

‘Shall I Offer My Eldest Son?’ (Mi. 6:7)

“Czy złożę w ofierze pierworodnego mego?” (Mi 6,7)

EDWARD LIPIŃSKI

address: Adolphe Lacomblélaan 50/11, 1030 Brussel, Belgium
e-mail: elip@telenet.be

SUMMARY: Leaving aside the speculations about the alleged god Molech, who does not belong to the Bible, but only to the history of biblical studies, the article deals with a few passages referring to child sacrifices. Starting from Mi. 6:7, which shows that the *molk*-offering was a particular form of Yahwistic cult, practiced in the 8th-7th centuries B.C., a distinction is made between an old belief that the first-born should be ‘given’ to the deity and the accomplishment of an unfortunate vow. Among the passages examined are Ex. 22:28-29; 34:19, and Judg. 11. More attention is paid to Lev. 20:2-5 and to Isa. 30:33, where the image of a sacrificed victim ready to be burnt is applied to Assyria. Since the question cannot be studied historically without using non-biblical sources, the article also refers to related Phoenician, Punic, and Latin texts. It examines the etymology of the words *molek* and *tophet*, as well as the particular meaning of *gēr* in the 8th-7th centuries B.C.

KEY-WORDS: *molk*-sacrifice, first-born, substitution offer, cultic use of *nātan*, ‘*am hā’āreš*, *gēr*.

SŁOWA-KLUCZE: ofiara *molk*, pierworodny, ofiara zastępcza, rytualne znaczenie *nātan*, ‘*am hā’āreš*, *gēr*.

Eighty years ago, O. Eissfeldt demonstrated convincingly that no god Molech or Moloch is mentioned either in the Hebrew Bible or in non-biblical sources and that *molk* is a West Semitic noun designating a ritual comparable to ‘*ōlā*, ‘whole-offering’¹. The terminology used still needs some clarification, especially in Punic², and one should stress that Yahweh-worshippers were

- 1 O. Eissfeldt, *Molk als Opferbegriff im Punischen und Hebräischen, und das Ende des Gottes Moloch* (Beiträge zur Religionsgeschichte des Altertums 3; Halle 1935); a new edition with Spanish translation is published in *Molk como concepto del sacrificio punico y hebreo, y el final del dios Moloch* (eds. C. González Wagner – L. A. Ruiz Cabrero; Madrid 2002) 1-86. Later, fruitless discussions among biblical scholars are presented and summarized by A. Piwowar, “Pochodzenie i natura starotestamentalnego kultu Molocha: Stan badań”, *SBO* 1 (2009) 107-134.
- 2 See, at present, E. Lipiński, *Peuples de la Mer, Phéniciens, Puniqes* (OLA 237; Leuven 2015) 217-221.

offering such sacrifices to their God, just like descendants of Phoenicians emigrated to the West were sacrificing to Baal Hamon, then to Tanit and Baal Hamon, who in Roman times was identified with Saturn. In the area of central Mediterranean, on the islands of Malta, Sicily, Sardinia, and in North Africa, we can follow the history of the sacrificial *molk*-ritual during ten centuries. But this is not the subject of the present article, which deals with a few biblical texts from a small area, datable around the 7th century B.C.

Micah 6:7

The particular characteristic of *molk*-sacrifices is best expressed in Mi. 6:7: ‘Shall I offer my eldest son?’ (*ha-’ettēn bākōrī*), this is the question a pious Judean countryman is asking at the time of prophet Micah, in the second half of the 8th century B.C. This is precisely the period when we start having literary, epigraphic, and archaeological attestations of child sacrifices among Western Semites: Phoenicians and Punics, Israelites and Judaeans, also Aramaeans, although we lack here a factual information. Only some clauses of Neo-Assyrian contracts, written in an Aramaic ambient, refer to such an eventuality and warn the possible perjurer, that ‘he shall burn his first-born son in the sacred precinct of Adad’³. The Assyrian phrase is *māršu rabû*, literally ‘his great son’, and it does obviously not refer to a just born baby. The same can be said about the Hebrew word *bākōr*, which is often replaced by the phrase *habben haggādōl*, ‘the great son,’ for instance in Gen. 27:1, where we read that Isaac called his eldest son Esau, *bənō haggādōl*, what corresponds exactly to Neo-Assyrian *māršu rabû*.

There is still another Hebrew phrase designating the first-born, namely *peṭer rāḥam*, literally ‘splitter of the mother’s womb’. This phrase occurs in Ez. 20:26⁴, which also refers to child sacrifice, but it does not designate the first-born of a patriarchal family. It considers the child from the point of view of the mother. Such an approach has an institutional significance in a matriarchal family, but does not express the notion of ‘eldest son’ in the polygamic patriarchal family like the one of the biblical tradition. Matriliney, however, the custom of reckoning kinship and descent in the female line, is attested by Mandaean bowl inscriptions and lead amulets from Babylonia.

