre for the worship of the moon god Sin (4.6). Finally, a few examples of synagogue inscriptions containing a version of a remembrance formula are mentioned as well (4.7). The comparative material in these chapters shows that the votive inscriptions from Mount Gerizim can be placed within a broad religious practice of dedicating gifts to the gods and leaving inscriptions in sanctuaries, requesting that the deities remember their worshippers.

In the following chapter 5, the aspect of the deity's good remembrance is traced in the Hebrew Bible as is the relationship between the remembrance of the deity and materiality, such as ritual objects and worshippers performing ritual actions. It is proposed in this chapter that the understanding of divine remembrance and its link to material objects described in the Hebrew Bible corresponds very well with the practice behind not only the votive inscriptions from Mount Gerizim, but also the dedicatory inscriptions presented in chapter 4.

There seems to be a 'theology' or perception of the divine behind the practice of dedicating the votive inscriptions from Mount Gerizim that ties together the aspects of gift, remembrance and material presence. This 'theology' is echoed both in similar Semitic dedicatory inscriptions containing a version of a remembrance formula and in the Hebrew Bible.

The translations of inscriptions cited as examples of votive practice in chapter 1 are *not* my own, whereas all inscriptions in the following chapters and all biblical texts are given in my own translation. For the reproduction of Hebrew and Aramaic Text the SBL Academic Style is used.[7] For the sake of comparability I have chosen to transliterate both Hebrew and Aramaic texts.

In a study such as the present, where archaeological and palaeographical material is presented and analysed it is certainly preferable to be able to illustrate the text with fotographs, drawings and floor plans. Unfortunately, however, it has not been possible to obtain permission to reproduce the illustrations from the publication of the Gerizim material. Therefore I must refer my readers to the two excavation reports that have been published so far, *Mount Gerizim Excavations Volume I* (*JSP 2*), which is the preliminary publication of the Aramaic, Hebrew and Samaritan inscriptions from Mount Gerizim and *Mount Gerizim Excavations Volume II* (*JSP 8*), which contains a preliminary report of the results of the excavations.[8]

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7 *SBL Handbook of Style:* 5.1.1, page 26.
8 Magen, Misgav and Tsfania 2004; Magen 2008a.

1 Votive Practice: A Methodological Framework

In the field of religious studies, surprisingly little has been written on the subject of votive practice. To this day scholarly works thematically treating the subject in general as well as votive practice in the ancient world are surprisingly few.

In 1902, William Henry Denham Rouse wrote his very thorough and impressive although now in many ways outdated monograph, *Greek Votive Offerings: An Essay in the History of Greek Religion*.[9] Rouse's book is just as much a catalogue of Greek votive objects as it is a treatment of the phenomenon of votive practice. Rouse systematically lists recipients of votive objects, different kinds of objects dedicated and various occasions for dedicating votive objects. Since then only a handful of works on the subject have appeared. Folkert van Straten has written two essays on votive practice in Greek religion, *Gifts for the Gods* (1981)[10] and *Votives and Votaries in Greek Sanctuaries* (1990).[11] Walter Burkert devotes two brief chapters to '*Votive Offerings*' and '*Anathemata*' in his *Greek Religion* (1985; first edition in German 1977).[12] In a conference volume, *Gifts to the Gods* (1987), based on a symposium in Uppsala in 1985, there are some brief but very informative articles by Jan Bergman, Walter Burkert and Gertie Englund touching upon the more general aspects of votive practice and gift giving.[13] Finally, in 2004 an entire theme issue of the journal *World Archaeology*, edited by Robin Osborne, was dedicated to votive practice and "The Object of Dedication."[14] It is evident from the above mentioned titles that there is a strong preponderance of works by classicists in the field of votive studies. A couple of notable exceptions are Lenz Kriss-Rettenbeck's beautifully illustrated book on Christian votive objects, *Ex Voto: Zeichen, Bild und Abbild im christlichen Votivbrauchtum* (1972), primarily from the second half of the second millennium CE and thus quite late with regard to our area of interest.[15] And Eva Andrea Braun-Holzinger's study of Mesopotamian votive objects from 1991: *Mesopotamische Weihgaben der frühdynastischen bis altbabylonischen Zeit*.[16] Finally I wish to draw attention to Geraldine Pinch's comprehensive *Votive Offerings to Hathor*

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9 Rouse 1902.

10 van Straten 1981.

11 van Straten 1990.

12 Burkert 1985.

13 Bergman 1987; Burkert 1987; Englund 1987.

14 Osborne 2004.

15 Kriss-Rettenbeck 1972.

16 Braun-Holzinger 1991.

from 1993.[17] Although Pinch's book is primarily a catalogue of votive offerings from a number of Hathor sanctuaries it contains an excellent chapter which attempts to place votive offerings within 'popular' Egyptian religion.

In general votive practice is mentioned mostly in catalogues of and articles on votive objects; this is apparent in diverse collections of votive objects in Rouse's catalogue that lists everything from statues, plates and figurines, used tools and garments to locks of hair, and Pinch's catalogue, which is divided into the subgroups stelae, textiles, Hathor masks, cows, cats and fertility figurines. Alternatively votive practice is mentioned in works concentrating on specific types of votive objects, such as Cypriote votive statues,[18] Phrygian votive steles,[19] Athenian votive statues[20] or Greek anthropomorphic figurines[21] to mention but a few.