3 E. Lipiński, “Le sacrifice *molk* dans le cadre des cultes sémitiques”, *Molk como concepto del sacrificio punico y hebreo, y el final del dios Moloch* (eds. C. González Wagner – L. A. Ruiz Cabrero; Madrid 2002) 141-157 (see 147-148).

4 The phrase occurs also in Ex. 13:2, 12, 15; 34:19; Numb. 3:12; 18:15. Cf. H. Niehr, “*pāṭar*”, *TDOT XI* (Grand Rapids 2001) 529-533 (see 530-532).

‘Shall I Offer My Eldest Son?’ (Mi. 6:7)

The strict rabbinic conception of Jewish identity as pending on Jewish matrilineal descent can possibly be traced back to this Babylonian ambient, since Mandaean and Jews were living in the same areas and were speaking very similar dialects.

The sacrificial term used in Mi. 6:7 is the verb *nātan*, ‘to give’. In fact, this is the oldest Hebrew verb used in the sacral semantic field to signify an offering made to the deity. We find it in the law of Ex. 22:28b, 29, which belongs to the Book of the Covenant (Ex. 20:22-23:13) preserving an old Levantine legal tradition: ‘You shall give Me the first-born of your sons’ (*bākōr bānēkā tittēn-lī*), ‘he shall stay with the mother for seven days; on the eighth day, you shall give him to Me’ (*bayyōm haššāmīnī tittēnō-lī*). This offering of the first-born to the deity did not mean originally that this was a kind of spiritual consecration of the child to God, as it was later interpreted and as some present-day writers would like to see it. Some biblical texts seem indeed to support such an interpretation. For instance, the verb *nātan* is used in the story of Samuel in 1 Sam. 1:11, where it expresses certain reciprocity without sacrificial overtones: if the Lord **gives** an offspring to Hannah, Samuel’s mother, ‘she will **give** the child to the Lord for his whole life.’ In the post-exilic period, we find the institution of the *nētīnīm*, literally ‘the given ones,’ who constitute a category of people dedicated to the Lord and serving in His temple in Jerusalem⁵. Here, too, there is no question of sacrifice.

However, the situation and the context are different in Ex. 22:28-29, where the offering of oxen and sheep is mentioned as well: ‘You shall do the same with your oxen and your sheep’. But the law was later modified, as we can see in Ex. 34:19-20, that belongs to a younger tradition. The principle remains valid, but its formulation is a little changed because of the animals: ‘Every splitter of the mother’s womb belongs to me, ... but you may replace the splitter of a she-ass by a sheep. If you do not replace it, you must break its neck. You shall replace every first-born of your sons.’ There is no question of replacing oxen and sheep by other offerings. Instead, a substitution sacrifice is prescribed for the first-born son and for the first-born of an ass, because the latter is considered as unfit for sacrifices. If it is not replaced by a sheep, its neck must be broken, what is no sacrifice. The text at our disposal does not specify how the child must be replaced, but the formula was most likely identical in the case of a child and of a young ass: *tipdeh bā-šeh*. In any case, the biblical story of the sacrifice of Isaac in Gen. 22 provides a ram as substitutive animal. The primary aim of this parable was to instruct people that God has changed His mind at the time of Abraham

⁵ E. Lipiński, “*nātan*”, *TWAT* V (Stuttgart 1986) 693-712 (see 709-712).

and no longer requires the offering of the first-born child⁶. The descendants of Abraham should henceforth replace it by a substitution offer of a ram or a lamb.

Lambs were regularly used in Punic substitution offerings and the biblical story of the institution of Passover in Ex. 12 refers to sheep as substitutive offerings for the first-born Israelite children, while every Egyptian first-born of man and beast is killed.

Now, there are decidedly two different religious practices behind the effective or substitutive sacrifices of children. One practice is based on the principle formulated in Ex. 22:28b and in Ex. 34:19, that belong to two different traditions, but both are based on the same belief: 'You shall give Me the first-born of your sons' and 'Every splitter of the mother's womb belongs to Me.' The sacrificial terminology linked with this basic religious principle is characterized by the use of the verb *nātan*, 'to give.'

There is another religious practice which is ultimately not related to this supposedly divine law, but which is linked to an oath or a vow formulated by a human being in particular circumstances. It aims at performing a sacrifice which is not imposed by a general divine law, but results from a contract either agreed between human beings or concluded between man and God, on man's initiative. We have an excellent example of such a case in the biblical story of the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter in Judg. 11. The essential passage is found in verse 30: 'and Jephthah made a vow to Yahweh' (*wayyiddar Yiptaḥ neder lə-Yahweh*) 'Whoever it may be that comes out of the door of my house to meet me, when I return successful from the Ammonites, shall be Yahweh's, and I will offer him up as a burnt offering,' an *'ōlā*. Jephthah returns in triumph and his only child, his daughter, comes joyfully to meet him. The father is in despair, but he must keep his vow, his contract with God. And after two months he accomplishes his vow according to verse 39: 'and he accomplished on her the vow which he had vowed' (*wayyā'as lāh 'et-nidrō 'āšer nādar*). The technical term used in this account is not the verb *nātan*, 'to give', but the noun *neder*, 'vow,' and the verb *nādar*, 'to vow.' The relation to God is expressed by the phrase *he'olā*, *'ōlā* (verse 31), 'to let a burnt offering go up' to God.'