Thus, the focus is primarily on the votive objects themselves, their types, manufacture and style, and less on how the practice of bringing votive offerings to the sanctuary fits into the overall scheme of religious practices. Robin Osborne suggests that this circumstance is due to archaeologists' tendency to privilege the object rather than the assemblage. According to Osborne other factors accounting for the lack of studies on votive objects as aspects of practice are the difficulty in recognizing that an object has been dedicated rather than simply discarded and the relative novelty of 'cognitive archaeology' within the field of archaeology.[22]

In the following, I shall propose a working definition for votive practice and suggest a place for this practice within a broader theoretical framework of giving gifts to the gods.

1.1 Votive Practice

One initial difficulty related to the study of votive practice is the absence of a common definition. Literally anything can be given as a votive object and votive practice can be found in most cultures during all time periods, but what exactly

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17 Pinch 1993. I also strongly recommend two books on contemporary votive practice: Raj and Harman 2006, which is a collection of essays on the practice of making vows in South Asia, and and Teske 1980, which is a study of votive practice among the Greek-American community in the city of Philadelphia.
18 Beer 1994.
19 Drew-Bear, Thomas and Yildizturan 1999.
20 Keesling 2003.
21 Alroth 1989.
22 Osborne 2004.

is understood by *votive?* The term votive appears to exist in an area of tension between a very narrow definition based on the semantic root of the word derived from the Latin word for vow, *votum,* and a much broader and more frequently applied definition, where a votive object can be more or less any object found in a context defined as cultic.

An example of the narrow definition is found in *Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion*, where a votive offering is summarized as a "sacrifice made in fulfilment of a vow."[23] This definition limits votive offerings to vow-based dedications. In connection with votive practice the vow is always understood as a conditional vow which is linked to a prayer. Thus the votary promises to dedicate an object to the deity, if the deity answers the prayer accompanying the vow. For example, if you grant me a son/a bountiful harvest/a safe journey, then I will give you X. It is implied that if the deity does not answer the prayer, the votary is not obliged to fulfil his part of the agreement. An example is this archaic Greek votive inscription on a statue dedicated to the goddess Athena from the Athenian Acropolis:

> Alkimachos dedicated (ανέσθεκε) me, a magnificent votive offering (αγαλμα), to Zeus' daughter as a (redemption of his) vow (ἐυχολέν).[24]

Or this Punic inscription on a stele from the Carthaginian tophet:

> To the Lady, to Tinnit "face of Baal," and to the Lord, to Baal Hamon, which vowed Bōdʻaštart, the son of Hannō.[25]

In both cases the votive object is offered in fulfilment of a vow and thus as the last link in a chain of actions that can be described as vow/prayer – divine intervention – fulfilment of vow.

This New Kingdom Egyptian inscription to Amenra is an example of a votive object dedicated at an earlier stage in the process, namely at the making of the vow:

> If I see that you cause my affairs to go (well) then I shall provide for you a jar of potted *sermet*, likewise a *ds* jug of beer, and likewise my people with [cakes] and white bread.[26]

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23 *Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion*, first edition, 1126.
24 Raubitschek 1949: 10 – 12; van Straten 1981: 70.
25 Stele 2 in Mosca 1978. This stele was found in the fourth century CE fill, but undoubtedly came from the tophet.
26 Sadek 1987: 234.

These examples represent votive practice in the narrowest sense of the word, vow-based dedication. The performance of vow-based votive practice is well documented, especially in the Greek and Roman worlds. In fact in Roman religion the practice was so commonplace that a standardized votive formula stating the fulfilment of a vow developed, *votum solvit laetus libens merito* ('vow fulfilled gladly willingly deservedly'), and was turned into an acronym, *VSLM*, that can be seen in numerous inscriptions on stelae, votive altars and the like all over the Roman empire.[27]

The disadvantages of applying this very narrow definition is that when working with archaeological material regardless of the frequent mention of vows in ancient literature and inscriptions, more often than not we have simply no chance of determining whether an object interpreted as a votive object has been given on the basis of a vow.

A good illustration of this problem is the group of 'temple-boys' from Cyprus. About 200 temple-boy statuettes have been found in Cyprus in at least 20 different sites. The contexts are primarily *favissae* or votive deposits related to sanctuaries of Apollo, Melqart, or Aphrodite. Only two of the temple-boy statuettes have inscriptions on them both saying "to Apollo."[28] The Cypriote temple-boys are interpreted as votive statuettes and I do not dispute this interpretation, but we simply can not know whether the temple-boys were brought to the sanctuaries as gifts to the deity *in fulfilment of a vow* or whether they were brought to the sanctuaries merely as gifts.[29]

Thus an insistence on the use of the narrow sense of the term considerably cuts down the amount of available material that we can meaningfully use and eliminate any non-epigraphic material.[30]

This brings me to a second disadvantage, which is the actual use of the term votive practice in scholarly literature. In so far as the term is even defined it is very often done with a reference to the semantic root of the word votive, that is the narrow definition, but it is applied to possibly much more diverse and

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27 Keppie 1991: 93–94.

28 Beer 1994: 21–22.

29 Cf. Tigay 2007: 342, note 7. For an introduction to the difficulties of determining whether figurines without inscriptions are votive objects at all see Kletter 1996.

30 In general, exclusion of non-inscribed objects poses a problem for the study of votive practice. Eva Andrea Braun-Holzinger writes: "Eine klare Abgrenzung der Weihgaben, die als persönliche Geschenke für die Gottheit im Tempel aufgestellt waren, gegen Tempelinventar, das möglicherweise auch im Auftrag der Tempelverwaltung hergestellt oder erworben wurde, ist nur bei beschrifteten Objekten möglich." (1991: 2). In most votive assemblages, uninscribed votive objects are the norm and therefore a demand for certainty, which excludes uninscribed objects, may result in a schewed representation of religious practices.