The same difference occurs in the Punic inscriptions engraved on stelae which were placed above the vessels containing burnt remains of children

6 The redactor connected the parable with the whole narrative in Gen. 22:1: "The time came when God put Abraham to the test". The Christian allegoric or typological interpretation of this chapter is not related to its original aim. For this kind of exegesis, cf. G. G. Stroumsa, 'Herméneutique biblique et identité: L'exemple d'Isaac', *RB* 99 (1992) 529-543, with further literature.

‘Shall I Offer My Eldest Son?’ (Mi. 6:7)

or substitution animals sacrificed first to Baal Hamon, later to Tanit and to Baal. In the archaic inscriptions from Carthage, from Sulcis in Sardinia and from the island Mozia near the western shore of Sicily, we find the verb *yatōn*, ‘to give’, while *nadōr*, ‘to vow’, occurs in most Carthaginian inscriptions from the 5th to the 2nd centuries B.C.⁷ This change is not due to the sole chronology. There has been a religious reform or evolution and a change occurred in the conception of the sacrifice itself. In fact, the introduction of a different terminology coincides more or less with the appearance of the name of Tanit in Carthaginian inscriptions, henceforth mentioned always before Baal: *l-rbt l-Tnt-pn-B'l w-l-'dn l-B'l Hmn ... ndr š ndr*, ‘For the Lady, for Tanit-pane-Baal, and for the Lord, for Baal Hamon, ... the vow which he had vowed.’ The noun ‘vow’ and the verb ‘to vow’ have a determinate meaning and they indicate that the sacrifices referred to were accomplished in fulfilment of a vow which had been pronounced by the person mentioned in the inscription. The older terminology, with the verb ‘to give’, belongs to a period or, at least, goes back to a time when the first-born was offered to the deity, to Baal Hamon, because every first-born was supposed to belong to him.

Leviticus 20:2-5

We shall pay attention here to two texts, which are referring to this ritual practice and use its technical terms. The verb ‘to give’ is found in the important passage of Lev. 20:2-5, which is supposed to reproduce words addressed by the Lord to Moses, who had to repeat them to the sons of Israel. This passage is preserved in the Palaeo-Hebrew Leviticus Scroll from Qumran Cave 11 (11Q1), published by Freedman and Matthews in 1985⁸. The differences between the scroll and the masoretic text are insignificant. In verse 2, instead of *mibbānē Yiśrā'ēl* we have *mibbēt Yiśrā'ēl*, like in the Samaritan Pentateuch, and in verse 3 we have *wə-ḥillēl*, also like in the Samaritan Pentateuch, instead of the infinitive *ū-lə-ḥallēl*. Another remark concerns the word *mlk* in verse 5, which is vocalized by the Masoretes like in verse 4, but this passage is an anti-royal addition referring to a king of Judah, probably Manasseh (cf. II Kings 21). One should thus read *hammelek*,

⁷ M. G. Amadasi Guzzo, “Le iscrizioni del *tofet*: osservazioni sulle espressioni di offerta”, *Molk como concepto del sacrificio punico y hebreo, y el final del dios Moloch* (eds. C. González Wagner – L. A. Ruiz Cabrero; Madrid 2002) 93-119.

⁸ D. N. Freedman, K. A. Matthews, *The Paleo-Hebrew Leviticus Scroll* (Winona Lake 1985) 38.

what the Septuagint interpreted as a plural, εἰς τοὺς ἄρχοντας, as we shall see below.

אִישׁ אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִן־הַגֵּר וְהַגֵּר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יִתֵּן מִזְרְעוֹ
 לְמִלְכָּדִי מוֹת יוּמָת עִם הָאָרֶץ יִרְגְּמֶהוּ בְּאֶבֶן׃ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲתָן אֶת־פְּנֵי
 בְּאִישׁ הַהוּא וְהִכְרַתִּי אֹתוֹ מִקֶּרֶב עַמּוֹ כִּי מִזְרְעוֹ נָתַן לְמִלְכָּד לְמַעַן
 שָׂמָא אֶת־מִקְדָּשִׁי וְלִחְלָלֵי אֶת־שֵׁם קִדְשִׁי׃ וַיֵּאֵם הָעָלָם יַעֲלִימוּ עִם
 הָאָרֶץ אֶת־עֵינֵיהֶם מִן־הָאִישׁ הַהוּא בַּחֲתוֹ מִזְרְעוֹ לְמִלְכָּד לְכַלְתִּי
 הַמִּית אֹתוֹ׃ וַיִּשְׁמָתִי אֲנִי אֶת־פְּנֵי בְּאִישׁ הַהוּא וּבְמִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ וְהִכְרַתִּי
 אֹתוֹ וְאֵת כָּל־הַזָּנִים אַחֲרָיו לְזָנוֹת אַחֲרֵי הַמִּלְכָּד מִקֶּרֶב עַמָּם׃

2^β 1MS מִבֵּית מִ 7 cf 18,21^β; id 3. 4. (5) | 3^α מִ 5^α 6 τοὺς ἄρχοντας |

We can translate this passage as follows:

²Every man from the sons of Israel and from the settlers settled in Israel who **gives** any of his offspring for the *molk*-offering shall be put to death. The assembly of the land shall stone him. ³And I shall see to that man so that I may cut him off from his people, because he has **given** one of his offspring for the *molk*-offering, thus desecrating My sanctuary and defiling My holy name. ⁴And if the assembly of the land turns the eyes away from that man while he is **giving** one of his offspring for the *molk*-offering, without putting him to death, ⁵may I then see to that man and his family, so that I may cut him and all those prostituting themselves behind him – to prostitute themselves behind the king – from their people.

This passage has been attributed to a secondary level of the Priestly legal source, but the terminology used by its author and the situation it implies clearly belong to the 7th century B.C. First of all, the role attributed to the *‘am hā’āreš*, which has the juridical power to condemn someone to death and to execute this sentence by stoning him, shows that this has nothing to do with the despised post-exilic *‘am hā’āreš* of the Judaeen countryside, in opposition to the orthodox xenophobes in Jerusalem who have returned from Babylonia. Instead, we know that the *‘am hā’āreš* as a people assembly played an important role in the Kingdom of Judah from the 9th century B.C. to the Babylonian conquest. The double use of the name ‘Israel’ is not an objection against this interpretation, because this is the name which has been used in the final redaction of the biblical books to present the religious traditions of Israel and of Judah. However, it is possible that the original text of our passage was first mentioning Judah or perhaps *Bēt Dāwid*, as suggested

‘Shall I Offer My Eldest Son?’ (Mi. 6:7)

by 11Q1, since this was the official name of the Kingdom of Judah in the mid-ninth century B.C., as shown by the Aramaic inscription discovered at Tell al-Qādi (Tel Dan) and by line 31 of the Moabite stele of king Mesha⁹. Instead, the second mention of Israel in ‘settled in Israel’ must be correct, but *b* should be corrected into *m*: *miy-Yiśrā’ēl*, ‘from Israel’, i.e. from the Northern Kingdom. The text has been slightly changed, when the situation of the 8th-7th centuries was no longer understood.

This phrase contains a second interesting element. In fact, the *gēr*, ‘settler’, can hardly be considered here as a foreigner from Transjordan, Philistia, Phoenicia, or another country. This *gēr* is most likely the refugee from the Kingdom of Israel who settled in Judah or in Jerusalem, flying from the Assyrian invasions and occupation¹⁰. The number of these refugees must have been very large, judging from the extension of Jerusalem towards the end of the 8th century B.C. According to a serious evaluation made by archaeologists, the walled city of Jerusalem contained, at the end of the 8th century and in the 7th century B.C., a population of about 15,000 inhabitants¹¹, while the earlier population amounted only to about 3,500, also at the time of Solomon’s reign. The conspicuous mention of the *gēr*, as an important part of the population, suggests that we are in the 7th century B.C.

A third chronological element might be provided by the mention of one sanctuary, *miqdāšī*, which would suggest the final part of the 7th century, after the centralization of the cult. However, this interpretation has a shaky base, because it is supported only by the singular vocalization *miqdāšī*, whereas we could perfectly read the plural *miqdāšay*, ‘My sanctuaries.’ In fact, the Greek translators of the Septuagint have read the plural and translated *miqdāšay* by τὰ ἁγία μου. This is possibly the correct reading in many places, but a distinction can be made only with *mqdšy (byt) Yhwh, mqdšy-’l*, etc. Besides, the text gives the impression that the ‘*am hā’āreš* may be indifferent to the form of cult which is condemned by the author. This is easier to understand if we deal with the time of kings Manasseh or Amon who are reprovved in the Deuteronomistic history for their infidelity to Yahweh (II Kings 21) and are referred to in the additional clause *lznwt ’hry hmlk* of Lev. 20:5. Their reigns correspond approximately to the years 687-640 B.C.

The kind of sacrifices condemned by the author of this Priestly passage was offered to Yahweh in His own sanctuaries. This results clearly from

⁹ E. Lipiński, *On the Skirts of Canaan in the Iron Age* (OLA 153; Leuven 2006) 337 with n. 108.

¹⁰ D. Kellermann, “*gūr*”, *TWAT* 1 (Stuttgart 1973) 979-991 (see 985-986).

¹¹ Cf. M. Broshi, “The Expansion of Jerusalem in the Reigns of Hezekiah and Manasseh”, *IEJ* 24 (1974) 21-26; Id., “La population de l’ancienne Jérusalem”, *RB* 82 (1975) 5-14 (proposed 20.000); H. Geva, *Biblical Archaeology Today 1990* (Jerusalem 1993) 620-624.

verse 3b, since people sacrificing their own children were desecrating Yahweh's sanctuaries and defiling His holy name. The verb *ṭimmē'* signifies causing ritual impurity, thus desecrating, while *ḥillēl* has a larger meaning, something as 'defiling'. From the grammatical point of view, it is interesting to note that *ləma'an* does not express here an aim or an intention, but a consequence, a result.

The sacrifice in question is signified by the phrase *nātan pəlonī lam-molek*. This is a syntagm which occurs frequently in Biblical Hebrew with different indirect complements, for example *nātan pəlonī lə-rah^amīm*, 'to give somebody for compassion,' *nātan pəlonī lə-ālā*, 'to give somebody for a curse,' *nātan pəlonī lə-zəwā'ā*, 'to give somebody for a bugbear.' All these expressions - and similar ones - mean that somebody is made an object of compassion, of curse, of fright, of offering: he is, in consequence, pitied, cursed, feared, and offered. There is even a very close biblical parallel to the phrase *nātan pəlonī lam-molek* in I Chron. 21:23: *natattī habbāqār lā-olōt*, 'I give the oxen for the whole-offerings, the threshing sledges for the fuel, and the wheat for the grain offering.'

The name of the sacrifice itself was *molk* in Punic, as we know from Latin transcriptions of the Punic word, attested in North-African inscriptions¹². The Hebrew vocalization *molek* follows the rules of the Masoretes from Tiberias and corresponds perfectly to *molk*, and the same can be said of the Greek transcription *μολοχ*, *μολεχ*, when the Septuagint does not try to translate this word by *ἄρχοντι*. We can thus conclude that the pronunciation of the word was transmitted correctly down to the time of the Masoretes, in the 9th century A.D. This is not surprising, since the pronunciation *molch* is still attested in the 3rd century A.D. by Latin inscriptions from North Africa, where the Jewish communities were then quite numerous.¹³ One should add that the Hebrew Bible is so far the unique Palestinian source in which the word *molk* occurs. The inscription *RÉS 367*, allegedly discovered in the 19th century at Nebi-Yunis, between Ashdod and Jaffa, and kept before World

12 The Latin variant *mork* just shows the well-known phonetic confusion *l/r*, especially in foreign words. Egyptian does simply not distinguish *l* and *r*. An elementary acquaintance with phonetics is required when dealing with such questions. An additional inscription with *molk* was published by J.-P. Laporte, "N'Gaus (Numidie): deux inscriptions nouvelles", *H.-G. Pflaum, un historien du XX^e siècle* (eds. S. Demougin et al.; Paris 2006) 89-109, with a bibliography of the concerned Latin inscriptions.

13 P. Monceaux, "Les colonies juives dans l'Afrique romaine", *RÉJ* 44 (1902) 1-28; H. Solin, "Juden und Syrer im westlichen Teil der römischen Welt", *ANRW* II/29, 2 (Berlin 1983) 587-789 et 1222-1249 (see 770-779); Y. Le Bohec, "Bilan des recherches sur le judaïsme au Maghreb dans l'Antiquité", *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma*, 2nd ser., 7 (1994) 309-323; cf. also Ch. Pietri, "Un judéo-christianisme latin et l'Afrique chrétienne", *Église et histoire de l'Église en Afrique* (Paris 1990) 1-12.

‘Shall I Offer My Eldest Son?’ (Mi. 6:7)

War I in the Russian consulate in Jerusalem, is a forgery, as noticed already by M. Lidzbarski¹⁴. The publication of a photograph of its squeeze in 1976¹⁵ does not change anything in the matter, except that the only words [n]sb mlk of line 1, ‘stele of a *molk*-offering’, seem to have been added by the forger in the tiny still available space in order to increase the antiquarian value of the piece, which was no stele, but an offering table.

What about the meaning of *molk*? The exact meaning was later forgotten, but the knowledge that the word designated an unorthodox Jewish ritual act was preserved. This appears from the translation *pulḥānā nukrāyā* or *nukrā’ā*, ‘foreign priestly service,’ in the Palestinian Targum, especially in Targum *Neofiti 1*, the original of which can be dated around the 4th century A.D. This Aramaic phrase occurs also in Targum Yerushalmi I, for instance in Numb. 23:1, where *pulḥānā nukrā’ā* does not translate *molk*, but clearly refers to a foreign cult practice, namely Balaam’s. The general understanding of *molk* appears also from the Tiberian vocalization *lam-molek*, with the vowel *a* and the gemination of *m*, which indicate that *molek* was no proper name according to the Masoretes, but a common noun, used with the article as for a generic category or class determination. The real confusion started only with modern authors, especially in the late 20th century, despite the fundamental study of the question by Otto Eissfeldt¹⁶.

It is useless to insist on the obvious fact that *molk* cannot be related to the root *mālak*, ‘to be king’. The vocalization clearly points at a noun with the prefix *ma-*, lengthened like Akkadian *mālaku*, ‘march’, after elision of *hē* and then changed into *mō-*. We find a similar form in Hebrew Bible, namely, the participle *hiphil* of the verb *hālak*, ‘to go,’ which is *mōlīk*, ‘the one who lets go.’ However, we cannot identify *molek* with *mōlīk* because of the latter’s long vowel *ī*. We must rather think of a substantive formed from the same verbal root *hālak* by prefixing *ma-*, thus **ma-hlak*, then **mālak* after elision of the intervocalic *h*, finally **mōlak* after the change *ā > ō*, which is common in Hebrew and in Phoenician, with a further shortening and final elision of the vowel *a*, which is a general trend in Phoenician. In Arabic, the *hē* does not disappear and we thus find the noun *mahlaka*; it means ‘dangerous place’, for the verb is used in the sense ‘to pass away’.

Such a noun designates etymologically a place, like Arabic *mahlaka*, or a tool used to go somewhere, just as *’olā*, ‘burnt offering’, which etymologically

¹⁴ M. Lidzbarski, *Handbuch der nordsemitischen Epigraphik* (Weimar 1898) 131-132; id., *Ephemeris für semitische Epigraphik I* (Giessen 1902) 285-287.

¹⁵ B. Delavault, A. Lemaire, “Une stèle “molk” de Palestine, dédiée à Eshmoun? RES 367 reconsidéré”, *RB* 83 (1976) 569-589, pl. XLIV.

¹⁶ See here above, n. 1.

means ‘going up’ when speaking of the smoke that goes up to God in the heaven. The meaning of *mōlak* can be further determined, because the yphil of the verb *hālak* is used in Phoenician and in Punic as a sacrificial term. It is attested in the Karatepe inscriptions from the 8th century B.C. and in a Punic inscription from Carthage, dating to the mid-5th century B.C. (CIS I, 5510, 9), where the context seems to refer *ylk* to a solemn *molk*-sacrifice. At Karatepe, when introducing a list of sacrifices to be offered in different periods of the year, Azatiwada, the local prince and the strong man of the Kingdom of Adana, says: ‘Having I made Baal Karantaryash dwell in it (viz. the city), the whole river-land sacrificed to him’, *wylk zbh l kl h-mskt*¹⁷. The pronominal suffix is not expressed after the preposition *l*, because the intervocalic *hē* is elided, while the final vowel is not marked (*la-hū* > *lō*). The noun *mskt*, derived from *nsk*, ‘to pour out’, does not mean ‘molten image’, like in Hebrew, but it designates plains watered by rivers, as shown by the parallel Hieroglyphic Luwian text which uses the word *hapari-*, ‘river-land(s)’¹⁸. Earlier translations of this Karatepe passage are thus erroneous.

The verb *hālak* is used in Hebrew also with the meaning ‘to flow’ (I Kings 18:35; Cant. 7:10). In the inscription of the Siloam tunnel in Jerusalem, we read that ‘the water went from the spring to the pool’, *wylkw hmym mn hmws’ l hbrkh* (KAI 189:4-5; TSSI I, 21:4-5). It results from such texts that *molek* may imply effusion of blood and designate a bloody sacrifice. This would mean that the victims were killed and bled before being burnt, and not burnt alive, as was suggested because of the biblical phrase ‘to make his son pass through fire’, for instance in Deut. 18:10. This explanation is confirmed by the account of the sacrifice of Isaac in Gen. 22:11, where we read that Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. We may safely assume that this account is based on a precise knowledge of the ritual in question, but its purpose was convincing people that God wished to get a substitutive offer.

It is remarkable that God’s intervention in Lev. 20:4-5 is expressed conditionally, namely, God will turn against the man offering his child for the *molk* sacrifice, if the people assembly does not act. Moreover God’s effective action is formulated in the apodosis in the form of the so-called ‘converted perfect’, *wə-samtī ’ānī* and *wə-hikrattī ’otō* (Lev. 20:5). The ‘converted perfect’ is traditionally explained as having the function of an imperfect.

17 Phu/A II, 19 ; PhSt/C IV, 2: W. Röllig, “The Phoenician Inscriptions”, *Corpus of Hieroglyphic Luwian Inscriptions II. Karatepe-Aslantaş* (ed. H. Çambel; Berlin 1999) 50-82 (see 52-53 and 64-65). Cf. DNWSI 282. One can compare *ylk zbh* to *ha’al zebaḥ* in Lev. 17:8.

18 A. Morpurgo Davies, J.D. Hawkins, “The Late Hieroglyphic Luwian Corpus: Some New Lexical Recognitions”, *Hethitica* 8 (1987) 267-295 (see 270 ff.).

‘Shall I Offer My Eldest Son?’ (Mi. 6:7)

In reality, this perfect preserves an old function of the stative, namely optative or precative. It expresses the intention of the speaker; it signifies what the speaker would like to do. This is why we should translate those phrases ‘may I set My face’, ‘may I cut him’. These are neither statements of facts, nor plain declarations. They are just conditional expressions of an intention. One can quote here a passage from an article written by William Moran half a century ago for the *Albright Festschrift*. He deals there with the Byblos letters found in Amarna, where there are twenty-four occurrences of a perfect/stative preceded by the conjunction *u* and referring to the future. He writes¹⁹:

All of these perfects occur in sentences which are implicitly or explicitly conditional. And the exceptions are more apparent than real, since they occur with a temporal clause, the general structure of which is identical with that of conditional sentences. This restriction to conditional sentences, where optative and precative elements are well attested, would seem to corroborate H. L. Ginsberg’s insight that the development of the *waw* conversive with the perfect in Hebrew was favored by one of the original functions of the perfect, namely, as an optative or precative.

In the present text, we have original examples of this construction in Classical Hebrew. This certainly favours a pre-exilic dating of the concerned passage²⁰.

The two idiomatic expressions used in these sentences are also remarkable. The first one *šīm* or *nātan pānīm bi-pālonī* occurs also in Lev. 17:10 and frequently in the Amarna letters, especially those sent from Tyre, but also from Jerusalem, where *nadānu pāna ana*²¹ means ‘to see about’, ‘to see to’. This phrase can have either a positive or a negative sense. In the Amarna letters it has a positive meaning, because the acting subject is supposed to ‘see to’ a matter with the aim of bringing it in order. In any case, we have here an Old Canaanite expression.

The second phrase *hikrūt miqqereb ‘am* is a juridical formula which signifies somebody’s exclusion from his clan, from his tribe. The consequences of such an exclusion should be examined further, also in the light of ethnographic parallels.

We come then to the explicative or complementary gloss *li-zānōt ‘ah^arē hammolek* which aims at interpreting *kol-hazzonīm ‘ah^arā(y)w* in the light

¹⁹ W. J. Moran, “The Hebrew Language in Its Northwest Semitic Background”, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (ed. G. E. Wright; London 1961) 54-72, quotation from p. 65.

²⁰ The changing verbal system of Canaanite and Hebrew cannot be discussed here. At any rate, the simple apodosis of a conditional sentence in the Second Temple period is expressed by a *yiqtol* form: *w’m ynwḥ yhwḥ šryk* (Sir. 31:4), ‘And if he relaxes, he will become poor’.

²¹ EA 134:37; 150:14; 155:59; 288:49.

of the phrase *zānā 'ah^arē 'elōhīm 'ahērīm*, ‘to prostitute one’s self behind foreign gods’. If this was the original meaning, it would imply that its author considered *hammolek* as a divine name despite the presence of an article, which is not used with proper names²². However, the Greek translators did not understand the text in this way, since they translated εἰς τοὺς ἄρχοντας, which can go back to Hebrew *'ah^arē ham-mālākīm*, ‘to commit fornication behind the kings’, i.e. at the example of the kings. This meaning of *'ah^arē* is also attested elsewhere, for example in Deut. 12:30. It is possible that this is the original reading of the gloss which was referring to the kings of Judah, Manasseh and Amon. In a later phase, the *m* was suppressed because the whole passage was about *mlk* without final *m*, whereas this *m* of *mālākīm* was appearing as a dittography of the *m* in *miqqereb*. However, there is another possibility: the Hebrew gloss had to be read *'ah^arē ham-melek*, ‘behind the king’, in the singular, with an allusion to king Manasseh, while the Greek translation is a quite common generalization using the plural instead of the singular. Considering the absence of any Hebrew manuscript reading the plural *mālākīm*, this seems to be the best explanation. It would also confirm our dating of the text in the 7th century B.C., the gloss belonging also to that period.

Another question is to know what the Greek translators intended exactly by ἄρχοντες. This is a different problem, which cannot be discussed here. They may have thought of lesser deities, called ἄρχοντες in the Graeco-Roman period²³, but ἄρχοντες could just be ‘leaders’.

The text of the Book Leviticus does not speak about the first-born son, but uses the phrase *mizzar'ō*, ‘from his offspring’. The reason is probably that the author intended to include all kind of child sacrifices. Besides, there is a literary feature in the text that opposes *nātan mizzar'ō* to *hikrūt miqqereb 'ammō*.

22 It appears that this requires some explanation. Common nouns used with an article do not become grammatically proper names. The article just shows that they are used as such. This is a question for grammars dealing with languages which have a definite article or a similar affix, like Aramaic. In a French elementary school, for instance, one could explain that *grand* means ‘great’, but that *le grand*, with the definite article, can become the family name *Legrand*. This does not mean that *grand* has become a proper name. The Grolier Webster dictionary of the English language defines the article as ‘a part of speech used before nouns to limit or define their application’. A particular use of the article is attested in Punic, when the place name designates citizens of the town.

23 K. van der Toorn - B. Becking - P. W. van der Horst (eds.), *Dictionary of Deities and Daemons* (Leiden-Grand Rapids 1999) 78b, 82-85.

Isaiah 30:33

Let us give now a look at our second text in Isa. 30:33. This is a highly poetical passage giving a description of a *tophet*, the place where the remains of sacrificed children were burnt, and applying it to the lot the Lord has reserved to Assyria. The poem is quite long, but we are interested only in verse 33, where the characteristic words *topheth*, 'His *tophet*', and *lammolek* occur, the latter vocalized erroneously *lammelek* in the masoretic text²⁴.

In archaeological terminology *tophet* is used to designate the sacred area where vessels with burnt remains of sacrificed children or substitutive animals were buried. This is not the original meaning of the word which clearly designates the place where the victims were burnt. In Greek transcriptions this word appears constantly as $\theta\alpha\varphi\epsilon\theta$ or $\tau\alpha\varphi\epsilon\theta$, not *tophet*, and it should be linked etymologically with Aramaic *tapyā*, 'hearth', 'fire-place', and with the verb *tapā*, 'to put on fire', 'to set on for cooking', or its variant *'āpā* (*'py*), 'to put in the oven', used in a Neo-Punic inscription in relation to a child sacrifice²⁵. So far, the substantive *tophet* occurs only in the Bible, and Isa. 30:33 is the only place where it is used with a pronominal suffix referring to the Lord who is the active subject in the whole verse.

כִּי־עָרוֹךְ מִאֲתֹמוֹל' תִּפְתֶּהּ גַּם־הָיָא לְמִלְכָּד הַרְגָן
הָעֵמִיק הַרְחִיב מְדַרְתֶּהּ אֵשׁ וְעֵצִים הִרְבֶּה
נִשְׁמַת יְהוָה' בְּנַחַל גַּפְרִית בַּעֲרָה בָּהּ

'His *tophet* is ready from yesterday;
also He is prepared for the *molk*-offering:
He had made deep and broad its pit,
fire and trees He had heaped up.
The breath of Yahweh is like a flow,
a brimstone blazing in it.'

The consonantal text of the manuscript in St.-Petersburg is perfectly preserved and the variants of the great Isaiah manuscript from Qumran (1QIs^a) rather show that the text was not understood properly. In particular,

- ²⁴ As a matter of principle, the historical interpretation of texts from the first millennium B.C. should not rely on unconfirmed masoretic vocalization of the 9th-11th centuries A.D. The latter is important, when one studies the Mediaeval Jewish understanding of biblical texts.
- ²⁵ A. Berthier, R. Charlier, *Le sanctuaire punique d'El-Hofra à Constantine. Planches* (Paris 1952) pl. XL, D, line 4. Cf. Lipiński, *Peuples de la Mer* (n. 2) 320.

the scribe did not grasp that the whole image, the whole metaphor was taken from a *tophet* and from a *molk*-sacrifice, and he did not understand that the active subject was Yahweh described as preparing the sacrifice and the burning of Ashur. Thus, verbal forms in the singular, like *hūkān*, *he'mīq*, and *hirhib* were replaced in the Qumran scroll by plurals, not easily recognizable because of the great similarity of *wāw* and *yōd*. There are also some other changes that make the meaning of the text quite obscure. For instance, 'His *tophet*' is changed into *tiptah*, 'she will open', and *hū*' is changed into *hī*', 'she', quite logically, but obscuring the sense of the poem.

It is remarkable that the *tophet* is called 'Yahweh's fire-place', 'His *tophet*'. It confirms our interpretation of the text of Leviticus and also of Mi. 6:7 from which it results that these sacrifices were offered to Yahweh and not to a foreign deity. The phrase *lammolek hūkān* has a meaning quite different from *nātan lammolek*. *Lammolek hūkān* means 'to be equipped for the *molk*-sacrifice' as sacrificer or temple's attendant. This is explained in the following stichos; everything is ready for the fire-place: wood in quantity, firestone, bellows to make up the fire.

Did such sacrifices ever take place in the Temple of Jerusalem itself? This does not seem to be the case, because the Bible itself specifies that this ritual was practiced in the Valley of Ben Hinnom (II Kings 23:10; Jer. 7:31; 32:35), the Gehenna of the Greek transcriptions. This valley should not be identified with the Kidron Valley, but with the valley bordering, on the west and the south, the so-called Western Hill which comprises the Jewish and Armenian quarters of the Old City, as well as the 'Mount Zion', now outside the Turkish city walls. Tombs from the Iron Age have been found in this area, but no stelae which could be related to this cult.

In conclusion, the text of Isa. 30:33 applies the metaphor of the *tophet* to Assyria, alluding to a practice known in the 7th century B.C to the author of Isa 30 and to his listeners or readers. This text should not be neglected in studies dealing with the *molk*-sacrifice.

'Shall I Offer My Eldest Son?' (Mi. 6:7)



The Valley of Ben Hinnom in 1927 with its age-old stock market
(photo: American Colony)

The texts examined above show that Yahweh-worshippers offering the *molk*-sacrifice believed to honour their own God, despite the negative attitude of some segments of Judaeen clergy around the 7th century B.C. The situation may have been different in earlier times, as suggest Judg. 11 and Mi. 6:7, but the account of Gen. 22 and Ex. 34:20b already reveal a changing approach to such practices. The date of the Yahwistic, Elohist, Priestly or Deuteronomistic redactors has no great importance in these matters. Approximate chronological indications must be furnished, if possible, by their sources, which often go back to pre-exilic times.